

EDITORS' PREFACE

Is there a "European civil society" which cuts across national borders and spreads, though unevenly, through the continent? Does it help to form a European identity from below? Can it be seen as an answer to the obvious democratic deficit of the European Union?

For two and a half years, more than forty political scientists, sociologists, historians, and other scholars from fifteen research institutions in ten different countries have worked together on the project "Towards a European Civil Society." They were supported within the 5th Framework Programme of the EU. The network was coordinated by the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB). The results of the project are published in the five to six volumes of this series, which include studies by other authors as well.

"Civil society" means many things—the concept varies and oscillates. To give a working definition: civil society refers to (a) the community of associations, initiatives, movements, and networks in a social space related to but distinguished from government, business, and the private sphere; (b) a type of social action that takes place in the public sphere and is characterized by nonviolence, discourse, self-organization, recognition of plurality, orientation towards general goals, and civility; (c) a project with socially and geographically limited origins and universalistic claims, which changes while it tends to expand, socially and geographically.

Civil society is a deeply historical concept. For a quarter of a century, it has experienced a remarkable career, in several languages. Having a long tradition of many centuries, it had nearly disappeared during most of the twentieth century before being rediscovered and reinforced in the 1970s and 1980s, when the concept became attractive again in the fight against dictatorship, particularly against communist rule in East Central Europe. But in non-dictatorial parts of the world, the term and its promise responded to widely spread needs as well. Western Europe can be taken as an example.

Civil society as a political concept of our time has come to formulate a critique of a broad variety of problems in contemporary society. To name three tendencies: First, the concept emphasizes social self-

organization as well as individual responsibilities, reflecting the widespread skepticism towards being spoon-fed by the state. Second, civil society, as demonstrated by the phrase's use by present-day antiglobalization movements, promises an alternative to the unbridled capitalism that has been developing so victoriously across the world. The term thus reflects a new kind of capitalism critique, since the logic of civil society, as determined by public discourse, conflict, and agreement, promises solutions different from those of the logic of the market, which is based on competition, exchange, and the maximization of individual benefits. Third, civic involvement and efforts to achieve common goals are specific to civil society, no matter how differently the goals may be defined. In the highly individualized and partly fragmented societies of the present time, civil society promises an answer to the pressing question of what holds our societies together at all.

On the basis of broad empirical evidence, the project has analyzed a large number of core problems of civil society, among them the complicated relation between markets and civil society, the impact of a European civil society on a European polity and vice versa, and the importance of family and household for the ups and downs of civil society. The project has dealt with resources, dynamics, and actors of civil society. It has dealt with questions of gender and other forms of inequality. It has compared developments in different European regions. It has begun to open up the perspective towards the non-European conditions, consequences, and correlates of European civil society. It has reconstructed the language of civil society, including different semantic strategies in the context of tradition, ideology, and power, which explain the multiple uses of the concept for different practical purposes. These are some of the topics dealt with in the volumes of this series. The authors combine a long historical perspective with broad and systematic comparison.

What does it mean to speak of a "European" civil society? It implies a certain common European development, a parallel or even convergent trend towards the emergence of civil society in Europe. Such a development may be based on the activities of civil society groups. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, civil society circles, associations, networks, and institutions largely evolved in local, regional, and national frameworks. However, transnational variants, which might contribute to the emergence of transnational coherence and similarities, remained secondary. It is in the second half of the twentieth century that the quality of the process changed. In this phase, the development of civil society in Europe increasingly assumed transnational, "European," and sometimes global dimensions. This is a basic hypothesis of research in this series of studies. "European Civil Society" will concentrate on transnational dimensions of civil society in Europe, by comparing and by reconstructing interrelations.

The evolution of a European civil society in the process of transnationalization is based on actors as well as on mobile concepts. The ideas and practices of civil society have evolved in a very uneven way, starting to emerge mainly in Western Europe, where it was initially restricted to a few proponents and to specific circles. In the course of its development, civil society spread to other parts of Europe (and into other parts of the world) and gained support within broader social spheres. As they expanded into widening social and spatial environments, the ideas and realities of civil society changed. Thus, the potential of an approach is explored which takes civil society as a geographically and socially mobile phenomenon with a good deal of traveling potential and with the propensity to become a European-wide concept.

"European Civil Society" focuses on Europe in a broad, not merely geographical sense. This includes comparing European developments with developments in other parts of the world, as well as analyzing processes of mutual transfer and entanglement. Europe in this sense transcends the institutional and spatial realm of the European Union. Yet, studying the emergence and dynamics, the perspectives and problems of civil society in Europe may produce insights into the historical process of European integration, which is underway, but far from complete, and presently in crisis.

"European Civil Society" is a common endeavor of European and non-European scholars. It centers on a topic that is the object of both scientific analysis and political efforts. The political success cannot be taken for granted. Scientific analysis, however, may help to work out the conditions under which the utopia of civil society in Europe has a chance of realization.

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