“We need to think ourselves beyond the nation,” declared Arjun Appadurai in the first sentence of his 1993 essay “Patriotism and Its Futures.” Since that announcement, and indeed for some time before it, the demand has been made with increasing urgency to give clearer theoretical shape to the practices, locations, solidarities, and institutions that seem to be emerging beyond the familiar grid of the nation-state system. One obvious reason for the demand is empirical: there is little doubt that the volume of significant social phenomena that are in one way or another of a “transnational” kind has grown considerably over the last three decades, and that these cannot be satisfactorily described or explained within a conceptual field that is still organized around the idea that a “modern” society and people are, under normal circumstances, constituted as a nation-state. The second reason for the demand is moral-political: it is based on the perception that the authority and legitimacy of the nation-state are in crisis, and that its capacity to act for the good of the people over whom it claims to exercise authority has been exhausted or irreparably undermined. The two reasons together have produced the sense of urgency behind the demand to think beyond the nation.

I will in this essay advance an argument that acknowledges the force of the two reasons mentioned above, but that nevertheless suggests that for those very reasons we should look within the nation rather than beyond it. It could, of course, be objected that the options “beyond or within” ought not to be posed as mutually exclusive ones, and that the proposals to think more seriously of postnational institutions or solidarities do not necessarily rule out rethinking the internal forms of the nation-state. My response to this anticipated objection is that for certain strategic reasons having to do with the politics of theoretical intervention, I will insist that the journey that might take us beyond the nation must first pass through the currently disturbed zones within the nation-state, and that in fact a more satisfactory resolution of the problems within could give us some of the theoretical instruments we are looking for to tackle the questions beyond.

It makes little sense for me to undertake here a review of all of the things that have been said to make the case for looking beyond the nation-state. Since Arjun Appadurai is one of the most prominent and able advocates of this proposal, I will in the following paragraphs arrange the mate-
rials for my argument through an interlocution with some of his recent writings.

The Transnational Tendencies

Let us take a brief look, first of all, at some of the “facts.” Appadurai summarizes these under two heads: electronic mediation and mass migration. The developments on this score in the last three decades or so cannot be regarded as merely quantitative enlargements of phenomena that existed in the pre-electronic age. First, “more people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born”: this creates new mythographies that are “not just a counterpoint to the certainties of daily life” but are “charters for new social projects” that impel ordinary people to change their daily lives (6). Second, contrary to the theory of the media as the opium of the masses, there is enough evidence to show that the consumption of mass media has produced among ordinary people its own instruments of agency in the form of irony, selectivity, or resistance. Third, the collective experience of electronic media creates the possibility of collective imaginings that are more powerful and far-reaching than the imaginative boundaries of the nation. The combination of electronic mediation and mass migration has created new diasporic public spheres that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. These have produced in a large number of cases an awareness of cultural identity that cuts across national boundaries; movements of modern ethnicity that are transnational; and sometimes even a sense of political solidarity whose principles are nonterritorial.

If these are the facts about transnational tendencies in the contemporary world, moral conclusions have also been drawn from them. (Although Appadurai sometimes claims to be offering only a “diagnosis” and not a “prognosis,” the shift from the one to the other is tangible enough in his writings; indeed, without the moral-political implications, the descriptions of transnational phenomena would lose much of their evidential power.) Thus, “the nation-state, as a complex modern political form, is on its last legs. . . . Nation-states, as units in a complex interactive system, are not very likely to be the long-term arbiters of the relationship between globality and modernity” (19). With the nation-state having entered “a terminal crisis,” emergent “postnational” forms of organization have moved into political spaces that were previously jealously guarded under claims of national sovereignty. Several agencies within the United Nations network and bodies such as Amnesty International now actually monitor the activities of nation-states on questions of human rights,
peacekeeping, refugees, famine relief, and health. A vast network of non-
governmental organizations are now providing basic support and services
that nation-states in many countries of the world have failed to supply to
their citizens. Religious organizations and movements of various kinds
provide services across national boundaries and in addition mobilize loy-
alties that are not bounded by territory or citizenship. Such organizations
are “both instances and incubators of a postnational global order” (168).

Of course, to seriously argue the case for postnational political forms
as the emergent tendency of the age, one would have to provide an alter-
native account of the apparent resurgence of nationalism in many places,
especially in many parts of the former Soviet Union and in former
Yugoslavia. Appadurai does indeed offer an alternative account. He con-
tests the description of these phenomena as a recrudescence of primor-
dialism or tribalism; in fact, he specifically calls such descriptions “the
Bosnian fallacy.” Territorial nationalism is only “the alibi of these move-
ments and not necessarily their basic motive or final goal.” They “actually
contain transnational, subnational links and, more generally, nonnational
identities and aspirations.” But they cannot articulate these aspirations
except in the language of nationalism because

no idiom has yet emerged to capture the collective interests of many groups
in translocal solidarities, cross-border mobilizations and postnational identi-
ties. . . . They are still entrapped in the linguistic imaginary of the territorial
state. . . . This vicious circle can only be escaped when a language is found
to capture complex, nonterritorial, postnational forms of allegiance.
(165–66)

In the meantime, locality continues to be produced as a structure of
feeling, as a property of social life, and as an ideology of situated com-
munity, even under conditions of globalization. However, locked within
the grid of the nation-state system, the production of locality has become
increasingly difficult. The neighborhood has tended to become more con-
text-produced than context-generating. There are three reasons for this.
First, the modern nation-state has increasingly resorted to greater disci-
plinary powers to define all neighborhoods as owing allegiance and affili-
ation to it. Second, collective social movements and identities have been
increasingly dissociated from territory. And third, principally because of
the powers of electronic mediation, the relations between spatial and vir-
tual neighborhoods have been eroded. The virtual neighborhood, where
context-generating feelings of solidarity can be produced among people
spatially located in different places, is at present confined to relatively
small diasporic groups in which the most active component is probably
the exiled intellectual. But ideas, finances, and social linkages emanating
from these virtual locations also flow back to actually lived neighborhoods and can change and reshape the structures of solidarity in those “real” locations. The virtual locations would contain the emerging forces that might produce the new postnational neighborhoods.

Civil Society/Political Society

If we are to take seriously Appadurai’s proposal to rethink the linguistic imaginary of the territorial state, one way might be to take a fresh look at some of the conceptual components that claim to tie together local structures of community with territorial nation-states. Let me bring these up here: family, civil society, political society, and the state. These are classical concepts of political theory, but used, we know, in a wide variety of senses and often with much inconsistency. I must clarify here the sense in which I find it useful to employ these concepts in talking about contemporary political formations.

Hegel’s synthesis in the Philosophy of Right of these elements of what he called “ethical life” spoke of family, civil society, and the state, but it had no place for a distinct sphere of political society. However, in understanding the structure and dynamics of mass political formations in twentieth-century nation-states, it seems to me useful to think of a domain of mediating institutions between civil society and the state. The sharpness of the nineteenth-century distinction between state and civil society, developed along the tradition of European antiabsolutist thinking, has the analytical disadvantage today either of regarding civil society as a depoliticized domain in contrast with the political domain of the state, or of blurring the distinction altogether by claiming that all civil institutions are political. Neither emphasis is helpful in understanding the complexities of political phenomena in large parts of the contemporary world.

I find it useful to retain the term civil society for those characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in Western societies that are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles. Obviously, this is not to deny that the history of modernity in non-Western countries contains numerous examples of the emergence of what could well be called civil-social institutions which nevertheless do not always conform to these principles. Rather, it is precisely to identify these marks of difference, to understand their significance, to appreciate how by the continued invocation of a “pure” model of origin—the institutions of modernity as they were meant to be in the canonical Western texts—a normative discourse can still continue to energize and shape the evolving forms of social institutions in the
non-Western world, that I would prefer to retain the more classical sense of the term civil society rather than adopt any of its recent, revised versions. Indeed, for theoretical purposes, I even find it useful to hold on to the sense of civil society used in Hegel and Marx as bourgeois society (bürgerliche Gesellschaft).

An important consideration in thinking about the relation between civil society and the state in the modern history of formerly colonial countries is the fact that whereas the legal-bureaucratic apparatus of the state has been able, by the late colonial and certainly in the postcolonial period, to reach as the target of many of its activities virtually all of the population that inhabits its territory, the domain of civil-social institutions as conceived above is still restricted to a fairly small section of “citizens.” This hiatus is extremely significant because it is the mark of non-Western modernity as an always incomplete project of “modernization” and of the role of an enlightened elite engaged in a pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of society.

But then, how are we to conceptualize the rest of society that lies outside the domain of modern civil society? The most common approach has been to use a traditional/modern dichotomy. One difficulty with this is the trap, not at all easy to avoid, of dehistoricizing and essentializing “tradition.” The related difficulty is one of denying the possibility that this other domain, relegated to the zone of the traditional, could find ways of coping with the modern that might not conform to the (Western bourgeois, secularized Christian) principles of modern civil society. I think a notion of political society lying between civil society and the state could help us see some of these historical possibilities.

By political society, I mean a domain of institutions and activities where several mediations are carried out. In the classical theory, the family is the elementary unit of social organization: by the nineteenth century, this is widely assumed to mean the nuclear family of modern bourgeois patriarchy. Hegel, we know, strongly resisted the idea that the family was based on contract, but by the late nineteenth century the contractually formed family became the normative model of most social theorizing in the West as well as of reformed laws of marriage, property, inheritance, and personal taxation. Indeed, the family becomes a product of contractual arrangements between individuals who are the primary units of society. In countries such as India, it would be completely unrealistic to assume this definition of the family as obtaining universally. In fact, what is significant is that in formulating the policies and laws that must reach the greater part of the population, even the state does not make this assumption.

The conceptual move that seems to have been made very widely, even if somewhat imperceptibly, is from the idea of society as constituted by the
elementary units of homogeneous families to that of a *population*, differentiated but classifiable, describable and enumerable. Michel Foucault has been more perceptive than other social philosophers of recent times in noticing the crucial importance of the new concept of population for the emergence of modern governmental technologies. Perhaps we should also note the contribution here of colonial anthropology and colonial administrative theories.

Population, then, constitutes the material of society. Unlike the family in classical theory, the concept of population is descriptive and empirical, not normative. Indeed, population is assumed to contain large elements of "naturalness" and "primordiality"; the internal principles of the constitution of particular population groups are not expected to be rationally explicable since they are not the products of rational contractual association but are, as it were, prerational. What the concept of population does, however, is make available for governmental functions (economic policy, bureaucratic administration, law, and political mobilization) a set of rationally manipulable instruments for reaching large sections of the inhabitants of a country as the targets of "policy."

Civil-social institutions, on the other hand, if they are to conform to the normative model presented by Western modernity, must necessarily exclude from its scope the vast mass of the population. Unlike many radical theorists, I do not think that this "defect" of the classical concept needs to be rectified by revising the definition of civil society in order to include within it social institutions based on other principles. Rather, I think retaining the older idea of civil society actually helps us capture some of the conflicting desires of modernity that animate contemporary political and cultural debates in countries such as India.

Civil society in such countries is best used to describe those institutions of modern associational life set up by nationalist elites in the era of colonial modernity, though often as part of their anticolonial struggle. These institutions embody the desire of this elite to replicate in its own society the forms as well as the substance of Western modernity. It is a desire for a new ethical life in society, one that conforms to the virtues of the Enlightenment and of bourgeois freedom and whose known cultural forms are those of secularized Western Christianity. These are apparent in most of the arguments used by early nationalist elites in colonial countries for setting up new institutions of secular public life. It is well recognized in those arguments that the new domain of civil society will long remain an exclusive domain of the elite, that the actual "public" will not match up to the standards required by civil society, and that the function of civil-social institutions in relation to the public at large will be one of pedagogy rather than of free association.

Countries with relatively long histories of colonial modernization and
nationalist movements often have quite an extensive and impressive network of civil-social institutions of this kind. In India, most of them survive to this day, not as quaint remnants of colonial modernity but often as serious protagonists of a project of cultural modernization still to be completed. However, in more recent times, they seem to be under a state of siege.

To understand this, we will need to historicize more carefully the concepts of civil society, political society, and the state in colonial and postcolonial conditions.

The New Political Society and Democracy

The explicit form of the postcolonial state in India is that of a modern liberal democracy. It is often said, not unjustifiably, that the reason why liberal democratic institutions have performed more creditably in India than in many other parts of the formerly colonial world is the strength of its civil-social institutions, which are relatively independent of the political domain of the state. But one needs to be more careful about the precise relationships involved here.

Before the rise of mass nationalist movements in the early twentieth century, nationalist politics in India was largely confined to the same circle of elites that was then busy setting up the new institutions of “national” civil society. These elites were thoroughly wedded to the normative principles of modern associational public life and criticized the colonial state precisely for not living up to the standards of a liberal constitutional state. In talking about this part of the history of nationalist modernity, we do not need to bring in the notion of a political society mediating between civil society and the state.

However, entwined with this process of the formation of modern civil-social institutions, something else was also happening. I have explained elsewhere how the various cultural forms of Western modernity were put through a nationalist sieve and only selectively adopted, and then combined with, the reconstituted elements of what was claimed to be indigenous tradition. Dichotomies such as spiritual/material, inner/outer, and alien/indigenous were applied to justify and legitimize these choices from the standpoint of a nationalist cultural politics. What I wish to point out here in particular is that even as the associational principles of secular bourgeois civil institutions were adopted in the new civil society of the nationalist elite, the possibility of a different mediation between the population and the state was already being imagined, one that would not ground itself on a modernized civil society.

The impetus here was directly political. It had to do with the fact that
the governmental technologies of the colonial state were already seeking to bring within its reach large sections of the population as the targets of its policies. Nationalist politics had to find an adequate strategic response if it were not to remain immobilized within the confines of the "properly constituted" civil society of the urban elites. The cultural politics of nationalism supplied this answer by which it could mediate politically between the population and the nation-state of the future. In the Indian case, the most dramatic and effective form of this mediation was represented by what I have elsewhere described as the Gandhian moment of maneuver.4

This mediation between the population and the state takes place on the site of a new political society. It is built around the framework of modern political associations such as political parties. But, as research on nationalist political mobilizations in the Gandhian era has repeatedly shown, elite and popular anticolonial politics, even as they came together within a formally organized arena such as that of the Indian National Congress, diverged at specific moments and spilled over the limits laid down by the organization.5 This arena of nationalist politics, in other words, became a site of strategic maneuvers, resistance, and appropriation by different groups and classes, many of those contests remaining unresolved even in the present phase of the postcolonial state. The point is that the practices that activate the forms and methods of mobilization and participation in political society are not always consistent with the principles of association in civil society.

What then are the principles that govern political society? The question has been addressed in many ways in the literature on mass mobilizations, electoral politics, ethnic politics, and so on. In the light of the conceptual distinctions I have made above between population, civil society, political society, and the state, we will need to focus more clearly on the mediations between population on the one hand and political society and the state on the other. The major instrumental form here in the postcolonial period is that of the developmental state, which seeks to relate to different sections of the population through the governmental function of welfare. Correspondingly, if we have to give a name to the major form of mobilization by which political society (parties, movements, nonparty political formations) tries to channel and order popular demands on the developmental state, we should call it democracy. The institutional forms of this emergent political society are still unclear. Just as there is a continuing attempt to order these institutions in the prescribed forms of liberal civil society, there is probably an even stronger tendency to strive for what are perceived to be democratic rights and entitlements by violating those institutional norms. I have suggested elsewhere that the uncertain institutionalization of this domain of political society can be traced to the absence of a sufficiently differentiated and flexible notion of community in
the theoretical conception of the modern state. In any case, there is much churning in political society in the countries of the postcolonial world, not all of which are worthy of approval, which nevertheless can be seen as an attempt to find new democratic forms of the modern state that were not thought out by the post-Enlightenment social consensus of the secularized Christian world.

**Modernity versus Democracy**

In order to look more closely at what I see as the new movement of political society and the desire for democracy it represents, and also to bring the discussion back to the supposed crisis of the nation-state and the possibility of postnational formations, let me put forward three theses that might be pursued further. These theses arise from the historical study of modernity in non-Western societies.

1. The most significant site of transformations in the colonial period is that of civil society; the most significant transformations occurring in the postcolonial period are in political society.

2. The question that frames the debate over social transformation in the colonial period is that of modernity. In political society of the postcolonial period, the framing question is that of democracy.

3. In the context of the latest phase of the globalization of capital, we may well be witnessing an emerging opposition between modernity and democracy, that is, between civil society and political society.

The implications of these theses will, I believe, diverge in important ways from the proposals for creating postnational forms of government. If one looks closely at the descriptions of the crisis-ridden nation-state in different parts of the contemporary world, one will find two sets of interrelated arguments. One is about the failure of effective governability. This has to do, in terms of the functions listed above, with the failure of the state to provide for the “welfare” of populations. The second set of arguments relates to the decay or lack of appropriate civil-social institutions that could provide a secure foundation for a proper relationship between autonomous individual lives in society and the collective political domain of the state. This is where complaints are made about the authoritarian or tyrannical role of the nation-state. The two sets of arguments are often collapsed into a single prognosis, as in Appadurai, about the failure of nation-states to arbitrate between globality and modernity. I will argue that there are actually two kinds of mediation that are being expected here: one between globality and modernity, and the other between globality and democracy. The two, at least apparently, cannot be performed by

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A considerable part of transnational activities today takes place in the domain of nonstate institutions under the sign of the modernization of civil-social formations. These are the activities of a transnational public sphere whose moral claims derive from the assumed existence of a domain of universal civil society. The same set of institutions. This, as I see it, is the current crisis of the nation-state.

We can trace this crisis, in terms of the conceptual elements I have set out above, for at least two different sites: one, the old nation-states and liberal democracies of the West (including Australia and New Zealand), and the other, the countries, mostly ex-colonial, of Asia and Africa and those of the former socialist bloc in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In the first case, the historical yardstick is provided by a description (abstract and often idealized) of a sort of normative equilibrium where civil society and state were well demarcated and properly balanced. This is the liberal description of the “constitution” that supposedly provides both an abstract universal theory and a historically embedded, nation-specific instance of the actual and more or less permanent substantive content of political life. This relatively stable normative equilibrium is now often seen as having been disturbed by the new immigration of the last three decades. As residents, the new immigrants have free access to the institutions of civil society but are often insufficiently educated in or unappreciative of its practices. As populations, they are beneficiaries of governmental welfare activities but do not always have a commitment to or solidarity with the political community of the host nation. As citizens, their political loyalties are seen as suspect, and many do not even want citizenship if they can enjoy the economic and social advantages of residence. Here, transnational solidarities among immigrant groups, in fact, become evidence for the charge that they are inappropriate subjects of the nation’s civic and political life. This has created a crisis both for the universalist assumptions of civil society and for the particular cultural content of nationhood. One response to this has been to recognize the change in historical situation and to redefine the substantive content of civic and political life through an active effort at “multiculturalism.” But attempts have also been made to curb immigration, to deny citizenship to many immigrants, and even to restrict the access of residents to (the presumably universalist) civil-social and welfare institutions.

In the case of the formerly colonial countries of Asia and Africa, the dominant approach is to apply the same yardstick of the abstract model of the modern nation-state and place the different, actually existing states on a scale of “development” or “modernization.” The overwhelming theme is one of lack, sometimes with an additional story that describes the recent decay of a moderately satisfactory albeit inadequate set of institutions. But the lack, as I said before, is of two kinds: one in the domain of governmentality, the other in that of an effective civil society. For a considerable part of the 1960s and 1970s, modernization demanded primarily, often exclusively, a rapid expansion of the governmental functions of the developmental state, legitimized by its claims to represent and strengthen
the nation as a whole. By the 1980s, the complaints were getting stronger that the absence of an autonomous domain of civil-social institutions had made the nation-state tyrannical. And where the nation-state was failing to perform even its governmental functions, as in many countries in Africa, it was producing anarchy and massive social disaster. Proper modernization would have to ensure a more balanced development of state and civil-social institutions.

A considerable part of transnational activities today takes place in the domain of nonstate institutions under the sign of the modernization of civil-social formations. These are the activities of a transnational public sphere whose moral claims derive from the assumed existence of a domain of universal civil society. Many United Nations agencies, nongovernmental organizations, peacekeeping missions, human rights groups, women’s organizations, and free-speech activists operate in this moral terrain. As such, they act as an external check on the sovereign powers of the nation-state and occupy the critical moral position of a global civil society assessing the incomplete modernity of particular national political formations. This is the standpoint that produces the most aggressive charges of the nation-state’s failure to successfully mediate between globality and modernity.

The charges derive their ideological power from a universalist conception of the rights of autonomous and self-determining individuals balanced against the powers of the state and, by extension, of the rights of autonomous groups against the dominance of large political formations. Often these arguments are used with blatant cynicism, as in U.S. political interventions in different parts of the world. But many transnational activities and movements pursuing demands for social and cultural rights for individuals or groups seek to open up and institutionalize precisely such a sphere of global intervention, framed by a universalist notion of rights and grounded in a global civil society.

Even though there is much celebratory rhetoric and high moral passion associated with these visions of global modernity, the political-strategic implications of a move from “transnational tendencies” to postnational formations are largely elided. Comparing our present world-historical moment with that of, let us say, “the expansion of Europe” two or three centuries ago, it would not be far-fetched at all to notice similarities in the moral-cultural drive to spread “modernity” throughout the world.

The contrary tendencies I am pointing to—those that look within rather than beyond the nation-state—are also strong features of the contemporary world. In particular, they are tendencies that operate in the very heart of Western nation-states and liberal democracies, just as they are the driving force of politics in many non-Western countries. They are

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located on a different site—not the moral-cultural ground of modernity
and the external institutional domain of a global civil society but rather the
ground of democracy and the internal domain of national political society.
What these tendencies in many countries around the world reveal are the
glaring inadequacies of the old forms of democratic representation, not
only in the less modernized countries of the non-Western world but in
Western democracies themselves. There is much contestation over new
claims and entitlements, those that were not part of the earlier liberal consensus on state–civil society relations. In many cases, the new claims
directly contradict and violate universal “modern” conventions of civil
society. The historical task that has been set by these movements is to
work out new forms of democratic institutions and practices in the mediating field of political society that lies between civil society and the nation-state.

The framework of global modernity will, it seems to me, inevitably
structure the world according to a pattern that is profoundly colonial; the
framework of democracy, on the other hand, will pronounce modernity itself as inappropriate and deeply flawed. Arjun Appadurai has import-
antly observed the way in which transnational tendencies have made deep
inroads into contemporary Western societies and rendered currently exist-
ing nation-state forms inadequate. In particular, talking about the cities of
the Western world, James Holston and Arjun Appadurai have recently
noticed the abandonment of the notion of shared public space as an
attribute of citizenship and a retreat into segregated private spaces. They
have also correctly perceived this as an issue that is directly connected
with the question of the democratic negotiation of citizenship under condi-
tions of globalization.7 My argument here is that it is only by separating
the two interrelated issues of civil society/modernity and political soci-
ey/democracy that we will begin to see the dimensions of power and
political strategy that underlie this question. Without this awareness, the
proposals to “move beyond the nation” are quite likely to strengthen
inequalities and defeat the struggle for democracy the world over.

Notes
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1. Arjun Appadurai, “Patriotism and Its Futures,” in Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

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2. An account of some of these versions is given in Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, Civil Society and Political Theory (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).


5. One set of studies of Indian nationalist politics that explicitly addresses this “split in the domain of politics” is contained in the volumes of Subaltern Studies and in several monographs written by historians contributing to that series. See especially Ranajit Guha, ed., Subaltern Studies I (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Ranajit Guha, Dominance without Hegemony (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
