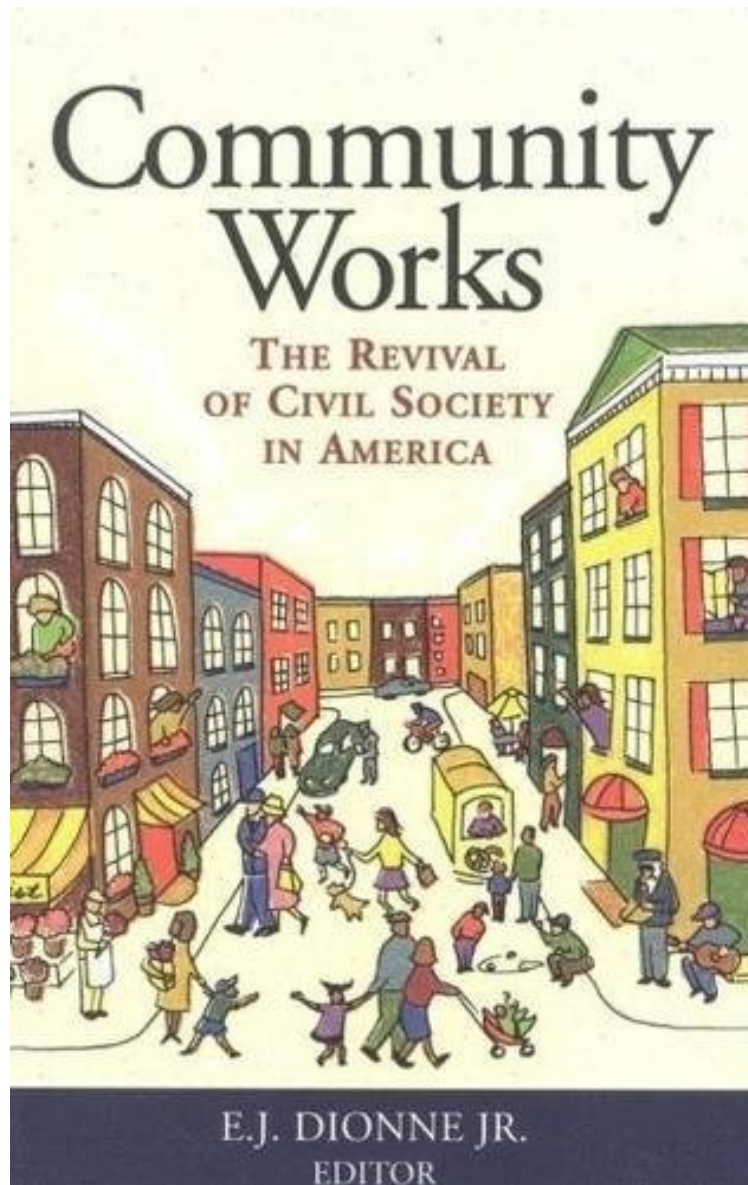


Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America

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From Brookings Institution Press : **Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised **Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America**:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The complex coexistence of civil society and government By Robert O. Bothwell **COMMUNITY WORKS** is a collection of 18 brief, pithy essays about civil society in America -- past,

present and future, although the emphasis is on the present (mid-1990s). The essayists are academicians, activists, religious leaders, former government officials, politicians and philosophers. With such a long time perspective and so many diverse perceptions, it is hardly surprising that "civil society" is defined in nearly 18 different ways. Civil society, thus, is viewed as either hurting or healthy, declining or reviving. Regardless, several things are certain: civil society exists in America, is not dead, nor is static, and more people than ever are writing about it. **COMMUNITY WORKS** is a rich and complex book. It is a terrific smorgasbord of provocative thought (and some facts) both for beginners in Civil Society 101 as well as for those much more steeped in the concept and its realities. The **REVIVAL** in the title is a takeoff from Robert Putnam's now famous "Bowling Alone" article (1995), in which he documented (with inadequate data and observations, in this author's view) that America's civil society was losing its networks of civic engagement, and this boded ill for the nation. E. J. Dionne, Jr., **REVIVAL**'s editor, clearly believes that Putnam overstated the case of civil society's decline. Nevertheless, Dionne includes a fair number of essays that share Putnam's pessimism, as well as a good number that reflect Dionne's optimism. Alan Wolfe opens the book by telling us not to worry that we are currently defining "civil society" in ways quite different from Locke, Rousseau, de Tocqueville, and other past observers, but to understand that we are reinventing civil society today, as indeed, civil society has been reinvented in every past era and different country/culture. The most common ground among the essayists is that civil society is not an isolation ward for the birth and nurturing of networks of trust, reciprocity, tolerance and more good things, but that civil society must coexist with government and business, both as critic and collaborator. While respecting the coexistence as fact, some, however, insist that civil society is the bedrock of government (and maybe business). Jean Bethke Elshtain leads this group, arguing that civil society provides the democratic culture for democratic government. (Francis Fukuyama in *Trust* made similar observations about civil society underpinning profitable global business.) Michael Waltzer and others argue, however, that government must first provide the legal and political space for civil society. Still others write that business must first provide the meat and potatoes (or peas and potatoes) before the citizens can focus on soccer, food banks, piano recitals, meals on wheels-- whatever networks create civil society values. To William A. Schambra and others, the bedrock in the coexisting spheres is neither business, government nor civil society, but the local activities that create civil society values. Theda Skocpol counters this local fixation by documenting that most local organizations historically have had substantial ties with national organizations, such as the PTA and American Legion, which "have often grown up in a mutually beneficial relationship with federal policies, including federal 'tax-and-spend' programs." Cutting across the foregoing issues are political liberals' and conservatives' thoughts on civil society. According to Dionne/Waltzer, "The interest in civil society reflects (for conservatives and libertarians) a reaction against government and (for liberals and progressives) a search for stronger ground on which to rebuild responsive and energetic government." But all agree that civil society should be more important than it now is. Politicians Bill Bradley, Dan Coats and Rick Santorum speak to this, as do essayists Alan Ehrenhalt, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Bruce Katz, David Kuo and Michael Waltzer. Compelling observations are offered by Kuo on what liberals and conservatives can learn from each other about government and civil society. For example, Kuo tells liberals that "Faith matters...(It has) policy potential as a catalyst for radical change in people's lives." Or, as he tells conservatives, "Government programs can do - and have done - good...food stamps... indexing of social security benefits and medicare....Despite its well-documented failures, the War on Poverty changed the face of poverty." Last, but not least, the role of faith-based organizations in civil society is another major discussion in *Revival*. John J. DiIulio, Jr., Rev. Eugene F. Rivers III and Himmelfarb focus on this role. They are all quite positive about the essentials of religion in building strong civil society, though they all ascertain critical roles for government in providing support for religion and faith-based charities. Such support may be in the form of money for community development and social services (as DiIulio and Rivers suggest), but it may also be non-monetary, as value support to stigmatize immoral behavior -- "illegitimacy, promiscuity and chronic dependency" -- through legislation, judicial decisions, administrative regulations, educational requirements and tax codes (as Himmelfarb advocates). If one wants to quarrel about the value of **REVIVAL**, it would be that most of the essays offer opinions about civil society rather than propose theories buttressed by facts about American civil society's shortcomings or illustrious realities. The essays by Skocpol and William A. Galston and Peter Levine are exceptions to this. Robert O. Bothwell is President Emeritus/Senior Fellow of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, Washington, DC, USA

America is experiencing a boom of voluntarism and civic mindedness. Community groups are working together to clean up their cities and neighborhoods. People are rejoining churches, civic associations, and Little Leagues. And, at every opportunity, local and national leaders are exhorting citizens to pitch in and do their part. Why has the concept of a civil society--an entire nation of communities, associations, civic and religious groups, and individuals all working toward the common good--become so popular? Why is so much hope being invested in the voluntary sector? Why is a civil society so important to us? This book looks at the growing debate over the rise, importance, and consequences of civil society. E.J. Dionne puts the issues of the debate in perspective and explains the deep-rooted developments that are reflected in civil society's revival. Alan Wolfe and Jean Bethke Elshtain discuss reasons why the idea of a civil society is important today. Theda Skocpol and William A. Schambra offer two opposing viewpoints on where

successful voluntary civic action originates--nationally or at the local grass roots. John J. DiIulio Jr. shines a light on the success of faith-based programs in the inner-city, and Bruce Katz studies the problems caused by concentrated poverty in those same neighborhoods. Jane Eisner underscores the extent to which the volunteer sector needs organization and support to effectively complete its work. Other contributors include Bill Bradley, William A. Galston, and Gertrude Himmelfarb.

"'Community Works' is... a buffet of ideas, that provides substantial food for thought about civil society in the United States." Dwayne Walling, Charity Channel- We , 6/1/2001"...a valuable, thoughtful, and surprisingly practical contribution to the debate on one of our most pressing moral questions--the restoration of common civil life." Stephen L. Carter, Yale"...the best current guide to these elusive but attractive concepts [civil society, mediating structures] and what they promise for our politics and our society." Nathan Glazer, Harvard"...admirably compressed and cogent essays help us clarify a necessary debate--not about whether American society needs reconstruction, but rather in which directions...full of heartening signs of a maturation that all the contending ideological parties sorely need." Todd Gitlin, NYU
From the Publisher
E.J. Dionne Jr. is a columnist for the Washington Post and a senior fellow in the Brookings Governmental Studies program. He is the author of *Why Americans Hate Politics* (Simon Schuster, 1991) and, most recently, *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era* (Simon Schuster, 1996).
About the Author
E.J. Dionne Jr. is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, cochair of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, and a syndicated columnist for the Washington Post Writers Group.