CHAPTER 2

Interrogating Civic Space: Applying a Civic-Driven Change Perspective

Kees Biekart and Alan Fowler

1 The Emergence of Civic Space as a Concept

One of the recurring problems in the study and analysis of civil society is that one cannot see it. This has at least one unpleasant side-effect: civil society strength is very hard to measure (Biekart, 2008). The main reason for this is that civil society is more than just an empirical concept: it entails more than a certain number of organisations and/or conditions for their existence (Edwards, 2014). In addition, the specific histories and national context of civil societies significantly co-determine its composition and strengths as well as its limitations. When a group of researchers a decade ago tried to develop a 'civil society index' to give a quantitative indicator to civil society strength, they had to admit that this was causing a whole

K. Biekart (✉)
International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands
e-mail: biekart@iss.nl

A. Fowler
University of Witwatersrand Business School, Johannesburg, South Africa
e-mail: alan@alanfowler.org

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range of methodological problems that were hard to solve (Heinrich, 2005).

Added to the confusion generated by the variety of civil society definitions, the concept of civil society as a liberating concept was soon abandoned, at least by civic activists. It is now only present in the term Civil Society Organization (CSO), which is vague enough to comprise every organisation in civil society we do not automatically reject as a potential ally. Generated by World Bank and UNDP circles in the late 1990s, the CSO concept seems to be here to stay as a proposition that does not have negative connotations of low accountability, undemocratic behaviour, and aid-driven connotation of NGOs (nongovernmental organisations) (Fowler, 2011: 43). However, by abandoning the rich concept of civil society and by no longer linking it to its dialectic relationship with the state that, as followers of Gramsci have convincingly argued for many decades, a vacuum had emerged. After all, isn't civil society *de facto* co-defined by the state? Its presence depends on the associational life of citizens thanks to state intervention measures or lack thereof. The vacuum now seems to be filled by the concept of *civic space*, a term that was coined in legal circles in the USA and gradually found its way to international institutions, including NGOs in North and South. This chapter will examine the meaning as well as the relevance of the term *civic space* for development discussions. It does so by employing the concepts of civic agency and civic-driven change to interrogate the notion and connotations of a nationally bordered 'space' that both houses and connects political actors and forces.

Civic space has all the attractions that civil society lacks: it can be 'visualised' as bounded, dynamic—a space that can grow or shrink. And it is general enough to include a whole range of actors and process factors. It, therefore, comes not as a surprise that civic space has firmly entered the vocabulary of donors, development NGOs as well, in recent years, by activist groups (Buyse, 2018; Hossain et al., 2018, 2019; Malena, 2015). In these discourses, civic space is often used interchangeably with civil society itself, or as a particular public arena conditioned by relations to the state and the market that co-determine civil society organisations' room for manoeuvre to mobilise and organise and to (critically) engage or, in the name of 'rights', resist public policies, rules, and interventions. This makes the term useful for a variety of actors and interests and it makes the concept more mentally tangible: a 'visible space' so to speak. One with boundaries that can be identified reflected for instance in the debates

concerning shrinking or changing civic space for civil societies of all kinds across the globe. In particular, years of past efforts have been applied to measure what is called the *enabling environment* for civil society organisations, implying a causal relationship co-determining the size and quality of 'space' for agency in the public realm. Also implying that—enabling or otherwise—the 'environment' is an interactive 'space' co-created by a myriad of transactions between citizens and ruling regimes generating uncertain political outcomes.

However, the rather simplified understanding of the various meanings of civic space leaves unexplored the more complex theoretical and empirical dynamics between civic space and citizenship, or between civic space and civil society, not to speak of civic space and the politics of (un)democratic development under conditions of interdependent, globalising capitalism as the prevailing economic system—be it 'owned' by private investors or by post-communist states.

Conceptually, it can be argued that the recent animation of civic agency—seen amongst others in civil disobedience and violent public protests—can provide a three-part theoretical enhancement as well as a deepening analytic coupling that interrogates what energises civic space: "(…) agency is an interplay between (i) past routine, experience, and learning, energized by (ii) images of a desired future situation, which is then (iii) situationally judged for achievability and risk, from which action may or may not be taken. In this reflexive sense, inaction is also an action" (Fowler & Biekart, 2020: 2). The first is an experiential element which can be partly understood in terms of historical pre-conditions discussed below. The second element can be interpreted in terms of Polanyi's double movement. In reconstruction of critical theory, Block (2008) updated Polanyi's (1944) original formulation in terms of global development propagating 'neo-liberalism' and 'market fundamentalism' generating popular discontents invoking counter-movements seeking to check, modify or control market forces (Block, 2008: 1). This results in destabilising inequality (Milanovic, 2018) and other social ills, including escalating mistrust in (democratic) governance (Harari, 2019). The third element is one of personal and collective imagined futures inspiring action in the public domain that—depending on positionality within the double movement—are potentially confrontational. Akin to prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), past and present are calibrated in terms of the probability of bringing about the desired future.

Here the Gramscian view of civil society as a site of political struggle against hegemony is in play.

Thus, in our reading the term civic space remains poorly defined, ahistorical and insufficiently scrutinised academically; neither in relation to the more elusive idea of 'civil society', nor in relation to development as a globalising economic process. Conceptually and theoretically, it is here that 'space' can be understood from the citizenship base of civic agency associated with a legal attribute of modern statehood (Fowler, 2009) which can be functionally observed and interpreted through five lenses of civic-driven change (Fowler & Biekart, 2013).

The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to explore how useful the term 'civic space' is for better understanding social resistance opportunities and whether civic space can help us understand better what civil society is (un)able to do in a political sense. The treatment homes in on the term 'civic agency' and especially its invisible historical reference points—what we call *the latency of civic agency*—as potential reservoirs of popular energy acting as drivers of socio-political processes. In addition, the dynamics of *civic-driven change* are discussed, as a potentially more useful lens to look at resistance and social change. Examples will be drawn from recent country studies (Fowler & Biekart, 2020).

2 Theoretical Foundations: From Civil Society to Civic Space

It is good to recall that the civil society discourse only re-emerged broadly in the late-1980s, after the breakdown of authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe and Latin America had preceded the end of the Cold War and of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe—which is often summarised a bit dramatically by speaking of the 'fall of the Berlin wall'. But authors studying these processes, like O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 55–65), already wrote about the 'resurrection of civil society' as a trigger for democratic politics when nobody in the development business had even used the term civil society. Bobbio (1987) re-introduced Gramsci's ideas to the community of Latin American refugees in Europe which contributed to several ideological transformations in the Latin American left (Howell & Pearce, 2001).

However, while the notion of civil society soon was extensively used in development discourses, it also was constantly challenged. First, the implied universalism of civil society proved to be a limitation, as we

have previously argued (Biekart & Fowler, 2013), when it was applied to countries such as Laos, Vietnam, or China. One of the reasons was that too little respect was given to *historical latencies*, such as the stigma of military defeat and the indignities of slavery and colonial subordination, embedded in the psychology of a polity that politicians could rely on to mobilise popular, nationalistic support seen assertively in China. These countries are adopting market economic principles while maintaining socio-political configurations deeply rooted in communism (Howell & Pearce, 2001). In other words, an implied universalism of civil society as both instigator and product of democratic dispensations associated with market capitalism is clearly open to challenge. Secondly, historical latencies (discussed further below) may be rooted in a perceived glorious past as a nation, sometimes phrased as *lost empires*. A third historical latency present in civil societies is struggles of resistance that have been repressed and which tend to re-emerge only decades later in a surprising similar format (Hirschman, 1984). It is against such a backdrop that what civil society is and means in the field of development studies becomes even more problematic.

A second challenge for using civil society in development discourse relates to the variety of definitions and interpretations of civil society, which has made it into a tricky concept in the development business. This is mainly due to the normative use of civil society as the 'good society', as the civil society we would like to see, rather than acknowledging its great diversity and its internal contradictions (Edwards, 2014). But obviously, there are many other views on civil society circulating as well. Edwards (2014) mentions three different approaches: next to the good society is also civil society as the sum of organisations ('associational life') and civil society as the public sphere. Glasius (2010: 1–2) identified five different interpretations of civil society inspired by various thinkers: as social capital (Putnam); as citizens active in public affairs for the common good (DeTocqueville); as non-violent and resisting violence (Gandhi); as fostering public debate (Habermas); and civil society as agency for counter-hegemony (Gramsci). Even if there is overlap, depending on your worldview as development actor, one can pick a particular approach that suits preferred ideologies and strategies. Be that as it may, what these views have in common is that civil society is implicitly defined by its (power) relation with the state, often overlooking power distribution within itself.

An additional challenge facing all these approaches is that civil society is normatively defined, therefore, automatically ignoring the opponents—if not enemies—which are not perceived to be part of civil society. Examples are extreme right, anti-woke, or neo-populist parties, illegal movements, violent-based groups, not to mention 'terrorist' associations. The place of faiths and sects was also often problematic. Moreover, types of conflict which are always present in civil society—it is after all a protagonist in and product of unresolved struggle in any society—are generally ignored or downplayed.

One of the major limitations of researching civil society is that its strength cannot easily be assessed, let alone 'measured'. Relying on an assessment of four dimensions: structure, environment, values, and impact, as previously noted, efforts by CIVICUS and other actors to develop a 'civil society index', which would make it possible to compare the strength of civil societies across the globe, did not really work out (Biekart, 2008; Heinrich, 2005). Basically, three problems were identified. First, national country research teams used different definitions and compositions of civil society. For example, some researchers proposed to include political parties in civil society, whereas others were opposed to that. Obviously, this leads to problematic cross-country comparisons. A second problem in designing a universal 'civil society index' was triggered by the predominantly Euro-American interpretation of civil society, in which issues like 'donor dependency' or 'conflict'—crucial, for example, in the African context—were not adequately considered. A third problem had to do with the use of a participatory research methodology, generating a quantitative index based on predominantly subjective criteria. This additional element obstructed cross-country comparisons (Biekart, 2008: 1177–1179). While establishing a sort of baseline, portrayal of the condition of parts of civil society in participating countries, the exercise was difficult to repeat year by year. But one value was bringing more critical attention to understand and empirically 'measure' the operating conditions—the environment—which co-determined civil society composition and capabilities. It can be argued that the Index experience—particularly by expanding the environment dimension—was folded into a much more dynamic approach of tracking civil society 'space' seen in the CIVICUS Monitor project on civic space and its parameters.

The above-mentioned limitations and history of concepts and their applications can partly explain why 'civic space' emerged as an attractive complementary term to gauge factors shaping civil society strength.

Rather than locating conflict within civil society, it is located outside this sphere by creating a new label for a domain between civil society and the state in which key civic rights are exercised. Civic space is described by CIVICUS (2020) in the following way:

> Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organisations are able to organise, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions. These are the three key rights that civil society depends upon.

On the basis of this (descriptive) definition, and reflecting a liberal democratic political dispensation, civic space can be loosely defined as: 'the public arena used by citizens and civil society organizations, and provided by the state, to exercise the fundamental rights of association, assembly, and expression'. Often the terms 'civic space' and 'civil society space' are used simultaneously (Hossain et al., 2018: 13, Footnote 1). In practice, civic space thus is viewed as the realm and quality of political environment in which civil society organisations can express themselves, and where they can voice their opinions and concerns. Oxfam International (2019) goes a step further by also adding other dimensions to measure (and thus monitor) civic space, such as the regulatory framework, the accountability of CSOs, their access to funding, as well as the safety and well-being of people. But is this in practice not basically the space that has already been defined as 'civil society'? Take, for example, the comprehensive definition of civil society proposed several decades ago by Gordon White:

> Civil society is an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values. (White, 1994: 379)

This can still be seen as a clear and strong definition because it highlights civil society as an intermediate realm (or call it a 'space') between public (the state) and private sphere (the family) in which civic rights are claimed and exercised by autonomous associations formed by citizens. Some have argued that civil society is the arena as well as the product of a

social struggle, but this is conflicting with the idea of a civic space (Keane, 1998). One can, therefore, argue that a new 'civic space'—an added realm that apparently would exist between civil society and the regime—is in fact depoliticising this implicit potential of civil society. Bratton (1989: 58–59) and others (paraphrasing Gramsci) argued many years ago that civil society and the state are two sides of the same coin: "the state is the realm of the politics of force (domination) and civil society is the realm of the politics of consent (hegemony)". This dynamic and alternating balance of power between state and civil society is what he called 'the centre of gravity of political life' (ibid.). Both spheres are driven by different forms of political power: civil society is likely driven by power based on civic energy, understood as the energy triggering and motivating collaboration between citizens to work for the public good. Civic energy is the pivotal force for civic-driven change as will be illustrated below.

In this reading, civic space appears to be a depoliticised form of this Gramscian understanding of civil society, since the potential power of hegemony is withdrawn. Why would this conceptualisation be so attractive to replace civil society? Well, there is another important reason that triggered the civic space discourse, preceding Bratton's quotes: the emergence of a digital civic sphere which was important for civic action, but hard to locate inside civil society. With the increased use of social media as a tool for protest and resistance, the internet has quickly become one of the main fora for civic association stimulating (disbursed) collective action not limited to a national space. Following White's definition, social media and other internet communication are not really defined as part of civil society: after all, it is about apps, tweets, and social communications rather than organisations. But social media are certainly part of the Habermasian public sphere (Öffentlichkeit), which comes closer to what the proponents perceive of the key features of a civic space in which critical debate is allowed and encouraged. Obstructions to citizens using this digital public sphere are obviously determined by state interventions as well as a product of business models and their approach to risk. Governments in many parts of the world abuse their power to restrict online access for and online freedoms of oppositional forces (Hellema, 2017).

A pivotal issue in bringing 'space' into civil society debates is the extent to which it is instrumental in enabling a dialectic of power distribution which emerges from processes of 'co-production' between citizen and state. Or does it constitute a location of autonomy for collective civic agency? In one sense, the 'quality' of civic space can be judged in terms

of power with respect to the degree of societal norms and ruling regime's 'tolerance' (Mill, 1860) for any type of agency by a polity, be they by citizens or otherwise, such as (illegal) migrants and refugees. That is, civic agency is simultaneously shaping and is shaped by a civic space that it co-creates.

By way of a biological analogy, civic space can be viewed, including time, as a four-dimensional living organism with surface irregularities, shapes, and scales that alter day by day. In a spatial frame, a geo-political, legal 'state' provides a bounding membrane for autonomous action civic action within constitutionally determined ground rules and norms, that are modified over time. In the other, a ruling regime—its legitimacy and ideology—is a protagonist in a continual struggle over the distribution of power within civil society as well as towards those who govern. Within the organism, viscous material is provided by a polity's multiple energising motivations—economic, social, theological, cultural, etc.—each trying to claim primacy that is abetted or impeded by the current regime. That is, energy stemming from contestation about who wins and who loses both within the polity and in relation to the ruling regime, each relying on different instruments for assertion. Universal human rights are often a legalistic reference point in how struggles and spatial changes are interpreted. The choice of a spatial frame becomes crucial in how civil society is conceived politically and portrayed in development studies which needs to be made explicit.

A final attractive element (at least for some development actors) of the use of the term 'civic space' is that it has been relied on as a popular instrument for political activism. In fact, the term was popularised by (moderate) activist organisations, such as ICNL, CIVICUS, Carnegie Foundation, and others (Hossain et al., 2018: 13). Reflecting the organic analogy, in its practical use, while there is a tendency to argue that 'civic space is shrinking', seldom do activists and/or human rights defenders point at where there is a selective 'widening' of civic space. Even not when there are signs that this is occurring for some types of prejudiced (neo-populist) citizen expression. In short, a much more differentiated understanding of what lives and expresses itself as (un)civic agency and non-civic CSOs (Monga, 2009)—intolerance of 'otherness' and promoting unfairness—is needed if 'civic space' is to have a firm, normatively aware empirical grounding.

In summary, our argument is that civic space elides from a normative concept of an *enabling environment* relying on three freedoms considered

to be a *sine qua non* for a particular, to be preferred (liberal democratic) political system. Even if other elements are added to the civic space 'measurement', as is suggested by international organisations such as Oxfam and ICNL. The freedom-principles of 'space' do not, however, provide a way to politically analyse how their relative presence or absence plays out in practice. The concept and dimensions of *civic-driven change* may be a way of 'filling' space by applying political dimensions of citizen agency, including drivers from historical latency. Remember that we identified three drivers of historical latency in civil society: (i) loss of dignity; (ii) appeals to a glorious past (a lost empire); and (iii) repressed struggles of resistance. All these latencies may reappear suddenly in a powerful manner as was seen in works by Chimiak for Poland, by Paturyan for South Caucasus, and by Sidel for China, Hong Kong, and Vietnam (cf. Biekart & Fowler, 2022).

3 From Civic Space to Citizen Agency

The discussion can now be expanded and theoretically informed by two (related) concepts: *civic* (or citizen) *agency* and *civic-driven change*. Civic agency may be understood as 'a human predisposition toward, and a capability for, leading life together with others in a society with concern for the whole'. Civic agency incorporates a basic principle of a fair, tolerant society (Fowler & Biekart, 2020: 2). This proposition was further elaborated as part of a collective enquiry of international civil society practitioners and thinkers to explore social change being triggered by other factors than development aid. The civic-driven change (CDC) concept—understood as the actions of members of a polity to alter the conditions in which they live—was rooted in case essays provided by scholars from multiple continents (Fowler & Biekart, 2008). Mwaura (2008) applied herself to drivers of religion, faith, and spirituality in Africa; Boyte (2008) examined developmental democracy in America; Bullain (2008) concentrated on law and the role of outside interventions in Hungary; Gumucio-Dagron (2008) analysed citizenship and communications from a Latin American perspective; Tandon (2008) spoke to the deepening democracy in India; and Dagnino (2008) detailed political projects in Brazil. Based on the Insights from these essays, our subsequent presentations, and critical debates, a five-part framework was established to bring politics back in to development discourse (Fowler & Biekart, 2013). A value of this framework is, following our biological analogy, to

see how civic space is shaped and 'filled' through people's agency, which is inferred but insufficiently explicit in existing treatments. In other words, the components involved can be used to unpack, tease out, and help understand the relationship between *space* and *agency*. That is, for any particular 'citizen associational assembly' within (un)civil society, to chart the extent to which space is changing. After their description, components will be laid over country examples.

As an ongoing exercise of expressing relative types of power—power to, power with, power within, and power over—citizens exert agency in interaction with the political space available and spaces to be claimed (Gaventa, 2007). To understand CDC, it is important to bear in mind that citizenship is simultaneously a personal and a collective property operating 24/7 with agency which is analytically distinct from a 'sector' and similar institutional frameworks. Extracted from Biekart and Fowler (2012) such agency can be viewed through five political lenses, described below. The purpose of this chapter steers our treatment towards factors of CDC related to civic space.

The politics of belonging: CDC is based on a rights-based understanding of political agency: *inclusive citizenship*. This individual as well as collective identity is the defining relationship between a state and its political community: the polity. Here is where historical latency can gain a hold in opening space for some associational formations, like nationalist groupings and in their choice of (aggressive) agency. Legitimacy of the former calls for active informed involvement by all of the latter. Where citizenship is not in play and the right to have rights is not honoured by a state, this condition needs first to be fulfilled, which was slowly happening in Myanmar, but not in North Korea. In many parts of the world, rights are granted in principle but not realised in practice. We have seen this with refugees on the Lao border. They have citizenship rights on paper but are unable to exercise those without facing repression. That is also why a CDC lens takes as a maxim the requirement for *equity of political agency rather than equity of economic opportunity* that informs the dominant three sector-based theories of change: namely state, market, and civil society. Equity of political agency exhibits strong gender differences, seen, for example, in the need to 'reserve' a proportion of (local) government seats for women and their exclusion from political systems in some Arab states. Applying this lens to civic space would seek out approaches to inclusion and assertions by those experiencing marginalisation.

The politics of action: A CDC lens focuses on *civic agency* for good or ill throughout all realms of society. A CDC perspective is, therefore, not institutionally 'located'—it is not 'owned' by civil society, as is often assumed with citizen's action. In whatever they do, people's agency contains 'political' choices which co-determine how a society thinks, functions, and evolves. From this mass of choices, what becomes 'political' on the streets, in the (social) media, and in systems of governance emerges from how power has been gained, distributed, and controlled in society. Consequently, civic agency means that CDC does not focus on the mechanics of politics, such as voting. Nor does it zoom in on institutions as such. Rather, it begins with identifying a domain of change where people decide to act to alter the society they live in and beyond to other locations. People's individual and collective decisions bring together past experience, an imagined future and a real-time assessment of the effort and risk involved in changing things. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt did not emerge from a 'sector' but from millions of families that lived and coped somehow with the stress of unemployment, giving bribes to stay in business or out of jail, being compromised by security services to spy on neighbours, experiencing denial as political opposition, and so on. Many years of such widespread micro-political circumstances and processes combined into a 'tinder box' of accumulating frustration, (youth) radicalism, and eventual mass public dissent with an unlikely trigger of self-immolation. Such accumulating, subterranean drivers of oppositional civic agency that emerge and catch fire, so to speak, are not confined to the poor, marginalised or to civil society as such, but belong to the political community at large. From a CDC point of view, this extreme example of civic agency is a source of innovation which impacts on the conventional three-sector analytic model in ways needing more explicit attention. Put another way, it is prudent to understand the socio-political fabric not only as visible institutions but also as formations that contain energising latencies—of historical injustice, (middle class) disaffection with (authoritarian) politics, (religious) intolerance, inequality, and more. In 'space terms' a task is to identify how civic-political action is layered.

The politics of scale: Tahrir square and similar events illustrate another core feature of a CDC lens: *scalability*. A CDC framework of analysis is applicable at local, regional, national, and global levels. This feature is particularly valuable when, through relationships both physical and virtual, change processes span multiple horizontal (networked) and

vertical (hierarchical) aggregations of civic agency, socio-political arrangements, and the different types and sites of governance and authority. For example, some governance landscapes are showing growth in citizen self-regulation. This shift is intended to make organisations more accountable without the heavy hand of legislation. A CDC view would connect this innovation with other types and sites of public accountability to see how power is being redistributed to whose advantage. A CDC view also orients towards analysis which links local to global changes and back again, abetted by globalisation of economic value chains and their (vulnerable) interdependencies. The UN Global Compact for Business and the impact of transnational citizen networks on multi-lateral institutions are examples of micro- to macro-scaling of civic agency, most acutely in responses to environmental concerns that were, for example, debated in November 2021 at COP 26 in Glasgow, UK. This feature of CDC ties to the proposition of imagined futures: such inspirations have no limit to their span in time or space, nor a theoretical limit to innovation. The 'blending' described above can be viewed in such an innovation light. This source of civic energy means that people can choose to think and act beyond their own small community or locality, for example, to influence global policies and governance arrangements via environmental movements and/or stewardship councils for natural resources. In terms of civic space, a challenge is to determine the degree of outreach across society and the diversity of civic agency.

The politics of knowledge and communication: A fourth core feature of the CDC lens is attention to the fact that civic agency is shaped by autonomy over power of knowledge. CDC recognises the multiple knowledges that inform agency. Even though learning is a complex process, it is important for civic actors to explore their own paths of change. Focussing on the ability of people to use their own knowledge and communication resources is, therefore, a crucial ingredient of applying a civic-driven change lens. The value of distributed knowledges increases when giving to and receiving from others. Ownership and control of mass media and blocking access to internet sites—the Chinese firewall—show that pathways for doing so are themselves part and parcel of power relationships. For example, in Tanzania only government statistics can be used to assess and report on progress in realising the Sustainable Development Goals (Fowler & Biekart, 2020). Independent research by CSOs or others was not permitted. Observing what information is (not) being transmitted to whom and how is a CDC task. Finally, the international development

industry still tends to ignore the subtle power asymmetry of resource transfers, through which Western knowledge and values are imposed. Civic space is typically permeated by multiple languages. A CDC angle is to unpack the ways in which language opens and closes debate and (dis)enable knowledge exchange with polity.

The politics of resourcing: This focuses attention on the material, economic, and human resource base that groups in (un)civil society rely on to exert agency for a collective purpose. In other words, what resources does civic energy draw on? The 'yellow vests' movement in France is self-supported by a 'beleaguered' middle class whose livelihoods are made precarious by 'green tax' increases on fuel, reducing subsidies and other reforms propagated by an insensitive political elite (Cigainero, 2018). Mega-philanthropists rely on massive financial accumulation exerting socio-political influence undermining democracy itself (Lechterman, 2022). The mass poor invade the streets in voluntary action defending whatever substance economy keeps them alive. Internet activists of all stripes self-finance their political and other messaging made cheaper by social media. This component of CDC should shine a critical, differentiating light on the economics of civic energy that enables and constrains (types of) agency. More specifically, in relation to civic space, to what extent can different constituents of civil society—through voluntary action, finance, or other means—engage in civic action. Here, an issue is the permeability of the membrane of civic space in terms of (dis)enabling resource flows.

Time specificity is an oft-neglected feature in the analysis of agency and change. Without an articulated temporal perspective and framing, the origins and significance of agency cannot be fully understood, nor can well-reasoned assessments of processes of socio-political change be made. As a practical rule of thumb, CDC analysis relies on four (simultaneous) time scales. One is immediate action—spontaneous protests, instant on-line campaigns, and so on. Next are political cycles that may be manipulated but are still required to give some sense of political legitimacy to govern. Institutional change—alteration and embedding of rules of the game governing society—is a third scale, say around ten years. Fourth is the timeline of (multiple) inter-generational change, anything from fifteen to thirty years, with climate change being a contemporary example. The general analytic point is that some specificity of the time frame is required if empirical evidence is to be well interpreted.

4 Analysing Changing Civic Spaces: New Dictators and the Re-emergence of Old Empires

The potential contribution of the concept of civic agency to our understanding of civic space can be further explored by zooming in on specific country settings in which civic space has changed in recent years. With *historical latency* in mind, this section looks at countries in which civic space became more restricted for some (and wider for others), largely due to conservative and/or neo-populist forces gaining presence and space. We would argue here that civic space changed, in various ways, and that an assessment is needed what this implied for citizen groups to trigger change.

A first example is Hungary, where the government of Viktor Orbán has curtailed rights of minorities, LGBTI+ activists, as well as rights of NGOs. This happened especially after the 2015–2016 refugee crisis when, in response, the government installed a fence along its Southern border, and introduced restrictive immigration and border control policies targeting asylum seekers. NGOs critical of government policies have been threatened with deregistration, and subject to legal and administrative investigations into their activities (CIVICUS, 2020). In fact, the legal system has changed in such a way that citizens' rights are less protected, media has become government controlled—affecting the politics of knowledge and communication—critical voices in NGOs, civil society, and universities have been silenced, combined with a 'remarkable increase in high-level corruption and political patronage (Freedom House, 2020). Orbán's Fidesz party makes an explicit appeal to latency by references to the old days of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. At the anniversary of the 1848 revolution, in which Hungary rose up against the Austrian Empire, Orbán said, 'We do not need to fight the anaemic little opposition parties but an international network which is organized into an empire'. This empire, he said, included 'a chain of NGOs financed by an international speculator, summed up by and embodied in the name George Soros' (Zerofski, 2019).

A second example where the legal-political environment for civic actors has been restricted is Erdogan's Turkey. There have been a range of events that destabilised the country, such as the aftermath of the 2016 coup, the Kurdish conflict, attacks related to the Syrian war, political refugees, economic crisis, international criticism and decline, and of course a failed coup attempt. This coup 'has paved way for a state of constant

readiness to curb basic freedoms, including the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, for the sake of the preserving national security or public order (ICNL, 2020)'. The Stockholm Center for Freedom has listed the post-coup results up to now: '(…) the government dismissed 140,000 state employees, arrested 40,000 people, jailed 152 journalists and twelve parliament deputies, purged one-third of the judges and prosecutors, and shut down 150 news organizations and 1,500 civil associations' (Brampton Koelle, 2019). Erdogan regularly refers to the idea of a 'Greater Turkey', one that was lost with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, foreign policy measures actively target territory that once belonged to the former empire, such as the Palestine territories, Saudi Arabia, and the Balkans. In terms of civic space, Erdogan has managed to open it up in ways which give voice to what is called the 'silent majority'. Zeynalov (2020) comments that Erdogan "can be assured of the popular support he enjoys among mostly conservative people in Turkey. Long a byword for poorly educated people and reactionary masses, conservative people that make up core of Erdogan's supporters are calling themselves the 'silent majority'". Just like Orban, Erdogan's campaign for electoral supremacy was built on repressing the opposition forces calling for more civic freedoms at Taksim Square, using electoral populism—or 'Erdoganism' as Yilmaz and Bashirov (2017) call it—as well as references to latency in myth of Turkish Empire to be reclaimed in order to sustain his political domination.

A third example is Bolsonaro's Brazil, ranked on the ninth spot of the world's largest economies. The country experienced a dramatic political and economic crisis in recent years. In the last fifteen years, Labour Party governments headed by President Lula and President Dilma were brought down by major popular street protests, demanding the return of military power to stop corruption and crime, and to bring back 'order and progress'. This was effectively implemented by President Jair Bolsonaro, who imposed a range of measures affecting the freedom of domestic and international NGOs. The protests against Dilma's government culminated in the 2018 elections amongst controversy and social protests. Lula was the prominent candidate leading in the polls, but the Brazilian Supreme Court blocked his candidacy as he had been arrested and was responding to legal proceedings, despite calls of the UN Human Rights committee to let him run (ICNL, 2020). The other prominent candidate, the later president Jair Bolsonaro, was stabbed during the campaign

and was hospitalised for several days. During electoral rallies and interviews, Jair Bolsonaro also made troubling statements such as 'we are going to put an end to all activism in Brazil' and 'there will be no public financing to CSOs' (ICNL, 2020). In addition, Bolsonaro said 'we want a Brazil that is similar to the one we had 40, 50 years ago', while praising one of the dictatorship's most notorious torture chiefs, Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra (Elliott & Phillips, 2018). As a congressman Bolsonaro always hailed authoritarian leaders in Latin America, including Peru's Alberto Fujimori and Chile's Augusto Pinochet. 'Yes, I'm in favour of a dictatorship' he once told congress (Elliott & Phillips, 2018).

5 How Civic-Driven Change Contributes to the Analysis of Civic Space

In this last section, we would like to reflect how applying CDC lenses can illuminate a search for common features in terms of the 'space-determining' politics of citizen agency.

First, the CDC lens of the politics of belonging helps to understand the first common element we identified, the long-term build-up of electoral support of right-wing populist parties with strong leaders. It is important to emphasise that these leaders are keen to use electoral instruments, but their intention often is to dominate rather than to serve democracy. This was seen with Erdogan and his refusal, for example, to accept the outcome of the 2019 elections for mayor in Istanbul, which was lost by the AKP candidate, as well as with Trump in the 2020 US presidential elections. This action was in line with Trump's (*Make America Great Again*), Erdogan's and Orbán's populist references to past empires and to give back dignity to the country (that assumably was taken away by previous governments). Bolsonaro was doing something similar by mobilising latent civic agency while referring to the Brazilian military dictatorship of 1964–1984.

The politics of action can shed light on the exercise of civic agency against autocratic behaviour of leaders and regimes. Such popular assertion and dissent are commonly seen in the form of initial massive protests in the large cities by the opposition (Taksim Square in Istanbul, and rallies in Budapest and Sao Paulo). As civic space is gradually changing, new populist movements emerge as a reaction, in support of the new populist leaders, also using massive street protests. The difference is that the latter are not repressed by police forces with tear gas. They also have a function

to demonstrate via mass media as well as social media the idea of 'domination', and visualise the idea of a 'silent majority' formerly silenced by the opposition forces. This image is essential to later legitimate the new legislation curbing civic rights of oppositional groups.

In the CDC framework, the politics of scale illustrates that the changes largely happen at the national level, but that scaling to both local and international levels is necessary to achieve political goals. The institutionalisation of the new populist regime is done by flirting with authoritarianism, hailing the role of military power (Erdogan, Bolsonaro, Putin), and/or breaking down the foundations of democratic rule by censuring the press and social media. In addition, international support is actively mobilised from other imperial allies such as Putin's Russia (Orbán, Erdogan) and/or Iran (Erdogan) to counter the interference of democratic forces such as the European Union and the United Nations.

In sum, a common tendency in the countries reviewed is to change the dynamics of civic space gradually and over a long period of time. It is definitely not the type of 'revolution' that we have seen, for example, during the Arab Spring (Biekart & Fowler, 2013). The purpose is to change society from being open and democratic into a restricted society based on hatred and selective solidarity in which there is no room for exceptions (such as LGBTI+ identities) let alone for undocumented refugees. Only government supporters are tolerated and rewarded, appealing to a latent civic agency of a heroic past.

What can we finally say about the usefulness of civic space? This chapter tried to show that civic space is replacing more complex but also more political conceptualisations of civil society and civic agency. The civic space discourse has its origin in a North American and Tocquevillian approach to civil society, largely coming from legalistic and human rights-related networks. It was soon taken over by the international donor community as an attractive explanation why their partners abroad were not having the development impact that was hoped for. In the view of donors, an open civic space thus became a condition for development effectiveness. The previous term to frame the limitations of civil society was 'enabling environment', but donors felt unable to effectively operationalise this in practice. Hence the shift to the more dynamic and 'malleable' term of civic space.

In this chapter, the main argument is that the institutional utility of the concept of civic space is such that a replacement is probably not on the cards. Be that as it may, we contend that the prevailing policy

and/or advocacy 'measuring' and tools approach is theoretically neo-liberal, analytically thin and too flat in terms of conceptual content. These instruments lack adequate sensitivity to the real-life shape-disrupting dynamism of society as a living organism, as well as being ahistorical in terms of recognising the role of latencies acting as a motivator of populist action exploited by the politics of autocratic regimes. We hope that the combination of civic agency theory and civic-driven change as its observed expression can help remedy what is depoliticising the civic space narrative.

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