I

Of "Sect Man"

The Modern Self and Civil Society in Max Weber

AGENCY, CITIZENSHIP, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society was a vision largely forgotten during the "short twentieth century." It sounded quaint and even irrelevant for the age of power politics, organized economy, and mass democracy, in which individual agency tended to be stifled by these gigantic institutions and processes that operated beyond one's practical comprehension and engagement. This was a time when the centralized bureaucratic state, whether the totalitarian or welfare variant, dominated public life, while the economy of scale, whether capitalist or not, was welcomed with little questioning. Democratization surely constituted an irreversible trend of the century, and yet its universal appeal was intrinsically tied to passive citizenship, in its worst case, of a mass consumerist kind. Neither society, increasingly cramped between the state and market, nor civility and civic virtues, increasingly displaced by the sovereignty of individual citizens' unreflective preferences, could claim much attention but in a romantic lament for their erosion. According to Eric Hobsbawm, the vision of civil society had no corresponding reality in the twentieth century and was merely reflective of a bygone era – that is, an "idealized nineteenth-century."[1] The twentieth century was not to be remembered as the age of civil society.

[1] E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 139.

Against this historical background, it comes rather as a surprise that its last decade witnessed the sudden triumph of civil society all over the world.[2] The unanticipated collapse of the communist bloc, third world democratization, and the crisis of the Keynsian regimes were all lumped together and seen as evidence that civil society, long thought dormant, had finally reasserted itself over the overbearing states. Much hubris followed these historical developments – most notably, the ironical celebration of the Hegelian "end of history" that had finally dawned with the demise of the Hegelian state.

For a while, it was widely believed that civil society was the answer to the governance and legitimacy crises of the Hegelian state, since it would make the state less intrusive while more responsive to individual citizens' daily concerns. This expectation was fueled by a formal-juridical understanding of civil society as embodying a set of determinate institutions that stand independent of or even in opposition to the state. Civil society was seen to consolidate a zone of institutionalized self-regulation, buttressed by the formal rule of law, which adjudicates the conflicts immanent in civil society and formed through spontaneous interaction among rights-bearing individuals religiously pursuing their own ends. Its inspiration came from, along with a Lockean liberalism, the social imagination of "commercial society" popularized by the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, and its model, a laissez-faire market where ideas and opinions would circulate throughout the society as freely as money. In this view, the state is also an institutional agent that faithfully services and implements the mandates given by civil society, one that confers legitimacy on the state and sometimes withdraws it. The alleged Hegelian end of history was to inaugurate a profoundly anti-Hegelian age in a double sense: first, the relationship between the state and civil society was to be completely reversed from the way in which Hegel postulated it, and second, formal juridical institutionalism of civil society was to trump the ethical formative principles of the state as Hegel saw them.

This reversal, of course, does not mean that the reinvigorated civil society would be indifferent to the question of good citizenship. Quite the contrary. For, within a clearly walled citadel in which to pursue

[2] P. Hirst, "The State, Civil Society, and the Collapse of Soviet Communism," *Economy and Society* 20:2 (1991) 217–42.

freely their autonomously chosen ends, individuals would regain the ownership of their lives and an authentic sense of agency. In turn, reempowerment of individual agency would usher in a more participant citizenship that was to make the state (and market) more accountable; the increasing efficacy of the public participation that was to ensue would further motivate active engagement; and so would begin the benign cycle that would ultimately culminate in a more robust and efficacious liberal democratic regime. In other words, civil society was believed to be the harbinger of the public citizenship without which neither a healthy democratic self-governance nor the liberal moral ideals of individual autonomy, freedom, and agency could be realized to their fullest extent. Civil society sustains "conditions of liberty," which (re)produce a uniquely modern kind of moral agency that Ernest Gellner called a "modal self."[3] The difference from Hegel's project, then, lies less in a principled indifference to the moral matters in the public sphere than in the institutional framework advocated for the empowerment of individual agency. This ultimate ethical stage was reachable, according to the civil society advocates, through an institutionalization of local voluntary associational life free of paternalistic interference of even the benevolent state. The recent project of civil society, one might say, rejected a Platonic politics of the soul only to embrace a laissez-faire politics of the soul. Alexis de Tocqueville was to replace Hegel as the political theorist for our posthistorical age.

As the initial euphoria has subsided, however, a growing number of people are focusing on a different understanding of civil society that is conceived more explicitly in terms of human *capabilities*, both moral and political, than of legal and economic *institutions*.[4] The new focus is predicated on a recognition that many of the optimistic consequences that were to ensue from a robust civil society did not materialize as

[3] E. Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Revivals* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

[4] S. Khilnani, "The Development of Civil Society," in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 24. From a similarly critical perspective, Krishan Kumar proposed that we do away with civil society as a historical and analytical concept. See his "Civil Society: An Inquiry into the Usefulness of a Historical Term," *British Journal of Sociology* 44:3 (1993) 375–95. Also see C. G. A. Bryant's defense of the concept in the same issue, "Social Self-Organization, Civility, and Sociology: A Comment on Kumar's 'Civil Society'," 397–401.

promised. Despite much talk of reform, the public still sees government as an alien, intrusive, and unresponsive power that is controlled by special interests, leaving even the regular voters feeling shut out, ill-informed, unrepresented, and manipulated. The consequent civic distress, apathy, and alienation show little sign of abating in Europe and North America; in fact, they are spreading to the newly democratized countries, where many greet them, along with the mass consumerism that accompanies them, as the *cognito ultima* of "progress" and "modernity." Politics seems as dysfunctional as ever. The civic virtues, mutual trust, and civility or, to be precise, the lack thereof continue to be sources of complaints everywhere and an occasion for the conservative (and liberal) jeremiad, especially in the United States and increasingly in Europe. Weaker family ties and fraying neighborhoods are loathed universally as the root cause for the evaporation of mutual trust and erosion of common identity, without which civic solidarity cannot be sustained. In much of the rest of the world, in fact, the similar apprehension about the disintegration of traditional cultural, religious, and communal values is growing more acute, even taking, in some places, a violent turn in a renewed anticolonial and antimodernist direction. Social disintegration is feared more than ever. The market, in the name of globalization, the new economy, and financial capitalism, has become unshackled, rapidly penetrating our lives to an extent hitherto unimagined. Refashioning society in the image of the market has so far generated only an unprecedented level of socioeconomic inequality, insecurity, and anxiety, both domestically and internationally.[5]

Under these circumstances, the simple presence of local voluntary associational life, no matter how autonomously instituted, and a laissez-faire politics of the soul, for all its implicit concern with good citizenship, do not seem to do much to ameliorate political dysfunction, social disintegration, and economic anxiety. Furthermore, civil society sometimes does more harm than good. Organized special interests and their vigorous activities are only deepening the general public's sense of

[5] W. Galston, "Political Economy and the Politics of Virtue: U.S. Public Philosophy at Century's End," in A. L. Allen and M. C. Regan, Jr. (eds.), *Debating Democracy's Discontents: Essays on American Politics, Law, and Public Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 65–9.

alienation from and mistrust of the political process; the neighborhood groups organized for gated communities can hardly be seen as making a positive contribution to the reinstatement of public commitment, mutual trust, and civic solidarity; economic globalization requires a new global regime for a better coordinated regulation of capital and trade flows, and yet an attempt to build such a regime is often frustrated for domestic political reasons that have to do with powerful workers' unions. In order to jump-start the benign cycle of public engagement, efficacious government, and individual agency, then, a one-sidedly institutional approach does not seem sufficient; instead, we need to pay closer attention to the more substantive side of what civil society can and cannot do. In other words, the question to be raised about civil society seems less about the institutional maturity and autonomy of voluntary associational life than about the variegated civic educational effects that different voluntary associations exert on their individual members' moral makeup. Civil society is in need of a reconceptualization that can allow it to address the question of citizenship and morality more directly. Nancy Rosenblum, one of the prominent theorists of contemporary civil society, observes that

> [t]he orthodox preoccupation with associations as buffers against government and avenues to political participation, and with freedom of association as an aspect of personal liberty has been eclipsed. Today, the dominant perspective is moral: civil society is seen as a school of virtue where men and women develop the dispositions essential to liberal democracy.[6]

Theoretically at issue in this recent reorientation is a more profound and troubling question about the self-sustainability of procedural liberalism on its own terms. That is to say, can a liberal democratic regime sustain itself in a robust form while remaining neutral to the moral dispositions and civic virtues of its citizens? What is the role of civil society with regard to the continuing viability of a liberal democratic regime (statecraft) and the self-constitution of its citizens (soulcraft)? Cutting across the vast array of liberal-communitarian interlocutions, an increasing number of contemporary theorists of Tocquevillean persuasions converge on the following points: first, a liberal

[6] N. Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) 26.

democratic regime cannot be sustained in a robust form without certain kinds of virtues and characters in its citizens that can capacitate and motivate their active public engagement[7]; second, these types of agency are cultivated, reproduced, and reinforced through a local, voluntary associational life in a pluralistically organized civil society[8]; third, American civil society is in serious decline, which has prompted these neo-Tocquevilleans to call for a "softening," if not a complete abandonment, of the liberal doctrine of neutrality and to encourage a stronger form of political and civic education of liberal citizens via a formative intervention in the organization and structure of civil society.[9] Criticizing the liberal reaffirmation of the strict separation of statecraft and soulcraft, in short, the neo-Tocquevillean position suggests a politics of civil society in which statecraft and soulcraft are combined to sustain a more robust liberal democratic regime.

Against this background, my book makes two claims about Weber's political thought: one pertains to its affinity with the neo-Tocquevillean politics of civil society; the other, to its crucial distance. First, Weber agrees that the cultivation of a certain type of moral agent he called the "person of vocation" (*Berufsmensch*) is critical for the continuing vitality of the modern liberal democratic regime; that its virtues, dispositions, and characters can be fostered only in a peculiar context of civil society he called "sectlike society" (*Sektengesellschaft*); and that the decline of civil society and the concomitant degeneration of the liberal self must be restored as one of the central agendas for late modern

[7] P. Berkowitz, *Virtues and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); R. Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); W. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); S. Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[8] A. Gutman (ed.), *Freedom of Association* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Perss, 1998); E. Shils, *The Virtue of Civility: Selected Essays on Liberalism, Tradition, and Civil Society* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1997); S. Macedo, "Community, Diversity, and Civic Education: Toward a Liberal Political Science of Group Life" in E. F. Paul, F. Miller, and J. Paul (eds.), *Communitarian Challenge to Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[9] B. Barber, "The Discourse of Civility" in S. Elkin and K. Soltan (eds.), *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1999); M. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); J. B. Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

politics. Statecraft and soulcraft are not separated in Weber's politics of civil society, nor can they or should they be separated.

Second, however, Weber maintains that not just any "revivification of civil society" would be conducive to the empowerment of the modern liberal agency. For he is more sensitive than some contemporary Tocquevilleans to the fact that the simple presence of a vibrant associational life does not offer a coherent guarantee against what John Keane calls the problem of "uncivil society" or "bad civil society."[10] Not all forms of civil society are conducive to a robust liberal democratic regime; some are in fact detrimental to it. Through a genealogical reconstruction, instead, Weber seeks to resuscitate a peculiar mode of civil society as the site where his liberal politics of voluntary associational life and the unique ontology of modern self intersect and interact. It is this theoretically elaborated ideal type of civil society, cutting across his larger reflections on modernity and modernization, that stabilizes the critical vista from which Weber substantiates the morphology of civil society for a vibrant liberal democratic citizenship.

From this perspective, then, it need not surprise anyone that, when questioned in November 1918 about the liberal democratic reform of postwar defeated Germany, Weber replied in the following unambiguous terms:

> Foremost among these, too, is the restoration of that prosaic moral "decency" [*Anständigkeit*] which, on the whole, we had and which we lost in the war – our most grievous loss. Massive problems of education, then. The method: only the "club" in the American sense [*amerikanische Klubwesen*] (and associations of every kind based on *selective* choice of members), starting with childhood and youth, no matter for what purpose.[11]

[10] J. Keane, *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 114ff, and S. Chambers and J. Kopstein, "Bad Civil Society," *Political Theory* 29:6 (2001) 837–65. An instructive historical example of bad civil society is analyzed in S. Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49:3 (1997) 401–29.

[11] Letter to Friedrich Crusius as quoted in W. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 323. A complete letter is in Biography 647/636; E. Baumgarten (ed.), *Max Weber: Werk und Person* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1964) 536ff; and GPS (1st ed.) 482ff, all of which Mommsen claims to be mistranscribed. Material enclosed in parentheses in the quote is based on Mommsen's claims. English rendering was altered to provide a more literal translation.

My book can be summarized as an attempt to understand these somewhat unexpected references by Weber to a robust associational life, ethical characterology, and America, and to draw their implications for the contemporary politics of civil society.

READING WEBER: BETWEEN POLITICS AND SCIENCE

As an interpretation of Max Weber's political thought, my book argues that Weber's reflections on liberal modernity, once adequately reconstrued, disclose an "immanentist" critique anchored in the logic and promises of the liberal modern project itself rather than an authoritarian challenge to it. For this purpose, I aim to topically and genealogically reconstruct Weber's political thought. First, this reconstruction is topical since various elements in Weber's political thought will be reconfigured in such a way as to highlight a sustained contemplation of the two questions of the modern self and civil society. Second, it is genealogical since the main narrative thread will be propelled by examinations in successive order of early and late modes of modernity that are embedded in Weber's social imagination. Obviously, this narrative order as well as the subject questions are conceptual artifices. They are artifices because Weber did not organize his ideas on modernity in such a genealogical order, even if one presumes an overarching architectonic and narrative unity in his vast opus. Nor did he explicitly privilege the self and civil society as his main themes. In fact, Weber's main theme is still far from settled, and I do not intend to engage in this highly philological contention among Weber scholars.[12]

[12] For more on this debate, see F. H. Tenbruck, "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber," *British Journal of Sociology* 31:3 (1980), 316–51; idem, "Das Webers Werk: Methodologie und Sozialwissenschaften," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 38:1 (1986), 663–702; W. Schluchter, "Die Paradoxie der Rationalisierung," *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 5 (1976) 256–84 (trans. Guether Roth in W. Schluchter and G. Roth, *Max Weber's Vision of History* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979]); and W. Hennis, "Max Webers Thema: "Die Persönlichkeit und die Lebensordnungen," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 31:1 (1984) 11–52 (trans. Keith Tribe in S. Whimster and S. Lash [eds.], *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1987]). For Anglophone contributions to this discussion, see B. Nelson, "Max Weber's 'Author's Introduction' (1920): A Master Clue to His Main Aims," *Sociological Inquiry* 44:4 (1974) 269–78. For a general overview, see

My book aims instead at an ideal typical reconstruction. It is an ideal type in the sense that any interpretative reconstruction unavoidably entails a hermeneutic accentuation predicated on the investigator's subjective commitments, prejudices, and problematics, shutting down one avenue of interpretation while opening up another. Thus, for example, my examination does not intend to exhaustively follow up the crucial distinction Weber makes between different forms of rationality that can be instrumental in accounting for the problematic nature of the charismatic-caesarist leadership ideal in his political thought.[13] Weber's morphology of rationality certainly figures importantly in my investigation as well – yet in a rather different context of constitution of the modern self and empowerment of its agency. To that extent, my investigation relies on a one-sided reconstruction of Weber's political thought. As Weber maintains that the unavoidable "one-sidedness" (*Einseitigkeit*) can be justified only by means of a clear elaboration and announcement of the subjective values (*Wertideen*) behind any ideal typical construction, then, I am certainly obliged to promulgate the subtexts in light of which my choice of strategy seemed expedient.

The most immediate subtext concerns Weber scholarship proper and, in particular, the continuing controversy among Weber scholars that was initiated by the publication of Wolfgang Mommsen's now classic study *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik* (1959).[14] Through meticulous analyses of Weber's political writings, partisan speeches, and private letters, Mommsen exposed a side of Weber little known until then – a figure whose political ideas epitomize the illiberal nationalism of Wilhelmine Germany and foreshadow at least in part the

S. Kalberg, "The Search for Thematic Orientations in a Fragmented Oeuvre: The Discussion of Max Weber in Recent German Sociological Literature," *Sociology* 13:1 (1979) 127–39.

[13] R. Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984), is still a valuable study for those interested in this direction.

[14] W. Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1959). The revised edition of 1974 was translated by Michael Steinberg as *Max Weber and the German Politics, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Mommsen's study was foreshadowed by J. P. Mayer's criticism of Weber's political ideas in which he likens Weber to Machiavelli. See J. P. Mayer, *Max Weber and German Politics: A Study in Political Sociology* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944) 90.

totalitarian dictatorship reminiscent of Hitler. Mommsen is essentially in agreement with Jürgen Habermas when the latter proclaims that Carl Schmitt, the crown jurist of National Socialism, is the "legitimate pupil" of Weber's political thought.[15]

In brief, Mommsen's critical examination consists of three points. First, Weber regarded traditional liberal democratic values as all but obsolete. Especially the natural rights theory had become, for Weber, outdated in the modern world, which enabled Mommsen to assert that Weber "de-normatized" liberal democracy. This was a critical revision of the liberal credo for Mommsen, since he believed that it prepared a way for Weber to discuss liberal political values and institutions solely in terms of "rational expediency."[16] Second, expediency for Weber was measured by serviceability to the enhancement of German national power. National imperialism was the ultimate political value Weber subscribed to consistently throughout his career, and all other values and institutional commitments were subject to it.[17] Third, therefore, it should not be taken as a surprise or an aberration that Weber shifted the focus in his proposal for the German political reform from a liberal parliamentarianism to a charismatic caesarism. The new focus, if not its inevitable outcome, falls within the parameters of Weber's political thought, which were delimited by the abandonment of liberal modernity and sanctification of irrational nationalism.

According to Mommsen, then, Weber signified a failure of German bourgeois liberalism, which was too willing to succumb to authoritarian politics in the face of the immanent threat from the working class – an illustrative piece of evidence, in short, for the *Sonderweg* paradigm of postwar German historiography.[18] Worse still, Weber paved the way

[15] Habermas's discussion of Talcott Parsons's "Value-Freedom and Objectivity" in O. Stammer (ed.), *Max Weber and Sociology Today* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 66. For more details, see J. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, trans. J. Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1971), chapter V. Cf. Mommsen's agreement with Habermas in Stammer (1971) 113.

[16] For the clearest statement of this position, see Mommsen (1984) 392–5, 396, 404.

[17] Ibid. 322, 327, 395–6.

[18] Mommsen's revisionism indeed forms a part of generational rebellion in West German historiography that rejected the previous generation's conservative paradigm (of Gerhart Ritter et al.). Spearheaded by Fritz Fischer and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, the new paradigm problematized modern German history in terms of structurally determined