



CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INVESTMENT AND INNOVATION

CSI

Research Agenda – Towards 2025

By

Helmut K Anheier, PhD

Professor of Sociology

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With contributions by

Dr. Volker Then & Dr. Georg Mildemberger

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Introduction

The diverse set of social phenomena located between the institutional complexes of family, market and the state, having remained unchartered territory for a long time, has become a vibrant area of research. Sociology and the other social sciences have developed research agendas that address a wide range of approaches, theories, empirical questions and policy implications. Variously referred to as nonprofit, third sector or civil society studies, CSI is a leading part of this burgeoning field. It seeks to contribute to the field's theoretical knowledge; aims at advancing the empirical evidence base; and helps improve policy-making as well as the management and operations of organizations in the field.

While some of the research topics are genuinely sociological in nature, others fall more within the compass of economics, political science, or legal studies. Throughout, however, CSI emphasizes inter-disciplinary and comparative research: across sectors by comparing, for example, nonprofit organizations to public agencies and business firms; and by looking at civil society, philanthropy or social innovations across societies, especially in a European context, but also transatlantic and increasingly more broadly.

Based on the primary unit of analysis in focus, research in the field can be grouped into three main clusters. Clearly, some overlap clearly exists, and some phenomena can be examined from different perspectives:

- **Institutional**, which addresses macro concepts like civil society, philanthropy, charity, civility, and social economy. In focus are the constitution, meaning and dynamics of civil society; the role of philanthropy and other private contributions to the public good, such as charity and the notion of social investment; the institutional grounding of civility as norm and behavior; and the structure and development of an economic sphere that seeks to combine profit motives with social objectives.
- **Organizational**, which puts focus on the various formal (member-based, asset-based, liability-based organizations) and informal social forms (groups, networks, movements) as well as specific types such as nonprofit organizations, nongovernmental organizations, voluntary associations, foundations, and social enterprises. The main questions are: why do these forms and types exist in market economies; how do they behave relative market firms and public agencies, also in relation to governance, management and leadership, what is their comparative impact, and how and on what bases can it be measured?
- **Individual behaviors**, which includes the types of social participation and the resulting patterns of inclusion and exclusion; the amount and composition of social capital and its relationship to other capital forms; the motivations, patterns, and contributions of volunteering, giving and civic engagement generally; the forms and dynamics of social entrepreneurship and its relationship to other types of entrepreneurs; the incentives, types, and measurement of social investments, also relative to other forms of capital allocations; and the origins, patterns and processes of social innovations.

A Grounded, Evolving Agenda

Much progress has been made over the last two decades in advancing the various research topics and questions mentioned above. Since its founding in 2006, CSI has engaged in numerous research projects. They take advantage of social science theories and approaches and apply them to the issues at hand. They range from neo-institutionalism and institutional logics, public goods theories, organizational behavior, principal-agent models and rational choice approaches to social movement theories, social capital research and networks analysis. Next to more general social science theories, CSI research works with, and contributes to, a growing number of specific third sector and civil society theories as well as available explanations for social participation, civic engagement and volunteering, social investments and innovations or the role and contributions of philanthropic foundations.

Past and current projects included among many others:

Institutional:

- Civil society in numbers – measuring its scale and scope
- Creating spaces for social innovation in Europe
- Towards a European Foundation Model and Statute

Organizational:

- The roles and positions of foundations in Germany and the United States
- Philanthropic foundation impact in comparative perspectives
- Assessing foundation – grantee relations
- Social impact measurement and social return on investments
- The third sector and social innovation
- Transparency and accountability in the German nonprofit sector
- Governance and leadership in hybrid organizations

Individual behavior:

- Volunteering and the elderly
- Volunteering and job qualification
- Non-participation in local social protest movements
- Social entrepreneurship: reconciling the social and the economic

Projects were supported by a wide range of funders, including the German Science Foundation, the Volkswagen Foundation, the Thyssen Foundation, the European Commission, the German Federal Government, the State Government of Baden-Württemberg, the Bosch Foundation, Mercator Foundation, the Hertie Foundation, the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt, Haniel Foundation, Foundation for German-Polish Cooperation, King Baudouin Foundation, Rijksbanken Jubileumsfond, and the Compagnia di San Paolo (Italy).

The projects yielded authored books, edited books, special issues of journals, refereed journal articles, book chapter contributions and other publications as well. What is more, numerous doctoral, master and bachelor students were and continue to be involved in CSI research.

Research Agenda: Towards 2025

As the above sample of projects makes clear, CSI has mostly focused on the organizational level (i.e., foundations, impact measurement, social investment, and social innovation) as well as on volunteering and civic engagement in terms of individual behavior. While in future, CSI will continue to work on these topics, others will assume greater attention, especially macro-level considerations.

Institutional

Two projects will look at changes in civil society, one at the relationship between normative orders and self-organization, the other at civil society and the public sphere:

- **Civil society, normative orders and identities:** Civil society is a highly diverse ensemble of many different organizational entities that range from small neighborhood associations to large international NGOs like Green Peace, and from social service providers and relief agencies to foundations commanding billions of dollars. Located between government or the state and the market, it is, according to Ernest Gellner that “set of non-governmental institutions, which is strong enough to counter-balance the state, and, whilst not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of peace and arbitrator between major interests, can, nevertheless, prevent the state from dominating and atomizing the rest of society.” For John Keane, civil society is an “ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be

non-violent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that ‘frame’, constrict and enable their activities.” Taken together, they express the capacity of society for self-organization and the potential for peaceful, though often contested, settlement of diverse private interests. Yet new social cleavages and the strengthening of ethnic, religious and national identities in context of democratic back-sliding and the rise of populism, challenge the role of civil society. How will civil society react, change? What are the root causes of such developments, and what are the implications?

- **Civil society and the public sphere:** Europe’s civil societies are changing, as is the respective public sphere in member states. Both changes, in turn, are influenced by massive shifts in the larger media landscape, and unfold in the context of a complex set of issues of migration, national identity, democratic control and national sovereignty, growing economic inequality and lower social mobility. How can and how could political parties and movements react to a politics of resentment and the emergence of new political debate in general, campaigns in particular? What is the role of elites, and how can elite-population disconnections be avoided? Are elites changing in composition and “circulation” at local, national and international (European) levels? What is the role of the media, both established media and the social media? More broadly, what are the implications for the domestic and European public spheres, given the likely changes in which Europeans will communicate, participate and shape public life?

While the first two projects looked at European civil societies in a comparative perspective, the following two will examine the global governance of civil society organizations in an international context:

- **Global Governance and the international NGOs:** International NGOs have never fitted easily into the state-centred global governance system that emerged after World War II. The United Nations and the various specialized agencies developed NGOs regimes that have been subject to many criticisms. These have several reasons, but foremost are concerns about a formalized and politicized administrative process with, in the end, rather limited participation opportunities for NGOs – a deficit that is becoming more acute as both the UN and NGOs face legitimacy pressures and have to brave geopolitical and resource uncertainties. What cooperation models based on functional roles and new organizational formats would have the potential to improve the efficacy and effectiveness of global governance?
- **The geopolitics of civil society:** The roles of NGOs and civil society organizations generally have become more complex, especially in the context of changing relationships with nation states and the international community. In many instances, however, state-civil society relations have worsened, leading experts to speak of a “shrinking space” for civil society nationally as well as internationally. What are the reasons for the changing policy environment for civil society organizations in many countries as well as internationally, in particular the shrinking space civil society encounters in some parts of the world and its steady development in others? What proposal could be made concrete proposals for how the state and the international

system on the one hand and civil society can relate in national and multilateral contexts?

Two projects will focus less on geo-politics but address changes in a) markets and investments, and, often related, b) patterns of social innovation and development.

- **Social Impact of market investment disentangled:** Social investments have become more important, economically as well as politically. Yet the conceptual and methodological approaches for understanding the social impact of such investments remain underdeveloped. What is behind the blended value proposition of market actors, and to what extent are these markets clearly driven by social rather than primarily economic values? What is the role of public benefit organizations in this context? From a cross-national perspective, what are governance models of social impact and investment markets and quasi-markets, also in terms of regulations?
- **Models of innovation and social development:** Even though social innovation has become seen as the panacea for many kinds of problems and across a range of different countries, fields and organizations, the concept itself remains unclear. The project will reflect on different concepts of social innovation, and explore theoretical foundations for an improved understanding of the concept. In a policy context, the project engages the perplexing question why the concept has gained so much currency among policymakers who seem more comfortable with social innovations than social change, reform, or transformation.

Organizational

Many organizations straddle the borders between nonprofit and for-profit forms. They are part of hybridity tendencies generally. The origins, processes and implications of hybridity are key foci, as are the role of values in managing nonprofits, and the measurement of their performance.

- **Hybrid organizations and form transitions:** Grounded in stakeholder theory, we link hybridity to institutional logics. While the necessary condition for hybridity is the existence of multiple stakeholders with agency, the sufficient condition is that some stakeholders pursue divergent goals, and therefore have to act in settings with multiple objective functions. This approach helps overcome the conceptual looseness in hybridity research that makes it hard to decide on states of 'seeming' versus 'genuine' hybridity. Assessing research on hybridization in civil society organizations, three major factors emerge: (i) hybridization increases organizational capacity to manage dynamic context conditions and complex task environments, but does do at the expense of (ii) increased threats to legitimacy and (iii) higher transaction costs. Based on these three factors and inspired by political sociology, we develop a performance model of hybrid organizations that will inform targeted empirical research.
- **Organizations and innovation processes: creators, innovators, adapters:** Social innovations can be triggered by new organizations such as start-ups or by existing nonprofits, which is captured by the distinction between

entrepreneurship versus intrapreneurship. For social innovations to achieve scale and scope requires resources and connections, which start-ups typically lack. By contrast, existing larger organizations may suffer from inertia and weak incentives, thereby stifling innovations. To address both challenges, approaches such as systems innovation labs are attracting more attention. Based on a conceptual understanding of innovation processes, they promise to help transform organizations so they can carry innovations forward.

- **Governance of value-based organizations:** Values generate reference points for guiding organizational action – and organizations face challenges reconciling both. This frequent dilemma suggests a number of research questions: how are values dealt with in organizations? What happens if organizations lose their value base? How do professional values relate to organizational values? Finally, how are value conflicts managed as opposed to conflicts of interest? Informed by historical and sociological perspectives on value and means rationality in organizations, the project will make use of rational choice theories and neo-institutionalist approaches, and involve a series of empirical cases studies as well as cross-sectional analyses.
- **The concept of social impact measurement revisited:** The field of measuring impact has expanded in recent years but remains inchoate. As a complement to the impact project at the institutional level, the project here seeks to bring conceptual and methodological clarity by surveying existing approaches for different stakeholders (investors types), market situations (emerging, mature, unsettled) and outputs as well as outcomes.

Individual behavior:

- **Social capital and social media:** Do social media generate social capital and trust, and how do they differ from other forms of communication, be they face-to-face or through print, radio, telephony or television? Do they also shape concepts of social innovation and social entrepreneurship? The project will explore these questions using a variety of approaches ranging from discourse and network analysis to populations surveys and big data on social media use and their correlates in terms of social capital, trust etc., and especially in relation to social entrepreneurship.
- **Spontaneous Volunteering:** Spontaneous or informal volunteering is a response of engaged people having become dissatisfied with established organizations that seek to guide and design voluntary activities for them. Instead, they prefer to realize their own project, even at the expense of additional costs, work and time. Spontaneous volunteering has been observed in disaster situations, where these self-organized groups not only acted as auxiliary forces of designated responders, but also as independent agents. What are the main drivers of this development? How and under what conditions is spontaneous volunteering adding to, or subtracting from, other volunteer efforts, and what management and policy implications come to mind?

Academic Cooperation

In many of its projects, CSI has worked with similar centers in Europe and beyond, and will continue to do so in future. These include: the Hertie School of Governance; the University of California, Los Angeles; The Non-profit Competence Center at the Vienna Economic University; the Social Entrepreneurship group at Oxford Said Business School; the Center for Strategic Philanthropy at ESSEC Business School, Paris; the Center for Civil Society at Copenhagen Business School; the Center for Strategic Philanthropy at Erasmus University, Rotterdam; the London School of Economics; Bocconi University, Milano; the Higher School of Economics, Moscow, and many others.

Conclusion

Research agendas are evolving agendas. They are by no means fixed, and especially in fields as vibrant and dynamic as those coming within the compass of CSI, they develop as much through the results of actual research efforts as they do through changes in the social, political and economic fabric of societies. For this reason, the agenda proposed here charts a course for the next five to seven years, and in the hope that others can build on it in future.