THE FAMOUS American liberalism/communitarianism debate, which is now being reproduced (at least among academic political theorists) in many parts of the world, is far less important for real politics than the recognition of two competing kinds of communitarianism, one focused on the state and one on civil society. I want to describe these two, and then argue that each of them can play a part, but not in isolation from the other, in helping us address the hardest problems of contemporary society.

(1) The civic republican, Jacobin, statist model—which holds that there is only one really important community, the political community, whose members and agents are the citizens themselves, all of them, conceived as active participants in democratic decision making. Ideally (in Rousseau's description, for example) they "fly" to the public assemblies; they are eager to join in debates over public policy; when they choose positions, they regularly set the common good over their private interests; they "give the law to themselves," and live in accordance with this self-legislation. They proudly exemplify the civic virtues. Theirs is a noble image, but, perhaps for that reason, their work doesn't extend to the more prosaic administrative and distributive activities of the republican state. They are high-minded amateurs, devoted volunteers, but only for the highest tasks; they meet to argue about the great issues of the day. Administration and distribution are left to professionals, to a civil service whose work is determined but not joined by ordinary citizens. In principle, at least, all the citizens participate in deciding how they are to be served, and then the civil service serves everyone.

(2) The pluralist, multiculturalist, model—which holds that there are many communities, based on class, religion, ethnicity, neighborhood, and so on. The state is now understood as a framework, a social union of social unions (in immigrant societies like the United States, a "nation of nationalities"), where intensity, commitment, and the most satisfying forms of common work are realized in the plural social unions, which the singular state supports and facilitates. In the different communities, participation, because it is generated by very strong feelings of solidarity, is focused less on argument and decision making (though the members do have to make decisions) than on mutual aid, and the professional civil service is partly replaced by voluntary social service. Ordinary members serve each other, committing themselves to the everyday work of welfare, schooling, communal upkeep, and celebration. Like republican citizens, they are amateurs, but they are more widely committed than citizens commonly are: they work as recruiters, organizers, administrators, teachers, fund raisers, "helping hands." They assist the poor, visit the sick, and console the bereaved.

Both these communitarian doctrines are reactive in character; both express anxiety as much as ambition, and if the anxiety is sometimes exaggerated, it is nonetheless legitimate. The first communitarianism responds to a decline in the commitment and participation of
citizens—manifest in nonvoting, distrust of governmental institutions and officials, resignation, and apathy. The second responds to a kind of freewheeling individualism that undercuts religious, ethnic, class, and regional identification and, what may be more important, weakens the familial loyalties that ground all the forms of collective identity and help to reproduce them.

In the United States, a number of recent studies have demonstrated (though not beyond scholarly dispute) a significant decline in associational activity—a loss of membership in many of the most important social unions and a sharp drop in attendance at meetings. Indeed, a whole series of graphs, put together by the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, show exactly the same pattern of decline: a line angled sharply downward that measures voting; other forms of political activity; membership in the mainstream churches (though evangelical and Pentecostal sects are growing); membership in political parties, labor unions, philanthropic organizations, and parent/teacher groups; the number of people regularly reading newspapers; and the number engaged in team sports (as distinct from solitary exercise, which is definitely on the rise). It may be too soon to say what all this means, but it does make the two forms of communitarianism alike in this respect—that they both represent a worried politics. They both have revivalist aims.

I WANT TO argue that these two communitarianisms can help each other—and will have to do that if there is to be any help at all. But the more common idea is that the second communitarianism must rescue the first. An interesting alliance of conservatives and radicals put their hopes in associational vitality, voluntary work, and philanthropic contributions. So let me begin there.

Communities and associations inhabit the space of civil society, which is framed but not dominated by the state. Given the various financial, political, and moral difficulties of the contemporary state, it is to civil society that many people now look to solve the problems that the state was once expected to solve—above all, the problems of poverty, unemployment, and exclusion. (I have looked there too, as in my Dissent article "Socializing the Welfare State," Summer 1988.) The plural social unions are called to the rescue of the singular social union; the members of civil society must do what the citizens of the state can't do—even though these are the same people.

But if this rescue is to be accomplished, we must address frankly three features of civil society—inequality, fragmentation, and fitfulness—that stand in its way. When we do that, we will see that the communities of civil society require help from the same state that they are called to rescue. The social union of social unions cannot dispense with either its singularity or its pluralism. The one and the many are often described in philosophical literature as if they were opposed to each other, but in politics and society what we must hope for is their cooperation. But this is too abstract. Let's look more closely at the three obstacles to the project of a civil-society rescue.

INEQUALITY: Civil society is a realm of inequality. Its various groups do not have anything like the same capacity to accumulate resources and provide services. All the forms of inequality—of education, wealth, political access, and professional competence—are reflected and
even magnified in the organizational life of civil society, so that the weakest groups have the weakest organizational presence. Of course, the stronger groups sometimes extend their help to members of the weaker ones—as when unions work for the benefit of workers generally or church-supported hospitals and nursing homes serve the larger community. What we look for in civil society, however, is self-help and mutual aid. The goal of any pluralist communitarianism must be an equalizing of capacities, so that all men and women are capable of organizing in defense of their interests. All the different groups that coexist in civil society should be capable of serving their own members and also of providing services to needy individuals beyond their boundaries. If we don't achieve this, we will repeat in civil society the pattern of clientage and dependency that has sometimes characterized state welfare services and undermined their effectiveness. But this equality of communal capabilities requires the engagement of the state itself.

In a famous speech delivered at the Republican Party convention in 1988, George Bush described the voluntary activities of ordinary men and women in civil society as "points of light," as if the encompassing state were a realm of darkness (a common American view, which is more rare in Europe). In fact, even in America, civil society's points of light depend on electricity provided by the state, largely in the form of tax money. The strongest groups in American society (which tend to be ethnic/religious combinations, like Irish Catholics, German and Scandanavian Lutherans, Jews, and so on) could not pay for the life-cycle services they currently provide, from day care centers and nursery schools to old-age homes and burial societies, without access to state funds. Something like 60 percent of the money spent by Catholic Charities and the Jewish Federations, the examples that I know best, comes from tax money. Weaker groups (black Baptists the most important, given the long history of racism in the United States) could in principle get the same money but in fact don't get it on the same scale. They aren't organized to receive it; they don't have a sufficient material and institutional base of their own; they don't have the same access to political power as older, more established communities. If state programs are to help them, they will have to be designed specifically for that purpose. This kind of help can't come from within civil society, except in the form of political and moral support.

The voluntary giving of money, and also of time and energy, is central to associational life. But no dispersed community, without coercive power, can fund by itself the services necessary in a modern society. Marx thought that the factory system would rescue the working class from this dispersion, bringing its members together in large numbers and requiring very high levels of cooperative work. Indeed, European social democracy was the product of that concentration and cooperation. Its extensive organizational network, the many services it provided for its supporters, and the time, energy, and money that they contributed to it—all this was made possible by a common class culture, which had its origin in the experience of the modern factory. But today the working class is as dispersed as many ethnic and religious communities—or, it might be better to say, its members are similarly integrated into a mass society and a commercial culture that don't allow for the easy reproduction of any particularist
community, whether it is based on social class or religious belief or ethnic history or residential proximity. And that makes the mobilization of resources in civil society harder than it once was--and the role of the state crucially important.

HENCE THE permanence of the state: it isn't going to wither away. That old Marxist vision, which has been taken over in the United States by libertarians and free-marketeers, is still a fantasy. But if the state is to play its part, there must be a solidarity of citizens. The first kind of communitarianism, the civic-republican model, must have some reality over and above the pluralist solidarities of class, faith, ethnicity, and neighborhood. I am speaking now in the imperative mode, reiterating a programmatic commitment that I am not sure I know how to implement. Still, I know what is necessary: democratic participation must be not only a value, but a valued experience of large numbers of citizens--so that the sense of common effort works in the singular political community as it works in the plural communities of civil society. In the United States today, however, fewer than 50 percent of our citizens even bother to vote (voting percentages are much higher in Europe, though there are signs of decline in some countries). This suggests a degree of political alienation that is disastrous for American welfarism. And when the state commitment to welfare declines, so does the capacity of Catholics, Lutherans, Jews, and so on, to provide services of their own.

But the process works the other way, too: if political alienation undermines civil society, so associational weakness undermines the value of citizenship. Though participation in civil society cannot substitute for democratic engagement, it can inspire and sustain that engagement. All the available evidence suggests that activists in civil society are also active citizens. Hence the argument that brings together the two communitarianisms: that only a revival of associational life will produce a political revival, and only a political revival will produce the commitment (and eventually the resources) necessary to overcome the inequalities of associationalism. Only the two together can bring excluded men and women into the common life. This same interdependence holds also with regard to the second obstacle to civil society's rescue mission.

FRAGMENTATION: Civil society is a realm of fragmentation and division. The state, by contrast, at least in principle, is a universal society. Citizenship is a status available to all the residents of the territory the state controls (with whatever qualifications of time for new immigrants). I know that this isn't the case in all existing democracies, but it seems to me the appropriate aim of a democratic politics--that everyone whose life is directly determined by the state, everyone directly subject to its coercive power, should be represented in state decision making. The associations of civil society, by contrast, are ineradicably particularist, even when they defend a universal creed and are as open to new members as their specific character and purposes allow. For they coexist with other associations defending other universal creeds and competing for new members. And, of course, many associations are not universal in any sense; they advance particular interests that conflict with other particular interests. In both these cases, the associations promote identities that are shared with specific people, and not with others, and work in civil society engages some men and women, and not others. All this defines a pattern of
difference: creeds, interests, associates, and activities. It is because associations are specific and enclosed that intense solidarities arise within them. And it is these solidarities that make possible the gifts of time, energy, and money, and the widespread (though perhaps declining) readiness to join in political struggle, religious communion, and mutual aid.

Strengthen these groups, and you intensify the differences among them. At least, that is one of the dangers always present in civil society. It is clearly exemplified in (some) contemporary versions of identity politics, which serve indeed to reinforce necessary solidarities but do so at a very high cost, for they divide the citizens and make democratic politics harder than it need be. One remedy for this divisiveness comes from within civil society itself: if it is a realm of fragmentation, then identities within it are neither given for all time nor singular in character. The same people can commit themselves to different associations, and their cross-cutting memberships and the blurred boundaries that result provide the best social background for democratic politics. So churches bring together men and women from different classes, professions, and political parties; unions bring together people with different religious and ethnic affiliations; and so on. But if this pattern of overlapping association is to be sustained, we need a critique of, and some significant resistance to, what Lewis Coser once called "greedy institutions"—organized groups that demand total commitment from their members, that lay claim to all their time, energy, and available money. For obvious reasons, greedy institutions make for intolerance, whereas plural memberships and divided loyalties make for toleration.

A RECENT STUDY of the Weimar Republic by Sheri Berman, a political scientist at Princeton, suggests that the totalizing ambition of (some of) its most important groups was one of the causes of the troubles that lay ahead. Members of both Catholic and social democratic associations, for example, were more resistant than other Germans to the appeals of Nazism. But these two groups had hardly any overlapping membership; there was very little coming and going between them and little mutual understanding or respect among their members; and so they were not able to cooperate against the Nazis. Perhaps cooperation wasn't in the cards anyway: the church was far more conservative in those years than it is today, and social democrats were often militant atheists. But these far-reaching ideological divisions were closely connected to the virtually total institutional division between the two groups. Greedy institutions are the enemies of civil society and of the only viable form of democratic politics in the modern world: the politics of coalition and compromise. And yet the very greed of these institutions inspires in their members an exceptional devotion and commitment. Loosening the ties involves real losses, which are nonetheless necessary to the survival of pluralism.

Another remedy for the divisiveness of civil society lies in the actual experience of democratic politics. For state membership always overlaps with the various associational memberships; the one includes the many. And if the state is a democracy, and the citizens are active within it, they will inevitably deal with one another every day, in many different ways, in conflict and cooperation. They will argue and organize, but also bargain and compromise. So democratic encounters serve over time to moderate associational difference. At least this can
happen, if the encounters are frequent and the outcomes important to the citizens. Massive apathy and withdrawal not only weaken the democratic state, they make civil society a more dangerous place. In the United States, the most extreme forms of identity politics have developed among groups that are seriously underrepresented in the political arena or withdrawn or excluded from it. Bringing them into the state would open new possibilities for cooperation in civil society also. But it is still a question, given one further feature of civil society, just how extensive these possibilities really are.

FITFULNESS: Civil society is a realm of fitfulness, of part-time engagement and occasional, undisciplined work. Of course, it has its own full-time professionals (in American schools of business and management these days, students are trained to run nonprofit organizations), but for most people volunteering in civil society is an after-hours activity. When undertaken by unemployed women, still the most common volunteers though their numbers are declining, it comes after the work of family and household (for these women are never really unemployed); when undertaken by working men and women, it comes after the workday or -week. This is an intermittent activism, not subject to market or bureaucratic controls. Many men and women never volunteer at all; many of those who do are enthusiastic for a while and then drift away. Even for the most conscientious, work in civil society is rarely a day-in, day-out commitment. Nor can it be: making a living, making a home, raising one's own children all come first.

In principle, work in civil society is socially valued (hence George Bush's "points of light"). Certainly, the various associations find ways of honoring their most important volunteers--especially, but not only, those who volunteer their money. But unpaid work is not greatly respected in capitalist societies. This is most clearly true among men, since so many of the helping activities are thought to be women's work: nice things to do, but not compatible with success in the marketplace. For men already successful, of course, leading a philanthropic campaign or serving as the lay president of a religious or cultural association is more than a nice thing to do; it displays and reinforces previous economic success. But any lesser work is likely to be thought demeaning. For ordinary volunteers, the work has to be its own reward; there isn't any other--no compensation of any sort, no expense accounts, no health insurance or pensions, very little public recognition.

THE MOST radical proposals for bringing civil society to the rescue of the state (they come mainly from dissident social democrats in Europe: see Claus Offe, "Full Employment: Asking the Wrong Question," Dissent, Winter 1995) involve changing all of this. It isn't only a question of strengthening associational activism but of making it into steady work for significant numbers of men and women who are unlikely to find useful work or, in many countries today, any work at all in the market economy. This would obviously require considerable commitment on the part of civil society's steady workers--of a kind familiar on the old left, whose militants often committed themselves to something like full-time work for the Cause. These people were certainly volunteers, but they were paid subsistence wages and they looked forward to
revolutionary triumph. Within the movement, at least, they commanded great respect and often wielded real power. It will not be easy to reproduce conditions of that sort in associations where the work goes on and on with no expectation of a glorious conclusion; even the churches, or most of them, are not ready in the last years of the twentieth century to proclaim the near coming of the end of days.

Nonetheless, it is possible to imagine new forms of reward that might allow men and women to sustain a life in civil society or to move back and forth between civil society and the market, committing themselves for years at a time in each place. A guaranteed annual income is one possibility, though many people might find such a sharp break between work and reward morally problematic (and then it would be politically problematic, too). If everyone had the same guarantee, workers in civil society would be true volunteers, but there would be a social price to pay: productive work would be taxed not only for the benefit of people who volunteered, but also for the benefit of people who didn't volunteer, who chose leisure instead. Given the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois critique of aristocratic parasites, and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialist critique of bourgeois parasites, and the contemporary right-wing campaign against welfare parasites, I find that arrangement very difficult to imagine... or to justify.

The more likely alternative would involve subsistence pay, with benefits, for men and women who chose to work for all their lives or some part of their lives in civil society. These would still be volunteers, for they would forgo the greater incomes that might be available in the marketplace. Commitment would still be necessary; the point of the payments would be to make it economically possible. Since the payments would be the same across all (or almost all) the groups that make up civil society, they would also serve to reduce the inequalities of associational life.

It is radically unclear whether significant numbers of people would choose this kind of volunteering. But any increase in the number of volunteers would improve the services provided by civil society, and the payments would presumably make for less fitfulness, more discipline, in the different associations. Once again, however, only a very strong state would be able to collect and distribute the necessary funds. And the solidarity of the citizens would also have to be very strong if those engaged in productive work were to agree to be taxed to pay for those who opt out. I don't mean to suggest that work in civil society isn't importantly productive; nonetheless, the people doing that work would not be paying taxes, and so they would depend on the goodwill of the others. And this goodwill would have to run deep, since there are sure to be abuses.

Bringing civil society to the rescue of the state would require state action on a very large scale. This is a paradox, I suppose, but one that can, at least in theory, be solved. What would be necessary is a political movement of a sort that isn't historically uncommon, though nothing like it is currently on the horizon. Its activists would be drawn from civil society; its activities would take place in the arena of democratic politics. It would be a movement for social change. The
activists would be, at least initially, men and women already active in the many different associations that stand to gain from public recognition of voluntary work. The mainstream religious groups, and the new environmental and feminist organizations, might take the lead. But social change of this sort would also be in the interest of labor unions, not only because their own volunteers would benefit but also because the possibility of work in civil society might tighten the labor market, reducing the size of Europe's "reserve army” or creating alternatives to America's "second economy." Still, we haven't seen a social movement of this scope for a long time, and the weaknesses in both state and civil society that inspire communitarian revivalism suggest that it may be a long time coming.

One thing, however, seems clear: the contemporary neoliberal campaign against the state (or, better, against the state budget) will have to be defeated before we can even hope for the full flowering of civil society. Democratic politics requires vigorous associations, but it must also cope with the inequalities that arise within the associational world, the frequent divisiveness of communal solidarities, and the fitful and undisciplined character of voluntary work. This means that men and women active in civil society won't have the effects we need them to have unless they are also committed citizens, working (voluntarily) to create a state that values and supports their activism.

MICHAEL WALZER is co-editor of Dissent.