A social quality approach as (re)integration of civil society, the market and the state

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Civil society is currently positioned in much thinking as one part of a trinity: the market, the state and civil society. Such separateness is often premised on the distinctiveness of the value-bases and ways of organising each sector (Billis 1993). This positions civil society as outside of and acting upon (and acting on) the market and the state. Indeed it positions each of the market, the state and civil society as outside of and acting upon each other. In particular it maintains the negative definition of NGOs as part of a residual category.

Operationalising this trinity has created fertile ground for such endeavours as marketisation and (shadow) statisation of social provision through civil society actors (Deakin & Walsh 1996; Wolch 1999); quests for renewed partnership between the state or market and civil society in social provision (McGregor-Lowndes & Murnour 2003); and specific politicisation of civil society through the polarisation of market-based social provision and political/social action (Eikenberry & Kluver 2004). There is also a growing recognition of, and a fascination with, hybrid (and hybridisation of) organisations, such as business arms of non-profit organisations, quasi-nongovernment organisations, and social enterprise. Overall it is – paradoxically – enforcing a further individualisation of liberty, equality and fraternity which stood at the cradle of today’s societies (Herrmann, forthcoming).

These endeavours have given rise to struggles to create and enact concepts and practice related to different types of capital. For instance, organisational capital conceptualised as ‘processes for organising’ and social capital as ‘relationships’. Capital approaches potentially reduce civil society, market and state actors, and activity, to the mechanisms of exchange and the currency of investment, effectively ‘keeping society going’ from a transactional perspective. They also fail to problematise the rationale/motivation for civil, state and market activity – (re)production through allocation and distribution. Such (re)production is increasingly premised on the individual and individual fulfilment through materialism and perpetual growth and ‘improvement’.

Such approaches to explaining and rationalising the means and ends (ideals) of actors and action within and across sectors fail to recognise the debilitating impact of differentiation and fragmentation. Indeed in our quest for recognition of civil society as equally legitimate as the market and the state we may have fallen into the trap of “the modern rational mind (that) makes divisions of non-dual reality into two and then forgets that it has done this. Then it forgets that it forgot? As a result we continue to puzzle on how to put the two back into ‘one’ again” (Cacioppe 2000: 53). In effect, third sector theorists might have created civil society as ‘value-based organisation’ in order to study it (Leat 1998), as economists created ‘rational man’, and then we have forgotten we created it.

This paper provides critical reflections supplement by literature-based analysis from a co-operative cross-disciplinary perspective on the directions of current policy and practice and shares critical thinking on other possible policy and practice outlooks for a (re)integrated civil society, the state and the market. This reflective process is used to generate critical questions for third sector theorists and practitioners in the (not necessarily new or unique) climate of ‘facing crises’. In the quest for such alternative policy and practice directions beyond western welfare states and attempts to create welfare systems in transitioning social systems such critical reflection and questioning is central (Law 2004).
Integral theory approaches (Wilbur 1997) seek to (re)integrate the individual /biographical and the communal/societal; and the external/institutional and the internal/non-institutional. As an integral theory approach, a social quality approach seeks to work from that which is inherent in practice not that which is espoused in ideals. This requires a movement away from the notion of the trinity and the ‘solution’ of adjusting the balance between the three sectors that so occupies current policy debate and the adversary and/or ally positioning of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ and ‘acting upon’ that so saps the energy of those who seek to design and implement policy and practice. This requires (re)cognition of the inherent entity of the social and economic and political (actors and actions) and the remerging of allocation and distribution as (re)production (as aims and arena for actions). These are essential enabling elements for a (re)new(ed) standpoint, the social, and a one-world approach (differentiated but the same).

It will be argued that the social quality approach allows integration of a wider set of actors, arenas and actions in which the social is actually produced, ‘creatively consumed’, distributed and exchanged. As such it allows the recognition and acceptance of approaching (communitarian and civil engagement) shared/agreed social goals through alternate systems in a more specific and differentiated way in unique soci(et)al settings, radically referring to every day’s life and practice in small communities and societies alike.

References


