

A Response to Hoffmann on Civil Society

JAMES KENNEDY

Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann's work on civil society is important and stimulating because of its international focus, and because it fundamentally questions the facile relationship between voluntary associations and liberal democracy. At the same time, Hoffmann, in stressing international similarities, downplays the role of national or regional actors (such as the state) which help account for the different effects of civil society that Hoffmann notes. Religion, too, as a variable factor in the development of civil society receives short shrift.

Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann has offered a very stimulating work on the development of civil society, and we are indebted to him for it. Hoffmann does several things of import. In the first place, he offers us an international study that takes multiple countries into account, showing linkages and influences between various sectors of public life. In showing the development of civil society, Hoffmann rightly places an emphasis on an emerging bourgeois drive for virtuous sociability, and his focus on freemasonry is an excellent way to explore this sociability.

In the second place, Hoffmann insists, as others have done, that there is a need to raise critical questions about civil society, which has been defined differently but often as a normative concept from which we have come to expect nothing but good. It is important to underscore also, as Hoffmann does, the shadow sides of civil society: not only the shifting delineations of exclusion and hierarchy (which strikes me as inevitable in all human efforts at community) but more particularly its potentially *undemocratic*, *uncivil* or *unfree* effects, precisely at the point that civil society democratizes, that is, precisely at the point that more and more people are able to participate in associations. This is certainly a paradoxical twist, as civil society initially was often conceived as contesting 'fanaticism' (as Dominique Colas has pointed out¹). Understanding Germany's National Socialists, then, as one product of civil society really does gravitate against predominant notions of civil society. This raises fundamental questions about the self-regulation of civil society itself: to what rules did they subject themselves, and to which rules were they held accountable, in respect to, for example, civility? In any event, this ambiguous quality of civil society

¹ Dominique Colas, *Civil Society and Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories*, Trans. Amy Jacobs (Palo Alto, 1997).

was framed by Gramsci another way some seventy years ago when he saw the associations of civil society as possessing the capacity to both extend and resist state influence.² Civil society is more politically plastic than we might like to think, and not necessarily a bulwark against authoritarian government. But the reverse is also true; that voluntary associations are not necessarily impeded by having to exist under less-than-democratic regimes. Recent scholarship, on which Hoffmann has relied, has stressed that voluntary associations flourished in Central and Eastern Europe, under conditions historians once assumed must have been, through the presence of authoritarian government, fundamentally weak or deficient.

In the third place, Hoffmann takes on American exceptionalism in respect to public association (America as a unique ‘nation of joiners’ to cite Arthur Schlesinger Sr.³). Tocqueville may have seen forms of civil society in the United States unknown in France, but Tocqueville’s concern for civil society found widespread agreement in the Europe of his time. In this respect, civil society was not an American invention, nor by implication is it necessarily tied to democracy, as some have been tempted to read Tocqueville. More deeply, Hoffmann revisits the fundamental point, raised by others, that Tocqueville saw civil society as a possible check on democratic excess, not by generating all forms of social capital, as Robert Putnam’s line goes, but by generating emotionally stronger bonds between humans, a much higher litmus test in measuring the beneficence of civil society.⁴

Despite these important strengths, Hoffmann’s work brings important questions to mind. His concluding thesis – that the ‘expansion, democratization, and politicization of voluntary associations were ... a cause of the crisis of European civil societies before World War I’ – is surely a compelling one. There is a hint of sympathy for a Weberian critique of democracy, and like Habermas, his narrative seems to be one of declension – of a reasonably enlightened if exclusive and elitist civil society descending into a fissiparous public life whose hosts of organizations had become rather less enlightened by the end of the 19th century. Although Hoffmann is part of a historiographical trend that – rightly – no longer sanitizes civil society by making it an antipode of authoritarian politics, the question still needs to be asked: What are the connections between civil society, on the one hand, and political polity – democracy or authoritarianism, to put it in simple binaries – on the other? Is he saying that there are no more elective affinities between the presence of voluntary associations and democracies than there are between such associations and more authoritarian forms of government? Hoffmann has helped the discussion by problematizing

² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebook*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London, 1971).

³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, ‘Biography of a Nation of Joiners,’ *American Historical Review*, 50, 1 (October 1944) 1–25.

⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000).

the uncivil and exclusionary effects of civil society, but does that mean that there are not decisive connections between the growth of stable representative government and the rise of civil society? Hoffmann is unclear on this point; he speaks of ‘occasionally unintended political results’ that associations historically produced.⁵ What does he imply, then, about more common patterns?

For scholars working on civil society in a more contemporary context, the most important point is not whether civil society might pave the way to dictatorship, or whether it might fail in offering enough to democratic life to tame the tyrannical temptations inherent in democracy. Perhaps we should not be surprised at all that the very presence of civil society is not enough to guarantee a happy outcome in which liberal democracy triumphs. In some fields of study on the role of civil society and the development of democracy, particularly in respect to Asian countries, the issue is under *which* conditions civil society does encourage stable democratic life. In this view, civil society constitutes just one factor in democratization; one might say that it is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition (David Herbert).⁶ For instance, Robert Hefner argues in his study on *Civil Islam* in Indonesia that not only is a ‘balanced’ civil society required (that is, one not prone to political excess), but a public culture of tolerance and participation, and a self-limiting civilized state.⁷ Perhaps Hoffmann makes it a tad too easy for himself in focusing his criticism on the most simplistic model, i.e., that civil society is by definition an ally of liberal democracy. In summary, we need a more complicated model than debating whether civil society in itself automatically points in the direction of liberal democracy, a model that looks at other actors, *outside* of civil society.

But that’s precisely where Hoffmann, for the sake of his own argument, does not devote much attention: we get a sophisticated view but also a description of a civil society that is ubiquitous. *Everywhere* in Europe there is a mushrooming of public associations. National, regional or local differences must be relativized in order to show the ‘astonishing’ similarity in the types and in the motives of civil society that appeared across the continent. Hoffmann, to be fair, recognizes that such organizations had a higher density in Western Europe than in Eastern.⁸ Nationalism as a Pan-European phenomenon also receives much attention. But too hard a look at national political conditions is something that the author avoids, and the effect is to obscure the differing political and public significances of voluntary association. It is certainly true, as Hoffmann notes, that the national frame can obscure our view of civil society, but ignoring it may have the same effect.

Let’s take the example of the United States, the overused example par excellence, but useful for a moment to raise some of the old but still pertinent ques-

5 Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Civil Society 1750-1914* (Basingstoke/New York, 2006) 81.

6 David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society. Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot, 2003).

7 Robert. W. Hefner, *Civil Islam. Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, 2000).

8 Hoffmann, *Civil Society*, 45-46.

tions. American civil society may not have been unique, but as an example it can still raise broader questions of *difference* to which Hoffmann, in his quest for similarity, probably pays less attention than his legitimate focus requires him to. There is, in the first place, the *timing* of political openness: there was in the U.S. an early and extensive male voting franchise, and early developed civil society, where the opportunity structures of public life were relatively open. Tocqueville saw a relationship between these factors. Did it matter whether members outside voluntary organizations (where one could vote and debate, as Hoffmann stresses) could (fully) participate in political life? It seems an important question.

A second consideration pertains to the state itself: one could argue that throughout the 19th century, the American state was relatively weak and dependent more than elsewhere on volunteer, private initiative to order the public sphere. Western settlement was a task for enterprising do-good institutions, and philanthropy in early years of the American Republic approached state expenditures. The role of the state does seem to matter in the size, importance and arguably the political orientation of civil society. What room in practice does the state give to local civil society? In the Netherlands, eugenics found scholarly *entrée*, but did not find programmatic enactment because there was no state program. The relevant institutions, such as psychiatric wards, were in the hands not of the state but in civil society: philanthropic groups, often religious, whose role was more dominant and more decisive than in countries like Germany. The nature, perhaps especially the size and aspiration, of the state matters: the room it gives, the room it takes, the room it unsuccessfully claims for itself.

Perhaps, religion, too, makes more of a difference than Hoffmann allows. Hoffmann understands voluntary association as by definition ‘non-ecclesiastical’, though he explicitly acknowledges that civil society might be religiously motivated. He does not further justify his choices or explore its ramifications, hindered perhaps by the paucity of an extensive literature on this subject. It is, of course, an old debate whether the churches in particular and religious organizations in general constitute part of ‘civil society’, conceived since the 18th century as voluntary organizations that stood free from the purported organic structures of society. Because churches may be seen as as non-voluntary organizations (as illustrated in, for example, infant baptism) they have not, therefore, always been regarded as part of civil society. This distinction between church and civil society is used more in Catholic than in Protestant contexts, though the distinction had efficacy in Protestant countries, too. Putnam argued in the early 1990s that the power of the Catholic Church in Southern Italy constituted an alternative to the civil society found in northern climes; the church had inhibited the rise of civil society in the south.⁹ Putnam’s current research is, on the

9 Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993); Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein with Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* 2007.

other hand, positive about the role of churches in civil society, and scholars like David Fergusson have shown the strong but changing relationship between church and civil society.¹⁰ One could argue, as José Casanova has done, that the Catholic Church only became a part of civil society (as opposed to ‘political society’) in the decades since the Second World War.¹¹

Hoffmann does not take sides in this debate, but his focus on liberalism, freemasonry, and his tendency to view Catholic associations as Johnnies-come-lately (possibly as a declension from earlier higher-minded ideals?) seems to confirm an older tradition that does not, at the very least, regard religion as an intrinsically important factor in analysing civil society. This omission seems perhaps most odd in respect to (again) America: Tocqueville also remarked about the religiosity of Americans and the importance of religion in restraining the impulses of a democratic republic, and the importance Americans attached to religion as part of a moral order. Yet much of the civil society in the early Republic driven by ‘evangelical’ initiative, as Mark Noll shows in *America’s God*, combined with a ‘common sense’ philosophical orientation that swallowed republican virtue without so much as batting an eyelash.¹² But also outside the United States, the role of religion in civil society bears closer watching. The role of Protestantism as the religious basis for much of early civil society comes to mind (the Calvinist statesman Abraham Kuyper saw this at the end of the 19th century as a source of inspiration for his own nascent Protestant organizations), as do the links between 18th-century understandings of civil society and earlier (religious) forms of social mobilization.¹³ But also the ability of Jews and Catholics in the course of (even the early) 19th century to generate visions of sociability and philanthropy should be more fully included in discussions concerning civil society.

Perhaps it is wise, to summarize these remarks, to pay more attention not only to the broad similarities in an internationally porous civil society but also to persistent and important differences that the striking similarities in the motives and types of organization, and in their synchronic appearance and development, do not erase. This is certainly not a plea to go back and put civil society exclusively within the traditional frameworks of national histories, but to take seriously important factors in the particular developments of nations, regions, towns, etc. (Putnam also makes this point in his own way: Italy’s regions vary). It is possible that the differences in the constitution and orientation of civil societies actually widen as the 19th century progresses, as national states reach their highpoint of influence, and then narrow again in the course of the postwar period, as the opportunities for the transfer of ideas and practices, as well as the chances for international contacts and cooperation, grew. But even now, there are striking national differences across Europe in the level of partic-

10 David A. S. Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge, 2004).

11 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994).

12 Mark A. Noll, *America’s God. From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford, 2002).

13 Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, 2000).

ipation in civil society, and the types of organizations to which people belong (a much higher percentage of the Dutch population belong to organizations than is the case in Italy). And then we are not even talking about differences at the regional and local level.

And there is more: In the course of the late 19th and 20th centuries, civil society also increasingly became intertwined with the state, receiving, in many cases, extensive state subsidies. Dutch postwar civil society organizations, for instance, have enjoyed high levels of state subsidies, and the feature that differentiated Dutch ‘new social movements’ in the 1980s from other countries was that they enjoyed much more state support.¹⁴ The Dutch case illustrates another issue: the shifting representative function of the organizations of civil society. To what extent can they be said to represent their members? The presence of subsidies is only one factor in exploring such a question. But here, too, the *difference* in the representational character of civil society organizations must not be lost sight of.

There is no possible way that Hoffmann could answer all of these considerations – certainly not in the period lying beyond his area of specialization – and it is clear that he himself has wrestled with some of these questions. But as Hoffmann’s stimulating work itself shows, there is still much to learn about the shifting place of ‘civil society’ in the last two centuries.

*James Kennedy, Afdeling Geschiedenis, UvA, Spuistraat 134,
1012 VB Amsterdam, J.C.Kennedy1@uva.nl*

¹⁴ J. Duyvendak, H. van der Heijden, R. Koopmans and L. Wijmans (eds.), *Tussen verbeelding en macht. 25 jaar nieuwe sociale bewegingen in Nedeland* (Amsterdam, 1991).