
Assessment

Civil Society Studies: Two Compendia Compared**David Sogge**

Helmut K. Anheier and Stefan Toepler (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*. Berlin: Springer, 2010. xxvi + 1686 pp. € 846.94 print (book), € 966.79 e-Reference

Michael Edwards (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xiii + 552 pp. £ 95 hardback

Formerly cast as a hero in major dramas, such as ending misrule in Eastern Europe and South Africa, ‘civil society’ has today lost status as a star. Indeed, for activists in Latin America and beyond, the term is in bad odour. They see it as a playground of upper-middle classes and their NGOs, bankrolled by foreign donors to promote special hobbies or free-market agendas. The narrative of a civil society that animates citizens for emancipatory change is losing its powers of enchantment. A counter-narrative has now emerged about a civil society that domesticates citizens and sucks the oxygen out of politics. From Egypt and other Arab lands, where NGO seminars had reached saturation levels long before the popular uprisings of 2011, came the complaint: ‘Too much civil society, too little politics!’ (Langohr, 2004).

If civil society practice cannot change the world, can civil society concepts then at least explain it? Are they indispensable for analysis, as some have claimed? Or is civil society over-rated as an analytical frame, perhaps even a futile and counter-productive search for paradigms of a kind that Albert O. Hirschman (1970) famously called ‘a hindrance to understanding’? Or might today’s discourse of civil society merely be a conceptually empty yet socially useful idiom that ‘allows people to speak without knowing what they are saying, which in turn helps them to avoid arguing with each other’ (Colas, 1997 cited by Pearce in *Oxford Handbook*, p. 405)?

Such issues confronted the makers of the two compendia reviewed here. Both books reflect ambitions to clarify concepts and systematize knowledge; the editors evidently don’t see a search for paradigms about civil society as a hindrance to understanding it. Nevertheless they accept that the intellectual

terrain is full of disputes and is poorly charted. They have therefore tried neither to settle current debates nor to make definitive judgements. The editor of the *Oxford Handbook* holds that civil society is a 'necessary and necessarily contested idea' (p. 480). He expresses the hope that the book will help readers to 'chart a course through these uncertain waters' (p. 13). In the *International Encyclopedia*, many entries focus on conceptual issues, thereby displaying a conviction that ideas associated with civil society can be valid and useful. Contrary to those decrying civil society studies for 'chronic weakness', the *Encyclopedia's* editors argue that the 'unsettled' state of the field, with its 'complex, even confusing terminology', reflects its 'intellectual fertility' (p. v). Their aim is to 'offer an inventory of a conceptual landscape rather than set some standards' (ibid.).

According to their publishers, both books were made chiefly for readers in academia. The flyleaf of the *Oxford Handbook* specifies its intended audiences as 'scholars and graduate students'. The *International Encyclopedia* casts its net a little wider; beyond 'teachers, researchers and students' it also seeks to reach 'practitioners and policy-makers around the world' (p. v). Contributors to both volumes are mainly social science academics and others, such as specialists in law or management, at the scholar-practitioner interface. Of the forty-two persons contributing to the *Oxford Handbook*, most are associated with North American and British universities or think-tanks; a few others work for foundations. Similarly, most of the nearly 400 contributors to the *International Encyclopedia* are affiliated with academic and policy study centres. Those outside the Anglo-American intellectual zone (German universities and think-tanks being well represented) almost equal the number recruited from within that zone. Both volumes rely heavily on American case material and issues, a limitation not entirely compensated for by entries focused beyond the United States.

Both books involved many contributors and advisors. However the *International Encyclopedia* was the more complex undertaking. Its editorial team enlisted help from a thirty-nine-member advisory committee of scholars, most of whom also wrote entries for the *Encyclopedia* (and, in the case of several scholars, for the *Oxford Handbook* as well).

In setting out across these uncertain and unsettled waters and terrains of knowledge, the editors used rather different compasses and charts. A discussion of the outcomes in each case appears in the following two sections.

THE INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

In designing their book, the editors mapped the terrain according to four 'streams' or 'intellectual and policy divisions' (p. vi), namely: civil society, philanthropy, non-profit and non-governmental organizations, and social capital. Within these, they commissioned texts on three kinds of subjects: 'concepts', 'internationally relevant organizations' and 'personalities'. In

short, they set out to create a triptych in one volume: an intellectual *vade mecum*, a directory of institutions, and a *Who's Who*.

How logical and helpful was the editors' choice to organize material according to the four 'streams'? Such a choice evidently assumes that the boundaries and logical equivalences of those streams are everywhere clear and self-evident. Yet that is an heroic assumption in a world where, for example, most NGOs identify themselves as part of civil society, where some NGOs cannot be distinguished easily from philanthropic foundations, and where *social capital* can be found in each of the editors' three other intellectual/policy streams. Compounding those difficulties are the heterodox ways contributors use key terms. Some refer to civil society in a normative sense, while others use the term in a Gramscian or Putnam-esque sense, sometimes even in the same entry. In short, one of the *Encyclopedia's* chief aims, namely 'to introduce greater conceptual clarity to an increasingly perplexing terminology' (p. v) proved to be over-ambitious.

To apply their framework and wriggle free of the straightjacket of alphabetical order, the editors arrange some entries in clusters in accordance with their four streams. The most substantial cluster begins with the term civil society, as in 'Civil Society and Civic Education', 'Civil Society and the Elderly' and 'Civil Society and the European Union'. Further subdivisions of the Civil Society cluster focus on: Social Capital in a score of entries on regions or countries; Civil Society History in seven entries that range from antiquity to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; and Civil Society Theory, in entries covering nineteen selected thinkers, from Aristotle to Walzer. In addition, entries appear on at least two dozen other major intellectuals, from Thomas Hobbes to Max Weber. Those entries stand on their own — outside the Theory cluster. Based on criteria not explained, the editors apparently decided that those thinkers' contributions don't really count as Theory. Entries on such topics as Global Civil Society, Evaluation and Civil Society or Good Governance and Civil Society appear outside the main Civil Society cluster. Similarly, the entry on International NGOs appears outside the cluster of entries on NGOs. Readers can only guess what logic was applied in creating these patterns of clustering and labelling, for it is not explained. It seems that the *Encyclopedia's* categorizations are largely arbitrary, and their usefulness for readers limited.

In the absence of an index, anyone searching for a specific topic can turn to the cross-references placed at the end of most entries. Unfortunately, these are not always complete or consistent. There is little mutual cross-referencing among, for example, six closely-related entries: Contracts and Contract Regimes, Government–Non-profit Sector Relations, New Public Management, Partnership, Third Party Government, and Welfare State. Given limited means for searching its contents, the *Encyclopedia* thus lends itself more to browsing than to pursuit of specific topics.

As a test of the *Encyclopedia's* user-friendliness, I tried to find a discussion of the politics of statutory bodies that regulate non-profit/NGO sectors;

in any country, that is a crucial feature of the landscape facing civil organizations. However, my search was unsuccessful. Except for a brief mention of regulators, such as a tantalizing side comment in the entry entitled Tax Policy, 'unlike many countries, the US government has no bureaucracy to regulate nonprofits' (p. 1517), I could find no comparative discussion of regulatory agencies or their politics. That is, the existence of statutory bodies regulating non-profits is detectable in the book, but comparative information about what drives them politically, and how they have affected civil society, could not be found. Although the search engine of the *Encyclopedia's* digital version offers some help, the book is not user-friendly, either in overall design or internal connectedness. The publisher's online support to the digital edition was, for this review, dysfunctional.

In a publication of more than 1,700 pages, a breadth of topics and depth of treatment may be expected. This expectation is largely met for the worlds of grant-makers and not-for-profit enterprise in their Anglo-American settings. Readers interested in foundations, social enterprise, fundraising, non-profit management and related topics will find a large assortment of issues, organizations and philanthropists, particularly in the USA and Germany. In that well-endowed terrain, the *International Encyclopedia* offers rich pickings. In some cases there is almost an excess of information, such as about non-profit taxation issues in the USA, about which I counted at least three extensive entries, and side commentary in other entries.

But in other fields the content can be uneven and downright meagre. Take, for example, four powerful influences in twentieth century history: anti-colonialism, fascism, communism and neoliberalism. All stemmed from civil society. Yet none of them gets a specific entry and none of them is discussed in any depth elsewhere. The most extensive remarks about fascism appear in three sentences within a six-page entry on Civil Society History. Mentions of communism or socialism almost never allude to their roots in civil society. A highly relevant notion, 'neoliberal civil society' pops up in a few entries but unfortunately without much explanation. In short, some fundamental historical cases are poorly illuminated.

Further afield, information concerning non-Western settings is supplied in strange proportions, and generally under-supplied. For example, a skeletal South African NGO umbrella body, SANGOCO, gets an entry of a page and a half, whereas African Zionism, a powerful church movement of 15 to 18 million people in Southern Africa, gets no mention whatever. The assortment of texts pertaining to Western settings is even more idiosyncratic. For example, the Texas-based organization Mothers Against Drunk Driving gets a full entry, whereas the far larger and older Alcoholics Anonymous has none and is scarcely noted in the *Encyclopedia*. The World Trade Organization, a new and exclusively inter-governmental body, gets a full entry, whereas the International Labour Organization, an old institution that includes worker and employer organizations in its set-up, has no entry and is hardly noted. Large established civil society organizations with real policy clout, such as

those promoting the interests of automobile owners, and of gun owners, are completely ignored.

Apart from a skewed selection of topics, there is a deeper problem of achieving a critical distance from the subject matter. Consider the notion of ‘social capital’, one of the *Encyclopedia*’s four main conceptual pillars. The editors clearly regard it as a self-evident fact of social life. Guided by such convictions, almost no contributor acknowledges that the notion of social capital has been subject to sustained attack. Such criticism has questioned its overall validity. Yet no contributor probes that concept’s career, looking at why corporations, foundations and aid-and-development agencies have embraced it. In the twenty-one entries under the rubric ‘social capital’, only one (on South America) refers clearly to the controversies surrounding the concept.¹ Meanwhile, other contentious ideas get a free ride. ‘Communitarianism’ is an example. The author of the entry on that idea is its chief proponent, Amitai Etzioni. Moreover, because the separate entry about that sociologist is only laudatory, readers can learn nothing about the serious contestation over his concept. Some other entries, however, such as that about the ‘Third Way’, do pay attention to critiques and debates, making them relevant and interesting for readers.

About philanthropy, critical views are hard to detect. Virtually all entries on foundations avoid probing what has been called their ‘soft, rotten underbelly’.² Current discussions on ‘philanthrocapitalism’ are avoided and key studies, such as Mark Dowie’s (2001) critical survey of American foundations, go unmentioned. Many entries on specific foundations and those who endowed them offer sunny descriptions that sound like public relations pamphlets. Sometimes these conceal important information. Entries on the Lilly Endowment and one of its founders, for example, say nothing about their vigorous support of rightwing causes. There are other remarkable editorial choices; an entry appears, for example, about the Irish-American philanthropist Charles Feeney but not about the foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, built on his wealth. There are extensive separate entries for Corporate Giving, Corporate Foundations and Corporate Social Responsibility, and numerous entries on specific foundations built on corporate wealth. Yet the field of social change/social justice philanthropy, its umbrella bodies such as Funding Exchange, and the extensive literature about it, are largely ignored.

1. The *Encyclopedia* carries no mention of writings by, for example, the academicians Ben Fine or Maxine Molyneux, whose critiques of social capital have appeared in *Development and Change*. By contrast, the chapter ‘Civil Society and Social Capital’ in the *Oxford Handbook* discusses strengths and weaknesses of the concept, and some of the controversy it has provoked.

2. The phrase ‘soft, rotten underbelly’ (p. 1055) appears in the entry on Waldemar Nielsen, an important scholar of late twentieth century American foundations. That entry refers to critical debates about philanthropy, making it exceptional in the *Encyclopedia*. But users will have to find those remarks on their own, as the entry gets no cross-reference.

By contrast, most of the entries on NGO phenomena give attention to dissent, debate and dilemmas; that kind of probing makes them among the more objective contributions in the *Encyclopedia*. An insightful entry, Commercialization and For-Profits in Disguise, discusses blurred lines and cross-overs between non-profits and businesses. Similarly, the entry on Think Tanks achieves a good measure of objectivity by squarely discussing the ideological drivers of those sometimes influential participants in Western political life.

In a volume with ambitions to promote civil society studies, one might expect to find substantial information about their evolution in research and learning. Unfortunately the *International Encyclopedia* doesn't meet such expectations. There are entries on some well-known academic networks, such as the International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR) and the Association for Research on Non-profit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA). There are entries also on a few obscure ones, such as Australia New Zealand Third Sector Research (ANZTSR) and the Japan NPO Research Association (JANPORA). Yet there are no entries about the emergence of non-profit sector or philanthropic studies, or their key university bases such as at the LSE, Yale and the Third Sector Research Centre in the UK.

Finally, too many entries suffer from poor writing and editing. Some texts contain clunky, even incomprehensible sentences: 'In certain areas, like fund raising, is sometimes provided for voluntary supervision by a private body on a contractual basis' (p. 926); 'Civil society allows this social treasury to be directed at recognizing and solving social problems have been transformed' (p. 318). Others show bad syntax — what are 'job owners' (p. 922)?; mistaken choice of terms — 'Bibliographic' where 'Biographical' should be used (p. vi, Table 1); and misspellings — even in German: 'Stifung' appears in three places where 'Stiftung' is intended (pp. 12, 915, 1683). A higher standard of editing might have been expected, especially of a large professional publisher like Springer.

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK

Although its purposes resemble those of the *International Encyclopedia* — to offer a comprehensive overview, to take stock of knowledge in the field — the *Oxford Handbook's* design is much less complicated. It is made up of essays of about five thousand words, arranged in seven thematic sections. The first of these sections comprises the editor's introduction and a history of the idea of civil society in the West; the second, civil society's purpose-driven or organizational forms; the third, how it has manifested itself historically in various regions and countries; the fourth, its normative beacons and drivers; the fifth, the public spaces shaped by government, media and knowledge that inform its contexts; the sixth, actual achievements of civil society in

some domains; and the seventh, how philanthropic and other means have been applied in support of civil society initiatives.

Strengths of the *Handbook's* design appear also in chapter formats and tight editing. Each chapter brackets its main content between an introductory and a concluding section, followed by notes and an often extensive list of references. Most chapters offer succinct historical perspectives on the topic at hand; many discuss differing interpretations of the topic and their rise and fall over time. An index for the entire book allows some measure of cross-checking.³ All these features help make it a solid, accessible 'handbook' as its title implies.

Yet beyond its utility as a work of reference, the *Handbook* offers lenses and focal points for students and researchers to look afresh at concepts, settings and experiences. A resonant metaphor, that of a 'social ecology' or 'ecosystem' of associational life, appears in five different chapters, as well as the editor's own opening and concluding chapters. The ecological analogy implies complexity, feedback loops and vulnerability as recurring features of civil spaces, be they donor-driven hot-houses or Social Darwinist jungles filled with competing species, some of them red in tooth and claw. Such perspectives highlight the fact that terrains conventionally thought to be populated by good-tempered, 'civil' citizens in earnest pursuit of harmony and consensus, are actually contested, often intensely so. Several chapters bust such myths, and most probe similar conventional wisdoms. A kind of sceptical attitude — 'pessimism of the intellect' would put things perhaps too strongly — together with well-crafted and well-informed writing, underpin a majority of contributions. These genuinely advance the discussion and signpost further inquiry and learning.

The *Handbook* itself does not reflect consensus; indeed some arguments show striking divergences. The editor notes some of these disaccords, contrasting for example the cautions expressed by the political scientist John Ehrenberg, whose chapter concludes that civil society of itself 'cannot take on the historical concentrations of wealth and privilege' (p. 25), with the optimism of Simon Zadek, a veteran corporate responsibility specialist whose chapter makes a vigorous case for 'civil regulation' of the corporations. Yet other differences in accent and attitude appear in the book. Regarding Habermasian 'public spaces', the sociologist Craig Calhoun cautions against their idealization; by contrast, the intellectual-activist Harry C. Boyte emphasizes their importance in democracy building. Seasoned NGO scholar Alan Fowler calls attention to the weaknesses of many NGOs and the unintended, perverse outcomes of some of their activities; by contrast, the prominent academics Solava Ibrahim and David Hulme cite cases and surveys of anti-poverty impacts by NGOs to build a case for cautious

3. The index is not the *Handbook's* strongest feature. For example, according to the index, the issue of devolution of public tasks to non-profits appears in only two places in the book; yet I found at least six other places where that topic is mentioned in substantive ways.

optimism. In their critical survey of (US) government interplay with civil society, Harvard political scientists Nancy Rosenblum and Charles Lesch attribute the popularity of 'social entrepreneurship' to policies that offload public service tasks onto the for-profit and non-profit private sectors; by contrast, the Oxford Business School lecturer Alex Nicholls takes an almost entirely sanguine view of social enterprise and social entrepreneurs.

No chapter takes issue *explicitly* with any other chapter (indeed contributors apparently did not know in advance what company their texts would be keeping); yet some chapters can be read as in debate with others. As a result, the inquisitive reader will find some bracing doses of intellectual effervescence. The *Oxford Handbook* is thus more than the sum of its parts. Moreover, many of those parts show a certain tough-mindedness, or at least a willingness to cut through the nonsense and wishful thinking about civil society.

The persuasiveness of a number of chapters stems from the quality of attention they pay to contexts of civil society, especially pathways laid down over centuries in political economies and cultural institutions. The seven geographically-focused chapters are cases in point. A common denominator among them is a refusal to cast civil society as a place of consensus building, or as a normative agent — a white knight who valiantly goes about redressing wrongs. Rather, they address 'empirical civil society', taking it as a space of divergent interests and contestation, as well as 'uncivil' conduct and demobilization. That approach gives these chapters significant explanatory power. It allows readers better to grasp the social anchoring of camps within civil society, why the agendas of those camps differ, and why some have advanced while others have been frustrated.

An outstanding example is the chapter on the Civil Society in the United States, by the Harvard sociologist Thea Skocpol, covering the main trends since the 1960s. In less than eleven pages she diagnoses decay in the fundamentals of associational life, notably in organized labour and in what she terms 'fellowship associations'. She further depicts the forces generating fragmentation, polarization and steering from above. A main dynamic is the rise of vertical, centralized advocacy organizations whose members (if any exist) are 'seen as consumers who send money to buy a certain brand of public interest representation' (p. 115). That development, and the resulting disempowerment of horizontal and cross-class associational life, cast ever-larger shadows over democracy in the US and beyond. The relative abundance and sophistication of research material on US society furnished Skocpol with many advantages. Yet her explanations are insightful and convincing because, under a lens of political sociology, she treats civil society as a terrain of (de-)politicization and contestation, thereby highlighting the role of class in its shifting configurations. Chapters by the political scientists Evelina Dagnino, on Latin America, and Neera Chandhoke, on India, take similar approaches and thereby illuminate forces

operating at wider, even global levels, notably the polarizing impacts of neoliberalism.

In a significant minority of chapters, however, an ‘empirical civil society’ of contested spaces is eclipsed by an approach that casts civil society as a normative actor. This is detectable in chapters on, for example, the grassroots and the global dimensions of civil society, on equality, on spirituality and on public work. These are thoughtful and often inspiring contributions, but by highlighting aspirations for civil society as a moral agent, they tend to obscure (or wholly omit) agents who don’t share the emancipatory dream, or actively oppose it. Those chapters often have many merits, but handholds for analysis of power and change in civil society are not prominent among them.

Beyond the geographically-focused chapters, several thematic chapters also make successful use of an ‘empirical civil society’ approach and of research findings. In their chapter on Civil Society and Diversity, the Dutch-American team of sociologists Hilde Coffé and Catherine Bolzendahl offers insights based on sociological research, such as that ‘some social groups not only participate more, or less, in civil society and politics but that they also participate *differently*’ (p. 253). Later chapters use research results to frame critiques of outside support for civil society. In their assessment of US foundation philanthropy, William Schambra and Krista Shaffer, staffers of a conservative American think-tank, speak of ‘the alarming deficits in democratic engagement that [foundation philanthropy] had a hand in producing’ (p. 451). Their remedy includes an unshamed revival of charity, coupled with local self-animation and self-governance. They reject philanthropy focused on ‘root causes’, together with government programmes, as incompatible with grassroots problem-solving and community-mindedness. Likewise disenchanted with the technocratic optimism driving many civil society promotion efforts, the US political scientist Omar Encarnación calls the foreign funding of democracy promotion a ‘questionable export’ (p. 472), particularly in the Middle East and North Africa — a region where the demand for democracy has emerged from civil society camps that have been largely ignored, and sometimes vilified, in the West. In their attacks on mainstream civil society support efforts, these provocative essays will be red meat for many grant makers and democracy promoters. Both provide arguments suitable for dissection and debate in graduate-level seminars.

Intriguing conceptual tools appear in contributions by other political scientists. In a theoretically rich chapter on Civil Society and Power, John Gaventa outlines his ‘power cube’ (p. 420ff), an analytical framework now gaining popularity. It entails three dimensions of power: forms (hidden and overt), levels (local, supra-local, global), and spaces or arenas (claimed or closed). Successful challenges to power depend on actors operating across all three dimensions simultaneously — thus underscoring the importance of alliances, coalitions and movements of organizations. Mark E. Warren, writing on Civil Society and Democracy, throws conceptual light on the

potential effects of civil associations and the actual capabilities and political circumstances ('associational ecologies') they require in pursuit of democracy. Taking civil society as a contested space, both chapters acknowledge that socio-political terrains are complex and that some initiatives in civil society risk reinforcing rather than reducing unequal and undemocratic power relations. Read in tandem with chapters on specific regions or policy themes, these chapters offer relevant conceptual handholds and pointers for further research.

CONCLUSION

Summarizing, and taking sport as metaphor, the *International Encyclopedia* is a massive set of programme notes about the game, profiles of some teams, playing grounds and major figures on-field and off. It offers discussions of fine points of the game as played in the well-paid professional leagues, especially in the United States. Some of its nuggets of information are of good quality. But the peculiar logic of its design and selection of topics, the mixed quality of writing and editing, and the lack of user-friendliness set limits to its overall usefulness for scholars and practitioners. For any book priced at more than 800 Euros, one could reasonably expect a higher standard. The *International Encyclopedia* offers uneven, and generally mediocre value for (a lot of) money.

The Oxford Handbook, by contrast, offers a range of deep-going interpretations of what is at stake in the game, how its rules have been influenced by powerful interests, and how the playing fields have been confined and made anything but level. In the rigour of the research underpinning a good number of chapters and in the clarity of contrasting arguments, the *Handbook* offers depth and coherence accessible to both newcomers and specialists. A collection of substantial essays probing a vital field of politics and social life, it is sure to become a significant point of reference as research and debate in civil society studies continue.

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