Civil Society as Democratic Practice: North American Cities during the Nineteenth Century

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, many scholars and citizens are grasping for some sense of societal purpose more substantial and satisfying than the aggregated narcissism that triumphed in the last. Yet, the various formulations of the object of this quest, “Social capital,” “civic engagement,” “the public sphere,” or “civil society,” strike contradictory chords of meaning. “Social capital” might ring pleasantly in the ears of social scientists, but to some humanists, it emits a discordant economistic sound. “Civic engagement” might recall the pieties of a citizenship class convened a half century ago, which alternately comfort and repel. Gold-plated philosophical terms like “civil society” and “the public sphere” come enmeshed in a thicket of theoretical writing, much of it bound to parochial Western political theory. While the range and variety of issues that this special issue of the journal calls forth is to be applauded, such heterogeneous expectations can also lead to confusion and miscommunication. Thus, at the outset, let me state my own particular interpretation of what is at stake in the contemporary discussions of social capital.

The concept of social capital is a strategic vantage point from which to mount a discussion of a number of critical and interrelated concerns that have made their way into dispersed personal libraries and private offices for at least the last decade: first, the discovery of an extensive network of women’s organizations that undergirded American political history (especially the development of the welfare state); second, a theoretical search for the “public” that is invigorated by an extensive list of authors, ranging from Alexis de Tocqueville to Jürgen Habermas; and finally, that...
noisy, sometimes surly face-off between multiculturalism and its critics.

Between my empirical research about public life in American cities during the nineteenth century and these broader issues, I have forged the following rough formulation of the critical importance of social life to political history: Sustained, associated action is an essential condition for, and component of, democratic politics. (At times I have sounded like a civic cheerleader for the organizational panache, that, at least since Tocqueville’s visit in the 1830s, has been regarded as a character trait of Americans). Indeed I value this social acumen in itself, but not only for itself. I look beyond simple quantitative measurement of social capital or civic organizations toward some substantive civic goals, namely, the furtherance of democratic participation and the pursuit of social justice.

According to these standards and purposes, the concept of “civil society,” especially as formulated by Cohen and Arato, is the most useful conceptual foundation on which to mount a research project. Cohen and Arato “locate the genesis of democratic legitimacy and the chances for direct participation . . . within a highly differentiated model of civil society itself.” It follows from this premise that civil society can be found far and wide, in any place where “free and unconstrained association and discussion” reign. But civil society, so broadly construed, will not always represent, or even foster, genuine public democracy. My own search for effective democratic practice has taken me to a variety of social spaces—from exclusive clubs to scrappy social movements. What I found was a melange of political practices that will not fit neatly into a single classification—neither Putnam’s social capital nor Tocqueville’s voluntary association, nor even Habermas’ public sphere. In the United States during the antebellum period, citizens and outsiders filled urban public spaces with a whole panoply of institutions and practices that activated, exercised, and expanded what has always been an imperfect democracy.¹

This essay treats three very select places during approximately the second quarter of the nineteenth century: New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco—sites of investigation chosen for several purposes. First, this research strategy centers the analysis squarely within the chronology of the American democratic revolution, focusing on the period after the War of Independence, when republican ideology and mixed constitutions (at the state and federal levels) had set the stage for an explicitly democratic practice. By 1825, democratic expectations were firmly installed in a relatively widespread male suffrage that delegated public decisions to popularly elected officials who met in deliberative legislative bodies and were held accountable to their constituents. The operation of these basic democratic institutions is most visible at the local level, and it is particularly vivid in nineteenth-century American cities.

Basing my analysis in three rapidly growing and particularly diverse ports serves a second purpose: It puts severe pressure on the process of association, which Tocqueville among others regarded as the special cultural capital of homogeneous Anglo-Saxon populations (often personified by the New England town meeting). During the pivotal years of this study, roughly 1825 to 1860, these cities doubled in size nearly every decade (New York reaching more than 750,000 in population). At the same time, the foreign born came to constitute nearly half the total residents, and often the majority of the voters. Although hardly typical American settlements, New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco spanned a whole continent of urban experience, displaying a wide range of cultural and demographic patterns. Not far removed from Spanish and French, as well as English, colonial institutions and harboring everything from financial capitals to slums, slave quarters, and Chinatowns, these cities put the possibilities for democratic civic life to a rigorous test.

The simplest body of evidence about antebellum civil society is found in the city directories that were published in most American towns of significant size late in the eighteenth century. Even though these listings underrepresented levels of association, they turn up an extraordinarily large and diverse accounting of what were called “societies.” A contrast between these maps of organized social life and their contemporary analog, telephone directories, is instructive. The latter read like a monotonous compilation of names and addresses, prefixed with a list of government
offices and supplemented with a huge consumers’ guide to shops and businesses. The names of voluntary associations that occasionally appear within these lists are neither labelled nor aggregated to delineate any distinctive social space within the dense landscape of homes, businesses, and government services. (The task of charting social space from the World Wide Web is too dizzying to contemplate.) The early city directories projected a different morphology of urban social life.

The New York Directory for 1786 (when the city’s population was 23,614) set the pattern. The table of contents identified the basic cell structure of the community: first, the politically elected officials (from the Congress to the state assembly, the city, and the county of New York); next, the local lawyers and notary publics, followed by the learned professions (ministers, physicians, bank directors, professors at Columbia); and finally, a miscellaneous compendium of organizations grouped under the category of “Members of Abolition Society and other Societies.” The other “societies,” though only six in number, articulated the general principles of association in the eighteenth century. The purpose of the first one listed—the “Society for promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and protecting such of them as have been, or may be liberated”—is self-explanatory; the second, the Society of Cincinnati, was a seed of the first party system, an association of incipient Federalists. Both had a clear political intent, suggesting an American variant on Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere—a place of free discussion organized outside the state apparatus where public opinion took form. Like analogs in London and Paris, the Abolitionist Society met “in the Coffee-house” and the Society of Cincinnati was divided into two districts “for the sake of frequent communications.” Following these societies, in order, were social clubs—the Saint Andrews’ Society and the Masons—occupational associations—the Gold and Silver Smiths, the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, and the “Society of Peruke Makers and Hair Dressers, etc.”

Before the eighteenth century had closed, the habits of sustained association had been established in the City of New York: Some associations (like the antislavery society) challenged established institutions and enunciated the principles of political oppo-

situation; others (like the guilds of silversmiths and lawyers) took shape around social and economic distinctions. All of them opened up a place of civic discussion between state and individual. The subsequent decades would expand and elaborate this space, in New York and elsewhere.

The testimony of city directories indicates that the 1830s and the 1840s were an era of especially hearty growth in the number and variety of associations. Leafing forward through the New York directories to 1840 indicates a geometrical increase in the number of associations. By then, the table of contents was differentiating societies into several categories, favoring the term institution as the generic title for the separate building blocks of civil society. “Medical Institutions, Institutions of Fine Arts, and Literary and Scientific Associations” linked men of the elite professions according to specific civic interests or avocations, from the study of history and sacred music to political affiliation. Many clubs met weekly, sometimes in their own handsome buildings with substantial libraries and an air of conviviality. The United States Naval Lyceum, for example, aimed to “promote the diffusion of knowledge, to foster harmony, and a community of interest in the service.” Other clubs were devoted to mutual improvement, especially among the young and those employed at the level of clerk.3

The Directory of 1840 added yet another category of association—“Religious, Benevolent and Moral Institutions.” Clearly a by-product of the Second Great Awakening, this category added no less than fifty-six associations to the civic roster. Under the familiar names of Bible society, relief society, tract society, and Sunday school, women joined men at the penumbra to civil society. Eight of these societies were open to women, married and single, honoring them with titles like president, treasurer, and manager.4

Religion and morality were not monolithic values in antebellum America. Alongside the denominational variety of Protestantism (seen in the hundreds of different churches enumerated in New York’s directory), co-existed a number of Catholic and Jewish societies that gave identifiable civic status to recent immi-

3 New York as It Is: Containing a General Description of the City of New York (New York, 1840), 67–113.
4 Ibid., 75–108.
grants and different language groups. Associations with such names as the Society for the Education of Orphan Children of the Jewish Persuasion, Roman Catholic Benevolent Society, French Benevolent Society, the German Society, and St. Patrick’s Society revealed the cosmopolitan character of urban volunteerism.5

The spirit of joining had taken sufficient root by the early nineteenth century to sustain growth beyond the Northeast. The first New Orleans directory was issued in 1805, a few months after the Louisiana Purchase; it was a mere unadorned list of names. By 1822, however, the spirit of association was flourishing under southern skies and bursting with ethnic and religious diversity. Nineteen lodges, many schools, several orders of masons (with names like “Le Conseil de Royal Secret” or “L’Etoile Polaire”), “a number of benevolent and charitable societies,” and a female asylum endowed by a “rich bachelor” (Julien Pydras) testified to the proliferation of associations in what was then a bicultural city. A decade later, civil society in New Orleans had become multicultural, hosting organizations from far-flung corners of the world—“The Hibernian Society of New Orleans for the Relief of Unfortunate Irishmen,” for one.6

If a French, Catholic, southern city could be so enamored of associational life, it is no wonder that the western pioneer outposts did not turn out to be civic slackers. San Francisco Bay had hardly been settled in 1854 when the encampment of miners en route to and from the gold fields published a directory with a full contingent of fraternal lodges. No less than eight Masonic chapters and six chapters of odd fellows announced their weekly meetings, built public halls, and welcomed such ethnic variants as “the Harmony Lodge (German)” of the IOOF. Four weekly chapter meetings of the Sons of Temperance, as well as two “Temperance Taverns,” offered refuge from the temptations of “Baghdad by the Bay.” Other benevolent contingents formed as French, German, Hebrew, and New England Associations; the old bases of Protestant benevolence were covered by Bible, orphan, tract, and Sunday-school societies, and supplemented with newer members of the Christian coalition like the YMCA and the Ladies Protection and Relief Society. If the only objective were to locate a point of

5 Ibid., 102, 106.
6 New Orleans Directories (1805), 33; (1811), 34.
in the American past when habits of vigorous voluntary association were well established, the investigation could conclude well before the Civil War in the North, South, and West.\(^7\)

Yet, for all their variety and energy, these voluntary institutions fell far short of the democratic ideal in themselves, and in relation to the civic whole. Religious benevolent associations often featured an exclusive, top-heavy membership. The earliest associations, in particular, boasted patrician founders, restricted membership, hefty fees, and condescending attitudes toward the beneficiaries of their largesse. Sometimes benevolent associations took profit from their deployment of social “capital,” their purpose hidden behind such benign descriptions as industrial schools or employment agencies, or such titles as “Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants.” The last-named was a New York society that started in 1825, announcing its purpose as “the promotion of good feelings between employers and servants and to induce the latter to remain as long as possible in their places.” Other associations were even more blatant in their advertising, including such membership perks as access to employees who worked far below the market wage rates.\(^8\)

These early blemishes on civic noblesse oblige were only faint omens of the class connotations that voluntarism would assume in the Gilded Age. The depressed economy of the 1870s would bring this unseemly side of civil society into the limelight, especially during the cold of winter. Witness the New York Tribune’s Dickensian account of a “holiday scene” on Thanksgiving Day in 1875. The story began with the image of a “great number of ladies and gentlemen of the highest social standing and greatest wealth, merchants and business men whose names are well known in the community” making a pilgrimage to the slum of Five Points, carrying holiday dinner to “the crowd of hungry little people . . . of the squalid neighborhood—old men hobbling on crutches, young men and boys dressed in rags, and women carrying little children in their arms. They waited hour after hour, their numbers constantly increasing, for the opening of the doors.” Meanwhile, the regular beneficiaries of this elite society were inside the Five Points House of Industry, proving their worthiness by pious

\(^7\) Lecount and Strong’s San Francisco City Directory for 1854 (canvassed and compiled by Frank Rivers) (San Francisco, 1854).

\(^8\) Longworth’s American Almanac, New York Register, and City Directory (New York, 1830).
recitations and song. This holiday ritual made even the Tribune reporter queasy: He noted that some of the poor “in spite of their hunger seemed to shrink from having their eating made a spectacle for curious eyes.” Such a condescending display of social capital exposes a dimension of association that, though not often noted in Tocquevillian celebrations of democracy in America, was built into the very foundation of nineteenth-century civic life.9

Most associations were more democratic and egalitarian. Humbler lodges and mutual-benefit associations soon outnumbered elite religious and benevolent societies. The fraternal encampments of odd fellows, journeymen, or reformed drunkards dissolved class differences in common rituals and abundant good spirits. Their purpose, like that proclaimed by the St. Nicholas Society of New York, was little more than “Good fellowship and social intercourse . . . and charity toward those of them who may have fallen into decay.” By mid-century, such associations of mutual care and support had woven a finely meshed safety net around much of the urban population.10

At the western outpost of fraternalism, in the extraordinarily diverse congregation of San Francisco, mutual-benefit organizations served as prefabricated social shelters for thousands of lonesome pioneers. These associations, which fell somewhat arbitrarily under the categories of both benevolence and protective societies, were initiated according to two major principles—either occupational or ethnic. Those with the former orientation included everyone from cigar makers and stevedores to surgeons and the chamber of commerce; those with the latter often included such generic sources of mutual capital as the “Savings and Loan Society,” which, in its own words, came into being so “that by means of it the members may be enabled to find a secure and profitable investment for small savings,” as small, in fact, as $2.50.11

Other protective societies served ethnic clienteles. The Eureka Benevolent Society, established in 1850, for example, aimed “to assist poor and needy Hebrews in want or sickness.” Its monthly fee of $1 per member soon mounted to $10,000 in capital. The German General Benevolent Society, by collecting the same fee from 700 members, accumulated sufficient funds to

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9 New York Tribune, 26 Nov. 1875.
10 New York As It Is, 105.
11 San Francisco Directory for the Year Commencing June 1, 1859 (San Francisco, 1859), 391.
erect its own building, a hospital fitted with steam baths, a garden, and fountains, all valued at $20,000. Five San Francisco associations identified themselves as “Hebrew” societies, among them the Ladies Society of Israelites and the Ladies United Hebrew Benevolent Society (“for the assistance of Hebrew women who may require it”). Separate but friendly benevolent associations shot up in San Francisco—Irish (3) British, French, Swiss, Scandinavian, and Slavonic. The Societa Italiana di Mutua Beneficenza, for example, reported that it had secured “by arrangement with the French Benevolent society, ample accommodations” at the hospital of the latter “excellent institution.” The variety of social organizations that took such quick root in these diverse cities indicates that American associationism was not simply an offshoot of an Anglo-Protestant cultural predisposition.\textsuperscript{12}

The proliferation of mutual-benefit associations, fast on the heels of evangelical religious associations—especially among the foreign born—also serves as a caveat to those who would read the record of American voluntary association nostalgically backward to a small-town mentality forever lost. The wealth of associations testifies just as well to urban social diversity, or to competition between many parochial, close-minded groups. The propagation of societies says as much about tribalism as about concern for common civic good. Although most species of association educated its members to those organizational skills and habits of cooperation needed to make democracy work, some exhibited antisocial impulses as well, excluding those who were different, condescending to those deemed inferior, converting those judged to be less enlightened, and retreating from the rigors of the urban melting pot into villages of their own kind.

The gender boundary was the deepest of all trenches between associations. Not a single entry in the city directories indicated that men and women joined the same associations. The one known case of gender integration—the anti-slavery movement of the 1830s—did not issue a public invitation to women and presented the usual all-male list of officers. Women’s associations exhibited a separate set of values, as illustrated by the Ladies Protection and Relief Society: “The object of the society is to render aid and protection to women in need and distress, residents

\textsuperscript{12} San Francisco Directory for the Year Commencing July, 1860 (San Francisco, 1860), 440–445.
or strangers. All persons acquainted with any cases of distress or want are requested to give information at this office. All respectable women in want of protection, employment in families, or as needle-women, by applying at the office, will receive immediate attention.” No word about the mutual accumulation of social or economic capital is spoken herein, nor is there a hint of the robust conviviality of lodgemen.13

The male side of the divide gave play to a greater variety of needs and talents—the meeting in saloons by mutual-benefit associations, the spirited debating societies for ambitious clerks and lawyers, and the soldering of lucrative business connections at the chamber of commerce. All of these associations were aggressively masculine. The raison d’être of some, however, was not just masculine; it was distinctly puerile. The secret rites of societies of “knights,” “redmen,” and other “odd fellows” enacted fantasies of escape from female kin through male bonding. One San Francisco chapter of the Odd Fellows went by the name of “The Patriarchal Branch,” its chief called “D. D. Grand Sire.”14

The metaphor of social capital describes the operations of these early American associations aptly. They did accumulate material and cultural resources within select groups—based on class, ethnic, religious, and gender affiliations. Associations were not, however, intrinsically linked to the more public, disinterested civic world; nor did they necessarily conform to even the stripped-down liberal definition of the public realm, which guaranteed certain inalienable rights. The constitutional guarantee of free assembly did not extend to these private associations, even though a number of the most exclusive benevolent associations received state subsidies. Only by extension, and only under particular historical circumstances, was association a nutrient of democracy.

The high political stakes and the shifting context of the contemporary debate about civil society make this obvious point worth emphasizing. The institutionalization of civil society and expansion of social capital occurred at a time when America’s political culture explicitly adhered to high standards of democracy. America’s achievement of popular sovereignty and representative government, however, did not automatically bring inclusive and

13 Lecount and Strong’s San Francisco City Directory, 250.
14 Ibid., 254.
egalitarian ideals to the voluntary associations: The political sphere was at least open to all adult white men on an equal basis, regardless of birthplace, wealth, or religion. The fact that women had access to their own associations but not the franchise only underscores the point. The overwhelming majority of “ladies” who joined societies would not even imagine, much less demand or secure, title to the vote and the rights of full citizenship. Membership in a society was no guarantee of a share in public decision making nor of any input in the creation of a political democracy. For that we must look to other places in civil society.

Social capital is too blunt a measure to gauge the vitality and extent of democratic politics. At least three additional factors are necessary to encompass the democratic practices of antebellum Americans: social inclusion, genuine participation, and power to affect the public realm. Simple social organizations, no matter how extensive, do not satisfy these criteria. The records of the city directories sometimes indicated that associations were often exclusive rather than inclusive, that they disdained, or even prohibited, partisan political discussions on their turf, and that they delegated what some consider public responsibilities—like care of the poor, the orphaned, and the sick—to self-serving coteries.

By focusing only on group formation, we might overlook other conditions that are key to making democracy work. The city directories are a paltry record of civic engagement compared with another obvious way of documenting public life, the press. By the 1830s, urban newspapers reached almost the entire adult population. The New Orleans’ directory listed no less than fifteen local newspapers and periodicals—in German, French, and English. In New York, censuses numbered local periodical publications in the hundreds. Examination of just a few shows a society teeming with civic engagement, of a passionate, contentious, and not always civil sort.15

The first daily newspapers—like the New York Evening Post, which commenced publishing in the 1820s—provide a dynamic picture of how the units of civil society were activated and how they performed. On a typical day in New York City, the chamber

of commerce met to discuss tariff policies, the volunteer firemen paraded in front of city hall to celebrate their thirty-fifth anniversary, and “all who [were] desirous of becoming members [were] respectfully invited to attend” a meeting of the Dry Goods Clerks Association. An equally crowded calendar of association came into focus in the South, at least in the winter months when the weather was tolerable and the risk of contacting cholera or yellow fever had abated. Papers like the New Orleans Picayune were replete with articles about parades, festivals, balls, and meetings sponsored by various associations. The press charted the movements of diverse congregations into the city streets: for example, unskilled dock workers or proud screwmen from the cotton mills, different ethnic groups, or even an occasional contingent of free men of color.

Associations were especially welcome in San Francisco of the 1850s, a boombtown desperate for civilizing institutions. In what would become an all-too-familiar California practice, when the state legislature decided to cut costs by closing a public hospital, civil society came to the succor of the needy, winning accolades in the press: “Considering the varied and conflicting interests of individuals composing the community of San Francisco and in view of our peculiar and incongruous social elements it may be deemed wonderful that so much has been accomplished for the benefit of many by our benevolent institutions. Many of these institutions were organized during a period of our local history when all other objects seemed lost to view in the pursuit of wealth.” After singling out the Protestant Orphan Asylum, Ladies Protective Relief Society, the Riggers and Stevedores, as well as the Hebrew, Eureka, and German mutual-benefit associations for special commendation, the Daily Alta Californian sighed with relief that “many of our charitable societies have become established beyond the need of pecuniary assistance from the Public.” The picture that emerges from the press confirms and expands the meaning of voluntary societies. In an emergency, separate associations would come together to create a patchwork of civic responsibility. However segmented, civil society could assume the social breadth and vitality to meet public needs.16

The press accounts also indicated that the voluntary civic realm was more than a sum of these organized parts. Civic action

16 Daily Alta Californian, 22 Apr. 1955.
did not depend on pre-existing organization. It was so pervasive and entrenched an urban habit that the *New York Press* reserved a full column for notices of “Public Meetings”—events that mixed “regular meetings” of associations with ad hoc assemblies for anything from public relief to honoring a deceased hero. In 1827, for example, this eclectic column noted a funeral procession for Thomas Emmett, the Irish hero, a gathering of neighbors to install a pump, and a meeting called “by the desire of a number of respectable individuals . . . who are desirous of relieving the Greeks in their present most distressing need.”

Public assemblies hidden in minor presses augment this already high quotient of civic engagement. *The Workingmen’s Advocate* called its readers to a “Great Public Meeting” with “express resolution posted at [a previous] meeting of 3000 mechanics and the working men.” The New York papers testified that the practice of the public meeting was more than a local custom. A report on a Philadelphia meeting, called in opposition to the movement to abolish slavery, carefully detailed the convening process: “[I]n pursuance of publick notice, an immense assemblage of the young men of the City convened yesterday afternoon in the spacious hall of Musical Study Society.” Moreover, papers in New York, Philadelphia, and other cities served as organizers and moderators, as well as recorders of public meetings. The *New York Evening Press* had already established its role as a monitor in 1827 when it reported that the Federalists were plotting a secessionist convention in Harrisburg: “A plan is underway or quite matured by certain gentlemen in Albany to agitate the city to its center, by convening a public meeting of the inhabitants at an early date, for the purpose of choosing delegates.”

Participants in public meetings were not just joiners but alert citizens capable of creative and effective public action. They deployed well-honed political knowledge about how to call meetings, court the press, locate meeting space, summon support, make alliances, create publicity, and scrutinize the activities of others. Furthermore, no membership fees, pedigree, or elite sponsors were required for these ubiquitous *public events*, which were more democratic, more active in their mode of civic engagement, and

more eclectic in their civic possibilities than typical voluntary associations were. Antebellum city people developed a repertoire of procedures—notifying the press, convening in open-air, central locations, drafting and ratifying resolutions, and publicizing actions—and adapted them to multiple public goals.

Public meetings routinely reported in the city newspapers also document another, emphatically political, species of “human capital” that was much in evidence during debates about both national and local issues. The most lavish display of this civic resource took place at partisan events. Daily headlines announced papers’ favorite causes, such as the *New York Evening Press* headline, “Great Triumphant Meeting of the People,” about a gathering of Democrats. Such hyperbole did not rebound to Gotham’s glory alone. The “Great Democratic Meeting in Boston,” “Great Public Festivals in St. Louis,” and “Public Meetings in the South versus the Abolitionists” received ebullient reviews in New York City. Public assemblies called in San Francisco in the 1850s employed a new term, the “Mass Meeting.” The “very large meeting of the democracy in the plaza” in May 1850, for example, followed on an “issuance of a call for a mass meeting” six weeks earlier. Its purpose was to “[e]ffect an organization of the Democratic Party.”

The Jacksonian Democrats in New York City during the 1820s and 1830s were the impressarios of the public meeting. Andrew Jackson’s election was heralded with “[s]uch a meeting [as] we believe, was never before held in New York. Tammany Hall, from the place where the chairman sat to the door, was crowded to breathless suffocation; there was scarce room for another man to budge himself in. The stair case, the passages, the public rooms below, were equally thronged with persons pressing vainly for admittance. The street in front of the hall, and the sidewalks for a considerable distance each way were covered with a multitude.” Although the *Evening Press*—a fervently Jacksonian organ—duly reported that the faction allied to John Quincy Adams held its meetings in Tammany Hall, it hailed its own party as the champion of the Irish and of workers and smeared members of its rival as affluent monopolists. These public meetings were

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the crucibles of the two-party system; they contain the richest vein of civic engagement, the very bedrock on which democratic opposition was effectuated.20

Election campaigns were the stormy centers of democratic and participatory civil society. The bombastic headlines of the Jacksonian Press were the overture to democracy in America—for example, “A Great Meeting of Adopted Citizens,” and “Another Triumphant Expression of the Voice of Democracy.” During the spring election of 1834, New Yorkers mounted ward meetings throughout the city to nominate and ratify candidates for every office on the ballot. At the moment of electoral climax, civil society staged a classic democratic ritual: “When the doors of the great room were thrown open, the whole vast space was instantly and completely filled with a dense mass of citizens, all eager to raise their voices in behalf of the object.” A few days later, the editor of the Evening Press put democracy on the line:

The crisis is come. Tomorrow commences the struggle and three days will decide whether the Bank of the United States or the constituted authority chosen by the free voices of the people shall govern this great country. . . . The struggle between the two great parties has now resolved itself into a war of the rich against the poor—of private interest against public liberty, of MONEY against MEN. . . . Come forth then stern, proud, unchangeable and independent Democrats . . . and teach these mean, yet proud aristocrats who sell their souls for discounts, the memorable lesson that they can neither cheat you under the masks of friendship, nor bully you as apes and enemies. Come to the polls without noise, confusion, arrogance or fear. Give your votes like Freemen who know the value of their own rights, while they respect the rights of others.21

Meanwhile, the Whig opposition staged a “Tremendous” meeting at the Exchange, where “every avenue leading to the big room was one solid mass of human flesh.” Still the battle had hardly begun. Election morning found Whigs and Democrats confronting one another in Masonic Hall near Wall Street, as well as in the rougher neighborhoods of the sixth ward: “Armed, ferocious and half mad bands of desperadoes throng in the streets

20 New York Evening Press, 3 Nov. 1827.
21 Ibid., 5–12 Apr. 1834.
killing peaceable men.” Epithets of “low Irish” and “damned Irish” were mixed with swipes at hypocritical merchants and their officious clerks. Literal mud and a few bricks flew through the partisan air until the ballots were counted, the victorious Whigs celebrated, and the losing Democrats conceded, restoring civic quiet.\textsuperscript{22}

We have come to take this particular kind of civic engagement for granted—its demagogery, inflated rhetoric, venal motivation, vote tampering, and simple silliness. In the 1830s, such electoral antics were defiantly democratic acts. By a combination of organization and competition, challenge to established authority, and legitimation of opposition, political parties installed democratic representatives in positions of state power. These partisan battles—a kind of routine civic warfare—also defended and gradually expanded the rights of citizens.

In the 1840s and 1850s, for example, the Democratic Party of New York successfully repelled attempts to limit the voting rights of recent immigrants, some of whom carried their newly won franchise to San Francisco, where they posted a Tammany Hall placard on a tent in Portsmouth Plaza. These fledgling California Democrats were able to install a full network of ward organizations and public meetings; the Whigs were too weak to put up much of an opposition. The second party that formed in 1854 was something of an aberration: The Know-Nothing Party, a nativist association, was organized in secrecy, drawing its political capital from principles of social exclusion and mistrust. The Democrat’s electoral victory over the Know-Nothings that year generated such opposition that within a few months of the election, thousands of San Franciscans organized themselves into a lynch mob that drove the Democratic Party underground.

Such vigilantism and nativism represent a kind of social and political resource that we might not want to reclaim as our civic heritage. They are reminders of the volatility and risks of popular and participatory democracy. As the \textit{San Francisco Daily Alta} put it on the eve of the Vigilante insurrection: “What a curious thing is government. Who can explain, who comprehend it? It has taken a great many generations to work out the problem of democracy

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
as it has been developed in the United States and it sometimes goes astray.”

In 1854, American democracy was a partial and fragile institution. Although the nativist attempt to exclude immigrants from democracy would go down to electoral defeat, millions of other Americans were political exiles in the land of their birth. Before 1850, no government—local or national, North or South—seriously considered female suffrage, and only a few states permitted non-whites to vote. Before the Civil War, the principles of exclusion were clear and the boundaries firm all across the country. The delegates to the California State Constitutional Convention of 1849 stretched logic to the breaking point to deny citizenship to Indian tribesmen, native residents of Mexican origin, and African-Americans and grant it to “white men only.” The racial lines of democracy were also being tested and redesigned in New York, where a sequence of referenda denied suffrage to the vast majority of African-Americans, save a few men of sufficient property. By statute and pervasive prejudice, the majority of Americans were kept out of electoral procedures and representative government, the most important areas of civic engagement.

Yet, not all of the possible routes to a workable democratic civic center have been exhausted. Although non-whites and women were not found at the voting booth or at party caucuses, small prescient numbers of them mobilized in another critical arena of civil society, the sphere of social movements. Several points of civic contention early in the last century manifested the rudiments of social movements—for example, the issue of slavery, the grievances of working men, and the role of women in society. Because all of the groups involved mounted civic actions from a position outside the legal framework of political society, explicitly challenging dominant public opinion and expectation, they were compelled to devise distinctive ways to capitalize on the civic resources available.

Like other flanks of civil society, social movements were built on the foundation of voluntary associations and public meetings and caught up in the momentum of partisan politics. When, in 1844, George Evans announced the formation of a “New and

23 San Francisco Daily Alta, 7–31 May 1855.
Important Movement of the Working Men,” he was registering the maturation of a political practice that he had been nurturing since the 1820s but had roots in the eighteenth century. Ever since property-less artisans had mobilized in behalf of American independence and championed the federal constitution, unenfranchised manual workers had served as templates of political innovation. By the 1840s, the Workingman’s Advocate could report the existence of a strong network of trade unions. A typical cell, like the New York Society of Journeymen House Carpenters, pursued such familiar objectives as providing for “the decent internment of deceased members,” but it also demanded “equitable prices and just and reasonable wage.” Trade associations were common in American cities by mid-century. The Riggers and Stevedores Union Association of San Francisco, for example, was organized in 1853 “for the regulation of wages and protection of each other.” These mobilizations of manual workers gave a faint, but recognizable, shape to the independent labor movement—a loose aggregation of associations that had specific economic goals and regularly flexed their muscles with “turnouts” to raise wages.24

Organized manual workers also formed an explicitly political front. By the 1820s, the Working Man’s Party presented its own slate of candidates for public office and advocated specific public policies. The Democratic Working Men’s General Committee to Protect Equal Rights lobbied political parties to curtail prison labor during the election of 1835. The young labor movement was a major force in the democratic revolution of the Jacksonian period. Leaders like Evans pushed Tammany Hall toward opposing property restrictions on the franchise, adopting decentralized ward-level organizations, attacking the Second Bank of the United States, and championing the “producing classes.” As Hugins put it, the Working Men’s Party “democratized the Democracy.” It also converted the political margins into the political avant garde, presenting an early textbook exhibition of how social movements operate. It was launched “at a numerous meeting of Mechanics and other Working Men of the City of New York, held pursuant to public notice, at Wooster Street Military Hall,” which resolved to exert pressure on major political parties through coalitions with

24 Walter Hugins, Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class (Stanford, 1960), 57; San Francisco Directory for the Year Commencing June 1, 1859, 391.
other associations—notably, the Society for the Protection of Industry and Promotion of National Education.  

By 1844, Evans could translate these ad hoc programs into a concise formulation of how to effect political mobilization: “By providing information, By printing and circulating tracts calculated to give information to the people on these important subjects, By corresponding, reporting with similar societies in other towns and cities, By promoting the gradual extension of the associations through the states of the Union.” This movement expired in the depression of 1837, but labor rose again in the 1850s when scores of worker associations convened in the citywide Congress of Trades. Soon after mid-century, when industrial production had spread outside the northeast, similar networks emerged in the workingmen’s clubs of San Francisco and the trade associations of New Orleans.

Working men were not the only citizens who took advantage of the open civic spaces of antebellum cities to promote unpopular causes. The reform efforts of the American Anti-Slavery Society—listed in the New York City Directory under the category of Moral Institutions—were fuelled by a unique blend of social capital and moral–political passion. Its distinctive manner of civic engagement was stated in its preamble:

The object of this Society is the entire abolition of slavery in the United States. While it admits that each state, in which slavery exists has, by the Constitution of the United States, the exclusive right to legislate in regard to its abolition in said state, it shall aim to convince all our fellow-citizens, by arguments addressed to their understandings and consciences, that slave-holding is a heinous crime in the sight of God, and that the duty, safety and best interests of all concerned, require its immediate abandonment, with expatriation. The Society will also endeavor, in a constitutional way, to influence Congress to put an end to the domestic slave trade.

Welding the moral intensity of Protestant grace to the political framework of the federal constitution, the Antislavery Society created the civic space from which to influence public opinion and stir up agitation. By 1840, the Society’s headquarters in New

York had spawned almost 1,000 auxiliaries in nine states, distributing journals nationwide on a weekly, monthly, and quarterly basis.  

The anti-slavery movement mobilized ingenious forms of political capital at the grassroots level, where it tapped the moral concerns and organizational skills of women, who used boycotts, fairs, petition campaigns, and poetry to enlist support. After the Civil War, female abolitionists formed a movement for women's suffrage. The major claimant for that civic status before that was the Female Moral Reform society, which captured a few headlines in New York during the 1830s and in 1848. It managed to enact its own view of women's best interest into state law—the Seduction Act of 1848, an anemic statute of dubious efficacy that punished violators of a young woman’s virtue with a $25 fine. Nonetheless, this law demonstrated that with enough ingenuity and obstinence, even the most marginalized citizens could find the political leverage to change public policy.

Like women, African-Americans in nineteenth-century cities found ways to assert their rights and opinions and to exercise citizenship without official portfolio. They aired their grievances—slavery in the South and discrimination in the North—through a number of civic venues—mixed gender, mixed race associations, like the American Anti-slavery Society; national conventions; several state referenda campaigns; and such grassroots organizations as militia companies, newspapers, and fraternal orders. Neither the social death of slavery nor the political death of disenfranchisement left African-Americans bereft of political capital. The power that these associations accumulated cannot be exaggerated. They provided the original yeast from which followed the realignment of a major party, a sectional division, and eventually the end of slavery, after the most devastating war in United States history. Yet, this early movement of African-Americans was seldom even noted in the official roster of voluntary associations.

27 New York as It Is, 99–100.


Although it would take another generation for local associations of labor, women, and civil-rights advocates to congeal into well-oiled national organizations capable of effecting federal policy, the defining characteristics of powerful social movements were apparent by 1850. The exertion of organized political pressure in behalf of minority opinions added a critical dimension to public democracy. The evidence from antebellum cities indicates that at least three levels of civic organization are essential for a viable democracy, and only one of them corresponds with the kind of social capital generated in the garden variety of voluntary association, or all-American club. Membership in the societies listed in an antebellum city directory could inculcate social skills and organizational talents essential to democracy—the ability of citizens to work together, to create social meaning, and to voice concerns in the public sphere. The importance of simple social capital made associating a habitual, almost reflexive, quality of American cultural citizenship. Even though the network of lodges and ethnic brotherhoods represented a narrow range and a particularistic assertion of civic interests, often serving parochial interests and consolidating an inequitable distribution of power and resources, they established a first line of defense against the concentration of monolithic state power.

Open and public discussions about the needs of the whole polity, however, were not the stock-in-trade of the voluntary organizations, either locally or nationally. Debates about issues that went beyond private concern and tackled social differences were the province of the public meetings and were orchestrated most effectively by political parties. Partisan institutions were probably the most pervasive, most populous, and most vociferous organizations in antebellum civil society. They performed two critical services: First, they used the electoral process to bring the concerns of citizens to the government’s attention and, second, they initiated the spirit and practice of political opposition that was just as critical to democracy as the simple acts of joining and organizing. This strategic differentiation of civil society was achieved at the grassroots level, in the wards, public halls, and street corners of antebellum cities. Yet, however engaged in social dialogue and cognizant of political difference, parties were neither pure democracies nor boundless communities. As many of their critics bemoaned, professional politicians’ sense of public responsibility
stopped just outside the voting booth and far short of identifying the rights and needs of all. In fact, during the nineteenth century, it was confined within the narrow realm of white-male suffrage.

Working democracy required another mechanism to keep civil society open at its margins. Before 1850, America’s disenfranchised, relatively powerless citizens began to build up this political capital by means of social movements. It is neither an accident nor a simple function of demography that much of the history of American social movements concentrates on those who were excluded from participation during the formative period of American democratic institutions: non-whites, women, and, at the very outset, workingmen without property. Denied the political capital of the vote, and the economic capital of the property classes, these groups devised distinctive means of civic engagement: petition campaigns, public demonstrations, extensive organizational networks, and strategic alliances. By the midpoint of the nineteenth century, something more complex than Putnam’s social capital, Tocqueville’s voluntary associations, or Habermas’ public sphere had evolved in the new American republic. A combination of associations, public meetings, parties, and social movements had created a highly differentiated structure for empowering citizens and practicing democracy.

Some of the critical ingredients of this civil society resembled the makings of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas located in eighteenth-century European capitals, especially those that connected opposition to the absolutist state with the expansion of market capitalism. The imprint of merchant capital is unmistakable, almost tautological, in the city directories of the early nineteenth century. The directories were originally business propositions, created to facilitate trade; it is hardly surprising that they gave pride of place to banks, insurance companies, and later railroads. One of the earliest, most ubiquitous associations—often prominently placed in the directories—was the chamber of commerce, an association of the leading tradesmen of the city. It is a relatively easy matter to adapt Habermas’ concept of the structural foundation of the public sphere to American conditions; the advance of market capitalism faced little state interference in the American colonies. The English Board of Trade was a pushover compared with the European monarchies and the mercantilist ministers, and national independence won the new American
republic a relatively clear slate on which to expand individual enterprises and form mutually beneficial trade associations.

This is not to say that political institutions were immaterial to the luxurious growth of the voluntary civic sector. The civic identity of even a business organ like the city directory was shaped around government. Most directories began with a proud listing of state, federal, and local officials, and some charted the passage of time according to a national political calendar. *Longworth’s New York Directory* for 1820, for example, marked its date on the frontispiece as “the thirty-fifth Year of American Independence.” San Francisco’s first directories bore the title, “General Directory of Citizens and a Business Directory of Dealers,” but they gave top billing to “The Organization of the Different Branches of Municipal Government and the Laws regulating the Same: together with a Description of the Different associations.”

America’s civil society, and the payoff of social capital, drew momentum from the economic transformations of the Atlantic world but took form around the centering institutions of constituted government. The basic political scaffolding was laid in place by the American Revolution and its immediate consequences. Routine political practice in an antebellum city testifies to the widespread comprehension of basic civic lessons, especially the outlines of the constitutional order and federal system of government. This political knowledge became second nature to countless citizens who organized themselves into societies with “presidents” and “vice presidents,” “by-laws” and “constitutions.” Anyone who frequented a ward meeting or party rally knew something about how to draft resolutions, and could quote from the Bill of Rights, particularly the guarantees of free speech and assembly.

Another item in the Bill of Rights, freedom of religion, activated a second major source of civic engagement. The flood of Protestant evangelical societies issued directly from the political separation of church and state. It did not flow from some innate character trait of Protestants or outpouring of revivalist zeal; it evolved as a political strategy designed to assert specific ideological influence in the free market of religious belief. Much of the bloated condition of association in the second quarter of the nineteenth century is due to the formation of evangelical institutions aimed at propagating Protestantism once the state no longer funded an established ministry. The American Home Missionary
Society, for example—“a voluntary, unincorporated association, formed by persons of the Presbyterian, Congregational Associated Reformed and Reformed Dutch Churches”—came into being in 1826 for the express purpose of spreading the gospel among the poor. In ten years, it sent 755 missionaries into 27 states and territories and 1,000 congregations or missionary districts, at an expense of $92,108.30

The evangelical enthusiasm of the antebellum period, though not strong enough to penetrate to the unsavory climate of New Orleans, spread quickly to the West. The officers of the San Francisco Bible Society, whose listings in the city directory claimed the title “esquire” rather than cowboy, boasted that they had issued 8,594 Bibles, in English, Spanish, and other European languages. Benevolent associations stepped in where the liberal state refused to tread, propagating Anglo-Protestant culture to the far shores of America’s voluntary network. The proliferation of religious and benevolent associations gained added incentive from competition with the Catholic churches and Jewish temples of new immigrants.31

Religious diversity was only one shade in the rich palette of differences that invigorated civil society in the United States. The cell-like structure of antebellum public life expanded through a process of social differentiation and along lines of civic competition. Disagreement about a wide array of political and social issues—religious belief, partisan loyalty, public policy, reformist causes, and economic needs, as well as race, ethnicity, and gender identities—operated as a major catalyst for the proliferation of associations in antebellum cities. The vitality of civil society, in other words, does not necessarily depend on social trust. On the contrary, in antebellum American cities, it sometimes thrived on the leaven of difference, debate, even open conflict. This civic contention arose in tandem with democratic participation.

No map of civil society’s tributaries in antebellum America is complete without reference to geographical, as well as economic and political, factors. Like political parties, associations for the purpose of religious benevolence were nurtured by a federal system that recreated and augmented civic organization at every

30 New York as It Is, 79–81.
31 Lecount and Strong’s San Francisco City Directory, 255.
geographical level of government from the ward to Washington. The importance of spatial considerations for associations is also evident in both architecture and the urban plan. City directories gave special listings not just to societies but to their meeting places, some of which were local landmarks that had their names engraved in stone above the street: Hibernia Hall, The Merchants Exchange, Odd Fellows Hall. The San Francisco business directory for 1854 listed six entries under “Public Halls.” Tellingly, “City Hall,” the seat of legitimate government, was just one architectural landmark in a diversified public landscape. In a highly differentiated civil society with heterogeneous and scattered associations, the government office building was no more than the first among equals. It might have had a central location, a halo of classic ornament, a high dome, and often a large room for public assembly, but so did many public halls, some of them available for hire.

One last geographical feature of civil society might be tautological, but it is significant nonetheless. By their very nature, the major port cities in this investigation were especially conducive to civic vitality and democratic practice. Cities of a certain size and diversity, like New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco, provided the critical mass, social diversity, and concentrated human interaction that nourished a profusion of civic organizations. The distinctive pattern of urbanization in nineteenth-century America compounded the significance of this geographical factor. In the United States, new and instant cities emerged at the same time as older ones grew larger in population, thereby multiplying the sites where vigorous civil societies might appear. Space was far more than a metaphor for civic organization. Antebellum urban places provided particularly fertile habitats in which civic associations could emerge, grow, and propagate.

In the last analysis, the discrete factors mentioned in this analysis find their meaning and power only in conjunction with one another and within a unique historical context. American civic society, like Habermas’ public sphere, Tocqueville’s voluntary associations, or even Putnam’s Renaissance republics, evolved in tandem with small-scale, locally grounded sites of market capitalism. The three port cities described herein were bustling entrepôts of international commerce, at a time of nascent and fluid
economic power. Small entrepreneurs, like civic-minded individuals, had ready access to social resources with which to consolidate and advance their interests. In fact, business enterprises and civic associations drew on the same legal basis for accumulating capital through associated action—the general law of incorporation. City governments, local banks, turnpikes, and the ladies relief associations all applied to the state for corporate charters. At the municipal level, civil society and state power were analogous one to the other, and in this historical moment, relatively balanced in social power and political influence. Free enterprise and free association were not poles apart; nor was society divided by a gulf between private and public, individual and state, the realm of freedom and the domain of government. Such was the setting in which American democracy originated and matured.

A century later, the global scale of economic organization has destroyed the equilibrium between business corporations and civic associations, and democracy may hang in the balance. Although no transhistorical formula is available to determine what valences of state, capital, and civil society are necessary to make democracy work, this case study at least introduces some nuance into our understanding of these critical relationships. Social capital, one of the most elemental forms of civil society, is not a sufficient political force to challenge the concentration of power in the late twentieth century. Even simpler times required more to create effective democracy. The political resources assembled in the past by mass democratic parties and radical social movements are also essential to a democratic polity, first to create it, then to expand it, and now to keep it alive.