



Civil Society: History and Possibilities

Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds.)

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, 330pp.

ISBN: 0 521 00290 7.

The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy & Social Theory

Will Wright

Sage Publications, London, 2001, 205pp.

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In very different ways, these books can be read as attempts within political and social theory to understand the development of civil society in particular contexts, namely in ‘the South’ and in the world’s only superpower, the United States. It is perhaps appropriate that both are examined together, not least since September 11 and its fallout highlighted that the fate of both are intertwined.

The relationship between conceptions of ‘civil society’ in classical European thought and its practice in the developing South is the subject of the first book. The link is apposite, since, as the editors note, the questions which affect the South, state-formation, industrialization and secularization, ‘are no longer central facts of modern Western life; and therefore contemporary Western social thought is not directed towards grasping such processes. In the early modern thought of the West, however, these historical problems are absolutely central’ (p.6). The book is notable also in bringing together a highly distinguished array of contributors.

The volume is split into two parts: the first traces civil society’s genesis in Western political theory, while the second examines its practice in the South. The first part provides a clear overview of the main theoretical traditions within the West. The theoretical journey begins with a short essay by Antony Black, which traces the conception of civil society in pre-modern Europe, arguing, not without controversy, that its practice can be identified as early as the twelfth century. John Dunn examines John Locke’s use of the term to convey a legitimate political order that is ‘state liked’. Fania Oz-Salzberger focuses on Adam Ferguson’s republican and activist conception of civil society, rather than the liberal views of his contemporaries Smith and Hume, and discusses its impact on German philosophy. Keith Michael Baker charts the development of a particularly novel conception of society, which arose in the 18th century Enlightenment France, one that responded to a crisis of values



and which successfully instituted 'a human middle ground between certainty and doubt' (p. 104). Gareth Stedman Jones provides an appraisal of Hegel's important contribution, highlighting his conception of the public sphere as one outside the instrumentalities of the market. Finally, Joseph Femia surveys Marxism's engagement with the term, identifying a certain lack of consistency in its use between Marx and his later followers, Gramsci and Gorz.

The second part contains an array of highly suggestive essays examining the development of civil society in the 'South'. The lack of consistency in the way civil society is employed reflects the various traditions within the West itself. Jack Goody questions the uniqueness of the European pattern of development and the moral evaluation of other cultures that has often accompanied its assertion. Goody posits that many of the features ascribed to Western conceptions of civil society are to be found in the South. Partha Chatterjee suggests 'political society' as a way of conceptualizing groups, such as squatters in post-colonial India, which are more popular than elite-dominated civil society. These are groups that mediate between the state and the more limited, classical conception of civil society. Political culture is the focus of the next two articles. Luis Castro Leiva and Anthony Pagden examine the legacy of republicanism in Latin America. They demonstrate that republicanism was never pristine, often fused with liberalism and Marxism, and it is this that explains the variety of interpretations of civil society on offer today. Thomas A. Metzger considers civil society in Chinese intellectual history, and notes that despite economic reforms in China and Taiwan, intellectual debate still focuses on the political centre as the bearer of social reform. Sami Zubaida distinguishes between 'liberal-secular' and 'Islamic-communal' conceptions of civil society in the Middle East. The degree to which groups in Egypt seek to secure an Islamic sphere is reminiscent of attempts by the Catholic Church to cage its members in purposely constructed social associations and groups in the early 20th century. Rob Jenkins notes a certain irony in the West's promotion of civil society through agencies such as USAID; rather than providing an arena in which diverse views can be accommodated, it instead becomes something of a moral cage, mirroring the sanitized and bureaucratized version promoted by donor countries. Geoffrey Hawthorne eloquently argues that the very promise of civil society in the South is constrained by the character and strength or weakness of the state itself. The emphasis on the importance of 'the state' stands in contrast with theorizing in the North where it has been much maligned (cf Cohen and Arato, 1992).

The division of the book into two sections places a particular onus on the editors to draw together the ways in which the one informs the other. Both succeed in offering compelling syntheses. Sunil Khilnani's opening chapter identifies three basic conditions for the emergence of civil society: that participants share a common conception of 'politics', a conception of the self



that is changeable and a stable state structure. An immediate difficulty is that civil society's emergence was originally unintended, today it is sought. Sudipta Kaviraj's concluding essay contrasts civil society with natural society, community and the state, dichotomies frequently drawn in classical Western theory, and examines them in the Southern context. In certain cases, the post-colonial state took an absolutist form, with the only significant groups being *Gemeinschaften*. Yet, as Kaviraj states, these communities are themselves diverse, internally differentiated entities, with the possibility of approximating ideas of civil society within these specific cultural traditions.

Will Wright's book is broader in conception. Here social theory is used to investigate the continuing endurance of a key myth at the heart of American culture, that of the 'wild west' and the 'cowboy myth'. It also has interesting things to say about a specifically American conception of civil society. The book is divided into three parts. The first concentrates on 'Individualism', a key tenet of the United States. America was founded upon the very ideas John Dunn discusses above. There is a strong affinity between America and social contract theory, not least since both Hobbes and Locke conceived of America as a wilderness in which new beginnings were possible; Locke declared that 'in the beginning all the world was America' (p. 27). Locke and Adam Smith's emphasis on the availability of land is highlighted, which ensured social equality by providing equal access to property. The open frontier of the 'Wild West' guaranteed that land was available. The closure of the frontier coincided with industrialization, and its attendant problems.

The second part focuses on these 'Industrial Problems'. Marx, Weber and Durkheim's critique of industrial society is held to have much in common with that offered by the 'cowboy myth' itself. The myth's hostility to capitalism's corruption of government and law parallels Marx' (Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* is appropriately identified as an 'illustrative film'); Weberian ideas are also evident: the cowboy is a 'charismatic hero' who defends 'social honour'; and Durkheim's division between mechanical and organic society are analogous to the division between the frontier West and the urban East. The final section, 'Mythical Insights,' examines more contemporary issues in social and political theory: the 'cowboy myth' embodies the sexism, racism and environmental degradation of early market society. Market individualism was entirely compatible with all three.

The 'cowboy myth' provides a novel introduction to social theory. However, there is a sense in which social theory is being made to fit the analogy. The book is perhaps less about social theory than it is about the USA itself (as Simon Frith's dust jacket endorsement suggests). It is a country that is based on European thought, but is different from it. There is an obvious parallel here with the preceding discussion of the relationship between Western political theory and the development of civil society in the South. Both books are



concerned with the relationship between political theory and context. An obvious contrast is immediately discernible between these contexts. The ‘first new nation’, as Seymour Martin Lipset famously called the United States, was born without tradition. The idea of a wilderness made ideas of individualism all the more appealing. As Wright notes, it is excessive individualism that has provoked most concern. Robert Putnam’s call for civic (re-) engagement is a recent example (cf Putnam, 2000). Yet concern in the US is over-stated. The United States is curious in that despite its pervasive ethos of individualism, there is a remarkably high degree of conformity (cf Hall and Lindholm, 1999). Wright captures something of the tension between individualism and conformity: the cowboy ‘represents freedom and equality, but he also represents the idea that market freedom and equality can lead to a good society, a civil society’ (p. 188). Yet civil society, as Kaviraj and Khilnani argue, is above all about the ability to manage difference, and it is in the contemporary South, marked by a high degree of linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity that civil society promises most. There are grounds for cautious optimism given the evidence contained in Kaviraj and Khilnani’s volume, which suggests that culture, *contra* Huntington, is both malleable and internally differentiated.

Both books are recommended. In particular Kaviraj and Khilnani’s book provides a genuine advance in the literature. Both point to the importance of civil society and its interpretation in theory and practice. They are also a reminder of the powerful ideas contained in classical political and social theory — ideas upon which the United States was founded and which continue to influence the development of civil society in the contemporary South.

References

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