Chapter 2

The Dialectic of Civil and Uncivil Society— Fragility, Fault Lines, and Countervailing Forces

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Fragility: The Civil and Uncivil Society

Since its inception at the pen of Locke, Montesquieu, Ferguson, Tocqueville, and J. S. Mill, and notably since its revival during the Eastern European anti-totalitarian uprising of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the idea of the civil society has raised hopes, excited social reforms, energized social movements, and inspired writers and activists for whom the term conjures up free association, self-organization, and non-coercive governance. It has been an idea that empowered the overthrow of dictators, the resistance to totalitarian rule, and the protection of minorities. Yet, time and again, and especially in the past several decades, the civil society has also been an arena which has dashed hopes, and disappointed expectations, a sphere where old dictators were overthrown, but new ones were readily installed; where xenophobic rallies replaced the celebration of crumbling walls of repression; where indicators showing that social inequality was being ameliorated turned sharply to signal the reemergence of the gilded society; and where arenas that had witnessed the emergence of independent institutions of educational excellence began to bear witness to the reemergence of oligarchic structures of exclusivity and privilege.

In this paper, I submit that the dialectics reflected in the above zig-zag of the civil society invites us to rethink the civil society in two ways:

- first it requires that we come to terms with the civil society as an *inherently fragile* institution;

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- secondly, it demands that we engage more squarely and deliberately the moral *countervailing forces* capable of arresting the slide into incivility.

I address the first task in the first part of the essay, where I plead for an appraisal of the civil society that acknowledges its potentials as well as its pitfalls, ambivalences and tipping points. We need to better understand the features that can make the two superficially homologous and the tipping points at which one morphs into the other. For example, both, *civil society* and *gilded society* are open for the public role of philanthropy and independent associations. They both harness, in their fashion, the energy of people's particularistic attachments. They both encourage bottom-up self-government through foundations, endowments and charitable giving. Both allow for private citizens to shape public life beyond the casting of ballots on election day, and for decentralized private-public partnerships to assume important roles in public life. Both exalt the benign effects of private initiative and self-organization, the important role of self-regulating markets, and their potential to assume some of the governance functions of bureaucratic states.

But against a backdrop of steep socio-economic inequalities and with nation states rocked by the challenges of globalization and mass migrations, these similarities and affinities may also obscure distinctions where *differences of degree* morph into *differences of kind*: where, for example, moderate inequality that often acts as a spur to diligence, entrepreneurialism and a scaffolding for upward mobility tips into extreme inequality that dashes, discourages and demoralizes hopes of collective advancement and breeds distrust and resentment; where the freedom to form associations and create foundations may empower the many under one condition, but also disempower them when a few of these associations become astronomically well-financed and influential. As the civil society gives way to the gilded or bourgeois society it may not only pass tipping points where markets turn from agents of empowering choice to arenas of corrosive inequality. It may also facilitate the morphing of cultural pluralism in a religiously neutral public sphere into normative indifference in a morally anesthetized public square. Or it may see the change of philanthropic giving from cultivating generosity and benevolence to a tool that allows a handful of mega-rich foundations to pursue their policy utopias as they bypass democratic accountability (see, e.g., Collins & Flannery, 2020). As individuals lose sight of the moral foundations of democratic civility, there may be no amount of self-organized associations or philanthropically funded projects to save the civil society.

We can appreciate these ambivalences more thoroughly if we explore the possibility that these changes are not mere aberrations from the default of the civil society, to be repaired by smarter social policy. Rather, we might see the civil society as an inherently *fragile, vulnerable* and corruptible institution that easily morphs into its opposite. Such a dialectical view is aware of democratic civility's association-strengthening effects as well as its community eroding and *dissociative* potential, its power to energize and as well as to corrode civility. This view may ultimately be more realistic than views that are either one-sidedly optimistic or one-sidedly pessimistic.

But this dialectical view gives rise to a crucial question that is at the center of Part II of this paper: What, if any, are the *countervailing forces* that exist or can be mobilized to keep the civil society from wildly oscillating between strong bottom-up associative impulses and equally strong top-down oligarchic impulses? The view that sees both faces of the civil society—its association-strengthening and its association undermining, its bowling together and bowling alone (Putnam, 1995), its community-building and its “lonely-in-the-crowd” (Riesman, 1969) potential—finds precedent in established social theory. I draw here mainly on Tocqueville who had a keen sense of these ambivalences, and who believed in *the need for countervailing moral and spiritual forces* capable of checking the corruption of the civil society.

Ultimately, this is an essay to restore faith in the civil society by better understanding its vulnerabilities and fragility and by placing the question about countervailing forces more squarely on our intellectual and political agenda.

The essay thus cuts against several rival conceptions:

- *The civil society is in reality “nothing but” a bourgeois society*, a cosmetic and ultimately ineffective dressing of the wounds systemically cut by capitalism. This, the Marxist position, has gained a lot of face-validity in the past 20 years and David Harvey is one of its most effective contemporary proponents: “NGOs have grown and proliferated under neo-liberalism, giving rise to the illusion that opposition mobilized outside of the state apparatus and within some separate entity called ‘civil society’ is the powerhouse of oppositional politics and social transformation” (Harvey, 2005, p. 21; see also Hunt, 1987). This is the view of the civil society as a thin veil of bourgeois society. Although I believe that the civil society can indeed morph into its uncivil, bourgeois antipode, I believe the reductionist view of it as “nothing but” a veil on capitalism to be ultimately misguided. I also believe that pinning the blame for the most recent failures of the civil society on the new oligarchy (Krugman, 2011; Picketty, 2014; Rosen, 2014) is correct, but not sufficient. For while it seems that the civil society is being upstaged by the untamed market as the righteous heir of self-organized social activity—Picketty: “the risk of a drift towards oligarchy is real and gives little reason for optimism about where the United States is headed” (2014, p. 28)—we ought not ignore that for the civil society to trade places with the gilded society, the idea of virtue-civility and moral restraint more broadly first had to be abandoned *en masse*.
- The second view that this essay challenges is that *the civil society can do no wrong*. This, the romantic conception of the civil society, assumes that the more self-organized associations, the more and the wealthier the philanthropy, and the less state intervention, the better. This, too, is a one-sided view of things that ignores the many ways in which incivility, illiberality, and despotism can grow in the cracks between self-organized associations and in the gaps between classes of formally equal but politically or economically unequal citizens. It also ignores the by now patently obvious fact that a strong associational life *per se* is no guarantee for civility. I’ll return to this below.

- Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly: if it is true that the civil society is inherently fragile, we need to reengage the crucial problem of what kinds of *countervailing forces* can be mobilized to keep the project on track? As Alan Kahan (2015) recently reminded us, Tocqueville believed that countervailing forces capable of doing that are necessarily *moral and spiritual*. Although he was a master-analyst of the providential institutional design features that the nascent American democracy inherited, and although these design features were important and necessary to keep the project of liberal democracy on track, they were not sufficient.¹ Institutional design alone cannot save the civil society. But how can moral and spiritual forces be effective given our experience with the civic divisiveness of religion and our decision to corral it into the sphere of private choice carried out behind high walls of separation? I'll suggest that any practicable answer today must include a more effective navigation of the three-fold fault lines of the civil society.

The Inherent Fragility of the Civil Society

The Liberal Account

At the heart of the civil society tradition is the idea of an intermediate social space lodged between citizens and government, and state and market. For John Locke, one of the earliest exponents of the idea, society is both morally and politically prior to the state. For his “Two Treatises on Government” (1689/1988) to effectively reject the Hobbesian Leviathan Locke needed effective instruments of self-government in addition to and beyond the control of the central government. A half century later (1748), Montesquieu emphasized the role of the *corps intermédiaires* to maintain liberty in the face of centralized power (Montesquieu, 1989, pp. 17–18). He did so in response to the rise of centralized monarchical governments of proportions unthinkable for the city-states of antiquity. Montesquieu, like Locke, was concerned that a society squashed between central government on the one hand and an unorganized mass of atomized individuals on the other would inevitably fall victim to the rulers' untrammelled despotism. Intermediate social bodies could check this danger. The author of the “Spirit of the Laws” derived his remedy for government despotism from the experience of pre-monarchical France, where the power of the king's house had once been limited and counterbalanced by the power of rivaling

¹Peter Breiner, in an instructive recent essay (2019), considers how both Rousseau and Tocqueville seek to identify the kinds of *virtuous cycles* that can be engendered by good institutional design to prevent the corruption of democratic government. He demonstrates the affinity in their thought and Tocqueville's largely unacknowledged debt to Rousseau. But to this reader he leaves open the question whether the virtuous cycles thus engendered can carry the full weight of keeping liberal democracy on track. I'll suggest below that neither of the two authors believed that virtuous cycles could succeed without important moral supports.

aristocratic families and municipalities. One of his most famous followers, Alexis de Tocqueville, was later to reconceive this idea based on the new realities of life in modern democracies.

The distrust that Montesquieu expressed vis-a-vis the illiberal tendencies of centralized government was shared by many other European writers. One of the earliest was Wilhelm von Humboldt. His essay on “Die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates” [“On the Limits of the Effectiveness of the State”]² still stands as one of the earliest manifestos of civil society thinking. In the essay, von Humboldt limits legitimate state action to a very few necessary domains such as national defense and internal security. Education, in particular, was off limits. Two decades before he became Prussia's chief architect of education, von Humboldt rejected the idea of “national education,” which he believed to lie “wholly beyond the limits within which the State's activity should properly be confined” (von Humboldt, 1851/1969, p. 54; see also Meyer, 2016, Chapter 4).

In the hands of these writers, the civil society idea is shot through with an abiding *distrust* in the unfailing benevolence of central government, a rejection of the feasibility of the philosopher-king or the Leviathan model, and an understanding that “even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny . . .” (Jefferson, 1779/1984, p. 365). Rather than placing their trust in the reason and benevolence of an exalted few at the helm of the machinery of government, the civil society thinkers place their trust in the ability of an associated citizenry to govern themselves.

Alexis de Tocqueville

Alexis de Tocqueville is the writer who has, more than any other author, developed and elaborated that idea for the new condition of democratic equality. In “Democracy in America”, Tocqueville famously observes that “nothing . . . more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America” (1835 & 1840/1969, p. 517). Voluntary associations were key institutions for democratic vitality (Villa, 2006). “In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association” (1835 & 1840/1969, p. 513). According to Tocqueville, civil society represents a tradeoff between the benefits of top-down administrative organization and the benefits of vigorous bottom-up participation:

In America the force behind the state is much less well regulated, less enlightened, and less wise, but it is a hundred times more powerful than in Europe. . . . I know of no other people who have founded so many schools or such efficient ones, or churches more in touch with the religious needs of the inhabitants, or municipal roads better maintained. So it is no good looking in the United States for uniformity and permanence of outlook, minute care of

² von Humboldt's clunky but exacting title “Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen” [“Ideas to an Essay to Determine the Limits of the Effectiveness of the State”] has typically been shortened to “On the Limits of State Action” in English translations.

details, or perfection of administrative procedures; what one does find is a picture of power, somewhat wild perhaps, but robust, and a life liable to mishaps but full of striving and animation. (1835 & 1840/1969, pp. 92–93)

The American civil society experience and especially the ubiquity of voluntary associations inspired Tocqueville to adapt Montesquieu's idea of intermediate organizations to the conditions of modern democracy. In Tocqueville's view, liberty was threatened not only by centralized monarchies, but also by rule of the majority in democratic societies, which conceivably could produce a similarly unmediated juxtaposition of centralized power and unorganized masses. The mere fact that democratic government was elected by the majority did little to alleviate this problem. Tocqueville's lasting discovery was that, under democratic conditions, the role of intermediate bodies could be played by *civic associations* that could be at once independent of government and provide great numbers of people with an opportunity to learn and practice the art of self-government.

One of the happiest consequences of the absence of government (when a people is happy enough to be able to do without it, a rare event) is the ripening of individual strength which never fails to follow from it. Each man learns to think and to act for himself without counting on the support of any outside power which, however watchful it be, can never answer all the needs of man in society (Tocqueville, 1831–1832/1971, p. XI)

But Tocqueville famously warns:

But one must say it again, there are but few peoples who can manage like that without a government. Such a state of affairs can only exist at the two extremes of civilization. The savage with nought but his physical needs to satisfy, he too relies on himself. For the civilized man to be able to do the same, he must have reached that state of society in which knowledge allows a man to see clearly what is useful for him *and his passions do not prevent him from carrying it out* (emphasis added). The most important concern for a good government should be to get people used little by little to managing without it. (Tocqueville, 1831–1832/1971, p. XI)

The post-1989 revival

Although highly influential in the United States, in continental Europe the civil society has long been eclipsed by a different narrative, that of the *welfare state*. For many decades the public seemed more deeply preoccupied with socio-economic equality to be ameliorated by the welfare state than by self-government facilitated by self-organized initiative and associations. This trend, if it was one, seems to have been broken by the fall of the Soviet empire and the events of 1989.

In the wake of these events, the idea of the civil society (or any of its synonyms, such as civic associationism or third sector), generated much intellectual and political excitement (see, e.g., Anheier, Lang, & Toepler, 2019; Berger & Neuhaus, 1996; Dahrendorf, 1990; Diamond, 1994; Dionne, 1998; Ehrenberg, 1999; Glendon, 1991; Keane, 1998; Putnam, 1995; Shils, 1991; Walzer, 1995). It promised to be useful not only in resisting the Soviet Union's totalitarianism but also in reframing and reconceptualizing some vexing problems of social reform which often pitted

pro-government against pro-market advocates, sometimes superimposing another long-standing controversy between communitarians and libertarians (Walzer, 1995).

That the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of communist collectivism in 1989 should have re-energized the civil society, is, in retrospect, not surprising. For Eastern European dissidents, who had lived their lives under a regime that routinely and zealously squashed all social action independent of the state, the collapse of communism left the public square for the first time free for individual citizens to associate voluntarily. A further spur of excitement came from a newfound skepticism with the bureaucratic bloat of the welfare state and excitement over market-based alternatives. At about the time that the Soviet Empire began its terminal decline, the Western capitalist economies were swept up in a trend toward deregulation and privatization prompted by a reaction against “big government” and a widespread reexamination of the proper responsibilities of government spurred by hopes in a “new public management” that would borrow management ideas from the private sector and adapt them for public sector use (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993).

A further impetus for the resurgence of the idea of civil society was the opening to an ethnic and cultural *pluralism* that characterized societies changed by globalization and immigration. The notion of civic pluralism was revived by writers like Isaiah Berlin (2013), Nathan Glazer (1997), Charles Taylor (1992, 1996) and Michael Walzer (1983; 1995). They argued that the earlier idea of a dominant culture or ethnicity organized around a core of shared values and surrounded by a few dissenting voices on the fringe (duly tolerated by the majority), was and should be giving way to the idea of a *thick* pluralism that sees divergent creeds, beliefs, and worldviews as matters of first importance in a group’s self-understanding. Isaiah Berlin saw the new pluralism as a long overdue correction of a rationalist view of humans as creatures of reason and reason only, a view in which shared feelings and beliefs—the stuff of culture—are relegated to a marginal corner in the life of communities. In the new pluralism, the cultural commitments of groups and communities are viewed not as obstacles to be overcome, or as residual remains of an obsolete past, but as durable attachments from which different groups weave their tapestry of collective understanding.

By the mid-1990s, and as a result of these confluences of deep political, ideological, and cultural shifts, the civil society had been re-established as a vital energizing force of liberal democracy (Dionne, 1998; Taylor, 1996; Walzer, 1995).

Democratic Despotism

Near the end of “Democracy in America”, Tocqueville (1835 & 1840/1969, p. 690) asks a critical question that has received a far fainter echo from interpreters and advocates of democracy and civil society than his positive and optimistic espousal of the civil society’s liberal potential in the earlier parts: “What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear”.

In this section, Tocqueville returns to an idea that had already occupied him in his thinking about the tyranny of the majority: that the equality of conditions may also contain the seeds of despotism. For Tocqueville, the condition of democratic equality, while it may spur civic cooperation and the development of the skill of self-government, also engenders a love for egalitarian conditions and for material comfort and convenience. As a result, people withdraw from the public sphere and into the small circle of family and friends in the spirit of “individualism” which he famously defines as “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends” (1835 & 1840/1969, p. 506).

As their self-governing energies weaken, an expanded central government and/or a few oligarchs that untamed markets have thrown up the Nasdaq, move in to pick up the slack. This opens the door for *democratic despotism*, a new political condition, a kind of tyranny different from the one ubiquitous in the ancient world. The burdens of ancient tyranny “fell most heavily on some,” but “never spread over a great number.” Democratic despotism, by contrast, is “more widespread” but “milder.” It “degrades” rather than “torments.”

The slide into despotism can be surprisingly smooth. “[A]n innumerable multitude of men, circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures” (pp. 691–692) facing each other in a society whose power is “absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident, and gentle” (p. 692). The individual becomes a self-centered person who exists only “in and for himself, and though he still may have a family, one can at least say he has not got a fatherland” (p. 692).

Democratic despotism is administered by officials who rule more like “school-masters” than “tyrants.” They preside over a regime which “gladly works for the happiness of its people” so that subjects enjoy themselves, if only because they think “of nothing but enjoyment.” Under such a condition the “vices of those who govern” may combine with the “weaknesses of the governed” to bring the American experiment to “ruin.” While free choice is still possible, “it daily makes the exercise of free choice less useful and rarer, restricts the activity of free will within a narrower compass, and little by little robs each citizen of the proper use of his own faculties.” The result is a description of a new kind of servitude that even Kafka would have found it hard to improve upon:

Having thus taken each citizen in turn in its powerful grasp and shaped men to its will, government then extends its embrace to include the whole of society. It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform, through which even men of the greatest originality and the most vigorous temperament cannot force their heads above the crowd. It does not break men’s will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd. (p. 692)

The state thus turns into an institution that could not more fully deserve the “iron cage of servitude” moniker that Max Weber was later to pin on it.

Tocqueville's fear regarding the soft despotism face of democracy echoes a similar ambivalence expressed by other writers who saw capitalism capable of engendering both, greater degrees of civility and greater self-centered individualism and, as in Marx, despotism. A case in point is A. O. Hirschman's (1992) analysis of this two-faced nature of capitalist-commercial society, that showed up as early as in Montesquieu's *doux commerce* thesis, as well as in Marx' bourgeois society's *self-destruction* thesis. (Hunt, 1987)³

Individualism and untamed markets

Tocqueville thus sees democratic equality harboring two opposing tendencies or potentialities: the tendency for democratic self-government and the tendency for a new form of despotism. One reason for this seeming paradox is that the decentralization that is associated with strong civil society can also provide a protective shield for rising inequality. As individuals withdraw from the public sphere, the pursuit of private wealth becomes all consuming.

In democratic countries, no matter how rich a man is, he is almost always dissatisfied with his fortune, because he finds that he is less wealthy than his father was and he is afraid that his son will be less wealthy than he. So most wealthy men in democracies are dreaming of ways to increase their riches, and naturally their eyes turn to trade and industry, for these seem the quickest and best means of getting rich. In this respect, they share the poor man's instincts without his necessities, or rather they are driven by the most imperious of all necessities, that of not sinking. (Tocqueville, 1835 & 1840/1969, p. 552)

As the few winners and the many losers of the economic game engage in dissonance reduction, resentment grows on both sides of the divide. The more numerous middle and lower classes resent the upper classes for the inordinate, out-of-proportion gap that separates them from one another. And the super-rich resent and fear those on the other side of their gated communities for engaging in "class warfare." As Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) impressively demonstrated, the result is an epidemic of distrust that leaves *both* groups worse off as corrosive effects wreak havoc on the mental and physical health of all.

Inequality is thus a key switchman determining whether the aggregate effects of associative self-organization are positive or negative. Under conditions where a country's socio-economic and moral center rests in a flourishing middle class, characterized by high degrees of social mobility, and easy interaction across dividing

³Tocqueville's contemporary Marx, for all the divergences in their diagnosis of capitalism and democracy, saw some forms of despotism in ways Tocqueville might have recognized. Here is Marx describing the 1851 dictatorial coup of Louis Bonaparte in language which a contemporary of the year 2020 reads with wondrous recognition:

"Driven by the conflicting demands of the situation to keep the public's eye as on a sleight-of-hand conjurer through constant surprises on himself as Napoleon's substitute, hence to carry out daily coup d'états en miniature, [Louis] Napoleon throws the whole civil economy into chaos, violates everything that seemed inviolable to the revolution of 1848, renders some tolerant of revolution and others lusting for it, creates anarchy in the name of order, while at the same time stripping the entire machinery of the state off its halo, profaning it and making it at once loathsome and ridiculous" (Marx, 1852/1960, p. 207; own translation).

lines of status and wealth, the associative effect may trump the withdrawal effect. Under conditions of high socio-economic inequality, the withdrawal effect trumps the associative effect. The rich become fearful; the poor hopeless.

The withdrawal from public life that Tocqueville observed earlier is further hastened by the rise of an “*industrial aristocracy*”—one of the few places where Tocqueville’s commentary veers into the sphere of economics. He observes that ordinary people’s withdrawal from the public sphere is not only a result of the growing illusion of mutual independence as their material prosperity grows. It is also the result of a growing class of people degraded by the conditions of work in the factories of the owners of gigantic enterprises who lack the resources and energy for engaging in public life. While democracy makes “men grow more alike,” the newly emerging industry spurs the development of separate classes: “inequality increases in the less numerous class in the same ratio in which it decreases in the community.” Therefore:

[T]he friends of democracy should keep their eyes anxiously fixed in this direction; for if ever a permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy again penetrates into the world, it may be predicted that this is the gate by which they will enter. (Tocqueville, 1835 & 1840/1969, p. 558)

Paradoxically, as Smith (2010) points out, government attempts to combat inequality or injustice can add a further source of corrosion in that it leads to increased political *centralization*. In the United States, for example, the fight against slavery and for civil rights engendered a vast expansion of the machinery of central government and paved the way for similar expansions in other spheres, notably education.

Inequality and tyranny

At this point it is helpful to recall that Tocqueville’s view of the importance of relative equality and a civic virtue minded middle class has deep roots in the moral and political thought of the Greek founders. Aristotle, in particular, firmly believes that self-government flourishes best with a strong middle class. To him it was evident that gross inequality obstructs self-government:

... in the case of the goods of fortune ... a middling possession is the best of all. [A person of moderate wealth] is readiest to obey reason, while for one who is [very wealthy or very poor] it is difficult to follow reason. The former sort tend to become arrogant and base on a grand scale, the latter malicious and base in petty ways; and acts of injustice are committed either through arrogance or through malice. (Aristotle, 1941, p. 1222, Politics 1295b4)

A political community that has extremes of wealth and poverty “is a city not of free persons but of slaves and masters, the ones consumed by envy, the others by contempt. Nothing is further removed from affection and from a political partnership” (Aristotle, Politics 1295b22).

Aristotle’s teachers had weighed in on this point as well. In “The Republic” (Book VIII) Plato describes how, the love of lucre creates a class system in which both the wealthy and the poor lose interest in virtue. The rich “care only for making money, and are as indifferent as the pauper to the cultivation of virtue”. “One, seeing

another grow rich, seeks to rival him, and thus the great mass of the citizens become lovers of money” (Plato, 1968, p. 317).

And so they grow richer and richer, and the more they think of making a fortune the less they think of virtue; for when riches and virtue are placed together in the scales of the balance, the one always rises as the other falls. [...] And in proportion as riches and rich men are honoured in the State, virtue and the virtuous are dishonoured. [...] And what is honoured is cultivated, and that which has no honour is neglected. (Plato, 1968, p. 317)

The ruling laws and ruling individuals are bound to fall victim to the love of money:

... men become lovers of trade and money; they honour and look up to the rich man, and make a ruler of him, and dishonor the poor man. (Plato, 1968, p. 318)

Clearly, both Tocquevillian (e.g., Smith, 2010) and contemporary criticism of oligarchy and untamed market policies (i.e., Krugman, 2011; Piketty, 2014; Rosen, 2014; Stiglitz 2015; see also Meyer & Zhou, 2017 for oligarchic tendencies in US higher education), are standing on the tall shoulders of the Greek founders.

Summary: Associative and Dissociative Effects in the Civil Society

Under conditions of democracy as described by Tocqueville, civil society is an arena of two opposing effects, an associative and a dissociative effect. The former strengthens participation and engagement. The latter triggers civic disengagement and withdrawal from the public sphere. The former energizes and invigorates the public sphere; the latter creates apathy and indifference. We can expect the dissociative effect to be particularly strong when great economic growth in untamed markets causes inequality to rise and all are pre-occupied with safeguarding their economic status in a winner-take-all competition. Under those conditions, the moral bonds and moral obligations are weakening; the confidence, will, and skill for self-government wanes, and the readiness to abandon public affairs and self-government to a strong central authority grows (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Strengthening and corrosive effects in the civil society effects

Strengthening versus Corrosive Effects in the Civil Society	
Strengthening (Associative) Effects	Corrosive (Dissociative) Effects
→ ripening of individual strengths → flourishing of decentralized networks of associations which do real work of governance → ordinary citizens develop the ‘skill to be free’ and realize the potential benefits of self-organized cooperation → stronger self-interest properly understood → invigorating civil society → effective checks on central government	→ increasing affluence and well-being → nourishing the illusion of individual independence → withdrawal from public life → “lonely crowd” / “bowling alone” → inviting greater role for central government → greater self-interest improperly understood → weakening willingness to participate in checks on central government

Note. Source: Design by author

In sum, the *civil society is not self-sustaining*. The skill of associative self-government and public sphere participation does not, in and of itself, generate the full set of skills needed for democratic civility. Moreover, as we’ll see presently, even where associational life is strengthened, it may not be the kind that sustains a *civil society*.

The structural and normative dimension of the civil society

Based on the above discussion, it is useful to distinguish two dimensions or “faces” of the civil society: the structural and the normative. In the *structural dimension* we would register the strength of a given society’s associational life, the degree to which the sector between state and markets is replete with bottom-up energy of associations, foundations, charities, partnerships, and “third sector” organizations, facilitative of independent participation of individuals and groups in the public sphere. This dimension of the civil society may empirically be weakly or strongly developed. As we saw above, the liberal account takes its strong development to be a hallmark of the civil society.

In the *normative dimension* we would register the strength of a given society’s civil and moral life, the degree to which groups and individuals conduct themselves peacefully, with a measure of self-restraint, a measure of empathetic caring for and about the other, and an abhorrence of and rejection of violence. In this dimension, we again may observe weak and strong states of public life.

It suffices to make this distinction to observe that these two dimensions of the civil society need not vary together (see Table 2.2, below). Put differently: *a strong associational life is not the only worry of those interested in a vigorous civil society*. We can have strong associational life, along with rather weak normative restraints on how and for what ends those associations operate. The failings here may be of two kinds: on the one hand there may be a significant portion of associations espousing (or silently tolerating) violence and hatred. This is the case importantly discussed by Chambers and Kopstein (2001). On the other there may be a significant number of organizations which, thanks to an extraordinary degree of wealth and resources, are able to command an inordinately strong voice in the public square to a point where they overshadow and discourage public involvement and debate.

We may also encounter the reverse condition: a society with limited or weakly developed associational life, in which a few large private or semi-public organizations play a key role in a society’s moral and spiritual life (cell 3, Table 2.2). Such

Table 2.2 The structural and normative dimension of the civil society

Normative Dimension	Structural Dimension	
	Weak	Strong
Weak	Anomie	Oligarchy
Strong	Corporatism	Civil Society

Note. Source: Design by author

moral corporatism may effectively shape civic life through an array of charitable, educational, and social welfare-oriented organizations and activities. Germany, with its long tradition of harnessing Christian charity for public ends, may be a case in point. In fact, Germany has, in many ways, cultivated a tradition that harnesses and encourages cooperation between governmental or quasi-governmental and religiously rooted organizations in sectors from health-care, education, to social welfare and disability services (see Glenn, 2002; Meyer, Minkenberg, & Ostner, 2000).

While these kinds of organizations may well leave an imprint of charity and virtue on public life, they are doing so in a way that does not require widespread associational participation. In fact, these organizations, although technically independent of government, are often perceived as part and parcel of a large state-controlled bureaucratic welfare structure.

Finally, the case where neither associational life nor civic morality are strong, might be best described by Durkheim's condition of "anomie," a state where order is either non-existent or merely the result of a state's coercive power.

The purpose of distinguishing the two faces of the civil society is to emphasize that civic and moral vitality does not automatically follow from a strong associational life; it can, especially under conditions of stark socio-economic inequality, even be defeated by it. As Chambers and Kopstein (2001) point out, we may well be joining and bowling together, but our thoughts and discussions might be dominated by prejudice, hatred, and resentment.

The Need for Countervailing Moral Forces

When seen in the context of its inherent fragility in general and the inevitable ups and downs of a market economy in particular, the civil society looks more like a roller coast with its peaks of civic renewal and valleys of incivility, than like the pre-ordained progression towards self-government and civility as which it has often been portrayed (including by this author⁴). This more sober view of civil society does not mean we give up on it and its potential to buttress democratic political forms with civic energy of self-government. But it would seem that we need to work harder in seeking to understand which, if any, *countervailing forces* can help stay the corrosive tendencies that seem to grow so easily in the heart of the civil society.

⁴ See, for example, my "The Return of the Civil Society" (in Meyer & Boyd, 2001) which expounds a one-sidedly optimistic view of the civil society.

The Tocqueville-Kahan Thesis

Alan S. Kahan's (2015) recent masterful and compelling reconstruction of Tocqueville's ideas on this point goes a long way to do that. From Kahan's analysis we can infer that Tocqueville—although he was a master-analyst of institutional design (Elster, 2009; Meyer, 2003)—was convinced that institutional design alone would not save liberal democracy. Rather, he (Tocqueville) insisted on the vital role of a moral and spiritual foundation for democracy and the civil society. Kahan shows that Tocqueville's reference to the fundamental role of moral and spiritual forces in general and Christianity in particular cannot be dismissed as an idiosyncratic (and architecturally inessential) attempt to reconcile his private beliefs as a practicing (albeit often reluctant) Catholic with his hopes for a liberal democracy. Rather, for Tocqueville a liberal democracy without moral and spiritual checks and balances was an impossibility. *Liberal democracy needs not only political, but also moral and spiritual checks and balances.* This part of Tocqueville's meditation on democracy has, indeed, been the least acknowledged (but see Fradkin, 2000). This may be because, as Kahan suggests, it clashes with the rationalist and secular disposition of much of Western academia. Another reason may be that in our collective experience with religion's civic role the potential for organized religion to unite and uplift seems not securely dissociated from its potential to divide and separate.

Kahan's careful reconstruction makes it clear that Tocqueville the practicing Catholic never forces the hand of Tocqueville the social scientist. His analysis is nuanced enough to demonstrate the vital role of a moral and spiritual tradition that is capable of checking what Tocqueville sees as the inevitable moral entropic tendencies of democratic equality. According to Tocqueville it is essential that there are forces to help people realize the limitations and ultimate unsatisfactoriness of the pursuit of happiness understood as a pursuit of wealth and pleasure and the need to tap into sources of inner peace and well-being that are independent of the fluctuating fortunes of the market place or the iron-caged certainties of the rational state. One might say, that while Tocqueville's personal horizon was limited in this regard to Christianity (him having only limited, selective and rather distorted awareness of non-Christian religious traditions like Islam and Hinduism), his intellectual penetration of the problems of civil society leaves us with an open invitation to probe *any* kind of spiritual tradition or practice that can arrest the relentless but ultimately hollow pull of commerce and upward mobility as main source of meaning and success in democratic society.

Tocqueville arrives thus at what Kahan calls his "spiritual checks and balances thesis" because of an assumption about *basic human dispositions* that most modern social scientists are loath to make. Tocqueville believes that for humans, freedom is unattainable lest we transcend the strictures of materialism and the shallow pursuits of sense pleasure that many of his contemporaries deemed a sufficient basis for social civility and peace. As Kahan shows, his view of human nature is anchored in two principles:

- humans will not be relieved of the great causes of human suffering—uncertainty and doubt, illness and death—by means of knowledge or material well-being alone;
- for that reason humans are propelled to act from a need for both material *and* non-material satisfactions (Kahan, 2015, pp. 50–51).

With the first principle Tocqueville cuts against Descartes' rationalism and casts his lot with Pascal who knows that there is an element of belief and wisdom that transcends rational knowledge. With the second principle Tocqueville cuts against the utilitarian idea that satisfying material desires alone can lead to lasting satisfaction and happiness.

These two basic assessments of human nature—the impossibility to arrive at inner peace by means of rational knowledge alone and the impossibility to limit our aspirations to the satisfaction of material desires—imply that people under conditions of democratic equality face two possible fates: the first, resulting from abandoning democracy “to its wild instincts” is a degrading path leading to tyranny and servitude where men come to “know society only by its vices and miseries” (Tocqueville, quoted in Kahan, 2015, p. 13).⁵

The second is a path where our attachment to material well-being is kept in check by the need for non-material growth. Spirituality and religion are universal cultural forces uniquely helpful in this regard:

Man's instincts constantly push his soul toward the contemplation of another world, and it is religion that leads him there. So religion is only a particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself. [. . .] [T]o believe that democratic societies are naturally hostile to religion is to commit a great mistake. (Tocqueville, quoted in Kahan, 2015, p. 69)

In contrast to some of his contemporaries, who believed in the possibility of building a stable civil society on nothing more than the orientation toward the satisfaction of material desires, Tocqueville sees an insuppressible spiritual need in humans and wants to harness it for the project of liberal democracy.

Kahan summarizes Tocqueville's assessment thus: “Religion instills loftiness and spiritualism in the democratic soul, rescuing it from the materialism, pettiness, and individualism that threaten to monopolize it. Religion is the spiritual antidote to democracy's flaws.” As to the type of religion, Kahan describes Tocqueville's ecumenical stance thus: “Almost any religion (provided it is sufficiently democratic to maintain its hold on democratic people) will do” (Kahan, 2015, p. 72).

There is thus little hope for a stable civil society unless non-violence in our external affairs is coupled with and buttressed by non-violence internally—in the hearts and minds of people.

⁵Since Kahan relies on the new Nolla/Schleifer translation/editing of Tocqueville's *Democracy* (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Editor: Eduardo Nolla; translator: James T. Schleifer. Indianapolis: Liberty, 2012) and since this translation sometimes differs noticeably from the G. Lawrence translation I use, I provide the Nolla / Schleifer page quotations in this section.

Böckenförde and Habermas

Ironically, Tocqueville's understanding of the need for countervailing moral and spiritual forces is witnessing a recent comeback, if from a somewhat unlikely (and, as far as I can tell, unconnected) source. In 1967, the German federal judge Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde published a lecture containing what since has become known as the Böckenförde "dictum:"

"The liberal, secularized state is nourished by presuppositions that it cannot itself guarantee." [Der freiheitliche, säkularisierte Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann.] (Böckenförde, 2006, p. 112).

Böckenförde describes this as "the great risk into which the [secular] state has entered for the sake of liberty. As a liberal state, it can be sustained only if the freedom that the state grants the citizens regulates itself from the inside, from the moral substance of the individual and the homogeneity of society"⁶ (ibid).

Böckenförde's main question is our ability to reconcile the political imperative of a secular, religiously non-aligned "state" (the German "Staat" is often encompassing of both "government" and "society" and hence only imperfectly translated by either "government" or "state") with the sociological truism of society's social integration through shared moral bonds that keep particularistic tendencies from over-boarding. Without such moral bonds, he suggests, government and society are likely to disintegrate into what Durkheim would have called social anomy. Yet, the secular state, while depending on these bonds and utilizing them, is unable to guarantee and reproduce them, in part because of its obligation to secularism and religious neutrality. Thus, Böckenförde offers a diagnosis of the secular state in modern society as operating under (and contributing to) a condition of *moral entropy*. The center is unlikely to hold and reinforcements seem nowhere in sight. Or are they?

Here Böckenförde (like Tocqueville a Catholic) offers a thesis with strong affinity to Tocqueville. Aware that religious (and that means to him initially Judeo-Christian) forces cannot and should not expect official state support, he holds that they nonetheless deserve space in the modern civil society because of their positive civic role and their contribution to civil cohesion. But, again, like Tocqueville, Böckenförde argues that there is no need to limit the compass of those forces to Judeo-Christian ones, given, for example, the potential of Islam to similarly serve in such a role. Even further: there is no need to limit the compass to religious forces, in general. As he suggested in a 2009 interview: moral bonds can be generated through social practices other than distinctly religious ones, including through social movements like those for ecological or social justice (Böckenförde, 2009).⁷

⁶ „Das ist das große Wagnis, das er, um der Freiheit willen, eingegangen ist. Als freiheitlicher Staat kann er einerseits nur bestehen, wenn sich die Freiheit, die er seinen Bürgern gewährt, von innen her, aus der moralischen Substanz des Einzelnen und der Homogenität der Gesellschaft, reguliert.“

⁷ Böckenförde, Ernst W., „Freiheit ist ansteckend“. TAZ (Tageszeitung), 23.9.2009

In addition, government policy, while it cannot guarantee moral bonds, can facilitate their cultivation where they spring up spontaneously in society, in a variety of other ways. Instruments of such policy include:

- education;
- an open stance towards *all* religion and religious movements (as long as they are willing to operate within constitutional legal bounds);
- community-oriented social movements like ecological and labor unions;
- social policy that supports and facilitates bottom-up movements and institutions that contribute to the common welfare.

In general, while the state cannot be pro-religious, it need not be anti-religious. In this way, Böckenförde seems to hope that from this diverse interaction of spontaneous forces protected and encouraged by proper policy, a kind of shared understanding (he calls it “homogeneity”—a more fraught term) that emerges to bond the diverse members of a community and encourages their maintaining their “inner moral substance.” Referencing Ralf Dahrendorf, he calls this a “sense of belonging” that can be generated by means of a sense of shared language, history, and traditions up to and including those bonds generated by having a national soccer league.

But are these forces strong enough to reliably counteract the morally corrosive forces of individualism and narrow self-interest *improperly* understood? There is reason to doubt that. Not only would a truly pluralistic conception of society allow for multiple languages and traditions. The problem here is that in a secular and pluralistic society the only truly binding shared conceptions are largely or exclusively *procedural*: recognizing the other’s *right* to practice and conduct themselves according to beliefs and rules that are foreign to me. This is clearly necessary. But the problem here is that such a principle, while supporting the individual’s consent to leave the other alone, does not, in itself, provide a positive desire to cooperate and bond with the other, let alone to help and learn from her. Tolerance, if it is merely born from a reciprocally self-interested will to be left alone, is not compassion. It does not involve the heart.⁸ Hence, it is not clear whence the “state-supporting” (*staatstragendes*) ethos may reliably come. We are back to the start: the liberal state needs a degree of voluntary moral bonding that it cannot generate.⁹

⁸There is a peculiar “Continental” (as opposed to Anglo-American) way in which Böckenförde, unlike Tocqueville poses the problem. Rather than beginning with individuals in society, he begins with “the state”. The problem then becomes how *the state* can contribute to creating moral citizens. By contrast, in Tocqueville we begin with the social individual and the notion that humans cannot long ignore the fact of their mortality. This individual, aware of their “sickness unto death” and the impossibility of rising above that fatal condition through rational knowledge is inherently inclined to seek moral and spiritual counsel and to develop forms of moral and spiritual cultivation *before* the state ever gets to worry about society’s cohesion. In Böckenförde, by contrast, the problem is from the first framed as a problem of social order: “the state” needs to recruit moral citizens.

⁹„Der Staat ist darauf angewiesen, dass die Bürger gewisse Grundeinstellungen, ein staatstragendes Ethos haben, sonst hat er es schwer, eine am Gemeinwohl orientierte Politik zu verwirklichen. Wenn alle seine Ziele nur mit Zwang durchgesetzt werden müssten, wäre der Staat bald kein freier Staat mehr“ (Böckenförde, 2009).

Conservative and Liberal Readings of the “Dictum”

The sense of the limited power of procedural norms of constitutionally guaranteed rights and liberty has given rise, in some quarters, to a call—sometimes in reference to Böckenförde—for a “guiding culture” (in Germany, a *Leitkultur*) that, it is argued, should recognize and give a privileged role to those particular moral forces that have historically carried much of the burden of moral integration in a given place and geography. For Europe in general and Germany in particular, this would be represented by the religions of Judeo-Christian heritage. Representatives of this view have, thus, argued (to give one example) for the constitutionality of displaying the Christian cross in public schoolrooms. Some have, on similar grounds, called for a ban to the Hijab, the female head covering that is part of Islamic belief and culture considered to be foreign to the guiding culture (see Gordon, 2013).

But such a narrow, traditionalist reading of the idea of countervailing forces is not required by Tocqueville nor Böckenförde. Jürgen Habermas, for example, rejects the idea of a *Leitkultur* in terms that indicate his embracing of the Böckenförde dictum:

[T]he democratic state should not overhastily reduce the polyphonic complexity of the range of public voices, for it cannot be sure whether in doing so it would not cut society off from scarce resources for generating meanings and shaping identities. Especially regarding vulnerable domains of social life, religious traditions have the power to provide convincing articulations of moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions. (Habermas, 2009, in Gordon, 2013, p. 192)

Böckenförde’s dictum is explicitly invoked by Habermas in his historical exchange with then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (the later Pope Benedict XVI) at the outset of his statement on the “pre-political moral foundations of the liberal state” in January 2004.¹⁰ Habermas agrees that the liberal state requires a political integration of citizens that goes beyond a mere *modus vivendi* (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2018, p. 34). Habermas argues that it’s not necessary to decide whether the secular state is, *in principle*, incapable to generate the solidaristic value-based bonding that is required for its peaceful operation. It is, he suggests, in any case evident that our historical-empirical condition, where expansionist markets and large, rational-administrative states are marginalizing value-based action, pre-political moral forces, including religious ones, can and should be allowed to play a cohesion-strengthening role: “markets and administrative powers are increasingly crowding out societal solidarity—understood as coordination of action by way of values, norms and communicative action—of ever more domains of the lifeworld” (Habermas, in Habermas & Ratzinger, 2018, p. 32).

¹⁰ Following an invitation by the Catholic Academy of Bavaria (Germany), the “philosopher and the pope” famously engaged in a discussion on the “pre-political moral foundations of the liberal state” in January 2004. In their respective statements, both writers agree that “reason” and “religiously founded faith” (Vernunft und Glaube) can beneficially interact, enrich, and check and balance each other.

Under such conditions, religiously motivated solidaristic action can play an important corrective and constructive role. Given this potentially constructive role of religion (and the simple fact that a significant number of citizens interpret their role in the community in religious terms) the secular citizen can legitimately be expected to practice (*einüben*) a self-reflexive awareness regarding the limits of enlightenment (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2018, p. 35).¹¹ Secularists can concede to religious conviction a status that is not simply irrational. (p. 35). Similarly, secular citizens cannot deny their religiously oriented co-citizen the right to couch their contributions to public debate in religious language (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2018, p. 36).¹²

The above discussion easily articulates with Tocqueville's notion of moral and spiritual countervailing forces. The ultimate conclusion is that government cannot be more moral than the citizens in their un-coerced voluntary inclinations. Here, we seem to return to the starting point: does a civil society that fosters materialistic success and the illusion of independence not inevitably corrode citizens' moral intuitions? Does it not inevitably lead from self-interest properly understood to self-interest *improperly* understood? From solidarity and compassion to egotism and indifference? In other words: if all that bonds us is a reciprocal will to be left alone in our myriad private ways, then nothing of much force would seem to bond us; community would seem fragile, and civility mere politesse.

Alasdair MacIntyre has expanded the scope of reflection on this condition:

[U]nless there is a telos which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will both be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life and that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately. (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 203)

Reaching past the tradition of organized religion that figures so prominently in Tocquevillian and post-Tocquevillian thought on countervailing forces, MacIntyre suggests that we tap *Aristotelian ethics* as a source of countervailing moral development. His "After Virtue" (1981) has become the springboard for a renewal of interest in the virtue ethics around the central thesis "that the Aristotelian moral tradition is the best example we possess of a tradition whose adherents are rationally entitled to a high measure of confidence in its epistemological and moral resources"

¹¹ As Gordon (2013) notes, Habermas' embracing of Böckenförde's dictum, implies a noticeable distancing from Habermas' earlier view that posited that "an ambivalent modern age will stabilize itself exclusively on the basis of the secular forces of a communicative reason." (Habermas, in Habermas & Ratzinger, 2018, p. 38).

¹² Ratzinger, in his parallel statement, suggests that there are pathologies of organized religion that benefit from the checks and balances of secular reason (for example the experience of religiously motivated terror). Likewise, there are also pathologies of reason (the hubris that deems everything doable worth doing, including the building of nuclear bombs or the artificial cloning of human beings) that benefit from the checks and balances of religiously founded belief. Reason and religion are co-relationally called upon to engage in a "process of mutual cleansing and healing" ("Korrelationalität von Vernunft und Glaube, Vernunft und Religion, die zu gegenseitiger Reinigung und Heilung berufen sind") (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2018, p. 57).

(MacIntyre, 1981, p. 277). He also reminds us that virtues are not merely about external conduct:

“Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 149).

The above discussions of the moral and religious supports of democratic civility, point not only to the societal and external but also to the social-psychological and internal roots of the fragility of the civil society. We can learn from them that our thinking about the civil society is often hampered by an externalist focus, a perspective that sees civility only as a problem of external order and neglects the necessary inner dimension of civility. This line of thought suggests a richer sense of civility that comprises external and internal dimensions. In fact, I believe that the question of civility as an *embodied virtue* holds the key to some of the most pressing problems of the civility—incivility dialectic we face today. To heed the lessons this holds requires that we move past a conception of civility as mere outer non-violence and reflect seriously on how peace becomes *embodied* and obtains a foothold in the human heart.¹³

Arresting the Slide to Incivility: Recovering the Politics of the Mean

To conclude, I'll submit that the civil society is an institutional artifice erected over three fault-lines. The first two of these have long been recognized and discussed in the work of classic social theorists. These are

- the *socio-economic fault-line* demarcated by untamed markets on one end and various forms of coercive collectivism on the other;
- the *political fault-line* of an iron cage bureaucracy on one end, and of oligarchic despotism on the other.
- The less well reflected *moral fault line* of untrammelled individualism on end and of moral and religious fundamentalism on the other.¹⁴

For politics to steer a course through this landscape of rocks and hard places remains perhaps the key governance challenge our time, rivaled only by the ecological sustainability challenge. Both of these would seem to have all the ease of keeping a tractor trailer on a tightrope. But difficult or not: civil society politics would seem to be best understood as the politics of moderation, a mean between extremes, cultivating the center around tamed markets by means of social democracy, civil-minded

¹³For one interpretation of an emerging confluence of relevant ideas and their compatibility with early Greek thought see Chap. 14 by Meyer.

¹⁴An important exception is Jonathan Haidt's extraordinary "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided" by Politics and Religion. New York: Vintage, 2012.

self-organization, and facilitative of moral toleration, inclusion, and flourishing. Above all, they must be the politics of non-violence.

But here it is worth pointing to a new development, something that might assist in a renewed effort to cultivate the mean between extremes:

One result of the rapid cultural globalization going on before our eyes has large numbers of people in the West now encountering traditions of moral cultivation that, while not original to Western culture, are compatible with longstanding Western predilections for rational-secular forms of moral thinking, a reality not available to writers of Tocqueville's time. This, the West's intellectual and social opening to non-theistic moral practices and traditions, notably those of Confucianism and Buddhism, may offer what Kahan called "alternative forms of spirituality" and moral cultivation. "Twenty-first century democracies may find alternative forms of spirituality useful as well—as Tocqueville did—and they may well take forms unfamiliar to Tocqueville" (Kahan, 2015, p. 211). This may prove significant. For whereas Western democracies have a good deal of experience with centrist politics of moderation regarding the socio-economic and political fault lines (especially in the form of European social democracy and American limited government), the cultivation of moral and spiritual community that is safe from tipping into religious fundamentalism is much less developed.

I began this essay by considering the civil society's inherent fragility—a fragility that can result from some of its very successes, some of which foster material well-being, but also encourage individualistic withdrawal, breed the illusion of independence and hold moral and spiritual cultivation to be the optional pursuits of private citizens. These changes may not only give rise to dramatic gaps in wealth and income among classes. They also readily start a slide down the slippery slope of callous indifference to one's fellow citizen and, ultimately, open the space in which distrust, suspicion, incivility and the longing for benign despots grows. To check these tendencies, the remedies that have traditionally been proposed are necessary but not sufficient. Rather, there seems reason to take seriously the idea of the cultivation of moral and spiritual forces as a necessary, but independent countervailing factor that take us out of the narrow orbit of our mundane concern for material well-being and keep alive the care for our better angels.

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