

# **MAPPING CIVIL SOCIETY: FACING PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH BIAS AND OPERATIONAL COMPLEXITY**

## **CIVICUS PANEL ON THE CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX**

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### **Abstract**

This paper highlights some of the major problems facing any effort to undertake civil society research across the world. It does so against a backdrop of a critical analysis of the types of bias introduced by the selection of the paradigm and methodology employed for research *per se*, particularly in terms of a deterministic Enlightenment framework and its alternatives. This discussion is used to locate and explain the Index project in terms of its conceptual and methodological complexity, highlight the dilemmas faced by the Project Advisory Committee and provide a framework to analyse the findings of the evaluation of the pilot phase and subsequent re-design.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Under various labels, since the early nineteen nineties the study of civil society has become a focus for significant international research investment and energy. By and large, the starting point has been to first (better) delineate and then investigate the nature of civil society across the world. The motivations behind recent studies and academic analyses are as varied as those contributing to the terrain. While by no means mutually exclusive, and with varying mixes, for some investigators such 'mapping' exercises, provide the foundations for cross-country comparisons and improvement of theory and subsequently policy advice. For others, a motivation is more directly utilitarian, for example to investigate key questions related to the role of civil society in democratisation and political reform. Yet other initiatives stem from a more activist agenda of mobilizing civic forces for their own self-development. The number and variety of publications bears testimony to the array of motivations, conceptual positions adopted and practical difficulties involved. Consequently, it is still very difficult to make rigorous comparisons between empirical findings and interpretations arrived at by different analysts and researchers even when studying the same country.

Against this backdrop, this paper does not attempt to draw on and compare the variety of studies or their findings that are currently in the public domain. Instead, using the CIVICUS Index as but one example, my purpose is to provide critical observations on problems that virtually anyone interested in understanding and investigating civil society across the world has to contend with and resolve in one way or the other. Observations are grouped into two sequential exclusive categories of research biases and operational complexities.



## RESEARCH BIASES

All research frameworks, or paradigms, are underpinned by a guiding philosophy and related assumptions. Be they implicit or explicit, all underpinnings introduce some form of bias. In the case of research on civil society, this section reflects on the biases that result from the choice of a paradigm and indicates implications for practical investigation, that are explored in more detail in the subsequent section.

### Enlightenment and its alternatives

Underlying much western-initiated research is an implicit acceptance of a linear, deterministic 'convergent' understanding of human progress and change that relies on an Enlightenment philosophy and its assumptions. Central to this philosophy are: the authority of 'objective' science, the rational utility of individualism, dualism,<sup>1</sup> progress as freedom, an instrumental relationship with the natural world and the inherent value of economic transactions based on a free market. In this deterministic view, all societies are on a pathway that is furthest explored by countries in a post-industrial post-modern stage. Human endeavour, and its social constructions, can thus be understood as either about catching up or staying ahead. Hence, it is fully warranted to use an 'advanced society' lens to investigate how far other societies are along the path of Enlightenment manifest in their degree of modernisation along western lines. This philosophical and normative foundation is common to many investigations of human behaviour and its institutional arrangements.

Typically, imitating natural sciences, to ensure objectivity social science methodologies are premised on separating the observer and the observed. This position and its assumptions have been subject to substantial challenge, leading to an alternative methodological approach that 'constructs' reality from within the experience and perceptions of social actors (e.g., Sayer, 1984). This methodological shift does not, however, explicitly counter a foundation in Enlightenment assumptions.

In terms of understanding civil society, modern theories are essentially of western European and American origin derived from a relatively short - three hundred year - period of human experience. Consequently, even if it is possible to reconcile the differences between them (Howell and Pearce, 2001), there are geographical and temporal limitations built into the major theories currently on offer. It is therefore *a priori* problematic to apply universally a set of theoretical spectacles that have not been formed from global experience. Yet, this approach to research is commonplace, particularly in studies of non-western settings undertaken by westerners.

The features above introduce pre-suppositions and western normative biases into the analytic frameworks derived from them. This has a most direct impact on the way that research categories are defined, as well as the attention paid to qualitative as opposed to quantitative phenomenon. A point returned to later.

However, Enlightenment's axioms are increasingly open to challenge. One philosophical critique is that Enlightenment's 'truths' are themselves contingent on time, location and culture in which they are expressed. They are not universal across all time, all peoples and all places. Investigation of Enlightenment's foundations simply leads to infinite regression ((Lyotard, 1984). Society is simply not

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<sup>1</sup> "Dualism is an approach to knowledge that seeks to divide our understanding of the world into two discrete parts. Culture/nature, reason/emotion, masculine/feminine, West/East are all common dualisms in modern thought. What separates dualism from a simple dichotomy is that it also involves a hierarchy between the two sides of the dualism, in which ...the category on the left is constructed as superior to that on the right". (Pettitt, 2002:112)

a deterministic enterprise (Popper, 1982). Moreover, 'science' is itself not natural, but a human construct open to uncertainty (Wolpert, 1993).

A further criticism is that the distinctive self-aware characteristics of human consciousness renders inappropriate a Newtonian, closed systems, approach to investigating social behaviour (Mumford, 1967, 1970; Uphoff, 1992; Kaplan, 2002).

A more vivid and pragmatic challenge to deterministic convergence centres on the notion that the natural world can, through scientific discovery, provide a western lifestyle and consumption pattern for every inhabitant on the planet.<sup>2</sup> This counter argument informs the growing concern about not just about sustainable development, but the nature of 'development' itself (Sachs, 2001).

Both levels of Enlightenment critique point towards the importance of diversity and heterogeneity. They do not carry linear assumptions about human endeavour, nor recognize – no matter how materially useful it has proven to be - the sanctity of western science as the true root of all knowledge.

But how do such criticisms translate into an alternative approach to social research? One answer is reflected in theories of complexity and self-adaptive, open systems (Lewin, 1994). Instead of beginning with a pre-determined 'advanced society' lens, complexity begins 'from the ground up' so to speak. Here, human associational forms and forces – groups, organisations, networks, institutions, etc., - are investigated as phenomenon emerging and differentiating from within the myriad transactions and connections that make up social life. Transactions begin with basic rules, such as people will interact more with those who are similar or they trust than with those who are different or they mistrust. Under the uncertain influence of events, ecological circumstances, internal pressures, external forces and technological change, rules about relating to others get tested, negotiated and preferential norms become dominant (Campbell, 1969).

Complexity-founded research tries to find both differences and patterns in the resulting human arrangements and then explain them in terms of static and dynamic (path dependent) conditions. From here, theories can be derived that are not based on *a priori* assumption about linear progress but are grounded (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in diversity. This approach rests on open-ended assumptions that historical specificities may give rise to divergence or convergence, regression or advance. There is no pre-determined outcome. It allows for causation to be non-linear, heuristic and contingent on self-created pathways that may change in non-predictable ways because of (learning from) previous action.

However, an important rider to applying overly Darwinistic understandings of complexity and self-adaptation - as applied in biological sciences - to human behaviour are distinguishing factors of self-consciousness, volition and free will. It is these characteristics – interacting with specific environmental settings, evolutionary experience and learning - that give rise to the array of social, political and economic structures and systems; the prevailing moral imperatives; and the cultural diversity exhibited by the varied institutional arrangements to be found in countries and communities across the world.

From this theoretical perspective, research bias is introduced in terms of the how much diversity can be accommodated, which calls for selection and limits. Bias also arises from dealing with the incompatibility of categories that are meaningful to those within them, but not to an outside observer.

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<sup>2</sup> During his recent trip to Africa with pop artist Bono, US Treasury Secretary O'Neil argued that the income of every family on earth can be US\$30,000 a year.

Inferences must be drawn and interpreted by the researcher. A source of bias that means comparisons must be treated with extreme care.

In sum, bias is unavoidable. But, in global (comparative) investigation the risk of error in 'research by (western) analogy' is likely to be higher than 'research by grounded specificity', that is, building global theory from extant global diversity understood, in the first instance, in its own terms.

### **Implications for civil society research**

The previous general problem of globally oriented research into human behaviour, has particular implications for the study of civil society. An obvious implication is to be sure about the foundation for enquiry, which is typically set by the definition of what is to be investigated.

The dominant theoretical Anglo-American lens on civil society typically searches for a definition in relation to other dimensions of modern society, most commonly government, business and family. Here the definitional image of civil society is one of a bounded functional domain, sector, sphere or space inhabited by configurations of freely formed associations serving purposes that do not belong to, or are not adequately taken care of, by what is operating outside the boundaries. Typical units of analysis in this structural-functional approach are the number, types and tasks of associations located within the civic boundary.

A complexity-based definition will give preference to the innate individual-centred forces driving the creation of associational forms that freely 'emerge' (Johnson, 2001) from primary kinship over time, space and scale and become inter-connected as (sub) systems that operate according to selected rules, reflecting preferred morals, norms and values that may or not be widely shared and stable. Here, the definitional image is one of multi-layered (first, second, third, etc., order) networks of social entities responding to inherent human drives – such as identity, reproduction, sustenance, security and self-actuation. Typical units of analysis are values, associational patterns as differentiated systems with connections, force fields, processes and transactions between them.

In as far as a (sub) system's boundaries are discernable, they are 'fuzzy' (Kosko, 1993), because what occurs in real life are complicated attenuations of transactions between differentiated human systems, such as politics, beliefs and economics. Attenuation is reflected in the degree to which civic drives are satisfied within or beyond civil society, by allocating tasks to other actors. For example, the drive for sustenance can be progressively solved by: individuals, households, informal enterprise, collective economic action (as in cooperatives), private businesses, employment in the public service or in government employment programmes, with a welfare system or safety nets as the last resort for a few. Satisfying this drive is a distributed phenomenon with different weightings in different institutional locations reflected, for example, in different models of capitalism (Coates, 2000). The solution to a drive for security can be distributed over a neighbourhood watch, local militias, private security firms, the police and the armed forces. Again, the proportional roles each plays in providing security is context specific and not limited to one institutional type or location.

Building on this perspective, Uphoff and Krishna (2001) argue that, irrespective of the paradigmatic definition chosen what becomes important is not what civil society is, *but what it does*, in terms of ensuring that innate drives are satisfied, though itself or through non-civic institutions, such as self-help, traditional and modern forms of mutual aid, cooperatives, organised religion, government or the market place.

This view allies to the political roots of civil society as a concept to understand and explain the distribution of power between state and citizen. What types of power (Lukes, 1974) do citizens have

and which pathways do they use to attain the life they want within a state context? These authors argue that civil society is located between individuals and the state with varying degrees of autonomy from it. But wherever located along the continuum, civic associations are defined by an intention to satisfy their rights, interests and needs. Civil society is not a 'buffer' between state and citizen, *but a force through which citizens' act*.

Historical conditions will shape the extent to which associational life takes on formally recognised forms or remains 'invisible' to outsiders. When suppressed, in pursuit of rights and interests associational life can go 'underground' as it did under Apartheid in South Africa and during the totalitarian era in the Soviet Union. Or it can take on innocuous forms like, African sports clubs in the colonial era. Where states, as in much of Africa, have been predatory and, often, politically constrained, a logical response is to remain outside of legal purview, extraction and control. It makes sense to remain within culturally determined and trusted, informal relationships of kinship and utilise the 'economy of affection' to survive and advance (Hyden, 1980). Repressive, malevolent, unjust and corrupt governance breeds its own form of civic resistance and hidden formations.

But 'informalism' is also to be found under non-repressive conditions. Mutual voluntary support within neighbourhoods is commonplace everywhere – captured in the notion of the 'use value' of social capital in specific contexts (Edwards, Foley and Diani, 2001). Much volunteering goes unseen but can be a significant factor in preventing social problems and hardships from escalating into social or political instability and conflict.

In conclusion, and by way of reminder, any investigation of civil society must factor in the issue of power distribution and application. The notion of civil society as a force through which citizens act, is therefore apposite. Without the dimension of power informing theory and enquiry, research will potentially be little more than mapping a portion of society. Useful as this may be, it does not equate with research on civil society.

### **The Importance of Identity**

A common shortcoming in research on civil society is to neglect a fundamental reason why people associate. Associational life has a deeper purpose than the pursuit of interests, right and needs because it provides the grounding for self-identity in terms of I and We and Us and Them (Haslam, 2001). Who you are is co-determined by who you associated with, which itself lies along a spectrum from ascribed to freely chosen relationships. It is the complex make up of individual and collective identities that underlies social division, stratification and power distribution.

The political importance of understanding identity constellations within civil society cannot be overstated. Testimony to this fact can be found in many ways. But some examples are: the use of class identity to justify repression; the (re)assertion of sub-national identities as a state's importance wanes under pressure of global forces; the use of ethnic identity for political ends leading to the conflict within and ultimate collapse of Yugoslavia; the genocide in Rwanda; religious persecution in India and elsewhere; the rejection of (poor) immigrants now gaining political ascendancy in western Europe; separatist movements in Indonesia and the Philippines.

The abiding quest for identity recognition and assertion of citizens as claimants on public space and political power are abiding sources of potential instability and 'chaos' that must be actively 'managed'. The way this is achieved depends on the evolution of viable norms, conventions and political institutional arrangements that emerge from historical processes or, failing that, the application of coercion and force. For example, membership of an particular civic group can mean being regarded

as protagonist, victim or reconciler in social and political processes, or all three simultaneously depending on who is doing the categorising for what purposes.

Civil society research must therefore contain elements that enable identity configurations to be illuminated and power distributions between them understood. This calls for awareness of the ‘identity blinkers’ and normative pre-dispositions and prejudices of the researchers themselves, particularly when it comes to mapping associational forms and expression with which one disagrees – typically, the so-called ‘uncivil’, fundamentalist, racist or armed elements of civil society (Holloway, 1997).

**CONCEPTUALISING AND OPERATIONALISING THE INDEX PROJECT**

The previous section examines just some of the conceptual problems allied to undertaking international research on civil society. It sets out the types of choices that have to be made and some of the biases that introduce errors. This is what confronted CIVICUS in its decision to initiate the Index project described in *From Impossibility to Reality* (Naido and Heinrich, 1999).

The pilot phase is now at an end. Based on operational experience, a redesign is now underway. Drawing on the previous section, and using the Index as an example, this section reviews some of the conceptual and operational concerns encountered as a member of the Project’s advisory group. It does not describe the project itself but relies on the other papers in this panel to do so.

**Paradigmatic choices**

In terms of motivation, the Index initiative was intended to satisfy a number of objectives that are described in the paper presented by Finn Heinrich (Heinrich, 2002). First, to test a method of mapping civil society but, secondly, to do so in a way that would engage and inform local civil society actors with a view to them drawing implications for their context and acting accordingly if they saw fit. Moreover, consistent with CIVICUS policy, the exercise was intended to be locally ‘owned’ and driven, albeit with the guidance and help of CIVICUS staff.

Conceptually, the Index pilot project embodies an eclectic mix that tried to strike a golden balance. The conceptual grounding reflects complexity theory by not assuming a well-defined, comparatively consistent set of ‘occupant categories’ within the civic sphere. Decisions about boundaries, inclusion and exclusion were left to the participants. Nor does the Index approach assume linearity or western analogy in terms of civic configurations, but is premised on historical specificity. Reliance on the universal applicability of four dimensions that constitute the diamond is at a sufficiently high level of conceptualisation that they do not equate with a deterministic grounding. However, adopting the normative notion of civic ‘health’ introduced an analogical bias based on western norms.

In terms of methodological approach, the project adopted a social construction, rather than a positivist, basis of knowledge generation. Triangulation with survey or other data, typically derived from positivist methods of enquiry, was seldom possible or complete. Nevertheless, the content of enquiry within each of the diamond dimensions often rests on deterministic assumptions about causality, for example in intra-civic interactions and relations between civil society and the state.

**Table 1. Paradigmatic location of the Index project**

	Methodology	
Conceptual Grounding	Logical Positivist	Social Constructionist
Deterministic/ Enlightenment	Conventional NPO studies	

Non-Deterministic/ Complexity		Index Project
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This complicated combination is illustrated in Table 1. By way of comparison, research on nonprofit organisations, such as the John Hopkins’ study, rests on other grounding and methods locating it in a different quadrant.<sup>3</sup>

The practical difficulties and contradictions arising from this complex mix are captured in the Evaluation study, which is the subject of a separate paper and presentation.

Inevitably, this complicated combination or grounding and methods created a number of dilemmas that called for trade-offs and testing of the choices during the pilot stage. These have been described by Finn Heinrich’s paper and are revisited below.

### **Operational choices**

The choices to be made about how the Index project would be implemented were located around a number of pivotal, dilemmas and contentions. The pilot has help to see how an Index redesign can better address, if not resolve them.

#### *Value-bound or Value-Neutral – Health or State of Civil Society?*

A first dilemma was tied to the adoption of a normative or value-neutral basis of enquiry. The Index project carried the label of investigating the ‘health’ of civil society. But who is to say and judge what a healthy civil society looks like? I endorsed an argument that, at this stage of our knowledge, it is necessary to avoid normative imposition and investigate civil society ‘as it is’, whatever that might mean. This had direct implications for how questions were formulated and who was involved in the enquiry. Inevitably, bias in participant selection, discussed next, led to an implicit normativeness, but at least this was generated from within the setting rather than imported. However, this choice worked against generating sound comparative data.

#### *Inclusion and exclusion – boundaries*

The advisory committee also faced the issue of how to determine who would participate in the study in terms of expressing their perceptions and responses to the questions. Existing secondary data could offer an initial guide to the civic universe, but this was not always available or employed useful categories. The problem of inclusion and exclusion was reflected in the institutional point of entry provided by the national lead organisation (NLO) as well as the problem of choice of boundaries between civil society and other social institutions.

The definition employed by the study followed the, not uncommon, domain/sector/area/sphere/terrain view, locating civil society within and between other institutional types.

The sphere of institutions, organisations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market, in which people voluntarily associate to advance common interests. (Heinrich and Naidoo, 1991:9)

But, as noted above, borders are fuzzy or indeterminate rather than fixed. Borders reflect the historical trajectory, legal traditions and norms of a given society. This required the pilot project to ask

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<sup>3</sup> Salamon, et al, 1999.

participants to be very clear about where boundaries were set. This was not and could not be determined and decreed *a priori* without introducing normative distortions, which again works against firm comparability.

#### *Inclusion and exclusion - formal and informal associational life*

In addition to the boundaries problem, came the issue of the optic used to see civil society. Specifically, whether and how to capture associational life that is stable and formal to members, but informal to outsiders because it has not sought public recognition by means of legal registration of something similar. Anthropological critiques (e.g., Hann and Dunn, 1996) of civil society, as well as experience in 'community development' across the world, point to the significance of 'non-registered' civic associational life for many facets of a society's behaviour and satisfaction of civic drives. For example, a well-designed, grounded survey of civil society in South Africa found that fifty-two percent of the associations people belonged to were not registered. Could the Index project 'see' and capture this feature of civil society? For not to do so might mean distortions of unknown proportions.

#### *Degrees freedom of association*

Allied to the above problem was the issue of associational ascription versus the 'voluntary' association specified in the definition. Many informal associational forms, particularly in Africa, are embedded in identities of clan, tribe and lineage. One can be born with ascribed associational membership(s) as well as freely acquire such membership in later life. Was a separation of these possible, or even desirable? In dualistic societies – common to post-colonial settings – are the 'modern' dimensions of civil society in terms of free association to be conceptualised differently from the 'traditional' or ascribed forms? Or, because they can both embodied within a 'citizen', are they to be treated equally as aspects of identity?

#### *Autonomy and history*

Finally, there was a dilemma caused by the notion of autonomy as a key characteristic of civil society. It was pretty clear that 'autonomy' in absolute sense, made no sense. But what degree of power and control over agenda and behaviour should a civic entity have, and could this be understood outside of the political setting and conventions, where for example, many formally organised civic organisations rely on substantial public funding derived from taxes and allocated by governments?

### **Concluding Perspectives**

How these dilemmas were resolved or simply 'transparently managed' is explained in Finn Heinrich's paper. The relative success or failure of the trade-offs and choices made for the pilot stage is detailed in the Evaluation study.

A contribution of this paper is to point towards the care required in selecting a paradigmatic framework that is consistent with research intentions. The difficulty of the Index project is that one conceptual grounding alone cannot satisfy its intentions. Nevertheless, where trade-offs have to be made – for example in attaining valid comparability while accommodating situational specificity – two conditions must be satisfied. First, there must be rigour in staying within the paradigmatic grounding suited to the task in hand. The redesign must therefore tested by a 'deconstruction' of research categories and questions to their paradigmatic assumptions and theoretical roots (Derrida, 1991) so that inconsistency can be exposed, even if not resolved. For example, do the categories or questions posed to participants reflect an open-systems, non-deterministic perspective, or are deterministic assumptions about cause and effect hidden within them?

Second, even in a re-designed index project, to build a comprehensive understanding, information and processes from different groundings will have to be interfaced and conceptually connected. For example, this will occur when survey-based quantitative data is compared with participant opinions and other qualitative information. Drawing inferences about similarities and differences will be tricky. The task will be assisted if a set of ground rules and processes are put in place to ensure transparency, for example in the weighting given to different types of data from different sources.

An additional perspective and challenge is for the Index project to stay focussed on investigating civil society, rather than a vaguely bounded segment of 'society'. This will call for continually testing of how the specific contents of inquiry identify, signal and trace power expression and relations. In other words, how does the research operationalise the notion of civil society as a force – be it latent, passive or active, open or repressed, cooperative or contentious?

Finally, a case has been made for paying explicit attention to the psychosocial dimension of civic associational life as a key co-factor determining individual and group identity. Put another way, to consciously investigate identity as an explanatory factor for civil society configurations, their internal relations, their claim and use of public space and the relations between civil society, the state, the family and the market.

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