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Civil Society's Barbarisms

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Abstract

Instead of arguing about elements and boundaries of civil society, recent
discussions in social theory have focused on the concept of civil society itself
as embedded in different currents of social and political thought. Following
up on these discussions, this article reconstructs the concept of civil society
by identifying a number of implicit oppositional terms and the respective
semantic fields, which in different historical contexts have lent meaning to
the concept. Three such oppositional terms and counter-meanings will be
distinguished in turn and traced back to different traditions of European
social and political theory: (1) the barbarism of disorder; (2) the barbarism
of order; and (3) the realm of toil and material necessity. It is argued that
the multiple meanings and counter-meanings of civil society are connected
by a deep structure of discourse. This deep structure of civil society thinking
can be translated into a 'semiotic square' in the tradition of A.J. Greimas. In
conclusion, it is suggested to further investigate current uses of civil society
along these lines, in order to clarify normative goals and possible ways of
mediating between opposing moral worlds.

Key words

■ barbarism ■ civil society ■ democratic theory ■ evil ■ political order

From a normative perspective, the concept of civil society is set against two
different kinds of political evil: against over-integration of society by an over-
powerful state as well as against the phenomena of social disintegration, religious
violence, and fanaticism. In democratic theory, the concept typically wavers
between deliberative and republican critiques of liberal democracy, as has been
pointed out by Axel Honneth, who for this reason dismisses the whole vocabu-
lary as being frustratingly vague (Honneth, 1998: 781, n. 2). However, not only
theorists but an increasing number of ordinary citizens in many parts of the world
seem to stick to this vocabulary which is emphasized as a powerful tool to make
sense of democratic experiences, to frame political demands, and to challenge
adversaries. Furthermore, the concept continues to be much debated not only by

liberals, civic republicans, and neo-Marxists but also by representatives of non-Western ethical traditions (Chambers and Kymlicka, 2002).

A striking feature of these more recent debates is the shifting focus from questions about the boundaries and elements of civil society to questions regarding the concept itself as embedded in different traditions of social and political thought. Following this conceptual turn of the debate, this article examines the concept of civil society by looking at the ways in which its construction has rested upon oppositional terms and the construction of moral worlds, which are thought to threaten its continued existence. Whereas 'civil society' is often introduced as a free-standing concept, which refers to the moral foundations of liberal democracy, I argue that the entire vocabulary is steeped in a history of largely ignored counter-meanings. This history needs to be explored more thoroughly in order to salvage the concept from the maddening ambiguity, which has befallen its uses in social theory as well as in political criticism. As a member of the large family of polemically charged 'asymmetrical counter-concepts' (Koselleck, 1979) engrained in much of modern political language, 'civil society' points to implicit notions of the 'uncivil' and of 'non-society'. Like the prominent dualism of friend and foe, the conceptual pairs in which 'civil society' appears reveal 'a grid of possible antitheses' (Koselleck, 1979: 258) which accounts for the meaning and the critical thrust of this powerful vocabulary in different historical contexts.

The first antithesis is 'barbarism', a term with a long history mostly linked to Europe's failing grasp on non-European peoples and societies. Following Michael Oakeshott, I will start by showing that there are two distinct concepts of the 'barbaric', each with its own lineage. Oakeshott writes: 'For the skeptic, there is a barbarism of order no less to be avoided than a barbarism of disorder' (1996: 35). The evil of a total *loss* of order threatening to eat into the body of society is different from the equally disturbing evil of an *excess* of order ultimately leading to social paralysis. In addition, the grid of antitheses to the idea of liberal civility implies a third counter-meaning, since much of civil society discourse also holds the promise of escaping from the material hardship of toil and physical production. The world of hard work and necessity has its share in the Western discourse on civil society without fitting into the two rubrics of barbarism. Finally, I will propose a semiotic reading of the discourse on civil society that uncovers its deep structure, which helps us to elucidate even some of the more recent attempts to apply the category of civil society to global social relations.

Barbarism of Disorder

In his posthumously published book on politics in modern society, Niklas Luhmann quite correctly asserted that the vocabulary of civil society, in the course of its most recent philosophical and journalistic boom, lost any reference to reality: 'The current readoption of this term on the basis of historical reconstruction smacks of such evident enthusiasm that, whenever one asks what it

might possibly exclude, the answer one gets is: the reality' (Luhmann, 2000: 12). It is intriguing to take a closer look at this accusation of intellectual 'enthusiasm' [*Schwärmerei*]. Luhmann does not seem to suspect that his critique links 'civil society' with one of the concepts it had historically been introduced to *oppose*. Quite inadvertently he has therefore laid down a track that it is worth pursuing.

Before the idea of civil society was retrieved as a concept in the war of words against the threat of an overly powerful state, it was set against the danger of the *absence* of any kind of governmental order. In the beginning, fear about the destabilizing consequences of enthusiasm, fanaticism and *Schwärmerei* was paramount.[1] The word 'fanatical' derives, as Dominique Colas has shown, from the Latin *fanum*, which means temple, holy site. Here we broach the semantic field of hallucination, of the visionary and other powers of imagination that are resistant to rational discourse. A likewise demonstrable older spelling – 'phanatic' – might refer to the Greek *phantasma*, whose root is *phos* or light (Colas, 1992). Isaiah Berlin, for example, once used this spelling in his description of a Soviet commissar: 'all his countenance bore an expression of a phanatic' (quoted in Ignatieff, 1998: 36).

Fanaticism is the opposite of the critical faculty to scrutinize doctrines and evidence, and thus the opposite of the ability to draw and to discern distinctions. It is no accident that it was representatives of *critical* theory who saw in the loss of this ability an ominous characteristic of their time. Theodor W. Adorno recognized this characteristic, ironically, in the student movement of the late 1960s, which gave itself a lot of credit (some of it quite undeserved) for its critical attitude. In a discussion in December 1967, for example, the Frankfurt School sociologist dismissed the tendency of student groups to willfully ignore the difference between a fascist and a democratic state: 'And I would say', Adorno stated, 'that it would be abstract and, in a problematic sense, fanatical if one were to overlook this difference' (Adorno et al., 2000: 167). Here Adorno made a plea to cultivate a clear sense of reality against the political bigotry of those who were confusing social criticism with its opposite. According to Adorno, we may conclude, the fanatic is a person who distinguishes himself or herself by making *no* distinctions and by being unable to do so. On other occasions he made it clear that the inability or unwillingness to differentiate with regard to various kinds of political actors and threats is paving the way from fanaticism to 'barbarism'.[2]

If one searches for the origins of this line of critical reasoning, one comes across early modern Europe's religious disputes in which the entire semantic field of the fanatical and the fantastic was politically charged by often violent denominational quarrels. Jean Calvin and Philipp Melanchthon, in particular, fought against the Anabaptist sects of their time, who propagated adult baptism and primitive communitarian lifestyles, as well as against others whom they called fanatics or fantasts. Regardless of the fact that later on Calvinist sects were themselves sometimes regarded as fanatical – because they did not distinguish between sin and crime (see Oakeshott, 1993: 17) – Calvin may be regarded as a pioneer in the critique of fanaticism and, by extension, as an early analyst of modern politics. In his *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, the magnum opus he completed

in 1535, Calvin formulated (among other things) the basic idea of Reformationist iconoclasm against the effervescence of '*fantasie*' and against the '*fantasmes*' of the Catholics (Calvin, 1964, vol. 3: 129–30). This also had an adverse affect on the old teaching about miracles. Like many Protestants, Calvin participated in developing the concept of the pure fact. What he expected of true miracles was that they would be evident of their own accord, and that they could not take place in secret. The superstitious sectarian was second only to the devil as a threat to cognitive clarity, as a source disturbing sound belief, and as a contaminator of the powers of imagination.

In other circumstances, furthermore, the subject of discussion is the 'sectes phantastiques', whose pseudo-Christian or openly godless lifestyle not only called into question the Gospel, but also threatened the unity of the political common-wealth in Calvin's adopted hometown of Geneva (Naphy, 1994). The fanatics are opponents of 'civil' government because they seduce the simple- and feeble-minded into a 'dissolute lifestyle' (*vie dissolue*) and annul the basic distinction between justice and injustice. The consequence is that

> everyone gives in to his impulses unscrupulously, abuses Christian liberty in order to allow himself every kind of carnal licentiousness and to take pleasure in bringing the entire world into disorder and in upsetting every kind of human decency [toute police, ordre et honnesteté humaine]. (Calvin, 1964, vol. 7: 155)

Much like modern political thinkers from Weber to Gramsci or Hannah Arendt, Calvin views the errant wanderings of collective fantasies not disciplined by any kind of empirical experience and sound argumentation as the root cause of 'barbarian' practices endangering civility.[3] As if following up on exactly this point, Oakeshott much later concludes: 'Thus, engagement in politics entails a *disciplined* imagination' (1975: 164).

In Book IV, Chapter 20 ('Du gouvernement civil') of his opus, Calvin takes a staunch position against the '*fantastiques*' as he systematically explains the need for a strict separation between earthly and heavenly matters while at the same time showing equal concern for both. By contrast, the fantasts, whom he consistently likens to barbarians, mix up the two spheres and regard it as beneath their dignity to concern themselves with the 'dirty and profane matters that have to do with the hustle and bustle of this world' (Calvin, 1964, vol. 4: 1127). Little wonder, Calvin remarks, that the social world shaped by such an attitude is hardly suitable to live in. Anyone who disputes the utility of a well-devised '*ordonnance civile*' by invoking the vanity of all earthly endeavors in light of eternity is accused of 'inhuman barbarism' (Calvin, 1964, vol. 4: 1126, 1128). Calvin is modern because he no longer views the just order of things as cosmologically given. Instead, he sees it as something that has to be actively constructed through power and exertion of will. The core of a civil order in the making is envisioned in institutions that respect and reward its citizens' public-minded activities while punishing reprehensible activities. Only in this way can the elementary 'discipline of human societies' (Calvin, 1964, vol. 4: 1137) be maintained.

It is no exaggeration to say that the consciousness of the indispensability of

politics in a modern sense emerges first with Calvin (Hancock, 1989). Suddenly the 'hustle and bustle of this world' not only captures attention; it also gets counted as capable of being influenced and reformed. More importantly, religion no longer functions as an instrument of the existing system of authority, but as a medium for establishing a civil commonwealth under conditions of extreme turbulence. Calvin interpreted the urban environment of his time as the barbarian counterpart of a politically constituted civil society. His public sermons are full of accusations of moral decay, often dramatically depicted. Dastardly brigands, dissolute blasphemers, and all sorts of shady characters populate Calvin's picture of his contemporary world. Often, admittedly, these colorful depictions of decay are 'self-denying prophecies', intended to mobilize counter-vailing forces and so ward off some ominous fate – a rhetorical form of socio-logical prophecy which later has been taken up by Max Weber and others.

With a view not toward some impending end of time, but rather toward a political community of citizens still to be created, Calvin challenges his public to self-scrutiny and moral repentance. In so doing he distinguishes himself from the Old Testament prophets he frequently takes on as a model. The political aim of establishing a well-ordered republic also explains the enormous significance of the seemingly purely theological dispute about the prohibition of images. In order for the civil order to endure, according to Calvin, it must rest on the foundation of a simple, generally comprehensible religious creed that will be accepted as such without substantial dispute – '*sans controverse*' (Calvin, 1964, vol. 3: 55). Here, too, lies the ultimate political meaning of the radical Reformationist prohibition of images. Calvin knows that the relationship between the visible and the sayable is fraught with tension, and that the comprehension of images can never be completely controlled by means of discourse. Images are a poor method of religious instruction because they create a space for fantasy-guided interpretive controversies, which become dangerous when the religious creed forms the foundation of the *bonum civile* itself. In this case, it has to be kept out of public dispute.

The essentially political character of Calvin's sermons, which aim at the establishment of civil forms of political coexistence, becomes also clear in the way he poses his angry indictments under the proviso of moderating self-restriction. Calvin distinguishes most emphatically – even if, from today's perspective, this can barely be recognized given his own tirades and misdeeds – between genres of political speech in which undisciplined imagination turns the world's most righteous cause into its opposite and those 'iustes plaidoyeurs' (Calvin, 1964, vol. 4: 1148) who contribute to moderating public passions by displaying this very kind of moderation.[4]

Animality as a Threat to Civil Society

Traces of the critique of fanaticism and of the barbarism of disorder may be recovered in exemplary fashion in the writings of Arendt, Weber, and Gramsci. Thus, in Part Two of her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt discusses European

colonizers in southern Africa in Calvinian terms as inhabitants of a 'phantom world' who had 'escaped the reality of civilization' (Arendt, 1951: 190). The Boers in particular are regarded as inventors of a lifestyle which systematically renounces productive and cooperative labor in favor of 'lazy drudgery'. This attitude, in turn, is held partly responsible for the phantasms of racism (Arendt, 1951: 195).

In a similar vein, Weber shows that it was not Calvinist-influenced asceticism that produced the modern-day phenomenon of individuals acting like submissive human cogs in the machinery of modern society. Rather, Calvinism and like-minded religious movements aimed at changing individuals and their civic environments in a way that would allow them to 'lead an alert, conscious, bright life' (Weber, 1986: 117). The prerequisite for this was seen in the taming of the individual's inner nature and imagination. This motif runs through the whole of Weber's political criticism of his age.

As he left no doubt that democratic politics is made with the 'head' alone – and not with the 'heart' (traditionally regarded as the seat of fantasy and of emotions) – he sticks to a basic distinction which resonates with much of modern civil society thinking (Weber, 1984: 549). Weber introduced the notion of 'affective politics' in order to characterize forms of emotional mobilization that went against established rules of political behavior and organization. As far as he takes aim at the political Left, he mostly criticizes their 'affective politics' of fear and rage. Much the same is true for his critique of the Wilhelmine monarchy and the monarchist 'literati' of his time. Emotionalized politics is seen not only as notoriously unsuccessful, but also as undemocratic. The argument goes as follows: While the affective politics of monarchists, syndicalists, and Spartakists is capable of driving the masses to the streets, these masses are unable of immunizing themselves against outer-directed manipulation by hidden persuaders playing with public emotions. Weber sees a paradox in the fact that 'democracy of the street' is really no democracy at all, because it simply enhances the influence of demagogues without contributing to the construction and consolidation of rational associational structures. The close connection between his assumptions about mass society, collective emotion, and democracy also becomes evident in the way in which Weber translates the rationalist idea of a hydraulics of potentially explosive emotions threatening cool-headed reasoning into the equally common metaphor of street-level 'pressure' messing with the procedures of the modern state.

Weber saw imperial and then revolutionary Germany after World War I in the grip of emotional epidemics fueled by irresponsible demagogues aiming at a war-torn, highly excitable society. The wish to pursue rational politics in Germany, he wrote in early 1920, is impossible for as along 'as lunatics – from the Left and Right – can do whatever they are up to' (Weber, 1988: 273). During the brief period of his own active political involvement, Weber himself readily made ample use of instruments from the demagogue's stylistic repertoire in order to give expression to this view. Thus, in the months directly following the revolutionary events of November 1918, he appeared in a number of cities as a powerful speaker

for the newly founded liberal German Democratic Party. These public speeches, parts of which were written down by reporters, do indeed recall Jean Calvin's angry outbreaks on the streets of Geneva: 'One sees nothing but dirt, dung, bullshit and nothing else. Liebknecht belongs in an insane asylum, and Rosa Luxemburg in the zoo' (Weber, 1988: 441).

He saw a far greater danger, however, in the German bourgeoisie's obsession with the phantasm of the Communist 'red specter' (Weber, 1980: 31) and in the irrational fear generated by this kind of undisciplined imagination. Like Antonio Gramsci after him, Weber was early to recognize that radical socialism in the 'West' never really had a chance. The scary image of the red specter, however, led the bourgeoisie to withdraw mentally into a porcupine-like defensive posture and to remain largely hostile even toward the moderate leaders of the labor movement. Weber's entire political critique may be read as a critique of the Wilhelmine bourgeoisie's habitual inability to act in its own long-term interest by getting rid of irrational haunting images of Communism and to search for lasting constitutional compromises with the rising labor movement.

At this point it is helpful to briefly consider Gramsci's use of the civil society vocabulary. Unlike Weber, Gramsci explicitly uses the term 'civil society' (*società civile*). For him the term designates those institutions that regulate political and social action in modern societies via psychological and educational incentives without directly applying governmental coercion. Interestingly, Gramsci casts the social raw material of passions and interests, which is subjected to the refinement of civil society's multiple institutions, in a language of the barbarian and bestial. In contrast to Marx, however, for whom barbarism and civilization could be ascribed to entire countries, Gramsci de-territorializes these labels, which he uses to characterize the inner nature of human beings not yet fully adjusted to the requirements of modern society and Taylorist workplaces.[5]

It is interesting, in this context, to observe how both Weber and Gramsci are deeply impressed by the American model of society, in which they see a historically quite unlikely combination of comprehensive social rationalization and missionary idealism. What interests Gramsci about the case of the United States is the direct contribution made by the large and small institutions of civil society – from empirical social research to the Rotary Club – toward the productive rationalization of society. The result is twofold: first, a 'lean' state, and second, a systematic psycho-physical adjustment of the working population to the requirements of industrial mass production. I will briefly expand on both aspects.

Much like Weber, who denounces the 'coffee house intellectuals' and idling *flâneurs* of the modern metropolis as instigators of a purely affective politics, Gramsci sees among those groups not subjected to the discipline of productive labor a danger of 'regressive' propaganda for moral instability and sexual licentiousness (Gramsci, 1975: 2163; Weber, 1984: 391). Gramsci sees the United States of the 1920s and 1930s as a prototype of what has been called a social 'battlefield of desire' (Stearns, 1999), where a progressive entrepreneurial class achieved decisive victories over human nature without having to rely primarily on state repression. Instead, new instruments of civil leadership and fine-meshed

'regulation' (*regolamentazione*) of everyday life were deployed, instruments that, in contrast to the militarization of work in revolutionary Russia, influenced not only workers' external behavior, but also their moral motives and convictions. Consequently, and just like Weber, Gramsci distinguishes between a population's measurable aptitude for work and the mental *inclination* to work (Weber, 1995: 242). From Gramsci's perspective, the Bolsheviks' overemphasis on governmental and military coercion – their 'mechanical utopianism', as it was later called by an American sociologist (Lerner, 1957: 942) – is not to be rejected on moral grounds, but because it is simply ineffective. To the extent that he regards the authoritarian state as incapable of securely establishing new production methods, he indirectly pleads for 'democratic' forms of political control (Dubla, 1986: 173).[6]

Civil society aims not only at creating a correct 'consciousness' by persuading and educating the population; rather, it literally penetrates into the nervous system of the individuals by taming the barbarous and 'animal' portions of the personality. Gramsci speaks about 'subjugating the natural, that is to say the bestial and primitive instincts' through a ring of institutions that surround modern industry (1975: 2160). He further urges the conclusion, again reminiscent of Calvin, that a lack of self-control over sexual and violent instincts goes hand in hand with symptoms of 'religious fanaticism' (p. 2148), as they may especially be observed in some of the rural provinces of southern Italy.

Barbarism of Order

While modern barbarism and fanaticism are the 'hot' antitheses included in the discourse on civil society, rigid governmental command structures, insuperable hierarchies, and soulless discipline are the stuff of a 'cold' antithesis: 'The barbarism of order appears when order is pursued for its own sake and when preservation of order involves the destruction of that without which order is only the orderliness of the ant-heap or the graveyard' (Oakeshott, 1996: 35). Again, both Arendt as well as Weber and Gramsci have contributed to this lineage in the traditional critique of the barbarism of order. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) Arendt illustrated Weber's thesis that bureaucratic administrative methods really can be applied 'to *all* tasks' (Weber, 1976: 128; italics added) that arise in a modern society or that can be thought up by political criminals. She also shares Weber's view that bureaucratic power can cultivate something dangerously close to 'automatic obedience' (Weber, 1976: 28).

Weber's critique – just like Arendt's – is not directed against the existence of modern bureaucracy as such, in which he rather sees a rational bulwark against the advance of charismatic movements. Bureaucracy turns into a threat to liberal civility only at the point where the historic link between modern society on the one hand, and the potentials of activist-nonconformist lifestyles on the other are replaced by the pervasive rule – not of bureaucracy itself but – of 'bureaucratic ideals of life'. Bureaucracy thus becomes the object of an *indirect* critique to the

extent that it brings forth a new species of people who love 'order' more than freedom (Weber, 1998: 362–3). Weber's criticism of the 'barbarism of order' is centered on this crucial distinction between the evolutionary 'bureaucratization' of modern societies and the increase in the poisonous power of ubiquitous administrations over the sources of the self and shared 'life ideals'.

Here civil society is merely the absent referent in a discourse about the most assertive variants of a coming *uncivil*, state-dominated society, which Weber described by drawing his well-known analogy to the ancient Egyptian kingdom of serfs. Now, it is interesting to see the extent to which Weber's pessimistic analysis of his time was part of a *Zeitgeist* reflected in very different genres and political camps. Thus, Weber was familiar with Jack London's novel *The Iron Heel* (1908), famous for its stark imagery of humans dominated by machines and machine-like institutions which crops up over and over again throughout the twentieth century, even in some of Adorno's lectures after the World War II: 'Today humanity has arrived at a point where even those at the commanding heights do not really enjoy their positions, because they themselves have become mere functions of their own function' (Adorno, 2001: 12).[7]

One of the perhaps most impressive literary images of the future of a modern society whose members are simultaneously bureaucratically controlled and reck-lessly following their impulses is Alfred Döblin's expressionist novel *Berge, Meere und Giganten* (Montains, Seas, and Giants), published in 1924. Here Döblin paints the picture of the decline of the old European nation-state under the impact of a borderless mass society. Like Weber or Jack London, Döblin sees the masses as a politically defeated and oppressed appendage of the 'industrial body' and the 'huge syndicates' of society. They have gone soft, but pitiless, and they can easily be seduced by mass spectacles and pseudo-parliaments. And here, too, reigns an 'enormously lavish bureaucracy' (Döblin, 1980: 21), which no longer organizes any kind of commonwealth or civil society, but rather becomes a variable of the same gigantic technical forces that it once believed it could master.

Weber, London, Döblin, Adorno: all these authors see European–American modernity as the forerunner of an anthropological mutation in which rational fear ceases to be a force, as it was for Thomas Hobbes, contributing to the foun-dation of a *civitas*. Instead, fear itself originates in a political order that is as unjust as it is insurmountable. Ultimately, these counter-utopias have ceased to portray the bureaucracy and the masses, states and social movements, calculating and fanatical mindsets as opposites. Rather, they are parts of the same totalizing reality which can be read in two different ways, as if subjected to a gestalt switch.

Gramsci, too, cultivates a double-edged pattern of criticism, pitting his concept of civil society both against idolizing the state and fetishizing social movements (Bobbio, 1977: 36). Weber had already observed in the syndicalist ethic of brotherliness cultivated by independent trade unions an unavoidable antidote to the domination of party bosses and the 'barracks-like character of our factories' (Weber, 1998: 279). One may also find in the young Gramsci a strong impulse that is anti-authoritarian and critical of the state, an impulse that goes back to Georges Sorel's then influential critique of rule by 'politicians'. Gramsci

explicitly criticizes the 'German' ideal of the all-powerful state that stands above the interests of individuals and society while supervising and controlling all its expressions of life. He wrote in September 1918,

> The socialists have recognized the mistakes they made when their doctrine contributed to strengthening a monstrous conception of the state . . . They were deceiving themselves when they accepted that the socialist regime would be a continuation of the centralistic despotic state of the bourgeoisie that deprives individuals of autonomy and any revolutionary *élan*. (Gramsci, 1984: 298–9)[8]

The Realm of Toil and Brute Material Necessity

Seeing through the lens of the standard discourse on civil society, the central locus and source of democracy are public arenas where questions about how to live together are discussed, and where possible political decisions are suggested or criticized. As a result, certain basic distinctions in the recent history of social theory – between labor and interaction, production and action – have entered current conceptions of civil society as unquestioned premises. Accordingly, the world of material production seems to represent a third counter-meaning to liberal civility and its institutional forms, along with the unresponsive state and with violent social disintegration.

The frequently expressed demand to radicalize liberal democracy by strengthening civil society is, upon closer inspection, quite modest, since it seems to aim only at publicly raising additional questions about how to live together – questions which have so far been neglected or 'repressed' by official politics. Against this idea of simply expanding the scope of what can legitimately be discussed in public, some critics of civil society have argued in favor of a different model of moving beyond liberal democracy. The deliberative ideal of an unbounded public *conversation* is replaced by a model of expanded forms of social *cooperation* (Honneth, 1998). This idea, first laid out by Emile Durkheim and later developed by John Dewey, of a democratic way of life based on the cooperative problem-solving activities by individuals linked through the division of labor, overcomes the opposition between communication and labor and their assignment to different 'spheres' of social action.[9]

Historically, French and British syndicalists, American pragmatists, and Italian neo-Marxists can be cited as advocates for a perspective in which the world of material production and cooperation is included into the realm of politics instead of being relegated to a separate and largely invisible 'sphere' of social action. The recent so-called 'productivist turn' in democratic theory bears a distant resemblance to this tradition insofar as it struggles not for a democracy based on the liberation from the constraints of the market and the international division of labor, but rather on the inclusion of all citizens into socially responsible 'production communities' shaped by an 'ethos of efficiency' (Streeck, 1998: 46). In this productivist conception and its historical precursors, it is no longer just the 'citoyens', but also the 'producers' who are seen as carriers and inspirers of

democratic innovation. This influential recent contribution to democratic theory, which tries to close the gap between citizens and of producers, deviates from a intellectual history which has stylized them for a long time as irreconcilable opponents.

'Citoyen ou Producteur?'

The social and moral opposition between citizen and producer – '*citoyen ou producteur*' – emerges in the early twentieth century, especially in the syndicalist labor movement in France. This muddled international current, which was prematurely discredited by Georges Sorel's later sympathies for fascism, has an interestingly tense relationship with some of the normative claims of civil society discourses. With sometimes reformist, sometimes revolutionary goals in mind, the syndicalists debunked liberal representative democracy as inadequate. The contemporary citizen was seen as nothing more than an electoral citizen ruled by representatives evading his and her control. To the extent that modern citizens were even pleased about this comfortable revocation of freedom, syndicalists despised them as 'incompletely de-monarchized' (*mal démonarchisé*) (Leroy, 1919: 676). In the way people think about politics, the head of the king still hasn't rolled, as Michel Foucault puts it much later.

Against this background, writers like Maxime Leroy argued for the active promotion of other forces of civil freedom pointing beyond the institutions of liberal democracy. At this point, in a manner quite similar to John Dewey's theory of democracy, the cooperative character of modern labor relations came into play: 'La liberté prendra, grâce au travail, un caractère coopératif' (Leroy, 1919: 679). Society should be renewed proceeding from the material production and the division of labor, and in a manner that puts 'competence' in place of 'authority'. The values regarded today as characteristic of civil society – mutual recognition and respect for moral rules – were seen as embodied by an active, increasingly professionalized population which outshone the old hierarchies and the narrow, barracks-like character of earlier worlds of labor. Ultimately, the new society reshaped by the self-imposed discipline of a cooperative population would stem the twin evils of excessive bureaucratic organization and social disintegration.

In other contexts like Germany's non-Communist council movement after 1918, reflections took place about reorganizing a future society in which collective labor would no longer be, as it were, a brute activity carried out in obscurity, but would instead develop into an 'ethical factor' of social life. Workers councils were widely viewed as the political expression of this reassessment of productive activities, and British socialists, in particular, tried to transfer some democratic principles to industry (Lovell, 1973). While both Britain and France had many moderate followers of syndicalism who influenced jurisprudence and political science, others gave a more radical turn to the idea of the political power of social cooperation. In what is conceivably the greatest opposition to Hannah Arendt's idea of liberal civility, the Italian syndicalist Arturo Labriola called for treating 'the art of cultivating the earth or of steering railroad trains as a *public matter*'

instead of leaving the public sphere to intellectuals and civil servants (Labriola, 1914: 420). Revolutionary syndicalists also celebrated the unleashing of productive forces and the world-opening role of capitalism while reserving only scorn and derision for the 'sentimental and humanitarian democracy' (p. 441) of a citizenry remote from the realm of production.

A limited vindication of this in many respects highly questionable intellectual current may point to fact that some representatives of syndicalism were more or less aware of the idea that 'the type of community necessary for a dynamic democracy must unfold not within the political sphere but prepolitically within structures of a division of labor experienced as cooperation' (Honneth, 1998: 778). In light of this tradition, today's often increasingly dematerialized and transnational networks of productive labor might be studied as possible sources of self-respect and as an area for rehearsing experimental and cooperative capacities which are indispensable for strengthening civil society.

Global Civil Society and Neo-Barbarism

In order to see how the relations and antitheses between civility, work, order and barbarism are being reworked in current social theory, it is worth turning briefly to the current debate on 'global civil society' (see Heins, 2004; Delanty, 2001). In particular, much of Ulrich Beck's recent sociological writing may be redescribed as a transfer of an older semantics of civil society to now presumably global social worlds. The sociology of the 'second modernity' identifies segments of the middle classes from highly industrialized societies as carriers of a new, essentially borderless civil society. According to Beck, they stand opposite the '*natives* [Eingeborenen] of the work society' (Beck, 1997: 207; italics added), who are vegetating at the lower level of first modernity where people still believe in their nations and in old-style industrial progress. This polemical contrast, which clearly revives an Arendtian opposition between 'civil society' and 'the realm of toil', recurs in the distinction made by Beck between increasingly mobile and still largely sedentary sections of the population. Many conceptual oppositions in the sociology of globalization are of this kind which allows for gray areas and pragmatic reconciliation. Another example is Beck's dismissal of the 'productivist turn' in democratic theory cited earlier in favor of a less 'producer-oriented' and more 'consumer-oriented democracy' (Beck, 1998: 35).

Unlike Weber or Arendt, the sociology of the 'second modernity', which is inspired by a fundamentally optimistic mood reminiscent of early modernization theory, does not have an equivalent to the barbarism of order. In this regard it diverges from the path of much of classical social thinking. However, there is a strong emphasis on the barbarism of disorder which is seen as a true challenge to the prospects of global civil society. The contrasting worlds of cosmopolitan citizen-nomads and immobile working 'natives' are reconciled within a larger framework of stages of modernity. The true threat to be faced by global civil society comes from the muffled voices from a noncivil counter-world described by Beck in a way similar to Hannah Arendt or Joseph Conrad. Beck sees the

disruptive potential emerging from an amorphous global underclass driven by nothing more than 'bare survival interests' and a neo-barbarian mindset which epitomizes the 'opposite of civilization' (Beck, 1996: 91). Here the sociologist associates himself with an increasingly influential discourse on the return of barbarism – a discourse focusing on the moral significance of failing states, disintegrated societies, and a multitude of new 'uncivil' wars in various parts of the world (Nederveen Pieterse, 2002: 20).

Unfortunately, and in contrast to classical sociological modernity, the theme of (neo-)barbarism is again linked to particular spaces and territories rather than to the abysses of human nature. Of course, in the allegedly borderless world of globalization there are no longer impenetrable gates at which the barbarians might knock – they are already in. But still, Beck's sociology of our time implies a moral geography, which tends to translate the grid of antitheses to the idea of liberal civility into a global map of moral capabilities and aspirations. The domestic 'natives' bound to their workplaces are given a chance to climb up the ladder of modernization. The non-Western world, however, is 'panting more or less hopelessly' (Beck, 1996: 28) after reaching the safe shores of at least a primary modernity before getting sucked into the maelstrom of neo-barbarism. Thus, as it revives strong notions of the uncivil and of non-societal states of nature, the discourse on global civil society has a downside, like many of its predecessors.

Civil Society's Barbarisms: A Semiotic Reading

So far I have attempted to unfold the 'grid of possible antitheses' (Koselleck, 1979: 258) which lends meaning to the concept of civil society. In so doing, I have also tried to follow up on a remark made in passing by Adorno, who strongly felt the need to avoid lumping together all the world's evils into one Big Bad Thing and hence 'to differentiate in the negative' (Adorno and Mann, 2002: 102–3). My next step is the attempt to sort the material previously collected for an intellectual history of civil society thinking along the lines of a structural semantic analysis as it was introduced by A.J. Greimas and his school. In this influential tradition, the analysis of textual meaning is conducted as differential analysis of the deep structure of narratives. Individual meanings are defined by their position in a system of cultural units and, therefore, by their *difference* to other units of meaning ('semes'). This is extraordinarily helpful if one tries to reconstruct the semantic variants of a notably vague concept like that of civil society.

Like other symbolic systems, social theories including those centered around the concept of civil society can be treated as constructions which possess their own force and validity quite independently from empirical and rationalist considerations. With this premise in mind, Greimas bases his examination of cultural productions on the concept of basic oppositional semantic structures. The primary relation of his well-known 'semiotic square' is thus formed by the relationship between two opposing terms. Yet the intriguing thing about

Greimas' approach of explaining both the semantic coherence and the narrative organization of symbolic systems is that he does not simply talk of paired opposites, but instead carefully distinguishes different *ways of setting up oppositions*. The classic semiotic square initially establishes an axis between contrary terms such as 'black' and 'white'. These terms are *contrary* because they are set against each other while simultaneously presupposing each other, sometimes to the point of overlapping ('gray'). A square results when the contrary terms of the primary relation are being supplemented by their corresponding *contradictory* terms, which are 'not white' or 'not black' (Greimas, 1977; Broden, 1995).

One can replace these color specifications with concepts from modern political theory. In a tradition inspired by theorists from Arendt through Habermas, 'civil society' stands in an oppositional, but not in a contradictory or negational, relationship to the world of labor and toil. This elementary semantic structure based on two contrary terms can now easily be supplemented adding the respective contradictory units of meaning to 'civil society' and the 'realm of toil', which are 'barbarism of order' and 'barbarism of disorder', respectively. The outcome, following Greimas (1977), may be depicted as a semiotic square (Figure 1).

The powerful distinctions between physical production and communicative interaction have shaped the standard Western discourse on civil society in such a way as to conceive the relationship between citizens and producers as rich in contrast, but also as one of reciprocal presupposition. Even Hannah Arendt, who is strongest in emphasizing the gulf between the social roles of the citizen and of the *animal laborans*, demonstrates in her chapter on the Boers in South Africa that she sees in the work ethic of sedentary farmers or other producers a certain antidote against the danger of moral and civic decay. On this point, there is a lot of convergence between otherwise distant writers like Gramsci or Weber, who likewise (as we have seen) draw a sharp typological distinction between workers and non-workers.

In the discourse on civil society, there are two contradictory relationships: one between labor and the anti-labor of the barbarism of disorder, and one between
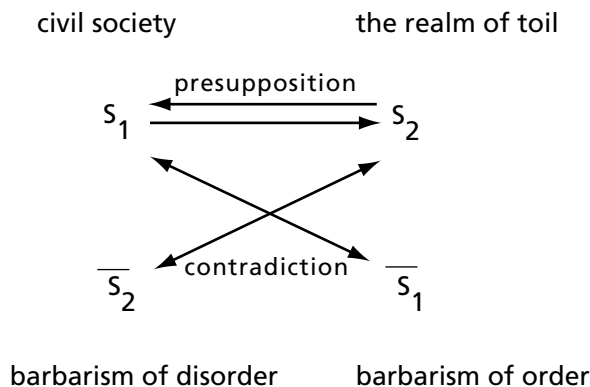

Figure 1   Civil society and its others

civil society and the barbarism of order. Interestingly, at least the first of these two relationship variants have also been prominent in major non-European contributions to the discourse on civil society. Thus, Gandhi criticized the colonial policy of introducing modern technologies because it would endanger a vital precondition for the envisioned democratic republic of indigenous producers. He also criticized the planned increase in industrial productivity by machines and other scientific aids because it was seen as being matched by a *phantasmatic* intensification of consumerist cravings and the spread of false images of happiness leading the human mind astray. Gandhi's call for a revival of cotton spinning in the context of India's struggle for national independence was therefore not only part of an economic, but also of a moral program of taming the 'restless bird' as he vividly called the human mind's powers of imagination (quoted in Chatterjee, 1994: 158).

Conclusion

Terms have a tendency to creep into writing and thinking without an adequate understanding of their deeper implications and ambiguities. This observation also applies to 'civil society', one of the most widely used concepts in European social and political theory. Given the ambiguities of the concept, social philosophers have presented a well-crafted case for dropping the concept altogether (Honneth, 1998). However, the wholesale dismissal of the vocabulary of civil society implies a problematic disengagement and detachment of social theory from the multiple ways in which this vocabulary continues to be used by many people in order to emphasize or question real-world solidarities across the boundaries of groups and states. Instead of turning a blind eye to these usages in both scholarly and everyday discourses, I have thus proposed to sort out the ambiguities of the concept by carefully dissecting its meaning in different contexts. One effective way of doing this is to subject given narratives to a differential analysis of their deep structure.

Such an analysis teaches us not just to uncover grids of oppositional terms implicit in various conceptions of civil society but also to draw a distinction between different *kinds* of oppositions. This in turn may help us to better understand the way in which key contributors to the debate on civil society reconcile contrary claims like, for example, defending the independence of civil associations while simultaneously advocating 'a strongly positive theory of the state' (Walzer, 2002: 47). The focus on contrary terms, which somehow have to be reconciled, also resonates with the liberal-democratic requirement to mediate between conflicting social goods and opposing moral worlds. At the same time, social theory must be aware of the possibility of adamantly antagonistic claims, which threaten to precipitate liberal democracies into the twin hells of excessive order or no order at all.

More specifically, the semiotic square sketched out here fulfills the important heuristic function of a model structure against which to compare different

discourses on civil society. Similar or divergent structures of meaning in this field can be made transparent and opened for further discussion. It is instructive to see how deep structures may also be found in contemporary extensions of classical concepts of civil society, as for example in the currently fashionable discourse on 'global civil society'. Moreover, as I have briefly pointed out with reference to Gandhi, representatives of non-European ethical traditions have developed their own semantics of barbarism, work and political order which may or may not be compatible with the requirements of a liberal polity.

Finally, by focusing on implicit oppositional structures, the approach of dissecting instead of dismissing 'civil society' challenges the managerial twist, which has recently been given to the concept of civil society by many global political and economic institutions. These institutions are thriving on the phantasma of a 'borderless' world and on strategically engineered fictions of moral consensus. The task at hand is to dispel these phantasms of bland consensus by highlighting the competing principles and impulses, which continue to contend beneath the universal rhetoric of civil society.

Notes

1 See the early treatise by Höchheimer (1786).
2 See, e.g., Adorno's letter to Thomas Mann, written on 13 April 1952:

> Among the demands placed today on the historical ability to react, one that should not be ranked last is the persistent need for differentiating in the negative. The fact that one was not sufficiently capable of doing this in Germany at the time, and that one equated Brüning with Hitler, was itself partly to blame for the disaster. (Adorno and Mann, 2002: 102–3)

3 See, for example, Arendt's characterization of the phantasms of a 'Trotskyite conspiracy' in Stalin's Russia. The political art of totalitarianism 'consists in using, and at the same time transcending, the elements of reality, of verifiable experiences, in the chosen fiction, and in generalizing them into regions which then are definitely removed from all possible control by individual experience' (Arendt, 1951: 351).
4 For a lucid defense of Calvin against Karl Barth's influential suspicion that Calvin introduced 'something primal, wild, undomesticated, and demonic' (K. Barth) into Christianity, see Pellerin (2003).
5 There is, admittedly, a tendency toward territorialization of the barbarism motif to the extent that Gramsci believes that maladjustment to modernity is much worse in the countryside than in the city (Gramsci, 1975: 2148). As for Marx's concept of barbarism, it is important to know that in 1848 he came out in favor of a Franco-German military attack against Russia in the name of European liberty: 'If the Prussians ally with the Russians, the Germans will ally with the French and lead a united war of the West against the East, of civilization against barbarism, of the republic against autocracy.' The quote is taken from unpublished manuscripts which will be made public by the new edition of the collected works of Marx and Engels (Herres, 2002).
6 Here lies the main difference between Gramsci and Sorel. What Sorel praises about

Bolshevism is precisely the violent modernization of Russia and the disciplining of the workers, which he understood as 'Europeanization' (Freund, 1972: 253–4).

7 Even Adorno's adversaries from the camp of modernization theory have at least envisaged the possibility that society could be de-civilized and de-subjectified through the pincer movement of social anomie and bureaucracy: 'There are many who feel similarly that, whether through conformism, fanaticism, or rigidity, American society will succumb to the final impersonality of the Age of Insects' (Lerner, 1957: 950).

8 In this newspaper article Gramsci relies on the testimony of the Berlin student Jakob Feldner, who fled to Switzerland in 1916 in order to avoid the draft and the militaristic culture of Germany at that time.

9 Strictly speaking, the critique of the categorical opposition between communication and labor was already laid out by Weber, who purposely suggested that early industrial sociology should investigate 'to what extent *conversation* is possible during work' and what are the consequences of this kind of labor-based conversation (Weber, 1995: 149, n.; italics added).

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