Review
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Still, Harding's account of a multicultural science takes us a long way toward a multicultural, inclusive, democratic, and ecological vision of science, and toward a progressive politics of epistemology. Harding's book is a powerful challenge to the self-understanding of modern science and Western culture in general. *Is Science Multicultural?* shows that postmodern epistemologies are not necessarily anti-modern; rather, at their best, they are a vital continuation of the rational and critical resources of learning developed by science, the Enlightenment, and democratic norms. If neo-positivists like the Gang of Three were truly interested in their cherished norms of truth and objectivity, they would welcome books like this and engage Harding and others in fruitful debate, rather than distort and malign these illuminating new theories. As Harding ably shows, the politicization and pluralization of knowledge is not necessarily a threat to (strong) objectivity, but one of its preconditions.

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John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1999.

The heterogeneous field of democratic theory abounds with publications extolling the virtues of civil society in light of political apathy and the weakening acclaim of political institutions. In the name of civil society, communitarians seek to encourage volunteer activities in local communities and many fight against interventionist state policies; meanwhile, in the same vein, social democrats and progressives seek to contest the ubiquitous forces of commodification in the public sphere. But with each invocation, the notion of civil society raises questions about its relation to the state and the market, while continuing to be in dire need of theoretical illumination. Addressing this exigency, John Ehrenberg's intriguing study *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* presents a differentiated overview of civil society's long tradition within political theory from a firmly critical perspective.

Positioning himself against the current, Ehrenberg turns the largely unquestioned assumption about civil society's democratic potential into the central question of his inquiry. Ehrenberg's critical history contests the prevailing tendency of employing civil society in a reified fashion, which is unable to identify fundamentally different interest

formations and institutional structures underlying the sphere of civil society. Connecting his project to the emancipatory legacy of the Enlightenment tradition, Ehrenberg increases the stakes beyond a mere intellectual history and simultaneously raises the reader's hope for an alternative conception of civil society that can be understood from a progressive standpoint. The articulation of emancipatory interests through the concept of civil society indeed requires the ability to distinguish carefully different traditions of thought – and Ehrenberg does so with great skill and depth. One has all the more reason then to anticipate his reappropriation of a privileged understanding that can further the historic struggle for economic justice and political democracy. After two-hundred pages of stimualting intellectual history, however, Ehrenberg discards the potential of civil society in favor of a different emancipatory trajectory for progressive thought: at the end, only Marx's view of civil society as the sphere of necessity offers a firm grounding for genuine social transformation. With this critical move, Ehrenberg is able to restore the state as the main agent for change. Although there is much to support the view of civil society as a derivative category, the general reluctance to reconceptualize Marx's insights in this area offers little relief from the larger strategic paralysis of critical theory. But despite the final philosophical reticence, Ehrenberg's analysis of civil society's intellectual trajectory throughout the tradition of Western political thought goes a long way toward shedding light on a debate often marked by theoretical minimalism and ideological confusion.

The notion of civil society as an autonomous sphere of democratic activity emerged at the center of contemporary political life with the appearance of dynamic social movements in Eastern Europe during the early 1980s. In opposition to a powerfully intrusive party-state apparatus, civil society gained new currency. Dissident leaders cast the popular struggle against "actual existing socialism" as a "rebellion of civil society against the state" (p. 173). In reading circles, underground magazines, civic forums, and trade union meetings, citizens in Eastern Europe sought to carve out a space for communication and interaction independent of the colonizing authoritarian state. Ehrenberg calls attention to the structural constraints under which early protest movements were forced to operate. It is only in the context of long-term political dominance of society by the bureaucratic party-state, he argues, that one can fully understand the attraction of civil society conceived in anti-statist terms. Vaclav Havel's "antipolitical politics" aimed to achieve a form of "destatification" in a context where "politics flooded

nearly every nook and cranny of our lives" (p. 194). Yet, depoliticization, Ehrenberg contends, did not come without a price: the attempt to create a sphere outside of state intervention ultimately meant that many areas of public and private life would instead be determined by unchecked market forces. As Ehrenberg suggests, the emancipatory dimension of the Eastern European concept of civil society had exhausted itself once "the links between liberal political theory and the capitalist market [had] been reasserted with a vengeance" (p. 198). Ehrenberg's argument can be best understood from his claim that "theories of civil society have fallen behind a social reality that they helped bring about but cannot satisfactorily explain" (p. 198).

By delineating three distinct historical traditions, Ehrenberg provides a framework of analysis in which it becomes possible to evaluate the limits and possibilities generated by the idea of civil society relevant to contemporary politics. On the most general level, Ehrenberg juxtaposes a political understanding in the premodern tradition and a market-driven conception within the Enlightenment tradition with the currently prevailing view of civil society as an intermediate sphere of voluntary associations. The discussion of Aristotle serves as an excellent example for Ehrenberg's thesis that premodern thought generally viewed civil society as a "politically organized commonwealth" (p. 3). Recognizing the fundamental division of labor and the differentiation of society, both Plato and Aristotle worried about the centrifugal forces of local, private pursuits. But whereas Plato tried to impose unity based on a single Good and wound up with an organic notion of the state, Aristotle sought to accommodate the existence of different classes and social backgrounds as part of his more comprehensive political conception. Aristotle's mixed polity, Ehrenberg points out, in fact offered the first coherent theory of civil society. Aristotle maintained that life in the household embraced a sphere of necessity and inequality but also furnished conditions for the "good life" of self-sufficient moral persons within the polity; moral freedom and autonomy ultimately could only be attained within the realm of the state. But against today's defenders of Aristotle, Ehrenberg argues that this conception of civil society was inextricably bound up with "Athens's aristocratic republicanism." An impartial and altruistic orientation toward the public good, of the sort envisioned by Aristotle, inevitably depends upon "men who have enough property and leisure time to attend to public matters free of corrupting material considerations" (p. 19). As it turns out, one cannot help but conclude that the classical view of civil society remains confined to its historical context insofar as we are left

with no differentiation between civil society and the state – a model that can hardly be applied to contemporary conditions.

With the disintegration of the medieval social structure and the gradual emergence of national economies and nation-states, the political and religious foundations of the premodern tradition dissolved; modernity profoundly changed our understanding of civilization. The Enlightenment gave rise to what Ehrenberg sees as the first strand of modern thought, which understood progress and civilization primarily in terms of developing market forces. Locke's theory of property represented the birth of a new conception, which increasingly differentiated social and economic from political and religious categories of thought. As Ehrenberg argues: "Locke's demonstration that property is derived from nature rather than from custom or privilege appealed to Enlightenment thinkers" (p. 88) precisely because the reliance on natural law could serve to "undermine the authority of revealed truth and established power" (p. 88). Early Liberalism understood civil society as a sphere of production, rational self-interest, and competition, which supposedly generated unprecedented opportunities for freedom and democracy in a secular world, thereby limiting the thrust of central state power.

With the later development of capitalism, liberal thought found perhaps its fullest expression in the work of Adam Smith, whose arguments in support of a free market are well known. Smith certainly shared the guiding liberal preference for a "strong society" and a "weak state" (p. 108), but unlike today's "compassionate" conservatives, he had no misgivings about the conflict of interests underlying civil society and the state's role in preserving inequality and the privileges of property. As Ehrenberg reveals with a telling quotation, Smith clearly recognized that the state had to defend actively the foundations of civil society: "Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor or of those who have some property against those who have none at all" (p. 104). In replacing the remnants of feudal hierarchy with equality before the law, the French Revolution, however, soon opened up new terrain upon which grave social and economic problems would become more visible. Thus, Hegel famously conceived of civil society as a "system of needs" (p. 127) and worried about the profound inequality and disorder emerging in a society that encouraged untrammeled selfishness, exploitation, and poverty. Culminating in Marx's critique of capitalism and his claim that democracy must be extended into the

realm of the market, civil society was now seen as requiring public supervision in the form of the state.

In outlining this path of Enlightenment thought, Ehrenberg insists on the important role of the state in the first strand of modern thought precisely because civil society has been understood in economic terms. Liberals, echoing John Locke, may understand the pursuit of private interests as advancing the sphere of *freedom* and may therefore follow Adam Smith in seeking to liberate market forces to the fullest extent. Socialists, by contrast, were far more likely to understand the market as a sphere of *necessity* and *compulsion*, and thus looked to restrain or even abolish it. Both liberals and socialists, according to Ehrenberg, agreed that the twin forces of state power and the social relations of capitalism shaped civil society. A crucial point in Ehrenberg's argument is that Enlightenment thought has been informed by a genuine interest in human emancipation. Indeed post-Hegelian thinkers retained the ethical aspirations of the French Revolution, yet claimed that liberty, equality, and fraternity remained purely abstract for the vast majority of people laboring under restraints of necessity within the sphere of civil society. From this standpoint, Marx's insight that human emancipation must begin with the democratization of the full range of social and material conditions underlying civil society continues to have resonance for the Left, even if this insight says little about concrete strategies or agencies for change.

A number of modern thinkers were always suspicious of the emancipatory content of progress under the guidance of science and commerce, and were opposed to the political radicalism of the French Revolution. In this context, Ehrenberg locates the second strand of modern thought, which conceptualized civil society "as an intermediate sphere of voluntary association and activity standing between the individual and the state" (p. 144). Concerned with political stability and the reproduction of the status quo, this understadning focuses primarily on the dangers posed by either despotism or anarchy: "[I]f 'human emancipation' was not the issue, then civil society could be theorized as a mediating sphere of organization and association whose goal was to temper state power even as it left the market untouched and inequality unaddressed" (p. 143). Ehrenberg traces this strand of thought to Montesquieu's critique of royal absolutism, Rousseau's preoccupation with small-scale republics, Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution, and Tocqueville's emphasis on civic culture.

Tocqueville had first worried about the threat of egalitarian social conditions to individual liberty. The preoccupation with private interests, Tocqueville believed, would isolate people and make them susceptible to the tyranny of the majority. Like Montesquieu and Burke, Tocqueville was convinced that the intermediae bodies of "nobles and wealthy" constituted "natural associations which check the abuses of power" (p. 164). Finding a "weak state" in America, Tocqueville concluded that the American propensity to associate in voluntary organizations and the representation of provincial interests in local municipalities provided a modern substitute for the "estates" and served to "domesticate the democratic state" (p. 162). It is therefore understandable, as Ehrenberg suggests, that contemporary American theorists who worry about moral decay in a consumer society and the inability of liberal institutions to sustain the social fabric often return to Tocqueville. The idea that the anthropological assumptions of political economists alone cannot explain citizen participation in voluntary associations led Tocqueville to a culturally-driven explanation. Yet, it is precisely this cultural core of Tocqueville's legacy that for Ehrenberg disqualifies his conception of civil society. Tocqueville's insistence on a specifically American "tradition of localism, the habits that come with political freedom, and a culture of self-reliance" (p. 163) not only idealized the virtues of parochial culture but completely discounted the all-important dynamics of the market. As Ehrenberg observes, removing the economic realm from democratic critique "was problematic enough in 1830, but it is impossible to maintain a century and a half later" (p. 169). True as this may be, discarding culture as an explanatory factor of democratic activity shifts the burden of proof back to Ehrenberg. One is prompted to ask: why *should* egoistic individuals ever engage in the pursuit of the common good?

Yet, Ehrenberg's critique of Tocqueville's influence upon contemporary political thought is forceful and unambiguous. The notion that public life might be invigorated through direct participation and social engagement in local communities must be understood within the actual political context. Ehrenberg writes:

> Tocqueville's popularity is tied to the general pessimism of a conservative and unstable age. Three decades of deindustrialization and political reaction have come together in relentless attacks on the welfare state, static and declining standards of living for tens of millions of families, heightened stress at work and home, unprecedented levels of cynicism about political institutions, and widespread contempt for public figures (p. 234).

Those theorists who assert that voluntary associations in civil society, supported by communitarian norms, constitute the true grounding of democratic politics can be criticized for confounding what should be explained with what explains. Modern communitarians, Ehrenberg holds, recognize the commercialization of civil society and the public sphere. This apperception, however, marks the conservative turn of communitarians to American history and particularist community culture. Theorists like Robert Bellah and his associates seek to contest the impact of "a relentlessly totalizing economy and a leveling bureaucratic state," (p. 224) by reviving "collective memory and selected traditions" (p. 224). Reappropriating Tocqueville's legacy in an era where small-town virtues have vanished, communitarians argue, must begin with a critique of individualism and the utilitarian emphasis on self-interest. Where Bellah emphasizes reliance on biblical and republican traditions, Michael Sandel claims that human beings are thoroughly socially encumbered, and that our normative judgments are inextricably linked to formative social attachments and communities. Looking backward, Sandel counts on "an American vision of civil society that predates the 'procedural republic' of contemporary life," and seeks to address "frustrated 'civic aspirations' [...] by engaging the substantive moral concerns that used to animate the republican tradition" (p. 226). But in relying on republican ideals and civic culture, Ehrenberg charges, the communitarian argument comes full circle. Civic virtue winds up as the cure of its own ailments.

But more is at work here than a simple logical fallacy: independent of its concrete socio-historic context, civil society must be viewed as an undetermined category. To equate civil society simply with an autonomous sphere of democatic activity in local communities reflects a distinct political and ideological bias. As Ehrenberg puts it: "Tocqueville serves important purposes anyway, for his notion of civil society performs a normalizing function by making it difficult to see the economic roots of contemporary problems and blinding us to the political avenues for their resolution" (p. 234). As Hegel and Marx well knew, civil society is as much part of the problem as it is part of the solution. In light of a well-documented "neo-Tocquevillean orthodoxy" (p. 233), the importance of Ehrenberg's argument can hardly be overstated: to ignore the role of economic factors obstructs the possibility of understanding the preconditions of democratic activity.

Echoing the work Grant McConnell, Jane Mansbridge, and Sidney Verba et al., Ehrenberg points out that education, socioeconomic

status, the role of work, and structural inequities all strongly influence citizens' ability to become involved in the public sphere. Verba et al. accept the proposition that the motivation and capacity of citizens to engage in public activity are acquired and developed in "non-political institutions," such as schools, families, jobs, voluntary associations, and churches. This presupposition, however, neither guarantees equality nor supports the notion of civil society as an autonomous sphere. Quite to the contrary, differences in available resources profoundly "affect the disposition to participate, skew the information that is communicated to political officials, distort public policy, and compromise the efforts of individuals and groups to defend their interests" (p. 245). According to Verba et al.'s research, the most reliable variable for explaining differences in political participation proves to be the respective level of income – and this, Ehrenberg points out, is most troublesome in light of the widening material disparities in recent U.S. history. "In a country where the top 1 percent of the population has enjoyed two-thirds of recent increases in wealth, nearly half of the families have lower real incomes today than in 1973. Surely these two phenomena are related. Surely they help explain disparities in the ability to organize and resulting differences in political power" (pp. 247–248). It is thus, first of all, the impact of unrestrained market forces, namely the consolidation of broad economic trends toward the concentration of economic power and the transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, which has become the most imminent threat to political democracy in the present. It is only consistent for Ehrenberg to conclude that "[i]t makes no sense to conceptualize these matters in moral terms" (p. 244).

If one wants to find a reason for the "unraveling of civic America," Ehrenberg suggests, one would be well advised to consider the economic transformations and the changing role of work, rather than "people's television habits" (Putnam) or their "individualism" (Bellah, Sandel) (p. 247). Pointing to a series of *New York Times* articles, Ehrenberg argues that with deindustrialization and the "downsizing of America," many cities and regions have suffered from the disappearance of secure, industrial blue-collar jobs. "[T]he replacement of stable governmental and unionized manufacturing labor by nonunion, low-wage service and retail jobs" (p. 246) profoundly affects people's motivation and ability to engage in volunteer activities. People may not be so much hyper-individualistic, than "too exhausted, or frustrated, or just too plain busy" (p. 246) to sustain a rich network of personal relations and to engage in public life. The transformation of the economic structure, however, cuts two ways. Deindustrialization is also

marked by the *disappearance* of jobs and the isolation of minority communities in urban areas. "[T]hree decades of economic hollowing out and catastrophic unemployment have created an entirely new urban structure" (p. 247). Quoting the sociologist William James Wilson, Ehrenberg points out that "high rates of joblessness trigger other neighborhood problems that undermine social organization ranging from crime, gang violence and drug trafficking to family breakup" (p. 247). The desolate state of many American inner cities is another case in point that Tocqueville's notion of civil society as a "self-organizing, self-policing, and self-limiting sphere of voluntary associations" (p. 248) is insufficient under contemporary conditions of accelerating social and economic inequality. Articulating emancipatory interests under contemporary conditions thus has to begin with the recognition that "civil society is a sphere of economic inequality and privilege. It is thoroughly penetrated by class relations, and its unequal distribution of political resources is a function of economic life.... Few institutions are strong enough to offset the impact of income disparities, which are reinforced and multiplied by civil society" (p. 245).

More significantly yet, Ehrenberg demonstrates that the anti-statist tenets of much contemporary political thought rest on a thoroughly undifferentiated notion of civil society. To ignore the impact of political power and the state on the formation of intermediate organization obscures the profound qualitative differences among voluntary associations and interests groups. Thus:

> The character of the legal system, national tax-policy, administrative procedures, interference with membership practices that discriminate against women or racial minorities – all this, and a good deal more, has a palpable impact on the habits, norms, and organizations that stand between political institutions and the logic of the market. ... *Any* civil society can be created, supported, manipulated, or repressed by *any* state, and it is profoundly misleading to try to conceptualize it apart from political power (p. 238).

Ehrenberg concludes that the idea of civil society is not reducible to any specific set of institutional arrangements and social norms. "What civil society 'is,'" Ehrenberg writes, "can be grasped only by looking carefully at what its constituent structures do, how they are organized, and what political and economic forces are at work" (p. 235). "Coercion, exclusion, and inequality can be as constitutive of any civil society as self-determination, inclusion and freedom" (p. 249). If "[t]he history of American segregation should give anti-statist advocates of localism

and community considerable pause" (p. 236), the institutionalization of the Hitler Youth may serve as an important reminder that a "robust" civil society can also be created and instrumentalized by the state. Finally, it should be clear that bowling leagues, choral societies, PTAs, and Girl Scout troops can hardly resist the concentration and centralization of economic power by corporate America – and, one should add, an increasingly globalized economy. Against the prevailing notion of civil society's self-evident democratic character rooted in a broad critique of modernity, Ehrenberg argues that both premodern thought and the Enlightenment tradition illuminate "the overriding importance of comprehensive *political* categories" (p. 239). The difference between Tocqueville and Marx turns on the question of human emancipation, and thus presents – as it always has – a political and ethical choice.

In the end, however, Ehrenberg's rendering of civil society as a heuristic category leaves his own theory in a rather undetermined position. Against reified notions of civil society, Ehrenberg persuasively demonstrates that the state system shapes the constitution and the character of voluntary associations, just as economic inequities provide structural obstacles to public activities. But having affirmed the strong constitutive role of the state and the market, Ehrenberg declines to offer any definitive sense of what the concept of *civil society* actually has to offer for the present. After all, most progressive social movements develop precisely in a context marked by various structural constraints; the question seems to be whether the institutions of civil society allow actors within it to articulate political goals in a manner reducible to *neither* the market *nor* the state. "Revitalizing civil society," Ehrenberg argues, "requires heightened levels of political struggle over state policy rather than good manners and 'civil discourse'" (p. 249). On this account, however, it becomes questionable whether civil society remains at all a useful category within which the terms for genuine social transformation can be formulated.

Indeed, Ehrenberg's envisioned trajectory of progressive politics seems to point in a different direction. Converging with Marx's view of civil society as a sphere of necessity and inequality, his analysis reaffirms that public supervision of the market presents the precondition for social transformation. Referring to France's educational system, which is centrally administered and financed by a national tax, Ehrenberg suggests that the extension of democratic institutions and practices ultimately rests with the state. If the state, however, is the primary agent responsible for transforming civil society, it still remains unclear

what forces will be capable of democratizing the state. Turning Tocqueville on his head only begs the question of political mobilization in light of fragmented progressive forces, the self-perpetuating logic of bureaucracy and interest group politics, and the thorough commodification of the public sphere. Relying on the Enlightenment legacy, as Ehrenberg recommends, may indeed help to furnish a trajectory for critical political theory, but one may question nonetheless whether a return to a simple redistributive model supervised by the institutions of the nation-state (French or otherwise) truly offers the greatest emancipatory prospects – especially in an age of international organizations and economic globalization.

Ehrenberg's reluctance to outline a new theory of civil society, however, neither compromises the strength of his critical narrative nor diminishes his contribution to the history of social and political thought. Focusing on limits rather than possibilities, Ehrenberg's differentiated historical overview explicates convincingly the major objections to current theories of civil society. At a minimum, those theorists who wish to speculate about the positive, emancipatory implications of civil society for the present will have to meet this challenge. Written in a thoroughly engaging prose, *Civil Society* is a fascinating and thought-provoking study of impressive scope, which provides a rewarding resource for everyone interested in the idea and history of civil society.

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