REVIEW ARTICLES

Civility, civil sphere and citizenship: solidarity versus the enclave society

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Jeff Alexander has written a major work of cultural and political sociology, exploring the possibilities of civility as action and civil sphere as a public domain, and at the same time providing a major and largely successful defense of sociology as a critical discipline. His work is timely. With the recent death of Seymour Martin Lipset in late December 2006, there has been much journalistic talk about the demise of sociology and the absence of any important analysis, political or moral, of modern (American) society. Alexander’s The Civil Sphere can be taken as conclusive evidence that sociology is alive and well, and more importantly relevant to modern social issues.

The problem of defining such concepts as civil society and public sphere has bedeviled political philosophy for centuries. Alexander argues that we need a new concept of civil society as the ‘civil sphere’ – a field of values and institutions – to create a space for social criticism and democratic integration, and such a sphere depends for its survival on social solidarity, including such emotions as sympathy for others, and solidarity is par excellence the subject matter of the discipline of sociology. Therefore, the importance and the social function of sociology as a critical discipline is hitched to the survival of the civil sphere, and not just sociology but cultural sociology in particular. Scholars who know Alexander’s existing work will consequently see how the groundwork for The Civil Sphere has been carefully laid out in previous publications – such as the essays on Watergate in The Meanings of Social Life (2003), the notion of ‘civil repair’ (Alexander 2001) and the idea of cultural trauma (Alexander 2004). In part these publications have defended the idea of cultural sociology against its dilution in cultural studies (Alexander 2005) and The Civil Sphere is apart from anything else an attempt to justify cultural sociology as a crucial subfield of sociology as a whole.

What is the civil sphere? Historically ‘civil society’ was of course specifically the product of bourgeois European society, being etymologically connected to burger culture through Burgerliche Gesellschaft which for Hegel was distinct from citoyen (from the Latin civis). Whereas a citizen is simply a member of a state, the traditional discussion of civil society has also included the ideas of civility and civic duty. Gesellschaft comes

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from *Geselle* indicating a shared space and subsequently is associated with the idea of companionship or friendship (Inwood 1992). Here again the connection with sociology should be obvious since at root sociology is the study of companionship (from *socius*). Society is that space within which the companions are sociable and for Aristotle these relationships are the true basis of the *polis*, since without trust and friendship the competition between rational actors in the state may well destroy political life through endless interpersonal conflicts. We have lost this sense of the political significance of friendship, but it was particularly important in the rise of German sociology in works by Otto von Gierke (1990) on premodern fellowships (*Genossenschaft*) and pre-eminently in Ferdinand Toennies’s *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Toennies 1957). Toennies’s distinction between community and association reminds us that German sociology was concerned to study the tensions between cooperation and competition (in fact between two different types of will formation) in the civil sphere or in Marxist terms between the destructive force of class interests and the need for reciprocity and trust, or between scarcity and solidarity (Turner and Rojek 2001). The principal exponent of this tradition in modern sociology is Jurgen Habermas (1992) in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* – an account of the growth of bourgeois society in terms of ‘discursive will formation’ and its decline under the influence of modern media.

What is Alexander’s account of this tradition? For Alexander the civil sphere is bounded by the ‘noncivil’ institutions of state, religion, family, and community, which are seen to be particularistic and sectoral rather than universalistic and societal. The hierarchies of these spaces often conflict with the processes of building solidarity in this wider sphere of civil life. Because the solidarities of the civil sphere constantly fail, there is an important role for civil repair – social and political acts that are designed to rebuild confidence, solidarity and trust. The demand for justice, especially in modern social movements from the black civil rights campaigns onwards, is an important component of civil repair. Alexander rightly takes John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* (1971) to be the turning point of modern political philosophy but complains justifiably that Rawlsian theories of justice have little underpinning from empirical sociological research. Rawls does not show, for example, in *The Law of Peoples* (1999) how an ‘overlapping consensus’ might actually come into existence through social processes.

Alexander traces the emergence of civil society through three phases. Civil Society 1 (CS1) was associated with the Scottish moralists. Referring to a variety of institutions existing outside the state, it described the society emerging in Edinburgh in contrast to the uncivilized highlands with their tribal structures. In CS1 these positive elements of associational life disappeared as critics like Karl Marx complained that the civil institutions of early capitalism were a sham, dividing human life into an artificial separation of the private and public, the social and the political. Critics of capitalist society from both Left and Right came to see the market as destructive of the social bonds that held society together, and hence a distinguished line of social theorists from John Dewey to Hannah Arendt came to see capitalist social relations as corrosive of authentic personal ties as well as of broader political relations. Alexander rejects this CS11 phase as unreflective and unidimensional, and detects a new phase in CS111 in which there has been a revival of interest in Aristotle and Hegel, and hence in informal ties, the life world of local cultures, trust and symbolic processes – in short a ‘cultural turn’ in the investigation of political life. A major work in this development was Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato’s *Civil Society and Political Theory* (1992), but for Alexander this work in its dependence on Hegel and Habermas ‘failed to define the civil sphere as distinctive vis-à-vis such arenas as family life, and neglected entirely the relation between the civil sphere and such arenas as culture, religion, ethnicity,
and race. Here they were following Habermas, who insists on separating rational discourse in the public sphere from the traditions of cultural life’ (Alexander 2006, p. 30).

Alexander argues therefore that in this reinvigoration of theories of civil society it is important not to return simply to CS1, and hence his use of the phrase ‘civil sphere’. His central theme is that we should conceive civil society as ‘a solidary sphere, in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced’ (Alexander 2006, p. 31). Against CS11 he wants to distinguish sharply between capitalist markets and civil society. Capitalist forces are not the only or most damaging threat to the civil sphere which is all too frequently overwhelmed by racial hatred, misogyny, patriarchy, or the monopolistic power of political elites, experts and bureaucrats. In these situations, social movements demanding a restoration of justice or a defense of civility and solidarity against efficiency and hierarchy lead to civil repair. The civil sphere is for Alexander characterized by a series of sentiments or civil motives (reasonableness, calmness and self-control), by civil relations (openness, trustworthiness, and deliberative) and by civil institutions (rule regulated, lawful, and inclusive). The civil sphere is also illustrated by the idea of ‘the public’ and above all by civil associations such as AARP (the American Association of Retired Persons) or by NAACP (the National Association of Colored People).

This view of America’s civil sphere clearly echoes the classical work of Alexis de Tocqueville, but Alexander tries to distinguish between public-minded, more universalistic associations and voluntary associations as such. Alexander associates a neo-Tocquevillian position with the work of Robert Putnam and the idea of social capital or social investments in society. Putnam’s work and especially Bowling Alone (Putnam 2000) offered a powerful criticism of the disturbing social consequences of modern individualism – epitomized in isolated teenagers watching the TV at home. Alexander offers an effective criticism of this legacy by noting that not all voluntary associations contribute to trust, democratic sentiments or generalized solidarity. What is liberal and democratic about the Boy Scouts? How does the National Rifle Association or the National Federation of Independent Businesses contribute to civil repair? Do secret societies such as the Masonic League promote the interests of the people as a whole? The problem – which Alexander recognizes only too well – is that associations can only contribute to democracy if they are ‘intertwined with the full range of communicative and regulative institutions’ (Alexander 2006, p. 103). One criticism of Alexander might be that he fails ultimately to provide a solution to this issue and in particular neglects how the institutions of secular citizenship as a public institution connecting the private citizen to the state through such mechanisms as taxation and public service is a necessary brake upon the exclusionary solidaristic forces of the family, the tribe, the sect and the secret society.

Alexander notes the fact that one can easily identify societies that have strong civil society components but weak or compromised democratic structures. My illustrations would be Italy through much of the twentieth century where local, familial and religious connections and organizations counteracted the possibilities of more democratic institutions at the national level, or modern Thailand where the strength of Buddhist associations such as the sangha and the monarchy preclude any reasonable settlement with its Muslim minority. Another illustration might be offered by Israel, where it appears that the very strength of associations outside the state makes the conduct of effective democratic government deeply problematic. But these illustrations may begin to create analytical problems for which the theory of ‘civil sphere’ may not produce ready-made solutions.

Theda Skocpol (1979) laid the foundations for a restoration of political theory by showing in her research on revolutions that the state cannot (and should not) be reduced
to society, but acts instead as an autonomous and independent historical force. The Israeli state may provide the counter example. In his *State in Society*, Joel Migdal (2001) argues that states vary in terms of their effectiveness depending on their ties to the wider society. He also shows that states are not unitary, integrated actors but in fact clusters of institutions and groups with decidedly conflicting interests. State policies reflect these contingent pressures from their wider social environment and as a result state and society can under some circumstances often stand in a mutually corrosive relationship. Modern religious parties such as Shas, which has mobilized much of the Sephardic vote, actually damage the functions of the state by securing resources for their own constituency against the interests of the society as a whole. One lesson from the 2006 crisis in Lebanon may well be that groups such as Hizbollah rather than acting as a valuable element of civil society replaces the state, thereby reinforcing the sectional interests that have dominated Lebanese politics.

The general lesson of any enclave society is that these enclaves preclude any effective policy response to ethnic stratification and do not create social capital. There is an important sociological lesson here. In civil societies that are seriously divided by separate cultural traditions understanding how ethnic enclaves interact with religious fissures and how such fissures are managed or not managed by a secular state become important issues. One might draw the conclusion that a differentiated, diverse and effervescent civil society may not be the optimum condition for a successful and effective state, producing instead a series of hostile enclaves (Turner 2007).

Alexander’s analytical attempt to resolve the legacies of different versions of civil society theory from Adam Ferguson to Jean Cohen is impressive, but we might take a more pragmatic view of his text – the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In this perspective we can read *The Civil Sphere* as a series of case studies showing the importance and vitality of the liberal, democratic sphere for the proper functioning of politics. These case studies are a model of sociological observation, and they are designed to study the contradictory forces unleashed by any human society between inclusive forces and exclusionary pressures around the We and Them divide. To illustrate these elementary forms of social life, Alexander turns to social movements as movements of civil repair. Once more, Alexander is not content merely to appropriate existing social movements theory but rather wants to recast it better to serve his normative and analytical purposes, claiming that the classical model of social movements needs to be given a deeper cultural and historical foundation. He notes that in modern societies, where notions of justice are often embedded in local and particular contexts, successful morally powerful social movements must present an idealized picture of the community as a whole if they are to command any generalized attention. In short, the particular interests of localized movements must be translated into society-wide interests and values if they are to mobilize society for civil repair. In the space of this review article, it is not possible to provide an account in detail of the examples which Alexander presents but they are essentially how through the conversion of the women’s movements into feminism with its notions of gender universalism the issues of gender found a wide and powerful public, and, second, how the movement for racial equality for black Americans ‘played an enormous role in the civil repair of racism that crystallized in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It supplied economic and organizational power and an ideology of solidarity in the struggle against white oppression’ (Alexander 2006, p. 286). This translation of black opposition was eventually translated into a legal apparatus such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which began the process of making segregation and discrimination on the basis of race a crime.

Alexander’s monumental investigation of the civil sphere ends with what is the great social and political problem of this century, namely, the problem of securing public
security and cultural cohesion in societies that, primarily as a result of global migration and transnational movements, have become deeply differentiated and divided by ethnicity, language and religion. Many conservatives and liberals, even in a society such as the United States which is constituted by migration, believe that multicultural policies have destroyed national identity and moral coherence. It is argued by critics of cultural liberalism that enthusiastic support for cultural difference has resulted in the erosion of national identity, thereby increasing social and political tensions over social membership. These criticisms are associated with the work of Nathan Glazer (1997) on American multiculturalism. Although Glazer rejects the label of ‘neoconservative’, his complaint that America has been ‘balkanized’ has become associated with what is seen as the national retreat from racial justice (Steinberg 1995). These arguments amount to noticing that recognition (of the validity and worth of cultural differences) may lead to neither justice nor solidarity. Alexander argues that empirically we must recognize that modern civil spheres are deeply fragmented and that ethnic particularism in noncivil spheres can and does contribute to this fragmentation, but he holds to the utopian vision of a genuine public sphere in which multiculturalism can in fact enhance universalism rather than destroy it.

Alexander proceeds to consider the various ways, mostly negative, by which people have been incorporated or otherwise into civil society through a variety of coercive strategies. This concluding analysis is very much concerned with the problem of insiders and outsiders and the cultural demonization of the Other. The Holocaust represents the deepest crisis of the western civil sphere, civility and civilization; it tested the limits of the public sphere as a liberal framework of solidarity. Against this background he concludes with an examination of the history of Jewish exclusion, anti-Semitism and assimilation of Jews into American society. The eventual inclusion of Jews into American society provides some confidence that the public sphere can operate in an ethnically differentiated society. Again he takes the current increase in Christian and Jewish marriages as an indicator of progressive change.

Alexander’s principal defense of multiculturalism is normative in the sense that he claims that it is a moral preference but he also aims to show empirically that it can also be a celebration of diversity and hybridity rather than merely a process of containment and assimilation. There is evidence, he claims, for the view that public recognition of various ‘primordial qualities’ – repressed sexualities, minority religious identities, subordinated genders, and minority languages – can enhance rather than undermine civility. Such evidence is supported by increasing marriage rates between phenotypically distinctive racial groups, a decline in the public acceptance of racial stereotypes, and cultural indications of the erasure of a white hegemony (at least in popular culture). These cultural signs of a wider sentiment of inter-ethnic solidarity are reinforced by regulatory measures, primarily in terms of legal enforcement. In conclusion, Alexander celebrates the idea of social solidarity as the utopian dream of all social reform and recognizes that ultimately the civil sphere is a project – ‘a restless aspiration that lies deep in the soul of democratic life’ (Alexander 2006, p. 551).

We can argue that there are, from a sociological point of view, at least three ways of formulating democratic theory as a perspective on participatory politics: social capital, citizenship and civil society. Alexander pays a lot of attention to the first two, but says relatively little about citizenship. He gives one of the most telling criticisms we have of social capital theory and develops a morally and sociologically powerful defense of civil sphere theory, having examined the limitations of traditional notions of civil society. However, while citizenship is frequently implied in his argument, he does not provide either a critique or a defense of the idea of citizenship as necessary to building and
defending solidarity. As a result there is concomitantly little emphasis on rights and duties as foundations of the public sphere. He clearly recognizes the importance of a regulatory regime in defending universalism against prejudice and parochialism. Can social solidarity be defended however without a well grounded set of citizenship institutions? How will public institutions be funded without the universal obligations of taxation? In Britain, the public as a discursive democratic space depends heavily on the BBC, public libraries, museums, and the universities, but these institutions are under constant threat of privatization and they are subordinated to an alien system of appraisal in terms of commercial values. In mundane and pedestrian terms, tax evasion is a basic denial of connectedness and responsibility. There is little in Alexander’s account of the civil sphere about the economic dimensions of membership and solidarity from personal taxation to retirement and pensions. It is also characteristic of American social and political philosophy to regard the movement for civil rights as a movement for human rights, thereby neglecting the simple fact that the right to vote is the fundamental political right of citizenship. This absence is not however fatal to Alexander’s theory which could in principle accommodate these issues.

Alexander’s work is profoundly ambitious. In scale and moral seriousness it might be usefully compared with Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s massive The New Spirit of Capitalism (2005). Boltanski and his colleagues have sought to reinvent a post-Marxist critical theory in which the sociological critique of society engages with the great array of public debates which also challenge social institutions, and which as a result demand some justification of power. This critical approach means that sociologists need to take seriously what social actors themselves have to say and to pay attention to how their agency is manifest in social change. For example, Boltanski and Chiapello are particularly interested in the role of indignation in social movements. They say that ‘indignation emerges in historically situated forms, while doubtless being rooted in anthropologies that possess very general validity. Forms of indignation may be regarded as emotional expressions of a meta-ethical anchorage, and concern infringements that are believed, at least implicitly, to affect people’s possibilities of realizing their humanity’ (p. 491). Boltanski and Chiapello want a sociology of action and justification in which agency is given its full recognition and in which actors are knowledgeable and capable of bringing about change through protest and debate. The emphasis on agency and justice leads them to characterize the public order in terms of confrontations between different orders of value. This analysis of the public sphere attempts to steer a course between conceptualizing society as an endless arena of violence and confrontation (Nietzsche, Marx, Foucault and Bourdieu) and between a contractual vision of social consensus (Rawls, Habermas and the communitarians). Boltanski and Chiapello are clear that they wish to avoid the idea that justification is merely an ideological superstructure, since, for them, justification also exerts constraints on capitalism limiting the impact of alienation and exploitation. Boltanski thus shares with Alexander recognition of the importance of social norms in both constraining and justifying social action, but neither Boltanski nor Alexander assumes that actual capitalist societies are built on a value consensus. On the contrary, the civil sphere is a space of endless debate between different orders of value.

Neither Alexander nor Boltanski and Chiapello in these critical studies of modern society has anything to say systematically about the challenge of Islam to western liberal views of the public sphere and yet reformist Islam is a significant challenge to democratic theories of multiculturalism and secularism. I am not here referring to something called ‘fundamentalism’ or worse still ‘political Islam’. My reference is to a broad movement of Islamic reform and development involving, for example, the Islamization of law
in Malaysia, recognition of Islam in Turkish public life, the growth of Qur’an reading groups in Indonesia and Bangladesh and the peaceful demand to wear headscarves in French schools that call for a recognition of Islam as itself a public sphere, but a sphere that is not necessarily compatible with secularism. This observation is to recognize that in modern Europe multiculturalism has become a code word for ‘the management of religious diversity’ and coping with religious diversity in fact means ‘the management of Muslims’. Secular republican France has of course been at the coal-face of this issue, as illustrated by the state’s problematic response to the ‘headscarf affair’. Critical sociology and Marxism were in retrospect notorious for the neglect of religion, which was seen as either an ideology of pre-capitalist societies or a superstition that would, in the face of scientific knowledge, wither away. Although Boltanski and Chiapello want to distance themselves from this Marxist legacy, they also fail to engage with the issue of religion in modernity. One might argue that one problem for secular authorities with religious revivalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is that it wants to draw its values from Jerusalem and Mecca rather than Athens and Rome, from the holy city rather than from network society. It is difficult to resolve religious disputes over incommensurable beliefs in secular society by procedures that could be mutually acceptable to both religion and state. Therefore, civil society remains unstable. The unspoken assumption of Alexander’s study of the civil sphere and its politics is that the public remains a secular domain. What would happen if the holy city replaced the civil sphere? Can universalism be a sacred rather than a profane domain and if so can it tolerate a struggle between competing gods?

To compare Alexander and Boltanski is also to remind ourselves of how little Marx and Marxism shaped the development of modern American sociology, including of course Alexander himself. While European sociology has been perhaps overstated the importance of social class in negating the positive possibilities of a bourgeois civil sphere, Alexander may understate the material constraints on democratic discourse. His main preoccupations are unexceptionally about race and ethnicity rather than with the scarcities associated with class, status and power. Boltanski’s theory is self-consciously post-Marxian. By contrast, Alexander is more preoccupied with the legacy of Durkheim who after all developed an implicit theory of the civil sphere in *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (Durkheim 1992). Although Alexander very openly recognizes that the civil sphere is subject to contestation, he sees these in terms of particularistic cultural threats to the democratic ideal rather than a constant battle between schism driven by material interests and solidarity forged by common values (Lockwood 1992).

Alexander might reply that my ruminations about the restoration of the Muslim caliphate from Istanbul to Jakarta are idle speculation and that his confidence in the project of the civil sphere and multiculturalism is grounded in solid empirical research – intermarriage rates and the cultural erosion of whiteness in popular culture. There are however other empirical indicators that all is not well with the civil sphere in terms of ethnic harmony and intercultural understanding. I have elsewhere argued that the contemporary emphasis on security is producing an ‘enclave society’ in which social groups are separated by walls – physical, cultural and to some extent biological (Turner 2007). Defending cosmopolitanism against the background of an enclave society is highly problematic and uncertain. The underlying rights of the *cosmopolis* might be described as ‘rights of mobility’. These rights claims are implicitly about crossing borders, transcending boundaries or creating new settlements. These include the rights of migrant labor, rights to hold a passport, rights of refuge, or rights to marry outside one’s group or religion. These mobility rights were consciously supported by western states during the Cold War but there has been a marked withdrawal from their defense, being replaced by rights to security in the age of the war on terrorism. The rise
of enclave society makes the quest for cosmopolitan values a pressing moral need, but the current preoccupation with immurement of the refugee, the asylum seeker and the underclass alongside the terrorist appears to be irresistible. The alternative strategy to cosmopolitan engagement would be to create public spaces in which there is in fact minimal cultural contact between ethnic enclaves. Citizens could then exist in tolerance, not because they like each other, but because they share no larger projects together. They share a ‘civility of indifference’ (Bailey 1996). This image of an enclave society of course represents a special theoretical challenge to the discipline of sociology precisely because it is committed to the view that the civil sphere cannot exist without social solidarity. The implications of current ‘enclavement’ is in fact that civil society could exist in a minimal fashion with a limited degree of value consensus combined with effective policing, high walls, electronic surveillance and forensic monitoring through DNA tests. In conclusion, while as intellectuals and members of the public sphere we should support Alexander’s moral position, there are at the very least worrisome indicators that the civil sphere is profoundly shaken by an alternative dystopian world of walls, closed borders, internal boundaries, ghettoes and gated communities. For some critics such as Giorgio Agamben (1998) and Judith Butler (2006), Guantanamo Bay rather than the cafes of bourgeois society or the debating chamber of the House of Commons presents us with the image of future social life.

References
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