Introduction to *Civility and Participatory Democracy*

Why is there so much focus now on civil society and citizenship in relation to participation and inclusion in late-modern society? Firstly, the civil society organizations have been – and still are – crucial in guaranteeing the economic, social and political rights of the individual. Only by constantly making demands for social justice and fighting for the rights to which citizens are entitled, is it possible for people to ensure and safeguard their own and others’ security. Secondly, citizenship and the rights and duties associated with it are fundamental to social cohesion and democratic participation.

Nation-states differentiate between citizens with all, limited or no rights in relation to citizenship. It is in this context that the many and diverse organizations in the civil sphere can play a central role. They have the potential to help ensure that the democratic decision-making process involves all social groups, including vulnerable ones, in both the development and the implementation of decisions on welfare policies. Neither market nor state institutions, as these two spheres are currently constituted, can do this; but it should be possible to develop democratic and inclusive organizations at the interfaces between civil society and other spheres of society. The core of the interrelationship between state and civil society is, then, the degree of democratic control and collective engagement within individual organizations, whether public or private. In this respect, it is plausible to talk about state institutions operating on civil society’s terms provided that citizens are in charge of the decision-making, and the structures are democratic, built from the bottom up, and involve the target groups for the institutions’ work.

To introduce this type of democratic participation, it is crucial that new institutional forms of involvement and decision-making processes are developed by civil society organizations as well as public and private institutions. Initiatives designed to facilitate this development, firstly, must have the potential to counteract the social and cultural differentiation that invariably arises between social groups in civil society. Secondly, these initiatives must ensure a more equitable distribution of economic and social resources than is the case in the current representative system. Thirdly, they must make it possible to stem the marginalization triggered by processes of segregation in the labour
market, and which existing welfare programmes are unable to prevent, and indeed often exacerbate.

Civil society organizations can resist these processes, both as mediators of people’s wishes and demands concerning welfare policy, and by demanding the inclusion of disadvantaged, less powerful groups and individuals in the social sphere and ensuring that they have a political voice through the act of citizenship. In this way, the organizations can represent collective responsibility and act as a counter to the dominant individualism of the age. However, this is only possible if civil society organizations include, and thus represent, all of the different groups of citizens, and just not the best-integrated and politically articulated. To make this possible, the organizations and society as a whole must adhere to the principle of equal participation. In a range of key areas, this requires that the welfare state guarantees a more equitable distribution of resources, and also that forms of social and political participation are created that are liberating, and to which there is equal access for all members of society. If equal participation proves impossible, organizations in the civil sphere will resemble the hierarchical and bureaucratic welfare state institutions, and this will detract from their legitimacy as representatives of the people in the democratic decision-making processes.

In the same way, since equal participation in democratic decision-making processes is essential for emancipation and collective responsibility, the autonomy of the organizations plays an important role. In this context, autonomy is understood as independence from both the institutional control of the welfare state and the economic rationale of the capitalist market. The growth of bottom-up, grassroots civil institutions all over Europe in the last decade is a clear indication that large groups of people wish, on the one hand, to demonstrate their independence from public institutions, and on the other, to be involved in – and in the best case achieve control over – the implementation of government policies. A significant number of today’s civic institutions are markedly different from traditional civil society in terms of the nature of the participation, the formal nature of the organizations and, in particular, the way decisions are made within them.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book revolves around three key concepts – civil society, citizenship and activism – which are presented in Chapter 1, ‘Civil society, citizenship and activism: conditions for real democracy’. The first concept is civil society, or more broadly speaking, organizations and social networks in the civic part of the public sphere. What role do the civil society organizations have in promoting civility, dialogue and deliberative democracy? The second concept is citizenship as practiced qua people’s rights and duties in relation to other
citizens, the local community and society as a whole. Under what conditions do citizenship – rights and duties – determine who is in and who is out of the social, political and cultural community? The third concept is activism, or participation in different forms of democratic decision-making processes related to the community and its institutions. What determines the conditions for the different forms of participation? How are equal conditions for citizens’ participation to be ensured? The book combines theoretical reflections and empirical evidence on the role of civil society organizations and citizenship in providing social cohesion and sustainable participatory democracy. Here it is important to clarify the conditions under which networks and organizations in the public sphere of civil society are able to balance the contradictory publics; in other words, to mediate between exclusionary and inclusionary discourses. Without a responsive and inclusive civil society, we have experienced that counterpublics are vulnerable to authoritarianism or populism and are at risk of excluding groups of citizens from the dominant public discourses.

The social conditions for being ‘good citizens’ are elaborated and discussed in detail in Chapter 2, ‘Civility, social justice and active participation’. Solidarity, trust in others and a sense of security depend, on the one hand, on a society’s ability to include people by providing opportunities for everyone to play an active role in all types of societal institutions. Inclusion of different social groups in society, which transcends social, ethnic and gender differences, relies on institutions and organizations acknowledging all citizens and treating them all equally, which means that they establish and maintain tolerance and civility. On the other hand, it is equally essential that ordinary people, in their daily lives, display tolerance and good citizenship by adapting their personal interests, by being helpful, seeking compromise and being open to others. In other words, civility – at both individual and institutional level – is a basic principle for an open and democratic society where all citizens are able to participate in the public conversation on equal terms.

As a key element of social, political and cultural public life, civil society is essential to the cohesion of society as a whole and to how secure citizens feel in their day-to-day lives. Chapter 3, ‘Civil society on the political agenda: the conditions for the collective’, discusses the different approaches to conceptualizing civil society and its role in the late-modern society. On the one hand, civil society represents organizations and associations that institutionalize key interests and discourses in the public sphere. They are independent of other societal spheres – the state, the market and the private sphere – but also interrelated to these spheres in a number of areas. On the other hand, civil society also includes more informal, non-organizational forms of social, political and cultural activities, insofar as they take place in the public sphere. Thus, civil society encompasses formal organizations as well as a whole range of non-organizational activities that take place in public spaces through actions,
demonstrations, social networks and similar activities. As things stand, it is fair
to say that civil society has contradictory or even negative characteristics. In
a range of contexts, civil society is a conflict-ridden part of the public sphere,
in which different social groups, formed around class, ethnicity, gender and
locality, contest the political agenda. Solidarity in civil society organizations is
often narrow and limited to small social groups, which exclude or restrict the
influence of other groups. Civil society encompasses both freedom discourses
and repression discourses at the same time.

Until the mid-1980s, civil society’s mediating role between the market and
the welfare state was of little importance, and the understanding of society that
prevailed was founded mainly on the relationship between state and market.
This has clearly changed. During recent decades, there have been political
efforts in all European societies to privatize public activities based on the
assumption that institutions within civil society can be revitalized and can take
over responsibility from the welfare state for providing social services and pro-
tecting vulnerable social groups. The importance of civil society organizations
in provision of welfare and their position in the welfare system is discussed in
Chapter 4, ‘From public to civic social services’.

It has in this context been argued that the future welfare societies will rely
more on the involvement of the family and social networks in caring for chil-
dren and the elderly, and on local community networks in providing welfare
services for the poor and most needy social groups. In this respect the civil
society and its organizations will become an important agent. Since the early
1980s, there has been an intensified discussion concerning the financing and
provision of welfare, and several different models have been introduced in the
debate on the ‘mixed economy of welfare’ giving civil society a bigger role in
provision of welfare.

When we refer to the organized civil society as an intermediate public space
between the state and the individuals and their families, it concerns not only its
role as provider of social services. Civil society also has an important role in
empowering citizens and facilitating democracy. More recently, scholars have
pointed out a number of critical issues concerning the involvement of civil
society in governance arrangements and decision-making processes. In short,
scholars have started to see the involvement of civil society in the democratic
processes as problematic, and to enquire about the conditions under which the
new forms of governance enhance democracy and are able to empower citi-
zens. Are civil society groups capable of adequately representing the character,
scale and spatial expressions of diversity, and the ways in which this is related
to inequality and social inclusion?

The perception of civil society has increasingly become global; a develop-
ment that is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, ‘Global civil society and
civic participation’. However, when we talk about civil society in a global
context, there are two important reservations. Firstly, the idea of civil society comes from an American–European tradition anchored in an individualistic and liberal approach, while civil society in the South is associated with specific religious and ethnic societies. Secondly, global civil society is not, like national society, anchored in citizen groups and a democratic structure based on a membership democracy. Most international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are typically governed through a highly hierarchical structure with a professional staff, and are scarcely democratic in their decision-making processes.

Citizenship is an active and inclusive concept that confers economic, social and political rights, and in principle enables individuals to become full members of a society to which they feel a sense of belonging. In Chapter 6, ‘Citizenship and civil society: rights, duties and belonging’, I discuss and elaborate this understanding of citizenship based on two absolute central dimensions: active participation in democratic decision-making at all levels, and equal access for all to the resources available in the welfare society. In discussing the act of citizenship I distinguish between different forms. Ordinary everyday citizenship is practiced through the daily routines. The individual citizen is thus ‘active’ in a wide range of contexts that identify the citizen in relation to the local community and the society as a whole. Active citizenship concerns activities and forms of participation that take place within the regulatory frame of society. You can say that an active citizen is a person who votes in elections, actively participates in public life, and so on. Activist citizenship challenges the traditional interpretation of citizenship rights and duties. The activist citizen, in contrast to the active citizen, is involved in reformulating the economic, social and political conditions for social and civic action. An additional and different type of citizenship is inclusive citizenship, which means that groups who are marginalised – ethnically, socially or because of gender – are included in society as ordinary citizens with all the existing social, political and cultural rights and obligations.

Citizenship provides individuals, irrespective of their social and economic background, with membership of a collective, access to social networks and shared values, all of which make it possible to practice citizenship in a late-modern welfare society. Citizenship is practiced through civil society organizations where people put forward their views and set limits on the powers of the state bureaucracy, conduct dialogue with each other, and form social groups to defend and promote particular ideas and aspirations.

Citizenship has become a battlefield in societies: a regulatory medium for sorting people based on their nationality and cultural background. Simultaneously it is a political pledge with hopes of inclusion, social belonging and democratic empowerment. When we discuss the potential impact of citizenship, it is important to remember the ‘Janus face’ of citizenship. On the
one hand, it disciplines citizens through the regulation of citizenship rights – activation programmes, control of citizens receiving welfare benefits, enforcing social norms, and so on – and on the other hand, it emancipates citizens by enabling them to enact citizenship rights by way of social protests, advocacy and political actions. Citizens who have control over their lives and have a say in relation to their daily lives will have more confidence in the system’s institutions and be more committed in relation to social activities, labour, and so on.

For the time being we register a polarized process of democratization taking place at a global level. A process that is intensified because the political or ideological differences in the society are sharpened. A variety of these conflictual aspects which have an impact on both civil society and citizenship are discussed in the two last chapters of the book. In Chapter 7, ‘Civil society, civic action and populism’, the growing scepticism toward the representative democracy and the increased popularity of populist movements are discussed, and the role of civil society in counteracting these tendencies is analysed.

Popular resentment against the traditional political parties, politicians and representative institutions has increased significantly. Political parties have been losing members for considerable time, and grassroots movements have been set up instead. Populist movements have gained strong support and become an important political force. In some countries they are the governing party. The populist movements either completely reject representative democracy, or challenge the legitimacy of the existing political institutions. Strong empirical evidence indicates a close relationship between declining confidence in democracy and the rise of anti-system populist parties. The populist leaders and the supporting citizens use the polarization consciously and deliberately in order to activate and reframe social divisions among people, thus mobilizing supporters in order to weaken opponents and demolish the democratic representative political system.

In the final Chapter 8, ‘Participation and democracy: the role of activism’, the growing polarization and the different responses from political movements and groups of citizens around the world are discussed. Two radically different developments in the political landscape can be registered. The first is that the enthusiasm and legitimacy of the liberal democracy has fallen in the ‘old’ Western democratic countries. This development has had considerable influence on the political climate. It has led to increasing support for authoritarian politicians, and tightening of civil and political rights. A significant number of developed democracies have thus been downgraded on various indexes for democracy on core dimensions such as civil rights and rights to political freedom. The second development is that, at the same time, we have seen a strong rise in resistance and protests against the demolishing of civil rights and the autocratization of the political system that has happened throughout the world in both old and new liberal democracies.
Satisfaction with democracy has declined, as has the proportion of citizens who are confident about the existing democracy. How can emancipation serve the democratization of the political system and make it more accessible? In the struggles over political discourse, the principle of ‘parity of participation’ on equal terms – economically, politically and socially – is essential to ensure equal conditions for all citizens. In this context, ‘participatory democracy’ is an important concept. In promoting deliberative democracy, the role of civil society organizations is to bring disaffected citizens back in touch with politics; but this is only the case if the citizens participate directly in governing these organizations. Seen from this perspective, there is a need for an institutional framework that ensures a more active involvement of citizens, enabling them to control the political and social organizations of importance for their social protection on local, national and transnational levels. Much of the resentment towards the democratic institutions concerns precisely this: that the governance of the societal institutions does not connect with or involve ordinary citizens.