Understanding contemporary civil society.

The changing societal embeddedness of the Third sector, seen from a German perspective

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For some time now, profound change is underway in the encounter of society and the voluntary, or Third, sector throughout the Western world. However, the current academic debate dealing with this sector seems to lag somewhat behind the dynamics of ongoing transformations in the economy, in the political system, and in social life. Existing conceptions of the Third sector and of ‘organised’ civil society are insufficiently robust when it comes to the understanding and characterisation of major changes in the aforementioned encounter. Indeed, with developments such as the out-contracting of public welfare provision, the rise of ‘post-democratic’ policy making, and, within the sector itself, the proliferation of commercial activity and of ‘social entrepreneurship’, the societal role of the latter appears rather unclear nowadays. Is it still a stronghold of civic mindedness, an alternative (or complementary) means to provide well-being for the socially disadvantaged, or a place where businesses are run differently, based on distinctive values? And more generally: What is its place in future Western society?

The paper argues that to make sense of current transformations it is useful to overcome some shortcomings of the liberal, widely Anglo-Saxon, tradition of understanding the relation between the sector and both its political and economic environment. Avoiding dichotomic distinctions between state and civil society, on the one hand, and between voluntarism and economic action, on the other, this approach sheds a distinctive light on the two-fold dynamic interface which constitutes, and permanently recreates, the voluntary sector in advanced Western societies, that is, the interlinkage between the sector and the political system, on the one hand, and the of association of voluntarism and economic action, on the other, with both shaping the development of ‘organised’ civil society in parallel and correspondence to each other. Referring to those parts of the voluntary sector involved in the provision of social welfare (in a large sense), the argument is developed by drawing on comparative case study evidence from various parts of the social welfare sector, for both Germany and a highly ‘typical’ liberal country, that is, Britain.

Overall, it is put forward that, across national boundaries, a German gaze makes discernable the very dynamics of a changing embeddedness of the Third sector in the wider society. Furthermore, it reveals major mechanisms through which this embeddedness is remoulded in our days. Concerning the two countries under inspection, it will be shown that even as the German voluntary sector becomes more ‘British’ and its British counterpart adopts some German features, the Third sector turns out, in the two countries, to be integrated into society less firmly than during the post-war settlement. This is due to the disorganisation of political alliances and to rising disruption in the relation between voluntarism and economic action throughout the sector. The analytical conclusion is that once we transcend the current mainstream approach to the borderlines between ‘organised’ civil society and its environments, and once we investigate typical political and economic interlinkages with an eye on how the two evolve in correspondence to each other, the current restructuring of the sector’s societal role can be better understood, including with regard to countries other than Germany.