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The concept of ‘Civil Society’ – Different understandings and their implications for third-sector policies

Abstract

Civil society is often used as a point of reference in public and welfare policy. However, there are various notions of civil society. The most popular concept broadly equates it with the ‘third sector’. A second concept sees the key to a more civil society mainly in the public domain with its ability for intermediation. Finally there is a third notion, arguing that a more civil society takes shape through a struggle to strengthen civility and civicness throughout society. This paper outlines these three approaches and their respective strengths and weaknesses. With an eye on public policies and welfare reform, it is argued that the first approach tends to limit questions about civil society to issues of strengthening third-sector-based service provision. Such a focus, however, marginalizes the potential offered by the other two approaches for analysing gains and losses in civility and civicness across society at large.


Introduction

Civil society may well be one of the most frequently used buzz terms in public policy debates and academic research these days. Any discourse on civil society allows us to bring together many other debates – on the state of society, on public policies and on welfare reforms with a normative orientation, for example. The notion of civil society can help us to look beyond narrow specialist issues in academic debates and to link empirical statements about where we are to broader questions of democracy and welfare.

Equally, however, references to civil society are often accompanied by vague or contradictory interpretations. In many countries, the accent is clearly on liberating society from state oppression. But in democratic welfare states – our field of reference in this paper – things are less clear. What could the call for activating and strengthening civil society imply for this field? That is the overarching question of this paper.

In addition to the frequent references made to civil society in the global debate on how to move on from authoritarian regimes and secure a future for democracy, civil society has also revitalized the discussion of how to bring citizens back into institutionalized welfare politics,
both by enhancing participation in decision-making and by making the responsibility for well-being and social cohesion into something that is shared. It is in this light that various discourses and key terms have made reference to the notion of civil society over the last decade or so – for example, a ‘third way’ to a better society, the ‘big society’, an enabling state, ‘activating’ policies or ‘policies of partnerships’ between public, private and the third sector.

Looking at a narrower field, of the research relating to the non-profit and voluntary sector or – in analytical terms – the third sector: the notion of ‘civil society’ has frequently been used here too, as a framework for empirical study and normative considerations. In the early days of third-sector research, the academic debate was confined to economic reasoning about state and market failures in the provision of goods and services and non-profits as gap-fillers for an overview see Powell 1997); however, this narrow focus has long since become a good deal wider. (Wagner (2012, 312f.) has recently traced the shifts in labelling from non-profit / third sector to “civil society”)

In order to understand the problems of the link between civil society and the third sector, one can start with an observation concerning policy changes. The reference to civil society has impacted on public policies and political programmes, especially with reference to issues of the division of labour between society, its citizens and the state. In the UK, for example, the attempt to rebalance social responsibilities between public authorities and citizens, and to find a ‘third way’ between liberalism and what was attacked as a ‘nanny state’, has assumed a pivotal role at the heart of politics; it has been said that the new policies of the Conservative Party labelled ‘the big society’ are a continuation of this in some way (Alcock 2010; Taylor 2011). In the country of the author, Germany, issues of civil society have never achieved such prominence. However, following the work of a committee of experts ten years ago, a recent government policy paper (Bundesregierung Deutschland 2010) and a first commission report on civic engagement (BMFSJ 2012; to be followed by regular reporting) show the stage that has currently been reached. The title of the commission report is ‘For a culture of co-responsibility’ and it sets the general tone for a report that focuses on civic engagement through volunteering, the work of foundations and service provision organizations, and the potential that they can have for increasing people’s co-responsibility. The belief is that civil society is basically about citizens and third-sector organizations making a larger contribution
to welfare services and matters of public welfare, and thereby to increased levels of self-governance and a greater say in overall decision making.

However, other notions of civil society also exist, which question this notion of a close link between civil society and the third sector. In this paper I seek to do the following: I first outline the aforementioned approach to the debate on civil society, its pros and cons and what it means for public politics, in particular the politics of welfare reform. I will then refer to two different notions of civil society, showing that they can open up new, broader perspectives for research, debates and politics with a reference to civil society. One of the other concepts of civil society I will consider focuses on the role of the public domain as an intermediate sphere. The third perspective on civil society that I will examine derives from analysing the attributes ‘civil’ and ‘civic’ that might characterise society at large as a ‘civil society’.

Clearly, the intellectual and academic debate on civil society has a long history of its own with many streams and sub-streams (among the many overviews, see particularly the compilations by Eberly 2000 and Edwards 2011; see as well Wagner (2012) for his perception of the ways the civil-society-paradigm began to dominate third sector research, especially in the USA). The ordering of the debate that I use here owes much to that developed by Edwards (2004). However, the arguments and emphasis in each of the following three sections are based on my own work. Passing references will be made to the policy debate in the UK and in Germany.

As the introduction to the paper has indicated, the aim here is not to reject completely the first understanding of civil society that I refer to. Neither do I seek to suggest that one of the other two conceptions that are about to be introduced is absolutely right. Rather, this is a plea for a wider and more complex conception of civil society than the one outlined in the introduction that equates civil society broadly with the ‘third sector’. I will argue, that ‘civil society’ as a reference point for both empirical studies and normative orientations ultimately concerns society at large and not just a particular aspect (or sector) of it. References to present policy debates on welfare and democracy will illustrate my argument.

1. A sphere apart from others? Civil society as a ‘third sector’
The discourse of the ‘civil society sector’

I will begin my overview of three different ways in which civil society can be conceptualized with one that is seen as almost unquestionable, both in public policy debates and in the third-sector research community. Here, civil society is basically seen as the field or sector that is left when the state, the market sector, communities and the family are removed from the overall picture of society. Even when discussing “Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society” (Chambers and Kymlicka 2002), the field of reference is made up by the organizations of associational life. And from there it is only a small but decisive step to equate civil society with the operations of NGOs and service providing associations as is done, for example, by the World Bank (2013) in its public statements.

In third sector research that looks at associational life, it has vice versa become a widespread habit to broadly equate the ‘third sector’ with ‘civil society’. Obviously the international community of third sector researchers is pluralistic and interdisciplinary. Accordingly, ‘civil society’ will be unimportant for many researchers with an economics background or be seen as a too vague and nebulous a concept for those sociologist who want to ‘measure’ trends. Nevertheless, I share with others (e.g. Wagner 2012) the impression that very often a tight link is made between ‘third sector’ and ‘civil society’, expressed in language insinuating that the two can largely be equated. There is a widespread talk of ‘the organized civil society’ or a ‘civil society sector’ (Salamon and Anheier 1997). The last two decades have witnessed a strong tendency, very much influenced by the writings of Putnam (1993; 2000), to emphasize the impact that all kinds of associations have for building trust within society and the micro-settings they provide for people to learn about issues of democratic participation and society at large. This form of association appears to be a kind of school for democracy. Third-sector organizations (TSOs) are generally understood as having a fundamental and primary role for promoting civic engagement, social competence, trust and social integration. They are often called ‘civil society organizations’ (CSOs), and are viewed as the foundation or cradle of democratic state building as suggested by Putnam’s famous dictum: ‘It takes social capital to make democracy work’ (Putnam 1993, 185).

However, while in public debate – depending on the policy issue raised – this third sector is represented both by non-profits and voluntary agencies on the one hand and NGOs on the other, the third-sector research debate, influenced by non-profit research and traditions of researching the social economy of cooperatives and similar entities, has long concentrated on
just one part of the third sector: those organizations that provide goods and services. Wagner (2012) has recently focussed on the problems caused by the attempt to bring together these two different paradigms, a basically political one and a socio-economic one. He has however not discussed the kind of solution that has been found for this problem. Especially through the impact of the social capital debate, a kind of centre of gravity has emerged, where the focus on the social economy of non-profits and service-providing third-sector organizations is combined with a research perspective that highlights their societal and political side effects in terms of community building, voluntary commitment and encouraging civic action. Particularly with the recent increase in interest in social enterprises and what some call ‘civic entrepreneurs’ (Goldsmith 2010), there is a strong tendency to merge concerns about civil society with those about the third sector in a double step of substitution: civil society is (a) defined as the organized civil society of the third sector, with much third-sector research (b) focusing particularly on those organizations that have an economic dimension as providers of goods and services.

**The strengths and weaknesses of this discourse**

The tone of the above outline would seem to imply that equating civil society and third-sector issues is something that should be avoided. Yet the positive aspects of this perspective deserve to be mentioned first.

It should be remembered that in the history of the political and social sciences, for a long time there was a separation between issues of democracy and issues of economic and social relations. The economy belonged to the market while policy making belonged to the sphere of the state and interest organizations. This meant that civil society issues were only involved through the organized interests of lobbies, traditional advocacy organizations like trade unions, and more recently the organized parts of social movements and NGOs. With respect to that, it should be recognized that an important positive contribution of the third-sector debate has been to bring groups and associations of all kinds into a concept of civil society, including those that provide services, goods and practical help as their primary function and which are often not speaking politics.

This means first of all that civil society acquires an economic dimension as well. Non-profits, voluntary organizations and social enterprises constitute different kinds of social and moral economies alongside the market economy; they produce goods and services but they also
represent forms of social learning in matters of solidarity, cooperation and interest formation (Fung 2003). Understanding this has helped us move beyond the classical state-market alternatives in economic and social policies by pointing at possible third ways – third-sector-based economies as parts of a “plural economy” (Defourny et al. 2001).

This has, secondly, raised interest in old and new forms of volunteering and community building, and their importance for civil society and, ultimately, for democracy. Ulrich Beck, as early as 1993, pointed to the important contribution that ‘sub-political action’ makes to political life - forms of action and social participation that have no explicit democratic and policy purposes can in fact produce democratic and civic externalities. Especially in Putnam’s writings, the links between economic and social action on the one hand and democratic action on the other hand have been underlined. Voluntary action and civic action are not necessarily the same, but they do not represent different worlds.

However, while it is useful to bring non-profit research and civil society closer together, it is certainly questionable whether the notions of the third sector and civil society should become synonymous.

First of all, there is the question of how to define and demarcate civil society. How should we differentiate between organizations that are ‘civil’ or ‘civic-minded’ and other organizations in the third sector? Can one simply refer to all third-sector organizations (TSOs) as ‘civil society organizations’ (CSOs)? If one places every organization that is non-state, non-market and non-community into the third sector, one will quickly run into problems if one seeks to label them all as CSOs. But equally, many problems will arise if one begins to introduce a large number of selective criteria to separate the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’, or the ‘civil’ from the ‘not so civil’ organizations in society.

But even if one takes a more modest position, bearing in mind the varying contributions that TSOs make to a more civil society, there will still be doubts about the suggested ‘primacy’ of third-sector organizations for building civility and civicness. Paul Dekker (2009), for example, has collected research evidence about the similarly significant impact that schools, links at the workplace and other state and/or market settings have on the political culture of participation and civil behaviour. From that perspective there is a strong but not a unique link between the development of third-sector organisations and the making of a civil society.
These findings relating to organizations and settings that do not belong to the third sector can be systematized by taking into account the contributions of market development and democratic state-building to the creation of more civil and civic societies. The debate on the ability of markets to soften political and social passions by creating a shared interest in ‘douce commerce’ is a recurrent theme in modern times (Hirschman 1977). And in contrast to Putnam, one could also defend the argument that it takes democracy to make social capital work; i.e. that often state-building is needed – both beforehand and concurrently – to allow for free association in third-sector organizations and its civilizing benefits (Paxton 2002; Evers 2003).

Two conclusions can be drawn from all this. The first one could be to avoid the “substantialist” orientation that is behind much of the equation of civil society with third-sector concerns. Instead of trying to find the ‘secrets of civil society’ in a sector and its organisations, one should look for them by studying the historically interactive processes between sectors, their various actors and the overall historical environment, as has been suggested by the ‘social origins’ approach in the third-sector debate (Salamon and Anheier 1998). The state, especially, has a fundamental role in helping civil society to develop (Cohen 1999).

Secondly, instead of making the terms ‘third sector’ and ‘civil society’ almost equivalent, it might be better to work on the open question concerning the various degrees and ways in which different types of third-sector organizations may serve to promote and cultivate civil society. Some organizations will have more democratic side effects than others. This may show when comparing organized social movements and NGOs with foundations, for example. There may be ‘uncivil societies’ which nonetheless have a large third sector, and vice versa.

**Links between this discourse and present public politics**

There are three points where I see particular proximity of the type of civil society discourse described above and political concepts such as the ‘big society’, the welfare society or the activating state.

First of all, there is a tendency to identify policies for a more civic and civil society with policies that address third-sector organizations. It is telling, for example, that upon coming to
power the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in the UK simply renamed the former Office of the Third Sector (OTS) as the ‘Office for Civil Society’ (OCS) (see: Alcock 2010, 381). This all too soon reduces challenges for state-politics in matters of civil society to issues of more or less support for what others are doing outside the state – TSOs, and increasingly social entrepreneurs too. However, it should not be forgotten how important state action itself and the culture of public institutions are for civil society. Volunteering and civic commitment do not take place exclusively within TSOs but also via public institutions such as schools and care services. It is often argued that, for a shift from the welfare state to a more participatory welfare society, greater third sector action is needed; but actually one could ask as well to what extent reforms are needed that promote a new type of open and participatory public sector. Increasing the scale of innovative action within society depends on making changes in other settings, beyond TSOs, such as in welfare bureaucracies. Therefore a bigger society does not necessarily mean a smaller state, but rather a different, more responsive state.

Finally, most public policies for ‘bigger societies’ aim primarily at providing support for TSOs with a strong self-help component and do not give more room for, or strengthen the impact of, other types of third-sector organizations, such as NGOs, advocacy and professional organizations, and watchdogs and lobbies for users and consumers. Strengthening not-for-profit services may be important, but this is only part of the issue. Unless this strengthening is accompanied by an appropriate role for organizations that stand for users’ and citizen-consumers’ concerns and rights to be guaranteed by the state, the civil society promised may mean a return to a form of ‘do-it-yourself-welfare’ (Alcock 2012) and a new form of state-paternalism in which programmes are determined centrally, along with the conditions under which service-providing TSOs are required to cooperate. The focus on service-providing organisations in the third sector can mean widening concerns with democracy but it might just as well mean the neglect of them.

2. Intermediation and deliberation. Building civil society in the public domain

A civil society through a well-functioning public domain
In this conception of civil society, the public sphere is firmly in the centre. This is an area that is basically not determined or governed by a sector-specific logic, as the market is determined
by profit and competition, community is determined by personal loyalties, and the state is determined by a specific doctrine. Michael Walzer (1991) has highlighted the basic plurality of the public sphere, in which one civilizing effect is the possibility that different forms of social action, utopias, belief systems and values can coexist. This pluralism places structural limits on the dominance of a specific discourse, both in space and time. Habermas (1984) has focused on another role of public space – that of intermediating between what he calls ‘Lebenswelten’ (‘Life-worlds’) and the state that represents the entire political community. He argues that the rational potentials of local forms of living, community and associations (‘Lebenswelten’) require a guaranteed free public sphere if they are to develop. In this sphere, various aspirations and concerns can be debated in a way that helps to transform particularisms and basic social conflicts between movements and established powers into compromises and shared concepts of the common good. Hence a society is a civil society to the extent to which there is a public space that is capable of providing such links between ‘life-worlds’ and politics. Habermas is aware of the threat posed by focusing excessively on one-sided processes of intermediation; this can lead to a colonization of life-worlds by the powers of monetization and bureaucratization. With regard to the UK, Marquand (2004) has analysed various other ways of de-civilizing social and democratic life, for example, by media that abuse their power or are exploited or hijacked to serve the aims of already powerful groups, while excluding weaker groups and their concerns. There is a wide range of literature on an important part of the challenge to cultivate an intermediate public sphere – the intermediation between institutionalized political decision-making and the participation of associations therein (e.g. Cohen and Rogers 1995 and Hirst and Bader 2001). Here the focus is on ways of supplementing representative democracy with democratic governance within society and its organisations. The difficult process of intermediating between notions of the public good and the needs and preferences of third-sector organizations has many faces and forms, however. A wider national and international public space co-exists with local public domains, which can mean that different notions of the public good in different settings need to be intermediated (Calhoun 1993).

In sum, one can say that from this perspective, the key to a more civil society is to be found in a successfully intermediating public sphere, rather than in a separate ‘third sector’. Civil society is to be co-founded by political guarantees, discussion and the process of deliberation.

The strengths and weaknesses of this discourse
One of the strong points of this second conception of civil society, as outlined above, is that it involves the state, more precisely, democratic statehood, directly in the civil society debate, not only in terms of providing protection and support for the activities of others, but also as a cofounding agency. Here, a more civil society is seen as a kind of co-product that needs both the voices of social movements and active citizens on the one hand, and state representatives to guarantee rights, create free spaces, and maintain openness to discursive forms of governance on the other hand.

Secondly, this conception of civil society involves a more refined idea of how civility and civicness are created. Here - contrary to the substantialist perspective of first approach, sketched above - the secret to the creation of these societal qualities is not understood as the outcome of the natural or structural logics of a sector but as a precarious product of a difficult learning process in which different sides must participate. It is opinion building in public debates, and not simply voicing one’s concerns and interests, which ‘civilizes’ actions and passions across sectors. This means that the extent to which third-sector organizations contribute to a civil and civic culture is determined by the degree to which they are influenced and educated by and within a political culture and its rules and standards of behaviour (Almond and Verba 1989). Research has shown that larger third-sector organizations which exchange and interact with their environment in many ways can contribute more to active citizenship than narrower organizations that interact little with the rest of society (Wollebaek 2008). The popular idea that flows from Putnam’s writings on trust and social capital – that somehow politicization begins at home – may thus be misleading. Politicization can come from anywhere and the learning process that leads to politicization is never secure. There are many third-sector organizations that simply coexist with their environment rather than interacting with it and there are always numerous associations that coexist happily with authoritarian regimes – witness flourishing associational life of sports, leisure and culture in Nazi Germany. Indeed, Nina Elisasoph (1998) has analysed the extent to which many voluntary associations are formed precisely on the basis of excluding politics rather than becoming involved in it. All of this underlines the key role in contributing to a more civil society of elements other than those found in a specific sector.

Thirdly, the focus on the public space and intermediation has the advantage of incorporating both sides of a civil society: on the one hand, plurality, conflict and dis-sociation - the political as an outcome of controversies (Mouffe 2005) – and, on other hand, a strengthening
of binding ties in society, with the political as an outcome of associating around a widely shared notion of the public good. In a lively political culture, both of these aspects interact and have to be balanced, as do two different types of commitment – that of engaged citizens and that of concerned volunteers. Volunteering, more than civic action, tends to be associated with politics of consent. The emphasis on the public domain and deliberation helps to avoid narrowing down commitment to voluntary action around consensual and depolitizised items in the tradition of philanthropy. A vital ingredient of the public deliberation is the societal conflict caused by NGOs and social movements when they take up public concerns – for example, child-abuse and child protection against poverty, and ways to tackle these – making them into ‘hot’ public issues in the struggle over welfare strategies. In more general terms, one can say that the focus on public deliberation involves the possibility of uniting two phenomena that are often separated in research and debates: on the one hand, voluntary and community groups or foundations which are involved in broadly consensual values and commitments to public concerns and, on the other hand, social and citizen movements with more confrontational values or positions, such as advocacy groups and social movements (Della Porta and Diari 2011).

Nevertheless, the notion of building a civil society by cultivating a domain for public deliberation also has limits and ambiguities. The focus is on communication, participating in a deliberative process and reaching collective agreements. But this may exclude questions of how to bring into public debate those forms of engagement that make themselves heard through their often self-organized social practices and forms of cooperative volunteering rather than by participating in policy talk. The concern to institutionalise participation in public debates and ultimately in policy-making may overshadow those forms of social and cultural engagement that are less firmly organized and which are more concerned with ‘doing their own thing’ and securing free spaces than with getting the chance to attend more meetings of participative boards. There may be the danger that the focus on the central intermediate role of public domains gets linked too much with utopias of participatory politics and not enough with the challenges of defending the free spaces that are needed for social experiments and the cultivation of plurality. Translating Habermas’s quest for a strong role for an intermediating public domain into a quest for participatory democracy may backfire against his concern with safeguarding life-worlds instead of colonizing them. Once the quest for public agreements is translated into practices that want to put everything to a test in public debates, not only new but more regulations might result.
**Links between this discourse and present public politics**

First of all, one can say that the focus on the public sphere and citizens who are engaged in political participation is a good antidote to the common tendency to limit issues of civil society, civility and civicness to less political or controversial issues, such as associations that provide or organize help, charity and social solidarity, and that focus more on social commonsense issues than on controversial politicised issues, on the emblematic figure of the volunteer rather than on active citizenship. In Germany for example, the national government strategy for civic engagement (2010), mentioned earlier, deals mainly with volunteer-groups that are involved in common-sense activities, such as giving support for projects on caring communities, new forms of personal support for people who suffer from dementia, etc. Here, politics plays a role but usually only with respect to the organisational and financial aspects of these programs. In a de-politicized context, in which government discourses focus primarily on further strengthening consensus, volunteering and the notion of co-citizens´ duty that this implies, it is all the more important to have a concept of civil society that is founded on active citizenship, underlining the legitimacy and potentially beneficial impact of conflict and dissent. In the example chosen, this could involve a campaign to give those who have to cope with dementia better cover in the care insurance that originally had not been tailored for their needs. The often-heard slogan that there are no rights without responsibilities also applies the other way around. One should not speak about responsibilities without also speaking about the complementary development of rights. Public debates that are advanced by advocacy groups and NGOs – such as the lack of statutory rights of older citizens, for which the government is only willing to spend a bit of money on time-limited programs for volunteer-based support – tend to address issues of active citizenship complementary to those of volunteering.

This point about balancing consent-oriented action of voluntary support with conflict-oriented action of concerned citizens raises a second point, the importance of the public domain for issues of personal rights and democratic governance.

A concept of civil society that focuses on revitalizing public debates and the open treatment of controversial issues is essential when it comes to a notion of citizenship that is not reduced to issues of social rights and entitlements but is equally sensible for personal and democratic rights (Evers and Guillemard 2012). One should bear in mind that today the public domain is
associated with such issues as the harm that managerial reforms in health and social care do to the respect for the personal rights of clients, concerns with privacy, data collection, minority rights, etc. Furthermore, with regard to the public arena and modes of governance, there are many issues concerning the participation rights of representatives of movements and citizen organizations. This relates to the right to information, transparency and a move from the informal corporatist methods of reaching consent behind closed doors towards a more institutionalized form of participatory politics. From this point of view, a critique of the current policies to promote the ‘big society’ would not only be directed at the issue of how much voluntary and community groups receive for what they give but also whether greater recognition for advocacy groups and NGOs is part of the package. Rather than only encouraging more hands-on volunteering, it might be more important to institutionalize local public spaces for deliberation (Barnes et. al 2007), open audits and other similar mechanisms for a civil society that also calls for voluntary action in terms of active citizenship.

3. Civility and civicness. Concerns with civil society at large.

Understanding civil society through a discourse on civility and civicness

A third approach to civil society is to define the values and issues in the complex field that give rise to the words ‘civil’ and ‘civicness’ themselves. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Evers 2009), while civility is a broad cultural issue entailing both private and public values, ‘civicness’ is narrower and refers to the degree to which people actively take part in public affairs. Civil society includes both of these concepts. According to the third perspective, societies may be called civil societies insofar as one can find there characteristics that are seen – by their members, including policy makers and academics – as ‘civil’ and ‘civic’. This approach can quickly turn into a debate about what a ‘good’ society (Etzioni 1999) should look like. However, the approach can also involve research into historical developments, struggles for power and reforms, in order to show how and where civility and civicness acquired their meaning. Indeed, history could be read as the struggle for, and consent building around, the fundamental values and virtues that are needed for a good, more civil and civic society (Kocka 2006). Clearly, there is no one all-encompassing definition of what makes for a civil society, and the notion of civility changes over time.
One of the most prominent theoreticians to take this historical perspective has been Jeffrey Alexander. He points out that the respective understandings of civility can be traced through a historical axis of antagonisms between what is seen as ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ (1998; 2006). In Germany and in much the same vein, Volker Heins (2002) has argued that historically civil society has been linked both with order and with processes that challenge order. Civility is linked with order through the need to build shared values and convictions, in a context that one today calls ‘state building’, moving away from chaos and anarchy. Conversely, it can also be associated with a criticism of (excessive) order, wherever reference is made to civil society in the battle against authoritarianism. There is extensive literature on how to define civility and civicness (Walzer 1974; Banfield 1992; Shils 1997; Calhoun 2000; Mouritsen 2003). Recurring themes in civility are ‘self-control’, ‘open-mindedness’ and ‘trust’, which are set against ‘loss of self-control’, ‘uninterested’ and ‘selfish’. The degree to which the notions linked with civility and civicness depend on the historical and geographical backdrop is often overlooked. Historically, for example, it has been possible to denounce in the name of upholding a decent and civil society those groups as ‘insane’ and ‘amoral’ that proclaim free sexuality, while recently the exact opposite has been the case, with the argument being advanced that a civil society should extend greater tolerance and equal rights to people with a variety of sexual orientations.

All in all, the approach taken under this third strand in dealing with civil society is to look at the attributes of a civil society – the values and perhaps also the institutions that make it and secure it – while acknowledging that such attributes are contested and may change over time. There is room, then, both for more empirical research about changing notions of civility and civicness, and for surveys about people’s opinions on the degree of civility of the societies in which they live (see Anheier 2011), but also for a debate on how to define the ‘good’, a more civil and civic society that one is working towards.

*Strengths and weaknesses of this discourse*

The first strength of this concept is that it is based on the qualities of society at large. It is therefore possible to sidestep the trap in which much third-sector research becomes ensnared: the assumption that the stronger the third-sector of ‘civil society organizations’, the more civil a society is. With regard to civility and civicness, it appears far too simple or even misleading to measure the civility of a society primarily by looking at the size or strength of its third sector.
This leads us to a second point: concern with civil society is basically to be found among all actors. This can be seen when associating it with various historical movements, discourses and conflicts in society at large. Excessively close links with third-sector organizations (often combined with setting aside NGOs and advocacy groups) are avoided here. Under this perspective, it is not fixed on which side of the ‘civil’–‘uncivil’ antagonism actors and institutions stand (Evers 2009) – witness the ambiguity of state and professional politics and markets with businessmen and entrepreneurs as forces for both ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ developments. Civil and civic values are seen, then, as playing a role in a wide range of settings; they are involved when it comes to attacking authoritarian states and dis-embedded market powers, but also involved in functionalist concepts of a society of well-administrated specialists, consumers and job-holders.

It could be argued that a debate on civil society that is conducted through the lens of observations on civility and civicness will lose its focus, since under these two headings a large and changing bundle of issues are addressed. However a counter-argument would be that observing what counts for civility and civicness and what is seen as less or not important is exactly the way to go when one wants to avoid civil society being taken as a catch-all term used by nearly every party in power in democratic states. Once it is understood that the meanings given to civility and civicness may change overtime one could ask for the reasons, why concerns with, for example, equality and social justice may over time have moved out of or re-entered the bundle of items associated with the two notions.

Anyway, the importance of an approach that defines civil society by referring to civility and civicness can be understood best in a kind of critical discourse analysis that understands civil society as an “empty signifier”, like other modern catchwords such as ‘democracy’ or ‘freedom’. Different meanings have been and are still being attached to the term ‘civil society’. Analysing discourses and how notions of civil society are positioned within them can help to clarify different meanings and roles. Defining notions of civility and civicness more clearly means relating them to their counterparts. It is then above all in controversial discourses and public debates (for an attempt see: Evers 2009), that one can discover more precise and usually different meanings. One contrast that can be found, for example, is between, on the one hand, a civil society that refers to the societal forces that control power and keep the innovatory laboratory of society moving ahead and, on the other, a vision of a
civil society in which citizens take more responsibility as partners for existing administrative and professional powers, ready to be guided towards active self-improvement and rewarded with a more harmonious and secure environment (Newman 2010). Both visions of a civil society and of the ‘good citizen’ can be attractive and threatening to some degree, and their elements can merge as one discourse shifts over into another.

**Links between this discourse and present public politics**
In many ways, the discourse sketched above could serve as an antidote to the prevailing notion of equating civil society with strengthening non-state service provision in traditional ways through the non-profit sector or in new ways by favouring support for civic entrepreneurialism and social business activities. From the position outlined above, the immediate question would appear to be: is this prevailing notion a core issue for a more civil and civic society? And if one admits that such policy aims are just part of a larger package of policies, then what about the other policies and their impact on civility and civicness?

Asking such questions can firstly help to bring the state and the market back into a debate on the deficiencies of societies with respect to civility and civicness. To cite to a question posed time and again to reformers ‘what does this mean for the economy?’; here one might ask ‘what does this mean for civility and civicness?’

This question could be addressed firstly to the activities of the state, for example with respect to employment policies and interventionist workfare concepts or the ways in which health care or education are organized. Do they serve to make the previous, much-criticized services more ‘civil’? As for civicness, one could question the effect of increased privatization in areas like housing and health care and the further expansion of consumerism. What is the effect on civility and civicness when in effect health care users are obliged to become smarter consumers and clients? To what degree do these tendencies “outsource” civic commitments instead of strengthening across sectors a more participatory culture of community development and service provision?

Questions based on notions of civility and civicness can also focus on market actors. There is a lively debate on the ways in which they are meeting their corporate social responsibility (or failing to), on greedy versus responsible business practices, and on what is required, beyond simply operating within the law, to be recognized as a contributor to and not as an opponent
of civil society. The effects of mainstream trends on consumer and labour markets are already being questioned in terms of their civility. German trade unions, for example, frame their criticisms in terms of the concept of ‘good work’ and in various countries there are different ideas about what makes for a ‘citizen-consumer’ that is not simply out for the ‘best buy’ but also takes account of the social and ecological implications of her or his choices. From consumer citizenship, there is a direct link to issues of corporate citizenship. As Colin Crouch (2011) has shown, public image and changing consumer attitudes may, particularly when it comes to big business, help bring about a more ‘civil’ notion of corporate citizenship, which needs to be more than a buzzword that masks ‘green-washing’. This may result in pressure not only for state regulations but also for responsible action by private business itself when in conflicts over what is legitimate or not in producing goods and services.

Secondly, a debate that concentrates on questions about how to safeguard and support civility and civicness across sectors would help to move on from an ex-ante obsession with widening the third sector towards a debate on trans-sectorial actor-networks, and hybrid organizations (Brandsen et. al. 2005; Evers 2005) as ways of supporting civility and civicness from different sides. Hybrids like “social enterprises” might be good examples for understanding the intertwining of economic and sociopolitical concerns not only in terms of an isomorphism that merely economizes social action and associations but for reverse attempts to give civil and civic concerns new impact in a different kind of entrepreneurialism (Evers 2013). Thereby, for public policies new possibilities take shape beyond thinking in terms of an either-or choice between state-based, third-sector-based or business-based action. For example, looking at the big society programme in the UK and its manifestation in reforms in schools may lead us to the conclusion that this is a very good choice in terms of settings and values, but that its trust in a third-sector-based solution may be ill-advised. Why should it be a priority to call for more ‘free schools’ on the basis of parent and state support, rather than trying to feed more freedom and resources back to public-sector schooling, building new coalitions of parents, administrators, politicians and teachers, and allowing for some degree of flexibility and variation to take account of local circumstances?

4. Summary and conclusion
Civil society is very often used as a point of reference with which to justify the changes that are currently being made to public and welfare policies and within which to conceive of the long-term utopia of future democratic welfare societies. There are, however, different notions of civil society, each with peculiar strengths and weaknesses and each leading to different ways of conceiving public policy reform. Three main concepts have been discussed here.

The most popular of today’s conceptions of ‘civil society’ broadly equates it with the ‘third sector’, attributing to third-sector organizations a primary role in building trust and active citizenship, and emphasizing that this can be achieved very much so as a by-product of strengthening non-profit and voluntary service provision. However, although this perspective makes volunteering, community action and third-sector-based service providers a major component of the contemporary notion of civil society and of new concepts for welfare and democracy, it tends to narrow down debates to issues of state support for a larger and stronger third sector. The main focus is on changing the mix of welfare providers towards more voluntary action rather than the related broader issues of governance such as empowering weaker voices in society, which would imply strengthening the third sector’s other aspect, represented by social movements, advocacy NGOs and civic action.

A second, somewhat wider conception views the key to civil society – as well as better public and welfare politics – as residing in the public domain, in the form of deliberative processes and governance that help to overcome particularism and forge shared notions of the public good while acknowledging the legitimacy of conflicts. As such, the secret of civility is not to be found within the substantialis of any specific sector but mainly in the interactions and the difficult learning processes that are to be achieved by intermediating conflicts in the public domain. However, this focus on the quality of our public spaces and opportunities for participation comes up against a difficult challenge: how to avoid visions of intermediation, when concretized in terms of more organized participation in the policy process, tending to privilege the debating citizen over the engaged volunteer, and participation in state affairs over the defence of individuals’ own social and cultural spaces that allow for difference and innovation?

Finally there is a third, very broad perspective on civil society, both in research and public discourse. Here, a ‘civilized’ society is conceived as taking shape through the struggle for and consent-building around the fundamental values and virtues which make up civility and
civinness. Civility and civicness can be important in all sectors of society and act as a yardstick for all actors, including professional politics and business. The debate on what precisely is seen as the most important areas or issues where civility and civicness are at stake can clarify what these notions currently are, how they can be defined, and help guard against empty civil society rhetoric.

In conclusion, one can say that while the three concepts of civil society differ in many ways and even contradict one another on some points, they may also be understood as complementary. Each of them can contribute to a more refined debate about civil society and related public policy reforms. This could help in breaking with the often-prevailing practice of narrowing down the issue of ‘strengthening civil society’ to questions about third-sector support and more service provision by non-profit organizations. Insisting on the difference between civil society and the third sector means understanding the sector as part of a larger package. Policies for third-sector organizations may be analysed in terms of the extent and ways in which they strengthen civil society, alongside complementary reorientations in public and welfare policies. Key points for such a reorientation would be: issues of democratic governance, revitalizing public spaces, the impact of NGOs and advocacy groups, and an upgrading of concerns with civility and civicness across sectors and policy fields.

**Literature**


