Chapter 6
Who Calls the Shots? The Real Normative Power of Civil Society

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Abstract What is the nature of the political agency of civil society organizations? As the research community concerned with civil society is a multidisciplinary and diverse one, it is not surprising that there is a lack of a common understanding of the concept of civil society, as well as of a common theoretical framework that would allow us to understand the place and role of civil society organisations in wider society. In mainstream political science, in particular, this situation has led to an analytical confusion, where the concept of civil society is infused with all kinds of normative meanings, while at the same time being altogether rejected as irrelevant by those scholars who are put off by that very normativity. So how can we understand the relationship between civil society and norms, values and ideas, and what does this relationship tell us about the role of this sphere in the society as such? In this conceptual chapter, we explore what we see as a useful way of understanding the political agency of civil society organizations. Inspired by the new institutionalism in organization theory, we suggest that such understanding needs to take into account the institutional logic of civil society, and to recognize this sphere as the institutional habitat of those actors who provide politics with normative and ideational content.

Keywords Normative meaning of civil society · Civil society organizations · Organization theory · New institutionalism

What are the contributions of civil society and its organizations (CSOs) to society? Which role do they play as actors or agents? Asking these questions, we enter a terrain which is contested both analytically and ideologically. Within the social sciences, the views on the societal roles of CSOs tend to vary between different disciplines, with economists as well as researchers in business administration and management tending to focus on the activity of CSOs in the welfare (market) arena, sociologists dealing with social movements and political scientists paying more

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attention to interest representation and the roles of CSOs in the processes of democratization. To this, we may also add the significant national differences regarding the mix and societal tasks assigned to, or taken up by, CSOs in different countries, which naturally also affect the perspectives, approaches and sensitivities of the scholars working in this research area.

The concept of civil society itself being as wide, ambiguous and contested as it is, this variety should not come as a surprise. Its downside is, however, that the various ideas about the role(s) of CSOs usually do not spring from any common, coherent idea about the different positions and roles of different types of organizations in the society, and thus often do not relate or connect to each other across the disciplinary borders in a meaningful way. This means that research on CSOs is probably less cumulative and comprehensive than it could be, given the advantages of its broad multidisciplinary outlook.

As Collier and Mahon (1993) remind us, stable concepts and a shared understanding of categories should function as a foundation of any research community. What we would like to contribute to this discussion, therefore, is a way of understanding CSOs that transcends the interdisciplinary boundaries and offers a view of the overarching societal role of CSOs more coherently connected to an analytical model of the organization of society itself.

In order to illustrate our point about the analytical implausibility of some of the ideas that flourish within the academia about the role or place of CSOs in society, we will in this chapter take a closer look at the popular view, widespread particularly within political science and also within the public discourses in many countries, that the importance of CSOs (and their relevance to social science research) is or should be related to their potential to contribute to the democratic governance of society. We propose here an alternative view of the relationship between CSOs and the democratic norm and, generally, of their role as political actors in wider society.

The character and ambition of the chapter is conceptual and exploratory rather than empirical. The chapter is structured as follows: We start with a short discussion of the way civil society and the actorhood of its organizations are conceptualized in contemporary political science, and explain why we find it analytically dissatisfying. Next, we briefly present our own model of the organization of society within which our view of civil society is anchored and suggest an alternative way of conceiving the wider societal role of CSOs. Subsequently, to illustrate that argument, we discuss the historical development of the worldwide norm of "good governance as democracy" and the relationship of CSOs to this norm. The chapter ends with a concluding discussion where we summarize our key points.

Civil Society and Politics: The Problem as We See It

Theorizing about civil society as an organizational realm governed by a specific organizational logic *and* as a site of political agency is today complicated by two interrelated problems. On the one hand, in political science the terms *civil society*

and *civil society organization* tend to be tainted by a normative connotation and are rarely used in positive (as opposed to normative) analyses of political actorhood. On the other hand, there is a whole range of actors in the political arena whose agency is today being analyzed in separate research fields within the discipline, but without attempts to connect the nodes and to approach these actors as belonging to a common institutional category whose particular logic is at the core of their political role. To increase the confusion even further, the lack of a clear, universally accepted definition of the *concept* of civil society and the often careless use of the *term* civil society mean that different kinds of organizations are labelled "civil society" in different academic texts, with different authors excluding different types of groups for different reasons.

At first sight, the situation in the research field should not be that complicated. Nowadays, most social scientists agree on a rough definition of civil society as the sphere between the state, the market and the family, where citizens interact with one another in order to further develop their common goals (cf. Heinrich 2002). This sphere is "public" insofar as it extends beyond the immediate context of family and friends and is a site of actions concerned with public ends, but also "private" as it stands outside state institutions (cf. Salamon et al. 2003, p. 1).

This fairly uncontroversial definition does not, however, say much about the conflation of two very different understandings of civil society that are intricately mixed within the academic discussion. The first, more organization-oriented understanding sees civil society as a societal sector comprised of actors such as non-profit, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movement organizations and different kinds of voluntary associations.[1] In the second understanding, civil society is conceptualized in terms of a civic ideal pertaining not only to a particular sector or sphere in society but also to certain more general values such as trust, pluralism, social capital and inclusion. While the first understanding is employed in a rather straightforward manner within such disciplines as sociology, economics, management and business administration, and the second one has its natural domain within normative political theory, in mainstream political science (as well as in the public policy debate in many countries), these two are curiously conflated, with the normative connotations of the civil society concept as developed over centuries within political philosophy "spilling over" into the more contemporary discussion on the nature of CSOs and their role in politics (see also, Reuter 2007).

What does that confusion look like in practice? Those political scientists who work with the concept of civil society do it usually from within one of the following two perspectives. The first, "neo-Tocquevillean" approach, inspired by the Anglo-Saxon liberal democratic tradition, sees the role of CSOs as representing the citizens in the face of the (potentially unresponsive, oppressive or disintegrating) state structures, cultivating civic virtues in the citizenry, and providing a necessary complement to the market and the welfare state in the social services area (see, e.g.,

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[1] In this context, the problem is that many terms used to denote different kinds of CSOs in different academic disciplines and subdisciplines actually describe the same or related types of organizations (cf. the ambiguous term "NGO" and the difference between it and "third-sector organization"), further adding to the analytical confusion in the field.

Diamond 1994; Putnam et al. 1993). In the international context, CSOs are seen here as an integral part of the emerging multilayered international decision-making structures of the so-called global governance, which needs to involve both state and non-state actors in order to be effective and legitimate (Rosenau and Czempiel 1992; Colàs 2001).

The second, "neo-Gramscian" perspective, conceives instead civil society as an arena of perpetual ideological conflict, resistance, counter-hegemony and revolution-ary praxis (McIlwaine 2007) rather than a set of actors comfortably embedded in the existing (liberal) system. Here, the forces that seek to challenge the neoliberal political and economic status quo are seen as clashing with those who wish to preserve it (Cox 1999). In the international context, this tradition conceptualizes an emerging "global civil society" as a possible first step towards a radical democratization of world poli-tics within a post-Westphalian framework of new cosmopolitan governance (see, e.g., Lipschutz 1992; Wapner 1995; Falk 1995; Kaldor 2003; Thörn 2007).

Despite their different points of departure, both the liberal/neo-Tocquevillean and the radical/neo-Gramscian approaches seem to share the same implicit prem-ise: The assumption that the relevance of civil society as a societal sphere, and the relevance of the political agency of its organizations, is related to their potential to make the world a better place, with "better" usually translating as "more demo-cratic". This is not to say that CSOs are always equated with democratic or progres-sive forces in the relevant literature. Unlike those who enthusiastically wrote on the transformative and empowering potential of civil society in the early 1990s (e.g., Lipschutz 1992; Falk 1995; Wapner 1995; Archibugi and Held 1995), today's politi-cal analysts do not necessarily believe offhand in the democratic potential of this particular sphere and its actors. The enthusiasm of that decade has given way to a more serious examination of the claims that CSOs can provide solutions to a whole range of political, social and economic problems ailing the world. The presumption that civil society by nature is a site of democracy, empowerment, tolerance and inclusion has been at least partly replaced by a more sober reflection on the specific circumstances under which these values can flourish within the civic sphere (e.g., Erman and Uhlin 2010).

Nevertheless, the interest in civil society within political science is still largely conditioned by the discipline's implicit normative preoccupation with democracy. This leads to certain normative myopia, where the question of the role that civil society organizations actually play in politics tends to get overshadowed by the question about the role that they might or should play in *democratic* politics. While other political actors, such as governmental agencies, political elites, individual pol-iticians or intergovernmental organizations, are routinely analyzed in terms of what strategies they use to attain their goals; what kinds of power they wield in society and what mechanisms make them behave the way they do—these kinds of ques-tions tend to make themselves conspicuously absent from the discussion as soon as the terms "civil society" or "civil society organization" appear. The questions asked tend then, instead, to revolve around the democratic contributions and credentials of the studied organizations.

However, this does not mean that the political agency of the various types of CSOs does not register under the political science radar. The more normatively neutral—or "technical"—questions about the nature of the political actorhood of such groups are indeed asked vigorously in the different subfields or research areas of political science—but, importantly, only seldom with reference to "civil society" or any other similar overarching concept, and indeed with little recognition that the different types of organizations studied in these different subfields may at all belong to a common analytical category. Actors such as political parties, trade unions and employers' associations, social movement organizations, welfare-producing non-profits and charities, developmental NGOs, international advocacy organizations and so on are all established objects of study in research areas such as comparative studies of party systems, industrial and labour relations, corporatism or welfare systems, as well as in research on development politics, peace and conflict studies and the study of international politics. Additionally, broader, more overarching and more theorized concepts such as "interest groups" or "transnational actors"—which usually include several or all of the above organization types—are often used in analyses of political systems or of international politics.

The relative absence of analytical links, exchanges and synergies between these different research fields, as well as the inability or unwillingness of the discipline as a whole to see the organizations listed above as belonging to a common, broader—but still normatively neutral—analytical category of political actors, have meant that our knowledge about what kind of political beasts CSOs are still rather sketchy and unsystematic. Those researchers in mainstream political science who are interested in how the political system works and how its different components relate to each other have never really warmed up to and integrated the concept of civil society because of its heavy normative connotations. At the same time, no other alternative concept has emerged within the discipline that would be wide enough to encompass all the organization types that in different contexts are referred to as parts of "civil society". We have thus a rather paradoxical situation, with an under-theorized but empirically existing organizational *sphere* in need of normatively detached conceptualization and analysis, a *term* that some scholars—such as the authors of this chapter—apply to this sphere while others apply it to a whole host of other phenomena and a *concept* that sometimes overlaps with this sphere and sometimes not, depending on whom we ask.

In the following section, we will outline what we see as a more coherent, analytically plausible way of understanding this particular organizational sphere—which we thus refer to as civil society—and suggest how the primary political role of its organizations could be understood. In order to do that, we employ an analytical framework borrowed from the study of organizations within sociology and business administration, and particularly the sociologist understanding of institutions and institutional logics developed within these disciplines, inspired among others by the works of Scott and Meyer (1991), Friedland and Alford (1991), Scott (2001) and Powell (2007).

Organization of Society Model

We would like to unfold our argument by sketching out the basic understanding of the relationship between different institutional spheres in the society upon which the argument rests. In our discussion, we build on a long tradition of authors who, like Cohen and Arato (1992) or Salamon et al. (2003), use a theoretical model of (late modern) society as consisting of a number of spheres inhabited by more or less distinct sets of actors.[2] However, our notion differs from those mentioned above, in that it stresses more explicitly the specificity of each sphere as the institutional habitat of actors who share a common institutional and organizational logic (Wijkström and Lundström 2002; Wijkström and Einarsson 2006; Wijkström 2011). These spheres are analytically distinct from each other in the sense that their actors are driven by different rationales (Sjöstrand 1985). Thus, the state sphere is populated by governmental agencies concerned with the formal task of running the public administration. The business sphere is ideally populated by commercial firms and corporations concerned with making of economic profit. The sphere of private relations is populated by family and friendship networks concerned with the (re)production of human-to-human relationships. Finally, the sphere of civil society is populated by organizations (as well as less formal networks) of private citizens who get together in order to further their own goals, cultivate (and defend) their interests or promote their visions of society.

We regard this four-sphere model as a first step in the analytical conceptualization of the roles of CSOs in the society. At the empirical level, following Neumyer et al. (2009), we argue that CSOs should essentially be seen as multifunctional, and that their functions can be broadly summarized as falling—in various magnitudes—into the three categories of service provision, advocacy and community building. Each of these functions is backed by a CSO's distinct values.

The first, service production, can be seen as a contribution to the economy, as hereby CSOs deliver outputs that can be priced and paid for—either by the beneficiaries themselves or by some other public or private organization. These services are sometimes marketable, though often positive externalities are even more important than the service itself (meritocratic goods), or some non-marketable benefits are linked with these services (public goods such as social security or democratic participation).

The public good property is crucial for the second function, which is tied to the political system: advocacy. Through this role, CSOs participate in political decision-making and the governance of society, i.e., to make collective binding of rules. There are various ways to fulfill this function, ranging from contributions to the legislative and executive processes (for example, through formal or informal consultation), to interest representation and lobbying, as well as awareness-raising

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[2] It is important to stress here that these spheres are ideal types, and that the analytical four-sphere model that we use is just that: an analytical and theoretical model, rather than an empirical description of reality.

campaigns on specific issues aimed at the general public. This aspect has always been of primary interest for political scientists.

The third function, community building, enhances (at least in theory) social capital by establishing and consolidating relationships between individuals. This can be the primary goal of the organization (as in groups built around common cultural activities or hobbies) or a "side effect" of an organization's service provision or advocacy work.

These three dimensions of socioeconomic and political life serve as a useful categorization of the empirical functions performed by CSOs. An individual CSO can thus be conceptualized as having a distinct profile, where the particular mix of contributions to service delivery, advocacy and community building constitutes its unique "fingerprint".

If we, however, lift our eyes above the empirical base, and try to find a common analytical denominator that would capture the distinct logic that lets us distinguish this sphere from those of the state, the business and the family, we will find—we argue—that the fundamental role of CSOs (from which the three above-discussed functions are derived) is to produce, articulate, disseminate and defend values, ideas and ideology with the aim of attaining normative change (or preserving the normative status quo in the face of unwanted challenges).

In some respects this is not a very new or controversial view; many accounts of the political agency of different types of CSOs point to their normative power (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). However, this normative agency is rarely explicitly placed at the core of civil society's institutional logic, or conceptualized as the fundamental and constitutive element of the ideal-type CSO.

Even more importantly, the implications of ascribing this role to CSOs for the study of politics at large have so far been largely ignored. Instead, as noted in the previous section, the ideational agency of civil society actors is usually studied in relation to what today passes as "good causes" (such as human rights, women's rights, environment protection, development etc.), placing focus more on the supposed emancipatory, progressive potential of civil society than on the way in which the ideational agency of CSOs shapes politics in general.

We would like to suggest that this one-dimensional focus on the role of CSOs as potential promoters and upholders of democratic ideas, values and norms has led the discipline to largely miss the forest for the trees. It has meant that political science research tends to overlook the complex institutionalization processes through which we (the academic community as well as the Western general public as such) have come to believe in the importance, relevance and even sanctity of these ideas, values and norms in the first place, and in this it overlooks the political agency of the actors who have set these processes off. Paradoxically thus, the tendency to see CSOs as potential vehicles of progress seems to have obscured their more fundamental role in society as the very actors, which shape our understanding of what "progress" means in the first place. It is this particular dimension of the political agency of CSOs that we would like to underscore here.

Who Framed Democracy?

We would like to illustrate our argument by briefly tracing the roots of the democratic norm established and institutionalized today in most Western societies—i.e., the very norm that CSOs are today scrutinized and evaluated against. Since World War II, in the Western public mind as well as in academia, "good governance"—i.e., the most effective, but also morally right way of administering our complex societies—has become more or less synonymous with the set of rules and practices connected to the broadly understood ideal of liberal democracy. One important dimension of this ideal has traditionally been the question of who is to enjoy democratic rights (see, e.g. Barbalet 1988); or, put differently, who is, in the eyes of society and the law, a "real individual", or Marshall's "full and equal member of society" (Marshall 1950).

The expansion of political citizenship, that is, the evolution of the idea of who is worthy of being included in the democratic community, is historically one of the most important elements of the process of democratization. This could be exemplified by the evolution of citizenship in North America from including white property-owning protestant men only to gradually extend to "women, the working class, Jews and Catholics, blacks and other previously excluded groups" (Kymlicka and Norman 1994). In western Europe, similarly, several countries had parliamentary governments and some form of competitive party systems by the second-half of the nineteenth century; however, their electorate was severely limited by property and/or income qualifications, which meant that only a minority of wealthy males counted as citizens. And yet, by 1918, suffrage in most western European countries had been extended to all males irrespective of their property and income status, and in the decades that followed, also to women (for the account of this process, see, e.g., Huber and Stephens 1997). Even more importantly, since then the *norm* of universal suffrage itself has become just as entrenched in the public mind as the norm of only wealthy men being capable of running state affairs had been just a few generations ago.

What happened in that relatively brief period of time to bring about this kind of institutional and normative change? In short: the labour and women's movements. In western Europe, as Huber and Stephens (1997) describe—trade unions and social-democratic political parties, while a marginal phenomenon in 1870s—emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as one of the major actors in the European political arena. At the onset of World War I, the labour movement had already converged on an ideology where achievement of universal male suffrage and introduction of parliamentary government played a central role. These goals were attained in most western European countries by 1918. Similarly, as Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) point out, prior to 1930 no country had granted women the right to vote without strong pressure from domestic suffrage organizations embedded in the worldwide women's suffrage movement, and those countries that had strong domestic women's movements were the most likely ones to adopt female suffrage.

There is no space here for a more detailed elaboration on the role of these two social movements in the development of contemporary democratic norms, but our point is that they have without doubt been the most important agents in the pro-

cess of shaping the contemporary understanding of who is worthy of being a full citizen—as in "not only wealthy men" and "not only men". Importantly, however, this process is far from being settled. On the contrary, the norms that regulate our understanding of citizenship—as well as our understanding of who is considered to be an "individual", from which the former have ultimately evolved—are being constantly challenged and reshaped by movements similar to, and/or derived from, those two discussed above.[3] What we today understand as "an individual", "a citizen", or finally "democracy" are thus just snapshots or stills of what in reality is a constantly changing worldview—and it is not only possible but also highly probable that a 100 years from now, our understanding of these concepts will have evolved beyond recognition.

We may in fact get a glimpse of this development if we take a closer look at more contemporary examples of the normative struggle in this field, where the standards of citizenship and of individual personhood are being continuously and gradually expanded in terms of the subjects conceptualized as "persons" or as "citizens". Here, the children's rights movement and the animal rights movement (see Regan 2004; Singer 2006) are perhaps the most interesting examples of civil society actors constantly challenging and seeking to expand the boundaries of individual personhood and/or citizenship.

History Is Written by the Victors

What we want to illustrate with the example of these movements is not that CSOs as such are necessarily the champions of "good" causes but rather that they are the ones which shape our understanding of which values and causes are to be seen as "good", important and worth supporting. These values and causes appeal to us today because certain, and not other, civil society actors happened to be remarkably successful in disseminating their particular visions of a just society. The fact that we consider the defense of rights such as universal suffrage laudable or progressive is in itself only a measure of that success.

What should thus catch our attention as students of political agency is the fact that a particular set of CSOs—those promoting the expansion of the pool of legitimate rights carriers—have managed in turning their own particular values into the *credo* of our societies, and with this have been able to shape our politics to an extraordinary extent. They managed, crucially, to persuade or force the state structures themselves to absorb and institutionalize these values, incorporate them into their own ideologies and take over the role of their guardians. This explains, for example, why various governmental agencies in the West are nowadays as fiercely intent on fighting gender discrimination (cf. the concept of "gender mainstreaming") or class inequal-

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[3] For example, the particular family of social movements that have struggled against racial and ethnic exclusion from the political realm and from society in general in different parts of the world, e.g., the American civil rights movement in the 1960s or the movement against apartheid in South Africa.

ity as other agents of government were intent on preserving such discrimination and inequality only a 100 years ago. It is simply a different set of civil society actors that is setting the ideological and normative agenda for the state today.

The above points also suggest why we cannot quote here, in a meaningful way, examples of "non-progressive" civil society actors currently enjoying the same level of ideological success. Being successful in this kind of normative struggle means being automatically perceived as progressive by society, just as being a normative "loser" means being perceived as reactionary—and this regardless of the moral weight or rightness of the values and ideals that each side happens to espouse and promote. The victors are the ones writing (ideological) history. We can, on the other hand, point to civil society actors that have previously enjoyed ideological hegemony (in terms of defining "progress" and shaping the public understanding of "good" and "evil") in the Western societies, and that are now going through the slow and painful process of losing that hegemony. The most obvious example is of course the Roman Catholic Church. We could in fact see the modernist process of secularization and of the ascendance of liberal democracy as a spectacular power shift within civil society, where the civil society actors who represent and promote the Catholic (and other religious/traditional) visions of a "good society" are gradually ceding their ideological (and thus political) primacy to another set of actors— those promoting individual rights within the secular, liberal democratic framework.

This brings us to another crucial point in our argument. If we look at the "other side of the barricade" in each of the cases of rights carriers expansion above, we will see that the chief opponents of the discussed movements in the discursive struggle for defining citizenship (or "personhood"), long before that struggle reached the stages of formal policy-making, have been and are *other civil society actors.* This is not a coincidence. The struggle for the privilege of defining "the good society" and shaping the public understanding of "progress" is the one which takes place not primarily between organizations from the other three societal spheres and civil society actors, but between different forces *within* civil society that seek normative primacy and ideological control over the other spheres, most importantly over the state apparatus which is perhaps the most effective vehicle for spreading the ideas and values of those civil society actors who control it. Therefore, while ideas and values may emerge within the other spheres, we argue that their cultivation and promotion in wider society are the prime functions of civil society actors, and constitute the core of the institutional logic of civil society. These functions, we suggest, should be the focus of the study of the political agency of CSOs, as they directly or indirectly underlie and determine all the tasks undertaken in today's society by these actors.

Conclusion

The impact of civil society actors on widely accepted practices, policies, attitudes and norms reaches far beyond (or rather, beneath) the grand societal changes mentioned above. These actors subtly influence what is accepted as "appropriate" or amounts to "good standards" in each and every niche of our society. From policies against re-

gimes that hurt civil rights to the way we treat drug addicts, from caring for the elderly to establishing standards for sports games, we argue that there is absolutely no field of policy and public debate we can imagine where discourse is not shaped by civil society actors and by the values and preferences they provide us with. Wherever value-based standpoints emerge and contest each other in the public debate, CSOs are there and take a position. Most probably, however, only the winners will be remembered.

Rather than infusing the concept of civil society with normative meaning and embracing it as a potential beacon of (democratic) hope, or alternatively dismissing it as a trendy but fuzzy and for analytical purposes meaningless notion, we propose to view civil society simply as the institutional habitat of a particular type of actors whose role is to provide politics with normative and ideational content. Many processes that are seen as fundamental to the game of politics—such as the production of ideology, political agitation, mobilization, lobbying and, ultimately, competition over the access to, and control over, the structures of the state—are in fact driven by civil society actors. This should not be surprising, since the institutional logics of the other three spheres—the governmental, the business and the private sphere—are centered on other things: administering the state, generating economic profit and tending to intimate relationships, respectively. On the other hand, establishing *how* these things should be done: for example, how and by whom the state should be run; how and for whom profit should be generated and what is the proper character of intimate relationships—i.e., the content of politics—is the "chosen domain" (Lindblom 2003) of civil society actors. We suggest therefore that civil society should be defined and distinguished from the other societal spheres primarily by the *normatively driven* nature of its constitutive organizations, rather than by the content of their messages—a content that in reality is as diverse as society itself.

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