

Armony, Ariel C. *The Dubious Link: Civic Engagement and Democratization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. Tables, figures, bibliography, index, 297 pp.; hardcover \$55.

The study of civil society and social capital has flourished since Putnam (1993) proposed a positive relationship between civic engagement and democratic governance. The arguments of Putnam and other “neo-Tocquevilleans” have generated significant debate, and in recent years, scholars increasingly have scrutinized, challenged, and revised such claims. With the publication of his latest book, Ariel Armony joins their ranks. This well-researched, engaging work is a welcome contribution to an important area of inquiry.

A central objective of the book is to challenge the conventional wisdom linking associational life and democracy. According to the neo-Tocquevilleans, social capital—networks of trust and reciprocity—accumulates through face-to-face interactions in voluntary associations. These microsocial processes yield positive results at the macropolitical level in the form of effective governance. Armony suggests, in contrast, that civic engagement does not automatically produce generalized social trust, defined as confidence in people outside of one’s immediate circle of family, friends, and group members. Rather, participants in groups may use their social capital to achieve distinctly undemocratic ends, such as discriminating against others or aggravating existing political and social inequalities. The book thus explores civil society’s “dark side” and emphasizes the aspects of civic engagement that are inimical to democracy (1).

Armony argues primarily that the political, social, and economic context shapes the “nature, dispositions, and orientations” of civil society, as well as its impact on democracy (3). Civil society can reproduce, reinforce, or intensify broader patterns of social interaction, which often are characterized by exclusion and subordination. Socioeconomic (in)equality and the strength or weakness of the rule of law are the most significant contextual factors. Armony contends that inequality undermines the rule of law, which entails “predictable and restrained governmental action,” a legalistic culture, and other institutional and societal features (41). Where the rule of law is weak, “positive predictability” is lacking: it is difficult for individuals to estimate sanctions for their own behavior and that of others. This deficit, in turn, hinders the development of broader networks of social trust through civic engagement. Stated briefly, when civil society is not supported by the rule of law, its democratic potential is limited.

To substantiate these arguments, Armony combines qualitative and quantitative methods. First, he draws on secondary sources to analyze civic associations in the United States of the 1950s and 1960s and in

Weimar Germany. For each case, he traces the effects of associational life on attitudes, goals, practices, and outcomes that are at odds with democracy. For instance, in the United States, white people formed citizens' councils to combat school desegregation in southern states and organized homeowners' movements to maintain residential segregation in northern cities. Civic engagement therefore perpetuated the exclusion of African Americans and thwarted the exercise of their citizenship rights. In Germany, an especially vibrant civil society (comprising groups of veterans, professionals, sports fans, and countless others) contributed to the demise of democracy by reinforcing social divisions and disseminating Nazi ideology. Here Armony builds on the work of Sheri Berman, who argues that the impact of "associationism" in Weimar Germany was dependent on the "wider political context" (1997, 427). Because civil society mobilized outside of—and in opposition to—existing political institutions, it helped precipitate the breakdown of democracy.

Next, the author presents an in-depth analysis of contemporary civil society in Argentina, based on original data collected during field research. Focusing on citizenship rights groups that mobilized throughout the 1990s around such issues as corruption, police brutality, citizen safety, and minority rights, Armony suggests that civil society's contribution to democratic politics "amid a weak rule of law and increasing levels of social stratification is paradoxical at best" (105). Associational life reflects the adverse social and political context in which it is embedded: growing inequality, widespread impunity, and a gap between formal laws and their implementation. Civic participation fails to breed generalized social trust, tolerance, cooperation, or other democratic dispositions and practices; therefore, groups refrain from linking up with one another and with government institutions, which they view as "inherently authoritarian and corrupt" (149).

To bolster his case study findings, Armony performs a quantitative, cross-national analysis of data from 28 countries representing both "third wave" and more established democracies. He begins with a test of Putnam's hypothesis that social trust is positively related to effective democratic institutions. The regression results confirm this relationship. However, the data do not support the other neo-Tocquevillean hypothesis, which states that civic engagement generates social trust. Instead, economic equality appears to drive the production of social capital. Armony concludes that the evidence against the received wisdom is "overwhelming," and his analysis does call into question the assertion that civic engagement necessarily creates generalized social trust, which individuals then use to advance a democratic agenda (200). Nevertheless, this debate is certain to continue. For one thing, the relationship between social trust and democratic governance is borne out by the author's own statistical analysis. More generally, much depends on how

scholars go about specifying and measuring these phenomena; they have yet to reach an agreement on the most appropriate indicators.

Armony makes a valuable contribution to this scholarly dialogue by proposing an alternative framework for understanding civic participation and social capital. I therefore devote the remainder of this essay to evaluating this competing theory and the evidence used to support it. A first set of questions concerns the author's strategy for conceptualizing the principal variables of the study. Armony envisions the undemocratic effects of civic engagement quite broadly and includes a variety of antidemocratic objectives, attitudes, practices, and outcomes in this category. Consequently, the dynamics and results of each case examined in the book are rather different. To illustrate, civic engagement in Germany contributed to the actual collapse of democracy, whereas citizens who opposed desegregation in the United States "undermined the democratic character of the liberal state" (3). Armony offers both cases as instances of civil societal actors transmitting and multiplying antidemocratic—discriminatory, racist, and exclusionary—ideas and "eroding democratic habits, practices, and institutions" (8).

Meanwhile, civic participation in Argentina has not led to the demise of democracy or the obstruction of minority rights. Armony instead presents this case as an example of civil society hindering democratization or falling short of contributing meaningfully to the process. He maintains that citizenship rights groups largely reinforce the vicious circles of Argentine democracy by intensifying social fragmentation and dissatisfaction with political institutions. The organizations fail to cultivate tolerance, generate broader networks of trust, or cooperate with either governmental or fellow civil societal actors. Thus, aside from some general similarities, the book's cases differ considerably. These differences bring two questions to mind: how comparable are the cases, and what are the precise limits of this expansive category of "undemocratic effects"?

The factors that Armony proposes to explain such effects also are defined broadly. He argues that inequality erodes the rule of law, which in turn limits the chances that civic engagement will produce generalized social trust and support democracy. The case studies, however, draw on a much wider array of contextual factors. Examples include state policies—most notably the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*—and economic transformation in the United States; and economic crisis, discontent with governing elites, and ineffectual political institutions and parties in Germany. In addition, the book touches on myriad types of social cleavages, including class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and religion. In short, readers may be left wondering what is *not* included under the rubric of "context."

Because Armony assigns great importance to context, moreover, he suggests that the "kinds of groups, movements, or networks" populat-

ing civil society are largely irrelevant (205). Two further questions arise: does civil society always reflect or magnify existing social divisions and conflicts? Can organizations and movements ever transcend the circumstances in which they find themselves? The historical record indicates that such actors frequently have challenged and reshaped cultural and social practices, political institutions, and policies. Indeed, Armony's own cases help illustrate this point. For instance, the author discusses the numerous citizens of the United States who organized to defend the racial status quo; yet during this same period, participants in the civil rights movement were mobilizing to effect change and to democratize both politics and society.

Similarly, Armony states that certain Argentine groups are incapable of rising above discrimination and intolerance and therefore reproduce social "dysfunction." He also concludes that organizations pursuing legislative reforms and criminal cases against violent police officers have enjoyed limited success in curbing the abuse of authority. Alternatively, one could argue that the groups' ability to contribute, however modestly, to strengthening the rule of law is surprising, given the pervasive impunity and corruption in Argentina. Instead of offering their activities as an example of failure, one would be compelled to explain how they achieved some degree of success in spite of this inauspicious environment.

These issues speak to a more fundamental debate, which concerns the role of structure versus agency in shaping political outcomes. Armony's model tends to overlook the agency of civil societal actors. Although the environment in which people associate constrains and shapes collective action, their ideas, goals, and strategies also merit attention. Furthermore, a scholar's vision of civil society depends largely on which groups or movements (s)he selects for analysis. This book obviously underscores the "dark side" of civic engagement in order to cast doubt on the neo-Tocquevillean thesis and to counter the usual tendency to focus on the "brighter" aspects of associational life. However, it is difficult to arrive at valid conclusions about civil society as a whole by examining only those cases that highlight its positive or negative elements. A more nuanced, disaggregated view of civil society seems overdue in this area of research.

The limitations discussed here do not overshadow the book's many admirable qualities. To begin with, the author knits together several important themes in democratization studies that are often discussed separately. In particular, the rule of law, inequality, and citizenship rights are interwoven nicely with the themes of civic engagement and social capital. The result is a finely textured analysis of democracy.

In addition, readers will appreciate Armony's comprehensive approach to the rule of law. He takes into account several characteristics of state and legal institutions—the degree to which these guarantee

the separation of powers, accountability, and transparency, for example—and various types of state-society linkages, including citizen perceptions of the legitimacy of such institutions. He also considers relations among citizens and the extent to which a culture of legality governs these interactions. By combining societal and institutional perspectives, the author has crafted a more robust concept than is commonly found in the literature.

Moreover, the book's detailed discussion of police brutality, the excessive use of force, and other abuses of power in Argentina will interest Latin American specialists and nonspecialists alike. Because the victims of this violence are disproportionately young and impoverished Argentines, the analysis provides a stark illustration of the relationship between inequality and a weak rule of law. Armony's insights are likely to resonate with scholars and students of Latin America, home to some of the world's most unequal societies. In general, by calling attention to the uneven distribution of citizenship rights in Argentina and other countries, the author paints a realistic portrait of democracy "on the ground." The book lends credence to the idea that democratization entails more than regime-level and institutional change.

The book's methodological rigor is most welcome. The cross-national comparisons and combination of qualitative and quantitative modes of analysis are especially positive features. The well-organized review of the civil society scholarship in chapter 1 is also praiseworthy. Resisting the temptation to lump together existing works on associational life, Armony distinguishes among three major areas of emphasis found in the literature: formal organizations (their numbers, characteristics, and actions), less-formal networks, movements, and "publics" engaging in political contestation and the creation of social capital.

This book succeeds in advancing several debates that are central to the field of political science and relevant to a broader audience. Armony's wide-ranging, provocative work undoubtedly will open up a number of promising avenues for future research.

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