

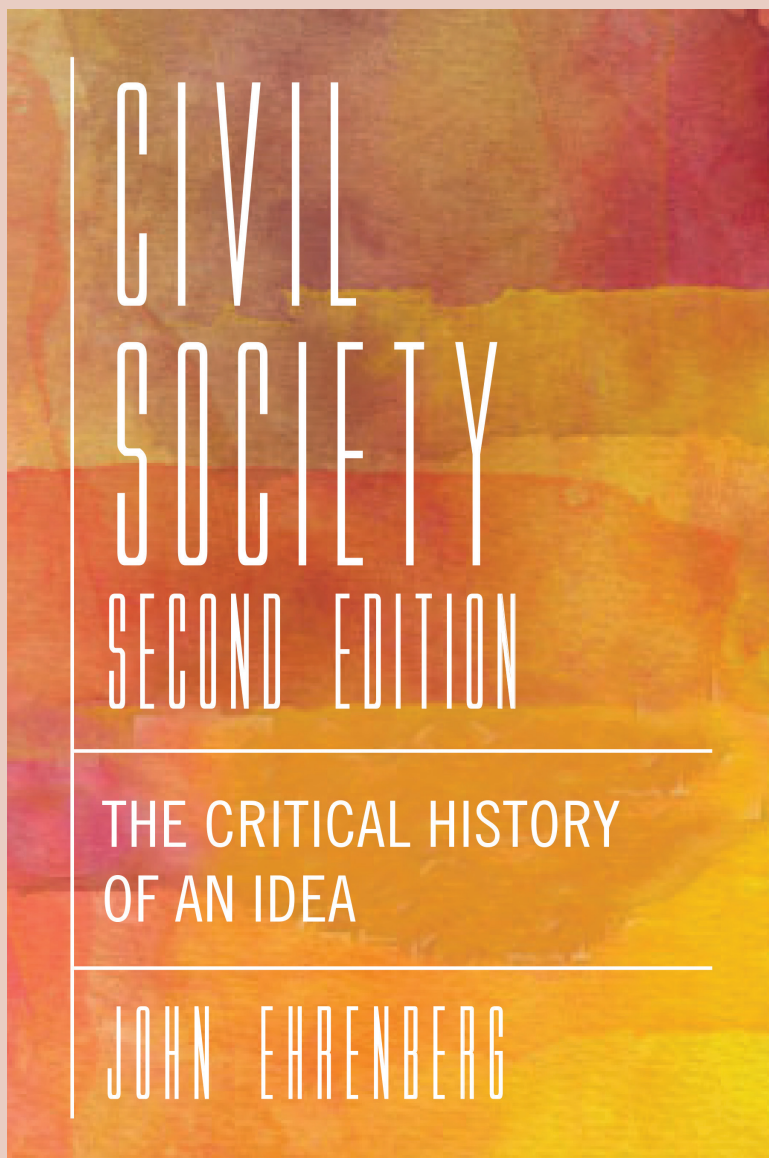
Civil Society

The Critical History of an Idea

SECOND EDITION

JOHN R. EHRENBERG

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



352 PAGES • PAPER
978-1-4798-9160-3

Why Consider this Book for Your Class?

- This is the only book that contains an historic and theoretical account of how the concept of civil society developed
- Each chapter covers a distinct phase in civil society's history
- Provides analysis of the concept's usefulness and limitations in an era of historic levels of inequality and threats to democratic politics

"Ehrenberg's lucid and insightful analysis of the role of civil society in contemporary discourse and practice is relevant both to today's politics, and to enduring issues in political theory and political analysis."

—Jeffry Frieden, author of *Currency Politics: The Political Economy of Exchange Rate Policy*

"This book is theoretically elegant, erudite, and conveyed in crisp prose. It is a must read for all those interested in the advance of civil society."

—Micheline Ishay, author of *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era*

General Summary

The second edition of *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* updates the scholarly and popular literature on civil society since the publication of the first edition in 1999. Theories of civil society began to proliferate following Bill Clinton's and George H. W. Bush's embrace of localism, voluntarism and community during the late 1980s and 90s. The bipartisan infatuation with civil society explained domestic attacks on the state's welfare functions, provided a background to the broad retreat from Marxism and other "grand narratives" that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and provided an alternative to the period's disillusionment with politics and established institutions.

But the category suffered from its thin and naïve assumptions. The book's first edition sought to provide an intellectual history so readers could arrive at a more informed and comprehensive viewpoint from which to assess claims that civil society could step in for the state and revive democracy in a period of accelerating inequality. The new edition incorporates that history and updates it in light of events like Occupy Wall Street, the rise of the Tea Party and Black Lives Matter, and the development of "global civil society." The book's claim that the skepticism of politics animating contemporary theories of civil society undermines the democratic potential of the category is as central to the second edition as it was to the first. As always with influential claims, an examination of tradition and history can help readers to critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of different positions.

PART ONE: THE ORIGINS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

SUMMARY

The very first formulations of civil society thought of it as a distinctly human community organized by political power and constituted by political relations between citizens. Greek and Roman thinkers' tendency to privilege political matters drove them to think of "civility" as an orientation toward the common good and the requirements of effective citizenship rather than as a matter of domestic relations or good manners, a trend that culminated in the classical identification of civil society with the political commonwealth. At the same time, a recognition that life is lived in different spheres that have their own internal logic drove toward a more nuanced approach that recognized social complexity and the limits of public life. Christian political thought, exemplified most directly by Augustine's rebellion against the classical heritage, sought to replace reason with faith and the political community with a Christian commonwealth. But as centralized kingdoms and nascent markets undermined the unity of Christendom and the material foundations of medieval life, thinkers like Machiavelli, Luther and Hobbes paved the way for a modern understanding of civil society constituted by the interactions of interest-bearing individuals organized by a single point of sovereign political power.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did classical thinkers differentiate civilization from barbarism? Why did Plato want to establish a moral foundation for a unitary community?
- What did Aristotle mean when he described the polis as mankind's most comprehensive association? How did he square that idea with the insight that people live their lives in different sorts of associations? How did his drive toward unity coexist with his recognition of diversity?
- In what way did Cicero's understanding of a "mixed constitution" develop Aristotle's thinking about civil society?
- What was the nature of Augustine's rebellion against the classical heritage? How did it establish the foundations for the medieval view of the Christian commonwealth? How did early Christianity's indifference to politics change classical views of civil society?
- What roles did Luther, Machiavelli and Hobbes play in the transition to a modern view of civil society?

PART TWO: CIVIL SOCIETY AND MODERNITY

SUMMARY

The second formulation of civil society conceptualized it as a sphere of conflict, tension and competition populated by interest-bearing individuals. As Aristotle's notion of an "embedded economy" broke down before the development of local markets and extended avenues for trade and communication, civil society became an arena that was constituted by material processes. John Locke announced the arrival of "economic man" whose safety would be guaranteed by natural rights and a civil society organized around property and the rule of law. Adam Ferguson developed Locke's understanding and tried to establish civil society on a moral foundation of shared sentiments and common feelings. But it was Adam Smith who articulated the first distinctly bourgeois theory of civil society when he described it as a sphere of private striving and individual interest that stands apart from the state. This second stage of theoretical development, shaped by the early development of bourgeois society in England and Scotland, established the foundations for the transition to modern political theory. In Germany, where modern social relations were not as well developed as in England, Immanuel Kant and GWF Hegel theorized civil society in ethical terms and as a system of needs. It fell to Karl Marx to identify civil society as bourgeois society and to look for a politically-driven path to its transcendence.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did Locke's criticism of Hobbes prepare the way for a theory of civil society based on property?
- How did Adam Smith develop Locke's theory of civil society and Adam Ferguson's moral economy?
- How did Kant's debt to Rousseau provide the foundation for his view of civil society? How did his republicanism address some of the issues raised by the English and Scots?
- How did Hegel's critique of Kant lead to a new theory of civil society? How did he try to reconcile the "kingdom of needs" with the imperatives of the modern state?
- How did Marx's critique of Hegel lead him to rescue the classical preference for political activity and comprehensive institutions?
- How do modern theories of civil society differ from the classical and medieval formulations? What weaknesses do they address? What do they leave out?

PART THREE: CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONTEMPORARY LIFE

SUMMARY

The third version of civil society conceives it as a sphere of voluntary associations standing between the individual and the larger community. Taking its cue from Tocqueville, it found initial expression in the “rebellion of civil society against the state” that swept through Eastern Europe and hastened the down-fall of Soviet-style communist regimes. In the United States, it built on a foundation of Madisonianism, postmodernism and pluralism that was suspicious of political involvement, “grand narratives” and the welfare state. An increasingly conservative atmosphere began to think of civil society as a democratic sphere because it blunted general, comprehensive political initiatives. Theoretical embrace of the local and the particular identified democracy as voluntary activity and intermediate associations. But there was less to the category than met the eye. Civil society’s suspicion of the state and of broad political activity made it increasingly difficult to grapple with the intensification of economic inequality that have crippled democracy and whose rectification will require more, not less, of the state.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did Tocqueville’s assumption about American social equality drive his preference for intermediate associations? How did it enable him to sidestep the problems that Hegel and Marx had identified? Why did he theorize civil society as an authentically American contribution to stability and democracy?
- What were some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Eastern European embrace of Tocqueville?
- How did Madison contribute to the development of American pluralism and its later embrace of Tocqueville?
- How did Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party represent different responses of civil society to widening American inequality?
- What do theories of civil society have to offer to contemporary American politics? What are their strengths? Weaknesses?