

Civil Society as a Complex Adaptive Phenomenon

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Abstract: I depict civil society as a complex and adaptive phenomenon. Individuals and groups within civil society interact with each other to achieve mutually agreeable outcomes, and this gives rise to identifiable spontaneous orders of economic, communal and political relationships. Civil society is not a mere aggregation of these sub-orders but a combinatorial ensemble of them in that a multiplicity of dispositions, interests and values, and relevant feedback mechanisms, co-exist tenuously, often contradictorily and in entangled fashion. This paper describes the general processes in which alternative perspectives within civil society continuously vie against each other for widespread support, and critically appraises the suggestion that certain aspects of economic, social or political evolution portend the “decline” of civil society itself. The distinct value of the civil society concept lies in the capacity of diverse individuals to arrange mutually agreeable adjustments in the absence of domination or subjection.

Keywords: adaptation, civil society, complexity, evolution, meso, structure, spontaneous order

INTRODUCTION

As observed throughout the course of human history and in all the places human beings inhabit, individuals incessantly interact with others in the pursuit of benefits and achievements. A broad-scale conception of the domain through which varying guises of human association takes place is coined “civil society,” and the objective of this paper is to provide an account of its nature and salient features.

Any attempt to provide a definitive account of civil society surely poses as an intellectually tall order. This reflects recognition that “civil society is a ... necessarily contested idea” and is “not a concept that yields to easy consensus, conclusion, or generalization” (Edwards 2011, 480). Ambiguities surrounding the definition of civil society reflect scholarly disputes over the appropriate scope of human activity to be encompassed within the civil society notion, as well as contestation surrounding the normative propriety of claims made about its efficacy in explaining the trends and tendencies of actual societies. Difficulties in grasping the idea of civil society may also be attributable to shifts and permutations in the kinds of cooperative human activities undertaken therein.

Inspired by developments in complexity and evolutionary science literatures, especially their applications in social scientific contexts, I depict civil society as a complex and adaptive phenomenon. To be more specific, civil society is that combinatorial sphere of cooperative relations between individuals and groups of people spanning the economic, communal and political orders, with each order consisting of both spontaneous and non-spontaneous elements (diZerega 2014; Madison 1997).

The explanation of civil society as a structured process (embodying complexity) unfolding in novel, and often unforeseen, ways (reflecting adaptation) yields several important insights. This approach invites an inclusive, non-reductionist approach toward examining the kinds of relationships and interdependencies forged when humans act to procure gains from each other. It also draws attention to the claim economic, communal and political situations within civil society are, themselves, the manifestation of decentralised actions by the many, and not the intentional design by the few. Finally, understanding civil society as a complex, adaptive phenomenon helps us to understand and appreciate the implications of observed changes that both surround us, and in which we participate.

I now turn to the structure of the paper. First, I draw upon a range of contemporary social scientific insights to depict some generic properties of civil society as a complex, adaptive phenomenon. This is followed by an analysis of a multi-phase processes in which change is realised through the economic, communal and political orders of civil society. Entrepreneurial action sets out to discover novel modes of conduct, the entrepreneurial insight is then competitively tested against other insights for prospective support, and the most popular insights potentially become embedded in the institutional frameworks of civil society as enduring rules. Next, I draw upon the dynamic picture of civil society explicated in this paper to critically assess the claim that observed changes necessarily illustrate that civil society is in “decline.” I finish by making concluding remarks.

CIVIL SOCIETY AS A COMPLEX MEDLEY OF SPONTANEOUS ORDERS

Theorising about the nature of civil society has assumed a prominent position within the classical liberal philosophical tradition since its very inception, arguably during the seventeenth century.

Contrary to Hobbes’s suggestion that the “state of nature” of human interaction is characterised by endlessly violent frictions, necessitating nothing less than the absolute sovereignty exercised by political actors to quell it, John Locke considered that people generally tended to be naturally cooperative and peace-loving in their natural state.

Lockean harmony in the state of nature did not suggest, however, that conflict and discord would be non-existent. Therefore, Locke hypothesised that a “political society” could be legitimately instituted for the relatively limited purpose of instituting laws protecting properties justly acquired and held by individuals. For Locke, the idea of civil society was coterminous with this political order mutually agreed upon, as if culminating in the form of a “social contract,” by the members of society.

Witnessing the embryonic phase of the British Industrial Revolution, the Scottish Enlightenment figure Adam Smith suggested that voluntary exchange relationships taking place within markets served as the centrepiece of civil society. The trading of commodities between sellers and buyers, according to Smith, echoed a certain inclination within human nature “to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.”

For Smith the sheer scale and scope of market activities, reflecting an increasing division of labour, provided a lucra-

tive opportunity to enhance living standards, even for those in economically impoverished positions. Furthermore, in sentiments reminiscent of the *doux-commerce* thesis of France’s Montesquieu, the Scotsman conceived that commercial development “contributes greatly to the extirpation of prejudice and parochialism and the cultivation of a shared sense of humanity. Commerce polishes away the rough edges of human nature and leads to the cultivation of civility and manners” (Boyd 2013, p. 444).

The nineteenth-century French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville studied the social and political conditions underpinning the formative American democracy, and in so doing formulated yet another version of civil society theory. Intermediate associations, both local and voluntary in their character, were elevated as the pivotal component of civil society. Tocqueville noted that diverse associations and social groupings encouraged Americans to devise their own solutions to problems, rather than depending upon government to do so purportedly on their behalf. Residing between atomistic individuals and the overbearing state, the constellation of free and intermediate associations described by Tocqueville undergirded a vibrant civil society.

The inclusion of each, or all, of the aforementioned forms of human activity in a definition of civil society has long elicited intellectual dispute, with arguments over which of these forms of interaction should be excluded. By contrast I consider there is merit in pursuing the alternative of a more inclusive stance concerning which relationships should be classified as being represented in civil society. This would enable us to more openly recognise different, and in fact the oft-intertwined, ways in which humans associate and mingle with each other, and the opportunities and challenges for peace and prosperity arising from such interdependencies.

G. B. Madison described it best when he called for a “more extensive conception of civil society” to inform analysis of human association, in which the notion of civil society itself is not “an entity *intermediate* between the “family” and the “state” ... but as *society organized in a particular way*” (Madison 1997, p. 36). Within this expansive, and unashamedly pluralistic, definition, Madison submitted that “[c]ivil society is composed of distinct yet overlapping *orders*, these orders being nothing other than the sedimented results of human agency in different spheres of life” (Ibid., p. 37).

I conceive civil society as generically composed of three nested and ordered systems in which humans interact to derive advantages and benefits conducive to their senses

of prosperity and wellbeing: the economic order; the communal order; and the political order. The three orders mentioned here can be construed as spontaneous orders, a dynamic pattern of mutually adaptive relationships which arises from a broad-scale agreement about rules rather than results:

[s]pontaneous orders are discovery processes structured by abstract procedural rules through which individual plans responding to local knowledge and personal insight are brought into greater coherence with similar plans by an infinite number of other individuals mutually unknown to each other (diZerega 2008, p. 1).

The observed regularities arising through spontaneous orders come about as individuals, and groups of individuals, follow particular rules of conduct which are independent of any specific or particular end (McCabe and Pitt 2011). Other features of (highly functional) spontaneous orders include: that the rules underpinning a given order apply to all participants in equal measure, with no discriminatory exemptions or privileges on the basis of personal identity or affiliation evident; that positive and negative feedback mechanisms exist to facilitate cooperation and encourage mutually beneficial outcomes; and that individuals can freely enter into, and exit from, arrangements which pervade the given spontaneous order and, indeed, may challenge pervading notions of “what works” by proposing novel ideas and solutions (diZerega 2008; Potts 2013).

I now turn to briefly outline the key characteristics of the economic, communal and political orders of civil society in which humans extensively interact.

The conception of markets within the economic order as a spontaneously ordered form of mutual cooperation between producing, trading and consuming strangers is arguably the central proposition expounded by scholars within the mainline tradition of political economy (Boettke 2012). For one of the figureheads of this mainline tradition, Friedrich Hayek, the “marvel of the market” rests upon its unheralded capacity to distil and coordinate dispersed economic knowledge—of how, why, where and when to produce, trade, and consume goods and services—that is possessed in fragmented, locally situated forms by multitudes of idiosyncratic individuals.

How does economic knowledge become coordinated, generating wealth within the reach of evermore members of civil society? Coordination is achieved with the aid of

movements in relative prices (which, in turn, inform shifts in profitability), superimposing a rank of goods and services according to their relative value in competing uses. Relatively higher prices induce consumers to ration yet encourage suppliers to invest and produce more output; relatively lower prices induce consumers to accumulate yet discourage suppliers to invest and produce more. That said, prices are not necessarily unambiguous bits of information and so there is scope for relative price changes to be subject to interpretation and understanding, instead of necessarily reflexive action and reaction (Lavoie 1986; Ebeling 1991; Dekker and Kuchař 2017).

It is often overlooked by market critics that the unceasing mutual adjustments in market settings, which are the product of oftentimes bustling and rivalrous interactions between people to exchange valuable commodities on mutually agreeable terms, happen to foster spontaneously ordered cooperation between millions of strangers (Rubin 2014). To put it simply, “Paris gets fed.” Virgil Storr (2008) also observed the markets composing the economic order serve as a forum through which friendships and other social relationships emerge, contravening the suggestion that market-based interactions are always and everywhere anonymous and impersonal.

The idea that the economic order is a fount of mutual assistance provides an almost perfect segue to a description of what I call the communal order, which was at the heart of Tocqueville’s seminal meditation on civil society yet has seemingly vanished from much of modern classical liberal scholarship for varied reasons (Cornuelle 1993; Ealy 2005; Garnett Jr. 2011).

Richard Cornuelle was best known for his unremitting call to include what he called the non-market, non-state “independent sector” (I consider this to be a major element of the communal order) into a comprehensive theory of civil society. He referred to the communal order as a spontaneous order in the respect that “[c]ommunity is a consequence. It results when people come together to accomplish things that are important to them and succeed” (Cornuelle 1993, p. 32).

Action in the communal order is predominated by altruistic and solidaristic acts between people. Oftentimes, individuals self-organise into agencies and other bodies to provide and to carry out acts of caring and enlightenment. In the United States alone “[t]here are hundreds of universities, elementary and secondary schools, thousands of hospitals, museums, symphony orchestras, and libraries, thousands of mutual aid groups like Alcoholics

Anonymous, to mention only a few of its more visible entities. Its institutions range from the giant Teachers' Insurance and Annuity Association, ... to a clearing house through which amputees can trade their useless left or right shoes or gloves" (Cornuelle 1992, p. 7).

The contributions of philanthropists and social entrepreneurs as of great import to the maintenance of non-commercial assistance and reciprocity be it in the form of grant funding or goods-in-kind to the needy or to participants involved in special causes, or through help to people which effectually build their capabilities, self-esteem and resilience.

Also situated within the communal order of civil society are social movements (for example, racial equality and queer rights activists) and interest groups (for example, business associations and labour unions) who utilise their divergent understandings of economic, social and political life to promote alternative, and prospectively improved, ways in which people can cooperate and align their prerogatives.

Several scholars suggest that feedback signals exist within the communal order to help participants "do well by doing good," even if the feedbacks are less finely grained than relative prices and profit-and-loss mechanisms conditioning the economic order. In the communal order it is supposed that reputational mechanisms help direct donors and supporters toward credible groups and associations which demonstrate an effectiveness in the fulfilment of their missions, and provide incentives for investment (of time, money and degree of engagement) in worthwhile ventures of mutual assistance (Boettke and Coyne 2009; Chamlee-Wright and Myers 2008).

Social movements and interest groups, along with the other manifestations of associational life within the communal order, play important roles "in stimulating political participation, increasing the political efficacy and skill of democratic citizens and promoting an appreciation of the obligations as well as the rights of democratic citizenship" (Diamond 1994, pp. 7-8). Insights into the potentially democratising effect of people interacting within the communal order brings me to a third kind of spontaneous order situated within civil society—namely, the political order.

The representation of democratic political deliberation as a spontaneous order is covered in several works by Gus diZerega (1989, 2001, 2011). In diZerega's view, "[a]s a spontaneous order, democracy refers to *the entire ensemble of citizens and their interactions when they observe the basic rules of democratic politics*: free elections, one-person-one-

vote, freedom of speech and of organization, and the like" (diZerega 1989, pp. 215-216; emphasis in original).

As is the case for the economic and communal orders, the political order does not exist, nor is it designed, to serve any particular purpose or to achieve any specific goal (Madison 1990). According to Nell (2017), the value of the democratic process is that facilitates the articulation from the bottom-up, as it were, of valuable information—including that which seems to be tacit, or otherwise un conveyed, knowledge about political demands or preferences.

The efficacy of the political order from this standpoint depends, of course, upon an abiding respect for certain norms and procedures facilitating a continuous "discussion," in the Knightian sense, amongst all those potentially affected by policy changes:

In democracies abstract criteria for political membership and procedures for participation can be linked with *any* specifiable interests. Political leaders and measures are selected by balloting in which every citizen's vote counts equally, and in which procedural and reasonably open criteria determine who runs for office. Civil liberties safeguard an indefinite and unpredictable variety of political opinions and programs. Freedom of speech can be used to support or attack political leaders and their policies. ... Criteria for democratic citizenship and participation are completely divorced from citizens' substantive views and values (diZerega 2001, p. 765).

The mark of a functional political order is the potentially indefinite and unpredictable numbers of political positions competing for the democratic affections of the general public (diZerega 1989; Madison 1990). The unfolding spontaneous order of politics embodies the fundamental notion that political decisions are the product of discovery processes orchestrated by sovereign-citizens. Buchanan also reminds us that "democracy as "government by discussion" implies that individual values can and do change in the process of decision-making. Men must be free to choose, and they must maintain an open mind if the democratic mechanism is to work at all" (Buchanan [1954] 1999, p. 99).

By no means do spontaneous orders eschew the role of purposeful action by individuals, or groups of individuals, to achieve their objectives in concert with others. Although centralised, top-down planning was construed by liberals as inimical to market functioning, associational life, and democratic deliberation, "decentralized planning by

many separate persons” (Hayek [1945] 1948, p. 79) is an entirely legitimate mode of human interaction (see also Vaughn [1982] 1994). A corollary of such insight is that “[s]ocial systems (of the human kind) are mixtures of deliberate arrangements of man-planner-designer, interacting with complex, spontaneously emerging orders, increasingly complex and important, made by no one, preconceived by no one, foreseen by no one. Both aspects—artificial and natural, man-made and spontaneous, designed and self-produced, simple and complex—should be studied in their interaction and mutual co-determination” (Zeleny 1985, p. 118).

The civil society notion entails several degrees of phenomenal complexity over and above those prevailing in any given component spontaneous order. Hayek once observed that the character of (civil) society is such that “the whole is more than the mere *sum* of its parts but presupposes also that these elements are related to each other in a particular manner” (Hayek 1967, p. 70). Thus, the irreducibility of civil society to given actions by individuals, with their heterogeneous values, beliefs, purposes, plans and ideas, indubitably reflects the ensemble of those interactions and relationships that people forge (Martin 2011; Lewis 2011).

The activities of those interacting within a given spontaneous order are shaped somewhat by the incentive-feedback signals emergent from within each order—that is, relative prices of the market order; reputation and esteem of the communal order; and votes of the political order. That a bewildering array of ordered interactions takes place implies that civil society itself accommodates a thick multiplicity of values in ways that the thinner economic, communal or political orders singularly cannot. This is because “feedback signals arising from different spontaneous orders merge within the more encompassing *cosmos* of civil society. Collectively these signals help people make the decisions needed to achieve their goals more effectively. But no single signal dominates. Each member attends to the feedback signals they wish, as much as they wish, and ignores the rest” (diZerega 2015, p. 19).

A highly functional civil society correlates well with the realisation of individual liberty since it allows for the greatest range and depth of unforced cooperation between non-intimates possible. Not only can individuals respond, or not respond, to certain feedback signals; they are free to act in a “modular” fashion, and by that I mean they can associate and dissociate with others without fear of being shunned, or punished in some other manner (Gellner [1925] 1994). There is no single focal point in civil society as individu-

als design, shape and direct their own lives, guided by their own interests, ideals, and passions (Ebeling 1993). The key condition, of course, is that each and all respect the equal liberty of others to engage in activities, and pursue their objectives, without rendering harm.

THE ADAPTIVITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY: A MESO PERSPECTIVE

Civil society is the epitome of the notion that, to paraphrase Friedrich Hayek, a person can live in many worlds at once. Although one can make intellectual distinctions concerning how the medley of spontaneous orders work, it should be recognised that the orders themselves are not insular or impregnable.

As highlighted by Richard Wagner (2007, 2010, 2016), civil society is exhibited by interactionist entanglements between individuals and their enterprises, organisations and ventures across the economic, communal and political orders. It is this entanglement of human relations which gives credence to the widely-held observation by social theorists that civil society possesses “structure,” and for others still, especially Hayek (1964, p. 10), “the structure of modern society has attained a degree of complexity which far exceeds that which is possible to achieve by deliberate organization.”

Although the entangled structures inhabiting civil society are of great significance, our analysis of the nature of civil society would be incomplete if it were to rest solely upon describing its structural properties. Buckley (1968, p. 497) criticised the focus of sociological (and presumably other social scientific) studies upon structural concepts, suggesting that this has led to “a rather static, overly deterministic, and elliptical view of societal workings.” Indeed, “for the sociocultural system, “structure” is only a relative stability of underlying, ongoing micro-processes” (Buckley 1968, p. 497).

Observing the structural ramparts of civil society are one thing, but comprehending “the actions and interactions of the components of an ongoing system, in which varying degrees of structuring arise, persist, dissolve, or change” (Ibid.) helps us appreciate the evolutionary dynamic of structural phenomena pervading civil society. Further still, even though the “continuous morphogenic process” (Ibid.) of civil society is not wholly reducible to individual action, classical liberals are deeply abiding methodological individualists who appreciate the pivotal role that individuals play in shaping the trajectory of orders posited within civil society.

The adaptive potential of civil society, as people act and react to novelty and other guises of change, has long been recognised in the liberal canon. The nineteenth-century French philosopher Destutt de Tracy ([1817] 2001, p. 95) observed that “[s]ociety is purely and solely a continual series of exchanges. ... consequently society is an uninterrupted succession of advantages, unceasingly renewed for all its members.” Much more recently James Buchanan valorised the exchange paradigm as the *modus operandi* for human interaction in market and non-market (including political settings) (Buchanan 2005; also Alvey 2009 and Garnett Jr. 2011).

Exchange in the sense described here entails a regime of mutually beneficial cooperation involving people. That said, there needs to be a given party, or parties, that reach out to the other party, or parties, with the aspiration of initiating the given exchange. *Even before then* there must have been people sufficiently mentally alert and socially adept to opportunities that enhance their position, and that of others, in ways that fortuitously render exchanging activity within civil society. These people are what are known as “entrepreneurs,” and they are widely recognised for their pivotal role in propelling processes of economic, social and political change.

Entrepreneurial conduct need not be understood merely in its well-known, yet exclusively, economic incarnation but, in fact, as an aspect of generalised human conduct present in all societies across time and space (Boettke and Coyne 2009; Koppl 2006; Koppl and Minniti 2008). As Koppl (2006, pp. 1-2) pointedly states, “[e]ntrepreneurship is an aspect of all human action. Entrepreneurship is a human universal,” and for our purpose we can roughly map the concepts of economic entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship and political entrepreneurship as the initial injections of novelty emergent within the economic, communal and political order trajectories, respectively.

It should be recognised that acts of entrepreneurship, prevalent in whichever order of civil society, represents an act of *dissensus* from, rather than consensus with, conventional ways of being, doing and knowing (i.e. rules). In civil society—within which a multiplex of beliefs, interests and values are subscribed to by interacting individuals—what Richard Wagner calls the “social tectonics” of discord emerge as very real features of our shared existence. In this context entrepreneurial action, borne of “the unpredictable, the creative, the imaginative expressions of the human mind” (Kirzner 1982, p. 147), frustrates as much as it accommodates and discoordinates as much as it coordinates.

It is a truism that living in a civil society enables us to modularly adjust ourselves to seek greater alignment with our fellows, but the fact that entrepreneurship oftentimes arouses controversy implies that novelty often elicits a modicum of discomfort and resistance among those who bear the costs and fatigues of adjustment and readjustment. This applies to successful entrepreneurial ventures into economic, social and political unknowns. Other, less successful proposals to inject novelty endure insufficient profits, esteem or votes to gain a foothold of critical mass in civil society.

According to Martin (2011, p. 141):

[w]ithout the possibility of individual entrepreneurs conceiving of new ways of doing things, dissenting from existing social structures, those structures would simply reproduce themselves *ad infinitum*. Interaction may give rise to novelty, but that novelty must be recognized and acted upon by individuals to have any lasting effect.

Moving from the initial phase of a given individual or agency (i.e. a socially organised rule carrier, such as a for-profit firm, non-profit charity, or political party) partaking in entrepreneurial activity we can, then, conceptualise the successive adoption of a novel economic, social or political rule by a population as the second phase of an evolutionary trajectory ramifying throughout civil society (Dopfer et. al. 2004; Dopfer and Potts 2008).

Isabel Almudi and colleagues (2017, 2017a, b; see also Markey-Towler 2016) have developed a propagation model in which people openly contribute economic resources toward supporting their preferred ideological position (or “utopia”) with respect to civil liberty, culture, environmental amenity, and the scope of market and state action. For Almudi and colleagues societal transformation, running from novel ideas to corresponding changes in social structures, is centred upon actors drawing upon their resources (effort, time, money and other resources) to convince others to accept their preferred utopia. The disparity of individual contributions toward promoting their utopia generates a contestable exchange of ideas, in which people constantly accept or reject offers of alternative organising principles for civil society.

What emanates from this complex process, given that “once an idea emerges, it can generate variations around the prior original conception” (Almudi et. al., 2017a, p. 632) and that individuals can alter their resource contributions

toward those multiple causes, is essentially a meso-level population of tenuously cohabitating ideas about how to live. According to Almudi and her colleagues their model, incidentally, seems to describe certain features of socio-economic-political change in the United States reasonably well.

We have moved from the origination phase of entrepreneurial action, embodying typically novel and sometimes useful but almost always unsettling values, to a depiction of a diffusion process whereby different ideas, interests and values are championed by varied groups and accommodated in a *modus vivendi* of an ongoing, albeit peaceful, struggle for prominence. Finally, I turn my attention to the final phase of change within civil society, centred upon the perpetuation, or stabilisation, of certain values into rule-systems that are commonly called “institutions” (Dopfer et al. 2004; Potts 2013).

Numerous definitions of institutions abound, though one which seems reasonably representative is as follows: “Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction” (North 1991, p. 97). This definition encompasses informal customs, mores and norms through to formal legislative edicts by the state.

An inherent value of institutions is that they provide focal points of orientation for individual planning that, incidentally, helps to ease problems of inter-subjectivity by bringing expectations of one another’s plans and intentions into better alignment, thereby reducing inconsistencies and conflicts (Martin 2011). Similarly, institutions shape the relative payoffs associated with conducting entrepreneurial activities in ways which either advantage, or disadvantage, other people.

Institutions which facilitate trust between strangers and do not unduly interfere with the free adjustment of economic feedback mechanisms of relative prices, several property and profit-and-loss mechanisms will encourage economic entrepreneurs to strive against each other to offer up a multitude of “preferred utopias” in the form of improvements to the existing production techniques and trading possibilities.

Similarly, institutions can also facilitate cooperative social and political endeavours. Rules maintaining an ease of entry to, and exit from, existing associations within the communal order, and tolerance for the creation of new, hitherto unknown bodies and groups of like-minded persons can facilitate the peaceful co-existence of the conventional and the non-conventional. This insight was at the

heart of John Stuart Mill’s defence of liberal civil society, as outlined in his famous tract *On Liberty*. As for political activities, political institutions (e.g., one-vote-one-value for all adults, open and contestable elections) which effectively treat individuals as intelligent, deliberating equals, and not as objects of domination and subjection, are more likely to generate outcomes perceived as reflective of the public (instead of special) interest.

Institutions come about when origination of a novel proposal leads to willing adoption by large segments of the population which then persists through time. Institutions can be so successful that they exert what Lewis (2012) calls a “downward causal influence” shaping attitudes, dispositions, interests and values in that most people routinely follow them, and indeed epitomise the enduring representations of social reality we call “culture.” By the same token, however, institutions themselves are not immune to challenge and change if there are insufficient incentives to justify their reproduction through time. In those instances we observe the processes of origination and adaptation of proposed, and actual, amendments of incumbent rule-systems at play within the various orders of civil society.

What has been offered here is a meso-centric narrative of change to the structured (and entangled) interactions between persons along economic, communal and political dimensions. It is from this perspective that we see that “social selection and relative stabilization or institutionalization of normatively interpreted role relations and value patterns occurs through the variety of processes usually studied under the headings of conflict, competition, accommodation, and such; power, authority and compliance; and “collective behavior,” from mob behavior through opinion formation processes and social movements to organized war” (Buckley 1968, p. 495).

Contestation over different ways to organise human affairs doubtlessly creates many avenues for disagreement between individuals and groups, depending upon the issues at stake. While there are always tensions within and across economic, communal and political orders of interaction, not least because of the fact that the incentive structures and value sets redounding in civil society are often incommensurable if not outright incompatible, it is nonetheless eminently possible for one to discover and achieve mutually agreeable exchanges with other people. This has long been demonstrated in the form of the “Great Enrichment” of market-tested betterment (McCloskey 2010) and other manifestations of human progress (Norberg 2016).

REFLECTIONS ON THE “CIVIL SOCIETY IN DECLINE” NARRATIVE

In recent decades, if not longer, arguments to the effect that civil society is in a state of “decline,” or gripped by some form of “decay,” have proliferated in both academic and popular literature. This has been reflected in studies pointing to falling membership rates of groups such as fraternal organisations, labour unions and religious orders, and declining voluntarism within clubs and societies (Putnam 1995, 2000). Although many of these studies do acknowledge the heightened interest in environmental concerns, and a growing affinity with feminist, racial and queer civil rights groups, they also suggest levels of commitment to these newer groups is of somewhat fleeting and *ad hoc* in nature (Wuthnow 1998; Skocpol 2004).

Those concerned with deteriorating civil society point out the more active involvement of people in a variety of associations in the past was not only indicative of a vibrant communal order, but tended to strengthen the level of social capital within civil society more generally. A greater social capital stock is associated with greater levels of trust and mutual respect, enabling communities to more effectively pitch together to resolve common problems without recourse to the likes of state action and other distant, top-down interventions. The observation that membership of, and participation in, numerous associations were declining therefore suggests generic deterioration in the stock of social capital, in turn threatening the functionality of civil society.

There is no doubt that the kinds of associations grafted within civil society have waxed and waned in modern times. To suggest, however, this implies civil society in its entirety is fraying or weakening is questionable.

We should remind ourselves that civil society is a *complex and adaptive process* accommodating an ensemble of various spontaneous orders which, in turn, facilitate interactions and preferential attachments of a mind-boggling number. Variety and change is at the core of the ways in which humans mingle, and these characteristics are not necessarily problematic from the perspective of the functionality and viability of civil society. As Buckley (1968, p. 495) stated:

[a] requisite of sociocultural systems is the development and maintenance of a significant level of non-pathological deviance manifest as a pool of alternate

ideas and behaviors with respect to the traditional, institutionalized ideologies and role behaviors. Rigidification of any given institutional structure must eventually lead to disruption or dissolution of the society by way of internal upheaval or ineffectiveness against external challenge.

The classical liberal Friedrich Hayek famously suggested that people adopted and retained institutions which were more conducive to the perpetuation and flourishing of the human species, whereas those who adopted less effective institutions were cast aside into irrelevance or oblivion. Some have made the suggestion that the retention of certain traditional ways of living are necessary to ensure our survival, and indeed Hayek’s writings on cultural evolution are often interpreted in this conservative fashion.

I suggest that survival in an evolutionary sense depends not so much upon institutional persistence, which unquestionably can matter greatly under certain conditions, but upon a capacity of institutions to adapt and change, and to accommodate discoveries and challenges to prevailing dispositions, inclinations and values. Indeed, “[e]volutionary models ... need to incorporate a means of change in order to be complete” (Vaughn [1982] 1994, p. 231), and, so, purposive human action should generally be viewed as both a fundamental and welcome feature of life in civil society and the orders within it.

Other accounts expressing a fear of civil-societal decline reflect concerns that the non-permeability of spontaneous orders within civil society may lead to the workings of a given order being inordinately, thus inappropriately, influenced by paradigms and values (perhaps even feedback mechanisms) widely perceived to be alien to it. From this standpoint the inherent diversity of human existence evident in civil society may dissipate as the logics of a given order dominate the logics of others.

Scholars in the communitarian tradition have expressed the view that the *Gemeinschaft* of intimate personal and familial ties are sorely tested by the *Gesellschaft* of unrepentantly commodifying markets of an impersonal nature, whereas the critics of “neo-liberalism” suggest that privatisation and deregulation reforms signal a disturbing retrenchment of the political (and communal) from human affairs. On the other hand, classical liberals view governmental activity as threatening the displacement, or “crowding out of,” those activities voluntarily undertaken by people within market and civic associational contexts.

Richard Wagner advises us that the “structured living-togetherness” that embodies civil society is exemplified by entangled human interactions which can criss-cross the economic, communal and political orders, and to some extent entanglement is unavoidable. Even so, he raises the issue that growing political influence in economic decision-making not only induces “rent seeking” behaviour, in which entrepreneurs attempt to extract special fiscal and regulatory advantages and privileges from government, but mixes private and public ordering principles in such a way as to generate calculational problems corrupting the political economy. One could extend such insights to describe, for example, the problems surrounding the displacement of polycentrically situated civil associations, such as mutual aid societies, by a massive, yet increasingly paternalistic and fiscally unaffordable, government welfare state.

A group of mid-twentieth century liberal scholars, mainly from Germany, acknowledged the fuzzy boundaries between spontaneous orders embedded within civil society but, nonetheless, sought to enumerate policies and institutional rules to ensure that the scope of entangled relations delicately remain within reasonable bounds, and without losing the dynamic propensities within civil society that yield widespread benefits (Stützel et. al. 1982; Peacock and Willgerodt 1989a, b).

The “ordoliberals,” as they were labelled, saw the maintenance of civil society as resting upon a “constitutional cultivation” of sorts—rules should maintain an economic order featuring open, competitive markets and whittle away monopolies that harm consumers’ interests; rules should encourage the development of vibrant, local communities but not concentrate social power in overbearing hierarchies; and rules should constrain political action in accordance with the rule of law, and preferably enshrine polycentric activity in line with subsidiarity principles. Dopfer and Potts (2008) offer a modern reinterpretation of key ordoliberal doctrines for maintaining fruitful interdependence between civil society’s orders:

An open market economy in which agents are not just operationally free to choose the commodities they will consume, but also generically free to choose the knowledge they will adopt, ultimately rests upon a social, political and cultural order in which variety is sustainable. Generic openness therefore fundamentally requires tolerance of novel ideas as a primary condition, and only excitement about novel ideas as an accelerant. Such tolerance may well be constitutionally embedded in, for example, freedom of speech laws or other legislation that affords and protects

the right to be different. Difference is the elemental driver of economic evolution, and societies that are tolerant of different ideas and rules carried by micro agents possess a necessary condition for economic evolution (Dopfer and Potts 2008, p. 98).

By contrast, persistently hierarchical and monopolistic relationships in any of the orders of civil society has the potential to fatally compromise those senses of equality, openness and toleration upon which we all rely to have decent opportunities to strike arrangements with others for mutual benefit. Indeed, a renewed appreciation of such lessons could prove most valuable in a time in which the pressure points of market concentration, social strife and political authoritarianism appear to be looming larger across developed countries, perhaps risking our capability to live freely and peacefully with one another.

CONCLUSION

No truer words were expressed than by Gus DiZerega when he reckoned the *cosmos* of civil society is that realm of individual choices across a broad range of different values consistent with peace with others (DiZerega 2015, p. 20). I can be atheist, queer, a hobby astronomer, an economist and a classical liberal all at once. Similarly, I can ignore calls to prayer; disparage pleas to privilege one race, gender and nationality over another; and critique demands to nationalise the economy at the same time. Many other members of civil society may not endorse my opinions and how I live my life, and I needn’t necessarily endorse theirs, but we maintain détente as we strive to paint our unique stories onto the canvass of life.

The ability of different people to indulge in their choices—individually and among persons, as well as over time, is instrumental to human flourishing, but choice-fulfilment often requires mutual assistance. People invariably engage with others to transform resources and earn money; to give and receive love and emotional and other supports; and to persuade others to gain political credibility and influence. For many classical liberal theorists the “variety of situations” (to paraphrase Wilhelm von Humboldt) arising from the varied orders comprising civil society serves as a very foundation for the realisation of freedom itself.

Civil society represents that ingenious admixture of evolving cooperative and competitive relationships, always peaceful and abhorring those techniques which privilege certain activities (indeed, certain individuals) above others on the basis of group identity or some other status. The

twin-marvels of civil society concern its accommodation of human diversity and its evolutionary attributes. To the extent to which these qualities are diligently and vigilantly well maintained, without extirpating individual liberties, the chances are civil society will continue to serve as that indispensable arena in which we look to accommodate mutually beneficial economic, social and political changes together.

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