Introduction

*Inequality and Democracy's Uncertain Future*

The last thirty-five years have witnessed historic levels of economic inequality, relentless attacks on the regulatory and redistributive functions of all levels of government, and the movement of “civil society” to the center of democratic theory and political discourse. These three impulses are different aspects of a single process of conservative ascendancy. Economics, politics, and ideology have combined to dramatically reshape contemporary American life and change the way we think about equality and democracy. Embraced by Republican and Democratic politicians alike, earnestly debated in university forums and college courses, expanded on by political pundits, and elaborated in countless books and articles, the idea that civil society can enrich democracy by contesting state power has become an article of faith.

It is no coincidence that the contemporary understanding of civil society—local activity and voluntary association—has come to replace political commitment and state activity during a period of accelerating inequality. Nor it is a coincidence that its democratic core should be so uncritically accepted by such a broad swath of political, social, and moral opinion. There is wide agreement that tutoring children, volunteering in social movements, joining bowling leagues, and working in soup kitchens can revitalize communities and strengthen habits of good citizenship at a time when there is virtually no confidence that political activity or established institutions are up to the task. In an era of wealth concentration, political dysfunction, and ideological polarization, both political parties agree that civil society can do what politics cannot. The first President Bush’s faith in “a thousand points of light” was a fitting introduction to President Clinton’s proclamation that “the era of big government is over.”

Barack Obama’s election in 2008 seemed to indicate that a change was in the works, but the faith that civil society can revitalize democ-
racy continues to shape American politics. In the absence of noble public goals, admired leaders, or general agreement, many observers have charted an alarming erosion of civic spirit and a corresponding decline in the quality of public life. An increasingly distressed literature has alerted the country to the damage done by cheapened standards of behavior, “road rage,” political dysfunction, microaggressions, inequality, and offensive jokes. Experts worry that an overworked, disengaged, and self-absorbed population has allowed its moral connections, social engagements, and political participation to atrophy. The concern is not limited to bad manners but has spilled over into political affairs and generated many suggestions about how public life could be improved in a period marked by fraying communities, widespread apathy, and unprecedented levels of contempt for politics. Driven by an uneasy sense of decline and animated by a deep suspicion of the state, a growing body of contemporary work hopes that civil society can provide a democratic counterweight to the broad political commitments of an earlier period.

But the view that local voluntary activity sustains democracy is only one way of understanding civil society. Ironically, the events that brought the notion of civil society to the center of contemporary political life conceptualized it in very different terms. In the early 1980s a broad series of civic forums, independent trade unions, and social movements began to carve out areas of political activity in the Eastern European countries of “actual existing socialism.” Their leaders talked of “the rebellion of civil society against the state,” and when they started coming to power in 1989 the stage was set for an explosion of interest in the West. Liberal political theory was revived in demands for “law-governed states” that would protect private life and public activity from the intrusive hand of meddling bureaucracies. It was not surprising that Eastern Europeans should conceptualize civil society in terms of limiting state power, or that its popularity in the United States should be expressed in the language of intermediate organization. Civil society meant constitutional republicanism in one area and denoted local volunteerism supported by informal norms of solidarity and mutual aid in another. Both bodies of thought sought to theorize it as a democratic sphere of public action because it limits the thrust of state power.

Eighteen years have passed since the first edition of this book, and some recent developments mark the limits of civil society’s democratic
potential as they simultaneously hint at a way forward. We know more than we did in 1999, and it is time to take note of history’s recent lesson that local volunteerism and intermediate organizations are insufficient vehicles for democratic renewal in an era of accelerating inequality. More is required, and that more is broad, comprehensive political activity. The breathless faith that the energy of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street would be enough to reinvigorate democracy has yielded to Black Lives Matter’s embrace of patient political organizing and presidential candidate Bernie Sanders’s unambiguous orientation toward the state. Spontaneous protests against European austerity led to Syriza’s and Podemos’s turn toward national politics in Greece and Spain. The collection of organizations in “global civil society” helped alert the world to great danger even as it made possible the state-centered Paris Climate Change Conference. All these developments underline how important state power, comprehensive politics, and broad ideologies are to democratic theory and practice. This is particularly true now. The threat to democracy posed by historic levels of inequality is very potent, and civil society has proved unable to respond to it in the way its admirers have anticipated. Things are not as enthusiastic and celebratory as they were in the heady aftermath of European communism’s collapse. There is considerably more to the category than meets the eye, and an explication of tradition can help us evaluate easy assumptions about its democratic potential.

This book examines the historical, political, and theoretical evolution of the way civil society has been theorized over two and a half millennia of Western political theory. Broadly speaking, three distinct bodies of thought have marked its development—but these are not hard and fast divisions, and considerable cross-fertilization has enriched each tradition. Reflecting its orientation toward broad categories of analysis, classical and medieval thought generally equated civil society with politically organized commonwealths. Whether its final source of authority was secular or religious, civil society made civilization possible because people lived in law-governed associations protected by the coercive power of the state. Such conceptions shaped the way civil society was understood for hundreds of years. As the forces of modernity began to undermine the embedded economies and universal knowledge of the Middle Ages, the gradual formation of national markets and national
states gave rise to a second tradition, which began to conceptualize civil society as a civilization made possible by production, individual interest, competition, and need. For some thinkers, the Enlightenment opened unprecedented opportunities for freedom in a secular world of commerce, science, culture, and liberty. For others, civil society’s disorder, inequality, and conflict falsified its emancipatory potential and required a measure of public supervision. However civil society was understood, it was clear that the world could no longer be understood as fused commonwealths. Civil society developed in tandem with the centralizing and leveling tendencies of the modern state, and an influential third body of thought conceptualized it as the now-familiar sphere of intermediate organization and association that serves liberty and limits the power of central institutions.

Chapter 1 explores the origins of civil society in a classical heritage that understood it as a politically organized commonwealth. Reflecting the general dominance of political categories, “civility” described the requirements of citizenship rather than private sensibilities or good manners. Plato’s wish to articulate an invariant ethical center for public life drove his attempt to unify dissimilar elements and stimulated his greatest student’s powerful critique. Aristotle’s civil society was still a political association that improved its citizens, but it was founded on respect for the different spheres and multiple associations in which life is lived. As important as Aristotle’s respect for variation and distinction was, civil society was still organized around the face-to-face relations of friends whose leisurely aristocratic benevolence allowed them to discover and articulate the public good. Cicero and others sought to develop a broader notion of civil society by adding the distinctive Roman recognition of a legally protected private realm, but republican degeneration and imperial collapse brought the first period of theory to a halt.

Christianity supplied the central categories of political life and theory for the better part of a millennium, beginning with Augustine’s devastating critique of classicism’s prideful striving for self-reliance. Chapter 2 explores how secular notions of political life succumbed to Christian theories of civil society that were organized around fallen man and human depravity, emphasized dependence and hierarchy, and denied that the works of man can guide moral action. As powerful as it was, such a blanket condemnation of the classical heritage eventually con-
plicated with the needs of a Church that had to make its way in the world. Augustine’s recognition that the state is both the result of and corrective for sin opened the way to more developed notions that did not denigrate the here and now. Aquinas invested the secular order with a fuller measure of ethical potential than Augustine was willing to admit and revived Aristotle’s civil society as an organized political community predicated on the distinct logics of different orders of creation. Since the moral content of human affairs was not erased by revelation, a politically constituted civil society was now essential to human life, expressed man’s nature, and served God’s purposes. Aquinas took Aristotle as far as he could within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, but notions of a civil society constituted by religion would not survive for long. As medieval attempts to theorize a Christian Commonwealth began to crumble under the corrosion of markets and the pressure of kings, Dante and Marsilius of Padua anticipated modern conceptions of a civil society constituted by a single point of secular sovereign power.

Chapter 3 traces the gradual transition to the two modern conceptions of civil society. Centralizing monarchies stimulated distinctly modern theories of power, legitimacy, and sovereignty. The end of classical and medieval attempts to theorize civil society in universal terms was reflected in Machiavelli’s recognition that Rome’s civic republicanism turned conflict into stability. But his understandable preoccupation with political decadence made it difficult for him to theorize a sphere of meritorious action outside a purely instrumental understanding of politics. The discovery of the individual was the work of the Reformation, and as Luther drove the conscience inward he left it to princes to organize civil society and choose their subjects’ religion. A unified and religiously constituted Christendom yielded to the autonomy of faith, a sharper distinction between the external and internal spheres of life, a new justification of state power, and a civil society that regulated the external relations of a fellowship of equal believers. But not all transitional conceptions were rooted in theology. The great work of this period, *Leviathan*, announced the appearance of a new calculating individual who had to take account of other self-interested entities. Hobbesian civil society was an artificial creation for the purposes of survival, but a constitutive sovereign power made the benefits of civilization possible. Justice, morality, culture, art, and science depended on the state’s ability to shape
a civil society that allowed people to go about their business in peace and security. If Hobbes looked backward to the politically organized universal community, he discerned a future marked by the individual pursuit of self-interest.

Modernity came in the form of centralizing nation-states, extensive markets, and political movements for freedom. Civil society was no longer understood as a universal commonwealth but came to mean private property, individual interest, political democracy, the rule of law, and an economic order devoted to prosperity. Chapter 4 begins with John Locke’s understanding that a civil society constituted by property, production, and acquisition required a law-governed state to preserve order and protect liberty. Civil society denoted the possibility of living in conditions of political freedom and economic activity. Adam Ferguson was worried about the disintegrative and divisive effects of the competitive pursuit of self-interest and tried to locate an innate ethical sensibility at civil society’s heart. Adam Smith shared Ferguson’s awareness of the corrupting effects of commerce, but it was he who articulated the first distinctively bourgeois sense that civil society is a market-organized sphere of production and competition driven by the private strivings of self-interested proprietors. The important role he reserved to the state did not conflict with his simultaneous recognition of civil society as the sphere of moral sentiments, arts, sciences, morality, and all the other benefits of civilized life. Smith’s tendency to privilege economic activity epitomized a powerful strand of liberal thought that assumed the market constituted civil society.

Chapter 5 traces the implications of this first modern conception. His separation of essence and appearance led Immanuel Kant to regard civil society as a protected sphere that can enable people to make their own decisions in conditions of freedom. A liberal public sphere, fair and equally applied public procedures, extensive civil liberties, and legitimate republican institutions would anchor a “republic of letters” and turn the pursuit of individual interests toward the public good. But Kant’s morality could never find an empirical referent, and Hegel’s criticism of his “introversion” led him to a theorization of the three ethical moments of the family, civil society, and the state. Hegel’s civil society was inhabited by economic man, was constituted by his private interests—and was a sphere of moral action. A network of social relations standing between
the family and the state, it linked self-serving individuals to one another in a mediating sphere of social connections and moral freedom. But Hegel's civil society fails to realize the fullest measure of freedom because it cannot solve the persistent problem of pauperism, and he ended with the hope that Prussia's bureaucratic state could resolve civil society's antagonisms. Marx agreed that civil society was the problem that had to be overcome but rejected Hegel's solution. His conclusion that the state could not be conceptualized apart from economic processes drove him to a theory of social revolution that placed the proletariat at the center of socialist politics and looked to a transformed state to take the lead in democratizing civil society. Marx brings to a close the modern tradition of thought that theorized civil society as a sphere constituted by production, class, and their attendant social and political relations. It raised the urgent question of how a chaotic sphere of competition could be subjected to public supervision. In so doing it posed the relation between civil society and the state as the fundamental question of modern life and developed a powerful reminder that civil society is not an autonomous sphere of self-contained democratic activity.

Chapter 6 shows how the second major strand of modern theory led in a different direction. It conceptualized civil society in light of conditions in France, where a tradition of centralizing monarchs and a powerful state stimulated notions of community and intermediate organization. Drawing on Aristotle's concept of mixed constitutions and wishing to protect local traditions of aristocratic privilege from central power, Montesquieu located intermediate bodies at the heart of republican theories of civil society. Rousseau mounted a romantic attack on Enlightenment notions of progress, the arts, and science but was unwilling to defend the privileges of blood. For him, civil society was a community whose solidarity reconciled the subjectivity of individual interests with the objectivity of the common good. But his indifference to intermediate bodies left him open to Burke's defense of local traditions against the leveling and centralizing French Revolution. This second strand of modern thought culminated in Tocqueville's attempt to understand how American localism and informal norms of voluntary association could limit the thrust of the democratic state in conditions of economic equality and political freedom. His attention to public life outside the state dominates contemporary thinking about civil society even though his
initial postulate of American equality exempted him from considering the effects of economic forces on local traditions of self-reliance and voluntary association.

Chapter 7 begins the examination of how civil society is theorized in contemporary political discourse and is rooted in the experience of Eastern Europe. The historical trajectory of twentieth-century communism has been shaped by the course of revolutions in underdeveloped societies. A state-driven strategy of industrialization built around the requirements of steel seemed to require the “leading role” of a highly organized party. Committed to central planning, suspicious of the market, and wary of spontaneous social initiatives, the bureaucratized party-states of “actual existing socialism” never developed a credible record of democratic accountability and were unable to accept significant levels of uncontrolled activity in civil society. As conformity, pretense, and hypocrisy came to mark Soviet-style socialism, it made sense that dissident intellectuals would theorize civil society in the familiar liberal terms of constitutional republics and limited states. But their conflation of political tyranny with economic regulation and their antistatist understanding of civil society blinded them to the danger of the market. In the end, almost all their civic forums, citizen groupings, “flying universities,” and social movements were swept away as traditional political structures emerged to apply the iron logic of the market. The once-heady discourse of civil society has long since faded in the region that restored it to the center of contemporary affairs.

The United States has the constitutional limitations on state power that were so attractive to Eastern Europeans dissidents, and chapter 8 chronicles the development of a powerful view that civil society is a set of informal norms supporting local intermediate associations. Its Madisonian reliance on political culture and interest groups has become the dominant trend of contemporary thought, but its failure to address the structural obstacles that prevent some interests from even being articulated also appear in much contemporary theory. Serving as a counterweight to this trend, however, Hannah Arendt, Richard Sennett, Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Marcuse, and others investigated how a powerful culture industry limits civil society’s ability to perform the mediating role demanded by neo-Tocquevillian theory. In different ways they have brought attention to bear on how the logic of commodification has in-
vaded ever-wider spheres of social life. The easy trust that civil society is the most important contemporary site of democratic activity makes no sense unless its theorists can broaden their field of inquiry and question some of their inherited assumptions.

The conclusion raises some of these issues and suggests that localism may not be all it is made out to be—particularly because heightened levels of economic inequality call Tocqueville's assumptions into question. A foundation has been provided by the pathbreaking work of Grant McConnell and Jane Mansbridge, who suggest that the intermediate organizations so much in favor cannot provide the democratizing effect called for by contemporary theory. An impressive body of theoretical and empirical work suggests that civil society is a badly under-theorized category because it cannot take account of the most important development of contemporary life: the rapid development of staggering levels of material inequality. We have come face-to-face with the ancient warnings that plutocracy destroys democracy and civil society alike. The civil rights movement, Occupy Wall Street, and the Tea Party demonstrate, in different ways, that it is time to move past small thinking and the celebration of local fragmentation to engage the big questions of economic justice and political democracy. If civil society is to play a role in contemporary democratic theory, it needs to be reconceptualized, enriched, and made appropriate to the concrete conditions of the real world. Theorizing it in limited antistatist terms makes it impossible to grasp the emancipatory possibilities of political action. Suffocating levels of inequality have revealed some of the limitations in the way we think about civil society. This second edition takes account of how dramatically things have changed. Two and a half thousand years of political thought and action can help us as we move into a future in which economic justice and political democracy will demand more, not less, of the state.