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# Rescuing Welfare Society

## Political Strategies for Mobilizing Civil Society in Denmark, 2010-2018

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### Abstract

*The article analyzes how civil society is constructed in two Danish civil society strategies from 2010 and 2017, the governmental programmes of the governments in question and the role civil society plays in the proposed upcoming reform of the Danish public sector, the Cohesion Reform. The article approaches civil society from a Foucauldian perspective meaning that it on the one hand analyzes civil society as a transactional reality, meaning something which does not exist as such, but must be continually produced as a given thing with certain values. On the other hand, it means analysing civil society as a central part of a governmental rationality, or governmentality, which represents the natural movements of society and which government must respect and govern according to. This means that the natural, vital and originary processes of civil society becomes a measurement for good and right government in contradistinction to the artificial, cold and bureaucratic state and thereby posited as the rescuer of welfare society.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In June 2017, the Danish government appointed a ‘Civil Society Task Force’ to formulate a new strategy for Danish civil society. The task force comprised ten members from civil society organizations, the municipalities, businesses and the main unions. The task force resulted in *Strategy for a Stronger Civil Society* (Strategi for et stærkere civilsamfund) published in October 2017. The task force and the new civil society strategy is part of a proposed larger reform of the public sector in Denmark to be launched in 2018 – the Cohesion Reform (Sammenhængsreformen) – which is meant to streamline and make the provision of welfare services more efficient by eliminating unnecessary rules and bureaucracy and through the inclusion of business and civil society organizations. The civil society strategy from 2017 states that “With the Cohesion Reform the government has a determined focus to strengthening the role of civil society in welfare society.” (Regeringen and Børne- og Socialministeriet 2017, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> This article analyzes the civil society strategy from 2017, along with the *National Civil Society Strategy* (National civilsamfundsstrategi) from 2010 and the role civil society plays in the proposed reform of the public sector by employing a Foucauldian framework. This entails viewing civil society as a transactional reality, something that does not exist as a given thing, but which must be continually produced, and as a part of a governmental rationality in which civil society (and the market) measures good and right government.

Since the 1980s, civil society and civil society organizations have been at the center of a massive interest both publically, politically and academically as the ‘third sphere’ or ‘third sector’ outside state and market. Civil society was seen as a hallmark of a wellfunctioning liberal democracy as a free, independent sphere, but was at the same time increasingly appropriated to overtake public service tasks that the state could or would no longer provide. Civil society and civil society organizations was increasingly seen by many Western European policy makers as a potential provider of welfare services for a welfare state increasingly challenged by the pressures of globalization (Brandsen, Verschuere, et al. 2014; Dean and Villadsen 2016, p. 6). This has also been the case in Denmark where, since the 1970s, at the height of the universal welfare state, discussions emerged about increasing the inclusion of civil society organizations –

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the two reviewers of this article for very thorough comments and constructive criticism that has helped improve this article.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Danish in this article are, unless otherwise stated, the author’s own.

particularly voluntary organizations – to avoid the excessive bureaucracy of public sector service provision.

Under a number of notions and buzz-words such as (social) responsibility, (active) citizenship, big society, participation, activation, horizontalization, co-production, co-creation, (private-public) partnerships, (social) cohesion, social capital and many more, governments in the West are increasingly shifting responsibility for public sector social service delivery to civil society (Brandsen, Verschuere, et al. 2014; Brandsen et al. 2017; Verschuere et al. 2012). This is also the case in Denmark. Even though the discourse of civil society organizations has been present for many years, “political discourse on activating civil society and involving volunteers in the delivery of public welfare services has increased” since the beginning of the 2000s (Frederiksen 2015, p. 1742). All governments have since then emphasized the importance of the voluntary effort in governmental and policy programmes (Fridberg and Skov Henriksen 2014, p. 16). Civil society engagement and increasing partnerships between the public sector, private businesses and civil society is seen as pivotal in contemporary society with complex societal issues (Andersen 2008; Brandsen et al. 2017, p. 77; Henriksen 2015, pp. 18–19). This development has in many ways intensified after the Financial Crisis of 2007-8 with increased austerity, cut-backs, welfare retrenchment and increased privatization in the West in general (Blyth 2015; Crouch 2011) and also in Denmark. This has caused a restructuring of the relationship between state, market and civil society and therefore the involvement of civil society organizations – particularly voluntary organizations – has become a major political concern with high priority (Boje 2015, p. 27; Jensen 2015, pp. 7–8).

This article approaches civil society from Foucauldian perspective, meaning that it views civil society on the one hand as what Michel Foucault called a ‘transactional reality’ and on the other as a central part of a governmental rationality or governmentality. Viewing civil society as a transactional reality means not viewing civil society as a given ‘thing’ or ‘sphere’, but as something that must be continually (discursively) produced in order to come into existence. Such a production is not neutral, but constructs a specific form of civil society and the values and tasks associated with it as well as the organizations that operate within it. Viewing civil society as a part of a governmental rationality or governmentality means analyzing how civil society (and the market) is posited as the site of what is natural, right, good, original, vital and innovative and

which thereby becomes the plane of reference or a site of veridiction for good and bad ways of governing.

The article analyzes the two Danish civil society strategies from 2010 and 2017, the governmental programmes of the governments in question and the role civil society plays in the proposed reform suggestion of the public sector, the Cohesion Reform. The article focuses on the center-right governments of these periods, because they have published two civil society strategies, because they consistently use the notion of civil society (and not just voluntariness, voluntarism and voluntary organizations, although these notions are still used as well) and because civil society exactly plays an important part in the proposed reform of the public sector. The article argues that civil society plays a central role in the Western socio-political imaginary given its attributes of social cohesion, democratization processes, communication and voluntarism (Cohen and Arato 1999; Habermas 2001) and thereby forms a discursive trope apt to legitimize reforms of the public sector, especially in a country like Denmark where public sector social provision is viewed with a high degree of positivity (Frederiksen 2015). This is especially the case at a time where the state, political elites and the global order find themselves in a crisis of legitimacy because of the recession following the financial crisis, welfare retrenchment, unemployment and increased immigration.

The article contributes to the growing discussion about the increased civil society inclusion in the provision of social services and the notions of manufacturing and reconstructing civil society (Brandsen et al. 2017; Brandsen, Trommel, et al. 2014; Brandsen, Verschuere, et al. 2014), the literature on Foucault and civil society (Dean and Villadsen 2016; Villadsen 2016; Villadsen and Dean 2012) as well as the literature about the ‘welfare mix’ or ‘hybridity’ of social service provision between state, market and civil society actors in Denmark and the increasing role of civil society, third sector and voluntary organizations in Danish welfare society (Frederiksen 2015; Henriksen et al. 2012, 2015; Henriksen and Bundesen 2004; Kaspersen and Ottesen 2006; La Cour 2014). It does so by analyzing Danish civil society strategies and how they construct civil society, the role of civil society organizations and how civil society becomes a plane of reference to distinguish between good and bad ways of governing and how civil society and civil society organizations are being posited as the saviors and rescuers of Danish welfare society.

Firstly, the article briefly outlines the increased focus on civil society and civil society organizations and the discussions in Denmark about including them in the provision of welfare services. Secondly, the article outlines the Foucauldian approach to civil society by looking at civil society as a transactional reality and as a part of a governmental rationality. Thirdly, the article analyzes the Danish civil society strategies and the role they play in the reform of the public sector through the Foucauldian framework. Finally, it ends with a conclusion and final reflections.

### **An Increased Focus on Civil Society and Civil Society Organizations**

The notion of civil society re-emerged in the 1980s in relation to anti-authoritarian struggles in Eastern Europe and Latin America and subsequently became a core notion in Western parliamentary democracies as a sphere outside of state and market, where people could deliberate and signified positive values such as democracy, voluntariness, democratic processes, contestation and critique (Cohen and Arato 1999; Habermas 2001). Since then, it has become central both as a hallmark of a well-functioning liberal democracy and at the same time increasingly been appropriated by state governance to take care of welfare tasks. Civil society then plays a central role in the Western socio-political imaginary and civil society can be designated as an central empty or floating signifier in Western politics (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). A core concept, whose essential meaning is so thin and vague and which is ascribed such a positive role in our society that any political actor seeking to legitimize their political project seeks to appropriate it and imbue it with their own understandings. At the same time, civil society remains a such a vague notion in that it is often only negatively defined, as that which is not state and market.

Before we go into the analysis of the Danish civil society strategies, governmental programs and reform suggestions, I want to briefly sketch out the Danish case and the history of civil society organizations and the provision of social services.<sup>3</sup> In order to understand the civil society strategies from 2010 onwards it is helpful to have a broad idea of the context in which they are situated.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough breakdown of the relationship and development of the state-civil society/third sector/voluntary sector in Denmark, see (Bundesén et al. 2001; Fridberg and Skov Henriksen 2014; Habermann and Ibsen 1998; Henriksen et al. 2012, pp. 465–72, 2015; Henriksen and Bundesén 2004; Kaspersen and Ottesen 2006; La Cour 2014, pp. 109–32; Villadsen 2004). The following section draws on this work.

Denmark's development towards a universal-type Scandinavian welfare state with tax-financed public institutions delivering health care and social services to all based on citizenship (or right of residency) and equal rights took off in the interwar period with the Social Assistance Act of 1933 (*Socialreformen*). This act formed a coordinated national social policy by the social democratic government which made the public institutions and the state the primary financer and coordinator of social services and welfare provision (Henriksen et al. 2012, pp. 465–66; Henriksen and Bundesen 2004, pp. 612–13). Before that, a number of voluntary and philanthropic (mainly religious) associations had been the main providers of a number of beneficial and social services without main coordination from the state (although state coordination and take-over gradually evolved from the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>4</sup> The development of the welfare state continued and intensified in the post-war period and culminated with the Social Assistance Act (*Bistandsloven*) of 1976 where “local and regional municipalities were made responsible for both the provision and administration of almost all the social services.” (Henriksen et al. 2012, p. 466). Already here, however, in the 1970s and 80s, there was a ‘rediscovery’ of voluntary social organizations as central to public service provision (La Cour 2014, p. 115; Sevelsted 2017, p. 52). Voluntary organizations were seen as closer to the needy and more flexible than the state institutions in delivering services. This increasing distrust in public welfare provision and the look to voluntary organizations came about on the backdrop of the both fiscal and legitimacy crisis of the welfare state in the 1970s. Already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, voluntarism had emerged as a practice as part of a liberal movement that emerged from a distrust in the state and public institutions represented by ‘cold’ state bureaucracy and now voluntarism emerged as a counter-concept in the 1970s and 1980s as a critique of the overreaching and overzealous welfare state (Sevelsted 2017, pp. 41–45).

In the beginning of the 1980s, then Minister of Social Affairs for the Social Democrats, Ritt Bjerregaard, warned that the welfare state, because of its bureaucracy, was becoming a part of the problem in securing welfare services, wherefore civil society and the voluntary sector should increasingly be brought in to help, support and revitalize the provision of social services (Henriksen and Bundesen 2004, pp. 618–619; Kaspersen and Ottesen 2006). This was continued in the 1980s under the succeeding conservative minister of social affairs. From the beginning of

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<sup>4</sup> For more about the development of state-civil society/voluntary associations development before the era of the welfare state, see especially (Henriksen and Bundesen 2004; Kaspersen and Ottesen 2006; Sevelsted 2017).



the 1980s (also incidentally a period of economic recession), initiatives were introduced that aimed at the increased inclusion of the third sector with many grants to social development initiated by the state being given to voluntary organizations. A National Board on Voluntary Action was initiated and a Contact Committee for Voluntary Social Work established in 1983 (which turned into Center for Voluntary Social Work in 1992 (Fridberg and Skov Henriksen 2014, p. 16; Henriksen et al. 2012, p. 466).

In the 1998 revision of the Social Service Act, under a social democratic government, it was inscribed in the law that municipal governments should cooperate with and support local, voluntary social organizations economically (Henriksen et al. 2012, p. 467; Henriksen and Bundesen 2004, p. 620; La Cour 2014, p. 118). All governments have subsequently noted the importance of voluntary social work in governmental platforms and political initiatives, most centrally the Volunteer Charter (*Frivilligcharter*) from 2001, *The Common Responsibility*, two governmental programs of action for the weakest groups (Det fælles ansvar – Regeringens handlingsprogram for de svageste grupper I & II) from 2002 and 2006 respectively and the so-called ‘Quality reform’, a major reform of the public sector in Denmark from 2007 onwards in conjunction with the ‘Structural reform’ from 2007 which changed the regional and municipal map and the provision of services (Fridberg and Skov Henriksen 2014, p. 16; Henriksen et al. 2012, p. 467). The quality reform stated that all municipalities should have a policy for the local voluntary sector.

From the 1980s on, in the words of Henriksen and Bundesen, “Denmark became part of a larger international movement in which the ideology of the welfare state was replaced by an ideology of a welfare society. Not only the state, but also other societal actors such as local communities, voluntary organizations, self-help movements, private companies, and so on, were responsible for the provision of welfare and the welfare of the citizen.” (Henriksen and Bundesen 2004, p. 618). Generally, from the 1980s, voluntarism and voluntariness were on both sides of the political spectrum counter-concepts that formed a critique of the bureaucratization of public service provision and which underlined the positive aspects of more civil society involvement. Many of the topics in the civil society strategies from 2010 and 2017 are not new, but are reformulations from discourses that have been long established. For instance the notions of cohesion (which in the 1990s was discussed as ‘social cohesion’) and responsibility. Furthermore, the tropes of civil society as the opposite or negation of the state (flexible,

innovative, warm, close civil society as opposed to the cold, slow, rigid and distant state), civil society as a supplement to public services and civil society as a specific quality and how to measure it, have all been standard of civil society/voluntary discourse in Denmark since the 1980s (Henriksen 2015; Henriksen and Bundesen 2004, pp. 620–22; La Cour 2014, pp. 109–32), and indeed go back to the era before the welfare state in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sevelsted 2017).

### **Civil Society as Transactional Reality and Governmental Rationality**

It is a basic premise of this article that civil society does not exist as a given ‘sphere’ or ‘sector’ with inherent (good) values, but that civil society – and thereby the environment that civil society organizations inhabit – is something that must be produced and constructed in order to come into existence. The article employs a Foucauldian approach in a two-fold way: Analyzing civil society as a transactional reality and as a central part of a governmental rationality or governmentality.

Viewing civil society as a ‘transactional reality’, means viewing it as something that does not exist as a given, a priori entity, but as something which must be continually produced, but which nonetheless has very real effects because of the many practices that invoke it (Foucault 2010, p. 297; Villadsen 2016, p. 11). Foucault discusses civil society in the final lectures of both *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the two lecture series at the *Collège de France* from 1977-78 and 1978-79 respectively, subsequently dubbed the ‘governmentality lectures’ (Saar 2011, p. 34). In the final lecture of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, concerned with the governmental rationality of liberalism and neoliberalism, Foucault warns about assuming that civil society is something that merely exists and he says that “I think we should be very prudent about the degree of reality we accord to this civil society” (Foucault 2010, p. 297). Civil society is not “an historical-natural given” or “a primary and immediate reality”, but should instead be viewed as a transactional reality “absolutely correlative to the form of governmental technology we call liberalism” (Foucault 2010, p. 297).

Viewing civil society as a transactional reality is very much in line with Foucault’s general approach which avoids starting with what he called ‘universals’ – such as state, sovereignty, the people, civil society – but to find out how such universals are created and come to be regarded *as* universals, as given, existing things (Foucault 2009, pp. 2–3). Viewing civil

society as a transactional reality does not in any way mean that it does not have any concrete or real effects. As Villadsen has highlighted, what Foucault wants to stress with the term ‘transactional reality’ is exactly that “even though these ‘things’ are constructed in discourse, they still have a reality in terms of real effects, since practices have recourse to it, invoke it, and organize themselves in relation to it.” (Villadsen 2016, p. 11). Viewing civil society as a transactional reality means seeing it as nothing in and for itself, nothing *a priori*, something that has no inherent, given qualities and values, but something that must be continually produced and constructed, but which nonetheless has very real effects.

The construction of civil society comes through those who speak of, use, position themselves in relation to and attempt to conceptualize civil society. Through this, these actors – both political, civil societal and economic – create and uphold civil society as a thing, as something, as an entity or a given sphere with inherent (good) values. To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, civil society is something that “thinks itself through those who attempt to think it” (Bourdieu 1994, p. 1).<sup>5</sup> Civil society is produced and constructed as a thing by those who attempt to think it, to conceptualize it, those who use it to position themselves and invoke it in the description, justification or legitimization of their own actions or those of others. This occurs academically, in public discourse, in organizational positionings, and in policy and political discussions about civil society. Such discourses are exactly not neutral descriptions, but partake in the construction of the very field they claim and aim to describe (Bourdieu 1994). Civil society does not exist as a given sphere or arena with its own specific logic independently of the state and the market. Civil society and its particular values and qualities is something that must continually be produced and constructed to come into existence. It is in this sense that it is a transactional reality.

Foucault viewed civil society as being “absolutely correlative to the form of governmental technology we call liberalism” (Foucault 2010, p. 297). He views civil society as an integral part of a liberal governmental rationality, or governmentality, that determines and regulates the appropriateness of state government, that forms a sort of self-regulating and self-limiting figure in opposition to state power. In such a governmental rationality, civil society exactly functions as ‘an historical-natural given’ which functions “as both the foundation of and source of opposition to the state or political institutions.” (Foucault 2010, p. 297). Foucault’s

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<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu’s comments are originally about the state, but they are equally relevant for speaking about civil society.

notion of governmentality has been at the center of a vast amount of scholarly work, particularly in what has since been termed ‘governmentality studies’ (Barry et al. 1996b; Burchell et al. 1991; Dean 2010; Lemke 2000; Rose 1999; Rose and Miller 1992). Foucault developed the notion of governmentality to investigate government at the level of the state, the territory and the population without assuming the universals of state and sovereignty (just as he wanted to avoid the universal of civil society). The notion of governmentality was on the one hand used to analyze rationalities of government, the practical reflection on government and a reflexive governmental practice, a specific political rationality (Barry et al. 1996a; Gordon 1991). On the other, governmentality is used to analyze a specific form of governing that is less concerned with command and law, and more with the ‘conduct of conduct’ with regulating the (possible) actions of individuals (and organizations) (Dean 2010; Foucault 1982). Governmentality has therefore primarily been used to investigate the multiplicity and plurality of power relations and forms of government in concrete practices and technologies of government and the decentralized practices of government beyond and beneath the state (Rose and Miller 1992). The governmentality-approach is therefore very well suited to analyze how government functions as a political rationality that structures the space of possible actions of a number of actors beyond the state, how the state governs politically in a decentralised mode by setting up the framework of possible actions, thereby structuring the possible conduct of societal actors. The notion of governmentality is well suited to analyze a mode and way of government of the social where the state withdraws itself from the direct government of social life – here the provision of welfare services – instead delegating responsibility and aligning itself with civil society organizations, voluntary organisations, NGO’s and private corporations to take care of social and welfare tasks.

To Foucault, civil society in the modern sense emerges towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a central field of reference for the art of government of political rationality that must respect and limit itself with regards to the (economic) processes of society. Civil society emerges as a field of reference for political government, a ‘system of natural liberty’ that those who govern must respect and not interfere with (Burchell 1991). Civil society is a field of reference and a self-limiting principle for a governmental rationality in the sense that it must be respected and governed according to, to the interests inherent in it (Foucault 2010, p. 301). Civil society forms a limitation of governmental practice, creating a division between what must be done and what it is advisable not to do (Foucault 2010, pp. 10–11). Civil society becomes a field of

reference for the right or good way of governing, that which dissociates between right and wrong government. Civil society becomes a key site of veridiction, of establishing the right way of governing, and thereby becomes an internal reference to a liberal governmentality (Dean and Villadsen 2016, pp. 123–24; Foucault 2010, p. 295). Civil society plays a central role in the liberal-democratic socio-political imaginary as the site or reference that tells governors how to govern right, even though it is a transactional reality, it has very real effects because so many practices have “recourse to it, invoke it, and organize themselves in relation to it, in particular, with regard to questions of true and false ways of governing.” (Dean and Villadsen 2016, p. 125).

A central part of the liberal governmentality that Foucault examines is also that it evokes certain traits of what Foucault terms an anti-statism or an outright state-phobia (Foucault 2009, pp. 75–78). A fear of the state as a cold monster that suffocates the vitalism of civil society and the market. In the final lecture of *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault evokes the theological notion of eschatology in civil society which emerges as a countermovement against a state-centred governmentality and which posits a time “when civil society can free itself of the constraints and controls of the state, when the power of the state can be absorbed into this civil society” and which dreams of a period where “civil society will prevail over the state.” (Foucault 2009, p. 356). As Villadsen points out, eschatologies makes possible “fundamental critiques of state-centred and self-referential forms of governing.” (Villadsen 2016, p. 16). We can therefore see, analyzing civil society as part of a liberal governmental rationality from a Foucauldian perspective, that it evinces certain traits of an anti-statism and a state-phobia, viewing civil society as inherently vital, innovative and the center of the right and good life, and the state being, at best, a necessary evil that must legislate and regulate. In some instances, this governing rationality evokes traits of a political eschatology in which the state is absorbed by the processes of society.

A final notion on analyzing civil society from a Foucauldian perspective is that it is interested in civil society as part of a governmental *reason* or *rationality* and not necessarily in the ‘concrete’ or ‘real’ practices. The Foucauldian approach is here focused on how civil society plays a central role in “the art of governing, that is to say, the reasoned ways of governing best and, at the same time, reflection on the best possible way of governing.” (Foucault 2010, p. 2).

The Foucauldian approach is here focused on the particular governmental reason and rationality, the particular way of thinking about civil society and the political rationality that is at play in the Danish civil society strategies.

### **Danish Civil Society Strategies**

The Civil Society Task Force set up by the Danish government in June 2017 to make a new civil society strategy (published in October 2017) was seen as part of a larger reform of the public sector and welfare provision called the Cohesion Reform (Sammenhængsreformen). The reform – whose name references the importance of the notion of cohesion in Danish political debate since the beginning of the 1990s – is meant to make the provision of public sector welfare service provision more effective by on the one hand streamlining and cleaning up in the public sector (the first part of the Cohesion Reform is a *De-bureacratization Reform* (Afbureaukratiseringsreform) laid out in September 2018) and on the other an increased involvement of civil society actors and increasing partnerships between civil society organizations, businesses and the public sector.

The civil society strategy from 2017, *Strategy for a Stronger Civil Society*, states that “With the Cohesion Reform the government has a determined focus to strengthening the role of civil society in welfare society.” (Regeringen and Børne- og Socialministeriet 2017, p. 5). In the press release announcing the civil society task force, it was thus stated that “Civil society holds the potential to challenge the silo- and customary thinking of the public sector” (Finansministeriet 2017). In the same press release, the chairman of the Volunteer Council (Frivilligrådet) – set up by the Danish government in 2008 to contribute to the public debate about what role the voluntary sector and voluntary civil society organizations could play in the development of welfare society – stated that “civil society can be a part of the solution to the challenges we are facing” (Finansministeriet 2017; Frivilligrådet n.d.).

The challenges facing welfare society are, according to the Cohesion Reform,<sup>6</sup> that it is “big and complex”, “divided into silos” and thereby not suited to the needs of citizens and enterprises” (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017, p. 3). If Denmark wishes to continue having high-quality welfare solutions, “renewal and innovation is necessary”, because there is a

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<sup>6</sup> When I speak of the Cohesion Reform here, I refer to the document outlining the ideas behind it (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017) published in April 2017, since the actual reform is only starting to be suggested and rolled out from the fall of 2018.

need for a more “modern” and “contemporary” public sector (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017, p. 3). In order to rescue welfare society, something needs to be done. A central part of this is increasing collaboration between civil society, business and the public sector.

The trope of modernizing, reforming and renewing the public sector has been a standard feature of Danish politics, governmental programs and reforms, particularly since the 1990s (Greve 2006). As already mentioned, the debate about voluntary associations as central to supplementing welfare services and as a means to hinder the expansion of state bureaucracy have been a feature of Danish politics since the 1970 and 1980s. But, as also already mentioned, the discourse on civil society as the solution to crisis of welfare management and public governance has increased in recent years, in the West in general as well as in Denmark.

The following analysis focuses on the role civil society plays in the civil society strategies of 2010 and 2017 and in the upcoming reform suggestion, the Cohesion Reform. The center-right government in power, consisting of the liberalist<sup>7</sup> party, Venstre, the Conservative Party and the libertarian party Liberal Alliance. The reason that the civil society strategy from 2010 is included is that it embodies many of the basic thoughts that are also espoused in the strategy from 2017 and seem to be the first coherent strategy of civil society for that government, consisting up until 2011 of the Venstre and the Conservatives. In 2011, the center-right government was ousted in favor of a social democratically led center-left government, and even though this government also spoke about the inclusion of voluntary organizations in the social effort – as indeed all governments have done in the last 20 years – and also renewed the Voluntary Charter made in 2001, I have chosen to focus on the center-right government and their civil society strategies for a number of reasons: Firstly, to focus the analysis and the documents analyzed. Secondly, they have explicitly formulated civil society strategies and appointed the civil society task force – thereby also explicitly and quite consistently used the notion civil society and not just voluntariness, voluntarism and voluntary organizations (although these notions are still used in conjunction with civil society). And thirdly, that civil society is seen as being an important part of the proposed reform of the public sector. Finally, at the moment, the

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<sup>7</sup> I use the notion ‘liberalist’ instead of ‘liberal’, because I want to invoke their adherence to liberalist ideology and distinguish it from the American notion of ‘liberal’. However, it is perhaps important to mention that over the last 20 years, the two biggest parties – Venstre and the Social Democrats – have converged on most central policy questions, why I have also distinguished between centre-right and centre-left governments.

center-right government is pushing the agenda of civil society more aggressively, as a result of its proposed part of the Cohesion Reform, than their social democratic counterparts.

The documents analyzed in the following are therefore focused on the two civil society strategies (from 2010 and 2017 respectively), the governmental programmes of the governments and the documents concerning the proposed Cohesion Reform. The analysis is centred around two vectors, as laid out in the section outlining the Foucauldian view of civil society espoused in this article: Civil society as a transactional reality and as a governmental rationality or governmentality. The first part of the analysis focuses on how civil society is constructed as being a thing, how this construction occurs and what this does to the object under construction, that is, how civil society is imbued with certain features and values. The second part focuses on how this civil society then plays a central role in the governmental rationality under scrutiny. Focus will be on how civil society in this rationality is appropriated as a central other in relation to the state and how it is therefore essential to solving problems that the state (because of its inherent qualities) cannot, how civil society becomes a measurement or indicator of good or right government and lastly, how these documents display a certain form of anti-statism, state-phobia and an eschatology that envisions of society's fusion with the state.

Finally, a little note on the notions and documents under analysis. Governmental programs and policy proposals are not guides to or necessarily indicators of concrete changes in governmental setup. In their nature, they are eminently ideological documents, espousing views of the world and symbolically addressing what one wants to do in vague and optimistic terms. This is why this is an analysis of a governmental rationality, a way of thinking, and what role civil society plays and is not an analysis of concrete changes in the welfare mix and hybridity of welfare service provision.

#### *Civil Society as Transactional Reality*

*The National Civil Society Strategy – An Increased Inclusion of Civil Society and Voluntary Organizations in the Social Effort* (National civilsamfundsstrategi – En styrket inddragelse af civilsamfundet of frivillige organisationer i den sociale indsats) from 2010 starts with a definition of civil society: “We are all part of civil society. Civil society is used as a common designation for those actors and groupings which exist between and independently of the private sphere, the market and the public sector in a democratic society.” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, p. 4). Civil society is here laid out as a sphere where all those groups and



actors that are not the family, not the market and not the state are situated, and where they can exist independently of the pressures of these. Furthermore, it is something that is characteristic of a *democratic* society. Civil society is essential to such a society because “civil society binds us together as a society because civil society bears some fundamental values in Danish society. Values like democracy, personal responsibility, and community spirit thrive and are developed in civil society. Civil society is in other words the foundation of active citizenship and social cohesion in society.” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, p. 4). Not only is civil society a particular sphere existing between the family, state and market, but it also is the site of some particular values that are inherent in it, values that are fundamental to Danish society. Civil society is unequivocally something good, with foundational values and positive attributes and properties.

In the Civil Society Strategy from 2017, *Strategy for a Stronger Civil Society* (Strategi for et stærkere civilsamfund), civil society is invoked as something that comes *before* the state and welfare society, and in this sense precedes it and is its foundation. As it says “civil society has in many ways paved the way for the welfare society we know today.” (Regeringen and Børne- og Socialministeriet 2017, p. 5) Civil society is in other words primary, it comes before welfare society and before the welfare state, and civil society is the basis on which it is formed. I will return to this point in the next section.

A strong civil society, it continues, “is the foundation of a society which is characterized by voluntary communities, personal responsibility and cohesion.” (Regeringen and Børne- og Socialministeriet 2017, p. 4). In this sense, we see civil society invoked as exactly that which Foucault wanted to avoid in his analysis, as a form of universal, as a “historical-natural given”, a “primary and immediate reality” (Foucault 2010, p. 297). It becomes a given thing with given, inherent qualities.

The reason that civil society is so important for the provision of welfare services is exactly because of these inherent values, logics and actions of it. Civil society, it is stated, “can do something that the public sector cannot. Civil society, and especially the voluntary sector, first of all has a capaciousness and a width that the public sector cannot offer” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, p. 11) and “voluntary communities and voluntary efforts can do something else than the public ones exactly because the effort comes from a voluntary engagement.” (Regeringen and Børne- og Socialministeriet 2017, p. 4).

Civil society has inherent qualities, distinct from both business (the market) and the public sector (the state) which can be mobilised. And it is exactly this independence, this special status, that the government underlines as a great asset: “The great strength of civil society is exactly its independence and thereby the possibility to a larger degree to take its starting point in local conditions, ideas and initiatives instead of central regulation.” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, p. 13). Civil society comes to appear as local and hands-on in opposition to the state which is far away and distant.

The same sentiment is echoed in the governmental programme *For a Freer, Richer and Safer Denmark* (For et friere, rigere og mere trygt Danmark) from 2016, the governmental guidelines for the government that were to launch the Civil Society Task Force, the new civil society strategy and the Cohesion Reform. Here it is highlighted that the public sector has the overall responsibility for the social effort, but that “the voluntary effort is an important supplement that consists of a great humane contribution” seeing that “the voluntary organisations can do something that the public sector cannot. Democracy, norms, community.” (Regeringen 2016, p. 65). Civil society supplement is vital because it is something different from the state, it can do something else, it has inherent values which the state and the market does not.

In the *Cohesion Reform*, as mentioned, it is highlighted that ‘renewal and innovation is necessary’ in order to continue having high-quality welfare solutions. Again it is implied that this innovation and renewal cannot come from the inherently stale state, but most come to it from without, from either the private sector or from civil society. This is why increasing collaboration is necessary to renew and rescue welfare society. The state comes to appear as too slow, too bureaucratic and too self-interested.

The 2010 strategy thus states that civil society is a particular sphere with given, inherent, good values, which are typical of Danish society. They are a specific *value* to the Danish welfare state. However, at the same time, it is also a *resource* that must be used (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, p. 4). The same sentiment was presented in the governmental program from 2010, *Denmark 2020 – Knowledge > growth > wealth > welfare* (Danmark 2020 – Viden > vækst > velstand > velfærd) where it is explicitly mentioned that the government is “aware of the great challenge that awaits in the time after the crisis” and that it “is the intention of the government to get Denmark back on the path to growth” (Regeringen 2010, p. 10). One of the ways of doing this is to create “equal opportunities” for all and to reach this goal, the government

states that it wants to attain an “increased involvement of civil society and voluntary organisations in the social task”, stating that “voluntary Denmark has vast resources” which are to be used “more goal-oriented and aggressively.” (Regeringen 2010, p. 28). The resources of civil society must be used in order to rescue a welfare society in crisis. In doing so, the state or the public provision of welfare services is painted as slow and ineffective while the solutions of civil society organizations and voluntary organizations is innovative and that cooperation between different actors will not only be a necessity, but an actual benefit and improvement of social services. The state, with its excessive and suffocating bureaucracy here stands in the way of the innovative solutions of civil society.

### *Civil Society and Governmental Rationality*

In this section I will take a closer look at what role civil society plays in the governmental rationality or governmentality at play. Continuing the Foucauldian approach, civil society is seen as a realm of natural rights and liberties and movements that government must respect and listen to in order to govern right, correctly and efficiently. Civil society becomes a plane of reference for the right or good government.

As we saw in the previous section, civil society is in these documents constructed as a given thing, a given sphere with certain, inherent (good) qualities. The logic of such a view is that civil society then has an innovative, entrepreneurial and vital potential that the state and its bureaucracy is stifling and suppressing. A large part of the proposed Cohesion Reform is therefore also a *de-bureaucratization* of the public sector (Finansministeriet 2018).<sup>8</sup> This de-bureaucratization reform, which is entitled *Fewer Rules and Less Bureaucracy* (Færre regler og mindre bureaukrati) opens with the statement that “it is out in the real world that the best ideas emerge” (Finansministeriet 2018, p. 3), again underlining the fact that civil society (and the market) is where things happen and painting the state as stale.

Alongside the civil society strategies, it is also a major interest for the government to increase competition in the solution to public sector tasks. In the policy paper *Competition Exposure – The best possible service for the money* (Konkurrenceudsættelse – Den bedste mulige service for pengene) from 2018 it is stated that “Denmark needs a public sector that is

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<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that attempts to de-bureaucratize the public sector has been a mainstay in Danish politics since the 1980s from both sides of the political spectrum (Finansministeriet 2018, p. 6).

contemporary and which is constantly evolving and renewing itself. A way to continued quality development, innovation and effectivization of public service provision is more competition for the public tasks.” (Økonomi- og Indennrigsministeriet and Erhvervsministeriet 2018, p. 4). It is underlined that a public task is subjected to competition “does not necessarily mean that it should be taken over by a private actor. The central thing for the government is that the task is invited to tender and that it is tested whether the task provision is effective and gives the best quality for the price.” (Økonomi- og Indennrigsministeriet and Erhvervsministeriet 2018, p. 4). The public sector should stick to its ‘core tasks’ (Økonomi- og Indennrigsministeriet and Erhvervsministeriet 2018; Regeringen and Finansministeriet 2017, p. 3). The market or competition is here that which should test who the best actor is to provide a certain service, be that the public sector, private enterprises or civil society organizations. Again, the logic is clear. The role of the public sector should be reduced to a minimum, to its core tasks, leaving all other to the market and civil society.

A big inspiration – explicitly mentioned – of the *National Civil Society Strategy* from 2010 was David Cameron’s *Big Society* project in the UK. Here, as the strategy suggests, the vision was that “the state should withdraw and people come through” and the objective “a change of culure where the citizens in their everyday life, households, local areas not always turn to the public sector, the local authorities or the government to find answers to their problems. But that the citizens instead feel free and powerful to help themselves and their fellow citizens in the local community.” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, p. 27). The bureaucratic structures of the state stand in the way of society solving tasks and problems for themselves. In this sense, the state is a hindrance to the free flowering of the processes of civil society. Civil society *can* solve their own problems, but the state stands in the way and hinders that.<sup>9</sup>

A central part of the Cohesion Reform and the civil society strategy from 2017 is therefore, as already mentioned, that the public sector should become more ‘contemporary’. A central part of this is, at it is stated, the creation of a public sector “which takes it starting point in the needs of the citizens, business community (erhvervslivet) and civil society.” (Regeringen and

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<sup>9</sup> One of the other components to rendering civil society a ‘transactional reality’ to Foucault is that the notion of civil society also opens up for a questioning of government by civil society, and civil society in this sense becomes a plane of reference not only for a state-centred governmental rationality, but also for practices of civil society either critical of government or attempting to justify their own actions. The ‘transactional reality’ of civil society is thereby as much created by representatives of civil society as those of the state. However, the focus of this article is on the state centred governmental rationality.

Børne- og Socialministeriet 2017, p. 8). The subtitle of the Cohesion Reform is thus also ‘the citizen first’. The state and the public sector – it is understood – is as it is now, largely concerned with itself and with aggrandizing its own power, it is not working for the ones it should be working for, the private sector and civil society. Again, civil society and the private sector come first, are original, are innovative and entrepreneurial and the state and the public sector should be accommodating them rather than looking after its own interests. The purpose of the state is to make it possible for business and civil society to flourish. In the policy paper *Fair and Equal Competition* from September 2017, it is also stated that “The private sector is the the reason why we can afford public welfare. It is therefore a priority for the government to create the best possible framework for private enterprises.” (Regeringen and Finansministeriet 2017, p. 3). Again, the sentiment is that civil society (and the market) is the original, the primary, that on which the welfare society is build. The state should not be preoccupied with its own interests, but should on the other hand exist to further the processes of market and civil society. The state should exist for the sake of the market and civil society and not the other way around. The same point can be found in a book published in 2012 by the libertarian think-tank CEPOS (Center for Political Studies) where the argument is exactly that civil society existed *before* the welfare state and welfare society and that those vital and loving civil society arrangement that existed before the welfare state are being suffocated by it (Gade Jensen 2012). This is exactly also the point that Michel Foucault reads out of Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), where civil society exactly is presented as an “historical-natural given”, something that is given, something that is already there before the establishment of states (Foucault 2010, pp. 298–300). Another interesting point is that while civil society is on the one hand a historical given, something that already exists, this at the same time makes civil society a-historical, something that has always existed.

It is in this sense that these strategies and documents espouse a fundamental anti-statism or state-phobia in the Foucauldian sense. The state should be reduced to its minimum, to its ‘core tasks’ and everything else should be the domain of business and civil society. In this sense, civil society (and business) forms the measuring point of good and right government. Government policies that seek to maximize competition, partnerships and the increased participation and freedom of business and civil society is good government, while that which does not, is bad government. In order to measure good government, civil society is central because it is primary,

originary and stands for the good values of Danish society, democracy, association, cohesion, etc.

In the Cohesion Reform, it is also stated that public sector service provision is too divided into structures and limits (i.e. it is not flexible), it is not suited to the needs of citizens and enterprises (Finansministeriet and Regeringen 2017, p. 3). One central way to make service provision more effective is therefore increasing partnerships between the public sector, businesses and civil society. In this way, there is an increased potential of co-creation or co-production of welfare services, just as civil society and private businesses take responsibility, both a responsibility of civil society in general, but also the personal responsibility of the individual citizen (Regeringen and Børne- og Socialministeriet 2017, pp. 4–5). The government therefore wishes to create “the best possible conditions for private organisations and volunteers to take co-responsibility” (Regeringen 2016, p. 65). Generally the strategy lays a great emphasis on increased cooperation between the public, the private and the civil sector. Civil society “holds the potential to “secure innovation and development of the social effort”, and there is a need to “prioritise the development of new models of cooperation between different actors” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, p. 9). One of the explicit aims is to improve the cooperation between municipalities, business and voluntary organisations, and the objective is a “civil society that cooperates with the public sector and private business on solving social problems” (Regeringen and Socialministeriet 2010, p. 11).

In this sense, civil society can be said to play a central role in the governing rationality of the Danish Liberalist-Conservative government. It is posited as something originary, embodying the values that Danish society and democracy is built upon. Through partnerships between civil society, private business and the public sector, the state and public sector service production must be made more ‘contemporary’, that is, more flexible and more suited to the needs of those that are in their essence more innovative, vital and entrepreneurial; private business and civil society. In this sense, civil society (along with the market) plays a role of a field of reference for the right or correct way of governing, something which government must take into account when governing. It also evinces certain traits of an eschatology that ideally would see the state dissolved into the natural, flexible and originary processes of market and civil society, but which at the very least must be reduced to its minimum or its core tasks.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have analyzed the role civil society plays in Danish civil society strategies and in the upcoming reform suggestion for the public sector, the Cohesion Reform. I have done so from a Foucauldian perspective, arguing that civil society must be analyzed as what Foucault called a ‘transactional reality’, something that does not exist as a given thing, but which must be continually produced. Even though it does not exist as such, it has very real effects because of the many practices – particularly here discursive practices – that invoke civil society, here exemplified by the Danish governments’ civil society strategies and reform proposal. Civil society has here a very real effect because it is used to legitimize certain policy suggestions and reforms of the public sector. It can do so, and is very apt to do so, I have argued, because of the central role it plays in the socio-political imaginary of the West, here specifically analyzed in Denmark. The transactional reality of civil society has been produced – and is continually produced – as a given sphere with inherent good values such as cohesion, communication, democratization processes, community and a closeness and proximity to people and their experiences.

It is also exactly in this way that civil society has been analyzed as a part of a governmental rationality that serves as a field of reference for a right or good way of governing. By positing civil society – as a transactional reality – as something which represents all these good and foundational values, it is posited as something originary and primary which the state can only be parasitic upon. As such, state government must respect the natural and original (good and right) processes of civil society (and the market) in order to govern right. Civil society comes to serve as a measurement of right government and thereby becomes an apt trope to legitimize transformations of the public sector with increased participation between and inclusion of private business and civil society organizations. As such, civil society becomes part and parcel of a governmental rationality that has an inherent anti-statism or state-phobia viewing the state as something that must be reduced to its minimum, to its core tasks, and leave as much as possible to the innovative, entrepreneurial and value-creating, natural, original and primary processes of market and civil society. As such, it evinces traits of an eschatology in which the flexible and natural processes of civil society and market merge with and overtake the essentially stale and cold bureaucratic state. However, in a more modest form, civil society – given its construction as a transactional reality, its role and the positivity ascribed to it in the socio-

political imaginary of the West, and here analyzed in Denmark particularly –forms an apt trope that is vital to operate and appropriate for those who wish to introduce more competition, market and civil society organizations into the provision of welfare services.

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