

# **The Separation between State, Market and Civil Society in Capitalism**

## **- A Cultural Political Economy Approach to Civil Society in Neoliberal Capitalism**

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### **Abstract**

*Since the 1980s and increasingly throughout the 1990s and up till today, civil society has become a central notion in Western liberal-democratic societies. On the one hand, civil society plays a central role in the liberal-democratic imaginary as a normatively privileged site of communication, voluntarism, social cohesion and democratisation processes which must be protected from encroaching logics of state and market. On the other hand, civil society is increasingly seen as a resource of public governance which can alleviate the pressures of the welfare state by providing the social and welfare services the state either can or will no longer provide.*

*This paper seeks to develop a Cultural Political Economy approach to civil society in neoliberal capitalism by arguing that the separation between state, market and civil society is a constitutive feature of the liberal-democratic capitalist imaginary. By delineating civil society as a sphere with inherent (good) values, it becomes depoliticised and can at the same time legitimise the progressiveness of liberal-democratic societies and is appropriated to alleviate the pressures on the welfare state and serve as a spatio-temporal fix of the crisis of the welfare state. The paper uses Denmark as an illustrative example of this development by showing how the discourse of civil society and voluntarism in government discourse since 1993, and especially since the 2008 financial crisis, serves a double function as both hailing values specific to Danish democracy and as a resource that can be used by the welfare state and as a prerequisite for austerity-measures.*

## **Introduction**

Since the 1980s, and increasingly throughout the 1990s and intensifying today, civil society has been the centre of much attention – both academically, publically and politically – as the third ‘sphere’ or ‘sector’ outside state and market. Originally brought to the fore as the force that fought for democracy against authoritarian regimes in especially Eastern Europe and Latin and South America, it was quickly adopted by debates in Western Europe as a force to secure democracy and democratisation processes against the colonising forces of market and state logics (Cohen and Arato 1999; Habermas 2001). Since then civil society has held a prominent place in the liberal-democratic imaginary as a normatively privileged sphere of communication, voluntarism, social cohesion and democratisation processes which must be protected from the encroaching logics of state and market. A strong and independent civil society and public sphere is in the liberal-democratic imaginary constitutive of the strength of liberal democracy and the independence of civil society from state and market both factually and normatively constitutive of modern, democratic societies (Habermas 1999; Taylor 2004).

However, at the same time, civil society has also become a central notion in state governance, particularly since the 2008 Financial Crisis. In an age and conjuncture of austerity and the scaling back of welfare services, civil society has increasingly been mobilised by Western states as a central arena for relieving the troubled welfare state (Dean and Villadsen 2016, 6; Jessop 2017). Under a number of guises and buzzwords, such as social responsibility, citizenship, big society, activation, participation, horisontalisation, modernisation, co-production and many more, civil society is increasingly mobilised to solve and provide social services (Brandsen, Verschuere, and Trommel 2014; Verschuere, Brandsen, and Pestoff 2012; Jessop 2017).

This paper analyses the doubly legitimacy function civil society plays in the current hegemonic order of neoliberalism and austerity in the post-Financial Crisis conjuncture: Civil society at the same legitimises the progressiveness of liberal democracy by underlining the necessity as well as factual existence of a delineated and free sphere of debate, democratic processes and social critique, while at the same time civil society as a privileged sphere with inherent (good) values is hailed as the arena which can aid, assist and overtake the stale, cold, ineffective bureaucratic state in the provision of welfare services, thereby legitimising the scaling back of state welfare services.

The paper seeks to develop a cultural political economy approach to civil society in neoliberal capitalism by arguing that the separation between state, market and civil society is a constitutive feature of the liberal-democratic, capitalist imaginary which serves to delineate and depoliticise civil society as something outside state and market, which can then be appropriated, administered and governed for appropriate aims, i.e. the provision of welfare services. It is the argument of the paper that civil society is not a given sphere with given values, but that the very state-society distinction is constitutive of the modern state and that civil society is constantly and continually produced by and through state power and that this entails a specific construction of civil society.

The paper uses the case of Denmark to illustrate how civil society – and particularly voluntary associations – plays this double function, by illustrating how civil society is at the same time hailed as a value specific to Danish society and a force that should increasingly be brought in to the provision of welfare services in order to ‘modernize’ a public sector no longer up to the task of providing social services to its population. Here, the ‘warm’, ‘innovative’ and ‘flexible’ civil society is contrasted to the ‘cold’, ‘old’ and ‘stale’ bureaucratic state. The paper analyses this production of civil society by the Danish state in government programmes and white papers since the Financial Crisis as well as in the law that regulates civil society associations.

The article argues that civil society plays a specific role for the hegemonic project in the current conjuncture. Civil society is a notion with positive connotations which plays a central role in the liberal-democratic, capitalist imaginary, thereby being central to appropriate by the hegemonic order. Civil society with its positive connotations thereby serves as a well-functioning both discursive and spatio-temporal fix of the crisis of the welfare state, which explains why civil society as a notion has been selected and retained in post-Financial Crisis hegemonic project. Civil society plays a central role in the current conjuncture because it helps to solve an essential problem for the crisis of the welfare state and to dislodge dissent from the neoliberal, austerity hegemonic project.

## **The Separation Between State, Market and (Civil) Society in Capitalism**

The separation or distinction between state and (civil) society is a constitutive and defining feature of the modern state. The very notion of modernity entails civility; modern society is civilized as opposed to uncivil and barbaric (Taylor 2004, 35). It is only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century that a thorough distinction between (civil) society and the state emerges. Before that civil society (as *societas civilis*) constituted a peaceful political order governed by law. Civil society equalled political society to for instance John Locke (Locke 1988). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, civil society becomes a distinct sphere and realm of life separated from the state (Keane 1998, 6). Generally, the separation between different logics, realms of spheres is an inherent and distinct feature of liberalism (Walzer 1984), just as the separation between the political and the economic is an essential feature of capitalism (Meiksins Wood 1981) and the state-society divide is a distinct feature and constitutive of the modern state and modern state theory (Mitchell 1991). The separation of state, market and civil society is a distinct and constitutive feature of modern, Western political modernity and liberal, representative democracy (Neocleous 1996). The distinction between (civil) society and the state becomes a distinct and constitutive feature of modernity and modern society in that the state is abstracted from society (Hegel 2013; Marx 1992b).

In his *Philosophy of Right* from 1921, G.W.F. Hegel laid the groundwork of the modern conception of civil society, and championed the conception that civil society was a feature of the modern state. To Hegel, civil society was a sphere between the family and the state, that is, including the market, and constituted, very centrally the ‘system of needs’ where people encounter each other with specific needs as specific, self-interested, subjects, which is best understood through the science of political economy (Hegel 2013 §189). Civil society (or rather *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* comprising both bourgeois society and civil society) is a sphere of atomised self-seeking individuals, which is socio-economic as opposed to political and as such appears non-political (Neocleous 1996, 2). The abstraction of the state as something opposed to (civil society) means that the state becomes the arena of political action, meaning that political struggle is reserved for the state, depoliticising the processes of civil society – most notably the economic (Neocleous 2003, 5). This was famously taken up by Marx, especially in “On the Jewish Question” and his “Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State” where he argues that the formal (political) equality of the state masked the (real) human, universal freedom of civil

society (or the economy) (Marx 1992b, 1992a). The abstraction of the state and the political away from civil society masks the political nature and the political constitution of civil society, especially the market and the economy, which come to appear as natural and unpolitical.

In the 1980s and 1990s, civil society once again came to the fore and achieved a privileged place in the liberal-democratic imaginary on the heels of the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin and South America. Now, however, civil society was distinguished as something other than the market, resulting in a three-fold distinction between state, market and civil society. This conception, which was located in a specific conjuncture of post-Soviet and capitalism and liberal-democratic optimism, was captured in the work *Civil Society and Political Theory* from 1992 by Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen. Here, civil society was conceptualised as a normatively privileged arena or sphere outside the state where organisations and individuals interact independently and separate from the logics of the political and the economic. Civil society was a privileged arena for social critique and dissent, one that was important to cultivate not only as a democratising force in authoritarian regimes, but also in order to keep democracy in Western Europe vibrant. A vibrant civil society became the hallmark of a well-functioning liberal, representative, parliamentary democracy. And therefore, civil society “based on solidarity” had to be “protected not only against the bureaucratic state but also the self-regulated market economy” (Cohen and Arato 1999, 18). Civil society was based on a specific value which had to be protected from the encroaching logics of state and market. This conception of civil society has left defining marks on civil society research in general.

However, the separation of spheres in the liberal-democratic imaginary hinders the understanding of how civil society is not a given entity or sphere, but is something which must be continually produced and constructed to exist. Such a separation construes civil society as something ‘extrapolitical’ (Taylor 2004), an arena, sphere or sector outside of the state and the market not originally or in its essence pervaded or perverted by political and economic logics or interests, and embodying and inhering special values specific to it such as voluntarism, communication, coherence, debate, democracy, critique and dissent. Thereby civil society comes to occupy a position as something existing before, prior to, or at least outside, independent, separate from the state (the political) and the market (the economy).

The separation between state, market and (civil) society thereby plays a significant role in the liberal-democratic imaginary. It reduces the complexity of society and societal processes by reducing and delineating social and societal actors to specific spheres with their own specific and irreducible logic. This imaginary constitutes a semiotic reduction, ordering the sense- and meaning-making of actors (both institutional and individual) in the world, but it also constitutes a structural complexity-reduction since it delineates political action to the state, thereby naturalising or sedimenting the market and civil society as non-political spheres and thereby the actions in them as natural or non-political, making possible only specific actions (i.e. ‘economic’ or ‘civil’) (Sum and Jessop 2013, 148–51). What goes on in the ‘civil’ or in the ‘market’ sphere is delineated from the political. The separation between state, market and civil society thereby plays a constitutive role for the modern state, capitalism and liberalism and consequently constitutes a strong semantic heritage deeply embedded and sedimented into the way we think the political (at least in the West). This aspect of the liberal-democratic imaginary has been given new significance in the post-Financial Crisis conjuncture. Increasingly since the 1990s has been hailed (and instrumentalised) as a sphere with specific values which could help and solve tasks of the welfare state in a better and more efficient manner, pegging the ‘warmth’, ‘innovation’ and ‘flexibility’ of civil society against the ‘cold’, ‘ineffective’ state bureaucracy. In doing so, the discourses on civil society continually reinforce, perpetuate and strengthen the established imaginary. The discourses on civil society play right into the discourses of the ‘modernisation’ of the public sector that has gone hand in hand with the dismantling of welfare services and austerity measures imposed on the welfare states since the 1990s. This development has only increased and intensified since the Financial Crisis.

### **Civil Society in the Shadow of the State**

However, civil society is not a given sphere or sector with given or inherent (good) values and qualities. Civil society is – like most, if not all, of the central socio-political entities and concepts we surround ourselves with – something that must be produced and constructed in order to come into existence. Civil society, like ‘the state’, ‘the political’, ‘the economic’ or ‘the market’, are fictitious entities which must be symbolised and imagined in order to come into existence (Neocleous 2003; Walzer 1967; Jessen 2015). Saying that civil society (or the state and the market) are fictitious entities does not amount to saying that they do not exist. On the contrary,

they are very real and have very real effects, but it means that they are nothing in and for themselves, nothing *a priori*, they have no inherent qualities, essence or being, but they must be (continually) produced and constructed in order to exist *as* entities with very real effects (Jessen 2015; Foucault 2009; Jessen and von Eggers 2013). Civil society is what Michel Foucault has called a ‘transactional reality’ (Foucault 2010; Villadsen 2016) – something which continually comes into being, and which has real effects even though it does not exist as such.

The symbolisation, creation and production of civil society comes through and from those who attempt to conceptualise civil society and thereby come to create it as a thing, as something, as an entity or a given sphere or sector with given (good) values and qualities. Paraphrasing Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the state, civil society can be said to be something which “thinks itself through those who attempt to think it” (Bourdieu 1994, 1; see also Foucault 2009, 234), Civil society is produced and constructed by those who attempt to think it, to conceptualise it: that is, those who do so academically, in public discourse, as well as in policy and political discussions about what civil society is and what it should be. Such discourses on civil society are exactly not neutral *descriptions*, but partake in the construction of the very field they claim and aim to describe (Bourdieu 1994). Civil society does not exist as a given sphere, sector, space or arena with its own specific logic independently of the state and the market. Civil society and its particular values and qualities is something which has always been, and which must continually be produced and constructed to come into existence.

It is the argument of this paper that the most central producer of civil society is the state. The state-civil society distinction is central to the emergence, operation and power of the modern state. The state-civil society distinction is important for the modern state in the sense that the state has constitutive power over civil society and the state produces, administers and governs civil society (Neocleous 1996, 2003). The state continually distinguishes itself from its ‘other’, society, which both legitimises the existence of the state (those natural processes of commercial exchange and innate political rights, desires and wants the state must defend) as well as constitutes a reservoir for the state to use and fashion for its governmental aims. The state, it can be said, “emerged as a project for the constitution and fashioning of social order (‘civil society’)” (Neocleous 2003, 5). Thereby, to preserve social order, the state must administer administer and govern civil society. Central to this is the creation of its ‘other’, society, as well as the market and the relegation of political struggle to the arena of the state (Neocleous 1996). Central to an

analysis of state power is therefore to analyse the “struggles over where the boundaries get drawn in practice between the state and civil society, state and economy” (Flohr and Harrison 2016, 308). This struggle is a hegemonic project waged very much by and for the state itself.

Civil society has always existed and continues to exist in the shadow of the state. Only under the protective aegis, administration, legislation and funding of the state can something like civil society exist. In this sense, the state produces (a specific type of) civil society through law, administration and political discourse, producing a sphere of civil society where organisations, associations and individuals can act and exist through the legislative and financial frames for the operation and existence of civil society. Law, administration and political discourse contribute to the carving out of a sector or sphere of civil society with its own inherent logics, values and actions.

This means viewing the state as not only the association which has the legitimate monopoly on physical violence (Weber 2009, 78), but more centrally on *symbolic violence*, meaning that it has the monopoly on the production and ordering of the categories with which we think the state as well as the social world in general (Bourdieu 2014, 1994; Thorup 2010; Foucault 2009, 2010). The state in this sense continues to be the most powerful association in social life, ordering and structuring the way we think about the world. The state is, to quote Antonio Gramsci, “the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci 1971, 244; Neocleous 1996, 37). This constitutes also the state’s role in securing and maintaining the hegemony of the ruling class, which very importantly in Gramsci’s analysis constituted the active consent of and over civil society (Anderson 1976; Neocleous 1996, 33–46; Thomas 2010; Sum and Jessop 2013, 201). Hegemony here refers to “the modalities of securing domination through social practices oriented to winning of overt or tacit consent” in a Gramscian sense of “the capacity of dominant groups to establish and maintain political, intellectual and moral leadership, and secure the ‘broad-based consent’ of allied and subordinate groups to prevailing relations of economic and political domination” (Sum and Jessop 2013, 201).

The state as the main producer, administrator and governor of civil society decides which organizations, associations and actions exist within it. The state is the association which through history has achieved a privileged place in the political order as the association which can decide



which other associations can exist and what they lawfully and morally can and cannot do (Luhmann 1993, 127–28; Neocleous 2003; Jessen 2015). Through legislation and administration, as well as public discourse, the state provides the framework and makes it possible for civil society to exist. This is especially the case in a country like Denmark, where a strong state has dominated and set the limits of civil society (Brandsen, Verschuere, and Trommel 2014, 3; Kaspersen and Ottesen 2006). The production of civil society as something distinct from the state and the market entails a specific construction and production of civil society, the individuals, organisations and associations acting within it and in what way they contribute to the common good (the *salus populi* or *publica*) of society as a whole. That type of civil society and those organisations and associations who promote social integration and cohesion as well as the solution and contribution to social, environmental and economic issues while not criticising, contesting or challenging the given order or the status quo are construed as ‘good’, ‘proper’ or ‘civil’ civil society. Those who do not, those individuals, associations, institutions and organisations who threaten to undermine the unity of the state and society and contribute to disintegrate the cohesion of society as a whole, those who do not contribute to, obey or uncritically accept what is understood or constructed as the common good of society are construed as ‘bad’, ‘improper’ or ‘uncivil’ civil society (Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Kopecký and Mudde 2003). What is good, proper and civil society is that type of civil society and those types of civil society associations which are produced as such. The state thereby – both semiotically and structurally – sets up the guidelines for what type of civil society can exist within it.

### **The Neoliberal Conjuncture**

We live in an era of capitalism that we, for the lack of a better term, call *neoliberalism*. Neoliberalism is the name given to the form of capitalism, or the form capitalism and capital accumulation took in the 1970s. Since the 1970s and intensifying in the 1990s, the perceived wisdom of public governance – inspired deeply by neoliberal thinking – has been the scaling back of welfare services, shrinking of the state and an increasing privatisation of public services as well as the introduction of competition, market-like conditions on the state and in public administration, both through New Public Management (NPM) in the 1990s and since the millennium, New Public Governance (Brandsen, Verschuere, and Trommel 2014; Davies 2014;

Blyth 2015; Mirowski and Plehwe 2015; Peck 2010). Neoliberalism denotes how policies of deregulation, privatisation, austerity and the promotion of free market economics caused a shift from the post-war Keynesian welfare state to the (neoliberal) competition state (Cerny 1997; Pedersen 2011). This shifted the political objective of the welfare state to being the social and economic rights of individuals to being the promotion of (business) competitiveness (Blyth 2015; Cerny 1997; Glyn 2006; Pedersen 2011; Porter 1990). Defining for *neoliberalism* and its contrast to classical *laissez-faire* liberalism is the constitutive role of the state in creating and upholding markets and market-logics as well as expanding the logic of the market and market principles and competitiveness to all sectors of social life (Brown 2015; Crouch 2011; Dardot and Laval 2013; Davies 2014; Foucault 2010; Mirowski 2014; Mirowski and Plehwe 2015; Peck 2010). In neoliberalism, markets do not simply exist and must be left alone (*laissez-faire*) in order to flourish, but the market logic, and especially the logic of competition, must be actively implemented onto all facets of social life in order to make it function optimally (Brown 2015; Davies 2014; Foucault 2010). Neoliberalism denotes a way of thinking about government and the role of the state as a means to securing the maximisation of profitability and economic growth. The common or public good (the *salus publica*) of society is in neoliberalism synonymous with economic growth and profitability and as a result, the economic logic and the logic of competition must be extended as far as possible throughout the societal body. This means an increasing “economization of government” (Vogl 2017, vii) – which also means a strong dedication to austerity measures and the cutting back of welfare services.

### **Civil Society as Value, Resource and Possibility – The Case of Denmark**

According to the Danish Constitution (Grundloven from 1849), §78, section 1, everyone (or every citizen) has the right without explicit permission to form an association for a legal purpose. Anyone can form an association as long as it is not unlawful or is opposed to the existing laws of the land. The Danish law on civic education (Folkeoplysningsloven, literally the law on the enlightenment of the people) from 1990, which succeeded the law on leisure time (Fritidsloven) from 1968, regulates which voluntary associations can get state and municipal funding and what they have to do to achieve this (Kaspersen and Ottesen 2006). The legislation thereby acts as an instigator of a specific type of organisation with specific values and structures and produces the good civil society organisation. Through this legislation, a space is carved out and something like

a sphere of ‘civil society’ is created, producing the boundaries and demarcations between state, market and civil society, constructing civil society as something which encapsulates certain ideas and values such as democracy and voluntarism. The law regulates particularly association which offer (civic) education, evening schools, athletic associations, sport clubs, scout-organizations as well as political and religious youth movements.

Such associations must be “of public good” or “for the common good” (almennyttig) (§4, 2.7.), which entails that a voluntary, enlightening association must not be established for commercial purposes and must be non-profit (§5, 3.).<sup>1</sup> The aim of such associations is to “further democratic understanding and active citizenship with the activity and the committed community as a starting point to strengthen general education and enlightenment for the people. The aim is to strengthen the participants’ ability and desire to take responsibility for their own lives and to participate actively and engaged in societal life” (§7; §14). Through law and administration, the state regulates the space, organisational structure and definition of the contribution to the common good of (voluntary) associations. Any association can exist, but in order to get state-funding, it is specified what such an association can and cannot do, just as there is rules for its organizational setup. The law thereby structures and incentivises to what kind of associations can exist, what they can do, and thereby what civil society is, what it can and cannot do. These associations are allowed to exist as long as they support the given order and not challenge it fundamentally. Civil society is a non-political and non-commercial sphere. It supports political youth organisations, but only to the degree that they live up to the established standards. They are youth organisations for established parties in the parliamentary system. As such, this is a prime example of how the state regulates and administers civil society and its associations by structuring them in legal, corporate form (the language and modus operandi of the state), recognising only as legitimate what it can regulate (Jessen 2015; Neocleous 1996, 2–5; Hegel 2013, 253).

The law of civic education regulates what is traditionally associated with civil society, especially in Denmark, and which is often hailed as the proud tradition of associational Denmark (foreningsdanmark). However, in recent years, especially since the Financial Crisis, civil society has attracted a lot of attention as a way to secure the Danish welfare society. When speaking of civil society here, as the providers of welfare services, it is primarily voluntary organisations that

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Danish in the following are my own, MHJ.

are referred to. The debates about voluntary associations as essential to securing welfare services and as a means to hinder the expansion of state bureaucracy was already made in the beginning of the 1980s (Henriksen and Bundesen 2004; Kaspersen and Ottesen 2006), just as the role of social work in the provision of social services goes back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Habermann and Ibsen 1998; Villadsen 2004).

In June 2017, the Danish government appointed a Civil Society Task Force, comprising ten members from civil society, the municipalities, business and the main unions. In the press release it was stated that “Civil society holds the potential to challenge the silo- and customary-thinking of the public sector” (Finansministeriet 2017).<sup>2</sup> In the same press release, the chairman of the Volunteer Council (Frivilligrådet) – set up by the government in 2008 to contribute to the public debate about what role the voluntary sector could play in the development of the welfare society – stated that “civil society can be a part of the solution to the challenges we are facing” (Finansministeriet 2017). The trope of modernising, reforming and renewing the public sector has been a standard feature of Danish politics, governmental programs and reforms for a number of years, especially from the 1990s (Greve 2006), but after the Financial Crisis, civil society is seen as a more active participant in this process. In the spring of 2017, the government also published two white papers, the *Cohesion Reform* (Sammenhængsreform – with the subtitle *The citizen first – a more cohesive public sector* (Borgeren først – en mere sammenhængende offentlig sektor)) from April 2017 (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017b) and *Joint solutions frees up money for welfare* (Fælles løsninger frigør penge to velfærd) (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017a). These are preliminary reform-suggestions for reforms to be conducted in the spring of 2018, of which the Civil Society Task Force is going to be a decisive part (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017b, 23). Here, the problems of the public sector are highlighted by the argument that even though Denmark has one of the best welfare societies in the world, it is very big and complex, and that it is too much divided in silos, and that the solutions of its tasks are not aimed at the needs of citizens and businesses (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017b, 3). If Denmark wishes to continue having high-quality welfare solutions, “renewal and innovation is necessary” (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017b, 3), just as there is a need for a more “modern” or “contemporary” (tidssvarende) public sector (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017b, 3). Here, civil society should play an active part.

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Danish are my own, MHJ.

Before 2010, the notion of civil society appears only sporadically in the different governmental programs in Denmark. Besides a 1998 white paper from the Ministry of Social Affairs on voluntary social work in the welfare society of the future (Socialministeriet 1998a, 1998b) (then a Social Democratic government), the notion of civil society organisations aiding the social effort occur only sporadically. From 2010, the reference to civil society and voluntary organisations becomes more explicit, just as it is with explicit reference to the economic crisis. In the government platform from 2010 – a government consisting of the Danish liberalist party, Venstre and the Conservatives (Konservative) – entitled *Denmark 2020 – Knowledge, growth, wealth, welfare* (Danmark 2020 – Viden, vækst, velstand, velfærd) it is explicitly mentioned that the government is “aware of the great challenge that awaits in the time after the crisis” and that it “is the intention of the government to get Denmark back on the path to growth” (Regeringen 2010, 10). One of the ways of doing this is to create “equal opportunities” for all and to reach this goal, the government states that it wants to attain an “increased involvement of civil society and voluntary organisations in the social task”, stating that “voluntary Denmark has vast resources” which are to be used “more goal-oriented and offensive.” (Regeringen 2010, 28).

This programme, from February 2010, was followed up by the *National Civil Society Strategy* (National civilsamfundsstrategi) from October of the same year (bearing the subtitle *An increased involvement by civil society and voluntary organisations in the social effort – En styrket inddragelse af civilsamfundet og frivillige organisationer i den sociale indsats*) by the government and the Ministry of Social Affairs (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010). The *Strategy* defines civil society as “a joint designation for the actors and groups that exist between and independent of the private sphere, the market and the public in a democratic society” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 4). Civil society actors exist somewhere between the private sphere (or family), the economy and the state and is something that is characteristic of a democratic society. The introduction furthermore states how “civil society binds us together as a society because civil society bears some fundamental values in Danish society. Values like democracy, personal responsibility, and community spirit thrive and are developed in civil society. Civil society is in other words the foundation of active citizenship and social cohesion in society.” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 4). Civil society is unequivocally associated with something good, with foundational values and democracy which are fundamental to Danish society. Two notions that are important to notice here are those of *active citizenship*, featured

prominently in the strategy, as well as that of *social cohesion*, which is in line with a general focus on *social cohesion* (sammenhængskraft) which has been prominent in the Danish political debate in at least the last decade of which the *Cohesion Reform* of 2017 also plays on. Civil society is both a societal *value* as well as a *resource* that must be protected and developed (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 4).

The strategy is explicitly inspired by David Cameron's *Big Society*, where "the state should pull back and let people through" and the objective is "a change of culture where the citizens in their everyday life, households, local areas not always turn to the public sector, the local authorities or the government to find answers to their problems. But that the citizens instead feel free and powerful to help themselves and their fellow citizens in the local community." (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 27). The bureaucratic structures of the state stand in the way of people (or civil society) actually solving tasks and problems for themselves. Active citizenship means not relying on the state for help, but in doing it more themselves, thereby individualising and depoliticising the solution to economic or societal problems.

Generally the strategy lays a great emphasis on increased cooperation between the public, the private and the civil sector. Civil society "holds the potential to "secure innovation and development of the social effort", and there is a need to "prioritise the development of new models of cooperation between different actors" (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 9). One of the explicit aims is to improve the cooperation between municipalities, business and voluntary organisations, and the objective is a "civil society that cooperates with the public sector and private business on solving social problems" (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 11). Thereby, with the strategy, "the government wants to focus on civil society as an essential part of the welfare society" (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 11).

The reason for this is based on the specificity of the values, logics and actions of civil society: "Civil society can do something that the public sector cannot. Civil society, and especially the voluntary sector, first of all has a capaciousness and a width that the public sector cannot offer" (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 11). Civil society has inherent qualities, distinct from both business (the market) and the public sector (the state) which can be mobilised. And it is exactly this independence, this special status, that the government underlines as a great asset: "The great strength of civil society is exactly its independence and thereby the possibility

to a larger degree to take its starting point in local conditions, ideas and initiatives instead of central regulation.” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, 13).

The Liberalist-Conservative government was ousted between 2011 and 2015. Here, the central tenets of the civil society strategy was retained, but not pushed as offensively. However, in their governmental programme, *A Denmark that Stands Together* (Et Danmark der står sammen) from 2011 it is underlined how the economic crisis has brought Denmark into an imbalance that threatens to hollow out the welfare system and that the welfare of future generations is at stake seeing increase in poverty and inequality (Regeringen 2011, 5). This requires a modernisation of Denmark with innovative and extensive reforms that are created in “partnerships that break down traditional barriers”, especially between civil society and the public sector in order to secure the welfare society of the future (Regeringen 2011, 5). Even though the public sector has the main responsibility in the social effort, the “voluntary sector is an important supplement because it can create another form of trust and contact with and between people. Social work based on voluntarism is a defining strength of the Danish welfare society.” (Regeringen 2011, 50). Therefore, the government sought to loosen state rules and regulations which “risk to suffocate initiative and entrepreneurship” (Regeringen 2011, 50). Again, the voluntary sector and civil society organisations are portrayed as embodying certain (good) values distinct from both the state and the market, and something that must be allowed to flourish without the constraining bonds of the bureaucratic, administrative state. But which must nonetheless increasingly be used to help the social effort.

Since 2015 the Liberalist Party, Venstre, is once again in power, originally alone, but from 2016 along with the Conservatives and the libertarian party Liberal Alliance. In their government programme *For a Freer, Richer and Safer Denmark* (For et friere, rigere og mere trygt Danmark) it is again highlighted that it is the public sector that has the responsibility for the social effort, but that “the voluntary effort is an important supplement that consists of a great humane contribution” seeing that “the voluntary organisations can do something that the public sector cannot. Democracy, norms, community.” (Regeringen 2016, 65). Therefore the government also wishes to strengthen the possibilities for the voluntary effort in Denmark and work to see that “the best possible conditions for private organisations and volunteers to take co-responsibility (medansvar)” exist (Regeringen 2016, 65). It is this government which has now initiated the Civil Society Task Force along with the reform-suggestions *Cohesion Reform Joint*

*solutions frees up money for welfare* which should prepare the grounds for more reforms in 2018, which also involves a new strategy for civil society.

Civil society has played an increasingly important role in Danish governmental programmes since 2010. It has become a central place for the reform and modernisation of what is portrayed as a too big, too bureaucratic, slow and cold unmanageable public sector. As opposed to this, the flexibility and innovation of civil society is a perfect antidote and constitutes a better solution to social tasks than the state can. This is common for both the Social Democratic as well as the Liberalist-Conservative governments, although the latter have definitely pushed the agenda further and more aggressively. However, they are both involved in casting civil society as a special, normatively privileged sphere with good and progressive values such as voluntarism, democracy, communication and innovation. These values which are cast as fundamental to Danish society are therefore consequently important to also use to save and improve the welfare society. However, this goes hand in hand with a number of cuts to social services which have been legitimised with reference to the necessity of scaling back with reference to the financial crisis, globalisation and the international economy. The discourse on civil society thereby comes in handy and serves a doubly legitimacy function in Danish state governance – both as a specific value, but also as a resource and a possibility to take advantage of for the sake of welfare society.

### **Concluding remarks – Civil Society in the Post-Financial Crisis Conjuncture**

Civil society plays a central role in the liberal-democratic imaginary as a sphere of free interaction, critique, voluntarism and democratic processes which must be protected from the encroaching logics of state and market. Civil society is primary in a sense, it is these natural, personal rights of free speech, association (and most importantly private property) which the state is originally institutes to guard and protect. However, in doing so, as Marx already pointed out, the state is abstracted away from society, thereby masking the constitutive role of the state over society, naturalising, sedimenting and depoliticising the processes of civil society as something essentially non-political and something that can and should not be interfered with. Thereby civil society comes to appear as an already given sphere and thereby the active role of the state and the hegemonic project in fashioning, governing and administering civil society disappears from view. In this sense, this defining aspect of the liberal-democratic imaginary



serves both a semiotic and a structural reduction of complexity, ordering the sense- and meaning making of societal actors as well as delineating political action to the state and structuring the market and civil society as non-political spheres.

It has been the argument of this paper – illustrated by the case of Denmark – that civil society plays a doubly legitimatory function in neoliberal capitalism. On the one hand, it testifies to the progressive character of liberal democracy in that it testifies to the existence and protection of a sphere of free interaction, critique and contestation as the hallmark of democracy. On the other hand, this sphere is increasingly being mobilised and appropriated by the state to modernise the public sector, pitting the warmth, innovation and flexibility of civil society against the cold, slow, ineffective bureaucratic state, thereby utilising the trope of civil society to legitimise austerity measures.

Civil society thereby plays an important role for the hegemonic project in the current post-Financial Crisis conjuncture. Given the positive connotations attached to civil society through a long semantic history and its role in the liberal-democratic imaginary, it serves as a discursive fix for the crisis of the welfare state, drawing on existing and well-established semiotic meaning-making to displace the scaling back of welfare services to the positive ‘taking-over’ of a more effective and better civil society. At the same time, it serves as a spatio-temporal fix by displacing the political and economic problem of the economic crisis to be solved by civil society and voluntary organisations. This also explains the centrality of the discourse of civil society. It is selected and retained both structurally, agentially and discursively because it already plays a central role in the liberal-democratic imaginary and in public and academic conceptions as something unequivocally good (Sum and Jessop 2013, 214–19). The discourse on civil society, in short, resonates because of its prominent place in the liberal-democratic imaginary, because of its established use both historically and actually. It resonates, is selected and retained because it serves a particular function in the post-Financial Crisis conjuncture of austerity-measures and the scaling back of welfare services. Civil society as a way to legitimise the scaling back of welfare services fits perfectly with the dominant hegemonic logic and project.

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