

Understanding Civil Society and Social Capital

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Civil society and **social capital** are two terms that have experienced a boom in comparative politics. Hundreds of scholarly articles using one or both of these terms are published each year. In addition, the World Bank, development organizations, and journalists have begun to use these terms in professional and popular publications. Often seen as interrelated, civil society and social capital open up exciting possibilities for the study of comparative politics, though their highly abstract and sometimes fuzzy definitions present some difficulties as well. Because these terms have become nearly impossible for students of politics to avoid, teachers of comparative politics are encouraged to find ways to integrate them into their courses.

Civil Society: History and Definitions

The term civil society has a long history in political theory dating back to the early Enlightenment. Locke, and later Tocqueville, Hegel, Marx, and other theorists, including the Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci, engaged the concept, each in a distinct way. Locke, for example, saw civil society as a means for self-governance and the protection of private property, focusing on the moral and institutional basis in the social contract and the law. Marx treated civil society as the self-regulating, self-interested realm of entrepreneurial economic activity, and Gramsci excluded the market altogether, instead defining civil society as the sphere in which political consent (or “hegemony”) is mobilized by the dominant class. In spite of these and other fundamentally different approaches, at its most basic, civil society has been typically understood as a realm of relatively autonomous and self-organized associational life.

The use of the term civil society fell off in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries and did not become a core concept in the social sciences until the beginning of the 1970s. At this time, conceptualized as a sphere of self-regulation and autonomy, civil society was counterposed against a “totalitarian state” and became a central rhetorical device and political strategy in the struggle against state socialism led by Solidarity in Poland and against oppressive military regimes by Latin American scholars and activists. At the end of the twentieth century, the concept also found its way into critiques of the European welfare state on the one hand and the power of large globalizing corporations on the other.

Over time, civil society has come to be understood by scholars as a site for citizen action

and agency that promotes and maintains stable democracy against the threats from political tyranny, citizen apathy, and even the all-embracing corporate power.

Civil Society and Social Capital

In considering the relationship between civil society and democracy, Robert Putnam has argued that a vibrant civil society characterized by widespread membership in groups promotes democracy by generating “social capital.” Social capital in this view is defined as “networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995, 67). Thus formal and informal groups such as neighborhood associations, sports clubs, and civic associations are seen as producing the “civic virtues” of tolerance, trust, cooperation, and the like that can help to solve problems, reduce crime, encourage development, and promote democracy. Civil society is seen as a training ground for democratic citizenship, and social capital is a way of solving problems without expanding the power of the state or corporations.

This approach follows from the study of political culture done most notably by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba beginning with *Civic Culture* in 1963. Relying on survey research that identifies and measures social trust and other key values in a community, as well as the density of membership in civic associations, social capital is treated as an independent variable that can explain the development and maintenance of stable democracies as well as economic growth and other positive outcomes. Networks are naturally good for individuals, but, Putnam argues, they also can produce externalities that are good for the community as a whole. Thus when neighbors get together for regular barbecues, crime in the neighborhood is likely to drop (Putnam 2004). This attitudinal or cultural approach to social capital is not the first or only one, but it has been the most influential, especially with political scientists, because it is seen as having important political effects. In Putnam’s approach, civil society directly promotes social capital, which in turn facilitates political participation, good governance, and other social goods (Putnam 1993).

This approach to social capital incorporates two aspects: values or cultural aspects (trust) and structural aspects (associational life or civil society). These two aspects are typically understood to be separate, although related, variables. Trust is difficult to measure, but the much-used World Values Survey data seeks to measure generalized social trust in a society by asking individuals the following question: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” Civil (or civic) society is measured by counting the number of organizations and the extent of participation. These two are combined to create a composite index for social capital. One of the most interesting findings is that nations tend to cluster together in patterns across a map of social capital, with the Nordic countries ranking high in both elements of social

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capital and Central Europe and South America ranking low in both (see Figures 1 and 2). Asian countries, both democratic and nondemocratic, including China, rank just below Germany on the composite social capital index, with relatively high levels of social trust but generally lower levels of civic society. In looking at these two measures separately, Pippa Norris finds that it is social trust rather than associational behavior that is most correlated with democratic outcomes (Norris 2003, chapter 8).

An alternative is taken by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his view there are three types of capital: economic, cultural, and social. All are forms of economic resources or power. Social capital refers to the possession of social networks, obligations, or “connections” that can be more or less institutionalized or guaranteed by a common family name or by membership in a class, tribe, school, party, or other group, and that provide members with the support of the collectivity. Nobility is a form of institutionalized social capital but so is membership in an elite club or the Communist Party. However, some networks have greater value than others. According to this structural approach, social capital, like all forms of capital, is accumulated over time through investment strategies by individuals and groups, and it can under certain circumstances be converted into economic capital and power (Bourdieu 1983).

Questions and Critiques of Concepts

Perhaps because of their relatively recent entrance into the lexicon of social science, a variety of questions and controversies remain: causality, comparability, and even the basic definitions of these concepts. Such questions do not mean that the concept of civil society will be abandoned anytime soon or that it cannot be used in the classroom. On the contrary, these questions can be presented to students as a way to sharpen their critical and analytical skills.

- **Defining the boundaries:** What precisely are the boundaries of civil society? Does civil society include legislatures and economic organizations, including firms and corporations? Are self-interested and instrumental actions part of civil society, or is it a realm of only public-spirited behavior? If we cannot agree on what it is, how can we engage in systematic study?
- **The normative vs. empirical:** Is civil society a normative or empirical concept or both? Juxtaposed to a repressive state, civil society is unalterably good. As a basis for the generation of democratic values, social capital can only be understood as good. Does this normative element lead to bias in our empirical work? Are clubs that allow only men (or the affluent or white people) to gain access to networks of power while preventing women entrance a part of civil society? Are organizations with antidemocratic or illiberal values considered part of civil society? Again, how is the boundary for civil society drawn? Even if they are not part of civil society,

they certainly produce social capital in Bourdieu's understanding of the term, but how does this fit into Putnam's civic-cultural approach? As students consider clientelistic relations in China (*guanxi*) or in Mexico (*camarillos*), they might find Bourdieu's approach to social capital more useful.

- **The dark side of social capital:** Membership in groups can promote cooperation and trust for insiders while encouraging distrust, disdain, and hatred for outsiders. Putnam (2004) recently acknowledged what has been called the "dark side of the force" (Heying 2001), noting that some networks have been used to finance terrorism. Thus an empirical question for scholars of social capital has become this: which associations and networks create good social capital by *bridging* social cleavages and which promote *bonding* social capital that reinforces exclusivist tendencies and cleavages such as ethnicity, region, and class?
- **Ethnocentrism:** There also is the question of whether the term civil society is limited to the particularities of European history and culture and so not appropriate for comparative study. Civil society is said by some to be a product of the Enlightenment and a function of liberal society. Attempting to find it and measure it in other places is a form of ethnocentrism and leads to bias as well as misunderstanding (Chatterjee 1990).
- **Methodology:** Finally, there are some concerns about methodology. Does the data collected by the World Values Survey really get at the questions raised by the literature on civil society and social capital? If so, the question of causality continues to be unclear. Does social capital promote economic growth and stable and good governance? Does democracy cause good governance, or do social trust and civic society result from economic prosperity and good governance?

In spite of these controversies, the term seems here to stay, and not just in the West. As the cold war ended and the new millennium dawned, civil society and social capital seemed to fill a need for analytical concepts that would illuminate the patterns and variations in democratization, economic development, and changing patterns of state-society relations. While some may reject the terms as Western impositions, there are many scholars in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East who have embraced them.

Civil Society and Social Capital as Heuristics

Civil society and social capital provide a useful heuristic for teachers and students of comparative politics. For classroom use, it might be useful to begin by thinking about civil society as a space between, but not fully independent of, the state and the domestic household sphere, one in which groups of various kinds engage in public activity to pursue individual, group, and national interests. Marcia Weigle and Jim Butterfield

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suggest that civil society has two parts that specify its character and organization: (1) some legal or quasi-legal framework that permits autonomous social organization and defines the terms of the relationship between state and society, and (2) the identity and goals of social actors (Weigle and Butterfield 1992). Social capital is generated by the social actors but constrained by the institutional arrangements. Thus, the nature, extent, and organization of civil society, and therefore social capital, will vary based on the institutional context and the values directing associational activity. This conception of civil society and social capital can be applied to any country if there are some voluntary associations between the state and the family.

Classroom Exercises: Locating Civil Society and Identifying Social Capital

- Begin by asking students to name voluntary associations that might make up part of civil society in a liberal political system such as that found in the United Kingdom. Typical responses would be neighborhood associations, soccer clubs, unions, animal rights groups, human rights organizations, and so forth.
- Have the class locate civil society and its relationship with the state and other spheres by drawing a diagram on the board, with separate but overlapping circles representing the state, the market, civil society, and the private sphere. Figure 3, adapted from Thomas Janoski (1998), is suggestive of one possible outcome.
- You can ask students to locate organizations and institutions that would be included in each sphere and also to discuss the areas of overlap and the nature of the changing relationships between these spheres (see Figure 4). It's important that students understand there is not necessarily a "right" answer to such questions, only well-reasoned arguments. What kinds of organizations and where they are located will depend on the particularities of time and place, but further, there can be considerable ambiguity about the location of some entities. The character of certain legislatures, citizen councils, business associations, nonprofits, private clubs, and secret societies may land them in ambiguous or overlapping territory.
- After the diagram is complete, students should consider and map where and how in the diagram social capital is created and reproduced. How do the networks of social capital connect individuals, groups, and institutions in the separate spheres? Membership in an elite family or private club might be converted to wealth via a well-paid business or a place in the government. The use of *guanxi* by the sons and daughters of high government officials in China (the "princelings") is an example of the conversion of social capital into wealth and political power.
- Civil society and social capital draw attention to the changing and ambiguous relations between public and private worlds. You can ask students to shade the private areas versus the public areas. They might consider the extent to which

even parts of the state, through corruption for example, might be “privatized,” or how parts of the family sector might be made public by birth control policies, reality shows, and so forth.

- Students can create a series of such diagrams through which they can compare the constitution and relationships between state, market, civil society, and private sphere across time and space. For example, China at the turn of the twenty-first century can be compared with Maoist China or with the United Kingdom, Mexico, or Russia. See Figure 5 for an example of China under reform.
- Drawing from Norris’s study and Figures 1 and 2, students can also consider some methodological and theoretical issues. Particular questions include:
 - How should we measure social trust? What if the people you are interviewing about trust do not trust you?
 - Is counting up formal organizations the best way to measure civil society? What kinds of things will be missed this way?
 - What is the difference between correlation or association on the one hand and causality on the other? If prosperous, democratic countries rank high on the social capital index. Does this mean that social capital causes economic growth, stability, and democracy or vice versa? How do we know?
 - How do we account for the fact that certain regions seem to have greater social capital than others? Is social trust culture-bound? Is it easier to trust people if you are living in a prosperous, stable country?

What is important is that students use the heuristics of civil society and social capital to understand the complexities and dynamism in these relationships rather than reify these concepts or diagrams. Thus the Cultural Revolution might be seen as a high point of totalitarianism in China, as measured by state penetration and atomization of society. If we diagram its social conditions, the large state sphere will crowd out the market and civil society, and even squeeze or atomize the family in the domestic sphere. The state did exhibit totalistic impulses. Stories such as “Chairman Mao Is a Rotten Egg” by Chen Jo-hsi, *The Red Scarf Girl* by Ji-li Jiang, or the film *The Blue Kite* can be used to illustrate the penetration and disruption of the private and family sphere by the party-state.

Yet the Cultural Revolution was also a time when the state lost control of many aspects of society, and black markets emerged in many regions of the country and laid the groundwork for private trading networks and private firms that would later be legalized under reform. Can these networks be seen as social capital or as a nascent civil society or social capital? Moreover, Red Guards in factories attacked offices and destroyed the dossiers that were one of the tools of state monitoring and control. Meanwhile, some of the students who criticized authority, studied Mao’s revolutionary theory, embarked on

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revolutionary travel, and were “sent down” to the countryside to learn from the peasants used these experiences and ideas in the creation of the Democracy Wall movement. Thus the Cultural Revolution might be seen as a time that produced localized social networks or autonomous social movements (Chan 1992) or even as a training ground for the democratic movements of the 1970s and 1980s (Goldman 2002) and perhaps one basis for an emerging civil society during the reform. (See Figure 5 below.)

Moreover, throughout the Maoist period, although there was no formal civil society, because autonomous organizations were not legal, there was plenty of room for the cultivation of social capital in the form of social networks. *Guanxi* networks were the basis for social trust and cooperation and the channel for guaranteeing access to resources of all kinds. In a context without secure legal protections or formal channels for pursuing interests or accumulating wealth, social capital in the form of clientelistic relations became crucial for those who hoped to succeed. In contemporary China, with the introduction of markets, the creation of property rights, and new values promoting wealth, the nature of social capital has changed as well.

Further Reading

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Country-Specific Cases for Further Analysis

China

- Falun Gong, the organization devoted to spiritual exercises, drew millions of followers and demonstrated in a silent protest in front of the leadership compound in April 1999. Although it began as an apolitical association (indeed, members claim that it is not even an organization), Falun Gong became highly politicized in response to criticism in the media and was targeted and for the most part crushed by the leadership under Jiang Zemin. The state-controlled media complained that the group, organized around charismatic leader Li Hongzhi, was cultlike and encouraged dangerous practices, including the use of breathing exercises and meditation rather than medical attention to treat illness.

The resistance of intrepid practitioners, some of whom responded to arrests with further demonstrations in the face of sure repression and even hunger strikes while in jail, fit the image of “civil society against the state.” The resulting reform program allowed greater autonomy for individuals and groups even as state support for health care and employment was limited. Although the millions of practitioners created and expanded social networks, this social capital was of little value when confronting the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) because of the institutional context they worked in. Without a rule of law or due process to check the power of the CCP, the Falun Gong networks might have encouraged practitioners to resist but did not protect them from arrest. Civil society is still weak, and a strategy of creating social capital through membership in the CCP might bring more valuable social capital for larger numbers of people.

Falun Gong raises interesting questions for students of civil society. While the state’s claims must be carefully scrutinized, the group did have cultlike qualities. Are cults part of civil society? Why or why not? If Falun Gong is seen as part of civil society in and beyond China, what about the East Turkestan Islamic movement that seeks an independent East Turkestan in Xinjiang Province? This group has been publicly listed by both the CCP and the Bush administration as a terrorist organization. Further, the leader of the Falun Gong was living and directing the organization from the United States, and many Falun Gong practitioners were organized around the world, some supporting or directly participating in protests against the CCP inside of China and pressuring the United States and other governments to denounce the repression.

- Although the student movement of 1989 is often used as an example of the emergence of civil society in China, there are a wide variety of examples and possibilities. Many of them are not nearly so dramatic.

Homeowner associations: One example from the local level is the new type of resident or homeowner associations that are emerging in urban China. While there have long been resident and neighborhood associations in China created by the state to provide services and monitor citizens, these associations are different. The introduction of the market and commodification of housing means that many middle-class and wealthy families now own expensive homes in posh compounds. In many cases, private homeowners associations, which are provided for by the law, have typically been organized independently of the state to protect the rights of homeowners and demand services. Such organizations are not seeking to change the political system or resist the state as such, but when publicly

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owned property management corporations (typically part of the local government) abrogate contracts or refuse to deliver services, these organizations have come together to demand services (trash pickup, cable TV, security, and so forth) and redress based on their new status and identity as property owners and rights-bearing citizens. In some cases, the leaders of these organizations have researched the law, written petitions, refused to pay for services, and gone to the newspapers and to court.

Civil society and self-interest: These homeowner associations are not other-oriented. They do not necessarily seek to promote the “public interest” or “democracy” as such. Nevertheless, these associations represent a fundamental change from the old state-organized neighborhood associations. While they are not necessarily in resistance to the state, it can be argued that individuals learn to identify and assert their rights and to work with others to articulate their interests. All of which might be seen as part of a newly emergent civil society and a training ground for democratic citizenship. It might also be seen as a way that the new middle class is able to convert its newly acquired economic capital into social capital and political power.

Students might be asked to consider the relationship between markets, civil society, and political change. Business owners and some young professionals have grown increasingly wealthy and powerful in many localities of China. Will the emergence of a middle class in China (and elsewhere) strengthen civil society? Will the middle class become the bearers of further political liberalization and ultimately democratization? Or are business owners and the newly rich as likely to support any government that will protect their private property rights? Do any of these changes signal a change in Chinese political culture?

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For East Turkestan information, see the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization at www.unpo.org/member.php?arg=21.

For the Falun Gong Web site, see www.falundafa.org.

Mexico

Natural disaster and civil society: Students can be asked about the sources of civil society. Does civil society emerge and social capital grow as a part of economic growth and marketization from political reform? In some cases, natural disasters create openings for civic organization, as neighborhoods and communities form self-help efforts in protest against the failure of state relief. The 1985 earthquake in Mexico City can be seen as one such case. Students can investigate the impact of that earthquake on Mexican political change and democratization. Did it trigger the growth of civic organizations? Do such organizations represent the growth of social capital in the sense of a civic culture? How did these new organizations relate to the power of the state over time? Did these organizations stimulate democratization processes in Mexico? Are there other examples of natural disasters that strengthen civil society and social capital?

Neoliberalism and civil society: Liberal policies introduced in the 1980s and 1990s also spurred both aid organizations and protest movements. While the Chiapas rebellion is the most dramatic and well-known response to NAFTA, there are other less dramatic responses to economic policies, including El Barzón (The Yoke), a middle-class response to the high interest rates resulting from the peso crisis that left the middle class overburdened by debt. El Barzón mobilized citizens, called for a moratorium on debts, and pushed the banking system into concessions. El Barzón continues as a civic organization defending small debtors against banks and other creditors. How does this middle-class organization compare to the Chiapas rebellion in Mexico or other people's movements? Is it similar or different from China's new homeowner associations?

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Is one class or another more likely to be the basis for civil society or bearer of social capital?

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Globalization

To what extent is civil society becoming transnational? Are we seeing the growth of a global civil society with such groups as Save the Children, Nature Conservancy, Habitat for Humanity, and others setting up shop in western China and other parts of the world? If so, can we expect this global civil society to promote a convergence of values? Or will the globalization of civil society bring more conflict?

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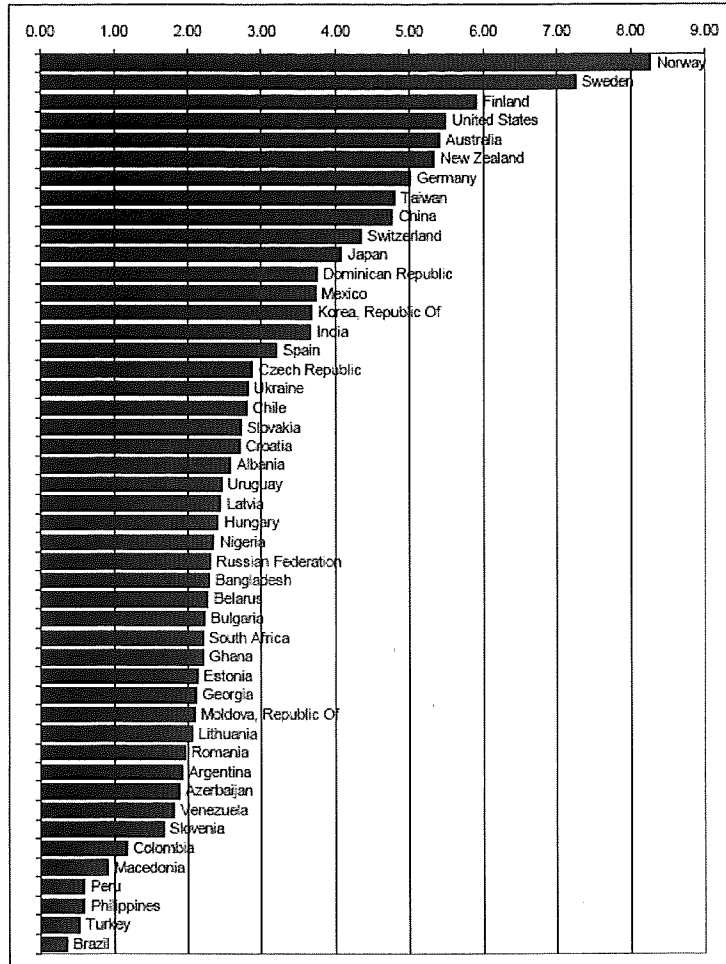
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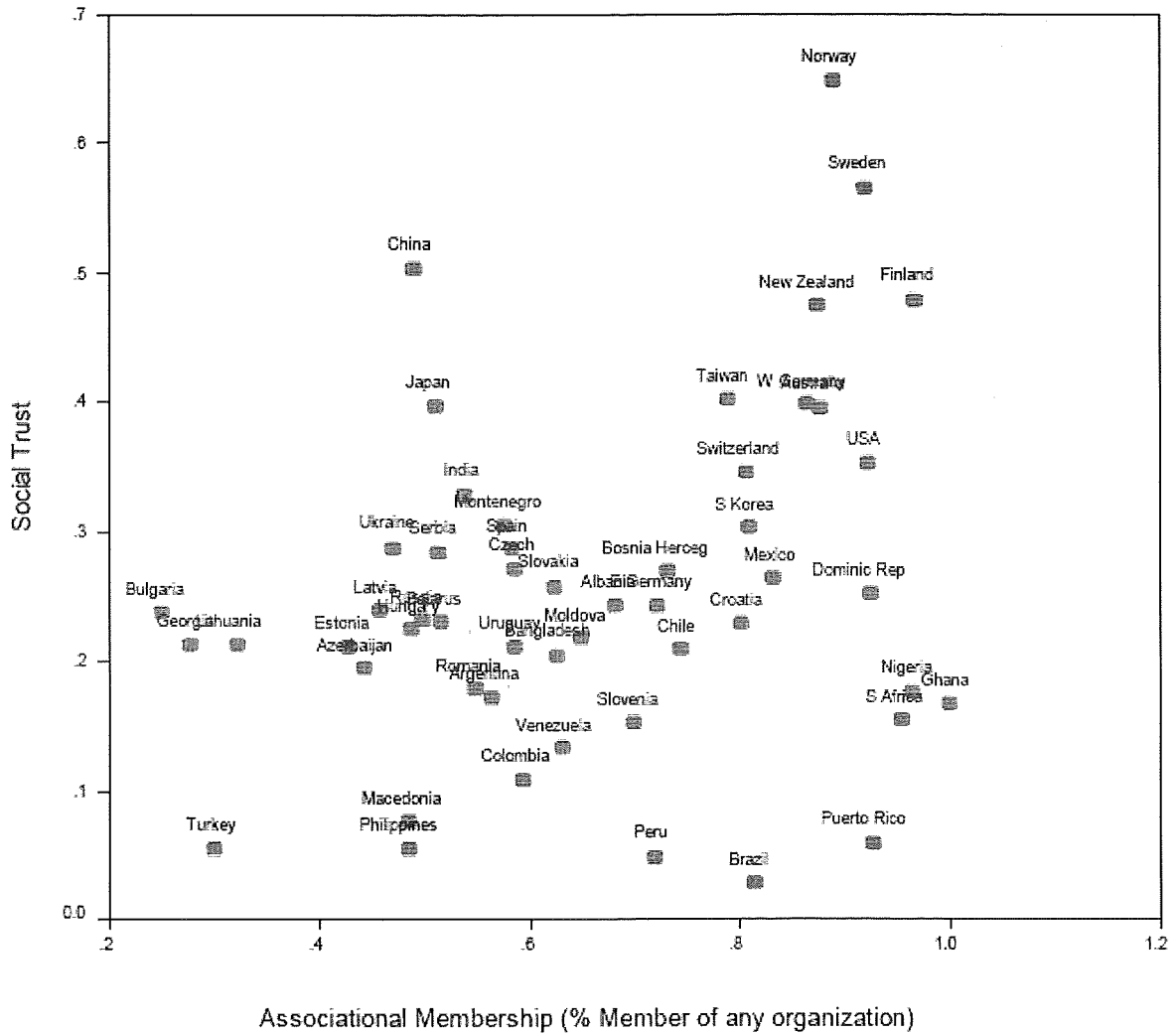
Figure 1: Distribution of societies by the Social Capital Index



Source: Norris 2003

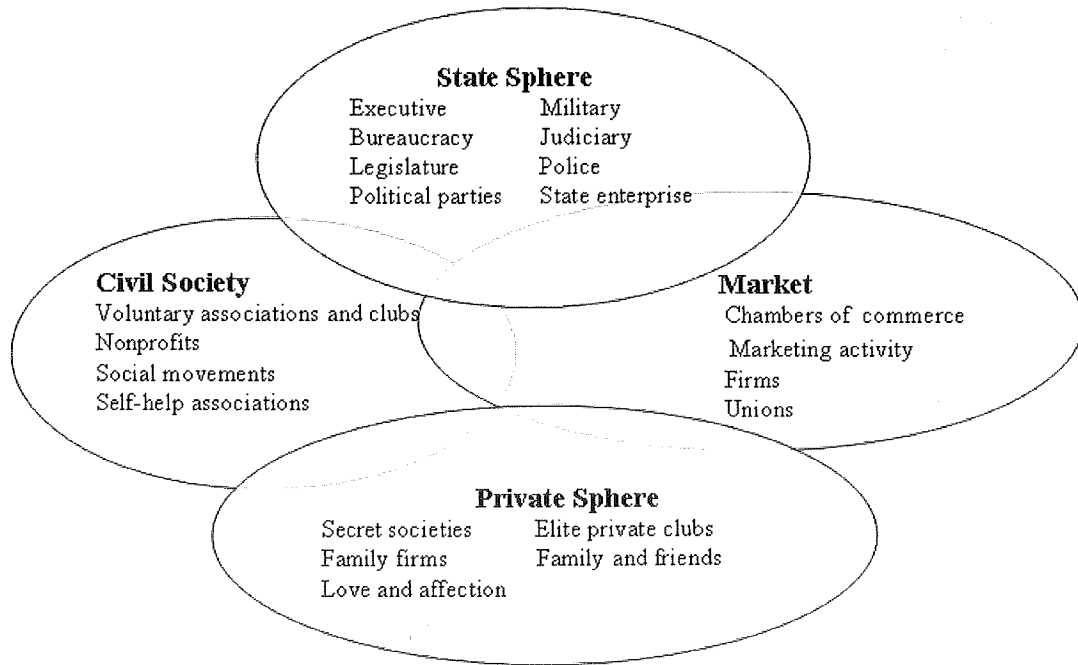
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Figure 2: Map of social capital (social trust and social activism), mid-1990s



Source: Norris 2003

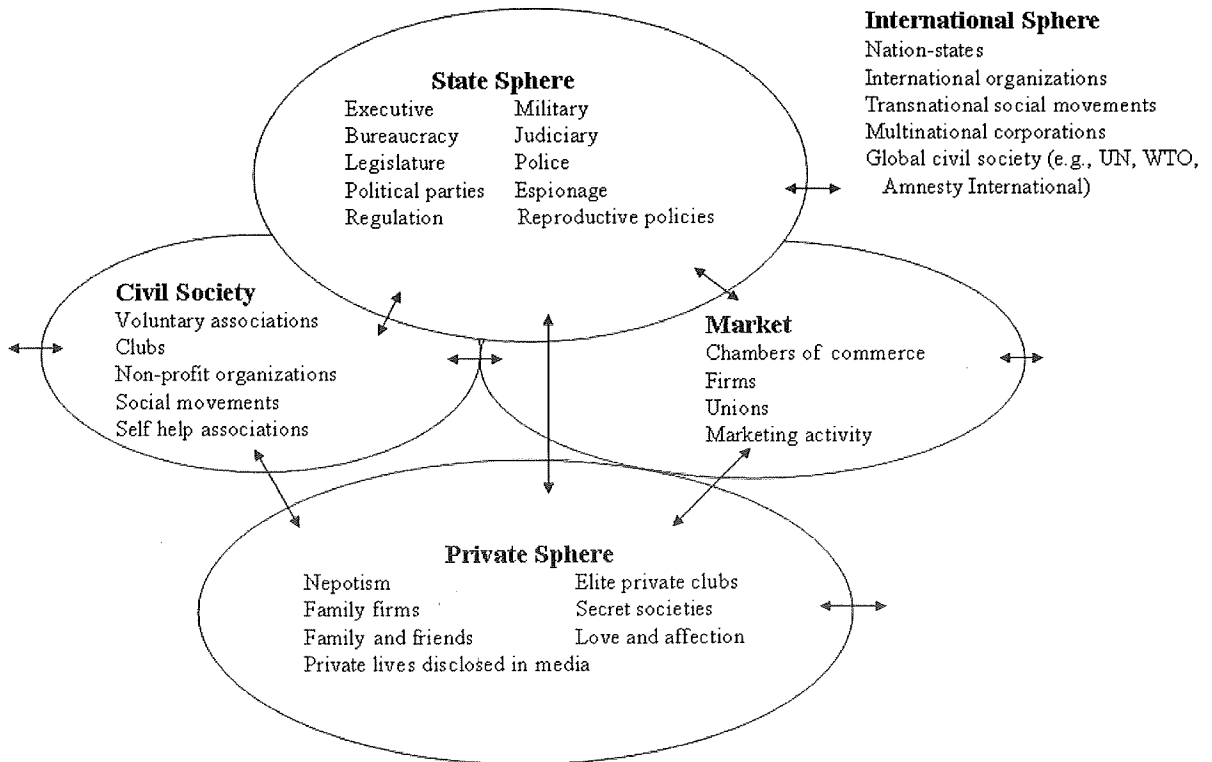
Figure 3: Mapping civil society, state, and market: actors within each sphere



Adapted from Thomas Janoski, *Citizenship and Civil Society: A Framework of Rights and Obligations in Liberal, Traditional, and Social Democratic Regimes*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 13.

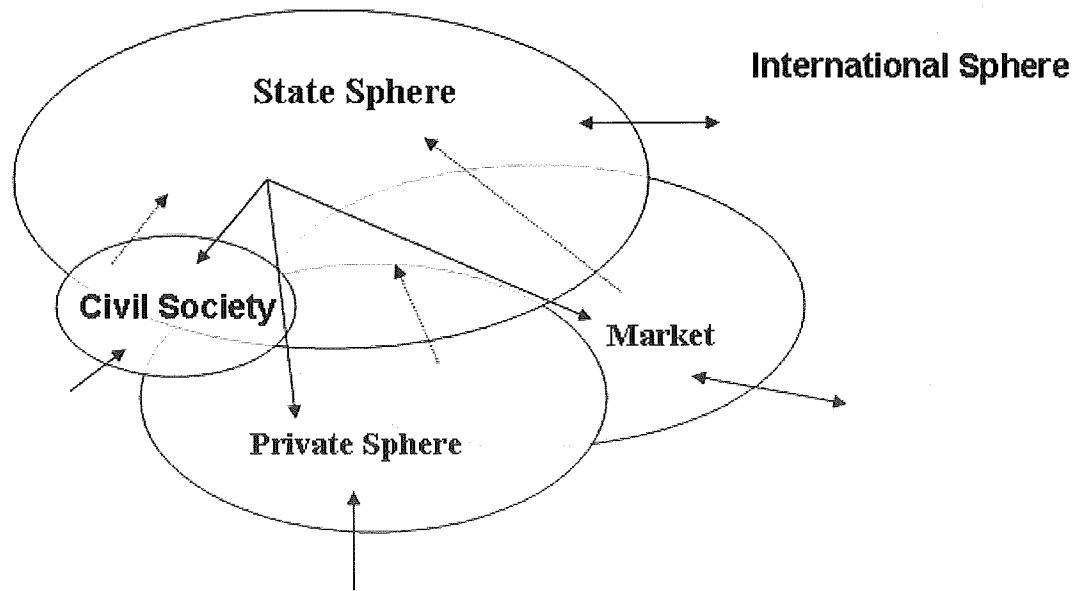
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Figure 4: Mapping relationships between civil society, state, market, and private sphere



Adapted from Thomas Janoski, *Citizenship and Civil Society: A Framework of Rights and Obligations in Liberal, Traditional, and Social Democratic Regimes*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 13.

Figure 5: Mapping civil society, state, and market in China under reform



Adapted from Thomas Janoski, *Citizenship and Civil Society: A Framework of Rights and Obligations in Liberal, Traditional, and Social Democratic Regimes*, Cambridge University Press, 1998. For his comparison of eight countries, see, p. 113.