Foreword

This book aims to conceptualize the importance of civil society and citizenship in building a sustainable and participatory democracy. Civil society is defined in the book as a mediating space between the public and private spheres and a place where citizens or social groups are free to form organizations and networks to promote common interests. These organizations represent a diversity of values and attitudes. Some are open and inclusive, others are divisive, and still others are closed and exclusive. Under what circumstances might citizens’ civil actions and networks, on the one hand, lead to trust and cooperation around shared concerns and norms, and on the other hand, create conflict, mistrust and competition among citizens as well as organizations? This is the core question in the book. Therefore, it is important to clarify who these civic networks serve and who they might exclude.

My position in the book is normative, arguing for social justice and civility, and the arguments are based on empirical evidence concerning participation, values, trust and organizational affiliation among citizens in late-modern Europe and elsewhere. In claiming that I hold a normative position, I am aiming for an active, liberating, equitable and participatory society. The book lays out a series of ideas for democratic involvement and emancipation through civil society organizations, as well as societal organizations in general. These are ideas to be followed if the society is to provide all of its citizens with equal opportunities to be involved in planning, decision-making processes and implementation of decisions about the future development of society at local, regional, national and global levels.

In differentiated societies such as late-modern ones, it will often be the case that civic organizations represent specific points of view and pursue interests that are contrary to, or even incompatible with, the common good. This propensity makes the institutions of the welfare state a necessity for the cohesion of the society. The welfare institutions are assumed to promote the common good, and in doing this, uphold the principles of equal representation and acknowledge diversity. As we know from countless studies, this is not always the case. In maintaining social justice and equal participation, it is therefore necessary to find a balance between the special interests of civic organizations and the role of the state institutions as guarantors of the common good. How do we create a balanced mixture of state institutions pursuing universal norms, and civic institutions creating social networks for cooperation, among citizens
pursuing particular and narrow interests? Through their membership of civil organizations citizens defend their special interests, while through their citizenship they aim for civic virtues and defend the public interest in general: ‘the common good’. During the recent decade this conflict has intensified in countries with growing inequality in socio-economic living conditions.

An open democratic process is a prerequisite for political decision-making that is accountable and legitimate, but it is equally important that organizations in the political sphere are themselves democratic and participatory, and represent the views of all citizens affected by the policy concerned. Where that is the case, forums for dialogue and communication channels need to be set up so that citizens and their organizations always have the opportunity to question the way that social and economic mechanisms function and the institutions operate, and to whom they apply. Real political representation is thus predicated on an active, participatory citizenship and on all members of society being included in social networks and having the opportunity to participate on equal terms in the political governance of society’s organizations.

The book ends with a discussion of the conditions for a participatory democratic system where all citizens are involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation of crucial decisions about the development of the society on equal conditions. In discussing these conditions, I will also formulate some of the essential criteria for equal opportunities and democratic representation of all social groups in the late-modern society. Evaluating the different models of governance and the importance of activist citizenship and civil society organizations for civic participation, civility and emancipation is the major task in this context. We need to clarify the relationship between being activist citizens, empowerment and social protection; and to clarify the future role of the public sphere of civil society. How can the individual citizens and civil institutions influence public policies, political outcomes and political practices in different institutional settings?

Writing a book is the result of many professional dialogues and confrontations. This is also the case with this book. My interest in civil society and citizenship is now more than 20 years old and has resulted in a number of different projects. The most important project has probably been the large European Union (EU) project, EU-FP6 Network of Excellence ‘Civil Society and New Forms of Governance in Europe – the Making of European Citizenship’ (CINEFOGO), where I was the international coordinator and which included 42 European research institutions and universities from 15 EU Member States. This project ran for the period 2005–2009 and was carried out at the same time as I was involved in a population survey of volunteering and non-governmental organization (NGO) activities in Denmark, 2004–2006. Later, another study of volunteering in Denmark in 2012–2013 followed, where I, together with colleagues from Denmark and the other Nordic
countries, carried out a number of comparisons of civil society activities and volunteering in the Nordic countries. During the years 2013–2017 I was head of the research programme ‘The Socio-Economic Impact of the Organized Civil Society and Volunteering in Denmark anno 2014–16’, financed by the Realdania Foundation.

Based on the results from these projects, I wrote a book, Civil Society, Citizenship and Participation, published in 2017, in Danish. In the present book I have developed my position laid out in the Danish book, introduced a more participatory approach, and made an attempt theoretically to address the societal conditions for civil society and citizenship in late-modern liberal democracies. How do we ensure equal conditions and social inclusion for all citizens in liberal democracies? It will only be possible through civility, solidarity, dialogue, mutual recognition, and empowerment in civil actions and social relations including all citizens.

Drafts of the present book’s chapters have been discussed and criticized in a number of academic contexts, primarily in the two research groups in which I participate at my university, Roskilde University. These groups are ‘Global Political Sociology’ and ‘Social Dynamics and Social Change’. Many thanks to my colleagues in these two groups for constructive discussions of the book’s chapters. An early version of Chapter 4 is published in an anthology edited by Bjarne Ibsen (Boje 2021). Many thanks to Bjarne Ibsen and anonymous reviewers for critical comments, which have taken me further in the work on this chapter. Chapter 5 is a heavily revised version of a chapter that has been published in a Danish publication on the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (Boje 2019). I would in this context like to thank Lars Josephsen and Steen Hildebrandt for giving me the opportunity to develop my view on the global civil society.

Like other non-English speakers, I have needed proficient language revision. Thanks to Tam McTurk and Grace Fairley for their great work in reviewing my English. The book is published by Edward Elgar Publishing, the staff of which have followed my work patiently and generously believed in the project. Thanks to Catherine Elgar and Saffron Watts for their support. I also want to thank my wife Marion Thorning for support, patience, and challenging remarks and questions during our many conversations about the book around the table – therefore, the book is dedicated to her.