Between grammar and style: Adam Smith and the moral geographies of civil society

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Abstract

The last three decades or so of scholarly debates over the concept of “civil society” have been preoccupied with taxonomical questions. What “counts” as “civil society,” and why? How do we identify, measure, and potentially foster the kinds of salutary associations that will help “make democracy work”? Do the market and for-profit organizations count? What about religious organizations or the family? Are quasi-political, state-sponsored institutions such as political parties, agencies, or trade’s unions better understood as part of civil society or as appendages of the state? These debates hinge on a kind of geographical imaginary that often portrays civil society as a physical “space,” “place,” or “location,” located somewhere “between” family and state or “outside” of the market.

I begin by considering how Adam Smith—one of the forerunners of contemporary discussions of civil society—conceived of the virtue of civility. As I demonstrate through a consideration of Smith’s comments on civility, the virtue of civility both resembles and differs from the virtue of justice in terms of its susceptibility to being articulated in general rules. Unlike the abstract rules that characterize justice, the practice of civility hinges on matters of finesse, savoir-faire, discernment, or taste that can’t be fully captured as formal rules. Civility is, in Smith’s terms, more akin to informal matters of “style” than to the rule-bound quality of “justice.”

This examination of Smith’s account of civility has significance for broader conceptual debates about civility by interrogating structural or geographical conceptions of civil society and suggesting instead that civil society is best understood in terms of its essential informality. Civil society is composed of human relationships that are neither as close and intimate as those of the family, with its emphasis on charity and magnanimity, nor as formal as those governed by the distant, abstract rules of citizenship and market economy. Rather, civil society—as I argue here—is constituted by a qualitatively distinct mode of human relationship that partakes of the informal, necessarily tacit dimensions of the virtue of civility.

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One curiosity of these conceptual discussions is the extent to which they hinge on a kind of geographical imaginary that envisions civil society as an identifiable “space,” “place,” “location,” “realm” or “sphere,” located somewhere “between” family and state or “outside” of the market (Barber, 1998; Cohen and Arato 1992; Jensen, 2011; Zakaria, 1995). To be sure, not all discussions of civil society invoke geographical or spatial metaphors, but the discourse of civil society seems nonetheless to have been preoccupied with defining civil society in terms of identifiable “boundaries” that demarcate a sphere called “civil society” from other things, most notably the state (Post & Rosenblum, 2002, pp. 2–3). The parameters of civil society are hotly contested, both intellectually and politically, and theorists differ about where to sketch the
exact lines of delineation. Even so, the very concept of civil society has always presupposed the existence of such dichotomies, rivals, or antitheses—whether between the state of nature and civil society, public and private, social and political, the legal and the ethical, the modern liberal state versus bourgeois economic society, and so forth (Colas, 1997; Ehrenberg, 1999; Gellner, 1994; Keane, 1988; Marx, 1978; Seligman, 1992).

Geospatial metaphors of borders, boundaries, and divisions play a role not just in distinguishing civil society from the state, but also in portraying what transpires within civil society itself. Post and Rosenblum (2002) observe that commentators have “continually shifted between envisioning civil society as fluid [or] segmented,” that is, between regarding civil society as a frictionless world of autonomous individuals who might spontaneously join (or leave) a variety of voluntary associations, on the one hand, and one composed of individuals indelibly stamped byascriptive memberships and cultural identities that raise barriers between them, on the other (p. 6). Is civil society a domain of rigid distinctions, hierarchies, and even conflicts, as many such as Karl Marx have feared? Or, alternatively, is the sphere of civil society characterized by community, hybridity, fluidity, and an “easy spontaneity” in our treatment of others (Rosenblum, 2006)?

At a deeper level, however, appeals to civil society are usually predicated on normative assumptions about the kinds of associations we deem to be desirable. What makes something count as part of civil society is whether its activities are conducive to the virtue of civility. Civil society, properly understood, is composed of those sorts of associations that promote the virtue of civility. Pursuing a moral account of civility does much to rescue the discourse of civil society from the purely structural assumptions imposed upon it from at least the nineteenth century onward, and to restore the moral sense of a civil society that was central to eighteenth-century thinkers such as David Hume, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson (Berry, 2003; Boyd, 2006, 2013; Kumar, 1993; Oz-Salzberger, 2001). Even here, however, there are nagging conceptual ambiguities: the virtue of civility is notoriously difficult to identify, few associations or human relationships are unequivocally conducive to civility, and conservative appeals to the moral quality of civility as constitutive of civil society are liable to excluding certain groups whose conduct might be deemed uncivil (Cuddihy, 1987; Elias, 2000; Keane, 1998; Schmidt, 2000; Sparks, 1997).

Much fruitful work remains to be done along the lines of inquiry sketched out above, and I would expect that these metrics—the structural, functional, and moral—will continue to frame future debates. All that being said, and at the risk of further clouding this already murky picture of civil society studies in the twentieth-first century, in the remainder of this paper I want to introduce a parallel but potentially different consideration by examining the strictly formal, rather than morally substantive, aspects of civility (and by extension, of civil society). Put simply, my claim is that the virtue of civility occupies a middle position between virtues such as justice, which consist in the strict observance of general rules, on the one hand, and other virtues such as charity or beneficence, which call for situational discretion, practical judgment, and some degree of finesse, on the other.

This ideal-typical distinction—as well as my sense of where civility falls on the spectrum to which it gives rise—is largely inspired by Adam Smith’s discussion of the categorical difference between the virtue of justice and other moral virtues. Smith’s metaphorical distinction between the formal rules of “grammar” and informal matters of “style” has great potential to illuminate the way civility’s quasi-formal and informal rules operate to structure our moral interactions in various sites of everyday life. In contrast to the abstract, inflexible rules of justice that govern the terms of our political and economic relationships with strangers, the sundry institutions of “civil society” are largely constituted by discretion, finesse, and individual judgment which are irreducible to general rules.

One contemporary analogue of Smith’s distinction that will undoubtedly be familiar to political geographers is the discussion surrounding care ethics, and especially the way that a so-called “ethics of care” departs from the strict, rationalistic, and legalistic standards of justice (Held, 2002; Lawson, 2007; StaeheUi & Brown, 2003; Tronto, 1993). As feminist political theorists and political geographers have emphasized, care ethics represent a vital alternative to the unduly formal and legalistic trappings of justice that dominate both the neoliberal market economy and the formal workings of public institutions. And yet rather than imagining care (what Smith might call “beneficence”) to be a moral quality narrowly confined to geographies of the private, local, or quotidian, upon closer examination Smith helps us to see that these kinds of informal moral interactions are present in virtually all aspects of our lives—public as well as private. While the legalistic terms of justice tend to dominate our relationships with strangers, the virtue of civility seems to occupy an intermediary position between intense and informal manners of “caring” and the impersonality of abstract rules.

Let us follow as I reckon with civil society as constituted by a particular kind of human relationship that takes place within an intermediary zone of moral, if not geographical proximity. I begin by considering how Adam Smith—one of the forerunners of contemporary discussions of civil society—conceived of civility. A careful consideration of Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments reveals that the virtue of civility both resembles, and differs from, the virtue of justice in terms of its susceptibility to being articulated in general rules. As we will see, the answer to the question of whether formal or informal types of relationships tend to preponderate is profoundly shaped by human geography: it is in large part a function of the moral (and sometimes explicitly geographical) distance between ourselves and other persons. Recognizing situations, domains, or geographical locations where the virtue of civility preponderates may offer a different take on how we sketch the borders of civil society.

Justice and the humane virtues: grammar versus style?

One major theme of Smith’s TMS is the nature of our obligations to distant strangers, both within and outside of our own political community, and especially how these duties may differ from those owed to family, friends, or neighbors. Restating this question affirmatively, and in more straightforwardly geographical terms, Smith thinks that all other things being equal, our obligations to others are conditioned by degrees of moral distance. Family, friends, and familiars deserve our love and beneficence; strangers are owed justice and good will, and perhaps little more. Smith’s justification for this asymmetry of obligations requires a theory of moral judgment capable of reckoning in both moral and spatial terms.

We sometimes think about moral judgment as the consistent application of abstract rules to particular cases. Some thinkers (e.g. Kant) characterize the phenomenon of moral judgment in terms of our adherence to universal moral rules that are products of abstract reason. Others (such as Hume) regard moral rules as socially useful conventions—albeit inflexible ones—that have arisen through a long process of trial and error. For Adam Smith, general rules also play an important social function in guiding moral conduct, even to the point that the virtue of justice may be described as strict obedience to a small set of general rules (cf. Fleischacker, 1999; Haakonsen, 1981).

In this sense, the virtue of justice differs qualitatively from other
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