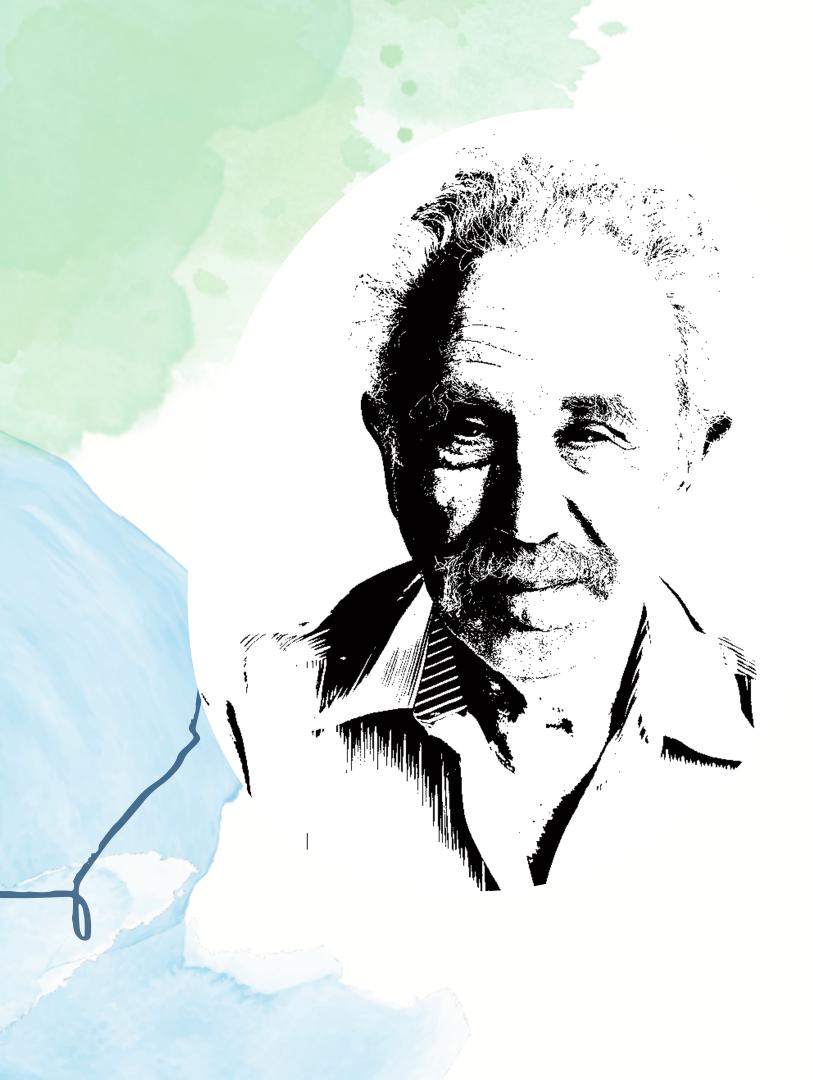# Civil Society and Social Theory

written by Andrew Arato and Jean Louise Cohen

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The Reconstruction of Civil Society

- anyone utilizing the concept of civil society faces a double task:
1. Demonstrate continued normative and empirical relevance of the concept to modern social conditions
2. Account for negative dimensions of contemporary civil societies while showing that these are only part of the story not the whole

- reconstructing the concept on basis of Habermas's development of a dualisitc social theory that differentiates the logic of system and life-world

- Habermas's concept of life-world has 2 distinct dimensions:
1. The life-world refers to the reservoir of unspoken traditions and assumed background beliefs rooted in language and culture, and used by individuals in their everyday lives
2. According to Habermas, life-world has 3 distinct structural components:
- culture, society, personality

Main point for Arato and Cohen:
- The life-world becomes more complex as specialized groups form to preserve traditions, unity, and identity (-->institutional dimension)
- it is this institutional dimension of the life-world that best corresponds to their concept of civil society
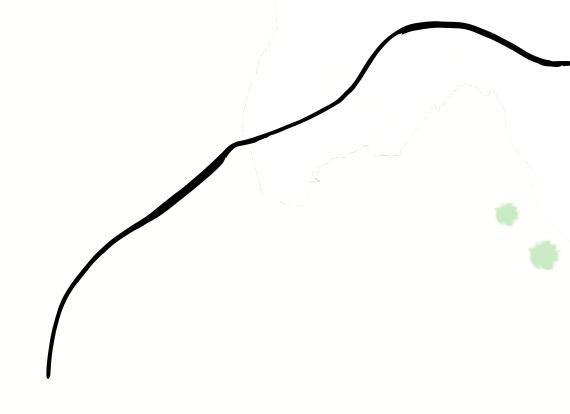
Theoretical Gains

1. Beyond traditional civil society

- a modernized life-world means allowing traditions, norms, and authority to be openly questioned and discussed through communication and discourse
- replacing a traditional normative agreement with one that's reflective, beyond conventional thinking, and based on open communication processes
- when linked to the life-world concept, the communication paradigm doesn't see modernization as getting rid of all tradition, just the traditional, rigid approach to it

2. The negativity of modern civil society
- the issue isn't cultural modernity itself, but rather the selective institutionalization and subsequent cultural decline that are problematic
- the "loss of freedom" is produced by the penetration of an already modernized life-world by their logic and selective pattern of institutionalization

-->Habermas calls this penetration "colonization"

- the existing version of civil society is only *one* logically possible path of institutionalizing of cultural modernity

3. The institutional doubleness and alternatives of civil society

- blockages in the modernization of the life-world due to *colonization* are counterproductive also for the state and economy
- Habermas assesses the doubleness of institutions of contemporary civil society in the domains of legality, political and cultural publicity, and the family
- doubleness in domain of legalization: there is the alternative of law, functioning solely as a *medium,* as a vehicle for the penetration of the life-world by money and power
- or as *institution* that secures and formalizes the normative accomplishments of the life-world

Alternatives:
1. reduction of associational life to bureaucratic and closed organizations
2. reviving voluntary groups by making their internal workings more democratic, open, and visible to the public eye

4. The utopia of civil society

- the model of civil societ Arato and Cohen reconstructed avoids "soulless" reformism by thematizing a *self-limiting*, self-reflective utopia of civil society
- "utopian horizon of a civil society" where the structured areas of the economy and state form the basis for the modern life-world split into the private and public spheres
- the ideal vision for civil society involves maintaining boundaries between various systems and the life-world, while prioritizing normative values from the life-world to guide formal systems of action
- in this utopian vision, the limitation lies in confining the coordination of action mainly within the institutional core of civil society, indirectly impacting other spheres instead of aiming to universally apply this communicative organizing across all societal mechanism

Thank you!