Capitalism and Civil Society Revisited or: Conceptualizing a Civil, Sustainable and Solidary Economy

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Abstract

After a brief reconstruction of the discourse on civil society, the notion that civil society and the economy are two separate spheres is criticized. Economies are not only embedded in civil society; they can also be organized according to civil society principles. This is discussed conceptually on the one hand, while on the other, the degrowth movement and cooperatives are used as examples to show what a civil, sustainable and solidary economy may look like. It will be shown that the concept of civil society is indispensable for the understanding of modern societies in general and also for economic processes. If one overcomes the sector-specific understanding of civil society and the identification of economy with profit-oriented capitalism on the basis of private property, a variety of connecting lines can be observed. Civic practices can also be identified in the economy and offer a reform approach that is largely overlooked and underestimated in social scientific and political debates. Many experiments on the entanglement of business and civil society are underway, and it is necessary to explore how these spaces can be created and expanded.

Keywords Civil society · Civic practices · Capitalism · Solidary economy · Cooperatives · Degrowth

Introduction

Western societies are currently faced with a constellation of crises whose exact contours and backgrounds we are only beginning to comprehend. In political science debates, the state of Western democracies is often referred to as “post-democratic” (Crouch 2007). The critical effects of these developments are being aggravated by stagnating rates of economic growth in Western countries, which go hand in hand

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with a significant increase in social inequality (cf. Piketty 2014) and the rise of populist movements. What is more, global political actors appear to be unable to agree on binding regulations for the reduction of economic resource use, and thus to counter climate change effectively.

The current constellation of crises can justifiably be summed up in the concept of a social and ecological “double crisis,” which can be traced back to the negative effects of prevailing capitalism. In capitalism, the economy must grow in order to keep profit-driven competition going, which in turn drives companies towards steady expansion (Barth and Reitz 2016). This type of economic activity is not sustainable because it is based on energy and ecological conditions that are not permanently available (Sommer 2016). More natural resources are consumed and destroyed than can be regenerated. Thus, on the one hand, contemporary capitalism produces social inequalities of unexpected proportions; on the other hand, it depletes natural resources. Modern capitalist society is too expansive, and it is necessary to create constraints of self-limitation.

However, there is no longer much confidence in the ability of nation states to deal with this double crisis—and yet, many critics of these developments are looking to governments for regulatory measures as solutions. In contrast, civil society all too easily disappears from view in such analyses, both as a critical voice in debates on the excesses of hyper-capitalism and as a place where alternative economic practices can be found. Consider, for instance, Colin Hay and Anthony Paynes’s *Civic Capitalism* (2015), which attempts to generate a political-scientific agenda for (re-)civilizing capitalism—but fails to take civil society actors into account (instead, the book focuses solely on the role of the state). In sharp contrast, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s approach (Hardt and Negri 2004) is characterized by state phobia. However, their reliance on the multitude’s self-empowerment within the context of civil society falls equally short of accounting for the complex interplay and antagonisms between the state, economy, and civil society—which is why it is all the more important to conceive of the concept of civil society in adequate terms and reintroduce it into contemporary social scientific debates.

After a brief reconstruction of the discourse on civil society, the notion that civil society and the economy are two separate spheres is criticized. Economies are not only embedded in civil society; they can also be organized according to civil society principles. This is discussed conceptually on the one hand, while on the other, the degrowth movement and cooperatives are used as examples to show what a civil and solidary economy may look like.

Civil Society: the History of the Concept

For twenty-five years now—after a long period of falling into oblivion—the concept of civil society has been discussed widely. Sociologists use it for empirical research, political theorists use the term in analytical and normative ways, and politicians and social movements employ it in a political-practical manner (cf. Edwards 2014). Such ambiguity makes the concept very difficult to handle, at the same time, it incites a strong fascination because science, values, and political ideals seem to coalesce in it.

Political actors and, less so, academics have revived the term “civil society” since the 1970s. It thus played a major role with Eastern European dissidents and human rights activists in their fight against communist regimes. Western intellectuals also began discussing the concept of civil society prior to 1989, often in connection with the emergence of new social movements: in France, Claude Lefort, Alain Touraine, Pierre Rosanvallon, and others engaged in post-Marxist debates; in Britain and the USA, the protagonists were Jean Cohen, Andrew Arato, and John Keane. Here, civil society was considered a model of radical-democratic

reform, an alternative to both state interventionism and hyper-capitalism. Moreover, the new social movements and civil society were believed to potentially trigger the self-regulation of society. In other words, while in the East and the South, the defeat of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes was at stake, in the West, people turned to civil society because they hoped for a democratization of democracy.

Civil society is usually defined as the plurality of public associations, organizations, and encounters that rest on the voluntary actions of persons. These associations go beyond intimate relationships (such as families) and are independent of the state and from interests in economic profit. Often, some civil standards of conduct, such as tolerance and non-violence, are also considered to be constitutive of civil society. At least a utopian element exists in many theories of civil society that envision self-government and true democracy (cf. Kocka 2006; Cohen and Arato 1992).

Civil society is a classical notion of European political philosophy. It traces back to Aristotle's concept of *politike koinonia* (Lat. *societas civilis*), which literally translates as civic association or civic community. Civil society is here synonymous with the ruling elites of the Athenian civic community (*polis*). This early definition differs significantly from the modern meaning of the concept, which is based on the separation of state and society, a distinction that only gained acceptance during the Enlightenment. Thus, the concept of civil society experienced its first genuinely modern theorizing with Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu, and then with Hegel and such Scottish Enlightenment thinkers as Smith and Ferguson.

The distinct contours of civil societies developed during the nineteenth century. Around 1800, civil society was not yet separated from the economy: Hegel, Smith, and Ferguson—as well as Marx some decades later—all considered the economy to be part of civil society. As a matter of fact, the relation between the two is complex, and the civil society–economy nexus remains a somewhat underexplored but notoriously controversial subject in historical and social scientific research. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1820/1991) and Scottish moral philosophers like Adam Smith (1776/1982) and Adam Ferguson (1767/1996) still adhered to a positive notion of the “civilizing” influence of markets as integral parts of civil society. John Keane (2003) reminds us of that tradition of thought when stressing that, when contained by civil society actors, markets may indeed evolve to include such civilizing effects. Already, however, Marx's criticism of the “bürgerliche Gesellschaft” questioned such a notion fundamentally. For Marx, civil society was pejoratively only a bourgeois society based on class antagonisms.

During the twentieth century, a dichotomy between the economy and civil societies mostly prevailed—be it in Gramsci (2011), Habermas (1998), or Putnam (2000). Despite all their differences, the approaches of Tocqueville (2000), Gramsci, Habermas, and Putnam all localize civil society in a certain sphere of action formed by clubs and associations. This definition still prevails in current debates over civil society, which is usually understood as constituting an independent sphere of society that can be distinguished from the family, the state, and the economy (cf. Adloff and Kocka 2016).

At the same time, there is an interaction-oriented and more normative definition of civil society that draws upon a republican perspective (in political theory) from which particular motives and modes of actions are preferable. Civility and public or civic spirit are deemed to be “virtuous” and serve as the nucleus of civil society (Shils 1997). Civility—as a mode of acting and thinking—forms a background consensus, an implicit agreement that dissent is possible and tolerable: “Civility is based on recognition of difference and diversity” (Hall 2013, p. 22). As a rather “cool” concept (citizens do not necessarily like each other), civility differs from the warmth of community and religious or national belonging.

As Edward Shils (1997) points out, in a liberal democratic society—which is at the same time a civil society—there is enough civility for “struggle” and special interest politics to be kept within certain limits through an orientation towards the common good. Thus, civility is for Shils—with negative reference to Carl Schmitt—the opposite of a splitting of society into friend and enemy (as in the Weimar Republic, in which many civil society organizations were fighting against each other; cf. Berman 1997). It is, as it were, the institutional, cognitive, and normative answer to pluralism and individualism, these unavoidable facts of modernity. Shils’s concept of civility is modeled on Montesquieu’s concept of republican virtues: For Montesquieu, the virtue of a republic is love for that republic; for Shils, the virtue of liberal democratic societies is their civility. That civility is not locally confined to specific spheres of action but is instead a matter of realizing political ideals that are directed towards public compromise and understanding, agree to non-violence, acknowledge plurality and differences, and are oriented towards the common good.

Particular institutional complexes are a necessary precondition for the existence of a well-developed and thriving civil society—for example, representative government, competing political parties, regular elections, a secret ballot, universal suffrage, an independent judiciary, a free press, the freedom of association, independent educational institutions, private property, and the freedom of contract (cf. Habermas 1989; Alexander 2006)—but these complexes are not sufficient conditions; there must also be public civility. Traced historically, civility goes back to the principle of religious freedom, which was established in the West. A form of Caesaropapism was never able to prevail here, and the necessity to accept religious pluralism increasingly became a positive value. Consider, for example, the Westphalian settlement of 1648 and later the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

The sector model of civil society, which has dominated research for some twenty years, has also been challenged, e.g., by Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014). For these authors, it no longer seems desirable to measure civil society as a space with (supposedly) clear-cut borders—for instance, by collecting data on volunteer work, the social capital of certain demographic groups, or public funding of clubs and associations. Once one goes beyond the sector model, the research focus will shift, and new forms of civic action will come into view. For example, there are civil practices in the private economy—and non-civil practices in some NGOs. The sector model equates the normative dignity of a civil action with the empirical realities of a not-for-profit sector and thus tends to portray civil society as the epitome of public spirit and public good. What is easily overlooked in this view is how the state, economy, and civil society interdepend, how each of these sectors is also informed by the logics of action of the other two. At best, the effects of a “colonialization” of civil society are noted, as when the increasing “monetization” of volunteer work or the “marketization” of the third sector is criticized (cf. Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012; Adloff and Kocka 2016; Shachar et al. 2018).

Also, most sector model-based research ignores economic activities by civil society organizations in the spirit of an *économie solidaire*, an alternative or third-sector economy. This has especially been the case in US research on the non-profit sector, which has explicitly excluded cooperatives and other social/solidary economy enterprises from its concept of civil society (cf. Salamon and Anheier 1997). French authors have traditionally been less interested in distinguishing for-profit from not-for-profit activities; instead, they have stressed the difference between the private and the collective, different democratic forms of making profits (cf. Laville 2010). Thus, it appears to be an empirical question as to whether a civil society sector can be distinguished from other spheres of action—and to what extent forms of civic action exist in all these spheres.

Civic Voice and Exit in the Economy

There are two ways civil society reacts to social problems in the spheres of economy and politics: opposition by public protest and the creation of self-organized alternative spaces. Both of these reactions have been crucial in transforming society in the past, and they remain effective. Loosely and heuristically adopting Albert O. Hirschman's conception of *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Hirschman 1970), one may thus distinguish between protest (voice) and a retreat from mainstream society with aspirations for self-reliance (exit) as basic forms of civil society reactions to social disaffection.¹ So far, most third-sector research focuses on the "loyal" part of civil society, investigating, for instance, social capital or volunteer engagement. In contrast, in what follows, I want to focus on civil society as an instrument of alleviating discontent by creating alternative socioeconomic spaces.

The belief that modern societies are functionally differentiated is pervasive in the social sciences: Societies are said to be constituted by different value spheres, each of which forms its own logic of behavior (cf., e.g., Luhmann 1977). In this view, economic actions in capitalist market economies are based on buying decisions that promise a profitable exchange, political actions on exercising power to come up with regulations that are binding for everyone, and civil society actions on principles of societal self-organization and voluntary association. This leads directly to the sector model of civil society, which focuses on clubs, organizations, and other forms of associations—and excludes other phenomena from examination.

The resulting notions of the economy are similarly simplistic and problematic: Economic theory regards it as solely motivated by individual and corporate desires for profit; sociologists consider it to be a self-referential functional system organized around the same ideal of profit making (Beckert 2006). However, the economy in a broader sense cannot be equated with capitalist market processes. It also depends on social processes of reproduction (i.e., unpaid domestic and educational work) as much as on processes of redistribution and reciprocity, especially when it comes to the allocation of commodities (Polanyi, 1944/2001; Laville and Salmon 2015; Adloff 2016). What is more, markets are by no means self-regulating, but require political regulation and must be embedded in civil society norms (cf. Kocka 2016). Finally, an economic venture is not necessarily the same as a business in the capitalist sense—think of cooperatives, communes, not-for-profits, and other forms of collectivist enterprises. As the debates on a "mixed economy" show—in which the welfare state, the economy proper, and (civil) society go hand in hand—new hybrid types of organizations continue to emerge (Evers 2005).

Therefore, we need another theoretical perspective on economic processes. For several years, we have been witnessing a renaissance of the thinking of Karl Polanyi and Marcel Mauss. Polanyi is considered to be the most important reference person when it comes to describing the processes of the economy's embeddedness and disembeddedness in society. This is not surprising—after all, Mauss's understanding of premodern social forms of gift giving is also significantly incorporated in Karl Polanyi's famous study, *The Great Transformation* (1944/2001). Polanyi points out that market economies are based on preconditions of embeddedness and that, traced historically, a purely market-based organization of the economy is a rare and very recent phenomenon. Before the nineteenth century, the economy was not yet

¹ In authoritarian regimes that do not permit public protests—e.g., Communist Eastern Europe, today's China—dissidents may additionally make use of an underground "shadow" strategy (Lagerkvist 2015).

socially “disembedded”—that is, a person’s economic activity as a rule was embedded in his social relations, while today, in contrast, social relations are embedded in the economy.

Polanyi is considered the founder of the substantivist school in economic anthropology. In his important essay, “The Economy as an Instituted Process,” he criticizes modern economics for its formal understanding of economic processes. For neoclassical economists, all economic decisions are traced back to means-end relations. Thus, homo economicus, as a utilitarian and individualistic atom, is set as a premise—even if hardly any markets or societies previously existed where there was no money in the modern sense. Economists generally assume that one can treat these societies *as if* individuals would have made decisions about buying and selling based on supply and demand. Polanyi departs from this view in his critique of, namely, the “substantive meanings of ‘economic’” (1957, p. 245). Hence, he targets the exact empirical circumstances under which an exchange with nature and other people is made. By this account, people’s economic activity is usually embedded in their social relations. In earlier societies, the exchange on markets played only a subordinate role. Polanyi instead refers to three principles that constituted the archaic and premodern economy: householding,² redistribution, and reciprocity. For Polanyi, reciprocity is a symmetrical form of exchange between peers (groups or individuals). Redistribution presupposes a principle of hierarchy and of centricity; goods are centrally pooled and then redistributed. The historically oldest principle, the household, consists of production for one’s own needs—the Greek principle of *oikonomia*. Polanyi’s thesis, then, is that until the end of feudalism, all societies known to us conducted business primarily based on householding, reciprocity, and redistribution, and that markets by contrast played only a subordinate role (mainly in long-distance trade).

Polanyi’s theses are still inspiring today, and they are regarded as important reference points for current economic sociological approaches (cf. Hann and Hart 2011). However, Polanyi draws too strong a contrast in the dichotomy between economies qua reciprocity and economies on the basis of exchange, market, and purchase. He underestimates the spread of markets in premodern societies. Recent contributions on the moral economy have also criticized Polanyi for the exaggerated contrast between embedded and autonomous markets. William James Booth (1994) considers it a mistake to assume a completely embedded economy in modernity. In the transition to modernity, the economy indeed loses its subordination to the humanizing aspects of society. But even if this transition (“The Great Transformation”) has undeniably occurred, it remains unclear what “disembeddedness” actually means; the economy is still culturally and normatively integrated into a variety of rules and regulations, merely in different ones. Thus, it must be emphasized that today’s neoliberal economies—despite their structural dominance—also exhibit an embeddedness in culture and society, but one that is qualitatively and quantitatively different from 200 years ago (cf. Fligstein and Dauter 2007; Fourcade and Healy 2007; Lainer-Vos 2013). A simple dichotomization does not help here.

A Civil, Sustainable and Solidary Economy

The question of how civil society can contribute to controlling neoliberal capitalism has become more urgent after the economic crisis of 2008. But this is not entirely new. History

² In *The Great Transformation*, householding still plays an important role; in later writings, this concept does not come up (cf. Gregory 2009). Householding is comparable to the principle of sharing.

might be instructive here: One thinks of nineteenth-century social reformers like Robert Owen or Ernst Abbe, who also owned factories and cared deeply for the well-being of their workers and the local communities. To such paternalism may be added philanthropy and patronage as other historical forms of middle-class civil society engagement (cf. Adloff 2015; Reich 2016). During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, civil society practices by businesses have grown in importance; more and more of them create their own charities or foundations to contribute to the public good. This line of tradition has been changing during the last few decades with the transition to manager and investor capitalism, as well as the transnationalization of corporations, often accompanied by processes of disembedding the economy (cf. Kocka 2016). The new catchphrases are “corporate citizenship” or “corporate social responsibility,” signaling the aspiration of companies to assume social responsibility in accordance with their business interests—that is, communicating the good deeds often appears to be the main point (cf. Banerjee 2008).

In quite another form, markets and civil society are entangled in genuinely democratic practices of participation and self-organization. Examples include the civil society activities of nineteenth-century unions and the early labor movement. Alternative economies integrate non-economic goals—e.g., enhancing social capital, building trust, and preventing alienation by reinforcing local attachments—and thus combine elements of capitalism, democracy, and civil society. This is true not least for cooperatives, which attempt to combine basic principles of capitalism with other coordination principles under market conditions (cf. Prinz 1996; Battilani and Schröter 2012).³ What matters in a cooperative is not so much making profits but the satisfaction of its members as well as principles like democracy and solidarity. These principles of the cooperative, which were genuinely skeptical of and averse to power and authority, were never seriously and extensively discussed in sociology. The concept of the cooperative has not been one of the basic sociological categories for a long time. Max Weber was significantly involved in these developments; he was only interested in forms of authority and believed that aspirations for the democratization of power to be futile or even ridiculous. His thinking revolves solely around phenomena of power attainment and preservation (cf. Hettlage 1981).

Under changed circumstances, this tradition has been continued since the early 1970s in what in Germany is known as the “alternative milieu” (Reichardt 2014). In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, alternative and more sustainable economic models were once again much discussed: the solidarity economy, the share economy, degrowth, commons, etc. (Laville 2010; D’Alisa et al. 2013). To this may be added digital economy initiatives like Wikipedia, Linux, or Creative Commons (Rifkin 2014), as well as local or regional experiments with alternative currencies often fostering a community spirit (Dodd 2014, Chapter 8).

Wikipedia, for example, is based solely on voluntary unpaid labor, provides access for all, and, in compliance with certain rules, enables everyone to contribute to the Wikipedia’s body of knowledge—a prime example of sharing in the sense of a non-agonistic gift to all (cf. Elder-Vass 2016). All of the alternative economic projects named here connect their approaches to non-economic purposes, including the creation of social capital and trust, non-alienation, local bonds, criticism of the commodity character of labor, rejection of hierarchy, ecological motives, and notions of fairness and justice. They link elements of capitalism, market,

³ The cooperative ideas are not only reactivated in the Global North; they also play an immensely important role in different countries of the Global South—currently, for example, in the transformation process in Cuba (cf. Walk 2015).

socialism, and civil society. They show in particular that under the global capitalist conditions, there are also a variety of non-capitalist ideals and practices of economic activity, but they are not taken seriously enough by either neoclassical economists or Marxist leftists—which seriously impedes the intellectual search for non-capitalist alternatives (cf. Gibson-Graham 2014). Elder-Vass emphasizes: “There is a powerful tendency on both left and right to think of the contemporary economy as thoroughly capitalist; this *does* obscure the existence of a vast range of non-capitalist practices in the contemporary economy, and that *does* discourage us from thinking of the development of such practices as a central plank of anti-capitalist politics” (2014, p. 266, emphasis in original). Not seeing that the economy is never completely identical with capitalist commodity economy ultimately undermines non-capitalist practices by rendering them publicly invisible, or even denying them.

Finally, critiques of capitalism, civil society forms of protest, and critical consumerism are also very much on the rise. Criticism of both a largely unchecked, globalized finance capitalism (and the transnational corporations that constitute it) and increasing social inequality plays an important social role nowadays (cf. Chomsky 1999; Soule 2009). The (world/regional) social forums or movements like No Logo, Occupy, Divestment, or Attac could be mentioned in this context (cf. Adloff and Kocka 2016). The critical consumerism movement moves on the margins of civil society because it is mainly focused on the private lifestyles of individuals (Lamla 2013); however, norms of global justice and ecological sustainability of course play a role here.

If one addresses Erik Olin Wright’s (2012) idealized distinction between economic power (control over the use of economic resources), state power (control over rulemaking and enforcing), and social power (capacity to mobilize people for cooperation), one sees that these new socioeconomic movements strongly emphasize social power, and thus the ability for social self-organization. They embody strong reform motives of empowerment, social economy, and associational democracy. They “seek to build new forms of social empowerment in capitalist society’s niches and margins” (Wright 2012, p. 20). This strategy builds on Proudhon’s “vision of building a cooperative alternative to capitalism within capitalism itself” (p. 20.). Wright stresses the contemporary relevance of this strategy: “The many experiments in the social economy today are also examples” (p. 20).

The non- or weak-capitalist interstitial approaches may play a major global role in the future, when one realizes that both the Global North and South are currently confronted with one major unsolved problem: It is intensively debated whether the Global North is heading for post-growth societies (Jackson 2009), whose contours and problems are only gradually being realized (dependency of labor, democracy, redistribution, social security systems, and self-realization from economic growth). Furthermore, the increasing consumption of non-renewable energies means that global warming is at hand. Worldwide, there are currently many social movements and local initiatives that urge for social experiments that combine civil society with economic activities without aiming at economic growth. A civic degrowth economy is underway in many experimental settings, which may point to the contours of a post-growth sustainable society. It is a search for alternatives to the growth ideology, which are expressed in concepts and practices of sharing, simplicity, commons, or care. What the practices and discourses on degrowth have in common is the search for alternative economic forms that manage without growth, as well as the attempt to break out of the social imaginary of rationalized and growth-driven modernity (cf. Kallis et al. 2015).

Conclusion

In summary, it should be noted that the concept of civil society is indispensable for the understanding of modern societies in general and also for economic processes. In such a constellation, what is needed is an open conception of civil society, one that is aware of today's pluralism of civic practices. If one overcomes the sector-specific understanding of civil society and the identification of the economy with profit-oriented capitalism on the basis of private property, a variety of connecting lines can be observed. Civic practices can also be identified in the economy and offer a reform approach that is largely overlooked and underestimated in social scientific and political debates.

Collective self-organization and self-empowerment—if we accept that this is what civil society boils down to—know many ways and forms of expression. Only if we acknowledge this can a sociology of civil society contribute to making real utopias, as well as to making visible and realizable these hitherto overlooked forms of community and alternative socio-economic approaches (Wright 2012; Adloff and Leggewie 2014; Adloff 2018). Many experiments on the entanglement of business and civil society are underway, and it is necessary to explore how these spaces can be created and expanded. For at least today, we cannot yet imagine that a pluralistic and heterogeneous civil society alone can produce and stabilize a post-capitalist, inclusive, and democratic alternative. But only social experiments can test out how the governing principles of state power and market and civic association can relate productively to each other in the future. These issues cannot always be addressed by means of the established “value-neutral” methods of social science; they are subject to the social and political struggle over the setting of topics and the predominance of definition. In this entanglement of a political term and a social science concept lies the attraction—as much as the difficulty—of the concept of civil society.

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