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## **Civic Sector and Organizational Identity. Formation of Civic Identities after 1989**

*Abstract:* The article provides an analysis of the re-formation of the civic sphere and civil society in the post-communist environment. Focusing on the widespread tendency to equate civil society with the organized public involvement through non-profit and non-governmental organizations, it points to tensions and conflicts that such equation brings about. It is inspired by an extensive research project, yet it also draws on two distinct theoretical perspectives in particular. Luhmann's and Alexander's conceptual schemes serve here to account for the relations between various components of the formation of civic identities after 1989: the specific historical situation and the modern concept of active citizenship, the organizational form of civic associations and symbolic representations of civil society, concrete relationships or organizational practices and the identity of the civic sector.

*Keywords:* civil society, civic sector, organizational identity, reflexivity, social systems, discursive codes, cultural representations

### **NGOs and Civil Society**

It is a historical peculiarity of post-communist countries that a renewal of civil society has been tied first and above all to development of formally registered civic associations, that is, of non-governmental and non-profit organizations (NGOs). Therefore this text begins with a brief explanation of why we can find such a firm and largely uncontested equation between civil society and NGOs—in the media, political speeches, governmental policies, academic texts, and especially in conceptual documents and public statements of representatives of the non-profit and non-governmental sector itself.

The resuscitation of an independent, competent, self-confident, responsible and publicly-active citizenship (cf. Turner 1992) began to be considered, with the changes of the political regime at the end of the year 1989, one of the major structural conditions of consolidation, stability and reliable functioning of liberal democracy. To achieve it became a historical goal which was to find its place in the agenda of the political representation of the new regime. Thus visions and conditions for the formation of a civil society became the subject of political discourse—a problem around which contradictory political positions and camps competing for political influence were articulated. Critical sociological analysis has been conducted only later: on the one hand it is still rather weak, on the other, it has too easily been often drawn into the dominant logic of ideological competition.

However, the political representation of the new regime, no matter how divided, could not—due to its ostentatious contrast with the paternalism of old regime—aim at too direct political re-education of the enslaved and passive socialist subject into an independent and active citizen of the new times. On the one hand, a liberal solution appeared attractive: ensuring fundamental human rights and freedoms (of speech, religion, association, enterprise etc.) alone will provide space and impetus for civic activism of responsible individual citizens. The other position, which we can term the realistic one, without necessarily prioritizing it, did take the quality of the human fabric into account of which the new civil society was to be created. It went a step further and saw it as a task for the new political representation to provide at least indirect formal (legal, financial) frameworks and impulses for the cultivation of an active citizenship. This position also reflected the fact that in socialist Czechoslovakia (especially after 1968) the conditions for the work of independent civic initiatives and the development of critical citizenship were even more precarious than, for example, in Poland or in Hungary, countries that otherwise underwent a similar historical experience.

For the latter position, the vision of civic association in the form of non-profit non-governmental organization acquired its exceptional representative status. This actually involves the type of public activity for which it is easier to find and demand concrete ways of political support in a liberal democratic regime (financial and material support, favorable legislation) and at the same time it is possible to maintain the image of independence of such associations from state power. Such political support was, at least to a certain degree, to compensate for the deficit of modern civic tradition which, in contrast, is available in politically more stable Western liberal democracies. Moreover, it is from them that we have adopted the concept of non-profit non-governmental organizations. The fact that, in those democracies, a civic sector institutionalized in such a manner is only one of many levels of representation of responsible citizenship remained somewhat understated. In the Czech Republic, and the post-communist environment in general, the development of an institutionalized civic sector has become the major indicator of the development of civil society as such. There also was an instrumental aspect involved: it was in and through the NGO sector that the western expertise and financial assistance could be received.

This is clearly a simplified story of the renewal of civil society in the post-communist world (I have offered a more detailed account in Marada 2003). It is, however, sufficient enough to at least outline one significant reason why in the Czech Republic non-profit non-governmental organizations and the civic sector institutionalized by them gained such a strong representational role in the vision of a modern civil society. In the following, I attempt to demonstrate in what sense and in what ways the civic sector conceived in such a manner influences the formation of civic identities.

### **The Civic Sector and (its) Identity**

To be publicly active via an organization of the non-profit and non-governmental sector is not equally important for everyone in respect of identity formation. Yet the

different attitudes are not just a matter of personal taste or commitment. We can see, for example, that with the increasing professionalization and anonymization of the non-profit and non-governmental sector a certain type of social actors finds it easier to fluctuate not only between different NGOs. They also more easily switch jobs among the organizations of the civic sector, business firms and the institutions of public and state administration.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, and more importantly, such anonymization of the NGO environment—connected with the reduction of NGOs' mission to instrumental effectiveness and a corresponding form of professionalization and bureaucratization (for an early treatment of this process from a management perspective see Handy 1988)—has increasingly been perceived as a threat to the NGOs' civic ethos and public reputation, and thus also as a threat to their attractiveness for morally committed social actors.<sup>2</sup>

With the professionalization of civic sector a clash of two opposing trends occurs. For one thing, some of the distinctive characteristics that have traditionally been believed to differentiate the civic sector from business and state administration tend to erode. These characteristics are, e.g., the accent on voluntary character of public activity, co-operative environment within and among associations, informal interpersonal relationships, simple administration, focus on more immediate goals, etc. Such blurring of clear distinctions, moreover, has been supported from the other side: by the noted changes in corporate culture, now stressing cooperative and friendly environment within firms, individual responsibility and creativity, heterarchical instead of hierarchical style of organization and communication, etc. (See, e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello 2005)

At the same time, a certain tension increases inside the civic sector whose many representatives strive to preserve the image of its specific ethical identity. They are incited to do so in reaction to: 1) the noticed change in corporate culture, 2) the expected social responsibility of state and local administrations, 3) the increasingly competitive relationships among these spheres (competing for resources<sup>3</sup>), 4) the mentioned professionalization and bureaucratization of the civic sector (which itself has largely been a result of that competition). The dramatic symbolical and rhetorical means they often tend to use in such endeavour is intended to preserve the exceptional moral and political status of the NGO sector vis-à-vis the mentioned trends.

Doubtless there still emerge many small NGOs that can hardly be labelled as overly professionalized and bureaucratized institutions. The question is whether and to what extent—despite their superiority in terms of numbers—they play an ade-

<sup>1</sup> Fluctuation among different sectors does not necessarily erase a sense of difference in the cultural status which these spheres represent. Sometimes such sensitivity can be even strengthened on the basis of concrete experience. As a rule, however, the experience of involvement in different professional sectors brushes away the militant edge of the radical moral and political evaluation of differences in the cultural status between individual sectors and their prototypical representatives.

<sup>2</sup> The empirical evidence for conclusions presented in this and the following sections is drawn from 12 unpublished case studies of Czech NGOs compiled by Kateřina Janků and Magdaléna Jantulová.

<sup>3</sup> The resources of civic associations or NGOs are not necessarily only of financial and material nature. They can also involve a more favourable legal status, systematic preferential treatment and privileged access to the government and other aid providers etc. The image of NGOs, their public legitimacy, is potentially a very powerful basis for their more favourable position in the competition for resources.

quately representative role in relation to the civic sector as a whole, to its general public image. What counts rather is the access to mass media, and the public authority of those who are (due to such access, among others) considered as spokespeople of the civic sector in general. In a discursive environment which, on the one hand, emphasizes the exceptional moral status of this sector and, on the other, appeals to the increase in the professionalism and effectiveness of NGOs (their accountability), smaller organizations may easily feel rather inadequate as embodiments of the civic sector. Their representatives often give a somewhat different picture of institutionalized citizenship than their counterparts from the overarching institutions of organized civil society, large established NGOs and foundations, or people who understand the civic sector as a social and moral base for the fulfillment of their political ambitions.

The principles of civility have become subject to constant clarification and contestation within the civic sector itself. Today, this seems to be a sociologically more interesting issue than the—related indeed—articulation of distinctions between this sector, business, and the state. The research project on the dynamics of the internal organizational environment of NGOs in post-communist countries,<sup>4</sup> which has provided an empirical evidence for this text, clearly showed that disputes over the character of NGOs as representations of the civic sector and civic ethos are a regular agenda within these organizations. The image and cultural status of the civic sector has an effect on the motivation and self-perception of many actors who participate in it. Their identification with a concrete NGO becomes to a significant degree dependent on whether they see the functioning of the given NGO as in line with a particular image of moral civility. It is only to that extent that they are willing to re-present their own identities through the participation in the activities of these NGOs.

Elaborating his theory of a differentiated modern society, Niklas Luhmann at times asserts that civil society is a misleading theoretical concept, which tells us little about how modern societies work. Conversely, his theory was often criticized for not making it possible to account for civil society as a specific kind of social environment, defined by a specific sort of social action and identity. Somewhat ironically, it seems that by equating civil society with the institutionalized NGO sector Luhmann's perspective becomes particularly apt to analyze and explain the subject matter which once seemed outside his theory's reach. In other words, the civic (NGO) sector as a representation of civil society fits well his definition of a relatively autonomous social system. This approach to the institutionalization of civil society brings up (or at least makes more articulate) the following traits: the sector's specific societal function and organizational principles, its boundaries from and channels of communication with other social systems (economic, political, legal, family, etc.), its inner functional sub-divisions, its specific ideological legitimations, and, above all, the awareness of its distinctiveness among social actors, that is, its distinctive culturally defined and socially reproduced identity.

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<sup>4</sup> *Organizational Innovation and Interactive Technology Among NGOs in Post-Socialist East Central Europe*. This project was sponsored by the National Science Foundation (USA), and also supported by a grant from the Czech Ministry of Education.

In our context, Luhmann's concept of self-reference as an indispensable property of any established social system provides a particularly useful analytical perspective (see, e.g., Luhmann 1990). In and through the above mentioned self-reflexive public disputes as well as debates within NGOs, the civic sector *as a representation of civil society* reproduces its own distinct identity. The basic self-reflexive question is: "Do we (always) behave as a real *civic* organization, as a *faithful* representation of civil values?" How can we say? Simply, we can do so by comparing ourselves with the ideal type of civic organization and by applying basic civic principles and values to what we do. It is to the extent that we understand NGOs and the civic sector as representations of basic civic values and principles that we weigh up our actions by the ideal image of civility, and we attempt to adjust our practice to it.

Indeed, in historically established social systems (institutionalized contexts of action) such leaning to the ideal mostly happens below the threshold of reflexive consciousness. A reflexive judgment especially comes to light in critical situations when our action in our own eyes and in the eyes of others deviates from such an ideal (that is, from the silently shared image or cultural representation). A similar reflection occurs in all *autopoietic* (i.e. self-referential) social systems: for example, in law, when the application of a legal norm does not fit a moral conviction, in science, when our theoretical proposition is questioned with reference to a model of science (for example, from the standpoint of natural sciences), in the family, when a spouse or children tell us "We are such a strange family," or in politics, when we hear about non-political politics. Similar collisions are not only tools of reflexive confirmation of the identity of a social system but also means of its eventual change. There may coexist (even in societies that are relatively stable over time) alternative views of what a specific social system exactly is about and how it should work. Yet it is exactly the intensity of these disputes which *validates* a shared presupposition that such social systems or contexts of action really exist (otherwise there would be nothing to disagree about), and that these contexts are important for making sense of our action. And it is this kind of underlying shared beliefs that makes the relevant contexts socially effective in guiding our action, and thus socially real.

This is one theoretical framework, within which we can pursue the question of formation of organizational/civic identities after 1989 in still relatively new democracies. Such historical context, the beginning of a new era, and the prominent political status of the task of developing a viable civil society, have effectively spurred the (self-)reflexivity of civic actors. The following examples illustrate in what ways the specific historical conditions of the transition period have affected the self-reflexive discourse of civility and civil society in the post-communist environment.

### Old and New Citizens

The historical situation under which the civic sector has been formed in post-communist countries has made it into a practical laboratory of sector reflexivity in the above mentioned sense. Immediately after the regime change in November

1989 a range of new civic organizations with a variety of aims and agendas came into being. They were often founded by people who envisaged a new opportunity to carry out projects that they could not pursue prior to November 1989 or could do so only in a restricted way. This involved, for example, alternative forms of education, organizing cultural events without the political consent of the authorities, more radically conceived environmental projects, protection and support of human rights, alternative forms of social welfare, which highlighted formerly concealed problems (for example, of drug abuse among the young), projects based on co-operation with fellow organizations in Western countries, the renewal of the Scout movement, etc.

Such projects were often legitimated by articulating a double opposition: a general opposition to the old regime, and a particular opposition to organizations that survived from the communist times. The latter had formerly been organized under the overarching wings and supervision of the so-called National Front, the effective controlling mechanism of the Communist Party. Under the old regime, this umbrella organization encompassed all formally organized public activities—from political parties, labor unions and the Socialist Youth Union all the way to associations and clubs of gardeners, beekeepers, hunters or stamp collectors. Doubtless many of these groups sighed with relief after the National Front, after the regime change disappeared. At the same time, they often started to feel uncertain about their financial and material resources. Their representatives then easily saw the newly founded associations as rivals in the competition for scarce resources. Given the civic ethos of the new activists, such competitive struggles readily acquired an ideological wrapping.

The newness of the projects that emerged after 1989 did not solely lie in the time of their creation. What their representatives declared as new was the civic ethos they represented and the ways in which they were to achieve their goals. Unlike the organized members of old associations, the new activists could hardly be suspected of being motivated by the possibility to declare their public involvement in their formal *curricula vitae*. Nor could their activity be seen as necessarily harmless to the political regime and representation. Moral commitment and political independence constituted a significant component of the ethos that was embodied by the new organizations and their representatives. Unlike the older organizations, they could claim to be the true representation and realization of newly gained freedoms. Not necessarily every new activist or organization did that. But such definition of ‘new’ civility was at hand as commonly understandable and therefore socially effective. And it *could* be employed—by those who were able to identify with it—if necessary for the affirmation of one’s moral identity or some more materially practical needs. Thus, the emergence of new association was vital for the public articulation of civic ethos and the sector’s moral and political self-reflection.

### **Non-profit Status as Moral Distinctiveness**

Independence from state power as a source of civic identity was soon supplemented with another distinction which endowed civic actors with a structural-cultural basis

for an exceptional moral status: their aim is not to generate financial profit. This distinction (not just non-governmental, but also non-profit) is firmly attached to the established label of civic associations, and it is discursively reproduced from a variety of angles, including social sciences. Titles of a number of studies dealing with NGOs—for example *Between States and Markets* (Wuthnow 1991) or *The Role of the market, state and the civic sector in the transformation of the Czech society* (Potůček 1997)—strengthen the seemingly natural character of such a division.

The non-profit status of civic organizations is indeed given already by their legal definition in the Czech law. This alone indeed, does not shape their identity and moral self-understanding of their members. The legitimacy of associations targeting, for example, environmental problems, social aid, education, support for cultural activities or local and regional development has been strongly articulated within the framework of “counterbalancing the socially dysfunctional market principle.” Similarly, the non-state character of such activities has been stressed by pointing out to, e.g., an imperfect legal system or the weak institutional support of the state. As these legitimations become publicly expressed, individuals active in the civic sector have to handle the challenge of articulating their own attitudes to state authority in a liberal democratic regime and to the market principle. The case is not that all of them are necessarily anti-state and anti-market. But they are induced to reflect upon these questions and explain their position, since such a partisan understanding of civil society almost automatically positions them in a certain kind of opposition to business and the state.

The non-profit character of civic associations is a powerful source of their actors’ moral self-confidence. A clear moral connotation is also involved in the very way of gaining financial and material resources for the work of NGOs. Especially in the 1990s, the only undisputable legitimate sources of support were largely seen in the state and well established foundations. Individual donations from private individuals were by and large not considered as civic participation. Such donations were rather seen as ‘buying out bad conscience’, as a compensation for public inactivity. This attitude, however, has been changing along with the increasing diversity of resources used by NGOs later on. As business firms, larger or local, found their way to supporting civic associations and projects, discussions on acceptable sources of financial and material support got a new impetus and became a regular agenda among the activists of the civic sector. In these debates, selective criteria of acceptability and unacceptability have been articulated, which have added just another layer to the cultural representation of civic identity.

Activists of the civic sector generally share the awareness that the question of sponsorship is not a morally neutral one. They, however, differ in concrete strategies that they select to sustain the reputation of their NGOs and their own moral integrity with respect to funding sources. Some of them formulate more or less explicit rules regarding their own acquisition of resources (for example, donations from environmental polluters are unacceptable, as well as from supporters of authoritarian regimes, weapon producers, supranational corporations etc.) and frequently they supplement these general criteria with a so-called grey area in respect of which decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. In other NGOs these questions are solved

only when a practical dilemma occurs. Such a dilemma can regularly occur—i.e., the participating actors are ready to engage in it—only if there is a shared sensitivity regarding this kind of moral challenge.

Such a shared sensitivity builds and, at the same time, results from the distinct identity of a relatively autonomous social system and its actors. With the increase of points of communication with surrounding systems (here legitimate sources of external support), the complexity of the system increases as well (see Luhmann 1995). The moral self-confidence of civic actors is no longer cultivated around their attitudes towards business and conventional politics in general. Now the question arises as to what kind of business and what kind of political regime we can legitimately deal with, that is, what criteria of selection to employ. The increase in complexity of a system, as Luhmann repeatedly reminds us, in turn generates the need for establishing mechanisms of reduction of such complexity. In the case of receiving external financial and material support for civic projects, these mechanisms are not only of legal nature. What matters more are selective criteria based on generalized moral norms, since this is where the participants are or can be directly involved. Application of general moral norms to concrete cases requires cultivation of interpretative capacities on the part of the involved actors. They have to take into account the moral standards valid for the social context within which they act—and thus they contribute to the increase of reflexivity of the system as a whole.

### **Civic Values: Communitarianism and Individualism**

In the case of civic self-confidence, too, two basic coordinates of identity formation are in place: it always involves a negative definition against the outside (what we are not) and an articulation of certain inner qualities (what makes us different). Regarding the latter component, actors demonstrate their generic distinctiveness, among other things, by the cultivation of certain value orientations corresponding to certain social practices. However, values are not immediately attached to concrete social practices, the two categories are not inseparable of each other. The link between them requires an active interpretation on the part of social actors, and such interpretations derive from established cultural definitions or representations of specific contexts of action. The following examples will indicate how cultural representations of civility affect concrete social practices and relationships within NGOs.

A significant part of the organizational identity of NGOs is the character of work relationships and the ways in which authority is exercised within the organization. Despite the push towards professionalization of the civic sector, and as a reaction to this trend, members of NGOs often put particular stress on the fact that relationships in the organizations are not purely professional. The relationships are not expected to be subjected solely to the instrumental effectiveness of achieving factual goals. As a rule, equal importance is attributed to a more informal spirit of interactions among their members. The fact that members or participants can perceive contacts within the organization as informal is an important part of motivation for their own participation.



Thus, for many NGO activists, small is not only beautiful, but also working. Many of them are outright cautious regarding the possible expansion of even successful projects. For the more experienced leaders, it would not be a problem to broaden the agenda and membership of their organization. They nonetheless carefully weigh the fact that organizational growth would most likely bring about a change in personal relationships and in the work style. Keeping the size of a project or association limited makes it better possible, among other things, to avoid an overt formalization of internal communication, complicated and hierarchical structures of decision making, explicit regulation of the internal environment, a strict specialization of positions within the organization, etc. In this way, the communitarian spirit—expected from an association of a civic kind—can better be preserved.

All this is a well known trait or self-image of civic associations. What is more interesting and important, for our argument, is that such imperative works as a trap when civil society gets institutionalized in the form of NGOs and forms a complex social system. Unwritten rules of communication and work within an association are most often the result of preceding closeness or friendship of the original founding members. If the founders find ways of solving certain problems and organizational challenges only when they happen, they gradually set up such a system of unwritten rules for a particular association. Such groups, however small, are usually not void of hierarchical relations. But the authority of leading individuals does not have to rely on formalized positions and organizational structure.

Here the problem is that the logic of a developed civic sector assumes that civic projects are attached to or represented by a certain permanent institutional structure—e.g., for legal or financial reasons (financing from distant resources, such as larger foundations, the state, the EU, etc.). This is how and why projects become organizations (NGOs), and are carried out within the latter. For a civic association to sustain, however, it sooner or later becomes a practical necessity to take on new members. Given the culturally established self-image of the civic sector, the new members often expect a certain informality of the internal environment. Yet, informality among the founding members practiced for long time may, for the newcomers, easily become a non-transparency of the milieu they have entered. Such experience is likely to make participants reflect on the level and kind of informality that is still workable. The integration of new members into the organization requires their familiarization with the unwritten rules or norms—yet that calls for a joint search for legitimating foundations of these rules (for a discussion of the relationship between membership and justice that is relevant here see Walzer 1984: 61). Communitarianism ceases to be a ‘natural’ given, and it becomes subject to reflexive formation. To the extent to which communitarian spirit still represents an imperative of civility for the involved actors, it creates tensions which are just another source of reflexivity and practiced identity of the civic sector. Identity of an organization or social system is as much re-produced by agreement as it is re-produced through disputes and strains.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Such experience occurs between two polar possibilities. The over-professionalized, bureaucratized and impersonalized NGOs discourage possible volunteers or new activists with developed civic motivations and ideas of active and convivial citizenship. On the other side, an association with too much stress on

Informality of relationships is associated with practical representations of other norms or values that are similarly effective in their role as motivational sources of civic activism. A specific form of individualism belongs among them. If working together and solving problems jointly is one thing that is expected of active citizens, a certain degree of individual responsibility and self-realization is another. Therefore many NGOs try to adjust to this latter expectation as well: especially by a corresponding distribution of competencies, responsibilities and duties within them. They often define the area of their members' responsibility rather vaguely. They leave more space for them to formulate those parts of a shared project for which they are responsible and also to select the means of achieving them (if they are not in contradiction with the general norms and values of the organization). This way of assigning competencies and duties corresponds, among others, with the above mentioned lack of detailed rules. Despite the professionalization and bureaucratization tendencies within the sector, civic associations still seek to rely on a shared vision and mutual trust among their members, rather than strict hierarchy and fragmentation of tasks. Also, a looser definition of members' individual competencies provides more space for unconventional solutions of the tasks of an organization—and innovative approaches are frequently attributed to civic initiatives, as opposed to the state bureaucracy, especially in competition for resources.

In these and other ways, the civic sector appropriates generally acknowledged societal values and adapts them to its own functional needs and identity. The capacity of such appropriation is just another feature of established social systems, according to Luhmann (1982). The given examples have shown that civic values correspond with what is valued in society as a whole or in some other spheres of action. The civic sector certainly cannot usurp only for itself, for example, friendliness and individual responsibility, nor can it make claims to some kind of their purest representation. Rather it pulls these symbolic codes into the gravitational field of its own identity and thus provides them with specific meanings through which social actors understand themselves as representatives of civil society. The gravitational field of the civic sector is in a certain sense a field of interpretative adjustment of symbols and values to a relatively coherent structure of meaning.

### **Civic Codes and Permanent Reflexivity**

Luhmann's perspective, as developed and discussed above, leads us to another apt theoretical framework for sociological analysis of the character of contemporary civil society. Jeffrey C. Alexander (1998) has systematically reconstructed the structure of symbolic codes of modern civic culture at three levels: social motivations, social relationships, and social institutions. He provides a systematic structure of binary symbolic codes as cultural sources of meaning through which civility and civil society

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intimate nature of relationships easily becomes a closed association of people who get on so well together and are so used to each other that they do not let anyone else among them as they would consider it a threat to their own group integrity.

are practically experienced by social actors. *Single* binary oppositions of this scheme eg. autonomy vs. dependence, deliberation vs. conspiracy, equality vs. hierarchy, etc.—endow actions, relationships and institutions with specific meanings also in other social contexts than just in the civic sphere. They work as a cultural point of orientation not only in relation to a specific functional imperative of a given system, but also in particular mutual associations with and oppositions to each other, that is, as a structure. The schemes of binary oppositions to be found in the discursive structures of social motives, social relationships and social institutions systematize the elements of both the democratic and counter-democratic code of modern civic culture (Alexander 1998: 100–101, 2006: 57–59).

What is at stake is not a mere theoretical construction of a symbolic representation of civility and civil society. Such symbolic coding guides social actors in concrete relationships and situations. It provides practical orientation point for interpretation and classification of actors and actions in relation to the demands of the particular social environment. The binary codes form a specific discursive and symbolic field which produces criteria of inclusion in and exclusion from the given sphere. (One subtle example of this is the tension between old and new citizens, discussed above.) “Just as there is no developed religion that does not divide the world into the saved and the damned, there is no civil discourse that does not conceptualize the world into those who deserve inclusion and those who do not” (Alexander 1998: 98). What is involved is always the reflection of cultural representations of civility which can be detected in certain contexts and actions. “Actors are not intrinsically either worthy or moral: they are determined to be so by being placed in certain positions on the grid of civil culture. When citizens make judgments about who should be included in civil society and who should not, about who is a friend and who is an enemy, they draw on a systematic, highly elaborated symbolic code” (l.c.).

Such symbolic structures give a distinct identity to particular spheres of action (in this case to the sphere of civil society), but they do not strictly speaking distinguish the sphere from other *specific* spheres. On the “counter-democratic” side of the binary oppositions we cannot look for something like a typical bureaucrat or businessman. Bureaucracy, business, family, science, and other spheres of action cultivate their own discursive structures of binary codes, and this happens in relative independence of the symbolic structure of the civic sphere. Their discursive structures provide interpretative schemes for distinguishing what is appropriate and what is inappropriate *for and within them*—just as the clusters of symbolic codings related to civility provide the cultural means for discriminating between civil and non-civil actions, relationships and institutions. Thus, they create the relative autonomy of the civic sphere—to the extent, to which this sphere still derives its cultural basis from the modern notion of civility and citizenship.

The democratic discourse of civil society indeed draws from a wider cultural environment, that is, from historically established cultural definitions and valuations which had often found their articulation and re-articulation in a religious or another context. What endows them with a ‘new’ specific meaning is their clustering into distinct symbolic structures and their application to a particular sphere of action. In

this way, they provide a cultural basis for self-understanding of modern civic actors.<sup>6</sup> I have attempted to show that and why such application of the historically established modern civic discourse to a particular institutional form of NGOs—understood as forming a civic sector and representing civil society—provides this sector with a distinct identity as a relatively autonomous sphere of action. More importantly, however, I have attempted to point out that and why such an endeavour creates tensions and sometimes conflicts within the sector itself. Equating civil society with a formally organized institutional structure does not necessarily deprive the involved actors of their civic self-understanding. To the contrary, it makes them reflect on the character and cultural status of the organizational setting which helps them achieve their goals. An elevated exclusionary potential of such reflections results from the permanent articulation of what counts as civil and what not.

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<sup>6</sup> As Alexander (2006) persuasively shows, however, it is not only the modern civil sphere in the narrow sense of a differentiated social system that historically borrows and appropriates its symbolic coding from other spheres. As the civic symbolic codes get culturally established and socially valued, in the course of modernity, they can in turn be adopted by the other spheres (law, political system, media, religion, etc.), within which they acquire a system-specific functional meaning again.