

Marxism and civil society: The left and the politics of decay

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ABSTRACT

While much of the contemporary literature on civil society is surprisingly inconsistent and incoherent, it does share a near-universal hostility to classical marxism's political orientation - and especially to its theory of the state. Ironically enough, though, it was Marx's own criticism of civil society which drove his maturing communism and its contradictory insistence that class political power be used in the service of a social transformation whose end result would be a classless society without a state. An examination of the currently popular notion of civil society which places it in its historical context, traces its theoretical development, and subjects it to critical examination is long overdue. What follows is an attempt to trace the outlines of a marxist response to this most recent attempt to resurrect a version of liberal pluralism which is distinguished from its dreary predecessors by only its deeper cynicism about the possibilities of collective action.

The current fascination with civil society originated in the Eastern European dissident intelligentsia's effort to attribute the crisis of Soviet-style communism to what became known as "the revolt of civil society against the state". Deeply hostile to the claims of a self-described vanguard party and to its bureaucratized version of politics, a literature took shape during the 1980s which ultimately identified 'actual existing socialism' with heavy-handed and inefficient central planning of heavy industrial production for its own sake, bureaucratic stifling of initiative, wooden incantations of service to the working class masking deep privilege and corruption, and a grasping and meddlesome state apparatus. Unthinkingly related to the anti-communist argument that Marx was a Blanquist, Lenin a voluntarist, and the left totalitarian contemporary theories of civil society have developed a sustained critique of Marxism's alleged lack of limits, its tendency to politicise everything, its inattention to questions of socialist democracy, and its suspicious disposition to atomize, direct and absorb any initiative arising from the chaotic and uncontrollable sphere of civil society.

This literature quickly spread to Western Europe and then to the United States, for socialism's practical and theoretical crisis was not limited to the Soviet bloc and Margaret Thatcher's worship of the market was soon joined by that of Ronald Reagan. As electronics and robotics began to make their presence felt in the West and both the welfare state and the working class came under sustained ideological, political and economic assault, the deterioration of the left's traditional anchor in the labor movement gave rise to a series of new social movements whose spontaneous effervescence seemed to confirm the civil society literature from the East. Postmodernism celebrated the end of grand narratives and totalizing discourses, looked to the new social movements and their decentred 'politics of identity' to replace the left's traditional orientation

toward the working class and the capture of state power, and perversely reflected the glorification of the market which characterized the 1980s. The 1989 collapse of the Soviet system seems to have completed the circle and has encouraged many people to dismiss marxism as an outmoded ideology, socialist revolution as a fantasy, and the centrality of the working class as a relic of the 'Fordist' past. In the absence of a credible left, the coalition politics of local struggles and a warmed-over pluralism seem to describe the practical and theoretical boundaries of contemporary democratic politics.

While much of the contemporary literature on civil society is surprisingly inconsistent and incoherent, it does share a near-universal hostility to classical marxism's political orientation - and especially to its theory of the state. Ironically enough, though, it was Marx's own criticism of civil society which drove his maturing communism and its contradictory insistence that class political power be used in the service of a social transformation whose end result would be a classless society without a state. An examination of the currently popular notion of civil society which places it in its historical context, traces its theoretical development, and subjects it to critical examination is long overdue. What follows is an attempt to trace the outlines of a marxist response to this most recent attempt to resurrect a version of liberal pluralism which is distinguished from its dreary predecessors by only its deeper cynicism about the possibilities of collective action.

Liberal roots

The development of market society and capitalist social relations brought civil society into Western political theory. As a separate social sphere separated out from its earlier entanglement with feudal politics, English political economy developed as the science of civil society and a theoretical literature took shape organized around the distinction between public and private and state and society, a rights-based conception of freedom, the notion of a law-governed state, a strong defense of property rights and epistemological individualism, the central imperative of self-interest, a suspicion of democracy and a deep distrust of political power. Identifying the latter with coercion and unfreedom, Adam Smith's and John Locke's liberalism developed as a theory of "a strong society and a weak state", and reserved to the latter the distasteful if necessary duties of policing the market's boundaries and defending a set of bourgeois social relations and civil interests, which had already taken shape within the confines of feudalism. Liberalism placed the claim that a self-regulating market will make possible the common life which the Greeks had identified with the city at the center of its understanding of both society and state. The noble and human is to be found in the spontaneous self-organization of civil society, while the state is always dangerous because it embodies arbitrary coercion. Revolutions are limited to changes in political regimes, and the preservation of existing social relations is the business of politics - with the public sphere understood as a series of rules governing the relationship between institutions and between them and citizens. An emphasis on formal equality before the law and free contractual relations did not obscure the often-decisive role that political power played in the development of bourgeois society, theoretical claims to the contrary notwithstanding.

One of the great nineteenth-century critics of conformity, Alexis de Tocqueville began with an appreciation of how dramatically the French Revolution had transformed European public life. He was most interested in the political consequences of social equality, which had levelled wealth and property as it had been reinforced by the uniform assurance of fundamental political rights and equal opportunity before the law. The ascribed inequality of the *ancien regime* was disappearing, and Tocqueville's celebrated examination of American democracy was conducted with at least one eye on Europe. In focusing on the atomism of a democratic and egalitarian market society, he described the replacement of feudal ties of obligation and solidarity by mutual equality, indifference, independence and impotence. The combination of American individualism and substantial social equality led him to fear that democracy would tend to enshrine mediocrity, indulge a purposeless and shortsighted passion for material wellbeing, and encourage a debilitating

and privatized concern for self. The only way to mitigate the loneliness and self-absorption of a competitive and individualistic democratic order was to temper it with liberty, excellence, greatness, and integral public virtue. Tocqueville knew that the democratic principle of the rights of man carried with it continuous pressures for ameliorating the same material conditions which were being relentlessly undermined by the spread of market society, and he anticipate? Hannah Arendt's later fear that excellence and virtue would find no home in an public environment which was oriented toward the pursuit of material goods. If his America was the most commercial society in the world, it testified to the dangerous elevation of self-interest to the first principle of social life, and helped reduce public life to a hollow and vulgar shell.

Equality and individualism can combine to produce tyranny, and Tocqueville directly anticipated Mill's later warnings about how public opinion in conditions of social equality can overwhelm the liberty which is a condition of excellence and virtue. The popular passion for equality must confront the reality of inequality, and the resulting frustration can encourage the majority to give up liberty in the name of equality. In a society in which all are independent, equal, divided and impotent, the state is always ready to supervise and benefit from the surrender of freedom to equality. A paternalistic despotism which takes care of material needs is not at all incompatible with popular sovereignty; democracy can lead to society tyrannizing itself through the medium of a democratic state. The tyranny of the ignorant and willful majority over the educated and propertied minority can be fed by the dangerous notion that the many are wiser than the few. Such a doctrine can become an article of democratic, faith and accelerate the trend toward uniformity and mediocrity, which violates the natural division between the virtuous and able few and the improvident many.

The answer to democracy's potentially destructive egalitarianism is not to restrain it with the aristocratic principles of feudalism, but to modify it with the liberty which is as integral to bourgeois civil society as is equality. The need of a state for the satisfaction of material needs must be balanced by political expedients such as local self-government, a free press, an independent judiciary and jury system, indirect elections and - most importantly - a flourishing network of voluntary associations of all kinds. Tocqueville's faith that localism, freedom of association and liberty would transform formerly atomized self-interested individuals into public-spirited citizens hinged on his argument that they can protect individuals against the depredations of the majority and the tyranny of public opinion. Liberal politics and association can minimize the dangers of social equality's levelling and create public morality out of an individualistic civil society whose members realize that their own self-interest requires public association and action. The problems at which Tocqueville hinted would lie at the center of Hegel's understanding of civil society and theory of the state, the starting-point of all modern discussion.

Hegel and the French revolution

The French Revolution marked the definitive appearance of the modern state, and Hegel took theoretical note of the differentiation of a distinct political realm from the welter of feudal estates. A universal power, the state emerged as the dissolution of the old order's explicit particularism and its fusion of state and society, in which one's property, title or occupation directly determined one's political position. Capitalism differentiates the state from society in the name of a market-driven formal equality before the law and freedom of opportunity, but for Hegel its equality is abstract, because its constituent individuals are separated by all the particularities of economic competition. Hegel's *bürgerlich gessellschaft* describes the identity of civil society with the specifically bourgeois sphere of egotistical individual strivings and interests. A "system of needs", it is the sphere of privatized, individual, competitive, economic activity organized by and expressed in the market, and embodied in the right of private property. An association of individuals who act as if they were self-sufficient entities because they are driven to satisfy their needs, civil society cannot be the sphere of freedom because its logic is the logic of self-interest. Individuals are different and unequal by nature,

and civil society can do no more than register the pre-existing inequalities which each brings to particular economic transactions. Hegel's civil society is the divisive sphere of social classes and of the struggle between them.

Faced with the disintegrative, chaotic and anarchic character of the market, Hegel conceived of the state as more than a set of institutions; it was the communal, collective sphere of human life - public affairs in the broadest sense of the word. The conditions for its development are generated in civil society itself, whose concrete particularity coexists with universal interdependence for the satisfaction of individual needs. It expresses this interdependence as the condition for happiness and ethical fulfilment. Hegel's distinction between the *bourgeois* and *citoyen* expresses the endless multiplication of needs and of the means to satisfy them, a condition which distinguishes people from animals and gives rise to what Hegel calls "factors which are a common interest".¹ Contrary to prevailing liberal wisdom and several scholarly descriptions of his philosophic idealism, he was sufficiently affected by "the social question" to assert that the market is not capable of automatically producing equilibrium. The primary purpose of public authority is to actualize and maintain the universal which is implicit in all the particularities of civil society. Its end is the universal interest as such and the state emerges as "the rational life of self-conscious freedom". More than the protector of property or an organization of rights, the state is a common universality whose moral freedom cannot be found in civil society.

Marx and civil society

Like most social theorists of the period, Marx shared Hegel's desire to restrain the market's chaotic destructiveness; his crucial step was to wonder whether the state could do the job which Hegel had assigned it.² The criticism of civil society which resulted from his rejection of Hegel's statism drove his early theoretical development toward communism as he concluded that the network of material interests centered in property shaped politics rather than the other way around. The development of distinct public and private spheres in civil society led him to examine the abstract equality of the modern state in light of actual social conditions, and find it illusory.

Religion, craft, residence, property, and the like had been emptied of formal political meaning and become characteristics of private individuals in civil society, but the bourgeois claim that private matters have no direct political bearing can never be more than an abstraction. Driving them out of the public sphere may free the state from society, but it simultaneously liberates civil society from the state. Public affairs are not formally determined by religion or property any longer, but religion and property are free to develop unconstrained by political restrictions. Their hold over people is not weakened by their formal separation from politics; indeed, the real domination of bourgeois society over its state works through and because of its formal separation from modern politics. This means . that "the *state* can free itself from a restriction without man being *really* free from this restriction, that the state can be a free *state* without man being a *free man*."³

Marx's decisive commitment to human liberation came from his criticism of both Hegel and civil society and took shape as a social revolution which would be broader and deeper than merely political changes. It would be compelled to strike at the very existence of social classes, and Marx placed the proletariat at the center of his thinking because its propertylessness made it the living negation of civil society. Human emancipation requires a classless society. Marx's criticism of Hegel's state becomes a criticism of bourgeois society, merely political democracy was broadened to social democracy, and political revolution yielded to social transformation.

But the criticism of Hegel's state and the bourgeoisie's civil society did not lead Marx to reject politics. A variety of nonpolitical socialist doctrines had sprung up as critics of capitalism began to pay attention to economic matters, and his early work was directed as much against the followers of Owen, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Proudhon, the "true socialists," and the "Young Hegelians" as against the hyperpolitics of the Jacobins and the Blanquists. If the "ultimate goal" of the communist

movement is the abolition of classes, its "immediate aim" is the capture and use of state power in the service of social transformation.⁴

The leading role of politics in the transition to communism is a central aspect of Marx's theory of the state and is rooted in his contention that the finished forms of the socialist order are absent from civil society and cannot be spontaneously generated within the boundaries of private property. Dramatic political developments notwithstanding, capitalist social relations gradually evolved within feudal society, but a radical break in continuity separates the socialist revolutions from earlier patterns which witnessed the replacement of one form of private property by another. The seizure of political power ended the transformation of feudalism and marked the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, but it is the precondition of a socialist revolution which begins before the social and material conditions for its completion are in place. Where bourgeois theories of revolution and democracy developed as rights-based theories of weak government, suspicion of politics, and the conviction that the operations of the market were the surest guarantees of democracy, freedom, and equality, marxism reserves a central role to a powerful and transformative political apparatus whose mission is to lead the attack on private property and the social relations which accompany it. Marxism's theory of the state rests on a deeply contradictory commitment to the use of political power in the assault on bourgeois property relations, relations which continue to exist even after the workers' victory. The use of state power 'against' the state and class dictatorship 'against' social classes testifies to Marx's expectation that any social revolution would be born in conditions of acute crisis and continuous emergency. His failure to appreciate how dangerous and complex the relationship between a revolutionary state and an untransformed society would be stemmed from the fact that he was not lucky enough to have to address it in real life. But the problems he uncovered have proven endemic to the socialist project as such, and it would be up to Lenin to face the complexities of a relationship which has decisively affected all modern thinking about the state and society.

Lenin and the Russian revolution

Marx and Engels spent very little time speculating about the future, but the theoretical legacy which Lenin inherited did contain the germs of a theory of communism. The central projection that the workers' political victory would precede and propel the social revolution implied that the basic structures of capitalist society would continue to exist even after -the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. An unavoidable if temporary coexistence between a newly-revolutionized proletarian state and an as yet-untransformed bourgeois society would complicate a difficult transitional environment opened up by the seizure of power.

As different as they were, both War Communism and the New Economic Policy illustrated Lenin's increasing reliance on the state to lead the assault on bourgeois social relations. A mismatch between the proletariat's exceptionally ambitious goals and its more limited means guaranteed that the seizure of power would mark the beginning of an extraordinarily difficult period. As the uneven course of the revolution took it from one crisis to another, it was the dangerous necessity of relying on elements of the capitalist past to organize an assault on bourgeois social relations which forced Lenin into increasing reliance on the state. Whether it concerned competition, one-person management, Taylorism, bourgeois experts, or material incentives, he fell back on the claim that the October Revolution had so altered the political environment that what had once been instruments of exploitation could now be tools of liberation.⁵

This was particularly apparent in the debate about the New Economic Policy. The civil war had forced Russia's vast peasantry to defer its dreams of economic independence and freedom, and victory now forced Lenin to take account of them. It was essential to establish mutually beneficial relations between the regime's core classes. The peasants' deepening resentment and discomfort demanded that a proletarian state protect the small property which Lenin knew would be a

tenacious enemy of the socialism he proposed to build with its reluctant help. He knew how contradictory and dangerous the New Economic Policy would be, for it would inexorably revive and strengthen bourgeois relations of production even if the market forces it unleashed might be politically contained. Two antagonistic systems still lived together in the same social formation, and if War Communism had benefitted the proletariat, the New Economic Policy would favor the small rural producers. If socialism was to work, then, it would work only in violation of both its own rules and those of its immediate environment. Forced to make concessions to the past in order to serve the future, the workers' state found itself compelled to resort to the market in the short run so it could strike at the market in the long. This made very little sense on the face of it, but Lenin remained confident that the proletarian character of the state would enable the workers to make their unavoidable concessions to the petty bourgeoisie benefit socialism; state capitalism under the political domination of the bourgeoisie would serve capitalism, he asserted, but it could serve socialism under the political domination of the workers. There was very little choice here, for it was essential to revitalize agricultural production and solidify the revolution in the eyes of the peasants. A proletarian island exhausted by years of struggle and sacrifice was trying to lead a reluctant petty-bourgeois ocean toward a socialism it did not yet want.

Political power became more important to Lenin because he knew that the concessions which forced him to strengthen small production would irresistibly generate bourgeois social relations. Under the circumstances, he said repeatedly, only the proletarian character of the state could enable the workers to use 'their' bureaucracy to defeat bureaucracy and their New Economic Policy's concessions to the market against the market. He was well aware of the implications of these contradictions; the final period of his life was shaped by the continuing struggle between a capitalism which, while wounded, was a long way from being uprooted and a socialism which, while in nominal control of the state, was a long way from consolidation.

The leadership of Stalin and the industrialization drive of the 1930s, followed by the rise of fascism, World War II and the Cold War, did little to change the parameters of a crisis which had become permanent. As socialism began to look more and more like a strategy of state-directed industrialization and collectivization based on iron and steel, theorists like Antonio Gramsci wondered why a "socialist civil society" which would reabsorb the state was not developing.⁶ Stalin attributed the need for a "revolution from above" to the legacy of Russian backwardness, the revolution's international isolation and the need to defend the gains of October, but this did not prevent him from declaring in 1936 that socialism was fully consolidated, and that the road to a communist society was open. Even if he was right, and it was no longer a question of two antagonistic social systems temporarily coexisting, Gramsci knew that the tenacity of bourgeois social relations in a socialist society could not be reduced solely to property relations. Mobilization, the "campaign style of work", terror and purges could not substitute for the atrophy of the soviets and the content of socialist democracy became increasingly problematic. Gramsci tried to theorize a "socialist civil society" which was independent of both economic development and state power and could serve as the vehicle of emancipation, but his tendency to assert the independence and even primacy of culture led him to locate such a civil society midway between a planned economy and a bureaucratized state. His hopes to the contrary notwithstanding, the soviet state had taken the lead in forging an industrialized social order, but the absence of democratic accountability strengthened a bureaucracy which was always entangled in, and tended to preserve, a society stuck in an earlier phase of development. Mao's "wave theory" of periodic shocks notwithstanding, the struggle to control a bureaucracy which is as necessary to modern life as it is dangerous to democracy and resistant to change rests at the heart of contemporary socialism's dilemma, and defined the contours of the contradiction between the Soviet Union's bureaucratically-hardened state, and the objective requirements of a world whose future is being defined by electronics rather than steel.

Modern transitions

Partly in reaction to the evolution of actual existing socialism, Karl Polanyi, Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas elaborated three rather distinct views of civil society whose range provides a provocative and fruitful transition to contemporary theorizing. The relationship between the state and society has been a central problem for democratic theory for some time, and Polanyi's classic *The Great Transformation* traces the discovery of society to the recognition that English industrialization and its "satanic mills" were grinding 'society' down into its constituent atoms.⁷ Some of the more enlightened feudal rulers tried to use political power to reduce the disruptiveness of the rapidly-developing markets, and Polanyi's famous account of Tudor and Stuart land policy and the Speenhamland Law illustrates that state attempts to control the destructiveness of the emerging social order stemmed from an understanding that its unrestricted development would make organized social life impossible.

The fiction of a self-regulating market with its accompanying institutional separation of society into an economic and a political sphere lay in the future. This liberal utopia was based on the view that humans are naturally disposed to trade and commerce, that markets have been an intrinsic feature of civilized life since its beginning, and, thus, that any attempt to use political measures to restrict its effects is irrational and doomed to failure. In reality, says Polanyi, markets had never played more than a marginal and incidental role in organizing economic life until the development of capitalism. Social life was not fundamentally economic in character, and the ideological separation of the economy from society was theoretically impossible. It was widely assumed that economic motives and desires spring from the context of social life and not from motives of individual gain. Reciprocity, redistribution and householding provided the motive force for pre-capitalist economic activity, and it was impossible to conceive of an economic sphere apart from 'society' in such conditions. But the capitalist market inexorably subordinates society to itself, and the phrase market society illustrates how impossible it is to distinguish between the capitalist market and bourgeois society. Where the economy had been embedded in social relations, social relations are now embedded in the economic system.

The bourgeois discovery that the market functions according to its own set of laws and dictates terms to the state meant that economic life was now understood to be independent and beyond the control of political authorities. Committed to promoting markets in labor, money, land and commodities, different varieties of economic liberalism became the guiding orthodoxy of bourgeois society. None of this implied the restriction of politics or the shrinking of the state, of course, for active governmental intervention was needed to create and protect market society. What it meant was that the business of the state was serving the market, and that was decidedly new.

Polanyi's claim that bourgeois ideology rests on the fiction that politics and markets occupy different if related spheres and that the state is separated from civil society is echoed by Hannah Arendt's criticism of the idea of society as such.⁸ Deeply influenced by Tocqueville, she builds a claim for the public character of freedom on a denial of the modern view that the state exists to protect society. Echoing, if disagreeing with Polanyi, she acknowledges that the labor movement has looked to redistribute wealth, provide jobs, and furnish economic protection but criticizes this mingling of the public and private in society's mediation between public and private.

Arendt's idealized account of Greek republicanism suggests that its distinction between public and private guaranteed each from the other and made possible the uniquely human pursuit of excellence, honor and freedom in self-revelatory speech and action. If the private sphere was organized around inequality, difference and uniqueness, the *polis* recognized the equality of its members and thus permitted the organization of a common world. Action is intrinsically public because only through equally-validated speech can citizens encounter one another and establish the reality of subjective expression. People who are unequal by nature are constructed as political equals in the *polis*, and noncoercive plural speech permits the self-organization of free citizens.

Public action can serve freedom only if it is an end in itself, and for Arendt this requires the restoration of the Greek distinction between public and private. A theory of freedom or democracy cannot be built on a foundation of civil society, because modernity is organized around the fusion and intermingling of public and private as expressed in the hegemony of society. The private sphere must be protected from the public by a network of rights which protect property and privacy, but the public can be protected from the private only by challenging the rise of society. The state cannot take on the responsibilities of social reproduction any more than the nation can take on those of the family; the nineteenth-century social question is the backdrop to the twentieth's political commitment to, and responsibility for, economic growth and social welfare. Like Hegel, but with a different purpose, Arendt understands politics to be more than civil liberties and constitutional rights because freedom is more than the fulfillment of material desires.

She attempts to provide the basis for a reconstruction of "the human condition" in freedom by attacking the modern notion that politics is a function of society and that action, speech and thought are superstructures built on a foundation of interest. The Greek striving for honour and excellence through speech and action is opposed to and stifled by the victory of the modern bureaucracy, the rule of 'nobody' and the expression of the communistic fiction that a single - or even a primary - interest can be discerned among the multitude of separate purposes and interests that comprise a genuine public sphere. A plural and tolerant public order requires that politics supplant administration and that common action replace individual behavior. Society represents the mutual submersion of the private and the public, and its tyranny is expressed in the 'sublimation' of politics in bureaucracy and the fusion of public with private. For Arendt the thorough degradation of the public sphere consists in the fact that it is here that people come together to exchange commodities rather than to encounter other people. They disclose themselves only in the intimacy of the private sphere.

Arendt's romantic and reactionary misreading of Greek democracy rendered her critique of civil society incompatible with modernity, but Jurgen Habermas tried to extend her analysis by counterposing a socially rooted form of the public sphere to the ancient model identified with the state.⁹ His public sphere is a set of mediations between civil society and the state and is frankly bourgeois in character because independent owners of property, divided in their egoistic, competitive economic pursuits, generate a collective will through the medium of rational, unconstrained communication. Supported by a network of rights, Habermas's public sphere - based on autonomous individuals and constituted by the bourgeois family - makes possible the distinctive form of modern intimacy: interaction free of domination and external social constraint.

This liberal public sphere stands between civil society and the state and took shape as market economy developed. From the bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state which represented the ruler's power before the people, a distinct sphere arose in which state power was publicly monitored and controlled through informed and critical discourse by the people - that is, by literate property-holders. As different wings of the industrial and financial bourgeoisie appealed to this evolving community of debating property-owners, the public came to mean a state which was wider than the personality of the monarch, while the private denoted exclusion from the developing state apparatus. Like Hegel, Habermas considers civil society to be the private bourgeois realm of commodity exchange and social labor; the public sphere developed when a critical reading bourgeois public began to mediate between civil society and the state because privatized individuals stopped communicating solely in terms of their subjective desires, and began to do so in their capacity as property-owners who wanted to influence public power in the name of a common interest.

The same process of social commercialization and state-building produced a legally-protected private realm where private people pursued their individual interests free from regulation or interference by estate or state. The emancipation of civil society from the directives of the public authority made it possible for what Habermas calls "the political public sphere" to attain its full

bourgeois development. Society presented itself as free from state compulsion, hence free from compulsion of any kind. This reinforced the liberal claim that the economic mechanism was self-regulating and that market calculations demanded objectivity and fairness. The private sphere was now insulated from arbitrariness, inequality and coercion; as we have seen, liberalism relegated power to the public sphere and defined it as coercion.

Habermas's theory of obligation rests on the claim that rational agreement about the public good can issue only from unfettered public discussion. The constitutional state presumes a wide network of civil, natural or human rights and the establishment of a public order which is subordinated to and serves a putatively free private order. The specifically bourgeois sense of publicity, then metamorphoses the private self-interested individual bourgeois into a rational public-spirited citizen. Habermas's attempt to generate a "discourse ethic" which can govern public interactions hopes that the principle of unconstrained communication, originally established in the intimate sphere of the bourgeois family, can mediate between society and the state.

Like Arendt, Habermas traces the rise of the social to the same market society which the modern state developed to shield. The separation between civil society and the state resulted from the development of a market which made economic affairs the concern of private people left to themselves. But this same market has been inexorably eroding the material conditions which permitted the development of a distinct public sphere, and the interventionist welfare state was forced to look upon the interests of civil society as its own. As state authority was extended into the private realm, private power began to be extended into the public. Public and private began to penetrate each other as the state became socialized and society became statized.

Like Polanyi, Habermas attributes the breakdown of bourgeois distinctions between the state and society to pressure for supervision of the economy from the labour movement and the poor. It had been clear for some time that power, inequality and oppression were not limited to the political sphere, and state intervention was designed to guarantee the integrity of a capitalism whose conditions were always being betrayed by the market acting alone. Important political limitations on such hallowed bourgeois institutions as property and contracts were accepted, and Habermas agrees with Arendt that a new intermediate sphere is developing based on the mutual penetration of society and state. Neither exclusively private nor public, it mirrors the transition of the public from one which debates culture to one which consumes it and stands in mute testimony to the aggressive penetration of all human social and political relations by the market.

The politics of fragmentation

Contemporary notions of civil society draw on and react to the classical tradition even as they reflect postmodernism's insistence that a comprehensive political challenge to the existing order is neither possible nor desirable. Frederick Jameson's analysis of postmodernism as the characteristic political ideology of late capitalism is particularly apt, for most contemporary theories of civil society share an abandonment of class, a disdain for the state and an aversion to comprehensive political activity which render them powerless to mount a serious ideological or political challenge to the market whose democratization remains the central, if unacknowledged, democratic project of contemporary life.¹⁰ While the new social movements and accompanying theories of civil society are rooted in the political economy of late capitalism and sprang from the very real theoretical and political failures of the classical left, the fragmentation of contemporary politics is more apparent than real and the theoretical projections of what passes for democratic theory are rapidly becoming the intellectual property of a deliberately self-isolated intelligentsia.

Habermas' s emphasis on rules of discourse and equal treatment fails to consider power and class as constitutive elements of the public life. Unable to penetrate behind the facade of shared assumptions to questions of material interest, his discourse ethic reduces politics to procedure and disengages it from the central, animating commitment of the Left to the democratization of the

market. Andre Gorz, on the other hand, has considered both the failure of Soviet-style socialism to break with the bourgeois logic of economic growth and capitalism's recent economic development to conclude that class is no longer a useful political category, because the new social movements have replaced the proletariat as the most powerful agents of democracy and progress. Contemporary economic developments have created permanent unemployment and enormous amounts of free time, and the labor movement must break with the logic of economic rationality and abandon its commitment to full paid employment in favor of a political agenda which seeks to share the jobs that exist in an equitable and democratic fashion through the extensive, planned and methodical reduction of working hours. A politics of free time can democratize civil society because it can free everyone from the imperatives of employment. By expelling the state from regulation of the economy, a sphere can develop which is independent of both and consists of such institutions as neighborhood centers, non-patriarchal families, and cooperatives. Gorz's version of socialism requires the minimization of socially necessary labour and a shrunken state sector which no longer polices a democratic network of local, small-scale voluntary institutions and social movements.¹¹

The modern working class has been divided, weakened and differentiated in a ' post-Fordist' environment, and Gorz says that it is no longer the central agent of democracy or liberation. Individuals have to find political meaning for themselves, and the shifting coalitions and alliances of the new social movements have replaced the integral class politics of the proletariat as the agency of progressive politics. Class drops out of this new pluralism, summarized by Habermas' s agreement that there are many manifestations and sites of democratic struggle and those of the working class can no longer claim general validity. Everyone is in it for himself, and politics has degenerated to what Stephen Bronner has called "the art of the separate deal".¹²

Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen see civil society as increasingly differentiated and contested and have attempted to theorize a sphere which mediates between the economy and the state and whose core elements are plurality, legality, publicity, privacy, and legality.¹³ Deeply hostile to the left's traditional orientation toward state power, they express the same sort of anti-statism which Michel Foucault' s anarchistic discussion of power and civil society embodies. Their pluralism tries to correct Marx's economic reductionism by concentrating on forms of collective action which, while not linked to any specific class interests, do approach the legal, associational, and public dimensions which are so central to contemporary public life and so reminiscent of Tocqueville. Like Gorz, John Keane and other theorists, their civil society is a legally-protected framework in which the new social movements operate and are protected against state intervention by a network of rights.

Arato and Cohen claim that they aim to theorize a civil society which is independent of both the market and the state, and they share many contemporary theorists' disposition to exempt the market from democratic control or accountability. The state has effectively dropped out of their understanding of democracy, replaced by a marginal terrain of spontaneous local activity which compensates for the totalizing tendency of all political discourses which accept the logic of the state and aim at capturing or influencing it. The old cold-war literature which claimed that too much politics, too much ambition and too much emphasis on the general is the seed-bed of modern totalitarianism finds a curious echo in Arato and Cohen's pluralistic social-democracy.

Much contemporary theorizing about civil society severs the link between class, state and politics. Whether civil society includes the market or mediates between it and the state, the time-honored goal of democratizing the market has pretty much disappeared, for political power can serve democracy only if it protects an independent, plural and self-organizing civil society. Polanyi's prophetic warnings about the effects of ideological fantasy are as appropriate now as they were forty years ago, and the suspicion of politics and power which drives the literature on civil society leaves open Marx's insight - one shared by the democratic and labour movements for hundreds of years - that the only way the poor and powerless can translate economic concerns into the sort of general perspectives which held any prospect of success is through comprehensive political activity aimed at the use of state power in the service of social transformation.

Out of the darkness?

Immanuel Wallerstein may be right when he characterizes the current climate of immiseration and reaction as a new Dark Age which has yet to run its course. The combination of a conservative political climate and the enormous impact of computers and robotics has stimulated the recent interest in civil society and the renewed faith in the market in the West. Increasingly marked by diversity, fragmentation, and differentiation, late capitalist societies are now characterized by sharpening divisions between classes, the rapid reorganization of work and permanent marginalization of large sections of the population, fierce competition between leaner and more specialized enterprises, a labour movement weakened by persistent high unemployment, and an enervated political left. Postmodernism is the perfect ideological expression of such an environment, and claims that civil society marks the new terrain of democratic theory and action faithfully mirror its retreat from politics and contempt for theory. Modern socialism, organized as it has been around heavy industry, central planning, the leading role of a vanguard party, and the centrality of the industrial proletariat, has been as affected by these trends as has the capitalism which is its incubator, and suggestions that the preeminence of civil society demonstrates the obsolescence of marxism in a postmodern world accompany liberal and social-democratic assertions that the best one can hope for are the coalition politics of a moderate pluralism. Civil society, populated by voluntary organizations, the family, press, political parties, social movements, and forms of communication whose structure and content are not shaped by the imperatives of class or oriented toward the state, is now the arena of post-marxist and post-industrial democratic theory and action. There are no more collective agents, class no longer drives politics, and isolated individuals and eclectically organized groups struggle to find and create meaning for themselves. Given a decimated working class and the decentered character of contemporary life, only loose coalitions can form the ever-shifting majorities which can influence public life in elections. Mutualism, localism, self-limitation and solidarity are the new public values of democratic practice; just as George Bush suggested that the voluntarism of "a thousand points of light" should replace a public commitment to the social regulation of the market, so theorists of civil society mimic the right's claim that culture has replaced work as the decisive locus of modern life, and that the left's traditional emphasis on the capture and use of state power in the service transformation is a dangerous fantasy which leads straight to the Gulag. A marked tendency to exempt the market from democratic struggle or public control reflects the semi-anarchistic hostility of civil society theories to the breadth of view and comprehensiveness of scope which only politics can provide.

While incapable of providing a comprehensive theoretical or political framework for understanding the concrete meaning of democracy in the contemporary world, the new social movements and accompanying theories of civil society are a genuine response to the ideological sclerosis, organizational rigidity and political failures of what remains of the left. The American Civil Rights Movement was the first of the great new social movements, and its democratizing impact can hardly be exaggerated. Its boundaries were set by the limits of formal equality, the imperatives of economic redistribution and the reality of class, but its very success illustrates how rapidly the worldwide transition from an economy based on steel to one organized around electronics is undermining the relationship between what remains of socialism's economics and its politics. Even as an end to scarcity becomes possible, outmoded relations of production intensify their resistance to reorganizing society around the new instruments of production. Yet reliance on the market will not reinvigorate a postindustrial socialism. Capitalism is still the operative form of social organization in the West, and its basic laws of motion are those described by Marx more than a century ago. Making the leap to a public power rooted in technology and electronics is very different from the current infatuation with privacy, individualism, spontaneity, and the market. The deep crisis of the contemporary left reflects the necessity, and provides the opportunity, to take account of dramatic shifts in the international situation, while retaining the profound hostility to the market which has characterized the socialist and labour movements since the development of market society. Given Ralph Miliband's dramatic demonstrations of the use of state political power by a

highly organized and conscious ruling class, it is an odd time to be claiming that the state and the politics of social class are no longer relevant to the democratic and social left. Marx's Tenth Thesis on Feuerbach is as relevant now as when it was written a century and a half ago: "the standpoint of the old materialism is *civil* society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or associated humanity". Time is moving, and we have a lot of work to do. Let's get to it.

Notes

1. Hegel, G.W.F. (1967) *The Philosophy of Right*, trans T. M. Knox. New York: Oxford University Press, 147.
2. Much of the analysis which follows is based on my *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat: Marxism's Theory of Socialist Democracy*. (1992) New York and London: Routledge.
3. Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in Marx and Engels (1995). *Collected Works*. New York: International Publishers, 1975- 3: 152. Unless otherwise noted, all references from Marx will be to the *Collected Works*. The emphasis is his.
4. Marx and Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', 6:477-519.
5. Lenin, V.I. (1960-72) 'How to Organize Competition?' *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 26:404; 'The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government', 27:248-9; 'The Achievements and Difficulties of the Soviet Government', 29:70; 'Elections and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat', 30:263. Unless otherwise noted, all references from Lenin will be to this edition of the *Collected Works*
6. See Gramsci, G. (1971) *Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers, and Anderson, P. (November 1976-January 1977) 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*, 100: 5-78.
7. Polanyi, K. (1957) *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
8. Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
9. Habermas, H. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* trans Thomas Burger. Cambridge: MIT Press.
10. Jameson, F. (1992) *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
11. Gorz, A. (1989) *Critique of Economic Reason* trans Gillian Handyside. London: Verso.
12. Bronner, S. (1992) *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Radicalism*. New York and London: Routledge.
13. Cohen, J. and Arato, A. (1992) *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.