Books

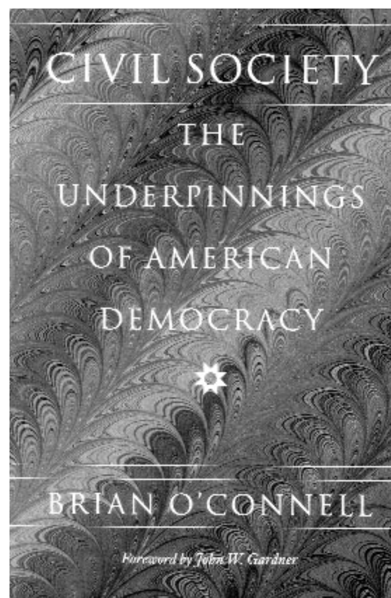
America's Other Sector
Melvin H. Bernstein

Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy, Brian O'Connell, University Press of New England, 1999, $14.95

The existence of a strong, vibrant civil society is what differentiates America from other nations. Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic study, *Democracy in America*, was the first to recognize this unique feature of American life. The concept as it has evolved in the United States means more than people simply acting decently and in a civilized way toward each other, and it should not be viewed as synonymous with the existence of the nonprofit sector, which is only a part of civil society, according to Brian O'Connell, the practitioner-scholar whose new book explores the much talked-about topic. Instead, the notion of a civil sector is essential to the effective functioning of democracy in America—that is the point of O'Connell's book.

With the publication of *Civil Society,* Tufts University and the University Press of New England have launched a promising new series building on the recent upsurge of interest in the subject around the world and domestically. "Civil society" is a centuries old concept of western political thought. In America, the term can be traced back as far as the Mayflower Compact of 1620. But it has been in the 1990s that interest in the importance of civil society has exploded among political and social thinkers in this country and in places such as Eastern and Central Europe, Russia, Asia and Latin America.

Spurred by the post-Cold War interest of former Communist countries in Western democracies in general, and the American democratic model in particular, America's thinkers, commentators, practitioners and policymakers have been compelled to re-examine the timeliness and significance of civil life in America as it is experienced today. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, many leaders from the former Communist Bloc countries looked to the United States to find out what it is about grassroots community life in this country that accounts for the success of American-style democracy.



With nearly 50 years of service as a community organizer and 12 books to his credit, O'Connell is a natural to kick-off this timely new series on civil society. The founding president of Independent Sector, O'Connell served as CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based national association of nonprofit organizations for a decade and a half before becoming Professor of Public Service at the Lincoln Filene Center for Citizenship and Public Affairs at Tufts.

O'Connell explores the way our civil life interacts with American institutions of government, and why civil activity is vital to the American way of life.

At the outset, O'Connell acknowledges the growing confusion about what civil society is and what it does. As Rutgers political scientist Benjamin Barber observes: "The more the term civil society has been used in recent years, the less it has been understood."

This insight is borne out by the voluminous literature that has appeared in the 1990s, revealing a lack of precision about what civil society means, what it encompasses and how to measure its effectiveness. At mid-decade, the New York-based Council on Foundations queried six commentators from diverse nonprofit organizations about the meaning of civil society only to collect six different answers.

Rather than dwell on any grand definition of a term which few can agree upon, the core of O'Connell's insightful guidebook can be found in his chapter on volunteers, voluntary associations and philanthropy, and another on the limitations of civil society. These voluntary associations comprise what he calls the independent sector of society, sometimes referred to as the nonprofit or third sector. (Commerce is viewed as the first sector, government the second, with the private, nonprofit activities of individuals or groups accounting for the third.)

When de Tocqueville traveled to America in the 1830s, the infinite variety of associations he

witnessed in towns and villages convinced him that in "no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America." For de Tocqueville, active participation by citizens in grassroots activities in their communities was the key to making democracy work.

Americans joining in a multiplicity of causes and interests—social, economic, educational, literary, scientific, medical or otherwise—account for the civil part of life in the United States that predates even the formation of government. Foreign observers still marvel at the size, diversity and involvement of America's civil society noting that it is unlike anything they see in their own countries. For instance, America's huge and rapidly growing independent sector generates an estimated $700 billion in annual revenue and is supported by a greater proportion of U.S. citizens than in any other nation in the world. As much as half of all Americans donate time to nonprofit organizations—for an average of four hours weekly. An even greater proportion, an estimated 75 percent, give money regularly to nonprofit organizations.

Although recognizing the size and potential of the independent sector in American society, O'Connell readily acknowledges it is no panacea for addressing the pressing social, educational and health-care issues that confront the nation. He points out in a candid assessment of the limitations of civil society: "We already know a good deal about the size of the country's independent sector, which is likely to be a large part of any measurement of civil society, and we know that the independent sector is very small compared with commerce and government." The $700 billion in nonprofit sector revenues account for only 6 percent of national income, compared with 79 percent attributed to commerce and 15 percent accounted for by government.

O'Connell cautions the reader about the importance of drawing reasonable boundaries around what civil society can accomplish and that it should not be seen as a substitute for the institutions of government, despite the disillusionment Americans have about the undue influence of money and special interests on the way government operates. O'Connell ends his analysis with a nine-point action agenda aimed at promoting civic education and civic engagement at all levels to bring about better understanding of civil society's role in preserving and strengthening American democracy.

At least 10 commissions, centers and institutes have been established and funded during the past five years to study the health and future of civil society, according to the national magazine *Foundation News and Commentary*. They include: the Newton, Mass.-based Institute for Civil Society established in 1997 with a $35 million anonymous gift; the National Commission on Civic Renewal, which is affiliated with the University of Maryland's Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy; the Civil Society Project of the Pennsylvania-based Commonwealth Fund for Public Policy Alternatives; the Kettering Foundation's Civil Investing Group; and the Council on Civil Society, affiliated with the Institute for American Values at the University of Chicago.

After some initial skepticism about the worthiness of studies in citizenship, values and public service, higher education is beginning to play a major role in the study of civil society. O'Connell reports more than 600 colleges and universities now belong to Campus Compact, a Brown University-based coalition of college presidents committed to helping students develop values of citizenship through practical experience in community service.

Nearly 50 universities have established academic centers for the study of civil society or its major components, such as the nonprofit sector and philanthropy. Nationally, a Nonprofit Academic Centers Council has been created. New England members include the Lincoln Filene Center, the Yale Program on Non-Profit Organizations, Boston College's Social Welfare Research Institute and Harvard's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations. Across the country, the number of graduate programs in nonprofit management surged from as few as 17 at the beginning of the decade to 82 in 1999.

Brown University recently created a Web site on civic engagement in America, highlighting the work of Harvard University's Robert Putnam and providing a context, commentaries and resources for examining the debate currently underway.

And during the summer, more than 50 U.S. college presidents issued a *Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibilities of Higher Education,* warning: "This country cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision-making." The presidents found it particularly unacceptable that less than 15 percent of college-age citizens voted in the last presidential election, just one of the indicators that bears out the existence of widespread cynicism and lack of trust in political campaigns, elections, the act of voting and the responsibilities of citizenship.

Whether the issue is how to rebuild societies based on active citizen participation or reaffirming the worth of civic engagement as found in the United States, it can be expected that the explosion of interest, research and studies of civil society will continue. Brian O'Connell's primer is an excellent place to start, both for the newcomer to the field and seasoned observers looking for fresh insights.

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In the Midst of Yankees

Alan R. Earls

Thy Honored Name: A History of the College of the Holy Cross, 1843-1994, Anthony J. Kuzniewski, S.J., Catholic University Press of America, 1999, $34.95

In 1843, just a few years after the Congregational Church was officially disestablished as the favored form of worship in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and only nine years after the infamous burning by Nativists of the Catholic Academy in Charlestown, Mass., the College of the Holy Cross was getting a rather shaky start in Worcester.

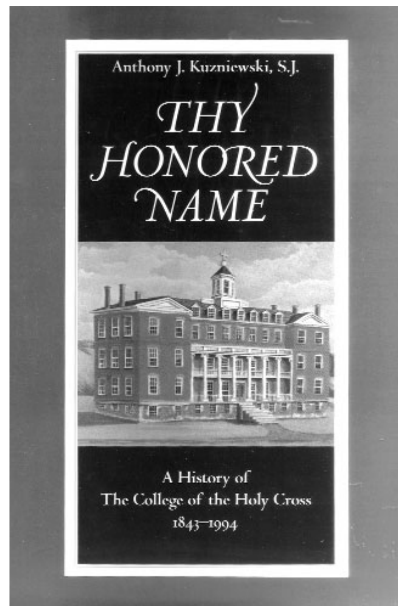
Despite the anti-Catholic bias of the time, the new college soon prospered, drawing strength from its surroundings and inspiration from its academic competitors.

Thy Honored Name reveals the confluence of two formidable educational traditions—Puritan and Jesuit—and a growing appreciation of their compatibility. It is also an account of efforts to promote academic excellence while maintaining an authentically Jesuit identity in a region where many former religious colleges have become largely or entirely secular.

Drawing on several earlier and less scholarly attempts at a history of the college, Anthony J. Kuzniewski, a history professor and rector of the Jesuit community at Holy Cross, has obviously labored hard to write a book that records the life and times of a single institution while documenting much of the larger story of Catholics in America. The book also provides a useful reference for any contemporary institution seeking to steer a path apart from the mainstream.

In its early years, Holy Cross was a pet project of Boston's second bishop, Benedict Fenwick. Indeed, the college almost became part of a Utopian Catholic Community called Benedicta that Fenwick established on 11,000 acres in Aroostook County, Maine. But advocates of a Worcester site prevailed, and the steep hill beside the Blackstone River eventually became the college's home—a perfect aerie for educating young Catholic men and perhaps encouraging some to enter the priesthood.

Holy Cross began as an exclusively Catholic operation offering a seven-year humanities program (including college preparatory-level courses) and failed in its initial attempt to obtain a charter from the Massachusetts General Court in part because of its refusal to admit non-Catholics. The college even endured a humiliating examination by the Joint Special Committee on the Inspection of Nunneries and Convents sent by the Massachusetts state Legislature, then dominated by the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party.



In the more liberal tenor of 1865, Holy Cross finally won its charter. But this was not the end of battles between the separatist institution and the majority culture, for while the college conformed in many ways to American practice, the academic program was still based primarily on the *Ratio Studiorum*—a traditional plan of study developed in the 16th century by Jesuit founder Ingatius Loyola. The *Ratio* favored classical languages and religion to the detriment of mathematics, the sciences and contemporary subjects. Holy Cross leaders made compromises with modernity, but by the turn of the century, it was clear those compromises had not been enough to keep graduates competitive with young men from other institutions. Armed with comparative data on Holy Cross graduates who had attended Harvard professional schools, Harvard President Charles W. Eliot became a vocal critic of the Catholic system in general and of Holy Cross in

particular. "Boston College and Holy Cross have sent a considerable number of graduates to our schools of Law and Medicine, and they as a rule do not make high scores," he sneered in a letter to the Holy Cross administration.

Despite these criticisms and a practical need to appeal to a broad base of students, many at Holy Cross were determined to maintain a focus on God, spirituality, Catholic practice and a deep core of traditional humanities. Finally, though, after 1900, the curriculum was altered to bring Holy Cross into fuller conformity with contemporary educational practice. College offerings were amplified and the prep school appendage was dropped, establishing Holy Cross as a four-year college in the American pattern, with many new subjects added to the curriculum. Despite an increasing number of lay faculty members, however, the Jesuit influence remained. Indeed, many Holy Cross men who served in the U.S. armed forces during World War I remarked on the similarity between military discipline and protocol and that which was maintained by the college.

When World War II came and students all but disappeared, Holy Cross was rescued by government programs such as the Navy's famous V-12 officer training effort, which filled the campus to near capacity.

Through the post-World War II period, Holy Cross retained its distinctive Catholic flavor while continuing to expand physically and academically, though it no longer ranked as the largest Catholic college in the United States as it had it in the 1920s.

Changing undergraduate tastes in the 1950s led to new majors such as business. And while the college continued to be regarded as the best Catholic institution in the country, concern about program quality laid the groundwork for later wholesale introduction or lay faculty.

The 1960s brought wrenching changes to Holy Cross, as the college embraced coeducation, a more open curriculum, increasing involvement of non-Jesuit faculty and administrators and the transition to a lay board of trustees.

Ultimately, Holy Cross emerges from *Thy Honored Name* as a place that is very much alive—informed by its traditions and still distinctive—but no longer exclusive. It is a story that Kuzniewski tells in a way that is both readable and engaging. And it is a New England story, for Holy Cross clearly owes as much to its surroundings as it does to its roots in the ancient Jesuit order. From the Jesuits it drew a sense of purpose and independence that occasionally bordered on the heroic. But its New England environs offered a constant set of challenges and opportunities—some played out on the athletic field through famous rivalries and others manifested through the achievement of its graduates and the continued strengthening of its faculty and curriculum.

Despite his own ties to Holy Cross, Kuzniewski, starting with modest ambitions toward his subject in the 1980s, has ultimately crafted an ample, widely encompassing institutional biography that is balanced, fair and interesting. And in so doing, he reminds us that an academic institution can achieve excellence and relevance even as it remains proud of its antique beginnings. ■

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