



Sovereign States or Political Communities? Civil Society and Contemporary Politics

D. Schecter

Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, 224pp.

Paperback, ISBN: 0-7190-4568-1/4569.

There are two main tendencies in the study of civil society. The one takes it to be a particular kind of social formation of institutions, values and behaviours, closely associated with the modern history of liberal democratic polities in Western Europe and North America (e.g. Bermeo and Nord, 2000). The other views civil society as the latest in a historical series of normative political concepts that will light the way toward a politics of human emancipation (e.g. Cohen and Arato, 1992). While this reviewer leans toward the former approach, Schecter's book is firmly positioned in the latter tendency. As he puts it, in this project 'the theoretical–philosophical analysis of civil society converges with the normative-utopian defence of the political' (p. 22).

To avoid any confusion on this point, Schecter begins by telling us what he is not going to do. He does not attempt any direct analyses of actual civil societies (which he tends to equate with New Social Movements), nor does he really engage with other contemporary theoretical writings on civil society in any depth. Instead, he is concerned with locating civil society conceptually within a tradition of critical political thought. To this end, he engages with an impressive and somewhat eclectic array of social and political thinkers, many of whom did not say much or anything about civil society *per se*. Prominent among these are: Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Schmitt, Benjamin, Arendt, Buber, Levinas, Habermas, and Honneth. For those with particular interests in these theorists and how they employ or relate to the idea of civil society this book may offer an interesting and provocative entry into those questions. More specifically, Schecter clarifies his aim in this book when he relates it to his previous one (Schecter, 1994), in which he argued that true democracy 'must be based on some form of non-statist socialism' (p. 20). Thus he turns here to civil society in an attempt to compensate for Marx and Engels' notorious failure to offer a positive account of politics in post-capitalist socialist society. For Schecter, the value of civil society lies precisely in its opposition to the state as a context for social action, and he defines it (in contrast to some versions) as inclusive of the economy, because only by acting within civil society to transform capitalism to socialism can the emancipatory potential of democracy be realised.



Chapters 2 and 3 provide a critical account of the historical development of conceptions of the state and civil society, running from Rousseau to Benjamin. Through a complex interpolation of Benjamin, Nietzsche, and Schmitt, he arrives at the argument that the truly political must be found in the '(now) time of the exception' (p. 73) by which he means that politics, understood as liberating praxis, can only exist outside the instrumentally rational temporalities of state, law and (capitalist) economy, that is, in civil society. In Chapters 3–5 he elaborates a more positive conception of this liberating politics, exploring the constitutive concepts of the public sphere, political community, and recognition. The cumulative argument defines politics as a situation in which there is free, unencumbered, authentic communication in which all differences are given expression. Altogether this might seem very close to Habermasian concepts of lifeworld, public sphere, and discourse ethics, and perhaps that is why the Conclusion seeks to distinguish Schecter's vision from Habermas', by stressing the contrast between Habermas' 'liberal' conception of a public sphere of relative freedom that can then inform economic and political-administrative systems, versus the author's conception of a form of politics that will overcome the alienations of systemic rationalities.

This book raises challenging and time-honoured questions in political theory. This reviewer has three main criticisms. First, the style of argument tends towards intellectual bricolage. In forming an argument by linking together such a diverse array of theorists, the reasoning is disciplined neither by its own internally devised logic, nor by sustained engagement with another thinker. Secondly, I'm not sure he succeeds in his claim to move beyond Marx's thin conception of a positive socialist politics. Indeed, the notion of politics proffered here is defined mostly negatively by what are rejected as legitimate parts of politics throughout the book: interests, identity, reform, clientelism, voting, parties, sovereignty, and most strangely of all, power. That these various dimensions of politics often have negative aspects is easy to agree with, but to separate them off in the way that Schecter does suggests a notion of politics that has been refined almost out of existence. The idea that real politics lies beyond power seems oxymoronic. In fact, what Schecter offers here is really more a theory of freedom, than of politics. In doing this, he works in a vein of modern critical political thought, stretching back to Rousseau and running through the Young Hegelians such as Feuerbach from whom he draws considerable inspiration. Characteristic of this tradition is what Bernard Yack has called 'the longing for total revolution' (Yack, 1992), a need to conceptualise politics in the modern world as the absolute overcoming of alienation and social constraints upon freedom. One's attitude toward this tradition will be central to one's reception of this book. Finally, stemming from these objections, I am not sure that this book is really about civil society. Rather, it uses the current interest in civil society as a foil for constructing an



ideal formulation of what politics should be. In keeping with my opening disclaimer, I find this rather too distant from the study of actual civil societies to be labelled as such. However, readers more sympathetic than myself to an approach to civil society purely through normative theory may find it more amenable.

References

- Bermeo, N. and Nord, P. (eds.) (2000) *Civil Society Before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Cohen, J. and Arato, A. (1992) *Civil society and Political theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schecter, D. (1994) *Radical Theories: Paths beyond Marxism and Social Democracy*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Yack, B. (1992) *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*, Berkeley: University of California Press..

J. Hearn

School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh.