The German Civil Society - characteristics and current trends in the third sector

Civil society can be understood both as a qualified characterisation of a society at large, i.e. the degree of civility be found, when dealing with economic, social and political challenges, and it can be understood in more narrow terms as a way of looking at the contributions, organisations in the third sector make as key components of a civil society.

The panel wants to present to those scholars from the international ISTR community, interested in developments in the country they are visiting, what could be seen as basic hallmarks and trends in the third sector with a perspective on civil society. Information on society as a whole, its politics, economics and social peculiarities will serve as a framework for understanding better the data given on what is going on in the third sector.

The plan is, to highlight three different but intertwined elements of third sector developments in Germany

One focus will be on giving information about what is internationally seen as the primary forms of the „organized civil society“: associations, foundations, cooperatives. What is the respective impact and balance of these different forms of third sector organizing in Germany today? Data should concentrate on items that qualify such third sector organisations as „civil society organisations“ – issues such as the impact of civic engagement and voluntary action in these kind of organisations. Thereby one important aspect of the civil and civic character of the German third sector should be highlighted (see the abstract of the contribution of Holger Krimmer, Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft)

Another focus will be less on the organisational dimension of the sector, its services and social economy, but on the social movement dimension in their various forms: e.g. forms of protest, of organizing voice through advocacy and participation. Issues of civility and civicness are raised with respect to the engagement in such movements, the topics taken up by them, the possibilities they have to participate in the various arenas of politics – reaching from local affairs over to international concerns such as environmental and energy policies. What has changed in social movements and what can be said about the development of possibilities to turn civic engagement into institutionalised forms of participation in politics? (see the abstract of the contribution of Heike Walk, Technical University Berlin)

A third complementary focus will be on innovative intermediary organisations and their experiences with building bridges between engagement in society and state-based policy making. In Germany, a nation-wide network of people and organisations concerned with strengthening civic engagement has developed - the Bundesnetzwerk bürgerhaftliches Engagement (federal network for civic engagement; BBE) It tries to build bridges between forms of civic engagement reaching from those in associational life over to corporate social responsibility and politics that open up to engaged partners in society and business, linking issues of civility that are associated with volunteering and others, mainly concerned with civic participation and advocacy. Questions will be raised about the importance of such kind of intermediary organisations but as well the difficulties experienced in Germany when it comes to building bridges and dialogues between state politics and the various contributions and voices from society. (see the abstract of the contribution of Ansgar Klein, Humboldt Universität Berlin)

Altogether the contributions and debates should give a lively picture of the state of things and developments in Germany in a way, that intertwines what is often separated: civil society at large and the role of the third sector for strengthening it, the contributions of organisations that provide services and of movements that raise public issues and awareness, protest and participation, the interaction between all these features of a third sector and state policies - a trans-disciplinary access to civil society issues in Germany.

Germany: Towards a divided Civil Society?
In the last decades, a couple of changes in associational life in western democratic countries have been postulated. Social capital theory assumed a decline of volunteering, affecting in particular traditional large scale organizations. A transition to a plurality of smaller organizations, embedded in local communities would be the result. The same was assumed by the German debate of a shift from an ‘old style’ to a ‘new style’ of volunteering. Changing values and transformations in labor market would affect motivational structures and professional life. An enhancing demand for more flexibility and possibilities in self-determining the settings of volunteering would be the result. Large-scale bureaucratic organizations would not be able to measure up to these expectations. The outcome also would be a shift to smaller associations with lower formalized organizational structures and fewer employees, offering volunteers more degrees of freedom for their own request of shaping organizational frameworks. Further developments affecting civil society that can be taken into regard in this context are the demographic change and the increasing changes of residence. Taken together civil society seemed to be in a transition to new forms of associational life. At the same time it was hard to figure out exactly what are the main directions of development in associational life in Germany because of lacking empirical data.

A representative survey of third sector organizations (n = 3,767), conducted in 2012, now offers the possibility to check common assumptions and to examine the contradictory paths of development of German civil society. In this paper, third sector organizations as an important part of civil society will be explored by a quantitative analysis with a focus on modes of resource mobilization, organizational structures, ways of combining volunteer and professional work and further dimensions. A comprehensive analysis of different fields of third sector organizations like sports, culture, social services, environment, education and others will be done.

The analysis shows, that at least three directions of current developments and corresponding three fields of third sector organizations have to be distinguished: organizational fields with high levels of competition between nonprofits and private enterprises, with competition only between nonprofits and fields without competition. Governmental policies are the main reason for differences in regulatory environments of these three fields of third sector organizations and they have lead to different relationships between civil society and the state.

In the last decades a gap between highly professionalized organizations with only few volunteers on the one side, a plurality of smaller associations with many volunteers and very few professionals on the other side emerged. While in the former group of organizations democratic processes were substituted mainly by a professional management, a high density of deliberation delivers the infrastructure for processes of collectivization in the latter. The paper tries to give arguments, why the discussion about civil society should reflect these developments - corresponding to developments in other European countries - with a broader focus on normative dimensions like the concept of civility. At the same time, an understanding of civil society as a field with smooth transitions to bordering sectors like the market is proposed.

The German Debate on Participation, Citizen Involvement and Social Movements

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The German Debate on Participation, Citizen Involvement and Social Movements

Social movements and protest initiatives are innovative and dynamic elements of democratic societies. Moreover, they are largely integrated into the existing network of civil society. Recent years have once again proved the power of protest and social movements in shaping society. Grassroots politics is now high on the public agenda. By comparison, Germany is relatively high up among European countries in terms of social movements and protest initiatives. Nonetheless up to now there has been low acceptance of social movement groups and initiatives in the
established institutions and procedures of the political system in Germany. Still, many members of the bureaucracy see informal groups and especially protest groups as an unnecessary disruption of the government's orderly planning and administration process. Some conservative analysts worry that these direct action techniques may disrupt the status quo and challenge the established institutions and procedures of the political system. In their view a politicized public with minorities lobbying intensely for their special interests can strain the political consensus.

In short, political leaders welcome participation in the abstract, but are not as eager to encourage citizen action when it meant frustrated voters challenging the parties, angry parents attacking school policy, or dissatisfied citizens drawing attention to the government's unsolved problems. Citizen input at the federal level has not developed as extensively. Federal regulations have institutionalized but also restricted the timing and form of citizen involvement in federal policy making. Nevertheless, several states and many local governments have instituted procedures that enable or even encourage citizen groups to participate in the making and administration of public policy. In recent decades, a renewed interest in citizen engagement and citizen participation and a growing re-emergence in academic and political discourse of ideas and values of community, localism, and citizen participation have emerged. Local governments are realizing that it is better to work with citizen groups rather than resist their input. Especially in the 1990s many reforms have expanded citizen voting rights through the expansion of referendums and direct election of local officials. Roundtables and civic forums have been adopted from the East to provide additional methods of informal citizen consultation. Democratic societies are based on participation in the political process and popular control of political elites. Therefore, an increase in political interest and various forms of political participation should be seen as a sign of the vitality of the political system. The traditional characterization of the average German as quiescent and uninvolved is no longer appropriate. Relative to other European publics, Germans are engaged in a wide range of political activities; the spectators have become participants. Nevertheless, there are many indices that Germany's government uses citizen participation only to increase the level of perceived legitimacy or to comply minimally with legal requirements, without really taking advantage of citizen participation to enhance decision-making processes. It is probably more accurate to say that the Federal Republic still provides too few opportunities for citizen participation, rather than too many. An electoral system that allows the average voter to make only a handful of political decisions during a four year electoral cycle is hardly a national accomplishment. And despite the increases in political involvement documented in the different surveys, only a minority of the population regularly participates beyond casting a ballot. The relevant empirical studies that address the abovementioned gaps and obstacles will be presented and discussed at the Panel.

Trans-sector networking and associative democracy – Purposes and experiences of the “National Network for Civic Engagement”

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Trans-sector networking and associative democracy – Purposes and experiences of the “National Network for Civic Engagement”

The concept of “associative democracy” assigns an important role to the actors within the organised civil society in framing a political agenda and creating favourable implementation conditions for that. This contribution takes into account the normative considerations of “associative democracy” (Cohen/Rogers et.al.) and bases them on an inventory of 11 years of networking experienced by the “Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement” (BBE - National Network for Civic Engagement), that operates on a national level. Besides his work in academic fields, the contributor is presently working as the business executive of the National Network for Civic Engagement.
Following a recommendation by the German parliament’s Enquete Commission on “The Future of Civic Engagement”, the National Network for Civic Engagement (BBE) was founded in 2002. Its purpose is to cross-connect organized actors of civil society, state and the business sector with a view to the needs of promoting voluntary engagement and the strengthening of civil society. The picture of civil society and civic engagement drawn by the Enquete Commission focuses on a close relation between volunteering and participation. The BBE connects sector-oriented perspectives (civil society, state, economy) with common interests in issues of governance of the civil society.

Within the BBE, expert discourses about the policies for strengthening civic engagement and democracy are held from the perspectives of the different social sectors: The challenges of governance and policies for strengthening civic engagement are discussed with respect to the various sectors, the BBE is related to, e.g. as practices of companies in matters of corporate social responsibility when it comes to the business sector or in terms of finding appropriate strategies of advocacy, lobbying and campaigning when it comes to NGOs.

In the lecture, some exemplary conflicts will be reflected, such as the failure of the “National Forum for Voluntary Engagement and Participation”, which was implemented in 2009/2010 by the BBE, having brought together 450 experts in 16 dialogue forums. Its main objective was to work as an instrument of intermediation and of participative advisory to the Federal Government on the way of establishing a consented national strategy for strengthening civic engagement and volunteering. Such an envisioned concept however finally collided with long time established top down control modes and the special interests of the administration.

Yet, on the part of the organized civil society, there were difficulties too when it came to develop policies of intermediation. Competition between various third sector organisations and associations as well as a poorly developed culture of cross-sector cooperation and understanding were among the main impediments. Influential corporatist actors of the civil society weigh the advantages and disadvantages of networking against the background of their own organizational interests. Finally, due to the misuse of volunteering as a stopgap for the state’s empty treasury, trade unions regard the emerging sphere of policies in favor of strengthening voluntary action with considerable distrust. As it will be shown by this example, appropriate formats that help in developing a genuine dialogue between state politics, business and the civil society still need to be developed.

The paper’s purpose is to inform about such developments in Germany in a perspective of shaping and strengthening policies and forms of governance that combine concerns with activating voluntary action, civic engagement and participation as ingredients of democracy.