

Response: Colonial Civil Society

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The tension between democracy and civil society is central for an understanding of nineteenth century ideas and practices of civil society in Europe. This becomes even more apparent if we include colonialism in our framework for historical analysis.

It is a great privilege to have one's work discussed in depth by such a distinguished group of historians. I am grateful for this introduction to Dutch historiography and for the comments on and criticism of my lecture in Amsterdam. As a matter of fact, I agree with most of the critical points raised in the discussion. True, I could have explored in more detail the connections between associational life and the emergence of mass political parties (Maartje Janse), the informal sociability of the countryside (Ronald Rommers), the emotional investments in civic practices and concepts (Natalie Scholz), and the intricate relationship between religion and civil society (James Kennedy), as well as between civil society and the state (Henk te Velde and, again, James Kennedy).¹ All of these questions have concerned historians of the post-Enlightenment world, and I have touched upon some of these issues in my own more detailed and comparative work on nineteenth-century Freemasonry and German civil society.²

This does not preclude, I would argue, conceptualizing some aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century voluntary societies of the European world within a comprehensive, transnational framework. My intention was to provide an explorative survey of such an entangled history without collapsing the place- and context-sensitive work of historians into the grand frameworks of (mostly Anglophone) social theory. I thus refrained from using a presentist definition of civil society in order to do precisely what Maartje Janse is proposing: to focus on past workings and dilemmas of social and cultural practices like associative sociability (the one element that most political theorists agree is

1 'Civil Society and Democracy in Nineteenth Century Europe: Entanglements, Variations, Conflicts', lecture at the Werkgroep Verenigingsgeschiedenis of the Huizinga Instituut, June 22, 2007, primarily based on Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Civil Society, 1750-1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Studies in European History series, 2006); and *Idem*, 'Democracy and Associations in the Long Nineteenth-Century: Toward a Transnational Perspective,' *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003), 269-99.

2 Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Politics of Sociability: Freemasonry and German Civil Society, 1840-1918* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

essential for civil society) in order to complicate our present notions of civil society and democracy. Such a survey would have been impossible without the past few decades' meticulous work by social, cultural and political historians who have studied the associational life of elites as well as of those groups previously excluded like laborers or women, in cities as well as provincial towns from Boston to Saint Petersburg. Within this framework – a focus on associative sociability as a transnational social and cultural practice between 1750 and 1914 – Dutch history does not seem to be that peculiar after all.³ This should not come as surprise given the fact that some of these voluntary societies were transnational in scope and ambition.

In response to the comments, therefore, I would like to explain why I have placed the conceptual emphasis in the book on the tension between civil society and democracy (and not, for example, on civil society and the state). I will do so by briefly discussing an example that I mentioned only in passing in my earlier account (for lack of empirical research on that issue), but that I consider pertinent to my argument: colonial civil society.⁴

If we move, as historian Frank Trentmann has suggested, from civil society as theory to civil society as an idea in action,⁵ we can discern an inherent tension between civil society and democracy. In my account, I tried to show specifically how associative sociability as a transnational practice involved inclusionary and exclusionary power, something that nineteenth-century practitioners of civil society were well aware of. Contrary to the enthusiasm of present-day advocates of civil society who expect democratic renewal from associational life, sociability is as much about participation as it is about exclusion. In a time when most continental European states were constitutional monarchies and not republics, associations served as schools of democracy. One could say that nineteenth-century 'ordinary' men (and, increasingly, women) had their first democratic and civic experiences predominantly in voluntary societies, with all their statutes, elections, offices, committees, speeches, rituals, rules, minutes, and courts. At the end of the century, this passion for associations encompassed nearly all social, confessional, and political groups and aspects of society in Europe. However, the more voluntary societies at the turn of the twentieth century became places of self-organization for differentiated and often agonistic social, confessional, and political actors (and thus an expression of democratic plurality, or what Dutch historians call *verzuijing*), the more they lost, especially in the eyes of European liberal elites, their moral capacity to reform society. Historically, civic activism was intrinsically connected to democratic practices *and* elitist presumptions.

3 Boudien de Vries, 'Voluntary Societies in the Netherlands, 1750-1900', in: *Idem*, Graeme Morton and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Civil Society, Associations and Urban Places: Class, Nation and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006) 103-116.

4 This point was also raised at the Amsterdam workshop by Annelieke Dirks, who is preparing a dissertation on colonial civil society in the Netherlands Indies at Leiden University.

5 Frank Trentmann, 'The Problem with Civil Society: Putting Modern European History Back into Contemporary Debate', in: Marlies Glasius, David Lewis and Hakan Seckinelgin (eds.), *Exploring Civil Society. Political and Cultural Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2004) 26-35.

This becomes even more apparent if we look at colonial civil societies. As historians of colonialism have reminded us, nineteenth-century European societies cannot be understood as nation-states with colonies external to them. Rather, we should conceptualize the metropole/colony duality within a singular imperial space, and transnational voluntary societies (what present-day social scientists call NGOs) are an obvious case in point. Within this imperial space, in the words of Frederick Cooper, 'Enlightenment thought, liberalism, and republicanism were neither intrinsically colonial or anti-colonial, neither racist nor antiracist, but they provided languages of claim-making and counter claim-making, whose effects were shaped less by grand abstractions than by complex struggles in specific contexts, played out over time.'⁶ Voluntary societies were central sites of this process of claim-making and counter claim-making, in the colonies no less than in the metropole.

Research on voluntary societies, however, has focused almost exclusively on the European nation-states and the civil society/state duality but not on the colonies and the imperial space in between. This space was populated in the nineteenth century by a myriad of voluntary societies that historians have only very recently started to explore. One obvious example is Freemasonry. As Jessica Harland-Jacobs has shown for the British case, Freemasonry transformed in the course of the century from a metropolitan, elite sociability with a cosmopolitan ideology to a global network with a universalist claim to civilize the world, an ambition that was intrinsically linked to the colonial project of the British Empire.⁷ Similarly, the Salvation Army changed in the late nineteenth century from a Home Mission movement to a global institution that encompassed the space between metropole and colony. Salvationists strived not only to rescue the denizens of London's underworld but also to inculcate the natives in Punjab and elsewhere with the European/British standard of civility. As historian Harald Fischer-Tiné notes, the example of the Salvation Army can serve to demonstrate that the new internationalism carried by organizations and agents belonging to the realm of civil society did not necessarily 'challenge state power,' nor did it unavoidably entail lofty aspirations 'to a more peaceful and stable world order through transnational efforts' because it was intrinsically linked to imperial ideologies and practices in manifold ways.⁸ Even less formal organizations like the British club became by the end of the century symbols of colonial rule and imperialism. Hence the very term 'colonial civil society' seems to be a *contradictio in adjecto*.

Still, this complicity of voluntary societies with imperial power captures only

6 Frederick Cooper, *Colonial Questions, Historical Trajectories*, in his *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 24.

7 Jessica Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717-1927* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

8 Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'Global Civil Society and the Forces of Empire: The Salvation Army, British Imperialism, and the "Prehistory" of NGOs (ca. 1880-1920)', in: Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements 1880s-1930s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) 31.

half of the story. For there has been a complex process of appropriation and transformation by colonial society of the concepts and practices of associative sociability. This holds true, for example, for voluntary societies like the Delhi Society, founded in 1865 by the British, ostensibly to secure support for imperial rule within the local Indian elite. The proceedings of the club record not only the speeches but also the evolving discussions on the civilizing effects of sociability (see, for example, the speech given by the local Hindu banker Lala Lakhshmi Narayan on May 10, 1871).⁹ Here we can discern how concepts and practices of the European/British Enlightenment (and of colonial rule) could be incorporated into the cosmology of colonial subjects and transformed accordingly. To be sure, this was a contentious appropriation that could also have reverse effects. Since colonial civil society was primarily associated with the privilege and power of British Raj, the clubs, in particular, became a target of widespread nationalist Indian criticism by the end of the century.¹⁰ Simultaneously, Europeans increasingly doubted the ‘clubbability’ of Indians, their moral and emotional capacity for sociable exchange (and, hence, for politics) – a classic ‘liberal strategy of exclusion’ (Uday Mehta),¹¹ which has its equivalent on the European continent in the alleged ‘insociabilité’ of local Jewry. Other products of colonial encounter like ‘caste’ came to be regarded (by colonizers and colonized) as the traditional form of organizing the social in India.¹² Fifty years later, however, the clubs proliferated again in independent India when a new post-colonial elite reappropriated associative sociability and its mechanics of intimacy and exclusion in their service.

To explain these mechanics, we can turn to Alexis de Tocqueville. As Henke Velde has pointed out, Tocqueville was primarily concerned with the question of what would become of the social, moral, and emotional foundations of politics in democratic society, the bonds (*liens*) that hold society together and prevent its collapse into despotism. Hence, the interest of the French aristocrat in the ‘art of associating together’ as a novel form of human reciprocity in democratic society. Contrary to his present-day admirers and those who dismiss his ideas as outmoded or elitist, Tocqueville was well aware of the contradictory nature of sociability and its possibly corrosive effects for a polity. In the travelogue of his journey to England, we find a note on May 30, 1835 entitled ‘Anomalies. Spirit of Association and Spirit of Exclusion’: ‘I see many things in this country which I cannot yet completely understand’ writes Tocqueville, ‘two spirits which, if not altogether contrary, are at least very diverse, seem to hold equal sway in England. The one prompts people to pool their efforts to attain ends which in France we would never think of approaching in

9 Margrit Pernau, *Bürger mit Turban: Muslime in Delhi im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) 274–76.

10 Mrinalini Sinha, ‘Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere’, in: Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne (eds.), *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 183–200.

11 Uday Mehta, ‘Liberal Strategies of Exclusion,’ *Politics & Society* 18 (1990) 427–54.

this way. There are associations to further science, politics, pleasure, business ... The other prompts each man and each association to keep all advantages as much as possible to themselves, to close every possible door that would let any outsider come in or look in. [...] I cannot completely understand how “the spirit of association” and the “spirit of exclusion” both came to be so highly developed in the same people, and often to be so intimately combined. [...] what better example of association than the union of individuals who form the club? What more exclusive than the corporate personality represented by the club? The same applies to almost all civil and political associations, the corporations ... [...] Association is a means suggested by sense and necessity for getting things unattainable by isolated effort. But the spirit of individuality comes in on every side; it recurs in every aspect of things. Perhaps one might suggest that it has indirectly helped the development of the other spirit by inspiring every man with greater ambitions and desires than one finds elsewhere.¹³

Tocqueville’s argument fits rather well with more recent attempts by Chantal Mouffe and others to explain the democratic paradox: that participation requires the possibility of distinguishing between us and them, that is, who belongs to a polity and who is exterior to it. For this reason, democratic equality cannot exist without the necessary correlate of inequality. Thus sociability, or ‘the spirit of association,’ brings subjects together in their common efforts but can also be the origin of political antagonism and inspire a desire for hierarchy and exclusion. European societies thus became ever more democratic at their imperial cores over the course of the nineteenth century, not least because of the proliferation of civil society, while they simultaneously formed new strategies of exclusion at their colonial peripheries. By refusing to acknowledge how the ‘spirit of association’ has been connected historically to the ‘spirit of exclusion’ we fail to grasp the complex nature of civil society.

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¹² Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to England and Ireland*, ed. J.P. Mayer (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988) 87.