Manufactured Civil Society: An Emerging Government Strategy

Across Europe, we are witnessing a new development in the relationship between the state and civil society. This development must be understood as a response to social trends with respect to governments and societies. It is a context in which traditional forms of (ideologically or religiously driven) social organisation have gradually declined. Various drivers behind this development have been identified, notably individualisation and changing life patterns. But states have also arguably played a role. Welfare-state growth propelled an era of 'big government' during the 1970s and 1980s. Collaboration between civil society and the state in the provision of social services has led many organisations to lose contact with their traditional member groups and, by implication, their original legitimacy.

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And yet, at the same time, civil society looms large in the public debate. A large collection of buzzwords accompany this resurrection of the civil society discourse: social responsibility, citizenship, big society, activation, participation, and horizontalisation - to name only a few. A firm belief in civil society as a solution, as a more effective alternative to the welfare state and market arrangements is feeding the current debate on how to solve pressing social problems.

Yet there is, of course, a paradox here. If civil society is indeed in decline, how can it be the answer to the problems of our time? How can it possibly deal with complex issues such as unemployment, social vulnerability, or social disintegration? The answer is as simple as it is puzzling: civil society should be revived, revitalised, and reinvented. States have started encouraging citizen participation, co-production, and self-organisation; involving civil society organisations in public service delivery; encouraging civil engagement and good behaviour in publicity campaigns. It brings states and civil society into a new kind of relationship that some will view with suspicion.

Public authorities are therefore increasingly inclined to define social relations and responsibilities as something that can be manufactured and/or managed. Is this new? Fear of weakening or changing social relations and loss of values is at the core of plays written 2,500 years ago and is presumably as old as man himself. Nor is it unusual for governments in any part of the world to try to regulate social life and turn society away from what is seen as moral degeneration. In that sense, we are in a new phase in a continuous process.

However, there are two respects in which a historically distinct, if not unique, character has been attained. Firstly, as we noted above, the role of government has essentially changed. Barring some exceptions, it has rarely been as powerful as it is today. Secondly, its ambition is not only to co-opt or integrate, but also to recreate civil society. To put it provocatively, public governance in modern welfare states is now looking for methods to reinvent (or revitalise) 'the social element'. Ambitions include a large-scale reconstruction of local communities, civil society, and citizenship by giving public responsibilities to citizens and third-sector organisations. Simultaneously, relationships with citizens, communities, and third-sector organisations are cast within the mould of public management.

Of course, this restoration is fraught with complications. For a start, government is not separate from society but

part of it, if only because its own mechanisms of control rest partly on the social relations that are in 'meltdown'. The solid state, intervening in society with powerful social technologies, is no more. Governance instruments that rely on authority, hierarchy, and bureaucracy increasingly suffer from lack of effectiveness and legitimacy. As a consequence, we have witnessed the emergence of new modes of public governance, aiming at the recovery of solid ground for public steering and intervention.

A second complication is that it is unclear how relations that are inherently built bottom up can be constructed with help from the top down. The search for civil society from above may lead to what Trommel has described as 'greedy governance' (2009) aiming at manufacturing a civil sphere by means of public interventions. This may easily destroy what it intends to promote: a lively, self-governing civil society. The recreated communities may not be able to exist without government support.

A related complication is that emerging social initiatives may not be in line with the values of the government itself. A well-known example is the tension between equality and exclusion. If new civil society networks are too closed, they may resemble 'gated communities' that are at odds with public values of open access and equality. Other issues of so-called 'voluntary failure' may occur: lack of resources; too narrow a scope of action with a focus on single issues or target groups while ignoring others; lack of accountability that leads to a focus on particular interests while neglecting larger social needs; and lack of professionalism. Yet when government interference preventing such dynamics is too strong, such initiatives may not get off the ground at all. From a policy perspective, civil society may lose the critical voice from which an intelligent government may benefit.

A further problem is that, as noted before, different paradigms of governance coexist. New public management also involves civil society, but with a narrower focus on performance and management. The risk is that government (and society) start to over-emphasise management indicators when judging civil society organisations; or that civil society organisations are forced into competition with commercial organisations. Ultimately, this may lead to mission drift and goal displacement (from 'care' to 'management', for example).

To examine government-civil society relations, we must move beyond the simple 'adversarial versus integrated' distinction that still forms much of the literature. The effects of efforts to recreate or reshape civil society hinge on the interfaces between the institutional architecture of modern society (with a dominant position for government and quasi-governmental institutions) and the emerging dynamics of a late-modern network society (with a diverse and heterogeneous civil society with hybrid relationships with government as a result of public management paradigms that have shifted over time).

The question is where will it all lead. In a worst-case scenario, civil society will be squeezed between a state aiming at reshaping traditional organisations that have lost inspiration and stability, and a new civil society emerging in the shape of 'gated communities' developing outside the public sphere. Of course, something may be happening 'in between', a new social realm between the state and the citizen which must be examined carefully through the lens of a reflexive process of manufacturing a new civility.

These issues and practical cases are discussed in the forthcoming edited volume Manufactured Civil Society: Principles, Practices and Effects, which will be published by Palgrave this year as part of the 'Governance and Public Management' series.

Willem Trommel is professor in public policy and governance at VU University Amsterdam. **Bram Verschuere** is assistant professor of public management at Ghent University. **Taco Brandsen** is professor of public administration at the Nijmegen School of Management of Radboud University in Nijmegen; he is a member of the steering committee of EGPA (European Group of Public Administration), vice-president for Europe of IRSPM (International Research Symposium on Public Management), and treasurer of the Dutch Association of Public Administration.

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