

# **Learning for Democracy**

**The role of the social professions  
in stimulating participation and voluntary association**

Introduction to the Summer School  
'Participation in a civil society – a challenge for Europe'  
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Marcel Spierts  
Senior lecturer and researcher, Hogeschool van Amsterdam  
P.O. Box 2241  
1000 CE Amsterdam  
Amsterdam  
Phone: +31 20 6938671  
email: [mspierts@xs4all.nl](mailto:mspierts@xs4all.nl)

## Introduction

Professionals in the social sector are primarily interested in helping people and in solving problems. Methods in which the main aim is to encourage social participation are popular tools for these professionals. An emphasis on participation is understandable and, in many situations, also adequate. However, these participation methods are often applied without reflection and without thorough investigation into the nature and the context of the problem being addressed. Usually this context is a social environment; it may also be called civil society. While participation methods typically attract enthusiastic reactions from professionals, ideas about developments taking place in the arena of civil society draw much less attention. Even so, these developments are of great importance, not only in a political and social aspect but increasingly also for social professionals. So, for a number of reasons, the theme for this year's Summer School has been well chosen.

### *Democracy: dream or nightmare?*

In the first place, there are the challenges to democracy in both Eastern and Western Europe. The French and Dutch referenda on the European constitution are still too recent for us to be able to draw clear conclusions about their results. Analyses up to now are noteworthy for their ambiguity. On the one hand, commentators see 'no' votes as proof of the public's decreasing trust in politicians. On the other hand, the referenda themselves demonstrate the power of democracy. Playing by the rules of democracy, the 'no' voters have fulfilled an important role in the democratization of 'project Europe', some because they believe that proposals haven't gone far enough and others because they fear disintegration of national autonomy. So, paradoxically, loss of trust in politicians and benefits for democracy seem to go hand in hand. What does this tell us about the vitality of democracy? And how self-evident is the democratic disposition?

For many years, a collective aversion to the Second World War formed a guarantee for a solid base of support for democracy in Western Europe. This is now becoming increasingly less obvious. A steadily-growing emphasis on self-interest, mercenary attitudes towards citizenship, immigration from countries with less democratic regimes and cultures, lack of identification with society in general, growing fundamentalism and political apathy all play a role in this. Researchers in a number of western countries have found that young people are barely interested in democracy. Comparative research in twenty-four countries has shown that 'civic education' is of low status and priority almost everywhere, and that pupils' interest in these issues is minimal. One conclusion drawn in the Netherlands is that secondary school pupils do not meet criteria set for 'good enough democratic citizenship'; in other words, they don't support democracy, are not well informed about politics, don't have political preferences and are not prepared to vote (De Winter, 2004).

A lack of knowledge of and involvement in democracy is a threat to democracy itself. If too few citizens are interested, then democratic structures and laws will not survive. In such a scenario, socio-political order will follow a downward spiral towards a situation in which a small, fanatical minority hold power. The best way to prevent waste and neglect is to ensure that growing numbers of citizens take democracy seriously and are actively involved in it. A civil society provides an outstanding environment for this.

### *The vulnerable and the enabled*

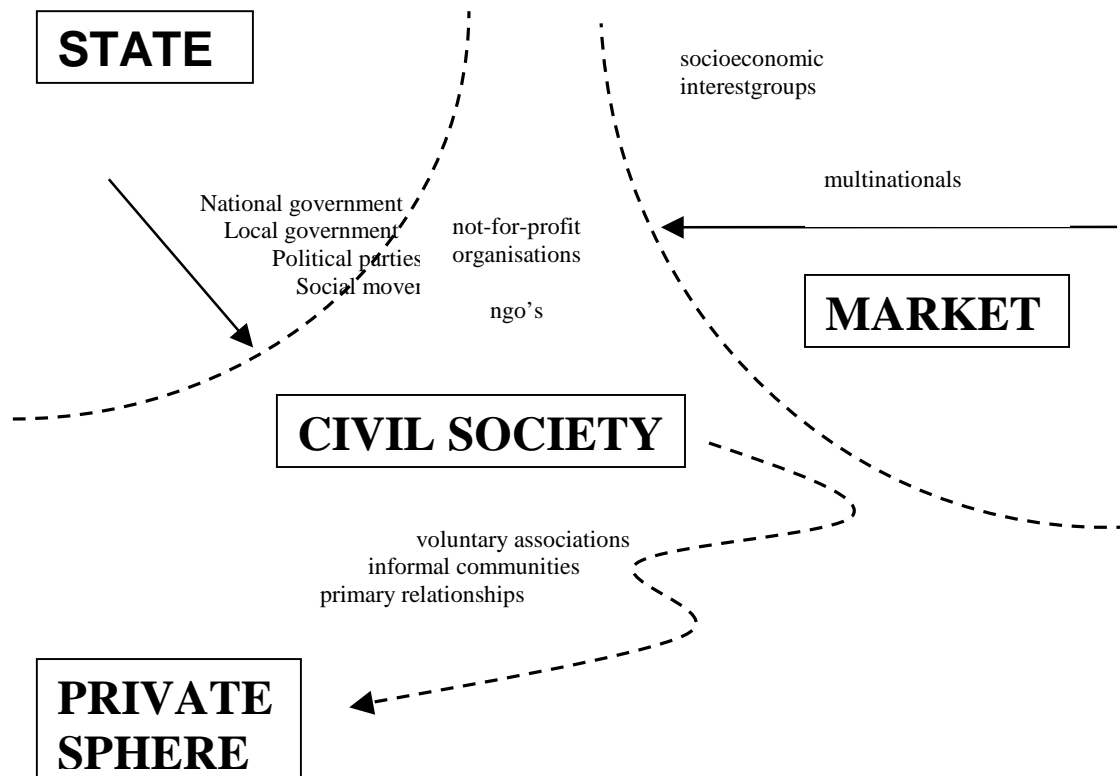
This year's Summer School theme is important for a second reason. Democracy is not the only concept under pressure. As time goes by, the welfare state seems a decreasingly obvious concept. In many European countries a welfare state has for many years guaranteed subsistence-level aid for those at the edge of poverty, and in so doing have regulated societal relationships. However, the compromise between capital and labour is increasingly under pressure from globalization. High rates of unemployment are already leading to forms of marginalization and exclusion. It seems likely that levels of social protection will be further reduced; although it is not to be expected that the situation will come to resemble that in the United States, it is still a cause for concern.

Social professionals will not be able to solve this structural problem. There is even a risk that their intervention will reinforce the isolation of vulnerable groups in society by concentrating solely on these people and their problems. More enabled citizens could develop the idea that simply paying taxes and social security contributions releases them from the responsibility of supporting the vulnerable citizens. The increasing schism between vulnerable and enabled citizens will then take on a psychological aspect which will make the situation even more explosive. Social professionals will have an important role to play in this by investing enabled citizens with a sense of responsibility in areas such as the relationship between work and caring for others, the quality of the living environment and social relationships within the public domain (Hortulanus 2004). The civil society offers social professionals a favourable context in which to appeal to this sense of responsibility.

Participation in the civil society is important with regard to questions of democracy, social inclusion and the quality of the living environment. In order to examine the possibilities open to social professionals in this area we must first take a closer look at the characteristics and meaning of civil society. What are its guiding principles, and how do they relate to those within other spheres of society? What is the composition of the civil society and which effects do its actors desire to achieve through their actions? The second part of this lecture presents four assignments for social professionals, formulated to encourage participation in a civil society.

### **Civil society as the lungs of democracy**

Civil society is the social domain in which active citizens unite and cooperate on the ground of their own volition. The space of the civil society is not fixed or delineated, but changeable. It is surrounded by other spheres of society which combine to influence the field of action of civil society: the state, the market and the private sphere. The state is recognizable by its public administration; the market by a formal economy; the private sphere by informal primary relationships including those based on affinity; the civil society by organized public social life (De Hart 2005). In the diagram, the civil society is positioned between market, state and private sphere.



*Diagram: Civil Society between State, Market and Private Sphere*

The civil society occupies a central position in the diagram, which demonstrates that the other domains encounter each other within civil society. It also indicates that the intermediary organizations present in the civil society encourage citizens to take in a broader view of society.

The arrows illustrate how people think about the civil society, especially in Western Europe and North America, and how it is related to the other three areas. On the one hand, the civil society is under threat from increasing state interference and from bureaucratization, on the other from growing market forces and commercialization. Many people feel that this is leading to citizens retreating into their own secure environments and a decrease in voluntary activities, as shown by the dotted-line arrow pointing downwards.

The tone of this discussion is rather different in Central and Eastern Europe. Before 1989 there was generally a very distinct separation between civil society and state. It was elements of society ranging from religious organizations to entrepreneurs whose actions forced the retreat of the state. Analyses of the period following 1989 are rather more sombre and pessimistic. The concept of the civil society has lost a degree of its mobilizing effect. These days it is more often applied from on high, partly by political bodies eager to legitimize their privatization policies and partly by foreign advisors who have discovered that building up a thriving economy is going to take more than the introduction of a free-market system and the removal of barriers to individual initiatives.

There are a number of ways to judge the situation in Eastern, Western and Central Europe. Even though state and market interference are on the rise, the networks, groups and organizations present in civil society are flourishing. A noteworthy trend in Western Europe is that the voluntary organizations typically found in civil society, such as local clubs, special-interest groups and charitable organizations, are undergoing a number of changes. These organizations are becoming more professionalized and the connections of their members to the organizations are becoming more fluid. Volunteers commit themselves for shorter periods of time to more clearly defined tasks, while the organizations themselves increasingly seek donations from contributors who are by definition less personally connected with the organizations. Social movements and civil initiatives are becoming more and more diverse and taking on issues ranging from local to global. Besides these, a huge variety of informal groups operating in the public arena, urban and otherwise, show great flexibility in their ability to combine the roles of participant, consumer and supplier. For this reason, the dotted-line arrow in the diagram should not only points downwards but also upwards.

The situation in Central and Eastern Europe is equally opaque. On the one hand there are many local pressure groups who are primarily concerned with tackling the excesses and other negative by-products of the market economy. On the other hand, initiatives in towns and cities are working to form lasting bonds and networks between citizens. In many places there is no tradition of voluntary association. It is interesting to note that many initiatives are not so much concerned with the daily problems of local citizens but have, from the beginning, been strongly oriented towards lobbying and influencing political policy.

Whatever conclusion is drawn about the state of civil society, the urgent question remains as to what the effects will be of the various connections and activities taking shape within it. Two primary tasks and effects can be assigned to civil society. The first is the formation of public opinion, the second the creation and consolidation of social capital. According to Putnam (2000), social organizations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government. They do this in two ways and in relation to two dimensions by which organizations can be classified. In the first place, they affect their members 'internally' by encouraging them to cooperate and by stimulating feelings of solidarity and an orientation towards the common interest. A prerequisite for this socialization effect is that there are 'horizontal' connections between members and that members intercommunicate on a personal level. This interaction with others teaches democratic attitudes and behaviour; it encourages trust in others and helps people to become competent and assertive citizens.

In the second place, social organizations contribute to democracy by means of their 'external' effects on the broader political system. Within civil society, a distinction can be made between primary, secondary and tertiary groups of organizations. Primary groups are the informal, face-to-face connections of family, neighbourhood, friends, acquaintances and so on. Secondary groups (including organizations) are more formalised, but still characterised by the proximity of and intercommunication between members. Within tertiary groups (or organizations), members do not intercommunicate and there are bonds only between individual members and the organization. A close network of secondary organizations stimulates the articulation of and agitation for the interests and needs of citizens. This means that it is crucial that there are institutional relationships between members of the groups and the political system, so that the groups can function as intermediaries through which citizens can exercise their influence.

## **Participation in the civil society**

I come to the second part of my lecture. What is the significance of this sketch of the developments within civil society for the role of social professionals? The interventions of social professionals can contribute to the reinforcement of civil society. They can stimulate and support various forms of voluntary activity which lay at the heart of the civil society and those operating in fringe areas. Here, voluntary activity can be defined as connections made by citizens with and for each other, on a completely voluntary basis, whether formally or informally. Although this is in no way a complete picture of the possibilities, I would like to expand on four tasks for social professionals.

### *1. Attunement to the informal character of voluntary associations*

In order to strengthen voluntary organizations, social professionals must be attuned to the day-to-day and the informal. The daily operations of voluntary associations should form a source of questions and needs by and from which they can learn. An essential aspect of this is that the social professions work with the individuals involved to discover these questions and needs and to use them to design activities and projects.

In this regard it is important that the practices of voluntary associations are seen as communities of practice. The structure and operation of these communities of practice were explored in detail by Etienne Wenger, an American social scientist who was one of the developers of the theories of situated learning (Wenger 1998). According to Wenger, a community of practice – in other words, a group of people with a common or shared type of practice – does not form a homogenous world with shared attitudes towards norms and values. Complicated choices and interactions between participants form the basis. Rather than being a naturally formed entity, a community is actually a more or less random result of various fields of power and interaction. Instead of ascribing to prevalent romantic ideas of communities as the cornerstones of social life, Wenger stresses the ambivalent relationship between individual and community. People are not only part of more than one community at a time, but membership is by definition partial and temporary, lasting only as long as there is resemblance with one's own personal history and experience. This does not contradict the fact that communities of practice have a powerfully attractive effect on their members and give them the feeling that they are 'a part of something'. Three elements are key in this: firstly the mutual engagement between members of a community; secondly, the experience of a joined enterprise and the accompanying obligations and responsibilities on both sides; and thirdly a shared repertoire of stories, concepts, styles, instruments and often common memories of shared experiences. These elements also influence the meaning which people attach to the community of practice, and this meaning is continuously being renegotiated. This makes communities of practice potentially powerful environments for learning since they provide a wealth of spontaneous, informal learning situations. If social professionals wish to enhance learning within these communities of practice then they will need to attune themselves to this kind of informal learning. The concept of the community of practice is especially useful for connecting informal and institutional entities with each other. This makes it an especially attractive tool for the stimulation of participation, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe where informal connections and networks receive little to no attention from political institutions.

## *2. Combating inequality*

With regards to levels of participation, social scientists have identified a ‘participation paradox’: the higher someone’s degree of education, income and career status, the higher the level of involvement in, for example, public debate and interactive policy. The more political and social possibilities become available with which citizens can express their opinions in a public arena, the more these are taken up by an existing ‘participatory elite’, the ubiquitous highly-educated, autochthonous, employed or retired male. The paradox is that the increasingly available opportunities for political participation do not, by definition, lead to further democratization but instead create even greater political inequality (Hartman 2000). The level of social involvement, then, is partly dependent on the availability of social and cultural capital. But this human capital is unevenly distributed. An important assignment for social professionals is to address this inequality and in so doing to contribute to the democratization of social involvement.

I have already mentioned the importance of attunement to the everyday and the informal. In situations of inequality, it must be recognized that informality can be ambiguous. Informal networks can be essential for the creation of social capital. Due to their informal character, the same is true for many voluntary associations. However, this informal character means that these organizations can be affected by mechanisms of marginalization and exclusion. Informal networks and organizations can operate as a double-edged sword, especially when they offer informal sources of aid to their members while simultaneously excluding outsiders’ access to these sources (Komter 2000). Efforts such as awareness training can be made to help voluntary associations increase their accessibility; constant attention must be paid to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time it can also be helpful to create opportunities within the voluntary associations for the stimulation of temporary or partial forms of participation. This offers people more flexibility and makes it easier for them to anticipate changes in their personal lives.

## *3. Awareness of internal and external functions of voluntary associations*

When speaking of the meaning of voluntary associations a distinction is generally made between their internal and external functions. Internal function refers to their position as ‘learning environment’ for social involvement and participation. They stimulate cooperative attitudes, identification with others and a feeling of community among members. Additionally, they equip their members with the political self-confidence and skills they need in order to exercise their influence on political procedures. But the positive influence of voluntary associations extends beyond this. The external function of the associations is often connected to the organizational network it offers to citizens with which they can articulate their interests publicly and to shift these interests into the political arena. In this way, power can be spread among a variety of interest groups, and lines of communication opened between citizens and government and between citizens themselves.

The task for social professionals is to stimulate the voluntary associations to continue in their development and in their encouragement of their members to take up their social responsibilities. With regards to the internal function it is essential to consider people’s personal competence and needs in the formulation of solutions to their problems and the fulfilment of their desires. The central question is to what extent individual capacities and experience can contribute to common interests. In terms of the external function, the interactions between the group and its social environment are key. Here, the question is how a group will deal with external experts and increase its awareness of how its decisions affect those within its sphere of influence.

#### 4. The development of an open identity

In both personal and social life, identifying relationships can be complicated. There seems to be

‘a confusing and often contradictory diversity of ways of life, concepts, desires and behaviour within social groups who appear to have little in common. Questions about *identity and meaning* (“who am I; where do I fit in?”) and about *social integration and cohesion* (“how can we live together in spite of all our differences?”) are high on social and political agendas’ (Jansen and Van den Berg 2000).

The search for the answers to these questions implies competencies which cannot be assumed to be part of someone’s repertoire. The Dutch philosopher Nauta distinguishes two competencies which are related to citizenship and the development of an open identity: alter-competence and ego-competence (Nauta 2000). Alter-competence is associated with the way one deals with the ‘otherness’ of another person. This has to do with the ability to *identify with* someone else or, in other words, to see things from someone else’s point of view. It also includes the capacity for *representation*: the competence to represent oneself to others and to gauge what is relevant and what is not. Ego-competence is related to the ability to perform as subject. On the one hand this is the competence of *approachability*; in other words, to address what someone has said or done and to be able to respond with a yes or no. On the other hand, it deals with the competence of *self-defence*, the ability to stand up for one’s rights and, when necessary, to demand that these rights are respected.

These questions of identity also play a role in voluntary associations. Social professionals must keep them in the forefront of their minds during their interventions. A recurring point of concern is that participants should be approached as people with coherent life histories. In this way the participants themselves are able to connect actively the scattered and fragmentary experiences and situations which take place throughout their lives.

### Conclusion

Particularly at a time when public and social life is increasingly influenced by a heterogeneous mix of cultures and subcultures, ethnicity and ways of life, arenas for encounter, confrontation and negotiation assume vital importance. People can no longer rely on pre-existing, generally accepted and adhesive values and interests unless they retreat from public life and entrench themselves within their own known circles. Conversely, individualization and globalization create an intermediary space in which people can give meaning to their own experiences and familiarise themselves with other spheres of experience. The need for this is increasingly evident in Western Europe as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. Social professionals have the expertise with which to provide this type of intermediary space. They are able to create a nearly intimate ambience of publicity, a place somewhere between the huge, anonymous outside world and the small closed circle of subculture, closed social group or family connection. This is a place people can visit in order to give vent to their thoughts and feelings; it contains a new world of experience. This area of ‘intimate publicity’, created by and for the people by social professionals, will certainly develop into a source of learning which will in turn lead to the development of democratic morality and competence.

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