

---

# Relocating Civil Society: Theories and Practices of Civil Society between Late Medieval and Modern Society

Maarten F. Van Dijck, Bert De Munck  
and Nicholas Terpstra

## Introduction: Long-Term Practices of European Civil Society

Civil society is widely considered as a crucial element in contemporary society. Academics and policy makers have traditionally associated it with voluntary associations and organizations, assuming that associational life is an ideal intermediary between citizens and government. While members of associations form large social networks, which they can mobilize at critical moments, the conviviality of group sociability fosters the development of a set of common values, such as a democratic political culture and other civic virtues. Its origins are generally situated in the eighteenth century, and are mostly attributed to secularization, Enlightenment thinking, the birth of the “public sphere,” and growing emancipation from oppressive structures such as the church and the state.

However, a growing number of recent studies shows that civil societies existed long before—depending on the definition. This new chronology implies that it was not the secular and voluntary associations of the Enlightenment that were crucial for the rise of a civil society, but rather the Christian—mainly urban—corporations of the Late Middle Ages. It also implies that the political impact of the civil society was not simply a question of membership and participation in voluntary social and cultural organizations. Instead, crucial questions on participation in the political realm arise.

Therefore, this special issue ventures into the world of the early modern guilds, brotherhoods, poor boxes, shooting guilds, chambers of rhetoric, and the like, as well as into some nineteenth-century forms of civil society that challenge present-day commonsense accounts of civil society. We will reveal some of the practices and reflect on the ideological contexts and drivers of all these forms of civil societies to discover long-term continuities and discontinuities. Yet in doing this we inevitably stumble upon a fundamental paradox: Can we still use the concept of civil society, given that most authors have situated the origin of the term in northwestern Europe at the end of the early modern period? In this introduction, we will review the opportunities, limits, and consequences of the use of the concept of civil society in a broader chronological and geographic framework.

## Relocating Civil Society

The concept of civil society has roots in Western modernization theories. The birth of civil society has typically been interpreted as part of a linear process of eman-

## 2 Social Science History

---

icipation, democratization, and progress. Most historians considered the supposedly more secular culture of the Enlightenment as an essential precondition for the rise of European civil society in the modern era (Jacob 1991: 475–91). Historians such as Augustin Cochin and François Furet identified the Enlightenment sociability of clubs, salons, and opera houses as a fertile breeding ground for a civil society, while philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Jürgen Habermas emphasized the critical attitudes of Enlightenment thinking as its central feature (Chartier 1991: 16). While these two approaches stressed different aspects of the Enlightenment, both acknowledged the essential role of an “emancipation” from church and state (Outram 2005: 28–46, 101–8). Specifically, economic liberalism, the ascent of the modern bureaucratic state, and the spread of Enlightenment values are seen as essential conditions for the rise of a “modern” civil society.

The growing popularity of the concept of civil society since the 1970s has given rise to a growing literature on the subject and resulted in a multiplication of definitions and approaches. Despite these various meanings of civil society, most approaches continued to emphasize the independence of civil society from religion and the state (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001b: 1–2; Khilnani 2001: 11–12). The crux of the matter was liberation from feudal and religious “shackles.” Keith Baker stressed that “the institution of society”—in the sense of a growing awareness of a natural bond among humanity—was the logical consequence of this changing intellectual framework (Baker 2001a: 84–85). Others have identified rational debate and equality between human beings in particular as the essential contributions of Enlightenment thinking to the redefinition of the concept of civil society (Chartier 1991: 16). According to Jürgen Habermas, the rise of civil society was fundamentally connected to individualization, secularization, rationalization, and the spread of capitalism (Calhoun 1999: 21–23; Habermas 1989: 141–235). Even the declining vitality of both civil society and the public sphere since the late nineteenth century could, in his view, be seen as a logical result of the process of modernization, as it was the commodification of culture and the democratization of civil society that hindered the good functioning of the public sphere.

Recently however, a growing amalgam of critiques questions the usefulness of all concepts stemming from modernity narratives (Bhambra 2007: 1–12). These critiques have extended to the twin concepts civil society and public sphere, which have been criticized, deconstructed, and redefined (Wittrock 2000: 31–35). For one, historians doubt the unity of civil society in Europe, as several studies reveal the significant differences between regions. The different composition of the middle classes in various regions certainly influenced the exercise of civil society all over Europe, but other factors were relevant too (Kocka 1995: 783–90). Historical studies point to significant variations within countries. The contrast between northern and southern Italy is a well-known example of this diversity. While Italy’s northern regions are singled out for having had a long history of civic participation, the south is often thought to have lacked a strong civil society since the Middle Ages (Banti 2000: 52–53; Muir 1999: 379–405; Putnam 1993: 121–51). The horizontal and voluntary social relations found in the north are contrasted here with vertical social relations and coercion in the south. Recent studies suggest that this neat division into north and south demonstrates nothing quite so much as the migration of traditional prejudices

into modern stereotypes (see the articles by Abulafia, Black, Cohen, and Marino in Eckstein and Terpstra 2009b).

Nonetheless, the Italian example reveals the historical complexities in the development of European civil society. On the one hand, Italy is seen as a country that was late in developing a public sphere because the Italian peninsula was only unified as a modern nation-state in 1861 (Kocka 2004: 75–76; Laurier and Philo 2007: 267). On the other hand, many of the important vehicles of civil society and the public sphere—including confraternities, guilds, and even opera—would have originated or flourished in late medieval and early modern Italian communes and republics (Muir 2006: 331). Certain social forms like the civic hospital, moreover, emerged and adapted around existing forms drawn from other cultures, including contemporary Arabic states, while other instantiations of social kinship groups continued to provide models and inspirations for Reformation-era religious and social organizations north of the Alps (Eckstein and Terpstra 2009a: 9–16; Terpstra 2011). These examples of Italy as a nexus for experimentation in multiple institutional forms of civil society thus show the need for both a broad geographical perspective and a long-term historical approach.

In this vein, historians also distinguish northwestern Europe from the rest of the continent. Once again, this draws back to a point long before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Antony Black, for instance, distinguishes civil society from a guild-related model. Black traces the origins of the latter to be northwest Europe, and finds the roots of the former in southern Europe. According to Black, Italian civil society during the Late Middle Ages was characterized primarily by such values as personal freedom, judicial and political equality, and individual independence. The guild ethic materialized instead through the values of friendship, equality, and mutual aid that could be found in guilds, chambers of rhetoric, and confraternities. Although the traditions of civil society and guilds merged during the early modern period and jointly constituted the basis of modern European civil society, according to Black, it is obvious that regional differences did not totally disappear (Black 1984: 1–43, 237–41). Indeed, northwest and south Europe developed along distinctive historical paths, though with many direct and indirect borrowings.

Katherine Lynch also recognizes the distinctions between south and northwest Europe, although she stresses different aspects of this divergence, and emphasizes that north and south share a common commitment to institutional forms rooted in social kinship. Lynch has particular interest in the role of civil society for the development of the modern welfare state, but she relates this evolution closely to the rise of civil society (Lynch 2010: 286). Her model is quite different from Black's, as she distinguishes a voluntarist and religious model of social assistance in southern Europe from a civic model in northwest Europe. In a similar vein, David Garrioch makes a distinction between the sacred neighborhoods of Italy and the secular urban communities in France (Garrioch 2001: 406–17). In short, while the differences between northwest and southern Europe diminished over time, it is nonetheless clear that the idea of a homogenous European civil society is an illusion.

The implicit or explicit European focus of many conceptions of civil society is further questioned by the growing number of studies looking at civil societies in

non-Western regions. Postcolonialism was one of a number of movements that shaped the fundamental critique of modernity and, by implication, of civil society. This has resulted in growing attention to the existence and development of forms of civil society in other parts of the globe, and particularly across Asia. Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Knilnani addressed this in their 2001 collection of essays on civil society in the west and the south (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001b: 2–5). Kaviraj contends in the concluding essay that civil society is a European concept and reality that only spread in non-Western countries after European colonization. In his view, only Western countries developed civil societies in the period after the eighteenth century, and largely because of the rise of the modern state. No other region in the world had similar absolutist, centralized states, which he considers a necessary condition for the development of a civil society. Nevertheless, Kaviraj adds that local elites imitated the forms and institutions of European civil society transforming and adapting the main ideas and practices of civil society to local traditions (Kaviraj 2001: 306–12).

Other authors are more radical and claim that the study of civil society has by and large only served to conceal important global variations and legitimize Western superiority and set it as the norm. Jack Goody asserts that the concept of civil society often—voluntary and involuntary—strengthens the myth about the Western monopoly on democratic practices. To counter that myth, Goody points at processes of democratization and rationalization in Africa and Asia. He recognizes the dominance of the Western discourse on civil society, but draws attention to a number of African and Asian phenomena that demonstrate active practices of civil society (Goody 2001: 149–64). While Goody's arguments are based on quite general observations about non-Western societies all over the world, other researchers have collected empirical evidence to build alternative models of civil society. Jeong-Woo Koo made such an effort in relation to Korean academies between 1500 and 1800, which he argued embodied all characteristics of a mature civil society. The important implication is that civil society was already a reality in Korea long before European colonization of the region (Koo 2007: 386–400).

A radically different critique comes from Dipesh Chakrabarty, who offers an interesting account of the outline of civil society in India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although Chakrabarty acknowledges the absence of a modern individualism in nineteenth-century India, he points at the indigenous origins of a genuine Indian civil society. Specifically, he describes the social practice of *adda*. This form of—predominantly male—sociability was a sphere of democratic speech: The participants in an *adda*—in contrast to the *majlish*—could freely talk about all topics without any restrictions. The subjects of the conversations could be trivial, but controversial (political) issues were not excluded. The growing availability of English newspapers and literature during the twentieth century certainly left its mark on the character of the meetings, but *adda* to a large extent kept its Indian character. In fact, it developed into a symbol of Bengali identity. Chakrabarty concludes that *adda* resembled the European conception of civil society, while clashing with dominant modernity narratives (Chakrabarty 2000: 180–213). The example of the Indian *adda* thus again points at the limits of European civil society as an analytic tool.

In short, the exceptionalism traditionally attributed to the European Enlightenment is qualified from both a geographical and a chronological perspective. Moreover, it has become clear that the question of whether a civil society existed either elsewhere in the world or earlier than the eighteenth century depends on the definition used. Numerous authors have already pointed out that the concept is normative in that it willingly or unwillingly separates genuine or beneficial organizations or collective activities from others—which are then labeled “traditional,” “religious,” “irrational,” or “undemocratic.” Still, this does not necessarily imply that the concept is useless as an analytical tool. In our view, current sociological concepts can help clarify historical evolutions provided that the emergence of the concept is part of the analysis.

### The History of a Concept

The eighteenth-century characterization of civil society as the antidote for religious dominance and state power has defined our present interpretation of the concept. Current definitions of civil society usually refer in one way or the other to a Habermasian societal sphere where individuals gather free from state control (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001b: 1–3). Therefore, the concept of civil society is necessarily part of the research focus, and historians have increasingly been addressing the emerging concept of civil society. Many continue to privilege the eighteenth century as a decisive turning point in this emergence. These historians usually consider their research about the changing definition of civil society through time as part of the history of ideas. From this point of view, the eighteenth-century distinction between state and society was indeed formative for the birth of civil society, although the term *civil society* was already in use in the thirteenth century as the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Koinonìa politikè*. This concept referred to the active participation of citizens in political life, yet this *societas civilis* was not considered independent from the formal institutions of the state.

During the late medieval period, the definition of civil society did not dramatically change, although the revival of republicanism in fifteenth-century Italy reinforced the secular connotations of the term. Leonardo Bruni’s reading and translation of Aristotelian thinking posed an alternative to William of Moerbeke and Thomas of Aquino’s thirteenth-century, scholastic interpretation of civil society. The Aristotelian view saw civil society not in relation to biblical references and Christian theology, but rather as a fundamental aspect of the independent city-states. Some traditional interpretations have seen in this a “secularization” of the concept of civil society, which they take to be a first step to a more “modern” definition (Hallberg and Wittrock 2006: 31–44). This interpretation is a sign of the enduring appeal of traditional modernization tropes. The second step is thought to have occurred during the eighteenth century, when classical republicanism was reinterpreted. Under the influence of Enlightenment thinking civil society was no longer restricted to “citizens” (and the urban context), but started to encompass humanity as a whole—or at least the “whole” of male, white, bourgeois society (Baker 2001b: 45–46). Even more important was the redefinition

of civil society as the societal sphere apart from state and economy. This eighteenth-century adaptation of civil society would have been a reaction to the growing power of the state, in line with the fifteenth-century reorientation of the concept, but it was also related to the rise of liberal ideology. It became the dominant interpretation of civil society from then on, and in part opened the way to those expansions of later centuries which extended the concept across boundaries of gender, race, and class (Hallberg and Wittrock 2006: 42; Mouritsen 2003: 652).

The work of Jürgen Habermas confirmed the eighteenth-century birth of civil society, and led many to claim this as the period of the “embryo form of modern civil society” (van Horn Melton 2001: 5). Habermas recognized the classical, medieval, and early origins of the concept of civil society, but pointed to fundamental transformations during the eighteenth century. His work is often misinterpreted as a description of the rise of the public sphere in the age of Enlightenment, yet in reality *the structural transformation of the public sphere* does not claim that civil society was an eighteenth-century invention. In fact, Habermas argues that only the relation between public and private sphere fundamentally changed during the eighteenth century and that this resulted in a new interpretation of the concept of civil society. The growing importance of the family during this period provided the conditions for the intellectual development of the individual. It assured that the individual could freely develop his own opinions. The privatization of the nuclear family guaranteed the independence of the (male) individual in the public sphere and thus laid the foundation for the Habermasian concept of the bourgeois civil society (Calhoun 1999: 6–7; Koller 2010: 267; Wilson and Yachnin 2010: 8).

Concomitantly, the autonomy of individuals participating in the public sphere is considered an essential feature of eighteenth-century civil society because it enabled people to critically debate political and cultural issues and the news of the day. Historians have perhaps overemphasized the spatial aspect of this debating culture by placing these discussions in coffee and opera houses, salons, reading clubs, and music halls (Mah 2000: 154). In reality, eighteenth-century civil society developed in a set of geographic places and a range of social collectivities, the latter being formalized in differing degrees. Nor is it reducible to the gathering of autonomous individuals or the development of communicative rationality in the Habermasian sense. While opinions were also communicated without physical contact, both public sphere and civil society are an amalgam of practices, discourses, material conditions, norms, and values. Charles Taylor rightly argues that the meta-topical character is the most important novelty in eighteenth-century interpretations of the public sphere and civil society (Fraser 2007: 10; Taylor 2007: 186). This is why practices, on the one hand, and definitions and ideas, on the other, must be studied simultaneously.

In this special issue, the development of civil society is examined both as a set of organizations and practices and as a normative idea and ideal. The challenge is to examine both discourses and practices in their reciprocal dynamics, paying attention on each level to both continuities and discontinuities. Did discontinuities occur more in discourse than they did in reality? It was certainly not a coincidence that definitions of civil society occupied critical liberal thinkers in the eighteenth century.

The Scottish philosopher and historian Adam Ferguson wrote his *History of Civil Society* as a reaction to the growing influence of the central state. He saw a return to classical republican values as a solution for what he perceived as a threat, because an active and participating citizenship would compensate for the rise of bureaucracy and centralization (Finlay 2006: 27–36; Geuna 2002: 181–89). However, we should not deduce from this, that civil society subsequently developed outside political and ideological structures. The great attention currently given to the concept of civil society is partially the result of specific recent historical developments. Many researchers witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the rise of neoliberalism from the 1980s. These events not only had a great influence in directing attention to the emergence, meanings, and impact of civil society, but also on the specific definition of civil society as a sphere separate from and in opposition to the state (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001b: 2; Khilnani 2001: 12).

However, looking at it through the lens of Michel Foucault's concepts of "governmentality" and "bio-power" it becomes clear that civil society is part of governance even in a neoliberal context (Lemke 2002: 50–60). Foucault's work puts received wisdom about the functioning of civil society in another perspective and provided the first major critique of the work of Jürgen Habermas and neoliberal definitions of civil society and the public sphere. The Enlightenment and its bourgeois civil society constructed the idea of rationality as a higher moral good with an almost transcendental nature, but rational discussions are not an immanent characteristic of the bourgeois public sphere. Moreover, for Foucault, civil society is not at all free from power relations and self-interest, but is an instrument to exercise and legitimize authority. Rather than vehicles of opposition and empowerment, intermediary organizations should be seen as disciplining and used to govern through (e.g., Swyngedouw 2005). This sharply contrasts with Habermas's popular definition of civil society and the public sphere as the intersubjective result of rational discussion. Indeed, rational discussions do not resolve power struggles, but favor the interests of certain social groups who claim to be rational and to represent the "common good."

## The Multiple Origins of Civil Society

This special issue aims to interrogate the interests and discursive practices that shape both abstract definitions and the practices of civil society (Flyvbjerg 1998: 211–28). In 2001 Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani published an ambitious book on the history of civil society that was certainly a source of inspiration for the current collection of essays (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001a). They brought together an impressive team of international specialists to pursue a long-term approach until the twentieth century and to compare European and non-Western forms of civil society. They found that different geographical traditions influenced each other, and that Western and modernist concepts of civil society were often used without any criticism. Unfortunately, the book focuses primarily on ideas and theories of civil society and hardly deals with practices, while the pre-Enlightenment perspective is limited to a contribution

of Antony Black. We take a complementary approach in this volume as our collection of papers aims to distinguish itself from earlier approaches on three grounds. It (1) incorporates the early modern history of civil society, (2) studies *practices* of civil society, and (3) interrogates the ideological and historical background of the concept of civil society by confronting discourses and practices. In concrete terms, two important aspects of civil society will be discussed in the contributions in this issue: democratization and social assistance. These two themes are selected because the existing literature usually stresses the positive effects of civil society on these domains. Robert Putnam, for instance, believes that a dense and vivid civil society results in a higher trust between citizens, a higher democratic participation in politics, and a higher willingness to help other people (Putnam 1993: 121–48). However, as noted in the first section, historical research into particular societies has underscored the significance of regional differences, and has shown that these effects are certainly not straightforward. Civil society could foster a social assistance system that was based on the Christian love of one's neighbor, but it could also limit help to the so-called deserving poor who lived according to "civil values" (Lynch 2010: 286). The same is true for the expected "democratic effect" of civil society. Some critics have expressed their concerns about the democratic qualities of contemporary civil societies, and historical research has shown the autocratic and totalitarian qualities of certain forms of civil society (Hoffmann 2006: 82–84; Lynch 2008: 713). This implies that multiple varieties of civil societies existed at the same time, depending on the social, cultural, ideological, and religious backgrounds of people. This denial of the unity of civil society is in line with current ideas about the multiplicity of identities, public spheres, and modernities (Eisenstadt 2000; Eisenstadt and Schluchter 1998; Warner 2002: 9–12). Some forms of civil society were, of course, more dominant than other ones, which can sometimes be labeled as *counter civil societies*, but they need the same historical approach to unravel their ideological positions.

Of course, the current collection of papers stands in a longer stream of studies about the history of European civil society nevertheless. Between 2003 and 2005, the European Union funded an important interdisciplinary research project entitled "European Civil Society Network" (CiSoNet). Several conferences and workshops were organized as part of this research program, which generated a number of edited volumes (Keane 2007; Nautz et al. 2009; Pérez Diaz 2009; Wagner 2006). This research project looked at both theories and practices of civil society, but the project emphasized the developments during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries without taking into account the important influences from preceding periods. The extensiveness of the research program and the involvement of prominent scholars, such as Maurice Aymard, John Keane, Jürgen Kocka, Björn Wittrock, and Bénédicte Zimmermann, advanced our understanding of modern forms, but the restricted time frame obscured the late medieval and early modern influences on European civil society and favored a liberal interpretation of the concept (Hoffmann 2006).<sup>1</sup>

1. See: <http://cisonet.wzb.eu/>. Note that it is not a coincidence that Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman's recent overview of Western civil society likewise focused on the eighteenth to twentieth century.



In contrast, Nicholas Eckstein and Nicholas Terpstra organized conferences in Australia and North America that aimed to explore precisely this earlier history of European civil society. Participants responded in part to Robert Putnam's call about the long-term development of civil society in Italy from the Middle Ages until today, with many taking issue with Putnam's stereotyped definitions and modernist thrust. The resulting volume edited by Eckstein and Terpstra focused especially on the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, with long-term developments receiving less attention. The book also made clear that civil societies are far more complex than Putnam suggested in his schematic divide between North and South Italian forms of civil society (Eckstein and Terpstra 2009b).

In a way, an earlier research project had already acknowledged the importance of long-term perspectives. Between 1995 and 1997 the European Science Foundation supported a major research project about the historical roots of republican political thought in the early modern period. The several volumes of this project, which were the result of a couple of international conferences, focused on the early modern period, because earlier research had already paid a great deal of attention to the late medieval and nineteenth-century history of republicanism. Yet, although republicanism formed the breeding ground for civil society, this research project did not use civil society as an analytical tool. Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, which is usually considered as a crucial contribution to the conceptual history of European civil society, was discussed by one of the contributors as an important republican text, but civil society was not considered as an essential part of European republican practices and political thought (Geuna 2002: 177–95). The project resulted in a traditional intellectual history and did not aim to describe the *practices* of republicanism, such as the daily sociability of civil society. Nonetheless, the intellectual tradition of European republicanism is essential to understand the related practices of civil society and should therefore be included in any book on early modern civil society.

Yet another European project studied *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe, 13th to 18th Centuries*. This major research project, directed by Wim Blockmans and Jean-Philippe Genet, resulted in several publications, but the rise of a European civil society or a transnational public sphere were not discussed in this wide-ranging history of the European state-formation process. Indeed, these topics were not considered important subjects at that moment. Nor does the volume edited by Peter Blickle on *Resistance, Representation, and Community* tackle the issue of civil society head on—notwithstanding its rich material on community building and citizens' participation in politics. The idea of a social history of the rejection of the monarchical state is key for the European tradition of republicanism and enlightened civil society, but it was not until the previously mentioned book of Antony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society*, was published that the political culture of guilds and other insurgent groups was connected to discussions about civil society in general and the connection of civil society to the state in specific (Black 1984, 2003).

Black has steered the discussion away from the enlightenment and the emergence of new “bourgeois” elites. As already argued, he points at the development of a guild ethic in the context of the medieval corporative system that emphasized brotherhood,

sociability, mutual assistance, and shared values. Yet while guilds stressed the significance of the collective, Black described a second ideology with roots in the medieval period: the ethos of civil society. The principles of civil society underscored the value of individual rights and liberties (Black 1984: 12–43). These two traditions had different origins, according to Black, although they intermingled through time and together formed the foundation of Western political thought (Black 1984: 237–41). Black's study is rightfully considered to be an important contribution to the history of the concept because he merges the history of ideas (the concept of civil society) and the practices of the medieval forerunners of enlightened sociability (the guilds). However, Black uses civil society in a particular way. In a second edition of his book he even changed the title to *Guild and State* to avoid further confusion. Civil society, as he understands it, is not a sphere free from state intervention, but is in fact synonymous with the political sphere in society (Black 2003: xv–xvi).

Although Black does not entirely succeed in reconciling the different research traditions on the concepts and the practices of civil society, he brings together two constitutive elements of the modern, enlightened conception of civil society. On the one hand, Black's ideology of civil society points at the long tradition of personal rights in Europe that is described by Habermas as a precondition for a modern civil society. Black shows that the independence of the individual in society goes back to the medieval period and is not an invention of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, Black shows that Western thought and practice provided forms of sociability that enabled the individual to act in public, namely in the context of the guild system (Black 1984: 237–41). Inevitably, this leads to problems of definition. How could the concept of civil society be defined as a sphere free from state intervention in a period in which bureaucratic states hardly—if at all—existed? Indeed, while enlightened thinking defined civil society as a reaction to the rise of the modern bureaucratic state (Hallberg and Wittrock 2006: 48; Mouritsen 2003: 652), the personal rights of civil society that Black referred to were a reaction to the power of feudal lords. The liberties of civil society protected the property and liberty of the individual against medieval lords, ecclesiastical powers, and early modern princes (Black 1984: 24, 33). Can this, then, be called “civil society” at all? Does it matter, for instance, that craft guilds elected their own governors and promulgated their own legal rules?

Joseph Bradley's contribution to this issue suggests that civil society could also flourish in the absence of individual liberties, political representation, and rule of law. In the nineteenth century, Russia's civil society emerged in an autocratic context and developed while being intricately related to the state. This did not prevent the organizations involved from acting like civil society organizations in a very recognizable way. While the associations studied by Bradley lack the autonomy and independence of proto-typical associations pointed at by Habermas and others, they nonetheless perform activities crucial for a civil society—up to and including defying the state and urging it to adopt less autocratic rules and practices. Simultaneously, however, the history of these associations makes clear that civil society, more often than not, acts in tandem with the state rather than in opposition to it. Just as was the case in liberal rule in nineteenth-century England (Joyce 2003; Otter 2008), the Russian organizations

offered nonstate solutions for societal problems. Both Black's and Bradley's work thus challenge prevailing interpretations regarding the field of tension with larger political and ideological structures.

Is the defining feature, then, the extent to which such organization acted as "schools of democracy"? As is clear from Bradley's account, associations could empower their members and foster civic engagement even when emerging under tutelage of the state. Nevertheless, this does not mean that a vibrant associational culture will automatically produce more democratic political practices. Jan Hein Furnée shows that not all associations acted as schools for democracy. In nineteenth-century The Hague, seat of the Dutch government, civil society organizations often had a negative impact on the democratic and public character of local politics. While a new liberal constitution in 1848 founded a relatively democratic political system with direct elections and public council meetings, the local political culture hardly changed. Moreover, the local civil associations recruited their members in the social circles of high nobility, entrepreneurs, and higher civil servants and appear to have acted as conservative rather than progressive forces. While being a member of one or more elite associations was, socially speaking, mandatory for the elites, these organizations acted in favor of power concentration and helped to raise barriers to newcomers. Even the internal practices in which the in-group participated rarely pioneered in introducing a more democratic culture of accountability. Although such organizations as the Zoölogical and Botanical Association developed an open and democratic culture, most followed the examples of the local and national government. It would therefore seem that historians should discern different types of civil societies, or at least various forms of associations.

Should we, then, somewhat unsettlingly conclude from this that a civil society is more likely to be found, in Europe, *before* the eighteenth and nineteenth century? Before reaching that conclusion, it is necessary to first look at the different shapes civil society can take. Maarten Van Dijck argues in this volume that historians should distinguish different types of civil societies. Following the later work of Habermas and recent definitions of democracy, he discerns three types of civil societies that developed during the late medieval and early modern period. These three types of civil society, the liberal, the republican, and the deliberative civil society, jointly shape modern civil society. Van Dijck claims that the eighteenth-century appearance of deliberative civil society was not the birth of civil society, but rather the culmination point of a long historical process. Modern civil society is the result of the cumulative development of late medieval liberal rights; fifteenth- and sixteenth-century republicanism; and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century public spheres. This also implies that not all forms of civil society result in the rise of democratic practices because definitions of modern democracy contain references to liberal, republican, and deliberative civil societies.

Bert De Munck also points at the importance of the late medieval and early modern history of civil society in his study of guilds and brotherhoods. While highlighting differences between the latter and classic examples of civil society De Munck identifies long-term transformations that are reminiscent of the transformations described by classical historical sociologists and political scientists like Max Weber and C. B.

Macpherson. On the one hand, De Munck describes a process of bureaucratization related to the decline of corporative values like brotherhood and mutual aid. On the other hand, the guilds' poor relief systems would have been influenced by the rise of market values, such that an "insurance logic" would have accompanied the bureaucratic logic. On top of that, this may have been related to the rise of a civil society as implied by Habermas and others, based on the separation between the private and the public sphere. These spheres were not separated in a late medieval guild context, as the position of guild master at that time overlapped with the position of housefather. In the early modern period, however, the guilds retreated from the private sphere and transformed into a civil society organization that one was no longer born into but had to join on a more voluntary basis. Thus, De Munck as well implies that a modern type of civil society is neither inherent in late medieval and early modern guilds and brotherhoods nor emergent only from late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century organizations. While old forms mattered, they were subject to important long-term transformations. David Garrioch too points to such transformations in confraternities in Paris and Milan. He claims that these religious associations became more secular during the eighteenth century, as religion became a more private matter. In fact, confraternities assimilated to changing historical conditions and resembled other, more secular, Enlightened associations.

This brings the question of definition to a head. Why and from what point on should we speak of civil society, rather than corporatism, guild life, or associational life? Besides the process of state formation and the internal political mechanisms and practices, three other developments seem particularly relevant here, because they are all—in one way or another—linked to eighteenth-century concepts of civil society: increasing social inequality, the process of secularization, and growing rationality. These three deserve special attention because of earlier claims made about the role of these processes in the rise of the eighteenth-century civil society. While secularization and rationality are usually seen as a necessary context for the rise of a civil society, the relation between civil society and inequality deserves more attention.

Eighteenth-century civil society was initially associated with egalitarian social relations (Outram 2005: 18–20; Oz-Salzberger 2001: 75). Several authors adopted this discourse about equality, but recent research has shown that these ideas were often illusory (Calhoun 1999: 12–16; Mouritsen 2003: 651). Although the discursive invention of "humanity" and "universal human brotherhood" is attributed to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, civil society was often restricted to the higher middle groups between 1700 and 1850 (Hunt 2007: 15–34). This dramatically changed during the second half of the nineteenth century when virtually all social layers started to join all kinds of associations. Yet the social elites did not mingle with the lower ranks of society during this period, and seldom if ever participation crossed barriers of race and gender (Hoffmann 2003: 269–92). In this regard, late medieval guilds and brotherhoods may have been more egalitarian and inclusive.

Although some historians argued that the relations between members of confraternities and guilds were egalitarian, these claims are untenable (Bossy 1985: 59–60). The praise of Christian charity and the use of the words brothers and sisters to address

fellow members conceal fundamental inequalities and social tensions that have been present in these associations since their first appearance (Bijsterveld and Trio 2003: 37; Terpstra 2000). After 1500, these associations even became more unequal, which is in line with more general evolutions in European society at that moment (Eckstein 2004: 2–3; Van Dijck 2005). However, the social reach of guilds and confraternities was quite large in comparison to the elitist associations that are usually considered as the backbone of the European civil society. Isabel dos Guimarães Sá points out in this issue that local elites controlled the *misericórdia* confraternities in the Portuguese empire and that religion and skin color could be barriers for entering associations, but the social profile of these confraternities was nevertheless more diverse. David Garrioch remarks in his contribution that Paris and Milan confraternities had a wider social reach compared to the Enlightenment sociability. This is in sharp contrast with the elitist character of nineteenth-century associations in The Hague described by Jan Hein Furnée in this issue.

A long-term view of civil society also suggests that secular and voluntary associations of the Enlightenment were not in fact crucial for the emergence of a civil society, but that Christian corporations and urban liberties provided precursors and models. If we reorient the chronology of the debate about the origins of civil society, we find that religion rather than secularization provides a relevant force and context. This is in line with recent ideas about the origins of modernity. Dale Van Kley, for instance, has fiercely criticized the antireligious historiography about the French Revolution and has identified the religious background of the ideas behind the French Revolution (Van Kley 1996: 3–13). Garrioch's article in this issue is in line with these ideas and shows how religious confraternities formed the backbone of civil society until the French Revolution abolished the collective rights of these associations.

In a similar vein, the relationship between civil society and rationality also needs to be qualified. The spread of literacy, the increasing number of printed books and the rise of new genres certainly influenced cognitive skills and forms of subjectivity during the eighteenth century, but a growing number of studies question the role of rationalization. William Reddy showed that the eighteenth century was mainly a period of mounting emotions and sentimentalism that culminated in the horror of the French Revolution (Reddy 2000: 109–33). Harold Mah, by contrast, points at various relevant forms of sociability and social criticism in use during the late medieval and early modern period that did not meet the criteria of eighteenth-century ratio. For Mah, public rituals such as grain riots, charivari, and ritual violence should not be interpreted as irrational and impulsive expressions of particular interests but as part of a public sphere in which group interests are expressed and negotiated (Mah 2000: 153–83). Recent literature thus casts doubt on the classical contrast between early modern behavior and modern rationality (Schwerhoff 2002: 116–17; 2004: 231–34). Garrioch argues in this volume that religious sentiments did not just address religious needs, but they also offered opportunities to build local identities, promote collective action, and strengthen social cohesion.

Confraternal life had not only effect on group dynamics, but it also taught individuals to participate in society and defend their own rights. Isabel dos Guimarães Sá's

contribution shows that these conclusions have consequences outside Europe because similar religious associations were institutions of personal empowerment in the Portuguese empire. These religious associations were erected from Macao to Salvador de Bahia—and did not only attract white Portuguese settlers. Only Christians were allowed to enter these associations, but this included creoles from different ethnic origins and baptized Portugueses with Jewish or Islamic ancestors.

### **Toward a New Definition?**

All this in our view does not have to result in the ultimate rejection of the concept. Interrogating the paradoxes and hidden assumptions behind definitions makes historical change visible in all its multilayered and multidimensional aspects (Sewell 2005: 10–11). Yet, it is through the use of “benchmarks” that the varying historical realities of civil society can be discerned. The results of this special issue point toward a working definition based on three elements: (1) civil society involves physical face-to-face relations; (2) the activities of this civil society are (juridically speaking) voluntary and relatively unrestricted by political institutions; and (3) these relations and activities work toward the production or organization of a certain goal that transcends the individual needs and refers to shared values of the group.

To be sure, this definition is limited to constitutive conditions, and does not incorporate common effects of civil societies like trust or public-spirited participation in politics. Moreover, it implies that a civil society goes beyond everyday sociability. It also distinguishes civil society from other comparable concepts. The first point about physical face-to-face connections between individuals underscores that civil society differs from an imagined community in Benedict Anderson’s definition (Anderson 2006: 6–7). The second point about institutions being voluntary and not directly related to political institutions makes clear that civil society can arise in a period or a region without a central state. These are essential elements of a civil society because they can trigger the rise of democratic political values of representation, negotiation, and responsibility (Hoffmann 2003: 269–70),—although even then civil society is part of a broader ideological framework and a governmental sphere. The third point about advancing a public good relates to this. It distinguishes civil society from everyday sociability, such as discussions in public houses or meetings of associations. Members of a civil society move beyond talk about everyday subjects. They also discuss and/or organize issues that concern the functioning and governance of the community. A civil society only produces a public good or public sphere when face-to-face debates are shared and discussed with a broader community of people who do not meet (Wilson and Yachnin 2010: 5). In this vein, the collective actions and public opinions of civil societies are not the outcome of rational arguments—as in the Habermasian definition of a public sphere—but are the result of the shared worldviews and values of the members of the civil society. The omission of a “rational” debate as a constitutive element of a civil society makes it possible to use the concept of civil society beyond the context of Enlightened Europe.

A three-part definition like this has the potential to highlight geographical and chronological differences. To date, most research on European civil society stresses the similarities between different regions of the continent. Recent work highlights the transnational and even global character of civil society that goes beyond European history (Arsan et al. 2012: 157–59; Hoffmann 2006: 7–8, 36–43). However, as suggested in the first section, civil society has many faces in European history and diverging historical contexts determine the varying characteristics of civil society across the continent. The importance of historical contexts and path dependency should therefore be brought to the fore and be acknowledged as a fundamental characteristic. Moreover, further reflection on the historical trajectories of civil societies will help historians to reveal the ideological content of the concept. It is essential that historians combine a broad geographic and temporal scope with a critical evaluation of the concept of civil society because such an approach enables them to reflect thoroughly about the unity and uniqueness of European civil society.

## References

- Anderson, B. (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Arsan, A., S. L. Lewis, and A.-I. Richard (2012) “The roots of global civil society and the interwar moment.” *Journal of Global History* 7: 157–65.
- Baker, K. M. (2001a) “Enlightenment and the institution of society: Notes for a conceptual history.” in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 84–104.
- (2001b) “Transformations of classical republicanism in eighteenth-century France.” *The Journal of Modern History* 73: 32–53.
- Banti, A. M. (2000) “Public opinion and associations in nineteenth-century Italy,” in N. G. Bermeo and P. G. Nord (eds.) *Civil Society before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield: 43–60.
- Bhambra, G. K. (2007) *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- Bijsterveld, A.-J., and P. Trio (2003) “Van gebedsverbod naar broederschap. De evolutie van het fraternitas-begrip in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden in de volle Middeleeuwen.” *Pts. 1 and 2. Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 6: 7–48; 9: 7–46.
- Black, A. (1984) *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present*. London: Methuen.
- (2003) *Guild and State: European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Bossy, J. (1985) *Christianity in the West 1400–1700*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Calhoun, C. (1999) “Introduction: Habermas and the public sphere,” in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 1–48.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chartier, R. (1991) *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Eckstein, N., and N. A. Terpstra (2009a) “Sociability and its discontents,” in N. Eckstein and N. A. Terpstra (eds.) *Sociability and Its Discontents: Civil Society, Social Capital, and Their Alternatives in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Turnhout: Brepols: 1–20.

- (2009b) *Sociability and Its Discontents: Civil Society, Social Capital, and Their Alternatives in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Eckstein, N. A. (2004) "Words and Deeds, Stasis and Change: New Directions in Florentine Devotion around 1500." *Journal of Religious History* 28: 1–18.
- Eisenstadt, S. N. (2000) "Multiple modernities." *Daedalus* 129: 1–29.
- Eisenstadt, S. N., and W. Schluchter (1998) "Paths to early modernities: A comparative view." *Daedalus* 127: 1–18.
- Finlay, C. J. (2006) "Rhetoric and citizenship in Adam Ferguson's Essay on the History of Civil Society." *History of Political Thought* 27: 27–49.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1998) "Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers for civil society?" *The British Journal of Sociology* 49: 210–33.
- Fraser, N. (2007) "Transnationalizing the public sphere: On the legitimacy and efficacy of public opinion in a post-Westphalian world." *Theory Culture and Society* 24: 7–30.
- Garrioch, D. (2001) "Sacred neighborhoods and secular neighborhoods: Milan and Paris in the eighteenth century." *Journal of Urban History* 27: 405–19.
- Geuna, M. (2002) "Republicanism and commercial society in the Scottish Enlightenment: The case of Adam Ferguson," in M. Van Gelderen and Q. Skinner (eds.) *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*. Volume II: The Values of Republicanism in Early Modern Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 177–95.
- Goody, J. (2001) "Civil society in an extra-European perspective," in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 149–64.
- Habermas, J. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Academic Publishers.
- Hallberg, P., and B. Wittrock (2006) "From *Koinonia politikè* to *societas civilis*: Birth, disappearance and first renaissance of the concept," in P. Wagner (ed.) *The Languages of Civil Society*. Oxford: Berghahn: 28–52.
- Hoffmann, S.-L. (2003) "Democracy and Associations in the Long Nineteenth Century: Towards a Transnational Perspective." *The Journal of Modern History* 75: 269–99.
- (2006) *Civil Society, 1750–1914*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hunt, L. (2007) *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Jacob, M. C. (1991) "The Enlightenment redefined: The formation of modern civil society." *Social Research* 58: 475–95.
- Joyce, P. (2003) *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*. London and New York: Verso.
- Kaviraj, S. (2001) "In search of civil society," in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 287–323.
- Kaviraj, S., and S. Khilnani (2001a) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2001b) "Introduction: Ideas of civil society," in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1–7.
- Keane, J. (2007) *Civil Society: Berlin Perspectives*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Khilnani, S. (2001) "The development of civil society," in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 11–32.
- Kocka, J. (1995) "The middle classes in Europe." *Journal of Modern History* 67: 783–806.
- (2004) "Civil society from a historical perspective." *European Review* 12: 65–79.
- Koller, A. (2010) "The public sphere and comparative historical research: An introduction." *Social Science History* 34: 261–90.
- Koo, J.-W. (2007) "The origins of the public sphere and civil society: Private academies and petitions in Korea, 1506–1800." *Social Science History* 31: 381–409.
- Laurier, E., and C. Philo (2007) "'A parcel of muddling muckworms': Revisiting Habermas and the English coffee-houses." *Social and Cultural Geography* 8: 259–81.
- Lemke, T. (2002) "Foucault, governmentality, and critique." *Rethinking Marxism* 14: 49–64.
- Lynch, C. (2008) "Reflexivity in research on civil society: Constructivist perspectives." *International Studies Review* 10: 708–21.



- Lynch, K. A. (2010) "Social provisions and the life of civil society in Europe: Rethinking public and private." *Journal of Urban History* 36: 285–99.
- Mah, H. (2000) "Phantasies of the public sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of historians." *Journal of Modern History* 72: 153–82.
- Mouritsen, P. (2003) "What's the civil in civil society? Robert Putnam, Italy and the Republican tradition." *Political Studies* 51: 650–68.
- Muir, E. (1999) "The sources of civil society in Italy." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29: 379–406.
- (2006) "Why Venice? Venetian society and the success of early opera." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36: 331–53.
- Nautz, J., P. Ginsborg, and T. Nijhuis (2009) *The Golden Chain: Family, Civil Society and the State*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Otter, C. (2008) *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800–1910*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Outram, D. (2005) *The Enlightenment: New Approaches to European History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oz-Salzberger, F. (2001) "Civil society in Scottish Enlightenment," in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 58–83.
- Pérez Diaz, V. (2009) *Markets and Civil Society: The European Experience in Comparative Perspective*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Reddy, W. M. (2000) "Sentimentalism and its erasure: The role of emotions in the era of the French Revolution." *Journal of Modern History* 72: 109–52.
- Schwerhoff, G. (2002) "Criminalized violence and the process of civilisation: A reappraisal." *Crime, History and Societies* 6: 103–26.
- (2004) "Social control of violence, violence as social control: the case of early modern Germany," in H. W. Roodenburg and P. C. Spierenburg (eds.) *Social Control in Europe*. Columbus: Ohio University Press: 220–46.
- Sewell, W. H. (2005) *Logics of history: Social theory and social transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2005) "Governance innovation and the citizen: The Janus face of governance-beyond-the-state." *Urban Studies* 42: 1991–2006.
- Taylor, C. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Terpstra, N. (2000) "The politics of ritual kinship," in N. Terpstra (ed.) *The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1–8.
- (2011) "Charity, civil society, and social capital in Islamic and Christian societies," in B. Ibrahim et al. (eds.) *Takaful 2011. The first annual conference on Arab Philanthropy and Civic Engagement*. Amman: John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement: 184–95.
- Van Dijk, M.F. (2005) "Het verenigingsleven op het hagelandse Platteland: Sociale polarisatie en mid-denveldparticipatie in de 17e en 18e eeuw," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 2: 95–104.
- van Horn Melton, J. (2001) *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe: New Approaches to European History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Kley, D. K. (1996) *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.
- Wagner, P. (2006) *The Languages of Civil Society: European Civil Society*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Warner, M. (2002) *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.
- Wilson, B., and P. Yachnin (2010) "Introduction," in B. Wilson and P. Yachnin (eds.) *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge*. New York: Routledge: 1–21.
- Wittrock, B. (2000) "Modernity: One, none, or many? European origins and modernity as a global condition." *Daedalus* 129: 31–60.