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Book Review

Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea (Second Edition), by John R. Ehrenberg, 2017, NYU Press: New York, 352 pp.

There was euphoria especially among liberal intellectuals following the collapse of European Communism in the early 1990s. However, after more than two and a half decades, the imagined civilisation based on democratic values they had hoped would dawn did not materialise; the fact is the world continues to be marked by issues of economic inequality, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, global warming and political apathy.

It is quite obvious that there is much to be done in academic circles in providing better tools (theory and concept) to understand the world setting we are currently in. It appears that conventional social science ideas such as the state and civil society should be revisited if the staying power of the three separate categories (state, market and society) are to remain forceful.

It is against these backdrop that John Ehrenberg wrote his book titled "Civil Society: The History of an Idea", published by New York University Press in 2017 (second edition).

Consistent with the first edition, he continues to argue on the importance of the state in taming the wild nature of the market that civil society is too weak to challenge, let alone stop the corrosiveness of the market.

The book is divided into three broad sections, in eight chapters, excluding introduction and conclusion. Surveying two and a half millennia of the idea of civil society, the author categorised the development of the idea into the three broad categories: The Origins of Civil Society, Civil Society and Modernity, and Civil Society in Contemporary Life. He observed that the last 35 years have witnessed historic levels of economic inequality, relentless attacks on the regulatory and redistributive functions of all levels of government, and that "civil society" has moved to the centre of democratic theory and political discourse.

The main argument of the book is that the current logic of civil society which is influenced by the paradigm of Antistatism popularised by Tocqueville and Hegel-Marxism should be opened to criticism. A new approach should be developed and that the classical and modern ideas of civil society re-examined. He argued that current studies on democracy and civil society have not gone far enough as they are too obsessed with the logic of the Tocquevillian and Hegel-Marxist approach. Ehrenberg believed that the inadequacy of both paradigms is reflected in the contemporary conundrum of economic inequality, the failure of the state to play its regulatory function and the dominance of the middle class in public debates.

This highlights the debates in Chapter 1 to 4 whereby the author urges

earlier concepts of civil society be reconsidered if the emancipatory potential of the concept is to be fully realised. The other chapters are reviewed to reinforce this core argument. A table is presented in this review to give a clear snapshot of the argument.

The table below reflects the main political thinkers and their main idea of civil society.

Table 1: Eras, thinkers and their main idea of civil society

Era	Thinker	Idea
Politically Organized Commonwealth (year)	Plato	Organic State and Division of Labour
	Aristotle	Deliberative Polity
	Cicero	Republicanism
Christian Commonwealth	Augustine	Empire Existed to Protect the Church
	Thomas Aquinas	Christian Republicanism
Transition	Machiavelli	Civic Republic
	Martin Luther	Sphere of Obligation
	Thomas Hobbes	Single Point of Sovereign Power
Economics and Morality	John Locke	Politically Protected Sphere of Individual Rights and Property
	Adam Ferguson	Locating Innate Moral Sociability
	Adam Smith	Unrestrained Pursuit of Advantage and Moral Development

Source: Compilation from Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4, (Civil Society: A History of an Idea)

To explain the three main ideas of civil society in the Era of Politically Organized Commonwealth, Ehrenberg orchestrated in Chapter 1, the Greek Thinker, Plato attempted to unify dissimilar elements of human natural endowment under the organic state in which civil society is possible through division of labour. The second idea was devised by Aristotle in which civil society was founded on respect for the different spheres and multiple associations through the logic of deliberative polity.

As for the third idea, Ehrenberg argued that the Roman project of civil society followed Cicero‘s concept of legally protected spheres under the banner of Republicanism. Ehrenberg expected that although demonstrating archaic idea, its emancipatory potential should be sufficiently explored.

Ehrenberg also looked at divinity and religion. In Chapter 2 Ehrenberg

highlights Augustine's stern critique of classicism and prideful striving for self-reliance in which Augustine argues that the reliance on God should be the way forward for civilisations. Augustine's argument essentially rejects the Greek and Roman's secular concept of civil society. Ehrenberg stresses that Augustine believed that in order to achieve civil society there is a need for the Christian empire to protect the church through his doctrine of just war.

In the same chapter, Ehrenberg highlights Aquinas' idea of civil society, where he adopted Aristotle's concept of deliberative polity and merged it with the logic of Republicanism that was within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.

The fact that Ehrenberg discussed in detail the contribution of Christian thinkers suggests an attempt to revise contemporary usage of the concept of civil society as a means to bring together intellectuals from different traditions, such as Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Given this, a civil society concept such as Farabian and Ghazalian should also merit our attention.

In Chapter 3, Ehrenberg traces three early traditions of civil society through the lenses of Niccolo Machiavelli, Martin Luther and Thomas Hobbes. Machiavelli's classics, "The Prince" and "The Discourses on Livy", explain how a society can be organised and Ehrenberg concurs with Machiavelli that conflict and stability can be coexist under civic republicanism. Martin Luther's idea of civil society explained in the same chapter is based on the discovery of the individual through the work of Reformation within Christianity.

As Luther drives the conscience inward, Ehrenberg discusses how civil society could be organised independent of Rome's central control under the concept of individual state, through the princes' power of the theory of divine rights.

The wars in Europe between the 16th and 17th century, particularly the civil war in England, led to Hobbes theorising civil society as a space for security under a single point of sovereign power, which is a concept of absolutism, in which many analysts later believed to be the prescription for countries in the Middle East.

It should be noted that in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, Ehrenberg discusses on the importance of the state as the sole institution for civilisation without any mention of market or property rights. This is consistent with most thinkers who see them as subordinate. In fact, there were no clear demarcation or separate categories between what was state and society in that era. Regardless of whether the source of state authority was through secular or religious notion, state and society were understood as inseparable under the concept of polity. However, as noted by Ehrenberg, beginning from the 17th century, the concept of market gradually developed. Although the thinkers

in this period, such as John Locke, Adam Ferguson, or even Adam Smith, acknowledged the emancipatory potential of the market for human liberty, individual freedom and economic growth, none of their works suggest that they had departed from the usefulness of the concept of state in their project of civil society.

In Chapter 4, Ehrenberg highlights Locke's view that a civil society based on the right to property, production, and acquisition requires a law-governed state to preserve order and protect liberty. Regarding the problems that might have been created by the market, such as the inability of the lower class to compete, Adam Ferguson together with Adam Smith understood the need for civil society to embrace an innate ethical quality in its heart.

While it was true, argued Ehrenberg, that Smith articulated the first distinctively bourgeois sense that civil society is a market-organised sphere of production and competition driven by the private strivings of self-interested proprietors, he still believed in the importance of the role of state in human development.

The table above represents a review of the first and second tradition of civil society, in which the former is centred on the idea of the role of the state, while the latter appreciates the emancipatory potential of the market for human civilisation discussed thus far. Ehrenberg's central idea of civil society which is a state focused under the first tradition (classical and medieval) is obvious, that is, civil society made civilisation possible because people lived in law-governed countries protected by the coercive power of the state. This is regardless if they are living under politically organised commonwealths, in which the source of authority is either rationality or under Christian commonwealth, in which the source of authority of the state is divinity.

Ehrenberg believes there is a need for the state in a contemporary society to play a bigger role in solving problems such as concentration of the wealth in a few hands; this is because he believes that civil society organisations are just unable to overcome the tyrannical nature of the market. By reappreciating classical and medieval ideas of civil society, in which the role of the state is very pertinent, he believes that some of the problems can be potentially solved. How then, is the second tradition of civil society which understood society as a civilisation made possible by production, individual interest, competition, and need, can be useful for current usage, since the emphasis on the emancipatory potential of the market is very obvious?

This, according to Ehrenberg, elicited different responses from different thinkers. The first group of thinkers stated that it offers unprecedented opportunities for freedom in a secular world of commerce, science, culture, and liberty. Whereas the other group believe that civil society's disorder, inequality, and conflict falsified its emancipatory potential and required a measure of public or state supervision.

The current ideas of civil society, as mentioned previously, is largely influenced by two main ideas of third tradition of civil society, Hegel-Marxism of intermediate organisation based on liberty and the Tocquevillian idea of limiting the power of central institutions (Antistatism), which Ehrenberg discusses in Chapters 5 and 6.

The current theorisation of the three ethical moments: family, civil society, and state was the intellectual product of Hegel. He believed that through competition and rivalry among civil societies, the state can play a neutral role to coordinate the emancipatory potential of civil society. Contrary to Hegel, Marx postulates that the civil society was the problem that had to be overcome; hence the reason he rejected the Hegel project. Ehrenberg explained that Marx's conclusion that the state could not be conceptualised apart from economic processes drove him to a theory of social revolution, which places the proletariat at the centre of socialist politics and looked at a transformed state to take the lead in democratising civil society.

Observing two polar opposites of society, the French politics of a powerful state and centralising monarchs, and on the other, is Tocqueville's experience of American democratic politics and voluntary associations. Ehrenberg, in Chapter 6, illustrates how Tocqueville developed the concept of Antistatism through his understanding of American localism and informal norms of voluntary association, and how this concept could limit the thrust of the democratic state in conditions of economic equality and political freedom.

We see two strands of thoughts on democratic theory of civil society. First, the liberalists, who examined potentials of civil society in democratising the state. Then we have the Marxists, who began the search for the state to democratise civil society. These are some of the observations made by Ehrenberg towards the end of his book. In his attempt to explain how the concept of Antistatism and intermediate organisations had been operationalized, Ehrenberg uses the case study in Chapter 7 on civil society movements, exploring Adam Michnik's work that led to the collapse of European Communism, while in the case of US, an explanation on many attempts by scholars, especially Hannah Arendt, to democratise the commodified sphere of capitalistic society.

Undoubtedly, analyses in both case studies of on communism and capitalism were informative and interesting, but perhaps it is essential to provide similar analyses in the case of Latin America under one specific chapter, knowing that the phenomenon of democratisation and civil society movements happened more or less in the same time span.

Ehrenberg's own review of series on global current events alerted him of the fact that the concepts of civil society is a badly under-theorised because it cannot take into account the most important development of contemporary

life, especially the heightened level of economic inequality, the unstoppable nuclear proliferation, global warming and social disengagement, as mentioned in the outset. It appears for him that in order to make civil society play a role in contemporary democratic theory, it needs to be reconceptualised by reviving the classical and modern era of civil society. Through such project, he believes that the concept of civil society can be made appropriate to the concrete conditions of the real world.

Thus, he urges readers to appreciate the emancipatory potentials of civil society, from the early period of Plato's idea on organic state and division of labour to the latest modernity era of Adam Smith's unrestrained pursuit of advantage and moral development (as shown in the Table). Therefore, different traditions of civil society, be it from the Islamic traditions such as Farabian and Ghazalian, or other Eastern traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism or Confucianism should be acknowledged together with the ones developed during the classical and modern era. The strength of the book lies on the detailed explanations on how the idea of civil society evolved and how politics, history and theory influenced the dynamics of the term. Therefore, by reading this book, readers are not only informed as to how in the span of two and a half millennia, the concept has evolved, but also how the history of politics and its theories concomitantly developed, and how the cross-fertilisation of knowledge between and among traditions in those periods happened, which marked different trajectories on the history of civil society.

The Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park, Singapore has not been the same since 2013. It is marked now as a gathering place for civil society movements. The protest at the site, on 16th February 2013, was Singapore's largest since its independence in 1965.

The protest was in response to the government's Population White Paper (PWP). Based on economic data and analysis, the PWP proposes that Singapore's population to be between 6.5-6.9 million by 2030. The paper also highlights changes in careers and lifestyles that Singaporeans must come to terms with given the demographic changes.

Singaporeans main grievances with the PWP was the government's justification to bring in foreign workers to sustain its competitive economy. The PWP explains that around 30,000 new permanent residents as well as 25,000 naturalised citizens are needed every year to support the country's falling birth rates. The findings upset Singaporeans especially at a time when they were having a tough time holding on to their jobs amid a growing number of foreign workers in the island city state.

Singaporean scholars view the public protest at Hong Lim as "the new normal", one that was very much in keeping with the winds of change sweeping Singapore's politics since the country's general election in 2011. Scholars spoke of a new normal, one where civil society, which for so long has been kept relatively latent, would be the third pillar that provides for a

new deliberative democracy. They see the Hong Lim's protest as a new turning point in Singapore politics as for decades, the term civil society had been a taboo. In Singapore, civic society is widely preferred than the term civil society as the former connotes a more agreeable or less combative relationship between voluntary associations and the state, one where the latter expects voluntary associations to play a supporting or junior role in articulating or influencing public policy.

The above issues are extensively discussed in Civil Society and the state in Singapore, co-edited by Carol Soon and Gillian Koh. Published in 2017, the book has 18 contributors and contains 12 chapters, based on three themes: "Philosophies and Approaches", "Change Agents", and "The Future of Civil Society". The book provides fresh insights and updates of the Singaporean civil society and its response to a changing Singaporean polity that has, according to many scholars and observers, been subjected to authoritarian rule.

Contributors discuss civil society along three well-acknowledged perspectives: liberalism, communitarianism and Hegelian perspective. The chapters also see the authors, emphasizing to varying degrees, the two main approaches of civil society: social capital and conflict.

The first three chapters of the book discuss major approaches and philosophies behind civil society. Kwok Kian-Woon, for instance, offers an alternative view of the nature of civil society in Singapore. He attempts to do so by applying the social capital approach, one that emphasises on trust, solidarity and nation-building and the need to enrich existing networks. In his attempt to "throw some light on the workings of civil society in Singapore", Kwok discusses six concepts: nation and civil society, idealism and ideology, civility and conflict, liberal individualism and communitarianism, moral pluralism and public reasoning, and moral reasoning and social inclusion. After discussing these concepts in detail, Kwok offers a new perspective of civil society in Singapore, calling it conflictual consensus that attempts to merge the concept of social capital and conflict.

Faizah Jamal's 'Engagement in Environmental Activism' extends Kwok's discussion on civil society's perspective by attempting to address the confrontational – collaboration continuum of social capital. Sharing her own experience in environment management, Faizah argues that the key to negotiate the confrontational –collaboration issues and to engage the state requires three conditions – relationship, evidence and "languaging". She draws such an engagement code from the interaction she had with the state when dealing with four environmental issues concerning Lower Pierce Reservoir, Chek Jawa, Bukit Brown and the "Green Conversation". Faizah's approach to engaging the state is similar to the one proposed by Alvin Tan in the next chapter. In describing the new approach to engagement, Alvin

highlights the importance of collaboration. He proposes the need for civil society to collaborate in five ways to deal with new diversities and that include collaboration with the audience through the techniques of participatory theatre, gradual movement towards collaboration with the state, collaboration within civil society, collaboration with agencies and corporations and collaboration across cultures. Alvin's proposals provide a fresh way of dealing with the changing dynamics of Singaporean society where there is now the need for state and civil society to recalibrate traditional approaches of managing issues given Singapore's increasing diversity. The discussions in this section confirmed the Tocquevillean" nature of Singapore civil societies which emphasises networking and reciprocity.

The second section of the book (Change Agents) describes how civil society work in Singapore from multiple perspectives - liberalism, communitarian, Hegelian, or a combination of them) work in Singapore. Centring his discussion on liberalism, Walter Woon describes how new developments such as immigration, technology and education will influence the dynamics of Singapore's civil society. He emphasizes that the changing demographic as a result of Singapore's liberal naturalisation policy has brought new challenges that require new civil society arrangement.

Using the metaphor of the *banyan tree* or *tembusu* tree to describe the authoritarian nature of the state in mind, Carol Soon combines both communitarian and liberal tradition to explain how social media has helped activists in Singapore bypass traditional regulations that govern civil society movements. Though technology has helped redefine collective action and civil society, Carol explains that technology should not alter the way conflict is resolved. Regardless of advances in technology, conflict resolution remains the same, which according to her, is still based on public discourse and rational dialogue with or without technology. Chapter 6 focusses on the role of different types of civil society in integrating immigrants. This is of special relevance to the island state given the rapid growth of its population due to migration. The state faces challenges in integrating the migrant population in the larger society, an issue that triggered the protest at Hong Lim Park in 2013. The role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in integrating the migrant population remains a challenge not only because of the varied profile of migrant workers but also because of local involvement "in the activities of service-oriented and advocacy-oriented organisations related to migrants" remains low.

Given this scenario, what will the future civil society of Singapore look like? The third and final section of the book describes how its contributors see the future of civil society in Singapore.

Adopting the communitarian perspective, in particular that of Michael Sandels, Ang Bee Lian describes Singapore's "Many Helping Hands" as the

need to cultivate close relationship between the state, the voluntary welfare organisations (VWO) and citizens to deliver services more effectively. This chapter adopted the social capital perspective, as well as the communitarian model of service provision and nation-building. In the following chapter, Corinna Lim and Michelle Ng combine both social capital and conflict approaches to champion social issues such as domestic violence arguing that a lot of sustainable and innovative ways can be adopted to enhance future civil society. Sharon Siddique's discussion on ethnic based civil society in Singapore describes Singapore's continuing challenge to establish ethnic-based civil society and the need to preserve Singapore's multicultural paradigm. She argues for the continuation of multiracial self-help groups which prevents the domination of one ethnic group over the other. Using the Hegelian approach, Siddique demonstrates the need for the state to take a neutral stance to allow for the continuation of ethnic-based civil societies. The challenge now is for the state to move beyond the ethnic based civil societies that have so characterised Singapore's multiculturalism to now include the new migrants. Siddique concludes the ethnic-based civil society model "can no longer contain the complexities of Singapore's desire to become a global city." The ensuing chapters depict the challenge for civil society to cater to the increasing complexity of the Singaporean society. Kenneth Paul Tan employed the Habermasian perspective in describing the need for government to learn quickly and respond to alternative voices. He adopted the public deliberation approach, popularised by Jurgen Habermas, to explain the importance of education and required skills to deliver such deliberation for a better Singapore. Healthy democracy, he says, would mean the need to have more social capital and this requires participation from the people, as well as ensuring that civil education and encouraging deliberative democracy. To make sure that volunteerism in youth movements in Singapore is truly self-directed and therefore sustainable, Tong Yee and Tay Ek Kiat in Chapter 11 discuss on the aspect of self-discovery and self-worth in improving effective service for youth activism in Singapore. The authors stress on the importance of social capital, stressing its communitarian and liberal approaches. In the final chapter, Kelvin YL Tan proposes the pruning of the *banyan* or *tembusu* tree, proposing the need for a new kind of legislative framework for a more active civil society in Singapore. He is not, however, overly sanguine on the state's ability to entertain such changes. Rather, he hopes that the state will be able to react quickly in dealing with unstoppable alternative voices in society.

To sum up, the book provides a good depiction of the issues surrounding civil society in Singapore. It is a bold move, a first in trying to bring the different issues of civil society in Singapore out in the open especially at a time when Singapore is facing increasing diversity. Though there have been attempts, especially by Kenneth Tan, to move away from a social capital

discourse in explaining civil society in Singapore, it can be summed up the contributors have struggled to move beyond the "Tocquevillian" argument of civil society.

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