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## A research agenda for civil society: introduction and overview

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### Origin of the volume

Any volume dedicated to civil society faces issues of motivation as well as difficult choices. When considering the invitation from Edward Elgar to put forward a research agenda in this field, we agreed that the task is worth taking on if: (a) while being informed by the past, it is not premised on extending an era of research which mainstreams liberal ‘democratisation’ processes; (b) did something to remedy past research and knowledge biases and gaps; (c) recognises a new era of global political realignments and trends towards ‘auto-crisation’; and (d) opened up opportunities for young scholars to share their analysis and ideas. An intention was to break out of a mould of compendiums, handbooks and guides that typify current publications about civil society and the formally constituted non-profit organisations which feature predominantly. By and large, the 22 chapters in this book fulfil these intentions.

We start by explaining the unusual way that this volume came together. This chapter then provides a contextual framework for future agendas. This objective begins with a brief historical review of civil society research, moving into an emerging era with major rearrangements of power between nation states well as realignments of power between citizens and their governments. While appearing in different ways in numerous chapters, two distinctive processes and interactions between them stand out. One is shifts and frictions between geo-political heavyweights of the United States and the Republic of China, bringing ripple effects across the globe. These appear in open challenges to an assumed desirability and ultimate universalism of liberal democracy over forms of governance associated with more authoritarian systems of politics and leadership. The other feature of interaction is regimes undertaking purposeful limitation to civic space – that is, the practical possibilities of citizens

freely enjoying rights of expression, association and assembly (CIVICUS, 2022).

Constraining civic agency differentially impacts on the constituents and norms to be found in civil society, with incivility gaining adherents and influence. Be they international, national or local in scope, these political realignments are taking place against the backdrop of the potentially devastating impact of climate change on the planet's climate, ecosystem and all of its species. As the November 2021 Conference of the Parties 26 (COP 26) in Glasgow showed, these threats can only be resolved by dedicated collective effort not just of governments but through social contracts with citizens themselves. These perspectives indicate that, while past experience is to be valued, the global and local ambiance for research on civil society is unlikely to be a linear continuation of the past. More probable are complex research parameters for decisions and risks. How today's and tomorrow's scenarios are informing researchers is richly described in the chapters to follow, which are loosely grouped within guiding themes. The final chapter offers a reflexive speculation of where and what next for the study of civil society.

## **Crafting the volume: a positive Covid story**

The proposal submitted to the publisher in June 2020 had a traditional idea about creating and editing a book. This included: making comparisons with and differentiation of this effort from existing publications in the field; an overall approach in terms of process; ideas about chapter length and numbers; structure of potential themes, topics, geographies and contributors, time lines and so on. With this agreed, the search for potential authors initially relied on personal outreach based on familiarity with existing works and leaders in this field of research, studies and debates. That is, an editor-centred process, with inbuilt limitations. Covid-19 offered an opportunity to move to an author-centred approach, paradoxically benefitting from enforced reliance on digital communication for meetings and seminars.

The International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR) had Covid-adapted to serving its members by, inter alia, instituting a series of webinars. With ISTR's active support, webinars were advertised that described the book initiative, inviting sign-up. Not quite crowd-sourcing, but mobilisation of contributors relying on interest and the energy that lies behind individual and (un)funded collective research efforts. The timing of two webinars allowed for participation across the world's time zones.

Those joining the webinars were asked to provide ideas about research topics. Suggestions were collated into 12 themes, shared with all participants inviting them to become authors, but not necessarily limited to a specific theme. The result is a volume where content is driven by those dedicated to advancing this area of knowledge in circumstances unlike a period of major investments by those governing research finance. The chapters speak to conditions, experiences and perspectives of all continents. Themes have emerged from accumulations of topics with implied or obvious similarity. This outcome does not mean that there is now a systematic agenda for future research, typically resulting from centrally constructed and resourced research projects that typify past global enquiry. Rather, this volume provides a bottom-up view of the value attached to new knowledge about civil society by those whose efforts drive improvements in understanding, that better inform and advance debates as well, perhaps, as shaping policies.

## **A brief review of past civil society research**

Civil society research has quite a long history, but has (re-)emerged especially in the early 1970s in the Global South. The past 40-year era of civil society research coincided with widespread civic resistance to authoritarian regimes, notably in Latin America, Asia and Southern Europe in the 1970s (cf. O'Donnell et al., 1986). Political assertion by a polity was reinforced by geo-political shifts in the late 1980s, associated with the implosion of the Soviet Union attributed, *inter alia*, to citizen action in civil society. The stage was set for a post-Enlightenment, colonially informed assumption of the eventual convergence of the world and its countries to a liberal-style democratic order governed by self-interested compliance with an international rule of law. Abundant aid-related resources to funding civil society strengthening programmes did the rest. This context created both an ambiance and motivation to undertake research on civil society, particularly in terms of advancing democratisation and its roles in serving a social contract between citizen and state.<sup>1</sup> Looking back, some 40 years of dedicated research can be characterised in a number of ways.

A first tendency is that theoretical explorations and notions of civil society seldom bypassed Eurocentric origins. Much of the civil society literature points at the Enlightenment as the inspiration of the civil society concept, often elaborated with examples from the French and American revolutions, later followed by practices in other European countries (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Keane, 1998; Howell and Pearce, 2001; Edwards, 2004). In these discussions, the civil society

concept was initially part of a 'good governance' debate, relating the concept to the (legitimacy of) a nation state, and (less so) to the market (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992; Clayton, 1996). It is only in recent decades that more local conceptualisations of civil society have been elaborated. Concerning Africa: Mamdami (1996), Lewis (2002), Obadare (2011, 2013), Obadare and Willems (2014), Ogawa (2018). Civil society studies in Asia include: Chandhoke (2001), Kaviraj and Khilnani (2001), Howell (2003), Chatterjee (2004), Lewis (2004), Shah (2004). For Latin America: Alvarez et al. (1998), Avritzer (2000), Stahler-Sholk et al. (2008), Petras and Veltmeyer (2011). And, for example in the Middle East: Bayat (1997), Ibrahim and Sherif (2008), Northey (2018).

A second tendency has been to equate civil society with a Third Sector of formal non-profit entities, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Korten, 1990; Salamon, 1994; Fernandes, 1994). In a way this was understandable: for a period of three decades NGOs had been the primary recipients of international aid. Research in this area focused first on the Northern-based non-profits, often becoming major donor agencies to fund the establishment of Southern NGOs (Smith, 1990; Thérien, 1991; Smillie, 1995). Soon the research focus shifted to the issue of effectiveness and impact, not in the last place triggered by an earlier report by Judith Tandler who labelled NGO virtues as 'articles of faith' (Tandler, 1982). Later studies were building on this critical analysis (Riddell and Robinson, 1995; Sogge et al., 1996; Fowler, 1997), often also adding the problematic accountability of NGOs (Edwards and Hulme, 1992, 1995). Both themes stood central at the range of Manchester NGO conferences (1992 and 1994), later repeated in Birmingham (1999) and again Manchester (2005) (Bebbington et al., 2008; Edwards, 2008). Obviously, a central element in these studies was the role of aid-related agendas (Van Rooy, 1998; Fowler, 2000; Kelsall and Igoe, 2005; Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2006), which was often at the cost of attention to 'below the radar' civic formations and associational life (Hilhorst, 2003; Hearn, 2007; Holmén, 2010).

A third tendency in the early civil society studies was a concentration on (support to) Southern civil society actors as key drivers of democratisation, highlighted by human rights groups, progressive social movements (such as peasant organisations) and a range of advocacy NGOs (Clark, 1991; Burnell, 1991; Carroll, 1992; Fisher, 1993; Fowler, 1993; Bratton, 1994; Riddell and Bebbington, 1995; Biekart, 1999). Carothers (1999: 207–9) called it the 'discovery of civil society' by Northern donors. In addition, Howell and Pearce (2001) made a difference between mainstream (mostly bilateral and multilateral aid) and alternative (largely European and Canadian NGOs) approaches to civil society strengthening as part of democracy building processes (Biekart, 2023). Studies often focused on country or regional cases, even though 'global civil

society' also received increased attention (Keane, 2003; Kaldor, 2003). In the transnational sphere of global advocacy networks, it was generally a focus on particular networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) and on international NGOs (Yanacopulos, 2016).

A fourth tendency in civil society research focused on efforts to quantify civil society strength or non-profit density in all societies around the globe. An often cited US-focused effort included an initiative to pin down social capital in civil society (Putnam, 1992, 1995). Another major comparative project was initiated in 1991 in the United States by The Johns Hopkins University with the so-called Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP), led by Lester Salamon. This project in the late 1990s was parked at the renamed Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies (Salamon and Anheier, 1998). The project studied non-profit cultures and densities in 46 countries worldwide, largely in the Northern hemisphere and generated a vast amount of publications.<sup>2</sup> A second major initiative to quantify civil society patterns was started by CIVICUS in the early 2000s. This so-called Civil Society Index project also employed local research teams, but had a clear emphasis on the Southern hemisphere, and looked also more closely at civil society groups (Heinrich, 2004; Heinrich and Fioramonti, 2007). This ambitious project was criticised by some for simplifying civil society and by primarily servicing the donor community (Biekart, 2008).

A fifth research tendency has looked at qualitative investigation of civil society in terms of its many functions and virtues. Examples are the studies on participation and citizen engagement (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010), as part of the range of Department for International Development (DFID)-funded case studies coordinated by the Citizenship Development Research Centre (CDRC) and published in a Zed Book series under the umbrella 'Claiming Citizenship: Rights, Participation, Accountability'. Another example is the focus on civil society and the reconnection of citizens with public life (Boyte, 2004), the role of unruly (or uncivil) civil society (Payne, 2000; Kopecký and Mudde, 2003), the relationship between civil society and online civic participation (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013), as well the link between civil society and markets (Zadek, 2011). These are just indicative examples, as many more studies were completed (see Edwards, 2011).

A sixth set of civil society studies demonstrated a renewed interest in the role of civic agency and citizenship in relation to civil society. An example of this in which we were involved ourselves is the role of civic agency in the process of civic-driven change (Fowler and Biekart, 2008). Rather than looking at changes at organisational levels, the project explored the results of change

processes triggered by civic initiatives, aiming at jointly imagined future outcomes. Research along the same lines was done by Gaventa and Tandon (2010) and Obadare and Willems (2014).

A seventh and final set of civil society studies in recent years explored the notion of ‘civic space’ in the Global South as an environmental context in which civil society actors use (or are limited in their use) of basic civic rights. For example, CIVICUS (2022) monitors the level of openness of civic space by looking at the freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of peaceful assembly. Follow-up studies were realised by Hossain et al. (2018, 2019) and by Fowler and Biekart (2020).

In addition to these research themes, several handbooks on non-profits and civil society were produced in the past decade, providing overviews of civil society-related issues (Edwards, 2011), up to a three-volume encyclopaedia of concepts related to civil society (Anheier and Toepler, 2010, updated in 2020).

## Exploring potentially new civil society research themes

The preparatory webinars in early 2021 as part of this book project generated a range of new urgent research themes, which later formed the basis for the design of the present volume. These themes were clustered in six areas, which we will briefly outline below. Some of these topics will obviously come back in the various chapters of this volume, and certainly inform the conclusions.

One thematic area was around the question how to label civil society and how to arrive at undisputed, commonly used definitions of civil society (or plural: civil societies). This is especially the case in countries with authoritarian regimes where there is very little ‘legal’ organised opposition. More attention is needed for the meaning of specific concepts in different languages, where the core idea of civil society is often lost in translation. It is also clear that civil society needs to be analysed in its complexity of various levels (from global to the family) and in its relationship to governance. Equating civil society with Third Sector is often problematic, needing further scrutiny in how this equivocating (co-)determines analytic frameworks.

A second theme pays renewed attention to values and rights, as the normative premises of civil society need to be specified. There is still a colonial undertone, as we also suggested above, that should be critically addressed. Whose values count, when, where and why? How are norms of accountability and legitimacy

determined and why has this shifted over time? What is the value base spurring volunteering and solidarity? There is increased focus on the ‘civic space’ in which civil society actors operate and often are constrained by authoritarian and autocratic regimes. Basic civic rights are no longer respected because, in various ways, their universality is questioned. It seems important to make a clear distinction between groups that are affected by shrinking civic space, but in different ways. Whose civic agency is benefitting and suffering from changing relations between citizen and state as their ideologies and instruments evolve? Future research will inevitably face issues of values and rights.

Third, a more comprehensive view is required of what civil society really does and looks like in different settings, beyond NGOs and aid, and above (as well as under) the radar of the formal towards the informal expressions of associational life. There is also a complexity of transnational networks like diaspora groups: what types of networks are emerging, who is involved and why? For example, in countries devastated by (civil) war the question of cultural roots of associational life triggers increased attention. On social media, small ad hoc civic initiatives accelerate in no time into massive movements. The issue of uncivility and ‘non-civic movements’ have generated renewed attention with the January 2021 siege of the US Capitol (see Chapter 5 in this volume). What are the drivers of these darker sides of civil society? How can civil society be kept bright as well?

The fourth theme evolves around the need for a serious epistemological conversation about civil society, one that really listens to everyone involved. When and what is on the ‘third bank’ of the knowledge river (see Chapter 3 in this volume)? How is Western and indigenous knowledge blending, and what is eventually the result? Developing a new epistemology on civil society requires questioning power differences in a global knowledge system that has been subjugated by a primacy of North American and Western European academics, publishers, journals and universities. A situation dominated by colonial languages, in particular English, but also French and Spanish. A future epistemology of civil society would have to take these factors into account.

The fifth theme concerns digitalisation and social media. Internet and smart-phones have transformed civil society drastically: the speed of action, the number of people reached, but also the time zones that can be crossed. In particular the Covid-19 pandemic made clear how voluntary action and networking have skyrocketed in the digital sphere. ‘Liking’ seems to have become the digital replacement of ‘membership’, even though it is highly fluid and volatile. How have social media shaped (or undermined) civil society in specific contextual settings? What are the implications for civil society as a whole; how

are digital and analogue forms of organising interacting? This is probably one of the most challenging and urgent agenda items for civil society researchers in the near future.

A final theme identified is the way research on civil society in the future should be done, by whom; where will the finance come from and why? But also: can new (qualitative) methodologies be devised to advance this research field? And a cross-cutting theme in the whole webinar conversation was: are we developing a new research agenda *of* civil society or *for* civil society? If the latter applies, which spaces should be occupied and how can coalitions be made effective? How can researchers and activists work together? Can inspiring practices of academic engagement with civil society be mapped?

While not pretending to remedy these shortcomings, the approach to setting out a future research agenda relies on a different premise, namely a reliance on the insights of those actively engaged with self-motivated enquiry, rather than a pre-defined research initiative to buy into.

## Framing a future civil society research agenda

As alluded to above, to be relevant, any future research on civil society will be within emerging geo-political force fields operating at multiple levels, all inviting conscious consideration. One field is contention about the relative merits of representative democracy as a nation's political system and the geo-historical meaning, place and role of civil society within it. Another is about competition for territorial hegemony, where transnational civil society can be in play, for example, leading to state control of internet access that could otherwise mobilise virtual associational life across borders. A third, more fundamental, issue is not contention about political ideology – technocratic or participatory – that better serves citizens, but about conflicting values that (competing) regimes rely on. Reflected in different chapters, under such conditions, researchers will need to take account of the personal risks, institutional positioning and practical constraints associated with tackling topics at any level.

Allied to the issue of values, and equally concerning, is populist nationalist tendencies illustrated in chapters that openly challenge a normative nature of a civil society that is, indeed, *civic*: loosely understood as a concern for the whole with tolerance for differences between people. Researching incivility – which may cross borders of legality – is likely to require contextual sensitivity,



cultivation of trust, adaptation of methods and an update to ethics. In short, whose norms count?

In sum, implicit assumptions that research and researchers are objective or neutral when investigating civil society are open to question.

## Research themes and chapter clusters

The process described above and the loose themes that were identified collectively led to a set of 20 chapters, next to the introductory and concluding chapters. These were grouped into three main clusters that form the backbone of the book. Below we will briefly outline these clusters.

Part I looks at ‘Studying Civil Society’, as this is the central focus of this volume. In Chapter 2, David Sogge examines the funding aspect of civil society research, a unique contribution as very little research has been done on this. Patricia Mendonça (Chapter 3) and Mário Alves (Chapter 4) focus on epistemologies of civil society, in this case both from a South American perspective. In Chapter 5, Roseanne Mirabella and W. King Mott explore the background of incivility in the United States leading to the 6 January 2021 siege of the US Capitol. Ali Bakir Hamoudi (Chapter 6) takes the perspective from the Middle East and North Africa region and Susan Appe (Chapter 7) the view from Ecuador to map and analyse civil society and its values.

Part II focuses on ‘Civil Society Typologies’, in which the emphasis is on analysing human rights organisations (Chapter 8 by Antoine Buyse and Verónica Gómez), humanitarian diplomacy (Chapter 9 by Dorothea Hilhorst and Margit van Wessel), NGOs and their innovation policies (Chapter 10 by Ana Luísa Silva), and international NGOs and their partners in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic (Chapter 11 by Irene Guijt, Duncan Green, Filippo Artuso and Katrina Barnes). Then, two chapters focus especially on volunteerism and philanthropy from various angles: Chapter 12 by Lucas Meijs and Stephanie Koolen-Maas and Chapter 13 by Philine van Overbeeke and Malika Ouacha. Finally, Chapter 15 by Chris McInerney examines the engagement of civil society organisations with public administration.

Part III, ‘Historiographies of Civil Society’, highlights particular regions where the history of civil society research is elaborated with a view towards potential future research agendas. Some chapters compare several regions on one specific aspect, such as Chapter 16 by John Godfrey who looks at corporate

philanthropy in India and Africa. Some chapters take a regional view on the historical development of civil society: Chapter 17 by Alan Fowler and Shauna Mottiar on Africa; Jenny Paturyan on the Southern Caucasus (Chapter 18); Pablo Marsal on the Southern Cone of Latin America (Chapter 20). And then there are two chapters with a focus on one particular country, with comparisons to their neighbours: Galia Chimiak looks at Eastern Europe from a Polish perspective (Chapter 19) and Mark Sidel focuses on China with comparative insights from Hong Kong and Vietnam (Chapter 21).

Finally, as will be elaborated in Part IV, ‘Conclusions’ (Chapter 22) as well, we emphasise that an exploration like this can never be complete. This has also not been our intention, as this is probably the first collective effort ever to map civil society research perspectives. Despite this disclaimer, we hope (and trust) that the current volume offers a rich insight and a clear inspiration to those wanting to embark upon future civil society research with a critical mindset.

## NOTES

1. For our purposes, the definition, formulated by Michael Waltzer, cited in Michael Edwards (2011, p. 4) suffices: ‘Civil society is the sphere of uncoerced human association between individuals and the state, in which people undertake collective action for normative and substantive purposes relatively independent of government and market.’
2. See <https://ccss.jhu.edu/research-projects/comparative-nonprofit-sector-project/>.

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