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## Civil society research: future perspectives

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### Introduction

This volume came about in a way that creates inevitable overlaps and problems of comparability in identifying future research agendas. What this plurality offers, however, is an opportunity to search for underlying and connecting themes. Put another way, this final chapter does not summarise the ideas for research agendas in each chapter. Rather, it takes a bird's-eye view of what can be discerned as recurrent perspectives and shared (aspects of) narratives. In this respect, conclusions highlight ideas and agendas emerging from the sectional divisions which are relied on to make the content more accessible for a reader. In other words, conclusions themselves are not 'sectionalised'.

The Introduction (Chapter 1, Biekart and Fowler) referred to 'themes' or areas of research interest coming from the webinars. This concluding chapter differs by teasing out what the contents of this volume point to as future research themes, together with what their content could look like. They are not intended to be predictive. At best this chapter provides indications of where research concerns, interests and energy might lie, which may not, however, correspond to where dedicated or mainstream research investment is heading.

A future research agenda requires attention to time frames. In most chapters this dimension is implied but seldom clearly set out. What do their implications suggest? First, a reasonable assumption is that the context-setting meta picture of geo-political realignments with their uneven and non-linear effects are *the* future. Within this expectation, some authors are grappling with issues, such as language and de-colonising a civil society lexicon, that are already decades old and, unless the locus of research shifts, may remain so. Others are aiming at advocacy into policy-making processes which are sensitive to political cycles and institutional reforms that can be measured in terms of a decade. Yet others are aiming at altering perspectives and advancing new narratives,

such as emergent civic agency, within academia that can move more quickly. In sum, the future for civil society research is many.

However, a speculative reading of the chapters and where energy lies, could translate into researchers in developing countries continuing to take initiatives into their own hands by establishing new research centres in or alongside academia. Perhaps even more speculative is that researchers in 'EuroAmerica' will actually start to see the value of applying the concept of civil society to their own settings, displacing non-profit, third sector and similar institutional frameworks that do not adequately resonate with the political moment where incivility challenges civic norms not just episodically, but structurally as well. One example is the *gilets jaunes* spontaneously expressing sentiments that still live in the polity, albeit no longer on the streets.

One of the main messages is that the future of research on civil society will be more openly politically sensitive and potentially riskier for those undertaking the effort (Fowler & Biekart, 2020, p. 7). Unlikely is a repeat of Western-inspired, globally oriented and orchestrated 'grand' research undertakings of the past unless, that is, the subject is sufficiently apolitical. An example might be the call for a global, comparative study of individual civic agency in terms of an (apolitical) behaviour of personal generosity (Wiepking, 2021, p. 200). If 'big narrative' large-scale international empirical research projects are probably not the case, future efforts are more likely to be aggregations of national data, and grounded studies driven by individuals or as self-organised groups that may be linked through national or regional structures and professional platforms. Consequently, it makes more sense to speak about research agendas in the plural.

Our review of chapters in terms of their research themes suggests that, while much future work will grapple with ongoing issues in both pre-existing and additional ways, there are emerging areas inviting advance in this field of study.

## Future research agendas

The following sections put forward elements of future research agendas for civil society and what they might contain. By 'theme' we mean a relatively coherent alignment of ideas, perspectives or topics, and justifications for them. That there are connections between themes should be apparent from the, often, multiple viewpoints put forward in each chapter. For example, Chapter 6 by Ali Bakir Hamoudi and Chapter 7 by Susan Appe, speak to the potential

'misuse' of mapping. In other words, the issue of in whose interests and what purpose do civil society researchers serve is likely to be an abiding concern. Their cautions reflect a somewhat naïve view of how research would be used, which does not fit future scenarios. A consequence is that researchers need to be (more) sensitive in terms of their own ethics.

Future agendas for civil society research can be summarised in terms of (a) the rules of the game and conceptual issues when studying this field; (b) taking a deeper historical approach to better locate and interpret civil society in national contexts; (c) giving specific attention to contending norms and values informing self-mobilisation by citizens; associated with (d) emergent forces and forms of civic-driven associational life.

### The study of civil society

Whatever the agenda will be – with examples to follow – studying civil society will have to grapple with issues old and new. One, embracing both, is an updated geo-politics of finance for researching civil society. In the context of development cooperation, much has been written about the priorities and practices of the public and private entities funding civil society organisations and their activities. However, there is scant research on the governance of financing civil society research itself. Chapter 2 by David Sogge goes an insightful and comprehensive way to filling this gap. Adoption of an historical perspective shows linkages between the provision of research resources and the financiers' political concerns that extended to (inter)national infrastructure infused by the interests and logics of the funder. Chapter 8 by Antoine Buyse and Verónica Gómez speaks to and illustrates this issue in terms of the protection of human rights. A situation where dependency on an official funder to take on the task of critical oversight of governments providing resources creates a structural paradox, inviting analytic restraint or self-censorship.

An update to funders' politics as driver – be they public or private – will be seen in ways co-determining what research resources are made available to who for what ends. One perspective will be more governments constraining or preventing their domestic research community from accessing external finance for topics considered sensitive, for example encroaching on issues of sovereignty. In parallel, or complementary, domestic finance of research on civil society will be guided towards aiding government policy development and implementation. As voiced by Mark Sidel (Chapter 21), one prospect is that official research resourcing will be directed towards apolitical third sector issues rather than political civil society concerns, such as human rights. In itself, a political choice. To the extent that it was ever the case, the scope

for researchers' autonomy in determining what is to be investigated, why, and to what end is likely to become more limited, including in democratic dispensations.

With its potential dilemmas, this suggests a future 'pragmatic' financing which consciously expands the notion of 'research' beyond that being undertaken by a theoretically informed, objective and rigorous academia to include the systematic gaining and interpretation of evidence of civic agency by many parties with multiple types of resources. That is, an orientation to actively pursue collaborative research that is less susceptible to the utilitarian needs of the existing funding governance landscape. Such a perspective points towards adopting a network-based approach to knowledge generation about how civic agency plays out and why.

Returning to a concern about mapping in terms of possible risks to those who are doing so voiced by Ali Bakir Hamoudi (Chapter 6) is the danger of empirical distortions to the lived reality of civil society as the associational life of citizens by reliance on commonly flawed and incomplete official data. Given the political times and prospects, a concern is about the merits or otherwise of, as an instrument of statehood, standardising evidence for statistical treatment (Salamon, Haddock & Toepler, 2022) of phenomena that are highly contextualised and not representative of the global diversity of nation statehood as practised. Many chapters suggest that an assumption that such enumeration is *a priori* in the interest of civil society needs to be problematised.

Such a research issue is compounded by a common elision between and equiv-  
alencing of civil society with non-profit organisations – often referred to as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Susan Appe, Chapter 7). It will be beholden on those studying in this field to avoid such epistemological dexterity. The more so because a major challenge for future research is to get below the radar of the 'formal' and statistically malleable to the real life of how people exert collective agency as well as its virtual emergence referred to below. The complex demands on methods to do so is both real and inviting.

Another continuing agenda for research in this field is to find a lexicon and vocabulary which is not almost exclusively imbued with EuroAmerican pre-  
cepts and assumptions about how nation states are configured, function and governed. Ironically, the concept of civil society is seldom encountered in public discourse or language in EuroAmerican countries themselves. The term is for export by aid mechanisms and similar means and is seldom for domestic consumption, hence creating a sort of research enclave. Chapter 3 by Patricia Mendonça speaks directly to this problem in terms, for example, of defini-

tions, as does Pablo Marsal Baraldi for a number of Latin American countries (Chapter 20) who traces the infiltration of contending labels and terminologies to global surveys. Latin America grapples with undoing a legacy of contending imposed vocabularies for research and interpretation that poorly resonate with indigenous perspectives that inform an emancipatory, post-colonial logic. The general point is to add energy to a research agenda that seeks to ‘de-colonise’ the civil society lexicon.

Also apparent is that countries governed along fundamentalist or theocratic lines and principles do not acknowledge civil society as an expression of civic agency. The concept does not fit into their understanding of statehood. Consequently, using current language and conceptualisation, the prospect of expanding civil society research into these jurisdictions is far from encouraging. But this cannot be equated with the idea that citizens do not, in some way exert agency as, for example, observed in organised protests in Iran.

### Norms and values

A recurrent topic is one of future research dedicated to understanding and explaining the advance of uncivil groups and deviant civil society: where it is occurring, how is it being expressed, by who and why (now)? (See Chapter 19 by Galia Chimiak for Poland; Chapter 5 by Roseanne Mirabella and W. King Mott for the United States; Chapter 4 by Mário Alves for Brazil.) As a research topic, incivility is not new (Anheier, 2007; Monga, 2009). But its significance has been masked by the implicit assumption of civility – fairness and tolerance of difference – as a characteristic of civil society itself, with respect for human rights as a ‘natural’ corollary. Such values are assumed to inherently emerge, justifying its promotion (Kopecký & Mudde, 2008). A future research agenda cannot rely on this assumption.

This conclusion implies not just calling for a more explicit inclusion of the normative basis of a research initiative but for dedicated study on the relationship between the effects of uncivil behaviour in democratic and autocratic political dispensations. This is not just an issue of how types of regimes respond to uncivility, but also what occurs within civil society, for example a (deep) fracturing of the social order and contract. What is it that makes a society resilient, or not, to authoritarian advances which tap into contentions stemming from deeply held values that emerge in (violent) intolerance (Mário Alves, Chapter 4)? Such an agenda can no longer principally look for uncivility in capital cities and on the streets (Mirabella and King Mott, Chapter 5), but also in the ether (Anderson et al., 2013). An implicit future research agenda is to disentangle

and categorise types of incivility, their origins, durations and effects both local and (far) beyond.

### Making historiography matter

Inevitably, various aspects of the research topics spoken of above arise in the many chapters that take an historiographic approach (John Godfrey, Chapter 16; Alan Fowler and Shauna Mottiar, Chapter 17; Jenny Paturyan, Chapter 18; Galia Chimiak, Chapter 19; Pablo Marsal Baraldi, Chapter 20; Mark Sidel, Chapter 21), which deepen understandings of causations. To some extent, these efforts point towards Escobar's (2018) call for an 'ontological turn', that is, gaining a deeper understanding of the universe in which identity and collective belonging that informs civic agency arise.

Typically, this type of analysis is used to explain findings from (comparative) landscape-type surveys of civil society and national case studies which accompany them (Salomon, Sokolowski & Haddock, 2017). The latter authors' sample does not include, but insightfully observes that the character of civil society in autocratic or fundamentalist regimes is small, is constrained, has little volunteering and enjoys minimal government support (Salomon, Sokolowski & Haddock, 2017, p. 127). Anticipated trends in global and national governance discussed in the Introduction (Chapter 1) suggest national contexts which are moving in this direction.

This perspective invites a research agenda to explore, for example, the extent to which historiography can explain tendencies towards closing civic space in previously open countries tracked by the CIVICUS Monitor. Examples are the United States, Poland and Hungary, which may signal an interesting 'reversal' feature of social origins theory (Salamon & Anheier, 1998) reflecting the, now discredited, assumption of global convergence towards EuroAmerican systems of governance. To what extent, if at all, do the (four) patterns emanating from the historiographical underpinnings of social origins theory explain speeds and modes of democratic backsliding and similar signs of power shift from citizens to state? Can future civil society research explain the relative tendency and 'recessive' rates between countries and a polity's responses to it (V-Dem Institute, 2022)?

### Reconsidering civic agency

A number of chapters speak to the emergence of different types and aspects of civic agency inviting research attention. We start with volunteering and move

on to emergent features of associationalism and civic action to arrive at the ways in which civil society is being ‘captured’ by regimes.

In respect of voluntarism, Chapter 12 by Lucas Meijs and Stephanie Koolen-Maas points out the advent of volunteering which is exporting instrumentalisation by third parties in the West to other contexts and cultures with different ideas of what volunteering is all about. Is this a new facet of neo-colonialism or an effective transfer of innovation? Or both? Alongside and potentially complementary is the research question posed by Philine van Overbeeke and Malika Ouacha (Chapter 13) that hinges on the dynamics of volunteering associated with migration. Does a cultural affinity of a volunteer with the ‘recipient’ country and cultural-linguistic groups within it offer both more effective transfers of skills, knowledge even, perhaps, affecting the political pre-dispositions of the communities involved? As a type of civic agency, to what extent does emigrational volunteering play a role in political remittances, such as fostering human rights (Piper, 2009)?

Chapter 14 by Cristine Højgaard, brings a growing dimension to volunteering as civic agency through the fluid organisationality resulting from collaboration through social media. This obviously has a bearing on other chapters and themes above in terms of modes of organising for public action, be it civil or otherwise. Amongst others, she points to a research agenda focused on how digital platforms channel and shape decision-making associated with collective agency. She invites reconsideration of the civic agency of volunteers outside of formal organisations and its role in the reform of institutional set-ups, effects that are gaining traction and scale.

An unexpected starting point for reconsidering associationalism is what has emerged in terms of civic agency spawned by the Covid-19 pandemic. Both Chapter 20 by Marsal Baraldi and Chapter 11 by Guijt et al. look at what emerged from and by citizens in response to the effects of a viral infection which left no part of society untouched, but affected the most vulnerable to the greatest degree. In the Southern Cone of Latin America, during the pandemic, spontaneous mobilisations and collaborations across many elements of civil society altered the rules of the game with governments. A research question resulting from this experience in many (other) countries is the extent to which there will (not) be reversion to the pre-existing interfaces and power relations between the governed and those governing that are becoming characterised by a process of shrinking space for civic agency, some aided by Covid-inspired restrictions on civil liberties.

Here, Chapter 15 by Chris McInerney poses this issue in a complementary way in terms of the mechanisms and pathways that civil society organisations can use to gain influence and leverage on public administrations towards more social justice that the disruptions Covid-19 may have provided. His conclusions suggest that (unusual) coalitions of civil society emerging from Covid-19 would be in a better position to do so.

The factor of emergent civic agency stands central to the contribution by Guijt et al. (Chapter 11). Their focus on structural inequalities exposed by Covid-19 have also exposed the significance of local civic action with a potential for altering the civic system that four research priorities can help both ascertain and support. It is beyond the intentions of this chapter to summarise each of these priorities which link, *inter alia*, to issues of whether or not permanent change will result; will new responses to inequality be adopted; will civil society relational innovations be sustained; and what can be learned from the digital enabling that facilitated emergence?

This chapter ties to Chapter 10 by Ana Luísa Silva, which deals directly with civil society as a much-touted source of innovation, particularly in the digital sphere. Here, research needs to take a systemic rather than case view, as well as treating failures as important sources of learning. The general point, aligning with Højgaard (Chapter 14), is that it makes little sense to reconsider civic agency without a digital dimension.

A fourth aspect of reconsidering civic agency – reflected in other chapters – is the mobilisation by ruling regimes of their own civil society organisations (governmental NGOs or GONGOs identified by Buyse and Gómez (Chapter 8) and self-driven anti-humanitarian ‘uncivil’ CSOs observed by Dorothea Hilhorst and Margit van Wessel (Chapter 9). In both cases a research question is: what rights or interests of which groups are such initiatives dedicated to undermining and why? Put another way, be it in long-term development or humanitarian aid, research agendas in the field of civil society need to be sensitive to opposition and resistance from within civil society itself: a major research topic as it emphasises the desired research agenda *of* civil society.

## Closure

A theme linking the themes, so to speak, is that a future agenda for research on civil society can no longer be apolitical, nor normatively inexplicit. Geo-political shifts, contending models of governance that posit different



relations between citizens and states, is a fast-emerging reality. At the time of writing, Russia's armed reconfiguration of Western Europe illustrates a disruption to fundamentals of statehood that civil society research has relied on. Epistemic assumptions that democracy is the natural order – and is here to stay, even where it is currently practised – needs critical questioning, as does how a polity responds.

With this prospect in mind, a concluding reflection is not just about the future of civil society research, but also about researchers themselves. To different degrees, the chapters in this volume reflect an author's positionality which is 'pracademic' (after Posner, 2009). That is, individuals who maintain or have had scholarly positions allied to practical engagement with civil society in its many expressions and grapple with the implications of aligning both roles. A speculative observation is that this combination – and its obstacles – brings a particular value added that has yet to be fully appreciated, with applications in emerging times that are worthy of attention. This related future agenda merits active exploration, too.

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