

U.S. Civil Society A Hemisphere-Wide Paradigm?

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INTRODUCTION¹

The privileged place of civil society's organized, active participation as a cornerstone of the consolidation of democratic processes in Latin America prompts us to look at its participation in the United States, given its status as an advanced democracy and an influential actor in the hemisphere.

As social scientists who must situate phenomena in their contexts, our point of departure must be the profound contradictions throughout U.S. history due to slavery, racism, nativism and other institutionalized practices that legitimize exclusion, at the same time that they have permeated (and as a result, molded) a particular notion of citizenship.

Considering that citizens are the substantive axis around which the public sphere of a nation-state (civil society) turns, it is paradoxical that the U.S. Constitution does not explicitly mention them until the Fourteenth Amendment (1868),² with regard to a national identity; prior to that, it emphasizes the individual or individuals or even the people.³

Even though at the center of federalist thinking is clearly an open call for

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the people to take their destiny into their own hands and design the institutions they need, the sense of a citizen's democracy in the United States does not allude directly to the notion of the common good as a result of an essentially political equality.

In other words, what is really objectionable in U.S. "exceptionalism" is its ability to reproduce the distance between the de facto citizen and the de jure citizen, bound by an ideology that seems to celebrate citizenship as something inherent in the nature of certain individuals or groups of "the virtuous." Does that mean, by any chance, that it is an attainment that strengthens the weak?

In brief, what I mean to emphasize here is that, regardless of the liberal tradition and the democratic government usually attributed to the United

States, it was born and consolidated as a country far from the essential principles of an inclusive democracy. This makes a reading of its civic experience both complex and unique.

DISTINCTIVE TRAITS OF THE U.S. EXPERIENCE

It was the eighteenth century when Alexis de Tocqueville noted the autonomy and influence of U.S. civil society. He considered that people's zeal in grouping around public questions turned its different organizations into real schools of democracy, in which individuals learned to respect, communicate and exercise their rights. This led to a civic vitality unprecedented in the European experience of the time and also provided a mechanism that would tend to limit the state's power.

For purposes of definition, I should point out that the organizations that make up the third sector cover an immense range: informal groups (neighborhood organizations, sports clubs, etc.); formal organizations (unions, cooperatives, religious groups, etc.); nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and even semi-governmental agencies when they have been formed by members of civil society.⁴

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This sector, in the context we are dealing with here, can be defined today fundamentally by virtue of its being complementary to the governmental and business sectors. By contrast, Latin America presents a different picture: here the NGO protagonism tends to obscure a broader view of the sector, identified mainly as not-for-profit organizations committed to significant social causes, that is, to resolving the needs not dealt with by either the state or the market.

Broadly speaking, in Latin America, these organizations have oscillated between autonomous, re-active positions, social networks or networks for collective protests, and part of traditional power structures (such as unions, churches or the state), up to the most recent and promising efforts for building strategic transnational alliances to promote harmonious, sustainable development.⁵

However, one characteristic shared in all the countries of the hemisphere is that people join these organizations voluntarily; they have not only practiced their fundamental right of free association but are also able to directly show their aspirations and needs.

Returning to the U.S. case, according to CIVICUS World, by 1997, this sector was made up of more than 1.4 million groups, with an aggregate worth of U.S.\$500 billion. It is important to note that the third sector has created new and diverse job opportunities: in the 1980s, it accounted for 13 percent of the increase in jobs in the United States, France and Germany alone.⁶

Despite the lack of sufficient data to determine exactly the correlation of structures and missions, spheres of action, sources of financing, number of members and staff in the U.S., clearly

the sector's growth has increased both in industrialized and developing countries.

Today, it is key for learning about and understanding modern society and a necessary point of reference for anyone monitoring its effects on the creation of new social capital⁷ and preventing against the not infrequent cases of corruption and fraud found inside it.

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tion of civic organizations, together with their intense relations with the governmental and business sectors, have favored a climate in the United States that tends to political and legally legitimize their existence and functioning.

They are equally noteworthy for their ability to gather and mobilize resources from local, state and federal governments, and from businesses, foundations and philanthropists, donations and the volunteer work of their members. They sometimes even sell certain goods and services, usually not for a profit.

ELEMENTS OF COHESION

Clearly, the strengthening of the organizations of civil society requires constructive attitudes by their members,

united not only by shared interests, but also by at least a minimum of common values, outstanding among which are solidarity, integrity, trust and mutual collaboration.

The central characteristics that give unity and formality to these structures and can be clearly seen in the United States are:

1) The existence of democratic mechanisms that allow for the members' participation in the organizations' decision-making or leadership bodies.

2) A permanent capacity for building internal consensus, thus fostering the possibility of transcending the organization itself and making alliances with other groups. Here, pragmatism plays a central role, although this by no means implies renouncing one's own critical outlook or, above all, self-criticism.

3) The ability to develop tools for internal regulation that make the organizations credible and legitimate as responsible social agents, beginning with the ability to make their strategies, financial situations and activities clear to the public.⁸

I should mention, however, that these organizations' optimal functioning is also at one with their adherence to the established legal framework. In the case of the United States, this assures them stability. Once legally established, they favor a plural society, which gives their objectives and/or demands meaning.

It is appropriate to mention at this point that these citizens' organizations lead to the creation of collective identities and that this, in turn, leads us to the idea of "community." And, individuals are capable of feeling part of a community because in it converge both their independence and their interdependence with others.⁹

If the organizations of the third sector are seen as communities, they come alive in our minds, with all their dynamism and fragility. According to Anne Golden, their true potential consists, first, in identifying shared goals, based on interdependence, and then proceeding to move ahead.

Developing a sense of community rescues the individual from a growing process of alienation and isolation which makes it impossible for him/her to come up with appropriate solutions given the magnitude of his/her problems, and offers the opportunity of generating processes of empowerment that make it possible to have an impact on the different levels of decision making.¹⁰

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The United States has not escaped the effects of the constant changes and adjustments experienced by all societies. Today, its scenario is one of contrasts: new civic organizations multiply while simultaneously the citizenry's participation both in public life and in the traditions of grassroots community life seems to be weakening.

Here we should consider Robert Putnam's controversial thesis about the decline in social capital in the United States.¹¹ After reviewing a good deal of empirical evidence, Putnam states that Americans' civic participation in its simplest form has been declining for almost three decades without there being a significant difference in voting rates for state or local elections.

The figures Putnam uses from the General Social Survey show that membership in religious groups and regular church attendance have dropped by one sixth since the 1960s, which may

indicate that people's sense of religiosity is being redefined in terms of their individual interests and not in terms of institutions.¹² In like fashion, union membership has dropped to an alarmingly low level: 12 percent.¹³ Parent membership in parent-teacher associations has also declined to only 7 million people.¹⁴

The following four elements are probably contributing factors to the origin of this problem:

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a) The new demographics that indicate fewer and fewer marriages, more divorces and fewer children.

b) The massive influx of women into the work force, imposing limits on the time and energy they can dedicate to actively participating in civic tasks they traditionally undertook (parent-teacher associations, the Red Cross, the League of Women Voters, etc.).

c) Americans' pattern of frequently changing residence and their concentration in suburbs.

d) Technological changes and their impact on jobs, wages and even management of leisure time.¹⁵

In the model of a market society, the public domain as the sphere par excellence for constructing and recon-

structing the common good seems to be succumbing to the temptations of unrestrained consumption. If money is not a means, but rather an end in itself, getting it is identified directly with each isolated individual's actions insofar as he/she is a competitor or rival of "the other" or "others."

Less willing to commit themselves to civic activities—given that "time is money"—Americans run the risk of getting trapped inside their own institutional structures, structures that will tend to become petrified through disuse and indifference, perhaps making it impossible to build a democratic consensus that—basic though it might be—does limit totalitarianism.

There is always the possibility, however, of a rebirth among our neighbors to the north of civic commitment beyond conventional structures. If their liberal notion favors individual rights and this has been compatible with an intense and historic community tradition,¹⁶ the ability to reverse unfavorable trends will be maintained through the creation of trust and the development of innovative forms of civic participation.

Even when this participation has had a marked class and social-status component given that the vast majority of members of third sector organizations are educated members of the middle layers of society, we should not disregard the potential for the civic organization of minorities. That is, the historically most vulnerable sectors of society could become a new source of social capital.

The impact and consequences of the emergence of civic organizations of those who have been voiceless in U.S. society is yet to be calculated given that in order for it to happen, they must first conquer their independence and autonomy.¹⁷

I would like to conclude by referring to the question in the title of this article, which still goes unanswered, and by quoting Robert Putnam on the question of models:

The concept of “civil society” has played a central role in the recent global debate about the preconditions for democracy....In the newer democracies this phrase has properly focussed on the need to foster a vibrant civic life....In the established democracies, ironically, growing numbers of citizens are questioning the effectiveness of their public institutions....In America, at least, there is reason to suspect that this democratic disarray may be linked to a broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement....High on our scholarly agenda should be the question of whether a comparable erosion of social capital may be underway in other advanced democracies.¹⁸ **MM**

NOTES

¹ This article was originally presented as a paper at the First Annual International Seminar on Pan-American Integration, organized by the Center for Argentine-Canadian Studies in Buenos Aires, Argentina, November 15 and 16, 2000.

² For a detailed analysis of the concept of citizenship in the United States, see Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship. The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1995).

³ It is surprising that when the Constitution alludes to the members of other nation-states, it refers to them as citizens or subjects. See, for example, the Eleventh Amendment.

⁴ <http://www.mihancivilsociety.org>, *The New Force —An Introductory Guide to Building Civil Society Organizations*, Chapter 1, June 2000, released by The Mihan Foundation.

⁵ Diana Tussie et al., comps., *Nexos. La sociedad civil en las cumbres*, no. 2 (Buenos Aires: PIEI/Flacso, September 2000).

⁶ <http://www.mihancivilsociety.org>, “The State of the Third Sector,” Chapter 1.

⁷ Here, I mean social capital in its broadest sense, that is, the sum of all the resources mobilized to support civil society. *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Anne Golden, “Building Stronger Communities: Why Is This Important Now?” (paper read at The Governor General’s Canadian Study Conference, Banff, Canada, May 17, 2000).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 6, no. 1 (Baltimore, Maryland), January 1995, pp. 64-78.

¹² These figures are particularly important if we take into account the historic importance that religious affiliation has had for U.S. society. Even today, the United States has the largest number of churches and houses of prayer per capita in the world. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

¹³ Conversation between the author and John T. Schmitt of the Economic Policy Institute.

¹⁴ Putnam, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

¹⁶ See Francis Fukuyama, “The Primacy of Culture,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 6, no. 1 (Baltimore, Maryland), January 1995, pp. 7-14.

¹⁷ See L.M. Salamon and H.K. Anheier, *The Emerging Sector: The Non-Profit Sector in Comparative Perspective —An Overview* (Baltimore, Maryland: Institute for Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins, 1994).

¹⁸ Putnam, *op. cit.*, p. 77.