Civil Society[1]

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Definition

Civil Society can be defined in three different ways. Firstly, the classical debate from Aristotle to Montesquieu (and Tocqueville) understood civil society in a republican sense as the political space of the citizens (the *citoyen* in the *polis*). Secondly, in the pre-modern tradition from Locke to Smith we can identify liberal concepts of civil society as the private space of the free citizens beyond the political space (the *bourgeois*). And thirdly, the Hegelian-Marxist definition of civil society from Hegel to Gramsci calls attention to the power structure of civil society (*hegemony*) as a part of the advanced (capitalist) state. The contributions in this third group of conceptions seek to synthesize the anti-thesis of *citoyen* and *bourgeois*.

In reference to such a heuristic the current contributions on civil society since the 1980s and early 1990s can mostly be categorized as republican or liberal – symbolized in the opposed positions of the Liberal-Communitarian Debate. Charles Taylor therefore distinguishes two current conceptual traces: the trace of *M*ontesquieu and the trace of *L*ocke-, the M- and the L-trace.

Concepts on civil society have a very long tradition – denoted here in the three conceptual lines. But they had nearly disappeared in the first two thirds of the 20th century. Since the last third of the 20th century they re-emerged mainly in the contexts of oppositional movements in Eastern Europe and are re-imported from there to Western Europe, Asia or South America. Beginning in the late 1950s the idea of a civil society was articulated and promoted/pursued by intellectuals in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, mainly as a political strategy in reaction to the so-called reform communism in order to seize the potentials of a self organised society – a self organization, that can mobilize pressure against the institutionalized political system (*party state*) from down below. The aim of these concepts was to constitute a public sphere, independent from the party state: a sphere of *civil society*.

Parallel to the global reincarnation of this idea civil society also emerged in social work and social policy debates. In the last 15 years debates on civil society became very popular, at least insofar as one regards the quantity of publications that carry a reference to "civil society" in their title as a valid indicator for the popularity of this concept. The motivation for underscoring the connection between social work/social policy and civil society is based on the fact that such concepts promise to offer an adequate analytical category to observe developments of democratization (e.g. in Eastern Europe, in South America or Asia) and new global political protests (especially anti-globalization-movements). At the same time civil society seems to provide an answer to the fundamental questions of governance and self-

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governance in advanced liberal states as well as in post-colonial-states. Civil society is in this respect an iridescent term. It delineates a program *and* an analytical category at the same time. Politicians, activists, *and* scholars often use the concept(s) in both ways and argue analytically and claim that a development of strengthening civil society means to strengthen the state in general. This iridescence of the concept(s) constitutes precisely its success.

Main issues
In the so called OECD-countries civil society is called „back" in the last two decades regarding to the *welfare state* critique or *state* critique in general. Associations (voluntary organisations as NGOs, clubs, and the German *Verein*), neighborhoods, and families as main actors in the civil society are politically focused as a rich source for real citizen engagement (*civic engagement*) beside the institutionalized political engagement (parties, political administration, parliaments). A very prominent and typical example can be found in the European Union (see the research network „Towards a European Civil Society").

A driving force behind the (welfare) state critique, which drives the mobilization of the current debates on civil society, was the (new) social movement since the 1970s. Ironically the current politics on civil society, discussed in the last 15 years on regional (*cities* or *districts*), national (*nation states*) or transnational levels (*international* and *transnational organizations*), now turned around the original direction of the political strategy, promoted by the actors of the civil society. While the social movements aim at mobilizing the state or transforming the existing political system – from *bottom up*, the current state based strategies now aim at mobilizing the civil society associations itself – from *top down*. The post-national states or transnational networks and organizations, emerging in the post-national contexts, expect insofar a substitution of the diagnosed lost social glue and the growing disenchantment with politics with more civic engagement coming from the civil society.

Social work as a state agency or even a state-based agency is now called upon to take over that activation policies. If we look back on the origins of social work in the 19th century and especially the process of professionalization and institutionalization in the early 20th century, we can clearly see the same fundamental shift in the fields of social policy and particularly social work: the professionalization and institutionalization of social work was promoted *by* associations of the civil society – primarily *women* and *worker movements* – and now social work *is called* to act as a body of activating such movements in the public interest.

Critical Placement and Perspectives
Neither liberal nor republican thinkers in the classical sense of Locke and Montesquieu are democrats in a sense of „one man one vote". For both thinkers especially poor people were not accepted as full citizens.

On this account and as a result of the acumination in the Liberal-Communitarian-Debate most current contributions are neither pure L- nor M-positions. With this in mind Taylor argues that – even though both traditions are deeply rooted in political theory and political thinking in general – analytically, a third model is needed: A model of a strong society, a community of citizens (*L-trace*), but at the same time a (civil) society, which is not outside of political power, but invades in the institutionalized political power structures (*M-trace*). One classical thinker, who belongs more to the M-trace, but has included the basic liberal idea, can be named as the source of such a third position: Alexis de Tocqueville.

Most current positions, like those in the fields of social work and social policy, can be characterized in that sense as *neo-tocquevillean* positions: They focus on the relevance of associations (in civil society) as a relatively independent system, which keeps the institutionalized political system under control – and such a system seems to be missed in the highly developed welfare arrangements as well in the post-colonial arrangements, why it has to be mobilized (again).

Particularly two aspects are analytically inadequate in regard to these dominant perspectives on civil society. Both objections could be avoided, if the main advice of Hegelian-Marxist concepts would be taken seriously, which is most often not the case: civil society is an arena of social conflicts, highly power structured, and not at all democratic and accessible per se.

The first critical objection, which has to be raised, is the following: the political context(s) – currently the context of advanced liberal and post-colonial societies – should be considered, what is often not the case. In the emerging post-welfare and post-colonial arrangements single actors rely more and more on particular spaces of private security instead of a public social security system (*privatization*). Therefore concepts of mobilizing associations in a civil society discover in a context, where this civil society – and the economy, of course – are now called as the two main spaces of inclusion. Two spaces, which are *beyond* the state, and thus beyond an institutionalized system of (quasi-)universal rights as it was – even rudimentarily and not at all sufficiently – realized in the social security systems.

The second critical objection refers to the „dark sides" of civil society, that are mostly still unconsidered. The idea of mobilizing civic engagement as a substitute for the assumed not any more realisable welfare provisions or as a countervailing power against the hegemonial state focus communities or community networks in the civil society. Communities are based primarily on loyalty between the participants and on the option of choice. The problem is that choice in civil society organizations only means inclusion *or* exclusion, because there are only members *or* non-members. As a member you can take real advantages of being part of the associational network, for example using privileged resources, but at the same time the network structure fixes the exclusion of non-members. Membership in associational networks thus constitutes a *loyalty trap*.

But even the members can be confronted with structural dilemmas. Because not all associations and groups in civil society are engaged in eligible issues, like neo-fascist or mafia-like associations illustrate. If a member wants to leave such associational networks, the loyalty trap snaps – which at times can be life-threatening.

On the other hand in the majority of cases it can be presumed that such non-eligible issues are not the case. But even then the problem of participation arises for huge parts of the population. That is, because of the fact that the typical member of civil society associations is male, employed, white, head of a family, and middle aged. Civil society empirically turns out to be a white middle class male project. To call for a mobilization of the „not mobilized parts" of the society, like black people in the cities of the United States, former Turkish families in Germany, or children from Arab migrants in the Banlieues in Paris or Marseille, can insofar be very cynical.

To have a strong civil society as a critical mass in democratic arrangements seems to be an evident necessity. But if the critical objections are ignored – especially in the fields of social policy and social work – such mobilization policies will cause the opposite and fix processes

of social exclusion. Civil society should therefore not be primarily seen as a not-exploited resource, but as a critical corrective and indicator for political institutions.

Not at least should we realize the research results, showing that participation in civil society is not per se beneficial for democracy. Civic engagement can not at all be equated with a politically relevant participation. Recent results from the political culture research can be helpful at that point: Current studies show that just critical positions on the systems of democratic states paradoxically stabilize democracy.

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