
ARTICLES

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Identifying and Engendering the Forms of Emergent Civil Societies: New Directions in Political Anthropology

Across political spectrums and disciplinary divides, amongst policy-makers and new social movements, between government bureaucrats and officials of non-governmental organizations, traversing the terrain travelled by transnational elites and territorial secessionists, the concept of civil society is increasingly at large. At the end of this introduction I will provide a preliminary (and admittedly idiosyncratic) bibliography to introduce anthropologists to a broad, if not exhaustive range of literature that engages and elaborates the concept in different disciplines and sites of study. Deployed by some scholars as a heuristic category and by others as an object of analysis, its dynamic coexistence as a political slogan and social prescription, social science analytic concept and philosophically normative category (Seligman 1992) make it ripe for anthropological debate and ethnographic consideration.

If political anthropologists have come rather lately to debates about civil society (see for eg. Comaroff and Comaroff, in press), this is not because it is peripheral to the issues they address. On the contrary, in a discipline increasingly preoccupied with questions of identity and community, nationbuilding and state formation, cultural specificities and universal human rights, colonial legal institutions and local interpretations, the question of civil society provides a provocative nexus of orientation. For civil society is always already a question; just as the public sphere has an existence that is always phantasmic, civil society is a condition animated by anxieties. Will civil society be achieved (in postcolonial, postsocialist, or postindustrial contexts); what are the conditions that might enable its emergence outside of its eighteenth-century European bourgeois origins; by what criteria can its existence be measured?

Whether the area of inquiry is Hungary or South Africa, Los Angeles or Lubutu, the discourse of civil society is punctuated with longing and nostalgia. Linking the alleged impossibility of representing society in contemporary conditions (Vattimo 1992), together with the crisis of the state in so many geographical areas, academics, policy-makers, and activists are concerned "to reassert (and often redefine) a sphere of civil society (or civil life) beyond the State and yet transcending purely individual existence" (Seligman 1992:9). Privileged as the sole source of social virtues that might keep festering forces of violence at bay, some fear that its existence in many parts of the globe is either fragile or unattainable. The concept arouses anxiety, I would suggest, because it is so deeply implicated in our hopes and fears for the future of democracy.

It seems appropriate to open this special issue on civil society with Harry West's remarkable paper "Creative Destruction and Sorcery of Construction: Power, Hope and Suspicion in Post-War Mozambique." Winner of the Political and Legal Anthropology Association's 1996 Student Paper Prize,

West's essay provides a rich ethnographic account of the onset of democracy in postcolonial and post Socialist Mozambique. In this account, he encapsulates many of the themes that the other contributors engage in their own explorations of the manifestations of civil society in the so-called New World Order. The meanings of democracy and its ritual practices, West demonstrates, are shaped by long histories of colonial governance and anticolonial activity as well as a history of local interpretations that have given meaning to the continuing crises of modernity's imposition. International aspirations for peace and prosperity, forged with a faith in reason and to be realized in the rationalization of economies and politics, too often fail to comprehend the cultural forms in which civil society is salient. Mozambique's 1994 multi-party elections, held under the purview of the United Nations and the watchful eyes of NGOs and international financial bodies, disappointed both official commentators and international observers in their failure to disrupt regional party allegiance.

The failure of such elections to disturb longstanding power relations was explained by way of the "lack of civic education" amongst a populace who had presumably failed to grasp the meaning of their new powers of citizenship. West, however, provides an alternative rendering of this event, showing how the local populace used the election to performatively articulate new state-society relationships in the idioms of a precolonial political cosmology. Despite protracted efforts in the colonial and post-independence period to police and prohibit "traditional" religious practices rooted in institutions of kinship, government officials nonetheless often found themselves secretly dependent upon the forms of sorcery and counter-sorcery. The crisis of state power consequent upon structural adjustment programs and the massive inequalities of wealth thereby occasioned gave credence to rumors of a government controlled by forms of sorcery no longer related to norms of kinship solidarity or social obligation. To clothe a party leader with the ritual vestments of the *humu* — a counsellor, healer, arbitrator, and diplomat responsible to a matrilineal kinship group who used his power to combat the destructive use of sorcery by others, but was unable to accumulate wealth for his own benefit — was not to reject "modernity" for "tradition," nor to abandon rights of citizenship, but to express democratic aspirations for governance in a locally meaningful register. For those who strive to establish new relations between state and society, traditional cultural forms may provide resilient and dynamic symbols, capable of expressing new subtleties and contradictions of power. These articulations should attract the attentions of anthropologists concerned with the ways in which transformations in relations between politics, economics, and social relations are locally understood. Such articulations may configure contemporary manifestations of civil society — a term with a history of conflicted meanings:

Originally posited in the eighteenth century as referring to a realm of social mutuality, in the nineteenth century it was used to characterize that aspect of social existence which existed beyond the State. It points, in its different articulations, to those elements of both community and individualism that have served to define political thought for the past two hundred years. For civil society is, at the same time, that realm of "natural affections and sociability" recognized by Adam Smith, as well as that arena where man "acts as a private individual, regards other men as means, degrades himself into means and becomes a plaything of alien powers" in Marx's famous characterization of market relations. It is the realm of "rights" but also of property, of civility but also of economic exploitation. It rests on the legally free individual, but also on the community of free individuals. Apart from the State, it is nevertheless regulated by law. A public realm, yet one constituted by private individuals. Given these very different resonances, it is no wonder that contemporary uses of the term tend to be broad and often lack

analytic rigor. The works of writers as diverse as Ferguson and Marx, Hegel and Adam Smith, de Tocqueville and Gramsci are all invoked in the contemporary “rediscovery” of civil society (Seligman 1992:3 footnotes omitted).

An amorphous space that lies somewhere between the state and society and mediates between the two by way of representations circulating in the public sphere, civil society has a long history in Western political philosophy. Stretching back to Christian natural law theory, its early modern articulation in the Scottish Enlightenment is perhaps the more relevant site of ancestry for today’s debates. Jonathan Hearn’s article in this volume “Scottish Nationalism and the Civil Society Concept” (1997) is significant because he takes the concept home, so to speak, to one of the most significant sites of its origin. By exploring its contemporary importance in anti-colonialist struggle, he points to one of the many ironies of the term and its deployment. Like so many other Enlightenment concepts, the meanings of civil society were forged on colonial terrain. The internal colonialisms of Britain and, more euphemistically, the United Kingdom, were crucial arenas for its inception. Nonetheless, like other Enlightenment concepts, it has provided a rich rhetorical resource for anticolonial movements seeking to “reclaim politics” and to “enable a more authentic, grassroots democracy.”

Not surprisingly, given its European heritage and philosophical presuppositions, the term’s relevance and applicability in non-Western and postcolonial contexts has been debated. There is little doubt that the term partakes of a Eurocentric provincialism and that the construction of civil society was integrally related to the construction of an uncivil other. Indeed, in philosophers like Kant and Hegel, the term was not unrelated to and in many ways legitimated processes of colonial subjugation (Serequeberhan 1989). Bruce Robbins (1995), for instance, argues that the uncivil negation the concept produced was in fact that contested conceptual field that long defined anthropological distinction — namely, culture or tradition. In one of the many unstable conceptual dichotomies bestowed upon us by the Enlightenment, European civil society — characterized by Reason and the Rule of Law — was opposed to the traditions and customs of others. These could in turn, however, become resources in anticolonial struggles to create new national publics (1995: 106; see also Coombe 1997, Fitzpatrick 1992).

A public space of interaction characterized by a dialectical tension between public and private, and between the economy and the state, and one in which a civic selfhood is (allegedly) distinguished from communal or collective roles and attributes, civil society is nonetheless a cultural space, at least as contemporary anthropologists deploy the term. This is a culture that occupies the public sphere (see Robbins, ed. 1993) but “evade[s] the strict determinations of the nation-state while remaining in interesting proximity to them:”

If, like culture, it values alternative or subversive practices wherever they exist, even within enclaves of self-expressive otherness, it also goes beyond culture in giving priority to practices that achieve the satisfaction of palpable friction as they push and are pushed by state power (Robbins 1995: 105).

The papers gathered here exemplify a tendency in anthropology towards examining the forms of civil society in neo- and postcolonial societies with conflicted histories of relationship to the European political traditions in which the concept was engendered. Although few of the authors, besides Hearn, make extensive use of the term, all are concerned with the cultural vehicles and idioms through which state-society relationships are articulated and evaluated in public forums.

Frederic Schaffer's contribution to this volume reminds us that the space of politics is not necessarily institutional but a rather a realm of expressive practice in which meanings are forged and negotiated (Coombe 1993; in press). Democracy and democratization may be the leitmotif of our era, but we should never presume to know what these terms mean in any given context (Comaroff n.d.). Enlightenment concepts are themselves transnational goods, invested with specific meanings through their appropriation in local contexts. The Senegalese Wolof term *demokaraasi* shares a genealogy with the "democracy" with which we are familiar, but is a "hybrid" term produced through local allegiances with and alienations from European concepts that have been simultaneously imposed (through colonialism and development agencies, aid organizations and structural adjustment policies) and embraced. As John Comaroff (n.d.) suggests, the term is often deployed in accusations and incriminations levelled at the "Third World" whose political inabilities and impossibilities are always open to global diagnosis and censure. Democracy and its local inflections then, are necessarily dialectical productions of relations of domination and resistance. *Demokaraasi* in Senegal, it appears, takes on a life of its own within the very political institutions whose mere existence might be seen to exhaust the concept in Western contexts. It becomes a vehicle with which party politics are both legitimated and questioned in a larger public sphere. For *demokaraasi* to be sustained and developed, the workings of the state itself must ideally become responsive to an ethos of civility forged as bonds of community solidarity. Political behavior which to Western eyes may appear as evidence of democracy's absence, is shaped by this aspiration.

Julian Go's paper adds further dimensions to our understandings of the hybrid meanings of democracy and our recognition of the relations of colonial and neocolonial subjugation in which "rituals of democracy" have been embedded. Thus his contribution also speaks to the imbrication of civil society with institutions of colonial governance and postcolonial struggle. Civil society was a space of virtue fostered by the self-discipline and moral restraint of individuals. Others, allegedly lacking in these virtues, were to be inculcated with them through the "democratic tutelage" afforded by legal rationality and liberal governmentality. These rhetorical and institutional forms could, however, be put to other political ends, as they were in the Philippines. Local understandings of the public interest were reformulated, to taking advantage of the American colonial state so as to meet precolonial cosmological norms of reciprocity, exchange, and obligation. A particular political performativity with relationship to law emerged in the colonial period and continues to enchant the state apparatus today. Its paternalist if not patriarchal nature should be noted; the performative enactment of masculinity in public forums is an oft remarked feature of civil society's articulation (as Robert Albro's contribution will indicate; see also Di Stefano 1991; Dean 1995; Fraser 1993 and sources cited therein).

The space of civil society, it must be remembered, is also a site of discipline and surveillance:

Civil society is proposed as the essential feature of any democracy: the institutional infrastructure for political mediation and public exchange. However, while recognizing the democratic functions that the concept and reality of civil society have made possible, it is also important to be aware of the functions of discipline and exploitation...inherent in and inseparable from these same structures (Hardt 1995: 28. See also Sintomer 1995).

If the bourgeois public sphere provided rights of freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and association, it also inaugurated an era characterized by more disciplinary mechanisms that tied the subject to his subjectivity in novel ways. Civil society exists "in a relation of tension and equilibrium with the state, generating sundry forms of association that elicit the establishment of a range of disciplinary institutions"

(Yudice 1995: 1). If civil society enabled hegemony to replace coercion as the dominant form of power, it was nonetheless closely tied to the rise of the administrative state and increased surveillance over those social sites where self and identity were forged.

Ciekawy's contribution, "Policing Religious Practice in Contemporary Coastal Kenya," points to the pervasive role of the administrative state in ritual forms of self-fashioning. Although colonial laws prohibiting witchcraft remain on the books in Kenya, their contemporary deployment may well be distinguishable from their colonial provenance. If regimes of colonial governance sought to contain and extinguish arenas of tribal superstition and primordialism while inculcating modern forms of personhood and civility, they also had the effect of restricting the very forms of assembly, association, and communication that civil society as a political force was reliant upon. Then, and now, religious forms provided the social organization and resources to engage in political activity vis-à-vis the state. What may be new, however, is the apparent dependence of state officials upon the very practices they police. Rituals "central to Mijikenda notions of identity and the maintenance of their social and political life" are increasingly penetrated by and harnessed to serve the interests of state power. Ciekawy echoes others with the assertion that civil society in Africa can rarely if ever be independent of state power (eg: Mamdani 1996).

Even in European history, however, the independence of civil society from the state may have been more aspirational than actual. Religious values have always been central to civil society, even within the Western tradition. Although he would be unlikely to affirm the possibilities inherent in religious forms outside of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Adam Seligman (1992) acknowledges as much when he shows that the emergence of civil society depended as much upon revelation as it did upon reason. Contemporary concerns that the "postmodern" loss of faith in reason threatens the existence of viable civil societies may therefore be misplaced. Faith in the public role of reason, was, after all, a form of faith, and it may well have been faith, rather than reason that historically provided the cement consolidating the bourgeois public sphere in which civil society was performatively enacted.

Most discussions of the limits of rationalist discourse as a medium for forging civil society come in wake of Habermas' formulations of the public sphere (1989, 1995, 1996) and in critical reactions to discursive models of democracy that privilege deliberation (eg: Fraser 1993, Young, 1995). In addition to pointing out the discriminatory and exclusionary effects of such models, critics also focus upon the lack of correspondence between such models and dominant forms of communication in societies where mass media and its messages increasingly shape, if they do not determine, transmissions of cultural forms (Wernick 1991, Garnham 1993, Yudice 1995, Hansen 1993, Polan 1993).

We must be wary when formulating configurations of a postmodern public sphere to avoid overvaluing "a particular model of rationalist discourse at the expense of disregarding the modes and functions of most media communication." It is no longer possible to pretend that political debates are only carried out in spaces labelled as such or that the entertainment and marketing forms proffered by commercial media are not deployed in the communication of wider social agendas. The resistances, imaginative strategies and creative reappropriations — "the production of life contexts" — enacted by subjects alienated from [commodified] networks of public expression and representation, are potentially political practices to the extent that relations of social production and cultural reproduction are thereby challenged. Forged "in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation," the activities of such counterpublics

may offer “forms of solidarity and reciprocity,” but “these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated (Coombe, in press, internal footnotes to Garnham and Hansen omitted).

Many scholars are anxious to point out that “civil society is also the society of consumption and spectacle” (Yudice 1995: 5), but they have been largely concerned with market-mediated forms of publicity and the forms of political subjectivity they forge (eg. Warner 1993). As Benjamin Lee reminds us, such modes of publicity (whether formulated around a print-mediated public in eighteenth-century Europe or a mass-mediated society of spectacle in twentieth-century North America) may not travel; in other societies alternative understandings of publicity and subjectivity may need to be developed. “Virtual Patriliney: Image Mutability and Populist Politics in Quillacollo, Bolivia” — Robert Albro’s discussion of political image-making in Bolivia — does precisely this, reminding us that political power in most societies requires extensive cultural support. Publicity networks are no less important in societies without extensive mass media communications but political self-production may assume other forms. In an emergent Bolivian neopopulism, colonial categories of ethnicity and class are publicly rearticulated through imaginative narratives of genealogy and kinship. In such practices, politics itself is en/gendered.

Sarah Diamond is also concerned with the gendered forms of performativity that shape a national public sphere, in this case in South India. In the Western history of civil society, self-governing voluntary associations are privileged as the institutions most likely to foster civil society, continually forging new interests and new identities. If voluntary associations provided the infrastructural nexii for civil society in the European bourgeois public sphere, however, we cannot simply quantify them and ascertain the extent of their activity to take the measure of civil society in other sociohistorical contexts. In “State Patronage and Performers: Negotiating Nationhood, Community Identity, and Cultural Value in South India,” Diamond shows how the state deploys voluntary associations to promote state-defined nationalist goals and how government sponsorship serves to entrench dominant cultural values and existing relations of social inequality. Again, the administrative state draws upon an invented tradition to stage the performative enactment of a new national public in which class and gender relations are articulated in dynamic interrelation. Nonetheless, nationalist discourses may also provide resources to contest these forms of social subordination and state patronage may provide leverage to politicize the exploitation upon which this production of culture is premised.

A similar enactment of “gendered nationalism” (see Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995) is explored in Linda Angst’s exploration of “The Himeyuri Story and Okinawan Identity in Postwar Japan.” Adolescent girls who lost their lives after serving as nurses to occupying Japanese soldiers in World War II, the Himeyuri have become privileged symbols of emergent nationalisms that seek to redefine majority/minority ethnic relations in a postimperial context. Condensing connotations of patriotism, virginity, sacrifice, and moral superiority, they provide resonant rhetorical vehicles with which to invert and to legitimate a history of colonial othering and postcolonial struggle. Articulations of relations between state and society — the space of civil society — often assume such affective dimensions.

If there is a signal absence in this collection, it may be in a lack of consideration of the role of the market and of the global forces of capital which are today constitutive in the formation of civil society. Nor should we presume that the nation-state is necessarily the defining arena for the constitution of publics or for the development of civil society. Public spheres now develop across national borders, and relationships between state and society may be consolidated amongst global diasporas and a transnational

populace. Relations of publicity are often intercultural and sometimes global in character; states may be influenced by social movements elsewhere. New communications technologies and trade networks suggest not that the state is becoming less important, nor that societies can no longer be located, but rather that their interrelationships may be more diffuse and their articulations multiply allusive. This is promising terrain for a political anthropology sensitive to the local conjunctures of power and meaning in transforming fields of governmentality.

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