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Civil Society Elites in the Italian Third Sector
A Comparative Perspective
Cecilia Santilli · Roberto Scaramuzzino
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This introductory chapter explores the development of the civil society sector in Europe, emphasising the processes of professionalisation and NGOisation that result in the concentration of power and resources among a few key actors. By integrating insights from civil society studies and elite studies, the book addresses a significant research gap concerning power stratification within civil society. The concept of a "civil society elite" is central, focusing on individuals in leading positions within major organisations. The Italian context is highlighted, underscoring the third sector's dual role in providing social services and advocacy. Key terms like "Third Sector" and "Ruling Class" are introduced, with the term "elite" being justified with reference to C. Wright Mills' perspective on power elites. This chapter outlines the book's structure, which includes an in-depth analysis of the Italian context, the organisational landscape, and leader composition, comparisons with professionalisation processes within the UK, career trajectories at the EU level, and subjective perspectives on elites in Sweden. This comprehensive framework sets the stage for a detailed examination of power dynamics and elitisation within the civil society sector in Italy, offering comparative insights from other European contexts and discussing the implications for civil society's role in democracy.

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Civil Society and Power

Civil society, like other societal fields, has always been filled with power relations and competition between actors. Competition over resources, which are often limited, is a natural part of the field, whether in relation to public funding, members, volunteers, donors, public attention, or access to policymaking. Competition over these resources perpetuates a dynamic of winners and losers among the involved actors, leading to an unequal distribution of power within the field. At times, however, this aspect of internal competition has been overshadowed by a dominant view of civil society as a social space for nurturing social trust and expressing solidarity, with an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition. It is nevertheless clear that civil society organisations (hereafter abbreviated as CSOs), interest groups, and social movements not only tend to compete with each other, but at times might also become engaged in challenging each other and counteracting each other's actions over ideological cleavages.

Increased inequalities in society have been acknowledged in recent years (Piketty, 2014; Chancel et al., 2022), a trend that does not seem to have missed the civil society sector. There are in fact signs of the sector becoming increasingly stratified and marked by oligarchic tendencies. With the professionalisation, bureaucratisation, and institutionalisation of many social movements, a process often referred to as "NGOisation", alongside a trend towards civil society actors increasingly becoming engaged in assisting the public sector to solve societal challenges (della Porta, 2020), we are witnessing a growing concentration of political and economic resources in the hands of small groups of major and structured organisations and their leaders within European civil societies (Scaramuzzino & Lee, 2024). In many countries, large and international organisations have become recognised brands with significant memberships, generous donors, and extensive turnover, which have gained significant access to the corridors of power. Their central position and access to resources allows them to engage in shaping decisions that affect not only their own members and beneficiaries but also society more generally (Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino, 2017; Guo & Saxton, 2020). This phenomenon also has an impact on the individuals engaged in civil society. As organisations construct hierarchies, civil society leaders become

progressively more disconnected from their members and constituencies. They become socialised within powerful institutions that encourage interactions and integration with political and business elites (Mills, 1956; Michels, 2001). We might even speak of a particular elite group that we could call a civil society elite (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020; Scaramuzzino, 2020).

The increased elitisation of civil society, in the sense of an increased concentration of resources and power in the hands of a few, can become a problem for organisations as they seek to fulfil their societal function, as already pointed out by Robert Michels in the early twentieth century (Michels, 2001). It can be argued that, for a sector that is often ascribed the role of being a counterweight to the state and the market in liberal democracy (Tocqueville, 2003), it is problematic if the leadership tends to reproduce the same inequality structures for which the sector is supposed to be compensating. In fact, we could expect that the more resources and power become concentrated at the top of the hierarchy in civil society, the more will those positions be occupied by representatives of privileged groups (Putnam, 1976). Issues of solidarity and the emancipation of disempowered societal groups have often been the hallmark of civil society, but how can they be pursued by organisations if their leadership lacks representation in those specific groups, and if the civil society elite begins to more and more closely resemble the general elite?

If these tendencies towards NGOisation seem to characterise many civil society contexts, their development and consequences are shaped by the specificities of the societal and political contexts in which CSOs operate. In contexts in which women's emancipation has been more successful, we would expect to find a larger proportion of female leaders in the civil society elite than in a context in which patriarchal structures are more dominant (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2023). Among these contextual factors, besides the more general elite structure of society, we also find the historical development of the sector, its characteristics and composition, its main functions in society, as well as its relations with the state and with other powerful actors (Scaramuzzino, 2012). In fact, these factors tend to shape both the types of resources available to CSOs and the resources that the organisations need to maintain their societal function. The status of the sector in a given context will also define the amount of power and resources that the sector wields, and hence its preconditions for resource accumulation and elitisation.

This volume addresses many of these debates by providing an original investigation into the Italian third sector's elite and analysing it in comparison with other European civil societies, as well as in relation to the development of the Italian third sector and political system. Already the Italian concepts of third sector (*Terzo Settore*) and elite (*Classe dirigente*) are setting the scene for a specific understanding of civil society and elites, and we will come back to this.

The Comparative Study of the Italian Civil Society Elite

Italian civil society, which is characterised by a myriad of actors operating at local, regional, and national levels, is divided among cultural and ideological pillars. It navigates through corporatist logics, professionalisation tendencies, and challenges posed by populist political and public actors (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). Italy being marked by a residual public welfare system, its civil society has historically performed an ambiguous or hybrid role, blending robust social service provision with advocacy endeavours (Ranci et al., 2009; Borzaga & Fazzi, 2011; Busso, 2018). As in other countries, in Italy too we are witnessing an increased shifting of public responsibilities towards the civil society sector in many societal areas, such as poverty, integration, and the reception of migrants. Amidst this evolution, numerous CSOs have emerged as pivotal players in welfare provision, contributing to a parallel system often termed the "second welfare state" in the Italian context (Cataldi & Cappellato, 2020).

This role has become recognised to such an extent that it became regulated by law in 2017 (Balli et al., 2017). Through this law, the state acknowledged the third sector—comprising the more formally organised segments of civil society—as an independent sector of public utility. It introduced mechanisms for the sector's representation and participation in decision-making processes, alongside other social components. The arenas for consultation with the third sector are only open to a selection of the "most representative" networks or meta-organisations. The principal civil society actor recognised by the state as being representative of the third sector is Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore, which has a permanent seat on the Council for the Third Sector (Consiglio Nazionale del Terzo Settore) and the power to appoint other civil society members to this state–civil society consultation body. The rise of the Forum as an instance

of coordination and representation of the sector can be understood as part of the hierarchisation of the sector which, however, is not limited to this institutional arena or to the general sector. Other umbrella organisations, having as their members lower-level networks of organisations, have developed and gained power to represent civil society actors active in specific subfields: for instance, cooperatives (Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane) or international aid (Associazione delle Ong Italiane).

This change, which has occurred after a long history of complex relations with the state, has led the sector to become not only institutionalised but also increasingly centralised, with the establishment of one meta-organisation at the top of the hierarchy representing the whole sector in decision-making processes, as well as meta-organisations specific to certain policy areas (cf. Ranci et al., 2009). Hence, the Italian third sector appears to be divided into subfields and to have a pyramidal structure that moves upwards from individual organisations across four levels of networks. Within such a hierarchical structure, it becomes interesting to observe the underlying logics to the unequal distribution of power and resources not only among civil society actors but also among the individuals holding strategic positions within the sector. These individual leaders, as the elite of the third sector, are also affected by and involved in these processes and, we believe, play a crucial role in shaping them.

The relations between the elite of the third sector and other elite groups, more specifically the political ones, have changed since the 1990s and are now more complex than in the past. The traditional ties between important sections of the Catholic movement and the Communist movement and the political parties have become looser, while new, more independent, actors have entered the field (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). New political actors have started to challenge civil society actors based on a populist agenda. Thus, civil society leaders find themselves trying to defend their role and position against the claims of political actors that they are no longer representative of the people (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). However, we are also witnessing powerful third-sector leaders entering the public sector and taking up top governmental positions, such as the national president of the Red Cross (Croce Rossa Italiana), who became regional president of the region Latium at the last elections. This is occurring while the large majority of Italian third-sector organisations remain local associations with few members and mostly relying on volunteers to run their activities.

While the civil society sector deals with the dual function of supplier of services for the state and acting as challenger of the state on behalf of its constituencies, the ruling class within the Italian third sector faces similar challenges to those of the civil society elites of many other European countries. They are also increasingly challenged by populist parties, which argue for a direct relationship with the people and seek to reduce the margins of manoeuvre for all intermediary bodies, including civil society actors (Ruzza, 2020).

Exploring the elite of the Italian third sector in relation to the specific national context, as well as in comparison with other civil society elites, allows us to shed light on an understudied part of civil society, which can nevertheless function as a litmus paper for the challenges facing the sector in the coming years. While Italy offers important insights into the elitisation of civil society within a liberal democracy, this volume adopts a cross-national comparative approach, encompassing other national contexts that are often associated with distinct welfare and civil society regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Salamon et al., 2004). Our comparisons include the UK, which represents a liberal civil society regime, and Sweden, which embodies a social democratic regime. We also develop a comparison with civil society at the EU level to add a supra-national dimension to the analysis of civil society elites. In doing so, the volume seeks to describe the key characteristics of the third-sector elite, while also comparing it with those of political and economic elites in some chapters. Furthermore, the volume provides a theoretical and conceptual development that draws upon both civil society studies and elite studies, two strands of research that have often been kept apart.

Civil Society and Elites

Studies of CSOs, interest groups, and social movements have a long tradition, especially in the social sciences. A considerable amount of work has been done on the issues of civil society actors' and movements' successes and failures, resource mobilisation, and influence. Many of these issues and research problems have been addressed by research on different types of civil society actors, such as third-sector organisations (Casey, 2004), social movements (Giugni, 1998), non-profit organisations (Neumayr et al., 2015), and interest groups (Dür, 2008). Depending on the types of organisations and their goals, different kinds of resources and influence have been considered relevant. For instance, while social movement studies has focused on the mobilisation of constituencies and adherents for the