On Civil Society: Why Eastern Europe’s Revolutions Could Succeed
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Review Essay

On Civil Society

Why Eastern Europe's Revolutions Could Succeed

*Michael Ignatieff*

*Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals.* By Ernest Gellner.

When the dissident East European intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s were trying to imagine what kind of community they wanted in place of communism, they turned back to the concept of civil society, an archaic term rooted so far back in the Enlightenment that most West European intellectuals had forgotten its meaning. Instinctively, however, East Europeans knew what it meant: the kind of place where you do not change the street signs every time you change the regime.

The teachers, writers, and journalists of the Czech underground, the shipyard workers and intellectuals of Poland's Solidarity, and the pastors and laymen who met in East German church crypts did more than dream of civil society. They sought to implant one in the very womb of communist society. The philosophical study groups in basements and boiler rooms, the prayer meetings in church crypts, and the unofficial trade union meetings in bars and backrooms were seen as a civil society in embryo. Within those covert institutions came the education in liberty and the liberating energies that led to 1989. In the revolutions of that year—in Hungary, Poland, Romania, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltics—civil society triumphed over the state.

In the communist utopia, true community would transcend all human divisions. In civil society, however, division and diversity, checks and balances, are of the essence. Political power is fenced off

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from cultural power and economic advantage, officeholders do not enrich themselves from office, power does not confer cultural authority, and social position does not entail cultural or political influence. A free society, acting through the press and its elected representatives, restrains the state, and the law restrains both. Needless to say, no civil society has ever lived up to this goal, and the tension between the formal promise of bourgeois society and its often sordid practice has served civil society’s totalitarian enemies well. Yet the formal promise is more than hypocrisy: it remains the standard against which civil society judges itself and from which it finds renewed impetus to reform.

Civil society may be a flawed ideal, but in one central aspect there is no gulf between promise and performance. In a civil society, no paradise beckons. Church and state are divided; no civil religion is enforced or endorsed. Protected by a web of mutually restraining institutions, individuals are free to pursue their own private visions of paradise. The chief attraction of civil society to East European intellectuals was that it renounced an enforceable vision of the good life toward which unhappy souls could be force-marched.

Since the 1980s, the renewed East European interest in civil society has returned West European intellectuals to a concept they had forgotten. Ernest Gellner’s book is not the first to observe this phenomenon, but it is certainly the most penetrating and profound. Gellner is a Czech-born, British-trained philosopher, anthropologist, and social theorist, formerly a professor of social anthropology at Cambridge University and now director of the Center for the Study of Nationalism at the Charles University in Prague. His new book brings together insightful East European thinking about civil society, an anthropologist’s interest in non-European points of comparison, and a real grasp of the political theory of the Enlightenment. The book will fascinate both students of social theory and policymakers and journalists concerned with the mechanics of transition in Eastern Europe.

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

The idea of civil society emerged in the European republic of letters in the eighteenth century as philosophers and historians sought to come to terms with the capitalist modernity emerging all around them.1 They realized that market economies were rapidly bursting the state’s integument of mercantilist regulation. They also saw that this transnational market economy had emerged in tandem with a bourgeois society that was also self-regulating. The idea of the invisible hand sought to capture what was distinctively self-acting and self-correcting about market and society alike. The great Scottish philosophers—

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Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and David Hume—called this new social formation a “civil society” to distinguish it from the “savage and barbarous” tribal societies observable in the New World. A “civil” society was civilized and ordered by the rule of law. Unlike tribal society, it was also large-scale and held together by impersonal bonds of interest rather than ties of kin and blood. The Scottish thinkers could see that it was a highly segmented society, with a division of labor and a class system. It was also, to a degree some found frightening, a self-correcting mechanism in which the selfish actions of myriad individuals, brought together only by the rule of law, managed to produce an orderly and dynamic accumulation of prosperity unprecedented in human history.

A civil society, as the eighteenth-century theorists understood it, was not necessarily a democratic society. The ancien régime in France was not a democracy, yet it enjoyed a vigorous civil society. What a commercial economy absolutely required, Hume maintained, was not democratic government, but “regular government,” that is, the rule of law. And while a civil society was inconceivable without a market, it was not a creature of the market. Indeed, the reverse was the case. As the Scottish philosophers believed, it was civil society—especially the pressure of its public opinion—that determined how free, efficient, and honest a market would emerge.

The moral scandal of such a society, as pointed out first by Bernard Mandeville in his 1715 classic The Fable of the Bees, was that its members were brazenly and unapologetically in the service of those sins of greed and avarice that Christian teaching had always condemned. A civil society was, in Gellner’s words, a profane society, a society that explicitly sought to put the lowest of human desires to productive uses. Mandeville’s paradox—private vices make public virtues—naturalized the profane by demonstrating that capitalist individuals were more likely to promote the public good when they looked exclusively to their private interest. In modern commercial society, said Hume and Smith, the poorest laborer was better housed and clothed than in the more egalitarian and possibly more virtuous tribal societies of the past. In other words, a civil society could also be a moral order without anyone intending it to be.

It was a moral order, however, without traditional moral tutelage. In a civil society, church and state were separated, as in the United States, or, as in England, religious nonconformity coexisted with an established church. Toleration and religious pluralism were the necessary preconditions of the spirit of free inquiry that inspired its capacity for innovation and sustained its political liberty.

A civil society is committed, to use Sir Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction, to “negative” rather than “positive” liberty. Freedom is freedom from interference and concentrations of arbitrary power, and freedom’s guarantee is a set of negative checks and balances designed to prevent unjust accumulation of influence. Liberty in civil society is essentially negative because there cannot be, in principle, agreement among human beings about the positive ends of political communities, beyond the protection of the liberties of the individuals who compose it. If people seek to overcome their own alien-
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atation and separateness, they can do so only as individuals or in voluntary groups. Society offers no salutations, only protections.

Throughout the eighteenth century, philosophers and historians struggled to evaluate the moral reality of the emerging capitalist order with the language of public virtue inherited from republican Rome. Adam Ferguson, a Scottish professor of moral philosophy, published an "Essay on the History of Civil Society" in 1773, which, while welcoming the wealth and liberty of the modern capitalist world, also observed that in this new society, "many of the establishments which serve to defend the weak from oppression, contribute, by securing the possession of property, to favor its unequal division and to increase the ascendant of those from whom the abuses of power may be feared." Here in embryo was Karl Marx's critique of bourgeois law. Other critics of capitalist modernity, led by Jean Jacques Rousseau, insisted that obsession with private interest would lead to neglect of public duty. Amid such neglect, despotism might thrive, and both public virtue and private liberty would be corrupted.

The young Marx, writing between 1842 and 1844, married this Rousseauian critique to a Hegelian theory of alienation. Civil society's supposed division of political, economic, and ideological power was a sham. The state was the executive committee of the ruling bourgeoisie, and law was its chosen instrument of oppression. Inspired by Hegel and the early socialists, Marx began to envision a utopia that would overcome and transcend the opposition between private and public interest. The result: a vision of paradise, beyond division, beyond "the narrow horizon of bourgeois right."

Judged from the standpoint of the twentieth century, of course, the consequences of Marx's intellectual breakthrough in 1844 can only be described as catastrophic. His contempt for bourgeois legality led inexorably toward a Leninist contempt for legality altogether. By cruel yet necessary irony, the doctrine that the bourgeois state was merely the executive committee of civil society helped to legitimize the creation of a Leninist state that abolished society altogether.

The consequences of Marx's contempt for civil society are well known. What Gellner adds is the insight that Marx remained the captive of both the classical republican and early Christian disdain for the profane. For all his attempts to rid his doctrine of any taint of mysticism or spirituality, Marx's thought remained permeated by the religious vision of man as a fallen creature, profaned by avarice and greed but capable of redemption in a community of plenty and justice. Like most German romantics, he believed that our true nature was artistic: that humankind released its suppressed potential in making and shaping rather than in huckstering and bartering.

Gellner's most interesting thought is that the societies built with the scaffolding of Marx's thought made the mistake not of attempting to drive religion out of life altogether, but of investing the economic with sacred significance. "The great weakness of Marxism," he writes, "may be not so much its formal elimination of the transcendent from religion, but its over-sacralization of the imma-
nent." The icons of this faith "depicted the sacredness of work and the worker, astride a tractor, his muscles bulging with productive effort." What was invested with sacred purpose was the disinterested, nonerotic, sacrificial components of work: heroic self-denial in the service of society. The Soviet Union's Five Year Plans were sustained by this heady religion of labor and social sacrifice, and as Gellner rightly sees, it was this religion that ensured that "mass murder did not undermine conviction." But the religion of productive labor could only sustain itself during the frenzies of total mobilization. A society that offers no ideological quarter to the profane, to the selfish, acquisitive, self-interested sides of human motivation, leaves itself vulnerable when the promised paradise never materializes and the collective enthusiasm of total mobilization is succeeded, as it must be, by exhaustion and disillusion. Faith in Soviet communism survived Stalin's purges but not the peaceful squalor of the Brezhnev years. The ideological ban on profane capitalist instincts not only undermined the economy but morally exposed the corruption, nepotism, and idleness that followed the breakdown of the old religion of labor. So, Gellner concludes, "the world's first secular religion failed not because it deprived man of the transcendent, but because it deprived him of the profane."

MODULAR MAN
The genius of capitalist civil society is that it not only harnesses our profane energies, but relieves us of the moral burden of thinking of them as profane. In so doing, it relieves us of the strain of constant longing for unattainable self-transcendence in desperate simulations of paradise.

By legitimizing the profane, such a society also encourages the emergence of a new kind of human identity, which Gellner calls "modular man." Modern individualism is not anomic or atomized, Gellner argues, because civil society allows individuals to associate with each other in bewilderingly complex networks—friendships, sports teams, work groups, and amateur and professional associations of all kinds. What is modular about the modern self is the inorganic, bolted-on character of those attachments. We enter and leave them at will, and we are constantly renegotiating their claims on our time and loyalty. We tend to take such associative connections for granted, but they form a pattern of life absolutely distinct from the kinship ties of a tribal society or the party ties of a totalitarian state.

Civil society may seem momentarily triumphant at "the end of history," but its triumph, Gellner argues, is vulnerable and may be short-lived. Its very suppleness—the refusal to sacralize the profane, the refusal to privilege public goals over private ones, the insistence that liberty can only have a negative rather than positive content—may also prove its undoing. From an anthropological point of view, modern civil society is unique in its bracketing of ultimate questions, in its refusal to provide its members with a faith or a myth to live by. Marxist totalitarianism, while it posed as a tradition-shattering avatar of modernism, remained obedient to the oldest traditions of human authority: it sought to create and enforce a collective moral authority. "It is civil society, with its separation of fact and
value, and its coldly instrumental unsacramental vision of authority, which is exceptional," Gellner writes.

In vain, liberal philosophers from John Stuart Mill to Isaiah Berlin have maintained that capitalist societies ought to stand only for liberty. They continue to be accused by conservatives of being nihilists in disguise, whose rationalization of the profane betrays the human need for shared meanings. In contemporary America, for example, the religious right has tapped into a deep longing that capitalist society "stand for" something, that it embody the virtues of a small-scale community. The unrelenting attack on "liberalism" from the religious and political right since the 1960s, when viewed from Gellner's perspective, appears as a futile attempt to "moralize" a mass society that by its very nature cannot serve collective moral ends.

On this reading, the conservative counterrevolution in morals—prayer in schools, opposition to abortion, the proscription of homosexuals—is dangerous precisely because it does not accept the nature of its own society. This is not pragmatic politics, but rather a demand that society be refashioned as a whole into its ideal of a Puritan, family-oriented community. This project cannot succeed because modern civil society cannot possibly be the moral community conservatives imagine. Since their attempts to make it so are bound to fail, they are necessarily driven into ever more fanatical postures of moral rejection. This is not to say that a modern civil society cannot defend and embody what the philosophers call a "thin" definition of the good: a set of rights and procedures that protect individuals against violence and abuse. But to drive civil society beyond that, into the holistic fantasy of a God-fearing, family-loving, resolutely heterosexual community, would be to sacrifice the liberty that is its defining characteristic. Yet the fact that it is impossible to create a moral community out of civil society will not make that desire go away. Desires do not vanish because they are incoherent or impossible. The risk, therefore, is that the politics of civil society may be immobilized by futile moral battles. The real problems a society has to address in its politics will be passed over in an interminable quarrel between liberals and conservatives that cannot, in the nature of things, issue a result. Thus, civil society is menaced from within by its own inability to satisfy its citizens' recurrent fantasy of a holistic community. But it is also threatened from without by competing societies that have proved more successful in offering moral community to their members.

THE COMPETITION

Civil society has modern competitors, whose chief claim is to offer the shared moral vision that civil society lacks. Islam, Gellner argues, far from being a reactionary throwback or flight from modernity, has proven itself an astonishingly adaptive alternative to civil society. To the disoriented, individualized urban dweller of the Third World—living through the chaos of urbanization, under-development, and the botched modernizations of weak postcolonial states—Islam offers a sacred code that provides metaphysical reassurance and the detailed regulation of private behavior once
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offered in tribal society. Islam thus is an exceptionally effective response to the spiritual and practical needs of a disoriented urban population in the throes of modernization. It offers the imaginary community that the real world of political and social life so signally lacks. Thus, in the Islamic world, Gellner argues, the masses put up with corrupt polities and unjust social orders because they believe that their rulers remain subjects, like them, of the same sacred order and moral law. Like Marxism, Islam sacralizes daily life by minute regulation of private behavior. But Islam has shown much greater staying power than Marxism: it has never made the mistake of offering paradise here on earth. It also has the immeasurable advantage of having it both ways in relation to wealth: it accepts riches when they come and offers the compensations of high-minded indifference when they do not. Thus, Islam cushions the Muslim masses from the endemic failure of these societies to successfully emulate the West while comfortably rationalizing the economic privileges of the elite.

Islam is not the only competitor to Western civil society. In passing, Gellner discusses the attractiveness of the emerging forms of Asiatic capitalism, which, in its Chinese, Taiwanese, Singaporean, and Malaysian variants, combines a dynamic market economy with political authoritarianism and, in place of a free civil society, offers a tightly bound kinship society. The evident appeal of such societies is that they offer an ingenious solution to capitalist anomie: the individual remains encased within the disciplines of authoritarian order from above and kinship and family networks from below.

Even in Europe, the coldly individualistic vision of civil society has always encountered resistance from those who wish society to “stand for” something. The appeal of nationalism, Gellner argues, is that it offers shared meaning to modular man. Gellner’s earlier work, Nations and Nationalism, developed the theory that nationalism is a functional adaptation to modernization, an attempt by the nation-state to provide the rituals of collective belonging and attachment formerly provided by the tribe, village, and local community. National systems of education, which inculcate national language, history, and values, have enabled modern civil societies to respond to the need for collective belonging within a market order characterized by alienation and anomie.

For Gellner, the nationalist temptation occurs in all civil societies, Western and Eastern. Civic varieties of nationalism—that is, ones that define membership in the nation in terms of shared adherence to civic values—are fully compatible with the necessary pluralism of civil society. Ethnic nationalism, which defines belonging in terms of blood, ethnic origin, or language, may or may not be compatible with civil society, depending on how such societies define the rights of ethnic and other minorities. In what Gellner aptly calls the third time zone of Europe, the Balkans, Western ideals of nationalism have proven disastrous. In a region where patterns of ethnic settlement are dispersed and heterogeneous and where ethnicity is deeply blurred by intermarriage and common settlement, the very idea of ethnic sepa-
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ratism is suicidal. In such ethnically heterogeneous regions, a civil society allowing individuals to collaborate as individuals on nonethnic lines appears to offer the most rational prospect for social order. Yet the paradox of the Balkans is that while nowhere is the rationality of a nonethnic civil society more obvious, nowhere has it proved more difficult to create. True, Yugoslavia enjoyed one of the most vigorous revivals of an independent civil society anywhere in the communist world in the 1960s and 1970s. Millions of young Yugoslavs believed they had emancipated themselves from ethnic ties. Yet when nationalist politicians, first in Serbia and then in Croatia, set out to create ethnic states on the ruins of Tito’s Yugoslavia, the courageous defenders of a nonethnic polity found themselves outnumbered, outvoted, and eventually outgunned.

Disappointingly, Gellner does not address the challenge raised by the Yugoslav catastrophe. It may be that Yugoslavia illustrates the truth that a multiethnic, multicultural civil society cannot exist without a strong state. Without such a state as arbiter and guarantor of ethnic accommodation, civil society risks disintegrating into ethnic factions, and it does so because it is rational for individuals to seek the protection of their own. In other words, a multiethnic civil society was possible only so long as Marshal Tito guaranteed civil order. In the vacuum created by the collapse of the Titoist state, civil society proved incapable of self-regulation, and those brave Yugoslav voices who preached against the madness of ethnic separation were drowned out in the gadarene rush to divide. Yugoslavia suggests, gloomily enough, that no civil society has the strength to withstand tribal or ethnic warfare once the state loses its capacity to maintain order. Invisible hands are no substitute for the magistrate’s sword.

A CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGY

Elsewhere in Eastern Europe, state structures remain sufficiently robust to contain ethnic conflict, yet their societies remain mired in the transition between the communist past and a capitalist future. Western policymakers, anxious to strengthen the so-called reform process in Eastern Europe, are usually aware that they ought to begin by strengthening civil society. This means funding independent media; maintaining ties not simply with governments and regimes but with their oppositions; providing aid and assistance to strengthen the key institutions of civil society, the courts, judiciary, and police; developing charitable and voluntary associations so that the population ceases to look to the state and begins to look to its own strengths; developing nongovernmental channels for the delivery of Western technical aid and assistance, and educational and cultural exchanges. A civil society strategy for strengthening reform and democracy starts with the search for partners outside the state, the leading parties, and the bureaucracy.

A civil society strategy, in other words, assumes that formal democracy is not enough. Indeed, democracy will degenerate into authoritarian populism unless the democratic habits of debating what needs to be done and then organizing to get it done take root in civil society’s
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institutions themselves. All of the post-communist regimes are nominally democratic, but in practice the levers of power have usually remained in the hands of the old nomenklatura. All of those societies are nominally capitalist in orientation, yet their economies remain locked in mid-transition as inefficient hybrids of state enterprise and mafia entrepreneurship. In a state like Serbia, the coming of democracy has actually strengthened the old nomenklatura, enabling them to secure democratic mandates for their brand of authoritarian populism by cynically fomenting nationalist hysteria. Likewise, a market economy coexists with a huge subsidized state sector, the one feeding off its semi-criminal links with the other.

Formal democracy cannot become real democracy until the civil society becomes strong enough to offer the old nomenklatura effective competition and opposition. It is in the institutions of civil society—a free press, independent universities, trade unions, banks, commercial firms, publishing houses, and so on—that the leadership of a democratic society is trained and recruited. If the Scottish philosophers were right, moreover, it is civil society in tandem with the state that tames the market. Without a strong civil society, there cannot be a debate about what kind of market to have, what portions of its surplus should be put to the use of present and future generations, and what standards of legal and commercial behavior are required to make it function properly. Without a free and robust civil society, market capitalism must inevitably turn into mafia capitalism.

And so it has been proven in the ardu-