

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ROBERT LAYTON, *Order and Anarchy: Civil Society, Social Disorder and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, vi + 197 p., index.

Order and Anarchy: Civil Society, Social Disorder and War is a well organized book, which first lays out the argument and then proceeds to present historical and anthropological evidence in favor of the claim underpinning a strong theoretical framework. The book is comprised of four chapters, empirically investigating and at times debunking myths about civil society, its origins as a concept, its transformations, and its present role in maintaining social order or causing anarchy. The book also addresses the question of the role of violence in the evolution of human society and offers alternative understandings of violence.

Civil society is perhaps one of the most debated and politically loaded concepts in political science, sociology and development studies. The 1990s saw a renewed interest in civil society due to the apparent failure of the modernization process, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, and a compelling need to introduce democracy in the non-Western world. These events prompted theorists to look for a suitable agency through which the autocratic political structure of these countries could be balanced and thereby resulting in a favorable context for introducing democracy. Disenchantment came rather quickly, however, as it proved a not-so-worthy process to be relied on in the former communist block. Nonetheless, the idea has recently become prominent again in neo-liberal discourse following the disastrous impact of structural adjustment and globalization on the economic and political spheres of developing countries and the consequent criticism of Bretton Woods Institutions.

Robert Layton is wonderful at radically altering the notion of civil society, which had long been thought of as a product of the Enlightenment and bourgeois-rational economy. He convincingly refutes the notion that rationality is a by-product of only Western societies, and presents evidence that rationality is a general characteristic of all human societies. The book is mainly borne out of, but not confined to, Layton's fieldwork for his doctoral research on social change. What Layton does here is deconstruct the concept of civil society and open it up for new possibilities, which incorporate not only the bourgeois form but also other forms of social organizations that lie between the state and the household. His definition of civil society eventually includes any "social organizations occupying the space between the household and the state that enable people to co-ordinate

their management of resources and activities” (3). In order to arrive at this definition it was necessary epistemologically to refute the idea of evolution as inherently progressive, fostered by sociologists such as Herbert Spencer. In his theory of natural selection, Darwin proposed a different trajectory of evolution for different species consistent with the local environment. Neo-Darwinians drawing on this line of argument advanced the concept of fitness landscape which represents “adaptation in an evolving population.” Better adaptation to a particular ecological niche is not necessarily a progressive change.

This socio-ecological approach, combined with game theory, enables Layton to refute the argument (advanced especially by Ernest Gellner, Adam Seligman, and Keith Tester) that civil society is typical of modern bourgeois society and rationalization processes, which emerged following the English enclosure movement. Layton instead insists that “the concept of civil society also needs to be freed from the evolutionist assumption that it emerges within the social life of the state at some particular point in the state’s evolution, particularly the point at which commercial capitalism dissolves traditional local communities” (14). This argument is then supported by a host of anthropological evidence showing that mainly out of self-interest people form associations independent of the state in almost every society and that these associations satisfy every criterion for being identified as civil society.

The present debate about civil society is rooted in the portrayal of human nature by classical thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes who, writing in the context of the English Civil War, depicted a grim picture of human nature where every individual is up against another in pursuing his/her unrestrained self-interest in a state of nature void of any central authority. A leader or sovereign was therefore necessary to restore order in society by injecting a sense of assuredness among members that anyone violating the law would be duly punished. John Locke, in contrast, saw human beings as inherently rational and able to pursue their self-interest peacefully without recourse to violence and hostility. For Locke, civil society was then a human condition in the state of nature. Adam Ferguson, in a similar vein, also treated human being as “intrinsically social.” Neither Locke nor Ferguson “confine(d) reason or civil society to mercantile capitalism” (28). The theoretical works of Locke and Ferguson directly inform Layton’s concept of civil society in which self interest is the crux of human social activity.

In neo-liberal discourse, civil society is often portrayed as a panacea for restoring and advancing democracy and social order. Layton does not consider the role of civil society as exclusively stabilizing for the state, but at times undermining as well (depending on the situation prevailing in any particular society). Social order is contingent upon the economic sustainability of society. Therefore, the mere existence of a vibrant civil society should not be seen as a guaranteeing factor of social order. Layton thinks that globalization and structural adjustment did more damage than any other factor to social order and political stability in the global South.

He almost ruthlessly displaces civil society from the centre stage and puts self-interest instead at the helm of affairs by arguing that “social order cannot be attributed to a natural human anarchy breaking free as the state loosens its grip. A more sophisticated theory of social order is needed that places self-interest in the context of social interaction, in order to show why social order is sometimes sustained and at other times disrupted” (78). He argues for an “ecology of social behavior” which will enable us not only to trace “the development of stable strategies over time” but also answer whether instability in the system is caused by its inherent dynamics or due to changes in the surrounding environment. This is no doubt an ambitious project of identifying a mechanism for the evolution of social order and disorder in social systems.

In order to solve the puzzle why local forms of civil society persist or dissolve, Layton insists that the answer lies in their “appropriateness to local conditions” and the interaction between civil society and the surrounding environment. Drawing on the atomistic evolutionary theory of Darwin, Layton explains social change, using the “fitness landscape” approach, as a complex interactive process where there is no “best” or “most evolved” social institution. He also combines the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, and game theory developed by behavioral ecologists to explain “what causes co-operation and reciprocity within civil society to give way to competition and conflict” (92). The causes of breakdown in social order are attributed to alterations in the economic and social fitness landscape that undermine the relevance of dominant social organizations, and eventually empower “subordinate parts of the cultural repertoire.” This argument is to a large extent similar to the Marxian view of social change but with obvious differences where change occurs due to a radical shift in the dominant mode of production and often necessitated by subordinate groups.

Layton, however, does not confine his analysis to abstract processes of social change that underlie the system. He also empirically investigates what causes the breakdown of social order in developing countries. Much akin to the argument espoused by the Dependency School, Layton concludes by referring to various studies on Rwanda, Congo and Sierra Leone that the evolutionary economies and the social landscape of “Third World” countries are heavily shaped by the West. He argues that “Western economic policy influences social stability in the Third World, ... contemporary nation states are embedded in an economic fitness landscape where each state influences the stability of others and shapes the strategies of local groups who find themselves competing for resources” (109). Therefore, the anarchism that often follows should not be seen as irrational behaviour, but as a rational response to changes in the economic environment by local competing groups operating in the absence of a strong state.

Finally, Layton introduces the concept of violence in the context of social order. Hopefully, it is evident by now that he is not ready to accept the taken-for-granted or to draw conclusions without proper examination. Thus

Layton does not consider violence as a uniquely disturbing feature for society. Rather, it is the functional aspects of violence that interest him. For him “violence and peacemaking are both parts of a broader social complex” (143). He has expressly maintained the position that human nature is not what Hobbes portrayed; therefore, it is logical to argue that although societies have latent or manifest tendencies to violence, they seldom result in a calamity. If it does, then “catastrophic” change occurs in which the nature of the state is radically altered. In that kind of circumstance, ethnicity and kinship (often considered as “primordial” institutions in neo-liberal discourse) could be two potential dimensions on which trust could be reconstructed.

This is a very good book, especially for those working in the area of development, democracy and social order. It offers critical insights into some of the concepts and assumptions that tend to be accepted unquestionably in neo-liberal discourse. The author is also skilled at providing theoretical insights into debates about the origins and nature of civil society, thus making the book accessible for non-specialized readers. The problem with the book is that at times it over-generalizes the argument and attempts to construct a meta-narrative of social order. While there is no inherent problem in constructing meta-narratives, that approach often risks taking time and space as constants and renders empirical evidence to be of secondary importance. Layton’s definition of civil society is so broad and generalized that it might be difficult to use his definition for categorical purposes. Definitions are heuristic devices for categorization, which purposefully exclude some of the features that make analysis easier. Unfortunately, Layton’s definition of civil society incorporates anything between the state and the household. The term loses any concrete meaning. If one accepts this definition, there is still a need to explain the emphasis on the state and household since even Plato defined civil society as a state-society or as politically organized citizens.

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