In their seminal book published in the early 1990s, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato take on the grand task of a “reconstruction” of the concept of civil society in the spirit of a critical theory of society.\(^1\) Civil society is defined as the sphere of associational life, intimate relations and organized communication that exists between the state and the market economy. The authors make clear their conviction that at the end of a century of failed political utopias, only this particular sphere promises to generate new impulses and movements for “freer, more democratic societies”\(^2\) across the world. For this reason, the concept is considered central for a critical political and social theory. Unfortunately, Cohen and Arato have confined their ambition to the reconstruction of an analytical category largely in the vein of Habermas’s general social theory. A dualistic model of state versus society is replaced by a tripartite framework; the idea of progress is attenuated by a more complex stage model of societal


\(^2\) Ibid., p. 421.
development; and the less tangible forms and effects of communicative “influence” are assigned a proper place in the theory, along with “power” and “money.” However, what is completely missing from this picture is a sense that the vocabulary of civil society is not only employed by critical observers but also by participants in political life involved in struggles over the meaning of solidarity and self-government; and that this has been the case since several centuries. Citizens not only struggle within the institutions of civil society, but also for “civil society.” The language of civil society is widely used as a powerful tool for making sense of democratic experiences, for framing political demands, and for challenging adversaries. The concept is marked by traces of the antagonistic usages that different groups at different times have made of it. Before becoming an international code word for more inclusive and more global forms of solidarity, “civil society” was used to defend individual liberties, the stability and prosperity of the political realm, and ideals of civic mutuality and reciprocity. The important point here is that, like other political concepts, civil society is not only a theoretical category that serves to slice up the social world in a certain manner, but also a deeply polarizing concept that creates an “ideal society” in the minds of everybody; and this ideal society is, as Durkheim has rightly emphasized, very much part of the “real society.”

Noncivil social spheres like the state and the economy may have their own ways of functioning, but whether they are perceived as resources or as threats depends entirely on the articulations of civil society.

In other words, what Jeffrey Alexander writes about the institutions of civil society applies to the concept of civil society as well; both “crystallize ideals about solidarity with and against others in specific terms … They articulate specific claims and binding demands for inclusion and exclusion, for liberation and for repression.”

Following up on this comment, the present chapter explores the concept of civil society by identifying a number of implicit oppositional terms and the respective semantic fields, which in different historical contexts have lent meaning to the concept. Three such oppositional terms and

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4 Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, p. 70.