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CIVIL SOCIETY AS A RESPONSE TO CATEGORICAL FAILURES OF THE STATE
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The authors in this week's readings agree that civil society is important for democratic consolidation, but do not agree on precisely what constitutes civil society and how civil society actually helps democratic consolidation. Further muddling the discourse, civil society is "romanticized"¹ and portrayed as synonymous with all things that lead to democracy. Many authors define civil society and civil society's important functions in a way that fits each specific case or theory. One common definitional thread of civil society that all the authors agree on is that civil society is important because it is not the state. In this assertion there is an implicit critique of the state—important functions of civil society are effective because civil society is autonomous from the state. This implies that the state is categorically deficient in some way. Focusing on this common thread allows us to gain traction on the concept of civil society, reconcile conflicting definitions, and rely less of normative criteria to determine what is or is not civil society and more on the specific failures of the state that civil society is responding to.

One of the critiques of the state in the literature is the tendency for the state to exercise too much power. The state needs to be checked and balanced by another force—and civil society is the prime candidate. This function of civil society was evident in the role of the church in both Poland and Africa (Ekiert's, Gymak-Boadi). In these cases, religious civil society lead to democratization. In other cases—notably in Arab states with the threat of Islamic extremism—religious groups do not lead to civil society, and therefore, are not included in the definition of civil society. It is not readily apparent why religious groups in one case are considered part of civil society, and not in other cases. Further, it is not clear why it is important for civil society—as opposed to an opposition party or other types of countervailing forces—to play the role as the intermediary to check the power of the state. By focusing on the critique of the state that is implicit in this discussion, one can explain the importance of certain types of religious organizations by the fact that these religious organizations have no ambitions of taking control of the state.² If the counter balancing force does take control, it becomes the state and risks overusing its power. Here, the importance of the civil society as being autonomous from the state, as opposed to an opposition to the government within the state, is illuminated. Also, a justification can be made for segregating religious organizations that counter the state but also threaten to take control of it. By focusing on the critique of the state that civil society responds to, we can have a nuanced definition of civil society that can contain some religious organizations, but not others, without resorting to arbitrary normative distinctions. We can also shed light on the unique contribution that civil society makes because it is categorically not the state.

¹ I'm borrowing from Diamond.

² Diamond describes the lack of aspirations of controlling the state as part of the definition of civil society.

Another unresolved question in the literature is whether non-state activity should be bifurcated between for profit market activity and non-profit publicly interested groups. The authors disagree on whether for profit business should be considered part of civil society. Diamond clearly states that civil society is not “profit-making enterprise”.³ Perry and Fuller, however, place private for profit enterprise in a central location when discussing civil society in China. Perry and Fuller look to private for profit enterprise as opening up the non-state sector, which may lead to democracy in China. On the other hand, in Chile, Paley described too much liberalization and private enterprise plays a role that leads against democratization. In Chile, civil society does not have a positive role because the problem with its state is not its penetration into every aspect of society, but the fact that it has privatized functions that should be its responsibility. Fish’s description of the press in Russia demonstrates a third situation in which the for profit press leads to democratic consolidation. For Fish, the press does not have only private interests that are generally ascribed to for profit enterprise, but plays an important role in checking state power. These differing definitions of civil society are contradictory because the same type of civil society—for profit enterprise—is filling in different roles with regards to the state. If the critique of the state is excessive liberalization, then for profit firms do not help the process of democratization. If the critique of the state is excessive use of power, then the for profit firms that check that power such as the press lead to democratic consolidation. Again, by starting with the critique of the state, and then moving to the way parts of civil society respond to the problem, seemingly dissonant literature can be understood together.

Focusing on civil society as a critique of the state also allows us to move past arbitrarily or normatively discounting some parts of the non state sector from the definition of civil society to a more analytical model. A useful definition of civil society should not arbitrarily define civil society to meet the case, or by its specific function, but by the role non-state activity plays in responding to failures of the state. Instead, the entire non-state sector should be included in the term civil society—remaining true to its classical definition—and the relationship between civil society and the state can be used to determine if it works for or against democratic consolidation. It is through this type of definition that these contradictions can be resolved, and the fundamental feature of civil society as separate from the state can be highlighted.

³ p 228