



# Introduction to the Special Issue 'Beyond Civil Society': Advancing a Post-sectoral Conception of Civil Society—Moving Beyond Civil Society?

Liv Egholm<sup>1</sup> · Lars Bo Kaspersen<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 26 August 2020

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020

Political actors and research perspectives currently identify civil society as a resource that is not fully exploited—an observation that, with some strategic adjustments, could incite a revitalization of several essential issues. From this viewpoint, “bringing civil society back in” to the political agenda could contribute to a revitalization of the welfare state, democracy, equality, and social cohesion. Moreover, civil society could potentially become the space needed for a critique of current developments—on national, European, and global levels. We can, however, recognize that civil society, as a resource that many commentators strongly believe in, is not mobilized and used to the extent people envision. Why is this the case?

We suggest that there are two reasons for the lack of engagement. One reason is related to the current political moment. The other reason is related to a particular conceptual and theoretical discourse on civil society. Concerning the first issue, the current political moment has become complex and, more importantly, loaded with paradoxes. Today, we can observe the prominent co-existence of apparently contradictory political ideologies, governance mechanisms, economic developments, and political and cultural clashes on multiple levels: between, first, the local and the national; second, the national and the global; and third, the secular and the religious. These developments have been with us for a while, but we now seem to experience these contradictions and paradoxes as the “normal” and not the “exception.” In this landscape, we find more invocations of “globalization,” as in a global financial crisis, a global pandemic, global trade and production patterns, and global refugee problems—together with more economic nationalism (in East Asia, the USA, and even the European Union), political-ideological nationalism (Brexit, “America First,” Hungary, and Poland), and nationalist reactions against immigrants, to mention a few. Other paradoxes have become more pronounced during the last thirty years: There is a growing interdependence between a bigger and more forceful global market and more influential states. And as we realized that we were living in an increasingly secular society, we discovered that secularization came with a reinforcement of religions. This paradoxical world has spurred new crossroads, conflicts,

---

✉ Liv Egholm  
le.mpp@cbs.dk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark

and collaborative forms across and between the arenas of civil society, state, and market. This development has provided a new space not only for a democratic civil society, but also for the authoritarian state. At this stage, no one can predict whether civil society will strike back as a stronger political actor or whether state and/or market will monopolize the space of governance. To study these current trends, we need a conceptual framework able to grasp and understand the many paradoxes in the current societal juncture.

This takes us to the next issue: the dominating conceptual discourse of civil society. Our claim is that the leading civil society discourse is problematic and that the present societal conjuncture has, in particular, thrown the usefulness of the traditional sectoral model of civil society into question. Civil society is most often seen as a specific sector outside of state and market with identifiable empirical types of civil associations and institutions, which are defined by specific types of actions supporting specific desirable, emancipatory, and pro-democratic values. For more than thirty years, the concept of civil society has been discussed widely. From the late 1980s, civil society came to be seen as inhabiting a specific role not only as a bulwark against the systemic excesses of the state, but also as a transformative and privileged space of critique, identifying voluntary organizations as places safeguarding the common good (Arato 1981; Arato and Cohen 1988; Cohen and Arato 1992; Gouldner 1980; Keane 1988; Walzer 1991). With few exceptions, the debate has been divided into two strings, which often converge: On the one hand, there is a tendency to localize civil society empirically in a specific social sphere or sector formed by voluntary clubs and associations, constituting an independent sector of distinct societal organizations and institutions that can be distinguished from the family, the state, and the economy (Anheier and Salamon 2006; Boje et al. 2006; Evers 2009; Evers and Laville 2004; Freise and Hallmann 2014; Henriksen et al. 2012).

On the other hand, there is a more normative definition of civil society that refers to a communitarian perspective, emphasizing particular motives, modes of action, and interaction as preferable. Central here is the notion that civility and public or civic spirit are normatively distinguished as virtues and values, which are seen as key to the very idea of civil society (e.g., Habermas 1989; Putnam 2000, 2004; Shils 1997; Walzer 1991). On this basis, civil society research has predominantly conceptualized state, market, and civil society as three distinct sectors, each with their types of actions, organizations, logics, and/or values (e.g., Ahn and Ostrom 2008; Cederström and Fleming 2016; Putnam and Campbell 2012; Rosenblum and Post 2002). These strings of research can be grouped under an umbrella labeled the “sector model.”

The sectoral concept of civil society has always suffered from ambiguity and incoherence. Lately, researchers have questioned whether the sector perspective enhances a thorough empirical analysis of current societal junctures and/or is useful as a conceptual and analytical framework. Today, we stand amid a series of radical transformations and crises that situate us in a decisively different political and societal moment than the late 1980s. In this changing context, the sectoral model of civil society is more than ever ill-equipped to capture the (by now) richly documented hybridity of actions, relations, and organizations, past and present, that cross the lines between the sectors and even challenge the very notion of distinct, separate sectors. In a more normative vein, we are witnessing this very idea; the ideal of an essential relation between voluntary associations and civility has been contradicted by what amounts to an unparalleled wave of violence, populism, and breakdown of civility carried out precisely by such “voluntary associations” (Alexander 1998, 2006; Alexander et al. 2019b; Armony 2004; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014).

By the same token, the sectoral model of civil society—defining it as an a priori empirical site for civil actions in opposition to state and market actions—not only pre-locates and

confines all actions within the civil society as civil and supportive of critical and democratic values, but also a priori defines action taking place outside the civil society arenas as *not* civil (Alexander 2006; Alexander et al. 2019a; Alexander, Stack, et al., 2019; Alexander and Tognato 2018; Egholm and Kaspersen 2020a, 2020b). The sectoral division has mainly been studied from a political philosophical, organizational, and/or sociological angle. Accordingly, it has separated politics of the state from politics of civil society, civil society organizations from other types of organizations, and the economy of the market from the economy of civil society—thus discarding cultural and moral components. Consequently, a distorted conception of civil society as an unquestioned locus of the “common good” and/or a space for critical voices of emancipation has triumphed. In this landscape, it has been downplayed that civil societies also consist of harmful components that can create dissociation instead of social cohesion and trust (Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Kopecky and Mudde 2003; Lipset and Lakin 2004; Pérez-Díaz 2002, 2014). This has left little room for a discussion of what kind of “good” and “critique” civil society represents—not to mention for and by whom. By likening the normative dignity of a civil action with the empirical realities of a not-for-profit sector, the sector model tends to both equate civil society with that sector and portray it/them as the essence of public spirit and the public good. In this view, it is easily overlooked how the state, economy, and civil society are mutually dependent, and how each of them has been produced and informed via interconnected practices in multiple and intricate ways. These productions cannot just be accounted for or explained away as mere expressions of “hybridity” (as, e.g., Anheier and Archambault 2014; Austin et al. 2012; Austin 2006; Dees and Anderson 2006). As a result, the explanatory force and fruitfulness of civil society as a predefined and mainly organized institutional arena—as well as a privileged space of critique and good values—must be questioned theoretically, methodologically, and empirically.

In contrast, this special issue contests the idea that civil society exists as a societal sphere in which civil action and social critique are privileged. Instead, we call for a more processual and relational perspective, in which actors’ ongoing doing, evaluation, and production of the boundaries between civic, state, and market spheres—and the very definition of the civic—become the centers of the analysis. More concretely, it does not seem desirable to measure civil society mainly as a space with (supposedly) clear-cut components and borders—for instance, by collecting data on volunteer work, social capital, or public funding of clubs and associations. Once one goes beyond the sector model, the research focus will shift, and new forms of civic action may come into view.

Recently, empirical research within a range of different research areas such as history, sociology, and organizational studies has shown that this is a more complex issue. Even if predefined substances are “easier” to trace, they do not necessarily depict social processes or societal challenges and probabilities adequately. Instead, what can be defined as civil actions and pro-democratic values have always transgressed the sectors of the state, market, and civil society and interlinked relations of politics, economy, and culture. In fact, such transgression and interlinkage provide possibilities and borders for civil actions. Across different strands, scholars have tried to re-enunciate such questioning and apply a more processual and relational perspective (Adloff 2016; Alexander 2017; Alexander et al. 2006; Clemens 2020; Clemens and Guthrie 2010; Egholm and Kaspersen 2020a, 2020b; Egholm et al. 2019; Eliasoph 2013; Enjolras 2009; Evers 2009; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014; Lilja 2015; Pérez-Díaz 2014). Even though there are obviously observable differences between these scholars and their specific takes on civil society, they all share an attentiveness to practices, relations, and processes that are in line with a broader movement within the social sciences—often termed

as the “relational (and processual) turn”(Abbott 2016; Dépelteau 2018; Dépelteau and Powell 2013; Donati 2010; Elias 2012; Emirbayer 1997).

It has prompted a specific interest in scrutinizing the (historical) processes of defining, performing, and practicing civil society in specific contexts as a fruitful avenue of inquiry. According to this view, civil society is an ever-changing phenomenon, which can never be studied a priori, but instead must be studied through its changing empirical forms. The alternative approach advances an analytical focus from an explanatory framework, which highlights objects from/in civil society, to a relational-processual framework, which emphasizes the nature of boundary-crossing topics and actions (e.g., social economy, populism, movements, voluntarism, civility, civil actions, gift-giving, and partnerships). In general terms, this perspective rests on the assumption that relations, activities, and practices create a civil society. It potentially transgresses the problems of normativity, universality, and ontologization inherent in the sectoral model. It paves the way for a reformulation of how political, economic, cultural, and moral actions were and are enacted in temporal variations across the traditional divides of state, market, and civil society.

Three sets of interrelated and complementary questions have guided this special issue: First, if the sector model is not, perhaps *was* not, even an adequate description of what constitutes civil society, what can we replace it with? How are we to grasp and explain the variable relations between an identifiable sector of voluntary associations and the ideas and ideals of civil society, civic action, and civility? Moreover, which normative definitions of civility, if any, are empirically at work, or in the state of being produced, in actual sites of voluntary association and civic action?

This special issue contribution seeks to further promote the relational and processual approach to civil society as a new research agenda, by gathering research concentrated around three interrelated components:

1. From entities of civil society to the relations, activities, and practices creating the contents or boundaries of civil society, civility, civil action, or civil “sphere.”
2. From the individual as an actor to a multitude of interconnected practices in different material, bodily, and discursive contexts, emphasizing both contentious and non-contentious repertoires of civic action.
3. That civic/civil (values and norms of everyday interaction) and civil society should be studied as historical and empirical categories instead of universal categories.

This special issue is an outcome of our work with the research program CISTAS (civil society in the shadow of the state). It was awarded substantial funding by the Carlsberg Foundation, permitting us to engage more scholars and launch conferences, seminars, and workshops on related topics. The development of the special issue took its beginning through a very fruitful discussion with Ilana Silber, (Bar-Ilan University), Frank Adloff, (University of Hamburg), and Nina Eliasoph (University of Southern California). The object has been to engage scholars in a debate about the relevance of various relational and processual approaches to the study and theorizing of civil society. The articles collected for this special issue stress three common elements: First, the papers argue that civil actions cannot be pre-located in specific areas. Even if the articles emphasize specific linkages between economy, politics, and culture, they all agree that civil actions take place in the interrelation between politic, economy, and culture. Second, the papers show that these interlinkages are continually changing and only through empirical investigation can we achieve insights into the processes of these phenomena. By

taking an empirical approach, the papers in this volume all help to uncover the specific shifting constellations of civil actions and their consequences. Third, the papers stress the need to incorporate cultural and moral elements. By adding moral or cultural components to economic and/or political descriptions and explanatory frameworks, the articles contribute to grasping the complexity of civil actions. As such, the collection of articles will advance a reconfiguration of the conceptual content and pragmatic character of civil society, as well as provide possibilities for identifying and examining the phenomena anew, stressing the approach to embrace not yet established institutions, forms, and actions within and across new and old arenas.

## References

- Abbott, A. (2016). *Processual sociology*. London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Adloff, F. (2016). *Gifts of cooperation, Mauss and pragmatism*. London: Routledge.
- Ahn, T. K., & Ostrom, E. (2008). Social capital and collective action. In D. Castiglione, J. W. Van Deth, & G. Wolleb (Eds.), *The handbook of social capital* (pp. 70–100). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, J. C. (1998). *Real civil societies: dilemmas of institutionalization*. London: Sage.
- Alexander, J. C. (2006). The civil sphere. In *Oxford*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, J. C. (2017). *The drama of social life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Alexander, J. C., & Tognato, C. (2018). *The civil sphere in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alexander, J. C., Giesen, B., & Mast, J. L. (2006). *Social performance: symbolic action, cultural pragmatics, and ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alexander, J. C., Lund, A., & Voyer, A. (2019a). *The Nordic civil sphere: polity*.
- Alexander, J. C., Stack, T., & Khosrokhavar, F. (2019b). *Breaching the civil order: radicalism and the civil sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Anheier, K. H., & Archambault, E. (2014). Social investment: Franco–German experiences. In M. Freise & T. Hallmann (Eds.), *Modernizing democracy: associations and associating in the 21st century* (pp. 291–300). New York: Springer New York.
- Anheier, H. K., & Salamon, L. M. (2006). The nonprofit sector in comparative perspective. The nonprofit sector: A research handbook, 2, 89–116.
- Arato, A. (1981). Civil society against the state: Poland 1980–81. *Télos*, 1981(47), 23–47.
- Arato, A., & Cohen, J. (1988). Civil society and social theory. *Thesis Eleven*, 21(1), 40–64.
- Armony, A. (2004). *The dubious link: civic engagement and democratization*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Austin, J. E. (2006). Three avenues for social entrepreneurship research. In *Social entrepreneurship* (pp. 22–33): Springer.
- Austin, J., Stevenson, H., & Wei-Skillern, J. (2012). Social and commercial entrepreneurship: same, different, or both? *Revista de Administração*, 47(3), 370–384.
- Boje, T. P., Fridberg, T., & Ibsen, B. (2006). Den frivillige sektor i Danmark. Omfang og betydning. KBH, Socialforskningsinstituttet.
- Cederström, C., & Fleming, P. (2016). On bandit organizations and their (IL)legitimacy: concept development and illustration. *Organ Stud*, 37(11), 1575–1594.
- Chambers, S., & Kopstein, J. (2001). Bad civil society. *Political Theory*, 29(6), 837–865.
- Clemens, E. S. (2020). *Civic gifts: voluntarism and the making of the American nation-state*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Clemens, E. S., & Guthrie, D. (2010). *Politics and partnerships: the role of voluntary associations in America's political past and present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cohen, J. L., & Arato, A. (1992). *Civil society and political theory*. London: MIT Press.
- Dees, J. G., & Anderson, B. B. (2006). Framing a theory of social entrepreneurship: building on two schools of practice and thought. *Research on Social Entrepreneurship*, 1(3), 39–66.
- Dépelteau, F. (2018). *The Palgrave handbook of relational sociology*. Berlin: Springer.
- Dépelteau, F., & Powell, C. (2013). Applying relational sociology. *Relations, Networks, and Society*: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Donati, P. (2010). *Relational sociology: a new paradigm for the social sciences*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Egholm, L., & Kaspersen, L. B. (2020a). *Civil society between concepts and empirical grounds*. London: Routledge.
- Egholm, L., & Kaspersen, L. B. (2020b). A processual-relational approach to civil society. In L. Egholm & L. B. Kaspersen (Eds.), *Civil society between concepts and empirical ground*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Egholm, L., Heyse, L., & Mourey, D. (2019). Civil society organizations: the site of legitimizing the common good—a literature review. *Voluntas*, 31(1), 1–18.
- Elias, N. (2012). *What is sociology?* Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Eliasoph, N. (2013). *The politics of volunteering*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Emirbayer, M. (1997). Manifesto for a relational sociology 1. *Am J Sociol*, 103(2), 281–317.
- Enjolras, B. (2009). Between market and civic governance regimes: civiness in the governance of social services in Europe. *Volunt Int J Volunt Nonprofit Org*, 20(3), 274–290.
- Evers, A. (2009). Civiness and civility: their meanings for social services. *Volunt Int J Volunt Nonprofit Org*, 20(3), 239–259.
- Evers, A., & Laville, J.-L. (2004). *The third sector in Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Freise, M., & Hallmann, T. (2014). Modernizing democracy. In *Associations and associating in the twenty-first century*. New York: Springer New York.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1980). *The two Marxisms : contradictions and anomalies in the development of theory*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Henriksen, L. S., Smith, S. R., & Zimmer, A. (2012). At the eve of convergence? Transformations of social service provision in Denmark, Germany, and the United States. *Volunt Int J Volunt Nonprofit Org*, 23(2), 458–501.
- Keane, J. (1988). *Civil society and the state: new European perspectives*: Verso books.
- Kopecky, P., & Mudde, C. (2003). Rethinking civil society. *Democratization*, 10(3), 1–14.
- Lichterman, P., & Eliasoph, N. (2014). Civic action. *Am J Sociol*, 120(3), 798–863.
- Lilja, E. (2015). A new ecology of civil society. *J Civ Soc*, 11(2), 117–122.
- Lipset, S. M., & Lakin, J. M. (2004). *The democratic century (Vol. 9)*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Pérez-Díaz, V. (2002). From civil war to civil society. In R. Putnam (Ed.), *Democracies in flux* (pp. 284–285). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pérez-Díaz, V. (2014). Civil society: a multi-layered concept. *Curr Sociol*, 62(6), 812–830.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*: Simon and schuster.
- Putnam, R. D. (2004). *Democracies in flux: the evolution of social capital in contemporary society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, D. E. (2012). *American grace: how religion divides and unites us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rosenblum, N. L., & Post, R. (2002). *Civil society and government*. Princeton: Princeton University press.
- Shils, E. (1997). The virtue of civility: selected essays on liberalism. In *Tradition, and civil society*. Liberty Fund Inc: Indianapolis.
- Walzer, M. (1991). The idea of civil society: a path to social reconstruction. *Dissent*, 38, 293–304.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.