

Chapter 1

The Place of Civil Society in the Creation of Knowledge



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This interdisciplinary volume addresses the relations between civil society and knowledge from a social, institutional, and spatial perspective. As knowledge and civil society are co-constitutive (any voluntary civic agency would seem to require a minimum of knowledge and the *kinds* of civic agency shape the production and use of knowledge), we approach their relationship from two viewpoints: (a) what we know and how we think about the civil society shapes our action in it; (b) the particular relations between knowledge and civil society shape how knowledge in civil society becomes actionable. Adhering to the first imperative, we should carefully reflect and occasionally reconsider our assumptions about civil society. In line with the second imperative, we should carefully distinguish the ways in which civil society impacts knowledge. These range from knowledge creation, its interpretation, and its influence on societal and political discourses to its dissemination through civil society.

This book's authors contribute to the discussion on these relations through conceptual reflections on the role and current developments in civil society as well as through empirical research that yields new insights into these relations. Also, they invite readers and researchers to take new and unconventional perspectives on civil

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J. Glückler et al. (eds.), *Knowledge and Civil Society*, Knowledge and Space 17,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71147-4_1

society and offer some outside-the-box perspectives on how civil society can be conceived and analyzed. Conceptual and empirical approaches go beyond the traditional division of the three sectors—market, state, and civil society—to offer inclusive frameworks, and take a broader and more integrative view on civil society and civic agency. In this introduction to the volume, we review selected strands of the contemporary debate and invite readers to examine the role of and relation between civil society and the creation, interpretation, and reproduction of knowledge, followed by a reflection on contemporary perspectives on the civil society concept. Finally, we will outline the book’s structure and sketch out the individual contributions to the questions raised in this volume.

Knowledge and Civil Society

Knowledge has been the focal concept in this book series. Beyond the many conceptualizations of and ascriptions to this term, knowledge denotes the human understanding of concrete and abstract phenomena of the world in which we live. Human understanding differs from data and information in that it is built and rests in people’s minds. Whereas bits of data or parcels of commodity can be transferred, knowledge requires comprehension to be translated from one person to the other and from one place to the other. Though being bound to the individual, the creation and interpretation of knowledge remains a relational social process, often collaborative and situated within the confines of symbolic, cultural, and institutional frames (Glückler, Herrigel, & Handke, 2020; Meusburger, 2008). Hence, learning and knowing are geographically situated and contingent social practices (Bathelt & Glückler, 2011).

Similarly to the notion of knowledge, the concept of civil society is also contested (Jensen, 2006) and has received contributions from various disciplines in a broad field of study. Researchers of civil society generally address “the diversity and richness of institutions, organizations and behaviors located between the ‘market’ and the ‘state’” (Anheier, Toepler, & List, 2010, p. V). Civil society encompasses the so-called third or nonprofit sector, which, according to the widely used functional and operational definition of the “Johns Hopkins Third Sector” project, includes organizations that are formal or “institutionalized to some extent,” private or “institutionally separate from government,” nonprofit-distributing, self-governing, and voluntary, “involving some meaningful degree of voluntary participation” (Salamon & Anheier, 1992, pp. 136–137). Beneath this societal landscape of organizations, practices, and institutions, the concept of civil society is further connected to the public sphere (Calhoun, 2011; Habermas, 1991, 1996), to civic modes of behavior, social movements, or, as an “utopian project,” to self-governing democratic coexistence (Adloff, 2005, pp. 8–9).

The relation between civil society and knowledge has several dimensions. Civil society organizations and civic practices are deeply involved in the *creation, interpretation, and dissemination* of knowledge.

First, civil society has a role in the *creation of knowledge*. Through financial or material support and programming priorities, grant-making foundations and associations as well as further nonprofit-organizations are strongly involved in the funding of higher education institutions and research activities (Warren, Hoyer, & Bell, 2014). Civil society organizations serve as spaces for knowledge production and “democratic innovation” (della Porta & Pavan, 2017, p. 198). Further, civil society organizations and formally and informally organized individuals themselves are active in innovative social practices and in knowledge creation through research activity and the development of new conceptual approaches and solutions for society, addressing societal challenges in the field of social innovation (Domanski, Howaldt, & Kaletka, 2020; Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010; Moulaert, 2016) as well as technology. Researchers increasingly recognize civil society organizations as co-creators of knowledge in regional innovation processes and as elements of innovation systems (Asheim, Grillitsch, & Trippl, 2017). Scholars in regional governance as well as in international development work consider the local embeddedness and knowledge of civil society actors to be key success factors for locally adapted problem-solving (Christmann, Ibert, Jessen, & Walther, 2019; Latulippe & Klenk, 2020; Mistry & Berardi, 2016). This has led to post-colonial debate on issues of legitimization and power structures as well as to discussions on the relations between different forms of knowledge (Antweiler, 1998; Briggs & Sharp, 2004, pp. 661–676; see Chap. 10 by Fouksman). In recent decades, new organizational forms such as innovation communities of interest (Brinks & Ibert, 2015, p. 363), open labs, and makerspaces have emerged as an infrastructure, enabling individuals to independently develop technical solutions, innovations, and prototypes, and to learn through cooperation (Brinks, 2019; Maravilhas & Martins, 2019). In citizen science, individuals are actively engaged in the advancement of empirical research, collectively collecting or analyzing data (Strasser, Baudry, Mahr, Sanchez, & Tancoigne, 2019).

Second, civil society actors actively affect and intervene in the *interpretation of knowledge, sense-making, and political and societal agenda-setting*, hereby influencing public debate and opinion. Civil society as a “locus of political activity” (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. XVIII) serves “the articulation, aggregation, and representation of interests” (Diamond, 1994, p. 8). In the conception of civil society as the public sphere, a place of deliberation (Calhoun, 2011; Habermas, 1991, 1996) and an “arena in which political ideas are raised, debated, and decided” (Bob, 2011, p. 216), civil society serves “to inform its members, and potentially influence the state and other institutions” (Calhoun, 2011, p. 321). With the globalization of communication and digitalization, the public sphere has increasingly shifted from the national to a global level (Castells, 2008). Associations and lobbies bundle interests as well as they advocate in pre- or non-political contexts and within political process (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Fung, 2003; Hendriks, 2012; Warren, 2011), thereby framing knowledge and (re)interpreting it (Benford & Snow, 2000, see also Chap. 11 by Chan). Hendriks (2006) distinguishes between formalized fora at a micro-level, where deliberation occurs through “participants from civil society who have relatively unformed and flexible preferences,” on one hand and the public

sphere at the macro-level on the other, as an informal space of “unconstrained communication [. . .] where public opinion is formed, shaped and contested” (Hendriks, 2006, p. 502). Dodge (2010) finds dualistic strategies of deliberation and transmitting ideas both in cooperation with government within deliberative fora as well as staying critical and autonomously outside of these fora. Further, civil society actors can be elements of epistemic communities, with experts on often global geographical scales sharing a common understanding of knowledge and a “common cognitive framework” (Cohendet, Grandadam, Simon, & Capdevila, 2014, p. 929; Haas, 1992). From here, actors interpret and transmit knowledge into policy and distribute it into external local contexts (see Chap. 10 by Fouksman). International non-governmental actors “directly influence domestic educational policies and as they construct a global interpretation of, and set of responses to, worldwide educational ‘needs’” (Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Mundy & Murphy, 2001, p. 85). Further, philanthropists and grant-making civil society organizations exert influence on societal debate with regard to which societal problems they address through their funding, and in their decisions on which topics and selected fields of research they actively support (Clarke, 2019; Frickel et al., 2010; Tompkins-Stange, 2020, see also Chap. 4 by Hess).

Third, civil society organizations are involved in *education and the dissemination of knowledge*. Worldwide, NGOs and other nonprofit educational institutions offer education and training, providing basic and higher education and adult learning (Meyer & Boyd, 2001; Priemer, 2015). Cooperation and networks between the state, market, and civil society in the field of education policy have gained increasing importance in the field of global education policy, where they have also raised critical concerns about an emerging deficit of democratic accountability (Ball, 2012; Meyer & Boyd, 2001; Meyer & Powell, 2020; Meyer & Rowan, 2006). In this way, civil society may play constructive roles as innovator in the field of education, but also faces the risk of educational privatization and filling the gaps left by the governmental education system, with philanthropy towards educational institutions covering an increasingly large share of educational finance and thus sometimes gaining asymmetrical influence on educational structures (Archer, 1994; Ball, 2012; Meyer & Zhou, 2017). Apart from their role in formal education systems, civil society and civic action are expected to provide opportunities to practice, develop, or build civic and citizenship skills, convey democratic values and knowledge of political processes, and to enable and motivate citizens to further political activities (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Dekker, 2009; Eikenberry, 2009; Foley & Edwards, 1998, pp. 11–12; Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014; Putnam, 2000; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). However, the scope and impact of civil society associations as schools of democracy in a Tocquevillian and neo-Tocquevillian sense, emphasizing the “educative, skill-building, and psychological contributions of associations” (Fung, 2003, p. 517), is subject of discussion (Dekker, 2014, see Chap. 2 by Meyer).

Civil engagement has a geographical dimension as well. The numerous types of organizations and activities discussed in this volume range from activities in specific local and regional contexts to organizations that are integrated in global networks and communities. Apart from the spatial scales of actions and their impacts,

this volume's authors also illustrate the richness and context-specificity of particular types of civil society, and thus contribute novel insights into civil society's practices and organizations in their relation to knowledge.

Looking for Civil Society in Unexpected Places

Several authors in this volume have utilized unconventional, innovative, and broader perspectives of civil society, addressing its ephemerality, fragility, and intermediality. In a tradition with a two-century-long pedigree, researchers typically conceive civil society as a place of organizations and associations between market and state, characterized by clearly discernible structures and high amounts of persistence and durability. They also often conceive it as unfolding in the agora of the public sphere, that unambiguous social and physical space in which private actors meet to carry out their business of shared interest. This was particularly obvious when civil society reclaimed widespread intellectual attention in the wake of the events associated with the fall of 1989. Thus, it was two large, formal organizations—the Catholic Church and Solidarnosc in Poland—that supplied the crucial infrastructure in which the cracks of the Soviet Union's empire first became obvious. Likewise, the call “Wir sind ein Volk” [We are one people] was first heard in the former GDR's Protestant churches, the only large social space uncontrolled by a dictatorial government. In both cases, it was large-scale formal organizations that provided arenas of civic associations and energy that played a crucial role in the events leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall and, eventually, the Soviet Empire. In a similar vein, researchers often equate the “third sector”—a frequent connote of the civil society—with “non-governmental and nonprofit organizations.”

In this volume, we are attempting to expand the optic on the civil society by foregrounding those less expected and unexpected spaces and geographies in which civil society energies unfold, are blocked, and may re-organize and regroup. In particular, several contributors in this volume suggest that an understanding of the full range of civil society action (and its obstacles) should comprise how civil associations and mobilization takes place in spaces of ephemerality, such as:

- networks, fields, and epistemic communities;
- types of knowledge and ways of doing (or not doing) science;
- by means of often unseen small-scale, grass-roots philanthropy, collective action groups, or rural (but quite “unprovincial”) women's associations;
- and through social movements that can be harbingers of civility, but can also overshoot their goal and turn violent and uncivil.

The easy fragility and easy reversal of civility into incivility, and hence, the great fragility of civil society are another theme of this collection of papers. While researchers of civil society have previously tended to emphasize its progressive and democratic potential, the last two decades have brought in their tow many social and political reversals that, we may consider today, have grown into spaces of increased

inequality and normative and moral heterogeneity that civil society made possible in the first place.

Civil society space, in this perspective, is pre-eminently a social space that may manifest with equal probability as institutional space, virtual space, or physical space. Given the dramatic changes associated with the digital revolution, this is not surprising. Mobilization, organization, and communication—while not limited to the virtual world—are severely hampered if they do not also unfold in cyberspace. Intermediality—both in the sense of multi-mediality (for example, physical and virtual mobilization) and of in-between-ness (e.g., between market and government, or between formal organization and movement) is rapidly becoming a lasting characteristic of civil society. In short, we propose that a useful expansion of our gaze to take in the full range of civil society activities is facilitated by paying greater attention to the ephemeral, fragile, and intermedial nature of civil society processes. Rather than viewing these characteristics as defects or negations of civil society, we may see them as essential aspects and staging grounds of civil society action. In what follows, we flesh out this perspective and offer a brief overview of the chapters included in this book.

The Book's Structure

The authors of Part I of this volume, *(Re-)Thinking Civil Society*, reflect on the role of civil society in contemporary societies. Scholars have formulated a broad range of normative expectations towards civil society's role in democratization and deliberation, with sociologists and political scientists intensively discussing this relation both conceptually and empirically (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Diamond, 1994; Katz, 2006; Walzer, 1995; Warren, 2001). One often finds “the classical liberal, the representative democratic, and the participatory” visions of democratic governance are in contest (Fung, 2003, p. 517). “Contrasting positions highlight that different political theories call on particular kinds of actors within civil society to promote democracy—from individuals, to oppositional groups and social movements, to apolitical associations” (Hendriks, 2006, p. 490). This is accompanied by arguments that civil society's democratic functions are “contingent rather than necessary” (Warren, 2011, p. 378). Undemocratic and uncivil manifestations of civil society are debated (Bob, 2011; Chambers & Kopstein, 2001; Clarke, 2019) as well as possible contradictions between deliberative democracy and civic activism within civil society as a “site for deliberative politics” (Levine & Nierras, 2007; Young, 2001, p. 689), all the way to the suggestion that civil society is “a mere abstraction without substance” (Fine, 1997, pp. 7–28).

Heinz-Dieter Meyer (Chap. 2) contributes to this debate, reflecting on the dialectics of civil and uncivil society. Drawing on Tocqueville, he addresses fragilities and vulnerabilities of the civil society and its inherent risks of tipping towards a “gilded” or “bourgeois” society, tending towards despotism. Meyer suggests that we distinguish more carefully between the *structural and the normative face of civil society*,

noticing that the two do not necessarily vary together (a structurally robust third sector of the civil society may coexist with a normatively uncivil society). He concludes with a reflection on the possibility that civil society does not generate the kinds of normative constraints and forces needed to maintain it, and points to relevant parallel concerns in the thought of Tocqueville and contemporary theorists like Böckenförde.

Rupert Graf Strachwitz (Chap. 3) discusses the role of civil society as a change agent in contemporary societies, marked by a crisis of capitalism, democracy, and the nation state, as well as growing inequalities. He outlines potentials and limitations of civil society with regards to its possible role in societal development in a globalized world and examines ways by which the interplay between civil society, the state, and the market may be improved. He supports a value-based approach to civil society and emphasizes the necessity of normative principles when looking at civil society organization, as well as the relevance of trustworthiness of civil society organizations as a prerequisite for their functioning as agents for social change.

David J. Hess (Chap. 4) reflects on the relation between knowledge, technology, and civil society. He explores industrial transition movements in the field of energy as a contemporary form of civil society, and discusses subdivisions in this type of social movement. Hess explores the absence of knowledge as “undone science” in emerging technologies, with regard to research on privacy and health risks for the case of smart cities and smart meters. Regarding civil society’s connections with politics of knowledge, he outlines how civil society actors may identify areas of undone science, mobilize resources that allow for research in the identified fields, and enable democratic political processes.

The chapters in the second part of this volume, *Analyzing Civil Society Organizations*, contribute to the knowledge of specific forms of contemporary civil society organizations and offer different approaches to their analysis. Laura Suarsana (Chap. 5) focuses on the LandFrauen organization, a national association of local clubs and associations in Germany. She analyzes the local diversity of civic practices and examines their role in social innovation. Empirically, she illustrates that the LandFrauen make social, cultural and educational offers to address local women’s needs in locally specific ways and that they often stimulate social change in the rural areas of Germany. She discusses how the LandFrauen activities are organizationally enabled within vertical and horizontal associational structures and how they are able to adapt to local needs and to initiate social change by interconnecting with the local contexts in which they operate. The deep integration of a large and diverse base of members in rural society empowers the LandFrauen to enact functions as local initiators, catalysts, and multipliers in regional development.

Angela M. Eikenberry (Chap. 6) presents empirically based insights on giving circles as an individualized and informal form of collaborative philanthropic giving and on their influence on their members’ civic and political participation. She discusses the role of this emergent form of voluntary associations as schools or pools of democracy, as promoters of civic and political participation, and she discusses how voluntary associations enable their members to develop their skills.

Johannes Glückler and Jakob Hoffmann (Chap. 7) explore the workings of time banks as a new organizational form of exchanging voluntary services within local communities. Whereas researchers of time banks have often focused on their normative aspects and design principles to strengthen democracy or to facilitate co-creation and reciprocity, the authors observe a lack of knowledge about the processes, mechanisms, and dynamics through which the civic practices as well as the organizational form of time banks actually evolve and operate. Previous researchers have observed an empirical puzzle: Why are time banks so often volatile and short-lived organizations? Based on a detailed case study of a time bank in Southern Germany over a period of 11 years, Glückler and Hoffmann illustrate how using dynamic social network analysis helps convey an understanding of the dynamics of organizational life through the lens of the structure and trajectory of individual practices in a time bank.

In Part III of this book, *Spaces, Networks and Fields*, the contributors adopt perspectives on civil society with which they challenge common sector-based conceptualizations of civil society or the third sector (Salamon & Anheier, 1992) as lying between market and state. This perspective has been challenged through empirical observations and conceptualizations that integrate overlaps and hybridization (Anheier & Krlev, 2014; Evers, 2020; Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005; Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014), as well as theoretically through approaches such as neo-institutionalism and network perspectives, contributing to a broader understanding of civil society and extended the research field (Adloff, 2016; Brown & Ferris, 2007; Burt, 1983; Diani & McAdam, 2003; Diani & Pilati, 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Evers, 1995; Faulk, Lecy, & McGinnis, 2012; Galaskiewicz & Burt, 1991; Guo & Acar, 2005; Johnson, Honnold, & Stevens, 2010; Krashinsky, 1997; Marquis, Glynn, & Davis, 2007; Marshall & Staeheli, 2015, see also Chap. 8 by Diani, Ernstson, and Jasny).

Mario Diani, Henrik Ernstson, and Lorien Jasny (Chap. 8) propose an approach with which they integrate conceptualizations of civil society as a discursive and associational space, combining perspectives on both communicative practices and actors. They provide evidence of civil society as networks of issues and associations for the case of food-related issues in the three urban settings of Cape Town, Bristol, and Glasgow. Firstly, they analyze the structure of networks of issues within three civil society organizations in this field, to gain information on their agenda structures and on how they shape public discourse. Secondly, through empirical exploration of inter-organizational civic networks, they focus on the question if and to what extent the prioritization of food-related issues shapes the structure of alliances within civil society networks, and if this increases the probability of collaboration among two organizations.

Johannes Glückler and Laura Suarsana (Chap. 9) draw on the neo-institutional notion of organizational fields and propose the concept of the philanthropic field to conceptualize the geography of giving and the interrelations of benevolent activities across the domains of private, public, and civic sectors. Empirically, they adopt a multimethod approach including a media analysis of reported acts of giving in the German region of Heilbronn-Franconia and provide evidence on the geography of

giving in this region. Based on their analysis, they suggest that the philanthropic field is constituted by diverse actors from all sectors of society who engage in specialization, division of labor, and collaboration. Moreover, practices of giving spread across geographical scales, though the majority of activity concentrates on the local and regional level.

E. Fouksman (Chap. 10) addresses the formation of epistemic communities and the production of knowledge through discursive geographies and identities with two multi-sited case studies in development-focused civil society organizations in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan. She offers insights into how NGOs adapt and use the categories of local and expert knowledge to defend and promote ideas in order to gain both global authenticity and local authority. She demonstrates how these categories provide positions of power for the individuals which are mobile within development networks and within the organizations, and how knowledge and their positions are used to legitimize local project activities as well as to set agenda in global development discourse.

The authors of Part IV of this book, *Doing Civil Society*, provide insights into the practices and challenges of contemporary civil society, utilizing theoretical reflections, scientific analyses, and in-depth ethnographic fieldwork on civil society practices.

Kin-man Chan (Chap. 11) draws on his participant knowledge of the pro-democracy Umbrella movement in Hong Kong to discuss how social movements produce and disseminate alternative knowledge as counter-knowledge to dominant discourses. He analyzes the mobilization period from March 2013 to September 2014 and illustrates how the movement set and changed the public agenda. It mobilized public attention to the issue of constitutional reform through creative actions as well as its ability to provide “repertoires of knowledge practices” (della Porta & Pavan, 2017, p. 300) that allowed for “a common orientation for making claims and acting collectively to produce change” (see Chap. 11 by Chan, p. 237).

Jen Sandler (Chap. 12) offers an approach to broaden the conceptualization of civil society. She argues that civil society is organized and analyzed around silos along lines of organization type, topical focus, and scale, as well as along disciplines. She proposes an integrated perspective of civil society as a set of practices, and hereby focuses on “epistemic activism” projects as cross-field and silo-cutting efforts to produce knowledge and truth and “making it matter.” She draws on primary ethnographic fieldwork into civic project meetings of two types of organizations—a civic reform coalition and a social anti-displacement movement—to map epistemic and relational practices and trace the epistemic dimension of civic action.

In his reflection on the #FeesMustFall movement, Adam Habib (Chap. 13) contributes to the understanding of social movements and the lessons to be learnt regarding the effectiveness of protest and social mobilization for social justice. As the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in South Africa during the protests, he illustrates the process of violence increasingly becoming an accepted means within the movement, and interrogates the framing and outcomes of the struggle as well as the associated decision-making processes. He raises the importance of ethical conduct by leaders and activists, concluding that

social movements must internalize and adapt ethical goals and social justice for sustainable success in social change.

Finally, Heinz-Dieter Meyer (Chap. 14) addresses the question: can there be a civil society without an education that reliably instills norms of civility in the young? What would that education look like? In his chapter on “Civility, Education, and the Embodied Mind—Three Approaches” he argues for a rethinking of education that moves beyond rationalistic conceptions of “head over heart” to one in which head and heart, sentimental and cognitive capacities are in better balance.

Conclusion

This volume reflects the diversity of civil society-knowledge relations—which we have discussed as knowledge creation, interpretation, and dissemination—and the broad variety of knowledge-related civil society practices and organizations within their specific spatial and socio-economic contexts. The authors adopt different angles to reflect on the reframing, analyzing, and doing of civil society, with some offering new conceptualizations and research perspectives.

Beyond that, this book’s contributors reveal the reflexivity of this relation: Civil society plays essential roles in the creation of new knowledge, in the invention of innovative social practices, as well as in education and knowledge dissemination. Enactors of civic practices and civil society organizations generate and reinterpret existing knowledge and introduce it into societal debate or larger epistemic networks. At the same time, civil society is highly dependent on knowledge and information in order to perform its functions. Access to knowledge and information, civil society’s capability to gain access, acquire, and create knowledge, as well as to process and reinterpret it, are essential for civil society and civic action and to pursue their objectives.

Present developments that affect contemporary civil society open a perspective on new and perhaps unprecedented ambiguities, ranging from rising concerns about incivility, the emergence of new autocratic regimes, increased hurdles for democracy movements (such as in Hong Kong) and shrinking spaces for civil society (Alscher, Priller, Ratka, & Strachwitz, 2017; Anheier, Lang, & Toepler, 2019) to new opportunities through digitalization and new media and the emergence of civil society in unexpected spaces of fields, networks, and communities. There is, also, the still imponderable influence of the coronavirus on everyday life, organizational practice, and civic action: Will our coping with this unprecedented challenge stimulate or chasten and freeze civil society? With regard to what will follow next, we would be glad should this volume contribute to new perspectives and future research on civil society, knowledge, and space.

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