Liberalism and Civil Society

As hinted before, liberalism tends to create and promote civil society. Historically, civil society has been primarily the creation and project of liberalism or liberal modernity, especially the Enlightenment. As Spencer remarks, liberalism created and promoted civil society in that it “diminished compulsory co-operation throughout social life and increased voluntary cooperation [i.e.] diminished the range of governmental authority, and increased the area within which each citizen may act unchecked”. This is also what Veblen implies by identifying what he describes as the “liberal construction of the principles of self-direction and equality among men in their civil capacity and their personal relations”. As contemporary sociologists point out, civil society originally developed as the “sphere of private autonomy” during classical liberalism – i.e. liberal capitalism in the 18th–19th centuries – by separating and emancipating from the state or “public authority”, as the crucial moment of the “modernization process” (Habermas et al. 1998: 109) in the Western world. In short, liberalism creates and promotes civil society as a non-political sphere of freedom.
to complement, reinforce, or help establish liberal democracy as a political system. This yields the concept and reality of liberal civil society, by analogy to liberal democracy or politics.

In particular, liberal civil society, like democracy, has been the original project, creation and legacy of the Enlightenment as the foundation of liberalism. Thus, contemporary analysts stress that for the “liberal Enlightenment thinkers, it was against [a] kind of proclaimed public authority of the absolute monarchy that the emerging civil society counteracted. Absolutism proclaimed a state-centered view of the constitution of political community whereas Enlightenment liberalism rejected it”1 (Ku 2000: 219). In this respect, with its dichotomy between public/state/political and private/market/civil society Enlightenment liberalism represented the relativist “flip side” of pre-liberal, including medieval as well as Roman, absolutism (Ku 2000: 221).

In addition to being an Enlightenment project, creation and legacy, liberal civil society’s elements involve social non-political liberty in general, in particular economic and non-economic freedoms, individual and group liberties, rights and identities, as well as a “dark side” of anti-liberal deformations and intrusions, considered next in this order (Table 8).

1 Ku (2000: 219) adds that the Enlightenment thinkers “identified the capitalist market as playing an essential part in the formation of such a civil society – a community that was capable of organizing itself independent of the specific direction of state power.” Also, it is suggested that since the public “signifies a domain of citizenship attached to both state and civil society [one should abandon] the Enlightenment dichotomy between public/state and private/market/civil society” (Ku 2000: 227).