Civil Society Organizations: Democratic Alternatives in action?

From Tocqueville onwards, Civil Society (CS) has been celebrated as an important site for democratic renewal (Lash & Urry, 1994), encouraging participation and critical thought (Flyvbjerg, 1988; Habermas, 1989) and enabling individuals and groups to hold the State to account (Newman, 2001). In particular Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are often claimed to be ‘Schools of Democracy’ (Dodge & Ospina, 2016), exemplars of more progressive and participatory civil society. They serve community interests through providing services, provide a representative function outside of the state (Edwards & Foley, 2001), create social bonding (Putnam, 2000), and formulating more interconnected forms of society (Rochester, 2013) by building citizenship. As Alexander, Nank, & Stivers argue, through engaging with CSOs “citizens learn citizenship partly through public-spirited activity and partly through bringing their experiences to bear on the consideration of public questions in open debate” (1999, p. 454). Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can thus strengthen democracy, by “empowering both providers and users so that they can work effectively in partnership to achieve shared goals” (Stoker, 1999, p. 3). It is thus argued CSOs should be intrinsically democratic by “pursuing a mission that is not state sponsored or driven by private gain but is furthering the public good” (Singleton, 2014, p. 6).

However, increasingly this image is being questioned by critical scholars who argue that the context in which CSOs operate and the way many are run undermines their capacity for democratic renewal (Milbourne, 2013). The market based discourse, particularly for organizations providing services, is threatening the values of democracy (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004), their governing structures privilege accountability towards external bodies (such as funders) rather than internal groups, such as users and staff (Coule, 2015) and are required to “demonstrate cost-effective and professional management” (Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2010, p. 102). However these pressures towards managerialism might play out rather differently for advocacy and campaigning groups who can be less beholden to the demands of funders. Consequently service orientated CSOs, such as social services providers, are shaped to become more business-like and managerial (Carnochan, Samples, Myers, & Austin, 2014; Coule & Bennett, 2016; Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016; Sanders & McClellan, 2014), as they are shaped by the organizing practices, often imported from the private sector, which is making them more business-like (King, 2016; King & Learmonth, 2015) whereas advocacy organizations or those that do community organizing, might work with foundations who understand the complexities of social change work. CSOs might seem to be little more than another neo-liberal, market-driven ‘instrument’ of welfare provision, conforming to the ideal categorical type – a professional and enterprising entity. The capacity for democratic forms of organizing therefore is diminished.

In this stream we want to take up these issues and from a critical (and affirmative) (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009) perspective, examine the possibilities of CSOs as sites of democracy and participation (Land & King, 2014), which offer democratic forms of organizing can offer an counter-discourse (Eikenberry, 2009) on which alternative forms of conceptualising CSOs and new forms of practice are rethought. We invite contributions that offer ideas on ways of advancing democratic and participatory organizational forms (Kokkinidis, 2015; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014; Sutherland, Land, & Böhm, 2014), processes and practices or even more radical ways of (re)frame CSOs. We therefore encourage, but do not restrict contributions addressing the following:
1. What are the possible alternative models and practices of organizing away from business-like forms of organizing?
2. What is the role of the critical scholar in engaging with CSOs? Should critique be taken from a distance or are more direct forms of engagement possible and/or desirable?
3. What are the ways of reconceptualising Civil Society that might produce radical forms of change? Are there dangers that might underlie such radical forms?
4. How do the various funding environments that CSOs operate in shape their capacity for democratic organizing? Are the pressures towards professionalism operate differently in different contexts, i.e. countries, fields, or funding regimes? How does this shape their capacity to organize democratically?

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References


