

INTRODUCTION

Any book praising civility is likely to encounter this sort of criticism:

There is something peculiarly unsatisfying about cases with which no decent-minded reader could disagree . . . [speaking] up for trust, loyalty, teamwork, dialogue, pluralism, an acceptance of difference and a sensitivity to others . . . is not the most world-shaking of moral standpoints. It is hard to see it competing with Machiavelli's *The Prince* or Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* for sheer shock value. Not many works loudly proclaim the virtues of suspicion, disloyalty, uniformity and rampant egoism.¹

Such criticism can be justified, but it does not apply to this book. A touch of aggression on this point serves the interests of clarity. Civility is not sugary froth but an ideal of visceral importance. Clear claims can be made about it. For one thing, it is possible to specify a condition that is poorly understood, to explain both why it is desirable and why alternatives to it tend to be repulsive. Differently put, analysis of civility will allow us to properly appreciate our better

¹ T. Eagleton, "On Meaning Well," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 10, 2012.

selves, thereby setting up a prescriptive ideal toward which we should aim. For another, “importance” has sociological as well as moral content: civil behavior has powerful and measurable consequences on identity, and these lie behind social decencies. This too can be put differently—by insisting that the normative thrust of the argument is neither vapid nor effete but wholly practical. This is not to say that the ideal is always embraced. Some are misled by the attractions of alternatives; others exhibit sheer folly, often as the result of the love of power. All of this is to say that the analysis here is hard rather than sloppy, as is neatly demonstrated by the praise it bestows on *The Prince*.

The simplest of observations can get us under way: human beings are endlessly imaginative and endlessly silly, with life being at once totally marvelous and utterly absurd. One response to this diversity of condition is the call for civility. An initial reason for the respect it shows toward the varied desires and goals of humanity lies in the realization that it is well-nigh impossible and certainly dangerous to impose any complete set of moral standards in modern circumstances. This does *not* entail absolute denial of all universal moral standards. How could it given that the ideal of civility considers the agreement to differ to have universal status? But a mild relativism does lie at the back of the ideal, an insistence that *few* rules of morality are really grounded. Civility accordingly has an ironic flavor that distinguishes it from those versions of liberalism that insist on severe uniformity, and this despite considerable overlap in philosophical assumptions. The fact that manners, polish, self-command, and calm are then properly seen as elements within

civility might suggest an endorsement of the cold and distant behavior of an English butler, not least given the portrayal by Anthony Hopkins of one such figure in the film version of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*. It would be a mistake to make such a link. Remember the last of George Washington's "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation": "Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience." Jane Austen makes a similar point:

Mr Elliot was rational, discreet, polished, but he was not open. There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others. This, to Anne, was a decided imperfection.... She prized the frank, the open-hearted, the eager character beyond all others. Warmth and enthusiasm did captivate her still. She felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped.

Mr Elliot was too generally agreeable.²

Civility does not stand in the way of truth and moral development but is rather a precondition for them. Nor is it the case that civility is tied in some essentialist way to the class-bound eighteenth-century world in which it first reached something of an apogee. On the contrary, civility

² J. Austen, *Persuasion* ([1818] New York: Random House, 1984), 116.

is important because it allows disagreement to take place without violence and regularizes conflict so that it can be productive.

But civility is not—or, rather, not just—a “sour grapes” philosophy arguing the negative case that we must put up with a rather undesirable situation since no better way forward can be detected. There is everything to be said in this context for remembering a dictum of Oscar Wilde: “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”³ Respect for privacy is called for so that there will be room for human beings to experiment with their lives, to try on different masks so that they can, with luck and perseverance, develop their own selves and take responsibility for them. This is a wholly positive case for individuation, made with unrivaled power by Wilde’s superb “The Soul of Man under Socialism.”⁴ And there can be enjoyment as well as despair when observing the antics of mankind. Indeed, such antics can be valued as sources of innovation, the seeds from which social development might spring.

This initial characterization should be taken merely as an orienting device for all that follows. A good deal of light will be cast on the nature of civility by describing the concerns of its enemies, by those who respond to diversity in different ways. But it would be irritating to have too much of an im-

³ O. Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in *Oscar Wilde: The Major Works* ([1891] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 282.

⁴ O. Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” in *De Profundis and Other Writings* ([1891] London: Penguin, 1973).

manent critique, presuming that the character of civility can be established merely by specifying its antitheses. So it is worth emphasizing that the intent is to offer a positive specification of civility; this explains the ordering—positive before negative—of the two parts of this book. But before turning to the general argument, three preliminary points must be made so as to highlight the character of the treatment of civility offered here.

Naturally enough, many wonder about the state of civility in contemporary circumstances. The intolerance of current political debate has led some to note a decline in civility, together with calls for its revival.⁵ In contrast, a superb ethnography has suggested that civil practices are arising in a wholly unplanned manner in the United States, in arenas where African Americans confront the public sphere.⁶ Sociologists have added to this the interesting discovery that incivility in public places is far from being the preserve of lower social strata, however defined.⁷ Such studies matter a great deal, and comments in these areas will be made. But this book goes beyond measuring the state of play of civility to confront something more basic, at least in the eyes of the author, a European all too aware of the historical record. The best way to underline my first preliminary point is to note that Norbert Elias's celebrated claim that there is a civi-

⁵ S. L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

⁶ E. Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

⁷ P. Smith, T. L. Phillips, and R. D. King, *Incivility: The Rude Stranger in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

lizing process is wholly wrong.⁸ For Elias's book was published in 1939, only to be followed in the next six years in Europe and in Asia by war, ethnic cleansing, and mass murder. So the first appearance of civil society was followed by savagery, which makes it necessary to analyze an initial creation and then to examine a later reconstruction—in light of an understanding of the forces that opposed it. Accordingly, civility is not something cast in stone, not the necessary unfolding of the logic of social evolution; rather, it comes and goes in waves and needs care and attention if it is to be maintained. It is necessary to struggle to establish decency in political life, and that condition cannot be secured without continual effort. This seems to me such a basic matter that it explains why this book pays so much attention to the vagaries of European history. Of course, the horrors of the historical record do not make the ideal of civility any less desirable; after all, one can value what is fragile. But it does suggest modesty, above all, recognition of the certain fact that civility does not warm the blood like wine.⁹ Bluntly,

⁸ N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969 and 1982). This point has been forcefully made by S. Malešević and K. Ryan, "The Disfigured Ontology of Figurational Sociology: Norbert Elias and the Question of Violence," *Critical Sociology* 38 (2012). The authors note the steady increase in deaths from organized violence over time (7.8 million for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but 19 million for the nineteenth century and 111 million for the twentieth century), and add to this the disconcerting fact that the educated have played a major role in the perpetuation of horror. On this later point, see M. Lange, *Educations in Ethnic Violence: Identity, Educational Bubbles, and Resource Mobilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁹ J. M. Cuddihy describes civility in these terms: "It is not the warm, dense closeness of 'real' solidarity. It is 'formal' solidarity. In a regime of civility, everybody doesn't love everybody. Everybody doesn't even respect everybody. Everybody 'shows respect for' everybody. Social equality, like legal equality, is 'formal,' not

civility stands opposed to romanticism. If this limits its general emotional appeal, it most certainly increases its merits in my eyes.

This first point leads directly to the second. Analyses of civility have told us a great deal about “microbehavior,” from associational life to the character of relations in public, and this approach will be extended in the rest of this book. Nonetheless, the life chances of civility have very often depended on “macroforces.” A comment must be made immediately about nationalism. In a fundamental sense nationalism stands opposed to the very base of civility: it seeks unity, in contrast to civility’s desire to manage diversity.¹⁰ But nationalism is a labile force that can take different forms. Absolute correspondence between state and nation may not be a universal requirement if arrangements can be made for several nations to live under the same political roof. So questions about civility matter enormously within the theory and practice of nationalism. And attention does not focus solely on nationalism but rather on the macroforces with which it interacts—above all, war, capitalism, and revolution.

‘real.’ In public, everyone is thus equal; yet, one may be private in public, and keep one’s ‘real’ feelings to oneself, till one gets home. True, this is not ‘solidarity forever’; it is solidarity ad interim, for the time being.” *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 210. This is accurate, but I differ from this brilliant author, one of whose texts is discussed in chapter 4, in warmly embracing what he dislikes. It is worth noting further that J. Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) offers a warmer and more romantic view of civility, but one in which hope triumphs over experience, prescription over realistic sociology.

¹⁰ A. Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflicts: Shadows of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

It may be helpful to make a personal comment here. I write as a sociologist, believing that my discipline has gone through three stages. The first of these had at its center the seminal contributions of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber, the holy trinity of the sociologists. A second stage was essentially formalist, obsessed with the creation of concepts and methods at the expense of a sense of reality, with “grand theory” and “abstracted empiricism,” as the American social critic C. Wright Mills put it.¹¹ That period has by no means ended, but it now runs alongside a third period, led above all by comparative historical sociologists who are rethinking everything from nationalism to the nature of “society,” from gender to geopolitics, and from revolution to class. This book is firmly within this third period, and, indeed, seeks to add to it. Civility is important sociologically for the two reasons already mentioned. On the one hand, it adds an essential descriptive component that allows us to understand what it is about our societies that is desirable, thereby establishing a crucial prescriptive ideal. On the other hand, civil behavior has important consequences; softness changes the character of social action, thereby making the norm practicable—which is not to say that it is always recognized and adopted. And beyond this stands an expansion of the sociological canon. The three founding figures already mentioned were, in different senses, anticapitalist thinkers, as is made clear in *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*, the famous treatment of their thought by

¹¹ C. W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). This second period looks set to run forever, reinforced both by endless imports from Paris’s Left Bank and by the marvels of modern methodology.

Anthony Giddens.¹² But to consider modern social theory in this manner is akin to playing Hamlet without the prince. One needs to know why certain social theorists endorsed and admired capitalism—not least, it can be added, because the theorists in question were wholly and powerfully sociological in character—if one is to make sense of the response that resulted. This is one reason for devoting an entire chapter to Adam Smith, with reflections on several other thinkers designed to further expand the canon of sociology.

The third point concerns the general cultural context necessary for a proper understanding of the nature of civility. Without further ado, let it be said that there are three main currents, three main ideological options, within the modern world. To say that reality is a little more complex than any simple theory is immeasurably dull. Theories become powerful not from inclusion but from exclusion. Just as utilitarianism gained enormous power from saying that *only* pleasure and pain existed, so too is the claim here meant to be strong: there are three and *only* three ideological options available to us. Of course, elements of the three positions can and have been joined; equally, all have merit, though some may seem more attractive than others. One benefit of this trinitarian view is to make us skeptical of the imperialist claims of modern economics, so keen to stress the dominant position of economics within social science, not least as that discipline fails, as we shall see, to understand the most high-powered theory, that of Adam Smith,

¹² A. Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

within its own tradition. A still greater benefit is to understand the sentiments that lie at the back of alternatives to civility.

The first version comprises liberal politics, capitalist economic organization, and the modes of thought of rational science. Within this world there is, of course, great variation. For one thing, liberal politics may or may not be democratic; for another, capitalism may be more or less restrained by the polities within which it operates. But if we leave these important matters aside, some general points can be made. Crucially, this is *a* world, not *the* world: it is less the end of ideology than a very particular ideology. It is spare and limited, suggesting that there are benefits to not filling out the world completely. Above all, the respect for genuine knowledge entails a certain moral emptiness. It is at this point that civility makes its contribution by adding to such basic liberal ideas and practices its insistence on an agreement to differ within specified limits. Interestingly, the stance in question is clearly present in the eighteenth century in Montesquieu. Any human being can feel pain, he insisted, thereby ruling slavery out of court and suggesting a politics designed to minimize fear; beyond this, relativism rules, as in the relations between men and women—complex, variable, and often ridiculous for Montesquieu, and certainly not the proper subject of any universal edict.¹³

The second version can neatly be introduced by noting that its greatest thinker, Rousseau, began his career with a long attack on Montesquieu, who had rejected the tradition

¹³ J. Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

of civic virtue in favor of an acceptance of the complexities and confusions of the modern world. Rousseau was horrified by this attitude: moral complexity and division can only bring psychic discomfort. There is a certain oddity here. The apostle of individualism bases everything he says on the weakness of human beings, their need for social support—and, quite possibly, religious meaning as well. We cannot manage by ourselves, as unrestricted individualism will inevitably lead to chaos and unhappiness. These sentiments led Rousseau to admire Sparta, and he accordingly agreed with Xenophon that—to use the nice expression of Adam Ferguson—virtue should be the business of the state.¹⁴ This is the tradition of belonging. This theme gained enormous prominence after the eighteenth century, which is not surprising given the disruptive social changes brought about by the transformation to industrial society. Marx's thought, for example, stresses the need to remove splitting, to restore unity to mankind: an end to alienation means that human beings can again be seen as creators in many different spheres rather than dull specialists in one. There is, of course, a measure of confidence in the individual in Marx that is wholly lacking in Durkheim, who was so deeply influenced by Rousseau: the sociologist believed he had shown that individuals bereft of social support were prone to kill themselves.

The concern with belonging is at the back of much social theory. Communitarianism descends from the tradition of civic virtue rather than from the tradition of civil society. There is a “malaise” to modernity, as the Canadian social

¹⁴ A. Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 4th ed., rev. and corrected ([1773] Hants, UK: Farnborough, 1969), 267.

theorist Charles Taylor puts it, such that happiness can only be found through fraternity, through being embedded within a rich cultural tradition, very often of a nation and a religion.¹⁵ Understanding all this can also enable cognitive development within sociology, past the point at which it has for so long been stuck, by placing its central presuppositions within the larger cultural context.

The view of man in much of the first tradition, especially in Montesquieu and in the Scottish moralists, is naturalistic. Human beings are driven by passions of varied character, a view disliked by the second tradition, which sees us in more elevated terms, as spiritual beings. The third tradition, exemplified by Nietzsche and Freud, differs from both. It stresses the instinctual desire for domination. It has no time at all for the elevated moral tone of communitarianism, regarding this as a dreadful escape from truly knowing ourselves. But the naturalism it describes differs from that of the first tradition.¹⁶ The passions are seen, so to speak, in the

¹⁵ C. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991).

¹⁶ One way of making the point is to cite Hume's reaction to the philosophical discovery that little made sense in the world:

The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? And on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty.

light of Darwin. Smith's benign view of human behavior is one based on jealousy, of working hard to attain what others have. But there is also envy. When my neighbor has a Mercedes, which makes me feel inferior with my Honda Accord, one option is not to work harder but to steal out in the dead of night to scratch my neighbor's car. "He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly," muses Iago when hoping for the death of Cassio.¹⁷ Of course, envy is but a perverted element of the more general desire for power. And one should stress perversion. This third tradition makes much of the certain fact that our instincts are devious and half-hidden from us, placing rationality at something of a discount. But the crucial, deeply worrying contribution of this tradition remains its awareness that the exercise of power can be pleasurable.

It is easy to see how these elements can interact. Replacing the emptiness of the first option seems to have worked best when blood was joined to belonging. This combination

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (D. Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* [(1739 and 1740) London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985], 316; emphasis in original)

The ease, even self-satisfaction, of this position is miles away from the ruthless and haunted world of Nietzsche.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, act 5, scene 1.

of the two traditions proved to be terribly dangerous and all-too-attractive to a large number of intellectuals. Maynard Keynes realized this and sought to save the world of civility when it was faced with power systems blessed with ideological fervor.¹⁸ It is largely because of this that my own preference is for the first tradition, despite the cogent arguments of both of the other positions. In negative terms, one can insist that it is the least bad alternative. But a more positive eighteenth note is possible. We are or ought to be grown up. Down with the enthusiasm seeking warmth and unity! For Kantian reasons, let us be masters of our own souls!

The book has been carefully constructed. The first half offers a composite definition of civility, stressing both ideas and the structures that support them; the second half seeks illumination by turning to those who dislike civility, and who propose alternatives to it. Both parts move systematically from the micro- to the macrolevel. Naturally enough, the division between these two parts is not watertight; consideration of the endorsers often brings in comments about the opponents, and vice versa. For example, nationalism is considered from different angles in chapters 3, 4, and 10. Further, the emphasis is on analytic clarity rather than on chronology. So the creation and reconstruction of civility is analyzed in the first and third chapters, long before an account is offered in chapter 10 of its destruction in the middle of the last century.

Chapter 1 offers an account of the social origins of civility in the course of an argument distinguishing civility from

¹⁸ R. Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1983, 1992, 2000).

civil society—or, rather, insisting that civility must be included in the definition of civil society if that concept is to carry the weight placed upon it. Attention then turns in chapter 2 to the nature of capitalism by recalling in the simplest terms the sophisticated sociology of Adam Smith, so often ignored and so very far removed from contemporary economic theory. The claim of the chapter is simple: namely, that competitive consumption is a support to civility. Chapter 3 claims that the way states behave, in civil or authoritarian ways, affects our social identities, and in the process says something about the reconstruction of civility. It is here that the key sociological content of civility is spelled out. Chapter 4 recognizes that the rules of civility can vary, making them at times very hard to understand, let alone to accept. A contrast is drawn between the differential abilities of the European Union and the United States to “let in” immigrants so as to create one out of many—an area in which the contemporary United States far outperforms Europe. Chapter 5 considers the great contribution of Raymond Aron to the understanding of civil behavior between states. The second part of the book begins with three related chapters considering in turn the dangers of authenticity, the alienation of many modern intellectuals, and the excessive moral demands of communism—or, differently put, attention is given to an alternative generic ideal, an explanation of the agents who created it, and an analysis of its most important practical instantiation in a social world in which virtue most certainly became the business of the state.¹⁹ The final two

¹⁹ I am well aware that the other revolution of the twentieth century, fascism, was as much an enemy of civility; the fact that it is not considered here does not

chapters present a negative view of the state, thereby standing as counterpoint to the positive argument put forward in chapter 3. Chapter 9 shows how the state can undermine civility by destroying cooperative relations in society. The last chapter considers the toxic relations between empires, nations, and states in the period between 1875 and 1945 that brought disaster to the modern world. The conclusion considers two especially serious limitations to the tradition under analysis, but against these is set the marvelous growth of civility in the non-European world.

derive from any bias, more than it was, in comparison to communism, so short-lived and so militaristic.