



# Civil Society from the Inside Out Community, Organization and the Challenge of Political Influence<sup>1</sup>

Philip Oxhorn

There is a tendency, in both academic research and the public imagination, to romanticize about the quality of life within communities. Frequently, communities are portrayed as models for peaceful, conflict free social relations. This is true particularly when such communities are poor or otherwise marginalized, such as indigenous people, where the quality of interpersonal relations seems to become the last recourse for groups otherwise lacking in resources and political influence, harking back to earlier times before the advent of colonialism or the impoverishment associated with market economies. This is ironic because it implicitly suggests that under what are often the worst of circumstances, people can put aside normal human foibles,

thrive on diversity, reach consensus without significant contention, and offer alternatives that will serve as new ideals for the organization of the very societies which have dispossessed them of power and influence.

The experience of a soup kitchen in a Chilean slum during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in the mid-1980s provides sad example of this irony.<sup>2</sup> The soup kitchen was one of the oldest in Santiago, having emerged in the depths of the economic collapse in the early 1980s. It was located in one of the most organized shantytowns, with a high level of participation in the social protests that began in 1983. Over the years, in addition to successfully feeding the families of its members, the soup kitchen organized a variety of complementary activities for its members, and it was an important actor in the larger community. Much of the soup kitchen's success was directly attributable to "Olga," the elderly widow who founded the soup kitchen and became a prominent community leader.

More generally, the shantytown enjoyed a strong sense of community that was reinforced by a number of factors, including the participation of different organizations like the soup kitchen in numerous public events intended to promote a veritable celebration of the shantytown's collective identity. A shared history of collective struggle, starting with the land seizure that founded the shantytown in the 1950s and continuing on through the social protests of the mid-1980s, the ubiquitous experience of repression in the midst of poverty, and a common "enemy" in the form of the military regime all seemed to unite the community vis-à-vis external threats. Dominated by the Communist Party (PC), which had organized the land seizure in 1957, the shantytown even benefitted from a shared world view regarding social justice and the absence of significant political alternatives. In other words, as a shantytown characterized by a high level of social organization, shared experiences dating back decades, clear common interests, and a high level of socioeconomic and political homogeneity, it provided a fertile foundation for a strong sense of "community" that was encapsulated in and deliberately nurtured by organizations like the soup kitchen.

Despite this, any sense of community was actually quite fragile. Political tensions between the PC and other opposition parties began to mount with the winding down of the protests in the second half

of 1986, resulting in the increasing political marginalization of the PC and growing suspicions of organizations associated with it, like the soup kitchen. In this context, when a donation from Europe was received by the soup kitchen, the sense of “community” quickly began to dissolve, as people both participating in the soup kitchen and people in the larger community began to question how the money was used. The lack of transparency in how the money was spent only added to people’s suspicions since it was assumed something was being covered up, even though most objective observers familiar with the situation found no evidence of wrongdoing. This, in turn, ultimately led to the soup kitchen’s demise and Olga being ostracized by the same “community” that she had worked so hard to strengthen.<sup>3</sup> Instead of further strengthening both the organization and the community which it served, the unexpected economic windfall caused the community to, in effect, turn on itself. What went wrong?

This article will argue that while the foundation for the inclusionary, democratic ideals typified by a romantic view of community can be found in many contexts, there is an inevitable tension between such ideals, on the one hand, and sources of conflict within communities, including the inevitable inequalities associated with grassroots participatory experiences more generally, and the danger of antagonistic relations with “other” communities, on the other. To resolve this tension, I will argue that the ideal of community must be analytically separated from the concept of civil society. While the two are often seen as synonymous, their relationship can be quite problematic in practice. In particular, a strong sense of community is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the existence of civil society. Strong communities under some circumstances can actually subvert the possibility of a strong civil society, as will be defined in the following section.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, through the emergence of autonomous organizations and an explicit recognition of the centrality of conflict in social relations, rather than its denial, civil society’s strength ultimately reflects how successfully this tension is resolved. This, in turn, determines the capacity of any modern society to achieve the ideals of “community.”

The article is organized as follows: after providing a conceptual discussion of what civil society is, I turn to an analysis of the dynamics

that determine the relationship between civil society and community. A third section then discusses how the problematic relationship between civil society and communities can be overcome in terms of what I refer to as a *thin societal consensus* and the way in which both civil society and communities contribute to the *social construction of citizenship*. In the fourth section, the threat posed by a new pattern of interest intermediation, what I define as *neopluralism*, to both community and civil society is explored. The implications of this for democracy are discussed in the concluding section.

## Defining Civil Society

### *A Collectivist Perspective*

While most authors would agree that civil society can play a vital role in democratization processes, there is still no consensus on what that role is, whether it is necessarily a positive one, or even what civil society actually consists of. Yet alternative perspectives have important implications for understanding the potential of civil society to contribute to democratization. This is particularly true when trying to understand civil society in Latin America, where both civil society and democracy have been historically fragile. Although few would deny this historic fragility, there are important disagreements regarding why this has been the case, with significant implications for understanding the prospects of democracy and civil society in the region. It is therefore essential that an appropriate conceptualization of civil society be adopted. Two perspectives on civil society tend to dominate the literature: a collectivist perspective this article on which this article is based, and a more liberal perspective which will be discussed below.

For the purposes of this article, civil society is defined as:

“the social fabric formed by a multiplicity of self-constituted territorially- and functionally-based units which peacefully coexist and collectively resist subordination to the state, at the same time that they demand inclusion into national political structures (Oxhorn 1995a, 251-2).

This definition reflects a collectivist approach that emphasizes the importance of organization and power relations. In particular, strong civil societies reflect the capacity of disadvantaged and marginalized groups to organize themselves. It is through this autonomous organization that groups can define and defend their collective interests and priorities in competition with other actors within civil society, as well as in interactions between civil society organizations and the state.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, implies that civil society has an important role to play in promoting more inclusionary democracies (Habermas 1992) by demanding respect for both individual and collective rights, (a point I will emphasize when discussing the social construction of citizenship below), and that the weakness of civil society in Latin America is both a cause and a consequence of the region's notorious historical problems of inequality and socio-economic exclusion.

It is important to emphasize that while poverty and exclusion themselves can be important obstacles to the emergence of strong civil societies, it would be a mistake to assume that they are insurmountable. This is why a collectivist perspective is essential for understanding civil society's potential. Organization and collective action, by taking advantage of the sheer numbers of people who are disadvantaged and their shared interests, are the principal resources that potentially are at disposal of poor, marginalized groups in order to seek redress for their exclusion. For example, organized labor's demands contributed to the emergence of welfare states and democracy in both the North and Latin America (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992), much in the same way that the emergence of women's movements across the globe since the 1960s have led to the adoption of a myriad of policies promoting greater gender equality.<sup>6</sup> Without sufficient pressure for change from society itself, at best reforms will be partial, creating new forms of inequality, and conditional at the discretion of those elites benefiting most from the existing structure of society—a point I will return to when discussing citizenship.

At the heart of this perspective is the inevitability of conflict in modern societies. Societies are too complex and involve such a myriad of alternatives and issues that it would be naïve to assume otherwise. People have multiple identities and interests, and the strength of civil society mirrors this complexity in its own rich mix of organizations,

which are both functionally-based (e.g., trade unions) and territorially-based (e.g., neighborhood councils). Whereas modernization theory lauded this multiplicity by implying it led to cross-cutting cleaves, consensus and the minimization, if not elimination, of conflict as a key driver of politics (Lipset 1960), the collectivist perspective on civil society being espoused here emphasizes the continued importance of conflict, particularly in societies marked by high levels of inequality and social exclusion. The social fabric that defines strong civil societies needs to be diverse to capture the complexities of exclusion and ensure that those who are marginalized or disadvantaged have a role to play in deciding political outcomes. If “modern” societies thus appear to be non-conflictual, it is because of the role civil society plays in mediating conflict in relatively peaceful ways, not because conflict is absent. “History” never ends (c.f. Fukuyama 1989), but constantly evolves as new issues enter public debate and/or new groups organize and become politically active.

Similarly, if conflict is inevitable, its consequences are not. This is in part because civil society is an important mechanism for non-violent conflict resolution. By any definition, violence should be seen as antithetical to the norms underpinning civil society. It is a direct threat to the autonomy of competing groups, including their very existence, whether it be promoted by the state or from within society. Whatever the adjective “civil” implies when referring to civil society, at a minimum it refers to the recognized right of others to coexist—a point I will return to below. Conversely, weak civil societies leave few alternatives to tacitly tolerating subordination (i.e., submission) or civil war, as societies move toward polarization between those who benefit from the status quo and those who are subjected to it—the so-called “haves” and “have-nots.”<sup>7</sup> Revolutionary struggles and civil war are extreme examples of this. In such cases, organized societal actors can be quite strong, particularly in the case of successful revolutions. But this is distinct from the kinds of organizations associated with civil society. In addition to resorting to violence, such groups have as their goal the capture of the state. Such political hegemony is antithetical to the conceptualization of civil society used here, since it deliberately denies the possibility of competition among different actors for political power and, at least in all examples to date, is associated with the subordination of society by the state.

The fact that civil society organizations are self-constituted and enjoy a certain level of autonomy vis-à-vis other actors, particularly the state, implies that these organizations effectively represent their members.<sup>8</sup> It is this representational dimension that gives these organizations legitimacy not only for their respective members, but also for other actors. This, in turn, means organizations can be effective interlocutors for important segments of a country's population in relations with other civil society actors in the state. Their roots in society and connections with their members are a form of power that is difficult to ignore as the organization grows in size and/or mobilizational capacity. Conversely, other actors can expect that the decisions made by the organization's leadership on behalf of its members will be respected by their members, which means that negotiations with such organizations are not only worth pursuing, but essential for maintaining social peace. Weak organizations or organizations that exist in name only cannot fill this role as interlocutor, undermining civil society's capacity to mediate conflict. This was the challenge the soup kitchen discussed above ultimately was unable to meet, despite an impressive track record of providing needed goods and services to its community.

The specific example of the soup kitchen and the inherently conflictual nature of civil society provide an important perspective on the role of "trust" in civil society. In the case of the soup kitchen, people ultimately did not trust Olga—even though one might have expected the opposite given her record of community service. In the case of civil society more generally, it would seem naïve to assume that high levels of trust would exist between groups, recognizing that they are likely to disagree on significant issues. This is important because if trust is necessary for strong civil society, as many have argued (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963), then many developing countries, particularly in Latin America (Lagos 1997), cannot even aspire to having a strong civil society given very low levels of inter-personal trust. The roots of this are less cultural than practical. Years of authoritarian rule and repression have taught people that too much "trust" can be a dangerous thing.<sup>9</sup> In the context of high levels of inequality, the contradictory interests of different actors are all the more apparent, making trust problematic even in the context of political democracy and markedly reduced political repression.

Rather than rule out the possibility of a strong civil society, a collectivist approach suggests that when trust is absent or, as in the case of the soup kitchen, fragile and ephemeral, civil society is most needed. This is because the organizations that compose civil society can be an effective mechanism for limiting the consequences of distrust internally, and for mediating relations among various social sectors that do not trust one another. As demonstrated by the example of the soup kitchen, growing levels of distrust belied what appeared to be a strong organization; the soup kitchen could not successfully mediate conflict once it surfaced within the organization. Other actors similarly were unable to help, despite the fact that such external assistance, especially from the Catholic Church, served as an important facilitator for the growth of civil society under the Pinochet dictatorship by providing a variety of forms of assistance, including training on conflict mediation (Oxhorn 1995b).

Ironically, the lack of trust might even provide the best incentive to involve oneself in the creation of strong civil society organizations. If people are not confident that the decisions made by others will reflect their interests, then they have much to gain by organizing to demand their inclusion in decision-making processes. This is why workers began to organize in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the same could be said for most other civil society organizations representing disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Conversely, a high level of trust in the decisions of others implies that participation would not lead to different outcomes, which obviously would lessen the imperative for committing time and other resources to building civil society organizations. As Dankwart Rustow (1970, 362) points out with reference to democratic transitions, “A people who were not in conflict about some rather fundamental matter would have little need to devise democracy’s elaborate rules for conflict resolution.” The same is perhaps even truer for civil society organizations.

Before discussing community, it is important to examine an alternative *liberal perspective* on civil society. Drawing its inspiration from the work of philosophers John Locke and Alexis de Tocqueville,<sup>10</sup> the liberal perspective is increasingly dominant in the literature. “Liberal” societies, principally the United Kingdom and the United States, come to represent the ideal of civil society (Seligman 1992),



in much the same way that these two cases represent the ideal for modernization theories. In sharp contrast with the collectivist perspective, civil society is defined in terms of individual rights and obligations. Rational individuals who decide to live together to further private, individual interests create civil society. Individual freedom is valued above all, and this requires the rule of law and respect for private property. Membership in any group becomes a function of interest maximization. Groups and group identities lose any sense of intrinsic value, while the exclusive focus on the individual has meant the concomitant marginalization of perspectives focusing more on collectivities and group identities, not to mention collective rights. Voluntarism and the absence of coercion, in turn, historically have justified unequal status by restricting citizenship rights for those who are defined as incompetent or dependent (such as women, youths, illiterates, indigenous people, the poor and the working class).

Although it is never very clear how liberal, individualist values become predominant, particularly the high levels of interpersonal trust which are seen as pivotal in order for people to organize and form vibrant civil societies, at a minimum, their presence at the level of society is seen as a prerequisite for civil society's emergence (Almond and Verba 1963; Fukuyama 2001; Gellner 1991; Shils 1991). Because of the lack of any intrinsic value attributed to group and organizational identities stemming from the focus on individuals, an appropriate political culture in effect becomes synonymous with civil society itself; its absence is seen as precluding civil society's emergence, while an appropriate political culture presumes its existence.

This focus on the normative dimension of civil society has important analytical consequences. The requisites for a highly organized, vibrant civil society are actually quite high. This is because the liberal perspective deliberately posits a *thick* notion of the consensual basis for civil society's emergence. Conflict is assumed away because there are no fundamental disagreements among citizens living in what are seen as "modern" societies. Moreover, this thick consensus is equated with a narrow set of Western values and unique cultural experiences. For societies that do not share (or necessarily want to share) those values and have been victimized by that history, such as most Latin American and African countries, or non-Western indigenous cultures

emphasizing the collective nature of rights, such a conception of civil society is extremely alienating (Hann 1996; Parekh 1992). In fact, disputes over competing norms and worldviews that challenge the individualism and other values associated with liberal societies are seen as anachronistic, more relevant for pre-modern times than the urban industrial societies that emerged as the epitome of “development” in the West.

This thick notion of societal consensus is obviously consistent with the historical fact that strong civil societies as identified by the collectivist perspective have been relatively rare and have been most closely associated with the development of Western (and now democratic) countries. Viewed this way, civil society would be expected to remain more aspirational than real in most contexts. Yet the alleged reasons for this are antithetical to a collectivist perspective and deny the centrality of conflict for understanding modern politics and civil society’s role. In other words, the problem is not that the “bar” for entering what is a rather exclusive club is so high, but the way in which that bar is set. Conflict, which is essential to understanding the role civil society plays from a collectivist perspective, is simply assumed to be non-existent in contexts marked by strong civil societies. This is not only irrelevant for much of the world, it is ahistorical in its understanding of how Western countries themselves developed modern welfare states and consolidated democratic regimes.

## Communities and Civil Society

### *The Ambiguous Link*

Ironically, the ideal of a thick social consensus is central to how “community” is generally understood. While the nature of the values associated with any particular community will be open-ended compared to the liberal ideals associated with predominant understandings of civil society, only a “community” could hope to enjoy the kinds of deep bonds that would unite its members and potentially eliminate conflict from everyday social and political life. Whether communities are defined geographically, culturally, socially, linguistically, religiously,

racially, and/or ethnically, high levels of trust, shared experiences and beliefs, the implicit level of homogeneity would serve as the foundation for thick social consensus. The irony is that those communities which are most likely to live up to this ideal—indigenous, religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities, to name just the most obvious—are also the same kinds of communities that liberal theorists tend to view as anachronistic and increasingly less important in “modern” societies. Only when members of such ascriptive groups disassociate themselves with those identities, will they be able to consider themselves as members of multiple communities, reinforcing the cross-cutting cleaves that define modern civil society. This reflects the ways in which the liberal perspective denies any intrinsic value for identities, despite the fact that they are a primary source of social movement—hence civil society—strength in Western societies (Cohen 1985; Melucci 1989; Oxhorn 1995b). From a liberal perspective, civil society seems to have almost an inverse relationship with community, in that the stronger communities are, the less likely it will be that civil society at a normative level can emerge.

The reality, however, is more ambiguous. As is the case with a liberal perspective on civil society, the general conclusions regarding community and civil society at first glance appear to hold some validity; some of the most violent conflicts in the world today are communal in nature, from Iraq to Sudan. Nevertheless, the reasons for this from a liberal perspective are mistaken. Communities with exceptionally strong bonds among their members can be either building blocks for civil society, or obstacles to its growth. Recent experiences with indigenous movements (Van Cott 2005; Yashar 2005) and religious groups associated with both the progressive Catholic Church and more conservative Christian Evangelical movements in Latin America, parts of Asia and Africa (Lehmann 1990, 1996; Oxhorn 1995b) show the contribution “communities” can make to democratization processes. The role communities will play in relation to civil society will depend on several factors, particularly the mechanisms for achieving consensus within the community and the consequences this has for the community’s relations with other social actors and the state.

As the example of the soup kitchen highlights, no community is inherently conflict free. The bonds that unite them can be ephemeral,

belying any strong sense of shared or common interest. Moreover, members of communities are not equal, no matter how egalitarian the structure is intended to be. Natural abilities, including the ability to express oneself clearly and leadership skills, mean that some members will inevitably have more influence than others (Mansbridge 1980). This, in turn, can reflect how “communities” address (or fail to address) differences amongst their members along race, gender, and social class, to name but the most obvious (Burdick 1992). Focusing on one identity, ignoring sources of friction and discrimination felt by members, and/or assuming sources of difference are unproblematic, means that communities can be almost unbelievably narrow in their outlook and activities. Any semblance of unity and consensus is then artificial, as people feel excluded from the community despite no obvious obstacle to their participation.<sup>11</sup>

One mechanism for maintaining such artificial consensus is to accentuate conflicts with other communities, reinforcing community bonds in order to resist the threat that outsiders are seen to represent. Manipulated by self-serving elites in pursuit of political power, this exacerbates the fragmentation of larger societies as a whole and the parochialism that is inevitably a by-product of an exclusively local focus. Rather than build strong civil societies, such dynamics have turned communities against one another and the state, feeding the kinds of communal conflicts that lead to violence, if not civil war. The recent experience of ethnic violence in Kenya during its 2007 presidential elections, not mention the bloodshed in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda’s genocide, are only the most extreme examples of this.

While such violence is sometimes viewed as the consequence of a civil society that has become too strong (Berman 1997; Foley and Edwards 1996), the real problem is civil society’s weakness (Oxhorn 2006). Strong societies, as evidenced by the strength of their organizations, including possibly their capacity to engage in armed struggle, are not civil society. This is because civil society mediates conflict rather than deliberately accentuates it. It is the lack of the mediating structures that civil society entails, both within and among communities, which generates these destructive dynamics. In other words, they epitomize—often with dramatic consequences—the failure of civil society. In such circumstances, societies tend to polarize and, in the worst cases, the

ascriptive communities that could, under appropriate circumstances, serve as the building blocks of strong civil societies, threaten to tear apart the larger societies in which they are found.

A good example of this conceptual problem is found in Sherri Berman's (1997) discussion of the collapse of Weimar Germany and the rise of Hitler. As she demonstrates, it was the ability of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) to use the organizations of civil society that ultimately enabled it to win electoral power. Yet it was the weakness of those organizations and their inability to represent the interests of their members that was responsible for the ability of the NSDAP to do this. The vacuum created by what was effectively the collapse of civil society meant that an organizational space was left behind for a totalizing party to fill, which the NSDAP was particularly adept in doing. In this example, as well as many others, the thick consensus associated with communities becomes the project of key political actors on a national scale, making compromise increasingly impossible and forcefully limiting the participation of competing communities at the national level, if not eliminating them altogether.

Ultimately, community and civil society are not only distinct concepts, but they are also potentially complementary ones. The normally high levels of trust found among community members and their shared history and experiences has much to offer in the quest for inclusive democratic government. But trust is not the same as agreement, and shared histories and experiences are open to differing interpretations, even as they can serve as a foundation for fruitful dialogue. Although the existence of civil societies is not dependent on these or other attributes of communities, their presence can definitely facilitate the emergence of the kinds of autonomous organizations that could collectively form a strong civil society. Civil society then becomes a mechanism for mediating conflict and ensuring the interests and priorities of the people who different organizations represent are taken into account. In this sense, "community" is a pre-political manifestation of collective identity, and communities require organization to enter the political realm. The political importance of specific communities will be determined by the kind of organization adopted, and the organizations composing civil society represent one way for communities to achieve this.

Finally, it is important to note that organizations that are not based on community are also central to understanding civil society's potential. Functional organizations such as labor movements play a critical role in representing and defending the rights of marginal groups, historically having contributed to the expansion of rights and the modern welfare state (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Functional organizations—defined in terms of what they seek to achieve independently of their geographical basis—have similarly played an important role in advancing the interests of groups when community-based organizations prove insufficient, and may even be obstacles. This is clear in the case of women. While women generally play important roles in community organizations, the constraints imposed on their activity by patriarchy and traditional gender roles has invariably led them to create separate women's organizations to advance gender equality more broadly. Functional organizations can also facilitate the growth of movements based on communal identities, in effect blurring the distinction between functional and territorially-based organizations. In Bolivia, for example, organized labor played a central role in the rise of the indigenous movements that would transform citizenship in Bolivia with the election of Evo Morales in 2005. This was the first time that Bolivia had an Indigenous president, despite the fact that a majority of the population was Indigenous. Among other things, Morales oversaw the implementation of a new constitution, formally declaring that Bolivia was now a plurinational state.<sup>12</sup>

### **Civil Society, Community and the Social Construction of Citizenship<sup>13</sup>**

The immediate effect of this ambiguous relationship between community and civil society can be understood in terms of what it means to be a “citizen” in a given society. More specifically, the conflicts that civil society helps mediate are reflected in the *social construction of citizenship*. As Tilly, (1996, 9) notes, historically, it was the “struggle and bargaining between expanding states and their subjects [that] created citizenship where it had not previously existed.” Even today, when there is perhaps greater agreement than ever before on the normative content of democratic citizenship rights, there is still no consensus for implementing many specific rights of citizenship. In most new democracies, conflicts over basic citizenship rights were central yet unresolved issues in the

transition process. The failure of democratic institutions to address these shortcomings after the transition is often the principal source of their fragility. The pressures for expanding citizenship rights that emerge (or fail to emerge) from within civil society, and how those pressures are dealt with by the state, are central to any causal theory of citizenship. In other words, citizenship reflects which groups participate in their social construction and how. In this way, the strength of civil society is mirrored in the scope and depth of citizenship rights.

In sharp contrast to the thick social consensus associated with the liberal perspective on civil society, the starting point for understanding the social construction of citizenship is a *thin* or minimal social consensus. Such a consensus has two components. First, relevant actors in a given society recognize that they are members of a geographically defined unit associated with some sense of “public good,” even if there are sharp disagreements over what that public good entails. Such acceptance may be normative (e.g., a shared national identity) or the result of a lack of alternatives (e.g., secession is not feasible due to external resistance or viable due to a lack of resources). Second, the right of other social actors to compete for political influence in the definition of that public good without threat of violence is accepted. This may be for normative reasons, or because the inability of any one actor to dominate the others means violence will only end in stalemate.

Once again, at first glance, the outcome may appear consistent with a liberal perspective. But the reasons are fundamentally distinct. They are related to continued conflict, the lack of consensus and the impossibility of succeeding through violent means rather than any rejection of violence. In other words, actors—including the state—perceive that they have no alternative than to “agree to disagree.” As noted above, the resultant lack of trust then can become a principal motivating factor for continued involvement in civil society, if only to help ensure that group interests are respected.

The latter point highlights another important distinction between collectivist and liberal perspectives. Rights are inevitably an outcome of collective struggle. Indeed, it is the reluctance of elites to grant rights in the first instance that requires collective action to pressure them into doing so (Oxhorn 2003). Whether it be civil rights such as the right to organize and express dissent, the right to vote or cultural, social

and economic rights, their existence both on paper and in practice is linked intrinsically to the capacity of disadvantaged groups to effectively demand them. Moreover, the collective nature of these struggles belies the incompatibility of collective rights with other rights associated with citizenship. This is because the rights, once won, often apply to ascriptive categories of citizens, such as workers, women, sexual identity, the elderly, youth, and so on. From a collectivist perspective, the dichotomy between Western, individual rights and non-Western collective rights is a false one. It is a contingent relationship, reflecting national social structures and the social construction of citizenship in distinct contexts.

The process of state-civil society interaction leads to different models of citizenship. The dominant citizenship model in Latin America was *citizenship as cooptation*. It was closely associated with industrialization and urbanization, starting early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a number of countries.

The cornerstone of citizenship as cooptation was a unique process of *controlled inclusion* (Oxhorn 2003). Controlled inclusion consisted of top-down processes of political and social inclusion in which citizenship rights were segmented, partial and, ultimately, precarious. Rather than substantially alter structures of inequality, it both reflected and reinforced them. Controlled inclusion was a state project intended to mediate the threat posed by organized subordinate classes through their selective and partial incorporation, severely restricting the scope and autonomy of civil society through policies of state corporatism, clientelism and populist appeals that were made possible by the resources placed at the disposal of political elites as a by-product of rapid economic growth.

Ultimately, controlled inclusion belied the existence of strong civil societies; only select segments of society were allowed to organize and the autonomy of those organizations was seriously compromised. Important social rights of citizenship were often granted in lieu of meaningful political rights, while the authoritarian nature of the regime by definition implied that respect for basic civil rights was precarious at best.<sup>14</sup>

The model of citizenship as cooptation generally began to break down in the 1970s and 1980s. This reflected the limits of the region's import substitution development model and the debt crisis of the early 1980s.



It was also reflected the fact that citizenship as cooptation co-existed with a competing citizenship model, *citizenship as agency*. Citizenship as agency reflects the active role that multiple actors, particularly those representing disadvantaged groups, must play in the social construction of citizenship for democratic governance to realize its full potential. It is synonymous with strong civil societies in Western Europe, where advanced social welfare states can be seen as one of this model of citizenship's principal achievements. Given Latin America's historical extremes of inequality and exclusion, the Left typically championed the ideal of citizenship as agency. When a citizenship as agency model threatened to predominate, military coups were often the result.

Today, the dichotomy of citizenship as agency and citizenship as cooptation has lost its centrality to a new model of citizenship: *citizenship as consumption*. Citizens are best understood as *consumers*, spending their votes and often-limited economic resources to access what normally would be considered minimal rights of democratic citizenship.

Citizenship as consumption is closely related to a market-centered mode of political incorporation and social integration, *neopluralism*. The political criteria for inclusion associated with controlled inclusion (social control and loyalty) are replaced by economic ones. While closely associated with neoliberal economic policies, it is not reducible to any specific set of economic policies or correlated with any particular the level of economic liberalization.

The pluralist aspect of neopluralism reflects a normative belief that the best balance of interests and values within a given polity is produced by some form (however limited) of free competition among individuals in the rational pursuit of their selfinterest. Ultimate political authority is determined through a free a market of votes. Individual freedom is valued above all, and this requires respect for private property and (ideally, at least) the rule of law.

What distinguishes neopluralism from the more traditional pluralist model associated with democracy in the United States is its marked authoritarianism. While it is important that the people who govern are elected, once elected, they have few checks on their power. They frequently bypass and deliberately undermine representative democratic institutions (O'Donnell 1994). Moreover, unelected power

holders, particularly the military and “de facto powers” including dominant economic interests, exercise control over key state decisions (Garretón 2003).

The logic of neopluralism permeates entire political systems in a variety of ways. Market-based incentives come to play a defining role in collective action. An individual’s personal economic resources largely determine the extent and nature of her political and social inclusion. One’s economic resources also directly affect the quality of education, health care and even the legal protection a person enjoys. Just as the state is assigned a minimal role in ensuring the smooth functioning of the market in the economic realm, the state largely abdicates its role in providing incentives. The public and private goods formally available at the state level to those mobilized in earlier periods, as well as the coercive incentives for the hierarchical organization of economic interests under state corporatism, no longer exist or have been significantly reduced. Group identities and collective interests lose any intrinsic value, yet these are a primary potential source of power for subaltern groups.

### **Neopluralism, Community and Civil Society<sup>15</sup>**

Neopluralism poses a unique threat to both community and civil society. This is because neopluralism is closely associated with rising economic inequality and economic insecurity, criminal violence, limited possibilities for social mobility, and a crisis of representation reflected in the growing disillusionment with political parties and key democratic institutions throughout the region (Oxhorn 2011).

At the level of civil society, state reforms that weaken the institutions regulating markets and that have the potential to redistribute income progressively, as well as other reforms that undermine the ability of workers to organize, contribute to this. The growing economic and physical insecurity people face, combined with the sense that political elites simply do not care, similarly combine to lower the incentive, if not capacity, for people to organize. Instead, they are increasingly concerned with their daily existence—a problem especially acute for poor, disadvantaged groups. Ultimately, civil society becomes atomized, losing its capacity to resolve conflict and represent disadvantaged groups.

These same dynamics, in turn, impact communities in contradictory ways. For indigenous communities, they can provide the opportunity to organize at the national level, successfully demanding new rights, particularly regarding cultural and linguistic recognition (Yashar 2005). More generally, the stress such dynamics create can lead to new forms of collective innovation at the community level (Burdick et al. 2009). Yet at the same time, such positive trends are still quite incipient, and have had a mixed record at best in terms of reversing the fundamental challenges for civil society and communities represented by neopluralism. This is especially true when looking beyond the level of the relatively small communities in which they emerge (Oxhorn 2009a). Even in the case of successful indigenous movements, their achievements, which are undeniably of tremendous historical importance, particularly in Bolivia where an indigenous president has transformed the constitutional structure of the state, it is still not clear what this means in terms of economic and social empowerment, inequality and poverty alleviation.

The ultimate danger is that in the perverse socio-economic and political context created by neopluralism, communities will turn in on themselves, contributing to a disintegration of national social fabrics without providing satisfactory alternatives. As states retreat, the definition and pursuit of public goods becomes an increasingly local matter, reinforcing inequality and marginalization as communities try to survive. At their worst, these threatened communities could ultimately turn on other communities in a spiral of violence as they look for scapegoats and/or access to resources.<sup>16</sup> To take one of the most extreme examples, this is precisely what happened in the Weimar Republic, paving the way for victory of fascism in its most extreme form. The alternative is the strengthening of communities through their mutual reinforcement as the foundation for the emergence of strong, inclusive democratic regimes based on a thin yet realistic societal consensus.

## The Quest for Inclusive Democratic Governance

### *Community, Civil Society and the State*

The threat posed by neopluralism to both civil society and communities ultimately serves to highlight the importance of state-society relations

as a *process* in which civil society plays a decisive role in determining the extent and nature of democratic inclusion. Communities are central to this as well, but their relation to civil society similarly determines their role. Whether communities contribute to the strengthening of civil society and, as a result, democratic governance, will depend on a number of factors, of which organization and autonomy are central concerns.

Citizenship offers a useful lens for understanding these relations. Whether it be through citizenship as cooptation or citizenship as consumption, civil society is severely circumscribed. In these cases, communities face numerous challenges, included fragmentation and manipulation by elites in the pursuit of their own self-interest. Civil society, as understood from a collectivist perspective, provides the tools to avoid both, contributing to the strength of communities and their capacity to enrich democratic processes.

In the end, the problem is not social conflict, but the way in which it is mediated. Ignoring it or pretending that it has been eclipsed by modernity only risks perpetuating exclusion and ultimately the collapse of democratic institutions. While there are alternative ways for mediating conflict, the argument advanced here is that only civil society can do so in a way that supports inclusive democratic governance, at the same time that it fortifies the true strengths of communities in positive ways. As the sad history not only of colonialism in the global South attests, but also the processes by which modern nation states in Western Europe and North America were created, this is the only way to preserve the true meaning of community.

## NOTES

1. Many of the ideas expressed in this section are developed in greater detail in Oxhorn (2011). A Spanish version of this article will appear in the *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Politicas*.
2. The following is based on fieldwork undertaken by the author in Santiago, Chile, 1984-7.

3. In fact, Olga was so ashamed of what happened to her that she refused to meet with me in subsequent trips to the shantytown.
4. As will be discussed in a following section, the failure to draw these distinctions has led some authors (e.g., Berman 1997; Foley and Edwards 1996) to mistakenly conclude that “civil society” can be the source of extremes of social violence when, upon closer examination, the source of the violence is actually the weakness of civil society. This weakness creates a representational vacuum within societies that is ultimately taken advantage of by actors that have more in common with communities that have become too strong than civil society.
5. It is important to emphasize that civil society organizations, particularly in developed democracies, frequently interact with their respective states at the local, subnational and national levels. Autonomy in this sense refers to the ability of civil society organizations to define and defend their collective dealings with the state, even when—as is frequently the case—they receive material assistance from states. Conversely, when civil society organizations do not interact with the state, they risk political marginalization, if not irrelevance.
6. Not surprisingly, similar arguments against the romanticizing communities can be found in feminist theory. See for example, the work of Seyla Benhabib (1992; 2002), among others. While this literature undoubtedly would enrich the arguments being made here, it is beyond the scope of the article to discuss them at length. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for reminding me of this important point.
7. While still inclusive, the increasing social mobilization around inequality that began with the Occupy Movement in the US is a good example of the beginnings of a civil society reaction to growing problems of inequality in advanced market economies, particularly after the Great Recession of 2008. Earlier examples would in the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements in the US, as well as various other identity-based new social movements, particularly in Western Europe. For example, see Melucci (1985).
8. As understood here, issues of representation are empirical rather than theoretical. On the one hand, organizations that created to access and/or distribute resources or provide a platform of individuals are not really civil organizations in this sense. For this reason, most NGOs are

not civil society organizations, although they can plan an important role in facilitating the growth of civil society organizations, much like the Catholic Church did during periods of military rule. See Oxhorn (1995b). On the other hand, civil society organizations that fit this definition may be small or large, politically influential or marginalized, weak or strong, and so-on, depending on the size of their membership and various obstacles that might exist to their participation in larger social and political processes. Such obstacle could include violence, racism and other negative social conditions in any particular case.

9. This was a particular problem for me in trying to do ethnographic research in Chile in the 1980s. As an outsider (particularly an American one), I was automatically suspect. Such suspicions were only reinforced by the regime's use of informants who, like me, wanted to learn as much as possible about civil society organizations in the shantytowns, and the harsh experience of repression after the 1973 coup. To overcome this, I literally had to earn their trust. See Oxhorn (1995b).
10. The collectivist perspective adopted here owes more to the work of Montesquieu. See Taylor (1990).
11. As Burdick (1992) shows in his study of religious organizations in Brazilian urban slums, such outcomes may be quite surprising. Progressive liberation theology in practice was actually quite exclusionary within poor communities. In part, this was because active participation requires a certain level of literacy to read and interpret the Bible, as well as an ability to articulate oneself effectively in group discussions. At the same time, Liberation Theology's links with social transformation emphasized the class nature of society, assuming that more economic equality would resolve problems caused by racism, gender inequality, and so on. Conversely, the requirements for participation in more conservative Evangelical groups were considerably lower—one merely had to believe. The strength of such beliefs, however, was associated with reductions in family violence, drug abuse and other real problems in peoples, day-to-day lives. Moreover, people were accepted regardless of their gender or skin color.
12. It is also worth noting that Morale's national success was based on the successful organization of a new political movement, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS). The movement transformed local community identity into a national force, reversing centuries

of indigenous peoples' marginalization. As part of civil society, the MAS continued to help mediate conflict, both between the new indigenous movement and other civil society actors, as well as among the functional and territorially based organizations that sought representation through it.

13. The following is a revised version of Oxhorn (2009b).
14. Following the seminal work of T.H. Marshall (1950), this analysis looks at three categories of rights: civil (freedom of speech and to organize, legal due process, etc.), political (the right to vote), and social (rights associated with the modern welfare state). The analysis can also be extended to other categories of rights, thereby overcoming a principal critique of Marshall's more limited conceptualization. See Oxhorn (2011).
15. The arguments presented here are developed in much greater detail in Oxhorn (2011). It is important to note that at least some aspects of my argument are applicable outside of Latin America, while some countries—most notably Bolivia—appear to have overcome the crisis of representation as the emergence of new social actors displaced more traditional political parties.
16. Fortunately, such extreme tendencies have been largely contained in Latin America, although to a certain extent regional struggles in Bolivia in the years immediately following Evo Morales election pointed in this direction until compromise was eventually achieved. Many African countries, however, have not been so fortunate.

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba (1963). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Benhabib, Seyla (1992). *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge.
- Benhabib, Seyla (2002). *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Berman, Sherri (1997). "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World Politics* 49 (3): 401-29.
- Burdick, John (1992). "Rethinking the Study of Social Movements: The Case of Christian Base Communities in Urban Brazil." In *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy*, ed. A. Escobar and S. E. Alvarez. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 171-84.
- Burdick, John, Philip Oxhorn, and Kenneth Roberts, eds. (2009). *Beyond Neoliberalism in Latin America? Societies and Politics at the Crossroads*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cohen, Jean (1985). "Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements." *Social Research* 52 (Winter): 663-716.
- Foley, Michael, and Bob Edwards (1996). "The Paradox of Civil Society." *Journal of Democracy* 7 (3): 38-52.
- Fukuyama, Francis (1989). "The End of History?" *The National Interest*.
- Fukuyama, Francis (2001). "Social Capital, Civil Society, and Development." *Third World Quarterly* 22 (1): 7-20.
- Garretón, Manuel Antonio (2003). *Incomplete Democracy: Political Democratization in Chile and Latin America*. Translated by R. K. Washbourne, with Gregory Horvath. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.
- Gellner, E. (1991). "Civil Society in Historical Context." *International Social Science Journal* 129 (August): 495-510.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1992). "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. C. Calhoun. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Hann, Chris (1996). "Introduction: Political Society and Civil Anthropology." In *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, ed. C. Hann and E. Dunn. London: London Routledge.
- Lagos, Marta (1997). "Latin America's Smiling Mask." *Journal of Democracy* 8 (July): 125-38.
- Lehmann, David (1990). *Democracy and development in Latin America : economics, politics and religion in the post-war period*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.



- Lehmann, David (1996). *Struggle for the Spirit: Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America*. New York: Polity.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin (1960). *Political man; the social bases of politics*. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- Mansbridge, Jane (1980). *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Marshall, T.H. (1950). *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Melucci, Alberto (1985). "The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements." *Social Research* 52 (4): 789-816.
- Melucci, Alberto (1989). *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. Edited by J. Keane and P. Mier. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo (1994). "Delegative Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 5 (1): 56-69.
- Oxhorn, Philip (1995a). "From Controlled Inclusion to Coerced Marginalization: The Struggle for Civil Society in Latin America." In *Civil Society: Theory, History and Comparison*, ed. J. Hall. Cambridge: Polity Press, 250-77.
- Oxhorn, Philip (1995b). *Organizing civil society : the popular sectors and the struggle for democracy in Chile*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Oxhorn, Philip (2003). "Social Inequality, Civil Society and the Limits of Citizenship in Latin America." In *What Justice? Whose Justice? Fighting for Fairness in Latin America*, ed. S. Eckstein and T. Wickham-Crawley. Berkeley: University of California, 35-63.
- Oxhorn, Philip (2006). "Conceptualizing Civil Society from the Bottom Up: A Political Economy Perspective." In *Civil Society and Democracy in Latin America*, ed. R. Feinberg, W. C. H. and L. Zamosc. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 59-84.
- Oxhorn, Philip (2009a). "Beyond Neoliberalism? Latin America's New Crossroads" In *Beyond Neoliberalism in Latin America? Societies and Politics at the Crossroads*, ed. J. Burdick, P. Oxhorn and K. M. Roberts. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 217-33.

- Oxhorn, Philip (2009b). "La ciudadanía como consumo o como agencia: comparando las reformas democráticas en Bolivia y Brasil." In *Pensar la globalización, la democracia y la diversidad* ed. J. Bokser Liwerant, J. F. Pozo Block and G. Waldman Mitnick. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Coordinación de Estudios de Posgrado, Programa de Posgrado en Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, 223-46.
- Oxhorn, Philip (2011). *Sustaining Civil Society: Economic Change, Democracy and the Social Construction of Citizenship in Latin America*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Parekh, Bhikhu (1992). "The Cultural Peculiarity of Liberal Democracy." *Political Studies* 40 (Special Issue): 160-75.
- Rueschemeyer, Dietrich, Evelyne Stephens, and John D. Stephens (1992). *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rustow, Dankwart A. (1970). "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model." *Comparative Politics* 2 (April): 337-63.
- Seligman, Adam (1992). *The Idea of Civil Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Shils, E. (1991). "The Virtue of Civil Society." *Government and Opposition* 26 (Winter): 3-20.
- Taylor, Charles (1990). "Invoking Civil Society." In *Working Paper*, 31. Chicago: Center for Psychosocial Studies.
- Tilly, Charles (1996). "Citizenship, Identity and Social History." In *Citizenship, Identity and Social History, International Review of Social History Supplement 3*, ed. C. Tilly. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge,
- Van Cott, Donna Lee (2005). *From Movements to Parties in Latin America: The Evolution of Ethnic Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Yashar, Deborah J. (2005). *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

## ABSTRACT

**Civil Society from the Inside Out. Community,  
Organization and the Challenge of Political Influence**

There is an inevitable tension between the ideals associated with the concept of community and multiple sources of conflict within them. To resolve this tension, the ideal of community is analytically separated from the concept of civil society, which is defined from a collectivist perspective that emphasizes the importance of organization and power relations. In particular, strong civil societies reflect the capacity of disadvantaged and marginalized groups to organize themselves, thereby helping to peacefully mediate social conflict. The ways in which civil society helps mediate conflict are reflected in three models of citizenship: citizenship as cooptation, citizenship as agency, and Citizenship as consumption. The latter model of citizenship is increasingly common in Latin America and threatens both communities and civil society more generally through its close association with rising economic inequality and economic insecurity, criminal violence, limited possibilities for social mobility, and a crisis of representation throughout the region. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of state-society relations as a process in which civil society plays a decisive role in determining the extent and nature of democratic inclusion. Communities are central to this as well, but their relation to civil society similarly determines their role. Whether communities contribute to the strengthening of civil society and, as a result, democratic governance, will ultimately depend on whether their true strengths are fortified in positive ways.

## RESUMEN

**La Sociedad Civil por dentro y por fuera. Comunidad,  
organización y el desafío de la influencia política**

Existe una tensión inevitable entre los ideales asociados con el concepto de comunidad y las múltiples fuentes de conflicto en su interior. A fin de resolver esa tensión, el artículo separa analíticamente el ideal de la comunidad del concepto de sociedad civil, definido este último desde una perspectiva colectivista que pone énfasis en la importancia de la organización y las relaciones de poder. En particular, las sociedades civiles fuertes reflejan la capacidad de los grupos desfavorecidos y

marginalizados para organizarse, ayudando a mediar pacíficamente en el conflicto social. La sociedad civil actúa como mediadora en el conflicto siguiendo tres modelos de ciudadanía: ciudadanía como cooptación, ciudadanía como intermediación y Ciudadanía como consumo. El último modelo de ciudadanía es cada vez más común en América Latina y amenaza tanto a las comunidades en particular como a la sociedad civil en general a través de su estrecha asociación con la creciente desigualdad e inseguridad económica, los delitos violentos, las limitadas posibilidades de movilidad social y la crisis de representación presente en toda la región. El artículo concluye destacando la importancia de las relaciones estado-sociedad como proceso en el que la sociedad civil desempeña un papel decisivo al momento de determinar el alcance y la naturaleza de la inclusión democrática. Las comunidades también tienen una importancia central en este sentido pero, del mismo modo, es su relación con la sociedad civil lo que determina su rol. La posible contribución de las comunidades al fortalecimiento de la sociedad civil y, por consiguiente, de la gobernanza democrática, dependerá en última instancia de si sus fuerzas genuinas salen fortalecidas positivamente.

#### SUMMARIO

### **A Sociedade Civil por dentro e por fora. Comunidade, organização e o desafio da influência política**

Existe uma tensão inevitável entre os ideais associados com o conceito de comunidade e as múltiplas fontes de conflito em seu interior. Com o propósito de resolver essa tensão, este artigo separa analiticamente o ideal da comunidade do conceito de sociedade civil, este último definido de uma perspectiva coletivista que enfatiza a importância da organização e as relações de poder. Em particular, as sociedades civis fortes refletem a capacidade de organização dos grupos desfavorecidos e marginalizados, o que ajuda a mediação pacífica do conflito social. A sociedade civil atua como mediadora no conflito seguindo três modelos de cidadania: cidadania como cooptação, cidadania como intermediação e cidadania como consumo. Este último modelo de cidadania é cada vez mais comum na América Latina e ameaça tanto as comunidades, em particular, quanto a sociedade civil, em geral, por meio de sua estreita associação com a crescente desigualdade e

insegurança econômica, os crimes violentos, as limitadas possibilidades de mobilidade social e a crise de representação presente em toda a região. O artigo conclui destacando a importância das relações estado-sociedade como processo no qual a sociedade civil desempenha um papel decisivo no momento de determinar o alcance e a natureza da inclusão democrática. As comunidades também têm uma importância central para isto. Do mesmo modo, porém, é a sua relação com a sociedade civil o que determina o seu papel. A possível contribuição das comunidades para o fortalecimento da sociedade civil, e, em consequência, da governança democrática, dependerá, em última instância, do enriquecimento de suas forças genuínas.

