A Panacea for all Seasons?
Civil Society and Governance in Europe

This introduction gives an overview of the edited volume and a preliminary answer to the overarching question. It illustrates that hopes and expectations concerning the role of civil society in modern times that are formulated by many feature writers and politicians are frequently unrealistic. Nevertheless, although civil society is definitely not a panacea for all seasons, empirical research shows that national paths and patterns of civil society and third sector developments can be used as important benchmarks and examples of best practices for the development of democratic governance in European countries.

Prima facie, the title of the anthology at hand seems to be an anachronism. In the midst of the global financial crisis, it is the state that enjoys a renaissance all over Europe. Crashing banks and wavering economic models called the governments into action, and they have tended to work with the traditional governmental instruments of regulation, subvention and redistribution. Despite immense indebtedness of public budgets, almost all European countries launched economic recovery plans worth billions of Euro. In other words, in times of a challenging crisis, state-centred policies are again very en vogue, and civil society is just a supporting actor at best.

Nevertheless, this current emphasis on government as the appropriate problem solver probably remains a snapshot. Against the background of high rates of unemployment, growing societal inequality and an insecure future of the welfare state caused by a combination of market and state failure, civil society-centred approaches will soon regain importance in politics as they already did before the crises started in the latter half of 2008.

At that time and bit by bit today again, there were and are many reasons why social scientists and policy experts alike are increasingly turning towards civil society in their search for reform concepts, new ideas and progressive initiatives. The new challenges of economy, society and politics caused by globalization and marketization have given a new boost to questions of democratic legitimation, which is closely linked to various forms of participatory and deliberative democracy and the central question of how to overcome an outdated representative system that bores or even scares off its citizens. This holds true, in particular, for the debate in the European Union, a political system that was originally established as an almost exclusively
output-oriented transnational tool to achieve a common market within Europe based on administration by technocratic experts. But with the creeping expansion of responsibilities to other topics – ranging from environmental questions to consumer protection and even culture and sports – and the demand for a greater influence of the citizens on the decision-making process, it becomes more and more clear that European governance cannot ignore claims for greater citizen participation beyond traditional forms of representative democracy (Scharpf 1999).

In times of globalization and Europeanization, traditional nation states have lost power and steering capacity, and most of all the modes of power have changed and become more reflexive under involvement of an increasing number of actors in a multi-level governance setting. Thus, state-centred reform concepts of the 1970s focusing on management and social engineering are therefore out of date. However, also the so-called Washington consensus, which emphasized exclusively the power of the market, did not prove to be successful. Despite political rhetoric, the heyday of neo-liberalism and what critical voices titled turbo-capitalism are gone, particularly in the countries of the European Union (Zimmer/Freise 2008).

Instead the focus shifts to the intermediate sphere between state, market and privacy that is labelled as civil society. A retrospect on nine meetings of the European PhD dissertation network on the third sector and civil society – which is the initiator of this edited volume – impressively documents the meteoric interdisciplinary career of the civil society concept in European arts and social sciences in recent years. Economists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, jurists, theologians, ethnologists, philosophers, cultural scientists and public administrators all have discovered civil society for their particular purposes.

Hence, the term civil society and its uses are addressed in many contexts and discourses. The term has developed into a somewhat vague, catch-all buzzword that always has a positive and pro-democratic connotation. The same holds true for the third sector – often characterized as the institutionalized heart of civil society (Zimmer/Freise 2008) – and its constituent organizations, which are based (at least partly) on the principles of volunteerism, philanthropy and societal self-organization. In a nutshell, civil society and third sector are discussed as answers to a huge variety of current societal grievances caused by globalization, predatory capitalism, supposed bowling-alone-effects and established welfare systems under pressure, and it seems that civil society, in particular, is sometimes prematurely conceptualized as an all-in-one device suitable for every purpose or “a panacea for all seasons”.

Current examples of these high expectations lie within the debate in public administration and political science on the effective and efficient implementation of new public management approaches. Civil society and its organized components all over Europe are discussed as reasonable targets for shifting responsibilities that have been previously part of state administration, but are now to be delivered through competitive bidding processes and contractual arrangements that try to maximize the competitive advantage of the third sector in complex markets under state tutelage (Lahusen 2005).
From a different angel, advocates of the social capital discourse are interested in the self-organizing capacities of volunteers and argue that civil society can prevent social ills and detect and correct them before they become social problems (Maloney 2008). In sharp contrast to mainstream public administration research, it is argued in the tradition of Robert Putnam (2000) that the success or failure of policy implementation is an outcome closely linked to the existence or absence of social capital. Social capital encompasses trust, norms and networks, and, according to Putnam, it is primarily accumulated through face-to-face contacts in the voluntary associations that shape civil society.

Finally, civil society is discussed as a place of dissent, challenge and innovation, as a countervailing force to government and the corporate business world. It is a place that serves as a social, cultural and political watchdog keeping both market and state in check, a sector that creates and reflects the diversity, pluralism and dynamism of modern society (Zimmer 2007).

The aim of the edited volume is to put these high expectations of civil society to test: Is it really a panacea for all seasons that could be used for a successful fight against multifaceted societal grievances? Of course, this question has more a rhetorical than an empirical character. Naturally, the hopes and expectations that feature writers and politicians pin on the role of civil society and its organizations in further democratic governance are frequently unrealistic.

Nevertheless, although civil society is definitely not a panacea for all seasons, the experience from the PhD network shows that national paths and patterns of civil society and third sector developments can be used as important benchmarks and examples of best (and sometimes worst) practices for other contexts. By analysing theoretical and empirical evidence from local, national and international contexts, the chapters of this volume contribute to a transfer of knowledge between the national discourses and practices of civil society and show what civil society can achieve and what it cannot.

Before looking at the structure of the volume, we should briefly take a deeper look at the two concepts – civil society and governance – that are the points of reference for all following chapters.

1. Conceptions of Civil Society

Many textbooks, monographs and volumes published in recent years dealing with the concept of civil society try to develop a clear-cut definition of the concept in their introductory chapters. As a multi-layered phenomenon in different social paradigms, civil society is distinguished in various aspects. The philosophical-ethical and cultural paradigms stress the importance of citizens and civility and looks at the role of the individual in civil society initiatives. It also takes the role of
the state as a given. The political paradigm analyzes a more narrow aspect of civil society, i.e., its manifestation and development under conditions of the democratic state and its legislation. Civil society in a political paradigm is recognized as a particular democratic condition that should be fostered by the state. Sociologists approach civil society as a political, social and economic complex, focusing on volunteering, philanthropy, social capital, trust, etc. From the perspective of public administration, civil society is interpreted in its more practical meaning, recognized as a tool of public governance with managerial knowledge. The public administration paradigm focuses on realistic strategies of how to foster civil society, which is considered to be an important element of governance alongside legal and managerial instruments (for a good overview, see Matonyte 2003).

In this introduction, we deliberately set aside any attempt to provide a single definition and instead highlight the three elements that are inherent to all contemporary definitions of civil society (for a good overview, see Kocka 2006).

In the first place, almost all concepts of civil society used in this volume focus on a societal sphere that is located between its neighboring spheres, i.e., state, market and family/private sphere, and has many intersections with the neighboring spheres, as well as grey areas. Often a distinction is made between civil society in a narrow sense, which includes only the group of entities with a legal form such as associations, foundations, unions, churches or cooperatives, and civil society in a broad sense, which incorporates also temporary initiatives, movements, networks and even internet blogs. Researchers favouring the former perspective frequently use the term “organized civil society” and utilize other terms such as third or non-profit sector (Anheier 2005).

In addition to the perspective concentrating on civil society as a sphere between others, some concepts of civil society see it as a specific type of social action that takes place in the public space. It is rather difficult to summarize the different elements that constitute this type of action. Nevertheless, it is generally characterized by non-violence and peaceful forms of protest, self-organization, deliberation and discourse, civility and the acceptance of diverse values. Frequently the debate on social capital in the sense of Robert Putnam (2000) as a “key component to building and maintaining democracy” is connected to this dimension of civil society.

Finally, all concepts of civil society used in this anthology contain a normative and utopian component that is strongly connected to democratic theory and includes images of democracy and societal justice (Cohen/Arato 1994). Since there exist many general concepts of democracy, ideas of man and views of justice all embedded in a complex system of values, there cannot be a coherent concept of civil society. Depending on the position of the theorist as a neo-liberal, conservative, socialist, social democrat, communitarian, anti-globalization activist, right-wing extremist or even anarchist, the role of civil society in the further development of democracy, democratic participation, democratic decision making, and democratic
governance will be defined in various ways by assigning different democratic functions (Keane 1998). One of the democratic functions connected to civil society is as a bulwark against a state that tries to intervene in the private sphere of its citizens. Others highlight that civil society takes over functions for the state or the Tocquevillian version of civil society as the school of democracy. Civil society is seen as the transmission belt between individuals and the political system through the articulation of interests and, finally, it is discussed as the forum of political discussion and deliberation as the precondition of democratic decision making. Depending on the political position of its advocates, these different functions are mixed and take on various levels of importance (Taylor 1990; Deakin 2001).

The utopian and normative element of all civil society concepts discussed at the moment explains the magical attraction of the term for politicians as well as for researchers. In a time at the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992) without overarching societal theories, it is evident that theorists concentrate on a buzzword that could stand for something more democratic without earnestly saying how this end can be achieved. That is why the different concepts, images, promises, ideas and illusions of civil society come under scrutiny: Is civil society more than “desperate wishful thinking” (Münkler 2006)? And if so, how could it contribute to a more democratic and more efficient governance? These questions lead us to the next central concept of this volume.

2. Governance and Civil Society

As already briefly noted, the concept of civil society has been recently strongly combined by many politicians, scholars and related thinkers with the governance of the Western societies. What needs to be taken into consideration here is that the term “governance” is also a very versatile one. It originates from the need of economics (as regards corporate governance) and political science (as regards state governance) for an all-embracing concept capable of conveying diverse meanings and ways of regulating and coordinating people, phenomena and things. Referring to the exercise of power in general, the term “governance” embraces action by executive bodies, assemblies and judicial bodies. According to Roderick Rhodes (1996), the concept of governance is currently used in contemporary social sciences with at least six different meanings: the minimal state, corporate governance, new public management, good governance, social-cybernetic systems, and self-organized networks. In other words, the term governance refers to introducing reflexivity, efficiency and civic inspiration to public administration (see also Pierre 2000; van Kersbergen/van Warden 2004).

During the 1980s and 1990s the term governance won a modifier, i.e., “new”, in the discourses of sociologists, political scientists and public administrators, for in-
stance. “New governance” is a concept that encompasses various new techniques designed to increase the transparency, deliberativeness and efficiency of administration, for instance. New governance, as a term and set of techniques, is deployed in all dimensions of governance: new forms of transnational and supranational coordination and regulation; experimentalist processes that foster broader participation and stimulate policy learning; and new modes of co-operation between public and private actors. Also the use of external expertise and expertise knowledge is one of the most visible aspects of the “newness” in new governance. The keywords for the new governance are empowerment of the citizens (especially those “at risk”), communities of practice, participatory governance, policy dialogue, communicative and collaborative planning, and co-construction. The overall purpose of the new governance is to give citizens and their consortiums access to the polity and organization of services concerning them in order to decrease the direct interventions by the state and public institutions on citizens’ lives. This meta-objective includes connecting a wider spectrum of citizens’ interests to the interest repertoire of the governing system and making this system more efficient socially and economically (Pierre 2000).

As one might conclude from many recent documents and studies concerning the forms and modes of governance of the European Union, European Council and European Commission (e.g., Freise 2008; Kvist/Saari 2006; Sandholtz/Sweet 1998), there is a wide and relatively protracted debate going on about the directions of interstate relations and public sector–civil society relations in European administration. The main focus of the debate seems to have been on building structures for the common European administration and avoiding pitfalls in that. This goal has been coated with various interrelated objectives dealing with the legitimacy of the interstate administration and the increasing distrust in policy institutions and parliamentary decision-making among the citizens. These objectives include, for instance, the aim of building new, more or less stable, and widespread structures for civic organizations and citizens to participate in their own administration and making public organizations accountable for their work. The debate has resulted in the reform of policy practices in various ways: the invention and use of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as a means of sharing good practices; dissemination of information and monitoring the implementation of EU-wide decisions between the states; multisectoral partnerships; outsourcing of public services; making administrative activities transparent and auditable; and as a general increase of something that Nikolas Rose (1999: 49-50), for instance, calls “government at a distance”.

It is perhaps an exaggeration to say that public policies and parliamentary democracies – both on national and supranational level – are in crisis, but they have certainly faced several serious challenges recently. From the perspective of governance – no matter whether conceptualized as “old” or “new” – one of the main overarching challenges seems to come back to the expression in the title of this volume: is civil society a cure for the problems the governance is presently facing? As many earlier studies (e.g., Borzaga/Defourny 2001; Freise 2008; Gidron et al. 1992) and the chapters of this volume show, many of the practical and theoretical efforts to
overcome the recent challenges of governance have turned attention to civil society organizations in all their varieties: philanthropic and charity organizations are expected to organize self-help, peer-aid and endowments for people at risk of social exclusion; national and international NGOs should advise governments, politicians and authorities in decision making concerning human rights, development and social issues; the professional third sector organizations are called on to help in fulfilling the gaps in public service provision by providing social and cultural services for the public sector to purchase; and social enterprises are to employ people with health and social disadvantages.

The chapters of this book observe and analyse illuminatingly the ways these administrative approaches toward civil society have been implemented and have succeeded, transformed and sometimes failed in different national and local contexts in Europe.

3. Structure of the Anthology

3.1 New roles and relations of civil society and public administration

In the first part of the book, research projects are presented that focus on the relationships between state and civil society from a political governance perspective: How are these relationships changing? How are civil society actors being entrusted by the state to take on tasks in several policy fields? What governance role does civil society play today and does it contribute to a more efficient and effective steering capacity?

This part is launched by Miikka Pyykkönen who introduces understandings of civil society and its linkage to the conceptualizations of power and governance in Gramscian and Foucauldian thinking. He analyses these approaches against the traditional liberalist and neo-liberalist understandings of civil society. As an overall result, the author argues that looking at the ideas and practices of civil society from Gramsci’s, Foucault’s and their interlocutors’ perspective, civil society does not look like an independent sphere with its own natural order or that is free of political actions and steering, but rather a sphere that is strongly connected to the practices of power and knowledge formation. From this perspective civil society is an ideal technology of modern governmentality, which is based on the enhancement of the freedom and self-sufficiency of the citizens.

Next, Taco Brandsen asks how the institutional environment of organized civil society affects its capacity to innovate. Specifically, he is interested in the question of how the institutional legacy of historical governance relationships affects processes of innovation, since such relationships are an important aspect of the institutional environment of organized civil society. The chapter is based on a case study
in Dutch social housing, which documents the strategic development of organizations that moved from philanthropic origins, through a state-dominated system of governance, to one in which they had a high degree of autonomy. The author proves that the fact that the merits of non-profit organizations remain largely unproven is not simply the result of a lack of systematic empirical evidence. It is also due to the highly contingent nature of those merits. That is why Brandsen advocates expanding the analytical perspective beyond the organizational level and including more levels of analysis.

In the next chapter, Matthias Freise structures the German debate on public-private partnerships (PPP) involving civil society actors and analyses how these partnerships contrast the established modes of state–civil society relations. He argues that the involvement of civil society actors in complex legal and financial governance arrangements strongly influences the day-to-day business of civil society organizations: On the one hand PPP enhances the chances of civil society organizations to participate in local policy making. On the other hand civil society organizations run the risk of getting “softly parented” by the local government since they have to submit too many contractual obligations. In a second step, the paper illustrates this process by focussing on a case study of a public-private partnership between local government and several self-help groups active in the field of municipal health care policy in the city of Münster.

Piotr Romaniuk then discusses civil society in the historical, legal and political circumstances of post-communist Poland. He argues that in the last decades Poland has faced a radical system transformation from a centrally controlled communist model to parliamentary democracy and market economy. The chapter aims to trace the process of change in the relationship between state’s institutions and civil society in Poland and give the characteristics of contemporary post-communist civil society. The author draws the picture of civil society in Poland and comes to the conclusion that civil society has taken on a strong role in generating economic and social development in post-communist Poland.

A specific instrument of civil society involvement in local governance arrangements is analysed by Stefano Stortone who focuses on participatory budgeting as a mechanism to call the citizens to contribute to determining municipal financial resources. The aim of the chapter is to look at participatory budgeting in order to gain insights into the debate on the political role of civil society in contemporary democratic theory. The author illustrates that participatory governance is not just a simple participatory mechanism, but also a pattern of a different coherent representative democratic system where political decisions are taken by civil society organizations as a result of direct participation of citizens in multiple spheres. However, the concept is challenging traditional modes of democratic legitimation of binding decision making.

The first part of the anthology is brought to a close by Egle Vaidelyte who analyzes the philanthropy phenomenon in a post-communist context. The chapter discusses whether it is possible that philanthropy as a part of civil society serve as a
panacea building social welfare in post-communist Lithuania. At the theoretical level, the author introduces the variety and diversity of philanthropy concepts and the historical background of post-communist Lithuanian welfare. The author then argues that modern philanthropy in a partnership with the state might play a role as a welfare model. Empirical data illustrate that the post-communist context provokes a challenging dichotomy of the public approach and philanthropy actors’ attitudes towards the role of philanthropy in the welfare state.

3.2 New Trends of Volunteerism and Organizational Practices

The second part of the anthology focuses attention on the organizational infrastructure of civil society and its current challenges. It encompasses chapters dealing with typical questions of the day-to-day operations of civil society, among them, problems of organizational behaviour of volunteers and the reciprocal relationship between individual members and their organizations. How do organizations deal with these challenges? What can organizations learn from the results? Is there a possibility of adaptation? Furthermore, management tasks of civil society groups are targeted by analysing civil society entrepreneurship and the discourse on accountability of voluntary organizations.

Monika Molnar argues that civil society associations demonstrate great economic power; thus, enhancing accountability is a critical issue in the management and governance of civil society organizations. In her chapter she discusses the accountability of civil society organizations in Hungary and explores various accountability mechanisms. Thereby, she compares non-profit accountability in theory and practice and presents accountability advantages, disadvantages and practical dilemmas. The chapter also introduces a framework of general non-profit accountability standards developed for the Hungarian civil society organizations. Finally, Molnar presents field research that examines the applicability of the standards and attempts to provide an answer to the question of whether accountability and its initiatives are really “magical tools” for civil society organizations.

Next, Johan Hvenmark analyzes the process of commercialization and membership in civil society organizations in Sweden. The chapter aims to describe how the perception of membership in Swedish civil society might be influenced by larger societal trends and changing behaviours among citizens. The author discusses the possible outcomes of the above-mentioned changes on both an organizational and societal level focusing on the contradiction between civil society organization members as owners and customers. The theoretical approach is illustrated through empirical insights into how leaders and officials in nine large Swedish civil society organizations perceive membership.

Stefan Einarsson contributes another study from Scandinavia by asking the questions of how strategic processes play out in civil society organizations through the
production, negotiation and interpretation of discourses and how these discourses interactively and iteratively influence the governance structure within the civil society organization. Using the example of the Swedish temperance movement, the author presents a longitudinal case study of the interplay of discourse and governance within a large federative Swedish civil society organization and illustrates how discourse shapes organizational power relations at a given time, while power relations shape organizational discourse over time.

Malin Gawell studies the creation of the organization Attac in Sweden. The narrative analysis of the chapter is grounded in theories on entrepreneurship seen as a dynamic social process in which, among other things, a new organization is created. The article brings the specific idea of entrepreneurship to the core of political mobilization in civil society, well beyond the idea’s use only in the context of businesses and the economic world. The author argues that the “entrepreneurial spirit” is important for the mobilization of the people and their engagement in the organization. Hence it is also crucial in the overall development process in which the organization becomes more or less institutionalized in civil society.

Kari Steen-Johnson rounds up the Scandinavian block in the second part of the anthology and discusses the role traditional voluntary organizations might play in creating and maintaining social bonds in a local context. The author analyzes the case of a long-standing local sports organization in Norway and discusses how the conditions for filling such a role have changed under the conditions of late modernity. The chapter introduces the theoretical community perspective and community typology on the basis of embeddedness and discusses how different types of community become relevant in the analysis of social bonds in a local voluntary sports club.

Lesley Hustinx analyzes the organizational behaviour of volunteers in the light of modernization and individualization processes. She argues that volunteerism experiences changes in the form of participation and in the profile of volunteers and proposes an innovative multidimensional classification of volunteering styles. The chapter is based on a survey of Red Cross volunteers in Flanders that attempts to explain the different styles of volunteering. Hustinx employs a new analytical framework of styles of volunteering based on three analytical components: styles of volunteering, the social embeddedness of the volunteers and the organizational framework. The chapter debates the distinctions between old, traditional or collective and new, modern and individualized styles of volunteering and attempts to determine to what extent it is realistic to consider volunteerism as a panacea for the social ills of present-day societies.

Eileen Humphreys observes the presence and implementation of social capital in regeneration policies in four different Irish neighbourhoods. Two of the districts are the most disadvantaged and are more socially segregated based on low social class. In contrast, two provincial towns are less disadvantaged. The chapter is based on a survey of 400 residents living in these neighbourhoods. Humphreys shows that relatively poor neighbourhoods are not necessarily devoid of social capital, as often
thought. There is no evidence of a causal relationship between levels of social capital and capacity of poor areas to “catch up” with the mainstream. However, the most deprived neighbourhoods lack “bridging” and “linking” social capital.

Finally, Anna Domaradzka analyses the desires and expectations of the individual women who participate in different kinds of women’s organizations in Poland. The chapter is based on survey research the author conducted on 51 leaders of women’s civil society organizations in nine Polish cities. According to the author, women’s third sector organizations form a space where different individuals seek fulfilment of their different needs in one way or another. The chapter states that the main role of women’s civil society organizations is filling the gaps – not only in state services, but, most of all, in people’s lives. In the case of women’s associations, the personal needs are often at the roots of collective activity.

4. Concluding Remarks

All authors of the anthology are alumni of the European PhD Dissertation Network on the Third Sector and Civil Society. The goal of the network, which was founded in 2001 by the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics, is to bring together PhD students doing research on the third sector and civil society. From the outset, the annual seminars have been enthusiastically received by the PhD students involved. In 2009 the seminar was organized in Leuven and in previous years in Kaunas (2008), Münster (2007), Vienna (2006), Rolduc (2005), Stockholm (2004), Dublin (2003) and Windsor Castle (2002 and 2001).

The four-day network meetings are partially filled with lectures from renowned scholars in the field, addressing both research themes (e.g., governance of nonprofits, social capital and volunteering) and practical issues (e.g., supervisor-student relationships and the borderline between academic and applied research). However, the core of the seminars is the discussion of the work of individual students, who are obliged to hand in papers on their research and to reflect on the work of fellow students.

The network meetings have two main benefits. First, they help students in their PhD research, both through the lectures and the intensive group discussions. Second, they put people in touch on a cross-disciplinary and cross-national basis. All meetings have been successful thanks to the diversity of students and projects brought together, but also as a result of the limited scale of the arrangements, with no more than 40 to 50 participants. Another important outcome of the meetings has been to help the students become part of an emerging network of young European scholars working on similar themes.

In principle, the Network is open to all European PhD students whose dissertation topic is linked to the third sector and/or civil society, whatever their disciplinary
background or specific focus. The anthology at hand proves the wide variety of successful research projects carried out under the umbrella of the network. For further information about the Network and its upcoming meetings, please visit the network’s website at www.civilsociety.se.

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References


