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## Civil society



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**Civil society is a social sphere which lies beyond the state, but not outside the political sphere. These stakeholders exist in an intermediate public space between the state, the commercial sector and the private sphere. This article explains the background to the history of the idea and the current popularity of the term in the social sciences.**

## 1 Introduction

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The space of civil society must be distinguished in ideal terms from the spheres of the state and the market and the private sphere. Relying on the various traditional lines of the history of the term (cf. Schmidt 2007; Taylor 1993), ‘civil’ or ‘civic’ society means all of the public alliances, movements, initiatives and associations in which citizens voluntarily gather and can also exert influence on the formation of political opinion. Civil society is accordingly a social sphere beyond the state, but not outside the political sphere. Civil society associations occupy an intermediate public space between the state, the commercial sector and the private sphere and are in principle open to everyone. In addition to such organisations and associations, civil society also includes independent involvement (e.g. demonstrations, strikes, petitions or boycott measures, social movements) to the extent that they are also characterised by a voluntary, public or collaborative nature and transcend private interests. Yet civil society remains dependent on the protection of human and civil rights by the state and on a decentralisation of economic power. In terms of the logic that drives such action, the behavioural standards – such as tolerance, communication, willingness to compromise or non-violence – that motivate civil society are as essential as a focus on community spirit beyond purely private interests. The notion of coming and living together in a self-governed democracy may be considered a utopian element (for definitions, cf. Kocka 2003; Pollack 2003; Adloff 2005).

## 2 The traditional understanding of the term and the current understanding of civil society

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In the classic, ancient European notion, the home is the essential economic unit and the basis of social relations (cf. Göhler/Klein 1991). Civil society is the political, class-based, cooperative organisation of the community, which extends above and beyond the private sphere of the life of citizens at home; citizens are embedded in this form of rule. Civil society is not detached from the political form of rule, the state. Terms such as *civitas*, *societas civilis*, *res publica* all refer to the society of citizens; civil society is thus in a classic sense *societas civilis sive politica*. This model of society, which was formulated by Aristoteles, remained relevant far into the modern era despite all the changes in the structure of government. Only in the 17th and 18th century did the emancipation of the middle class lead to a structural upheaval. In this period, in which the private economic sphere was embedded in a class-based, stratified system, civil society as a form in which citizens organised themselves politically became the primary economic field of activity of citizenry in the process of becoming emancipated and confronting political state power. From the perspective of the citizenry, the development of comprehensive market relations was a decisive stimulus for the emergence of modern society. Society as a horizontal pattern of interaction vis-à-vis the centralised state power emerges if the economy evolves from the principle of self-supply based primarily on production within the home and a regional exchange of goods into a network of markets advanced and driven by the division of labour, manufacturing and factories.

Modern civil society is thus constituted by the principles of ownership, the market and capital. The economy takes on a key role in human interaction. In the wake of the dynamic impetus of the English Revolution in the 17th century and the US and French revolutions in the 18th century, civil society developed in the 19th century to such an extent that its organisational principles became real political and social determining factors in western and central Europe: the equality of all citizens before the law, constitutionally secured opportunities for political participation and for gaining social standing through professional performance. A hierarchy based on professional class or inherited privileges was replaced by a generally permeable social structure defined by property, position in the production process and educational level. Outdated corporative ties made way for individualism as the defining principle of social relations.

In civil society, the term 'citizen' has become ambiguous. Used initially in the sense of an *inhabitant of a city*, it has now come to mean a *national of a state (citoyen)* as a political generalisation, as well as citizens (burghers) as members of a separate social class which is distinct from the nobility, clergy or farmers on the basis of its property-owning, bourgeois quality. This quality was expressed in the culture and lifestyle of the bourgeoisie, but also in their social notions of order which formed part of a distinct identity. The bourgeois as a lifestyle, but also as a guiding, utopian notion of society as a community of free and equal people – the fundamental notion of liberalism – was a key feature of the bourgeoisie as a social formation, and primarily of the educated middle class and the class of business people with an affinity for culture and education. Despite the shedding of birth-based privileges and the emergence of a middle class, bourgeois identity, this society of citizens (burghers) was at the same time a class-based society. The citizen as a member of the bourgeoisie (economic burgher) was in an increasingly defensive position against the initially excluded but persistently surging lower classes, due to the former's economic interests in protecting property and uninhibited entrepreneurial freedom, as well as their perception of education and culture. Bourgeois civil society thus increasingly found itself in open contradiction with its own normative aspirations, which the liberal bourgeoisie of the 19th century was not able to resolve.

While the notion of bourgeois society in the tradition of Hegel and Marx long dominated the German debate, the more recent understanding of the term civil society, which emerged in the 1970s, distinguishes more precisely between the commercial sector, the state and civil society (cf. Cohen/Arato 1992; Habermas 1992; Klein 2001). In the Anglo-Saxon theoretical tradition which inspired this development, the notion of *civil society*, however, had always been understood in a different sense. Since continental Europe had historically been confronted with the tradition of a dominant state, the notion of a bourgeois, middle-class society had always been an attempt to make a distinction from the state and to find and establish its place in a very statist theoretical tradition. Since for historical reasons the Anglo-Saxon tradition lacked this notion of the state as a prominent theoretical point of reference, the concepts of *civil society* since Locke as well as Scottish moral philosophy sought to describe the civilising force of societal developments and of connections between stakeholders and to analyse their consequences for the economy and the state.

### 3 Civil society as an interpretative framework for social and political stakeholders

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So-called social movements play a special role in our current understanding of civil society. They seek normative reference points and the organisational and political interpretative framework of their own activities and their status as stakeholders, which they claim as a political status vis-à-vis the political parties and associations of the lobby system. The discourse in civil society in western democracies has turned into an interpretative framework for the political organisation of the new social movements and also – with a transnational accent – of NGOs (non-governmental organisations). The new feminist movement's slogan of 'the personal is political' led to an examination of the gender-specific division of labour, role models and inequalities and a questioning of the basic demarcation of the history of political ideas between the private sphere, civil society and the state. While in classic republicanism, the *oikos* or home was still held to be a generally accepted prerequisite for the civic virtues of a *polis* of men, in the conceptual debates within the new feminist movement the family became the prototype of an association of the civil society to be assessed based on criteria for demands for individual autonomy. What cannot be circumvented in the context of this discussion at least is the insight that the private sphere is subject to historically changeable boundaries of a political character.

The debate on transnational or international civil society is a further significant context of use for the current concept of civil society. The protagonists driving this debate are mostly from the field of social policy. NGOs and movements critical of globalisation rely on a concept of an international civil society and mostly see themselves as stakeholders within this international civil society. The starting point for this is the increasing impact – identified since 1989 in international policy research – of the 'world of society' in a political arena, where previously the 'world of the state' was able to act like a monopolist. Empirically, the influence of the stakeholders in civil society on political decision-making processes varies and is reflected conceptually in political science as the change from government to ▷ *Governance*. Current discourse thematises the shrinking space in which civil society can act (on 'shrinking spaces', see e.g. Heinrich Böll Foundation 2016: <https://www.boell.de/en/dossier-squeezed-spaces-civil-society>).

### 4 Civil society and democracy

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Concepts of civil or civic society are also at the core of more recent theoretical discussions on democracy (cf. Rödel/Frankenbergl/Dubiel 1989; Klein 2001) as well as of the debates on the social integration potential of modern societies (▷ *Social capital*; cf. Putnam 1993). In political sociology, analytical interfaces with the normative concept of civil society in the study of the broad spectrum of political actors, the 'third sector' of non-profit organisations (cf. Zimmer/Priller 2004), are becoming increasingly important (cf. Klein 2008). An analytical and empirical survey of actual civil societies is necessarily a project of an interdisciplinary nature. Political sociology studies the logic of action and organisational forms of civil society stakeholders, ranging from social clubs to citizen action groups and social movements to associations and parties (cf. Klein 2008), while governance research examines the changing structures of decision-making processes,

and network research scrutinises the interaction of stakeholders and jurisprudence which impacts the organisational requirements imposed by the state. Ultimately, concepts of civic and civil society also play a role in current political discussions: the contours of a ‘policy of engagement’ and of engagement policy areas are becoming apparent (cf. Enquete Commission 2002; Evers/Kortmann/Olk et al. 2003; Olk/Klein/Hartnuß 2009). In the light of the above, concepts of civil and civic society are reference points for the more recent discussions on reform policies.

## 5 Civil society and the economy

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The interaction between the commercial sector and civil society is increasingly gaining importance, i.a. in the fields of economic ethics, consumer research and economic sociology (see the Special Issue on ‘*Kapitalismus und Zivilgesellschaft*’ [Capitalism and civil society] of the *Soziale Bewegungen* research journal, vol. 3/2016, Berlin). Even in the early stages of the development of capitalism, social reformist or philanthropic entrepreneurs have emphasised the social responsibility of economic actors. This debate is advanced today by foundations established by companies. In transnational corporate structures, too, discussions are evolving around corporate volunteering, corporate citizenship and corporate social responsibility, where employees develop interpersonal skills by becoming actively involved in society and where the responsibility of entrepreneurial citizens vis-à-vis their locations and the comprehensive social responsibility of companies are discussed and practised. The cooperative principle emphasises the non-profit orientation, common assets, mutual self-help, values and voluntary action. These traditions were revisited in the ‘alternative economy’ of the 1970s (cf. Reichhardt 2014). The banking crisis gave rise to discussions on the solidarity-based economy, the common good economy and the community economy. The current manifestations of capitalism, characterised by a largely independent, globalised financial capitalism, transnational companies and growing social inequality (cf. Piketty 2014) have breathed new life into the discussions about the interplay between the economy and civil society.

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