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Sevelsted, Anders; Johansson, Håkan

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Civil society elites: managers of civic capital

Anders Sevelsted¹ · Håkan Johansson²

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Abstract

The article takes the first steps towards a general theory of civil society elites, a concept not fully developed in either elite or civil society research. This conceptual gap hampers academic and public understanding of the dynamics at the top of civil society. To address this, the authors rely on the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu to build a theory of civil society elites as managers of civic capital. This role is illustrated through examples from the differently institutionalised UK and Nordic civil societies. The first part of the article introduces the notion of civic capital and its emergence during the 19th century. The second part focuses on elite positions in civil society fields, demonstrating how civil society elites, as managers of civic capital, navigate between their constituents and other elite groups. These elites wield the power to consecrate social relations while misrecognising their own symbolic and economic gains. Recent scandals in the climate movement and UK and Nordic civil societies shed light on the symbolic aspects of the positions of civil society elites. This comprehensive analysis contributes to elite and civil society research and enriches public discussions about the role of civil society leaders in society.

Keywords Field theory · Bourdieu · Civil society · Elite · Civic capital · Misrecognition · Symbolic capital

✉ Anders Sevelsted
ase.bhl@cbs.dk
Håkan Johansson
hakan.johansson@soch.lu.se

¹ Department of Business Humanities and Law, Copenhagen Business School, Porcelaenshaven 18, 4.132, Frederiksberg 2000, Denmark

² School of Social Work, Lund University, Allhelgona Kyrkogata 8 Lund, Box 23, Lund 22100, Sweden

Introduction

Civil society is undergoing profound changes. Research points to the growing concentration of political and economic resources in the hands of a small group of major organisations and their leaders (Johansson & Uhlin 2020; Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020). The Red Cross, Caritas, Barnados, Oxfam, and the World Wildlife Fund are today organisations with recognised brands, millions of members, generous donors, extensive turnover and significant access to corridors of power (Johansson & Meeuwisse 2024). Through consolidation of power and resources among top civil society organisations (CSOs), civil society leaders have gained status and prestige from the public and prominent politicians, leading to greater disparity and social distance between members/constituents and civil society leaders (Heylen et al., 2020; Jordan & Maloney, 2007; Skocpol, 2004). Related to this development, the practices of renowned leaders of large CSOs frequently give rise to public scandals: Climate icon Greta Thunberg has been publicly denounced for her support for the Palestinian cause, and the charismatic founder of the Kids Company, a UK charity for inner-city children, was accused of misuse of funds and questionable business practices. Similarly, housing association leaders in Denmark and Sweden have been hit by scandals after newspapers revealed how they used their organizations' funds on expensive travel, hotels and dinners (Aftonbladet, 2019, 2022; TV2 Denmark, 2021) (see also Chapman et al., 2023; Clarke, 2021).

Public scandals are revelatory of the growing elitisation of civil societies and the paradoxical position civil society elites occupy: They are expected to represent and embody egalitarian ideals, and at the same time, they have disproportional control over the symbolic and economic resources of civil society. Elected presidents, hired CEOs, and wealthy philanthropists constitute an elite of civil society who are economically and symbolically dominant while formally expected to represent the dominated. Constituents expect their leaders to 'represent' them and carry their causes and concerns, while other elite groups expect civil society elites to 'control' civil society and refrain from challenging social orders and power relations.

This article aims to explore civil society elites' paradoxical position by developing a novel Bourdieu-inspired conceptual framework. Our analysis addresses the following research questions: How is the field of civil society structured? What characterises elite positions in the field? We explore how civil society has developed as a field (alongside politics, the economy, culture, religion, etc.) with its own rules, positions of dominance and subordination and the development of a unique type of capital, namely civic capital. Civic capital is conceptualised as a foundational form of capital for all societies that self-identify as democratic and is thus valued beyond the field. Whereas economic and political capital only require a minimal form of passive acceptance to gain legitimacy (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1994), we argue that civic capital is highly symbolic and, like religious and artistic capital, relies on a strong emotional investment by field participants. We thus consider civil society elites as managers of a highly symbolic form of capital that is differently institutionalised across national contexts.

Methodologically, we leverage Bourdieusian relational sociology to conceptualise the civil society elite as a societal position (Bourdieu 1984). In contrast to a herme-

neutics of suspicion (Gadamer, 1985), we do not claim that ideal or material motives guide civil society elites. Instead, we aim to show the symbolic, monetary, and power gains of this position, the constraints and opportunities that it entails, and the strategies available to elite individuals. We recognise that the actual leadership of an organisation may reside with individuals beyond formal leadership, but in this context, we follow the positional method in elite studies and use formal leadership positions as an indicator of control over the resources of civil society (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018).

We illustrate our conceptual framework through references to civil society developments in the UK and the Nordic countries. The intention is not to develop a thorough empirical comparison but to analyse field structures and elite positions by using case variation and exploring the implications of differences in institutionalisation for the position of civil society elites (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Our conceptualisation of civil society as a field enables us to analyse civil society elites across contexts, e.g. across social-democratic, liberal and conservative political economies, and their relations to other elite groups. Although classical elite authors such as Michels (1968 [1911]) and Mills (2001) have described aspects of the position of civil society elites in connection with political parties and union leaders, Bourdieu's framework allows us to grasp the symbolic nature of civil society as a field-specific resource that can be accumulated and exchanged following specific rules and by observing certain taboos.

Our Bourdieu-inspired approach to civil society elites substantially contributes to both elite and civil society studies since neither has paid much attention to civil society elites despite the significance of this elite group in contemporary democratic societies. Civil society can formally be defined as self-governing non-governmental and non-market organisations that people join or support voluntarily (Salamon et al., 2003: 7f). CSOs include unions, associations, movements, cooperatives, charities, and philanthropic organisations – and are usually associated with bottom-up processes of self-organising (Tocqueville, 2003), deliberative decision-making (Cohen & Arato, 1992), and civility (Shils, 1991). Civil society is thus assumed to perform key democratic functions in liberal democracies (Habermas, 1998). Although such perspectives are central, we argue that civil society also comprises anti-democratic tendencies, and civil society organisations (CSOs) build hierarchies that tend to form elites who are socialised into established institutional arrangements (Michels, 1968; Mills, 2001).

A common definition of elites is 'those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource' (Khan, 2012:362). Elite researchers certainly address civil society elites yet rarely theorise their similarities and differences compared to other elite groups. One strand of research describes the social connections between foundations and economic elites through a 'transactional model of elite philanthropy' (Maclean et al., 2021: 334). Foundations exert a kind of 'social alchemy' in which economic capital is translated into symbolic capital and vice-versa (Dean 202; Harvey et al., 2020; Maclean & Harvey, 2016, 2019; Monier, 2019; Ostrower, 1995; Silber, 2009). Another category of research is concerned with board interlocks that link civil society elites to elites in other spheres. Such studies show the centrality of union leaders in power networks and fields of power (Ellersgaard, 2015; Grau Larsen, 2015; Hjellbrekke et al., 2007; see also Moore et al., 2002; Weare et al., 2009). A third category comes with prosopographical ambitions to describe civil society elites

as a group with specific career trajectories (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020; Santilli, 2022), forms of legitimisation (Altermark et al., 2022), interaction (Uhlín & Arvidson, 2022) and barriers to elite access (Johansson et al., 2022). Although these approaches have merits, few have sought to theorise civil society elites as a group or used field and capital theories in combination.

This article continues as follows. We introduce a Bourdieusian theory of civil society elites in two parts. The first part focuses on the historical emergence of civic capital and the field of civil society. The second part addresses the position of civil society elites and their power of consecration. In the conclusion, we address the convergence of national civil society elites resulting from increased professionalisation and the broader implications of an elite approach to civil society research.

Part I – the structures of the field

The following sections explore civil society's structures in terms of its distinctive form of capital and how it has become institutionalised and, hence, more autonomous from other fields. We reference civil society developments in the UK and the Nordic countries as contrasting cases and environmental CSOs to capture intra-field dynamics and the distinction between a pure and an established civil society elite.

Civic capital

The field of civil society that emerged in the 19th century was centred around the struggle over civic capital. Civic capital should be understood as a highly symbolic species of capital that, nonetheless, can be used for mundane transactions. Economists have developed the 'civic capital' concept based on Putnam's term *social capital* (Putnam, 1995, 2000) and use it to designate "persistent and shared beliefs and values that help a group overcome the free rider problem in the pursuit of socially valuable activities" (Guiso et al., 2011: 423). Here, civic capital is an asset that explains why some local communities are better at handling social problems or stimulating economic growth.

This view, however, does not capture how civic capital is generally unequally distributed in society, or how what is deemed socially valuable is continuously struggled over (Bourdieu, 1998a, 1986). In contrast, from a Bourdieusian point of view, Sivertsen & Hartley define civic capital as "the assets people can apply in an attempt to influence society in a normative direction that they deem right as citizens" (Sivertsen & Hartley 2023: 7). They show that only certain civic practices are considered legitimate in the public sphere, often linked to the practices of the cultured middle and upper classes, whereas 'populist' expressions of civic engagement are frowned upon.

While Sivertsen & Hartley point to the critical symbolic aspects of what kind of discourse and practice of civic engagement are considered legitimate, the symbolic dimension of civic capital is also undergirded by processes of accumulation, not only linked to broader perception of what is considered 'civic' among established strata of society but also to the differentiation and development of a field of civil society.

Combining the economists' focus on accumulation with the Bourdieusians' emphasis on the symbolic dimension, we define civic capital as the *accumulated resources invested in activities deemed to benefit society*.

The fact that civic capital is 'deemed to benefit society' means that it is symbolically invested with (perceived) self-sacrifice or self-subsumption vis-à-vis a group – evident in such phenomena as the communal sharing of wealth (Graeber, 2011) and cooperative practices (Adloff, 2016, 2022). This self-sacrifice is reflected in civic traditions through concepts such as philanthropy (love of man), charity, *caritas*, *charité* (love of man), public benefit, and solidarity (mutual responsibility). Civic capital is any capital that is 'earmarked' (or symbolically invested) towards what is considered unselfish civic activities. Prime examples are the voluntary donation of time, money, skills, etc., aimed at relieving a group's problems through mutual aid and self-help or alleviating the suffering of others.

Civic capital entails a strong symbolic dimension. Practitioners and academics alike hold that civil society is based on certain values that set it apart, especially from the private sector (Aaker et al., 2010; Frumkin & Andre-Clark, 2000; Miller, 2002). Classically, Beveridge wrote about the 'mutual benefit motive' and the 'philanthropic motive' (Beveridge, 1948), and volunteering has historically been associated with proximity and warmth as opposed to distance and cold (Sevelsted 2020). Civil society associations tend to have positive democratic connotations (Zimmer et al., 2007). In moral philosophical traditions, civil society is characterised by deliberative decision-making processes (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Habermas, 1998), compromise, understanding and plurality (Kocka, 2004), as well as the virtues of civility (Shils, 1991) and altruism (Smith, 2013). The valuation of civic capital may vary historically, often inversely with how the state and market are viewed as problem-solvers, but its symbolic power remains solid, albeit with fluctuating intensity.

The symbolic dimension of civic capital - the good glow it brings (Dean, 2020) - confers status on the CSO leaders who manage it. Such status can, in turn, function as a credit for economic and political benefits. Donations of time, effort, money, etc., are symbolic acts but also very real economic and political investments that function as capital transactions in and across fields (e.g. Maclean et al., 2021). Framing something as a civic task thus enables the mobilisation of other valuable resources (Sewell, 1992). For civil society elites, status means access to social networks and potential integration with the power elite (Mills, 2001[1948]). Moreover, civil society elites gain the power to 'consecrate'. As in the art world, where critics and established artists have the power to elevate some or demote other artists in the field (Bourdieu, 1998b; van Maanen, 2009), civil society elites can symbolically endorse certain actors, practices, and relations as being for a good cause (Bourdieu, 2009).

The fact that civic capital derives its symbolic value from its basis in self-sacrifice and commonality also means that any personal gains derived from possessing – or managing – civic capital are inherently suspicious as personal gain negates the communal value of civic capital. Those charged with managing civic capital are thus pushed to downplay or legitimise their personal gain. Misrecognition is, by necessity, part of the accumulation and successful management of civic capital by civil society elites (see part II for further elaboration). Arguably, if civic capital is only regarded

as bottom-up problem-solving, the economic and political derivative value of this symbolic capital is missed (Bourdieu, 1980).

Field genesis and institutionalisation

What merits the term ‘elite’ of civil society is the fact that civic capital has increasingly been concentrated in the hands of fewer CSOs during the 20th century and into the 21st century. Civic capital is in one sense transhistorical (as collective problem-solving has always been central to human societies), but it was mainly through the clubs of the 18th century and the proliferation of the right to associate in the 19th century that civic capital emerged in its modern sense in relation to a specific societal field (Clark, 2001). It was also at this time that CSOs began accumulating civic capital.

Field differentiation began in the 19th century with the dual breakthrough of economic liberalism and (limited) liberal democracy. The literary field emerged alongside the development of a market society, and artists had to establish themselves in a market of symbolic goods (Bourdieu, 1996). Similarly, the field of civil society had its precursors in guilds, state church charities, and business- and nobility-led foundations but emerged properly during the 19th century. Here, formally free citizens organised themselves in the great movements related to labour, farmers, religion, women’s rights, temperance, etc., as well as around efforts by the middle classes to answer ‘the social question’ and alleviate problems of poverty, housing, health care, alcoholism, etc. associated with the development of industrialised capitalism and urbanisation (Harris, 2018).

Symbolically, ‘the people’ became the central legitimating reference in society, attested to by the democratic and nationalist revolutions of 1848 that swept across Europe. In 1911, Michels noted that even conservatives were forced to legitimise themselves as representatives of the people (Michels, 1968). Key actors struggled over the rules of the field and the positions therein. The very boundaries of the field were (and still are) an essential part of this struggle (Atkinson, 2020: 86), for instance, what should be regarded as the obligations of the state and civil society, respectively.

The field is thus highly homologous (structurally similar) to the field of politics, and the two are often characterised by combined field memberships (Atkinson, 2020). Nevertheless, historically, the two fields have differentiated. Political party organisations have drifted from civil society to form ‘cartel parties’ that are virtually indistinguishable from the state (Katz & Mair, 1995). Because of that, political parties are losing civic capital as fewer members are engaged on a voluntary basis. The contemporary populist turn has, however, made political parties emphasise their roots (if they have any), and party leaders present themselves as being of ‘the people’. The autonomy of civil society vis-à-vis politics is thus historically varying, yet in its present state, civil society has endogenous dynamics.

Because of its high symbolic value, the field is also homologous to cultural fields such as that of literary production, as it is structured through the overall volume and composition of capital (civic vs. economic). Following the classical Bourdieusian depiction of the field of literary production, the top of civil society is divided horizontally between a *pure elite* and an *establishment elite*. The former has much civic

capital but little economic capital. They can be compared to the ‘charismatically consecrated’ cultural elite that gain their status primarily from within the field. The latter has less civic capital but more economic capital. The establishment elite resembles the ‘institutionally consecrated’ artists who depend on external funding actors, such as state officials or business elites (see Bourdieu, 1993).

Civil society elites tend to stand on the shoulders of powerful organisations or movements that have accumulated much capital and are established in the field. They have a record of actions and initiatives, protests, fundraising, lobbying, etc., that bring recognition. For instance, Greenpeace has a charismatically consecrated position in the subfield of environmental activism (see Fig. 1) as it has successfully focused public attention on its cause without ‘selling out’. Conversely, newcomers such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) also belong to the ‘pure’ left side of the field but have yet to be consecrated, i.e. has not accumulated the same volume of civic capital as Greenpeace. The World Wildlife Fund of Nature Inc. (WWF) is on the right-hand side of the field map. It exemplifies an establishment organisation with much overall capital and more economic capital than Greenpeace, as it has closer ties to governments and businesses. At the bottom of the right-hand side are initiatives such as environmental partnerships with local authorities or local businesses that have little overall capital but relatively more economic than civic capital.

Institutionalisation across contexts

The Nordic countries and the UK can be used to illustrate two contrasting cases of field institutionalisation into state and market, respectively. In the Nordics, the consecrated pure elites achieve their status by rejecting the state, and the consecrated establishment their economic and political affluence by embracing the state. In the UK, the dynamic is similar, but mainly concerning the market.

Nordic civil society (see Fig. 2 below) is rooted in the popular movements of the 19th century (Lundström & Svedberg, 2003). Nordic welfare states mainly developed on the principle of tax-financed and state-organised universalism in services. The civil society field is characterised by having few employees but many volunteers (Salamon et al., 2003). While Christian charitable associations continue to play a niche role in areas such as homelessness and drug abuse, the political victory of

Fig. 1 Structure of the field of civil society exemplified through climate and environmental CSOs

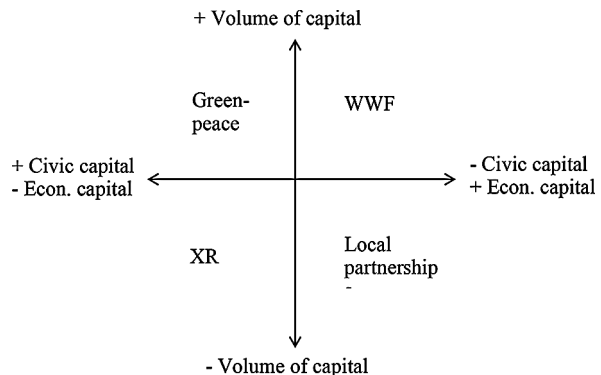
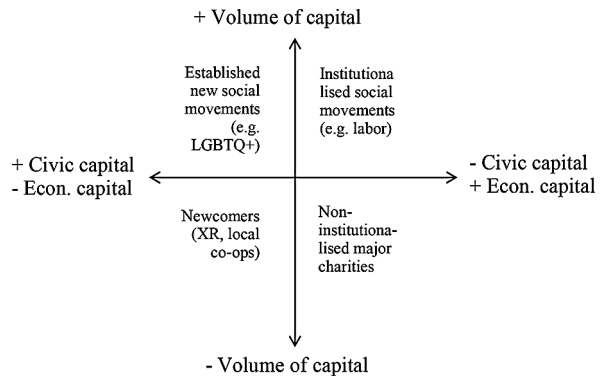


Fig. 2 Field structure in Nordic civil society

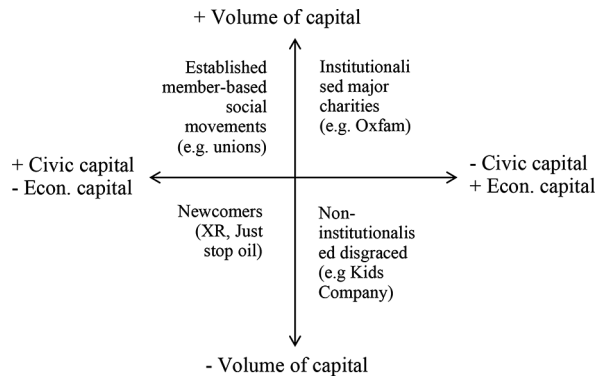


the rural-liberal movement, and especially the urban social democratic labour movement, means that the very idea of charity lost its legitimacy in favour of the symbolic hegemony of social rights (Sevelstedt 2023). Social-democratic and other traditional organisations continue to play important roles in civil society through unions, unemployment associations, and cooperative housing associations. However, other rights-oriented organisations such as Amnesty, Greenpeace, and Save the Children have emerged.

The central dynamic in the field of Nordic civil society may be said to take place between movements that have helped the welfare state to be universally embraced in these countries, especially labour and farmers and so-called new social movements concerned with ‘life politics’, the environment and gender politics. Symbolically, the latter movements have remained ‘pure’ as they only have the role of advocacy or opposition, whereas the labour movement is closely tied to the inner circles of power (Larsen & Ellersgaard, 2018). However, it accumulated a lot of symbolic capital as heirs to the (perceived) founders of the welfare state (cf. Michels, 1968).

In the UK (see Fig. 3 below), charities (philanthropic organisations) are institutionalised through the public benefit principle. UK charities are not based on social movements like in the Nordics. Instead, they are locally rooted and primarily formed around attempts by the middle classes to address different aspects of the social question. The guiding principle for charities comes from having ‘wholly and exclusively charitable’ purposes that ‘operate for the benefit of the public’ (McGovern in Dean, 2020: 7). While such principles are inherently malleable, charities are an attractive partner to the state in the provision of services due to the symbolic value they create (Dean, 2020). Classically, English charities are not ideologically coloured like their Nordic counterparts. Indeed, they are legally required to be non-political and remain independent of party politics (Brown, 2002). They emerged from middle-class concerns for a specific cause – education, health care, etc. – and the principles of localism in which several local charities pool their resources to gain national or even international impact.

The UK field of civil society is institutionalised into the economy, either through the quasi-market of public contract tendering or through voluntary donations. Voluntary donations made up 71% of the income of charities with income over £100 m in 2019/20 (NCVO, 2022). Civil society is thus operationally integrated into the fields of market and state, making the distinction between pure/establishment elites a dis-

Fig. 3 Field structure in UK civil society

inction between those who operate based on members and volunteers and those who operate based on contracts with the state or can attract large donors.

Part II – elite positions and practices in the field of civil society

Part II of the paper focuses on the positions and practices of civil society elites – specifically on the opportunities and pitfalls these positions imply and how elites can manage or mismanage the civic capital they have been entrusted with. We identify two ideal-typical career paths to the consecrated top-positions, we show how the benefits of these positions must be misrecognised, and through the example of scandals we show how civic capital can be mismanaged if doxa of the field is not adhered to.

Paths to consecration

Top positions in civil society have become part of a career path, either as a crowning achievement or a stepping stone to something else. The consecrated positions at the top of the field can be reached differently. The ‘pure’ path involves progressing through organisational ranks. Being recruited from within your ranks ensures ties with constituents and a feel for the organisation to the extent that leaders can fight off more qualified candidates (Michels, 1968: 49f). This path has traditionally been characteristic of the Nordic countries, in which a close relation between civil society elites representing employers and employees and the political elite existed and still exists. In these negotiated economies, union leaders are organisationally tied to the power elite (Lunding et al., 2021).

The establishment path goes via recruitment from outside civil society. Board seats at major CSOs are attractive to the power elite as they are few and thus create an aura of selectivity (Meyer & Rameder, 2022). The boards of CSOs in cultural foundations are often used as ‘retirement positions’ for financial elites (Ostrower, 2004), just as top politicians will frequently find a place on the board of a CSO in which social and political capital is exchanged for symbolic capital in the tradition of *pantouflage* (Levy, 1999). This is similar to the exchange relations in which wealthy individuals buy themselves into certain cultural circles and have their names carved in stone (Monier, 2019).

How elite positions in civil society are used as a career on- or off-ramps depends on the institutionalisation of the civil society field in question. Recent research on Nordic civil society shows that elected CSO leaders are more likely to view their position as a moral obligation than a career path (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2022), and high-profile career changes provide indications of close integration between CSOs and political party affiliation (e.g. former Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt becoming CEO of Save the Children International in 2016 and three Danish MPs for radical left part *Enhedslisten* occupying top-positions in civil society (Bonde, 2024)). In the UK, the ostensibly politically neutral charities are much more aligned with establishment interests in the economic sector. Here, philanthropy serves as a money- and power-laundering device that legitimises the wealth of business elites as socially and morally acceptable (Maclean et al., 2021). Donors might be rich, but compared to other wealthy individuals, they are good people who do good deeds (Dean, 2020).

Managers of civic capital

No matter how elites reach consecrated positions, these come with field-specific expectations of altruism: The work of civil society elites – as representatives of their constituents or for the benefit of their target group – is supposed to have intrinsic value. Leaders are elected or hired to work for a cause, and financial gain should be a negligible motive. Civil society elites are expected to act based on an organisation's principles, whether socialist, liberalist, Protestant, Catholic or simply dedicated to a cause: children, the environment, education, etc. They are expected to possess high moral integrity – either because they are ordinary, 'one of us' (what Michels ironically called 'super-comrades' (Michels, 1968: 89f), or because of their individual qualities as people who are devoted to a cause (Huggins, 1987). While they may very well be committed to a cause and, in some sense, 'ordinary', their very position at the top of organisations that have accumulated considerable civic resources makes them extraordinary.

Because of the symbolic nature of civil society, civil society elites become managers of civic capital. Whether they are elected as representatives, hired as CEOs, or acting as philanthrocapitalists, they manage a capital that principally is not their own but communal - derived from the support of members, donors, volunteers, and beneficiaries. Mills viewed union leaders as 'managers of discontent' who helped channel potential conflicts in the labour market into regulated and institutionalised forms, thereby settling conflicts peacefully (Mills, 2001 [1948]). We contend that all civil society elites, not only union leaders, play this manager role. They channel civic capital – the symbolically charged pooled problem-solving resources – into socially acceptable forms.

The manager position implies split allegiances for civil society elites (Flemmen, 2012; Miliband, 1969; Poulantzas, 1975) - both to their constituents/beneficiaries and the societal elites into which they are increasingly socialised and increasingly depend upon (Ellersgaard, 2015: 73–77). The pure civil society elite must disavow this dual allegiance since they gain their status primarily by refusing to have relationships with political or economic elites (e.g. Greenpeace). The establishment elite faces different dilemmas as they must safeguard their accumulated civic, political, and economic

capital. Compared to the pure civil society elite, they must engage with other elites to gain influence, attention and funding and thus trade their specific species of capital, as civic capital can be used as leverage to put pressure on economic and political elites (Baggott, 1995). In return, political and business elites can be endorsed if they are willing to follow the agendas of the CSOs. This insider/outsider position particularly places the establishment elite in a state of constant conflict of commitments.

Management of civic capital

Civil society elites have the power to consecrate as they possess a symbolic capital that is key to legitimacy in democratic societies (Maclean et al., 2021). Endorsements by civil society actors give political and business leaders an air of doing good. This is the ‘good glow’ that Dean (2020) suggests is the main asset of civil society. As civil society elites positively utilise civic capital for the sake of the organisation, the ‘good glow’ of a well-managed civic capital will ‘rub off’ on individual leaders. This will raise their status, a status which, in turn, can be exchanged for other resources and positions (Maclean et al., 2021; Maclean & Harvey, 2016; Silber, 2009).

In the coordinated Nordic economies, the power elite gains civic legitimacy by negotiating and compromising with union leaders, while union leaders, in turn, gain social and political capital through regular and orchestrated socialisation of the power elite (Ibsen et al., 2021). In contrast, the UK rests on conflictual relations between state and unions, while political elites enrol non-contentious civil society in social policy to build a ‘big society’ (Harris, 2018). Although civil society elites use their powers to influence agendas, frame debates, and engage in collective bargaining, they anyhow accumulate social and political capital that will benefit them in their career ambitions.

In Bourdieusian parlance, the personal benefits that civil society elites might gain must, however, remain taboo, or misrecognised (see Dean, 2020; Silber, 2009). They are required to act disinterestedly as if any personal benefit were solely coincidental (Lovell, 2007). Similar to bureaucrats who should only have the common good at heart, the interests of civil society elites must remain subtle and camouflaged (Bourdieu, 1998b: 87). Profit motives cannot be overt since this would cast a shadow over the good glow of the organisation that produces these profits in the first place. Both status profits and economic profits must be hidden from view or disguised. Even the pure elite must disavow that they are reaping any personal symbolic benefits - they are solely ‘in it for the cause’. While the pure elites and establishment elites of civil society will have to stay quiet about their symbolic benefits, the establishment elite must also misrecognise their literal economic and social gains.

Mismanagement of civic capital

The symbolic nature of civic capital implies that it is easily lost, and the strategies pursued by civil society elites may cause a backlash. Holding the power of consecration entails the risk of being personally deconsecrated – disgraced or dishonoured (Dean, 2023). Since civil society leaders are so heavily symbolically invested, they are also held to a higher standard than other societal leaders. While scandals impact

elites in multiple ways (Alexander, 2019; Alexander & Smith, 1993; Atkinson, 2022), they impact civil society elites significantly more. The salaries of the CEOs of major companies regularly become the target of critique, but these CEOs are generally insulated from such critique since they are only answerable to their boards and shareholders (even if CSR policies expose them to some extent). Conversely, even when no laws have been broken, there are symbolic boundaries that civil society elites cannot cross. Like every informal boundary, the symbolic boundaries that underpin their elite status often only become visible when violated (Garfinkel, 1984).

A recent example from the pure side of the climate movement illustrates this dynamic well. At a rally in Amsterdam on November 12, 2023, climate activist and icon Greta Thunberg linked the climate cause to the cause of the Palestinians, chanting ‘No climate justice on occupied lands’, but was challenged by a participant who disagreed with Thunberg’s statement and tried to wrestle the microphone from her (Hivert & Wieder, 2023). Thunberg’s stance on Palestine has subsequently caused the German branch of Fridays for Future, the school strike movement initiated by Thunberg, to distance itself from Thunberg’s statements. Luisa Neubauer, a prominent leader in the German branch declared that they had lost trust in Thunberg (Beyer et al., 2023). The example shows how difficult it is to remain pure in a field closely linked to the political field.

Disgrace is not only a risk for the pure elite but also for the institutionalised elite. The risks, however, depend on the specific institutionalisation of the field. In the Nordic countries with otherwise low corruption rates, we find the so-called *pamper*, a term referring to (labour) movement leaders who exploit their position for personal gain. Recently, in Denmark and Sweden, scandals have erupted over the salaries of housing association leaders and the way they have used funds on expensive travels, hotels and dinners (Aftonbladet, 2019; TV2 Denmark, 2021). In Sweden, representatives of several charities, including the Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, UNICEF, SOS Children’s Villages and Christian charities, have been hit by similar scandals related to high salaries (Aftonbladet, 2022).

In the Nordics, civil society *doxa*, the rules of the game, has been created by social movements rather than major charities. Thus, there is a strong ideology of equality, and leaders cannot simply argue that they receive high wages because of market mechanisms without harming their position as managers of civic capital. High salaries violate meritocratic norms and are viewed as coming out of the pockets of members, the sick, the disabled, or the unfortunate. It is not only economic capital that is mismanaged, but also civic capital – the accumulated collective problem-solving efforts and ideals.

In the UK, the scandals concerning the Kids Company and Oxfam illustrate the dynamics of de-consecration in a context in which the civil society *doxa* is economically liberal. The Kids Company scandal centred around a charismatic leader who had managed to build a prominent and well-recognised charity for a good cause (vulnerable inner-city children) yet lost everything due to accusations of misusing public funds and private donations (Dean, 2020). While the UK High Court exonerated the founder and then former CEO, the symbolic losses were too great and led to the collapse of the charity (Butler, 2021).

In the Oxfam scandal, senior staff were found to have hired sex workers while working in Haiti to rebuild the country after the 2010 earthquake (O'Neill, 2018). The public scandal had significant economic and symbolic consequences. Not only did the organisation lose GBP 16 million in donations and other income, it also lost status as actress Minnie Driver and civil rights champion Archbishop Desmond Tutu resigned from their positions as patron and ambassador (Scurlock et al., 2020). Leaders tried to secure the status of the organisation in different ways: UK Oxfam CEO Mark Goldring accused critics of being anti-aid, while the head of Oxfam International, Winnie Byanyima, acknowledged the symbolic losses by describing the scandal as 'a stain' that would cause shame for years (Oxfam International, 2018).

These cases show the similarities and differences across national institutionalizations. Like the Nordic scandals, UK civil society leaders mismanaged the civic capital with which they were entrusted for personal gain. However, the UK scandals were not about inflated salaries, as in Nordic civil societies. High salaries appear less of a symbolic issue in the UK as symbolic status is more about a leader's conduct and the personal incarnation of a cause. Despite these differences, what was at stake in both contexts was the consecrated position of the elites – both within and beyond the field of civil society.

Conclusion

This article proposes an original vocabulary for the study of civil societies and civil society leadership. By introducing the concept of civil society elite, we develop the first steps toward a general theoretical framework to unpack power relations inside civil society and civil society elites' relation to the field of power. Civil society is indeed a sphere for civic engagement, social and political mobilisation, and an oppositional force against states and markets – but it is also a field in which support for and investment in a cause constitutes a resource, i.e. civic capital, that is accumulated and through which civil society is stratified by horizontal (pure/established) and vertical (top/bottom) field divisions. Its highly symbolic qualities – the aura of doing good – is what makes civic capital valuable beyond the field of civil society and hence relevant for both political and business elites. Civil society elites thus have extensive intra-field power and potentially field-external power as long as they manage their civic capital properly and do not fall from grace.

Current elite theories mainly investigate civil society power structures from the 'outside in' and insufficiently theorise intra-field dynamics to be able to provide a comprehensive theory of civil society elites. Elite research has undoubtedly gained momentum, leading to analyses of the integration, composition, and reproduction of local, national, and field-specific elites in science, politics, business, etc. (Denord et al., 2018; Ellersgaard et al., 2012; Friedman et al., 2015; Hjellbrekke et al., 2007; Rossier et al., 2017). However, civil society elites have mainly been researched in their relation to, or as part of, the power elite (Maclean et al., 2021; Monier, 2019). Conversely, our approach conceptualises the elites *of* civil society rather than elites *in* civil society and accounts for vertical and horizontal intra-field differentiations and

intra-field practices that enable civil society elites to engage with political and business elites and the trade-offs between remaining pure and seeking influence.

The concept of civil society elites contributes to civil society research by going beyond normative as well as descriptive interpretations of civil society. Normative theories stress the role of CSOs as antennas and amplifiers for grievances in everyday life (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Habermas, 1998) but neglect the vertical divides and power differences between representatives and represented. By introducing the concept of civic capital as a symbolically laden species of capital, our civil society elite approach remains sensitive to the normative dimension of civil society while also showing the transactional dimensions of normative resources. Moreover, the proposed framework enables researchers to conceive of civil society not only as a sector whose characteristics in terms of employees, volunteers and types of organisations can be measured and compared (Salamon et al., 2003) but also as a field characterised by power differentials between top and bottom as well as autonomous and institutionalised positions depending on volume and composition of civic capital. Aside from its relevance to civil society research, our approach also contributes to debates on populism (Mudde, 2004): Populist leaders, too, need to manage constituents as well as elite interests and decide whether to remain pure or engage the establishment – each path entailing different strategic risks and opportunities.

Our theorising of civil society elites calls for further empirical investigation, for instance, regarding how different historical institutionalisations lead to other positions and expectations of civil society leaders, in turn opening different opportunity structures for symbolic and material gains and losses for these leaders. Our field approach allows for a comparative research agenda with a focus on showing differences and similarities in the institutionalisation of national civil society and the positions of civil society elites within the field and in wider society, e.g. across liberal, conservative, and social democratic welfare regimes. Although there is evidence that national civil societies may now be converging due to isomorphic pressures linked to professionalisation or neo-liberal state governance (Henriksen et al., 2012; Zimmer et al., 2007, 2016), we would expect this dynamic to have different consequences for the reproduction and integration of civil society elites across regime contexts.

To conclude, since civil society performs essential functions for the functioning of democratic institutions, it is critical to have concepts that enable researchers and the wider public to unpack power dynamics at the top of civil society and to hold CSO leaders accountable. Critical scrutiny of the elites of civil society helps qualify debates and campaigns taking place in the public sphere. Around the globe, public spheres are shrinking, and backlash movements attack organisations that promote reproductive rights, gender equality, and the rights of sexual minorities, while in some countries, civil society is criticised for its lack of diversity (Ivanovska Hadjevska, 2022). By showing the descriptive representativeness of civil society elites as well as the dynamics that lead to elite positions in the field and how this position is managed, a civil society elite perspective provides transparency and accountability and a way to go beyond mere resentment towards a discussion of what procedures and regulations can increase the legitimacy of the representatives of everyday grievances.

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Declarations

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Anders Sevelsted Anders Sevelsted is an Assistant Professor at Copenhagen Business School. His research interests include civil society, elite studies, and history of ideas. He is the PI of the ERC Starting Grant project MORALITES, a historical-comparative project on the influence of civil society elites on European societies.

Håkan Johansson is a professor of social work at Lund University, Sweden. His research interests include elite studies, and civil society and social movements research. He has been engaged in investigating the Europeanization of civil societies and recently completed a comparative project on Civil Society Elites in Europe.