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Civic Action

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Without Abstract

Introduction

Though widely diffused the concept of civic action is not clearly defined, nor has it a well-established meaning. For example, civic action is referred to enabling people to make sure legislators hear their voices; to building knowledge on important issues and take action through campaigns to change the behavior of public and private institutions; to citizens becoming more active members in their community; up to a military force operating in favor of civilians including dental, engineering, medical, veterinarian activities.

Civic action neither has a precise placing in scientific community. References to this concept can indeed be found in the literature on collective action and social movements, on participatory democracy, on advocacy, on political participation, on community organizing, on social networks, on social capital, on direct democracy, on volunteerism, on stakeholder theory, etc. (cf. Andriof, [2002](#); Della Porta & Diani, [2006](#); Rubin & Rubin, [1992](#)).

In this situation, therefore, what has to be done is not to choose the most updated, comprehensive, and precise definition of the concept, but rather to identify the kind of reality the concept would refer to. Starting from this concern, it can be noticed that, in the civil society discourse, what distinguishes this concept from close others is the focus on the practices that the citizenry carry out in order to fulfill general or common interest goals, rather than on forms, motivations, kind of actors, etc. Starting from this essential element a definition and a more precise content of the concept can be fixed.

Definition

Civic action can be defined as a form of citizenship practice consisting in mainly collective initiatives aimed at implementing rights, taking care of common goods or empowering citizens. It can be addressed both to governmental or private interlocutors as well as to the general public. It implies the exercise of powers and the use of specific tools on the citizens' side.

The general distinguishing elements of this definition of civic action can be summarized as

follows:

- It is related to the participatory component of citizenship, but going beyond the exercise of the right to vote.
- Also in case it addresses the political establishment, it is an autonomous practice of the citizenry, well distinguished by the traditional political participation through parties.
- It is about the fact that citizens engage themselves in common or general interest activities, rather than about issues like the fields of engagement, the organizational structures or the operational patterns (e.g., advocacy or service delivery); in other words, it is about the way citizens act rather than the way they get together.
- It requires some degree of organization to be really effective and is therefore based on the ability of citizens engaged in common problems to gather and collectively act.
- It implies the exercise of citizens' powers in the public realm, such as the powers to produce information and knowledge, to change the common awareness, to give the "social license to operate", to constrain public institutions to effectively work, to change material conditions, etc.
- Despite civic action being a widespread phenomenon, which does not depend on the political regimes, it is related to a constitutional role that citizens' activities acquire in the evolution of democracies, often defined in terms of horizontal subsidiarity.

Historical Background

It can be stated that civic action came into the fore together with a double process affecting contemporary societies, and especially democracies, starting from the 1960s. On one side, a weakening of the effectiveness of State structures and operations, due to a number of factors (localism, increased power of private companies, financial crisis of welfare systems, etc.), while on the other side a growing autonomous political subjectivity and an enriched and more concrete meaning of citizenship emerged in civil societies.

In relation to this process, citizens' initiatives from the local to the global levels expanded and increased their impact in the public realm, influencing a number of relevant policies and the public policy making styles and habits themselves. In particular, the public significance of non-state actors' practices devoted to the general interest definitely spread. The growing diffusion and importance of civic action can be accounted as a part of this broad phenomenon (cf. Pierre & Guy Peters, [2000](#)).

Key Issues

Enabling Factors

A number of factors can favor the implementation of civic action. Four of them can be distinguished.

There are, first of all, *material conditions*, in this case of the utmost importance since civic action requires an amount of energy definitely bigger than voting. Verba et al. ([1993](#)) identify three of them. A first category of material conditions is the availability of resources such as time; money and other goods to be mobilized; and civic skills, i.e., organizational and communicational abilities like the one of speaking in public or organizing a meeting. Another

kind of condition regards motivations, that is, a good cause to be involved in. A last kind of condition is the existence of recruiting structures, that meaning that the presence of a preexistent organization can make easier to take civic action.

Secondly, *social capital* can be considered as an enabling condition for civic action. Social capital can be defined as the links of reciprocity, cooperation, and trust that connect individuals in society (Putnam, [1993](#)). More the social capital, more civic action is likely to take place.

A third enabling condition for civic action is the *civic culture*, intended as the set of norms and habits, visions, symbols, behavioral models characterizing individuals as members of a democratic society (Donolo, [1992](#)). For example, if among the patterns of the civic culture there is the responsibility of citizens to take care of their neighborhood, civic action is favored.

A last condition enabling civic action can be defined as *civic dimension*, meaning the attitude of a society as a whole to consider the engagement of citizens in public affairs as a worthy resource or as an ordinary habit. If a strong civic dimension exists, the taking place of civic action is facilitated (Moro, [2005](#)).

Summarizing, it can be stated that, when a texture of social capital, a strong civic dimension, a rich individual civic culture and some material conditions (time, resources, and civic skills; strong motivations and recruiting structures) do exist, civic action is more likely to take place.

Repertoires of Civic Action “Technologies”

What are the main tools of civic action? Taking what worked out by Charles Tilly on social movements (cf. Traugott, [1995](#)), there can be identified repertoires of civic action tools, intended as sets of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out according to specific situations, needs, and goals. These tools can be considered as technologies, meaning with this term systems of operational rules based on a specific knowledge.

Starting from these assumptions, there can be identified four repertoires of civic action technologies, that can be illustrated using some examples coming mainly from European experience (Table [1](#)).

Civic Action. Table 1 Repertoires of civic action technologies

Repertoires	Examples of technologies
Direct action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charters of rights • Advice and counseling structures • Monitoring and production of data and information • Symbolic actions • Information and awakening actions • Proximity information • Conflict management • Establishment of services

Repertoires	Examples of technologies
Mobilization of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting • Fund raising • Mobilization of technical resources • Gathering of signatures and support • Boycott • Gathering and diffusion of good practices • Education and training • Use of information technologies • Use of media
Interlocution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roundtables • Agreements • Participatory planning, budgeting, etc. • Partnerships
Public institutions' activation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claims and complaints • Implementation of bodies and procedures provided by laws • Lobbying • Legal (civil) actions

Source: Adapted from Moro (2005)

Technologies of Direct Action

In this category tools that citizens can activate by themselves, without the consent or the involvement of other actors, are included.

The *Charters of rights* are documents that specify how rights established in laws and regulations in a general way and therefore often not implemented, should be protected (with regard, for example, to patients, children, immigrants, etc.). They are used also at the end of favoring the recognition and promotion of new rights. *Advice and counseling structures* are services enabling citizens to get information, expert knowledge and support in case their rights or common goods are at risk. The technology of *monitoring and production of data and information* refers to the, usually but not necessarily recurring, gathering of data and information regarding a concerning situation or functioning of a service. Its outputs are often reports. *Symbolic actions* are initiatives with a high degree of visibility aimed at stimulating a reaction of interlocutors and involving the public in an unsolved or unrecognized question, creating a strong pressure and catalyzing public attention. *Information and awakening actions* are devoted to increase the citizens' awareness of a problem or an opportunity related to a public interest through meetings, advertisements, publications, etc. *Proximity information* consists in the activation of people trusted by the citizens affected by a problem and able to give them direct and reliable information and answers on relevant questions.

Conflict management includes those activities aimed at prevent or minimize damages coming from tensions and clashing interests between individuals or groups in a number of issues, from service delivery to interethnic relations. *Establishment of services* refers to the creation and delivery of services that answer to needs or rights not protected adequately or not protected at all by public institutions.

Technologies of Mobilization of Resources

This category includes those technologies of civic action that are aimed at raising people, means, and money needed for the achievement of the planned goals.

Recruiting consists in the involvement of people in a project, a campaign or a long-term or permanent initiative, on the base of their link with a problem, commitment with the mission of the organization, abilities related to the goal of the action, and so on. *Fund raising* is the collection of financial resources for the fulfillment of the goal of the action. *Mobilization of technical resources* regards the gathering of those means that are needed for the civic action, usually through donations or on loan. *Gathering of signatures and support* can go from complex initiatives as a referendum proposals to more simple ones such as petitions. *Boycott* is a tool aimed at damaging the reputation of public or private bodies, whose behavior is against citizens' rights or common goods, making the continuing of this behavior counterproductive. *Gathering and diffusion of good practices* refers to the share - through catalogs or databases, for example - of good practices in the management of public issues, e.g., practices aimed at improving the efficiency or the quality of utilities or the attitude to listen to the citizenry. The aim of this tool is to trigger an emulation chain. *Education and training* refers to all the actions aimed at facilitating the increase of knowledge and abilities of citizens in protecting rights and taking care of common goods, thus empowering them. The *use of information technologies* refers to the internet tools available for campaigning, informing, protesting, promoting petitions, etc. The *use of the media* refers to those activities - press releases, press conferences, dossiers, and reports, letters to the editor, newsletters - able to activate the media in support of a citizens' cause.

Technologies of Interlocution

In this cluster are grouped tools of civic action that favor and make as much effective as possible citizens' relation with public institutions and with private actors - whatever of dialogue, confrontation, or conflict.

Roundtables consist in convening representatives of bodies engaged in a relevant issue in order to discuss the situation and how to address it, often in the presence of the whole concerned citizenry. With the *agreements*, that can have various forms, actors engaged in a issue of citizens' concern publicly undertake to develop programs, activities, and behaviors to face the problem and put them in a common agenda. *Participatory planning, budgeting, etc.* is the involvement of the affected citizens in planning and taking binding decisions on relevant issues such as urban planning or welfare spending. Though usually coming from public administrations, in case it is promoted and lead by the citizenry it can be considered a tool of civic action. *Partnership* refers to projects and programs promoted and implemented by a group of citizens together with one or more public or private actor, sharing objectives, resources, and risks, and in which the results have an added value.

Technologies of Public Institutions' Activation

This category refers to those civic actions that are aimed at pushing or forcing public

institutions to implement laws and regulations that contain principles, bodies, and procedures related to the protection of citizens' rights or the care for common goods. The common starting point of these tools is that citizens' engagement is necessary to make those institutions and procedures effectively work.

Claims and complaints are reports, requests, or call for intervention that citizens (also as individuals) can address to public institutions in relation to a problem or a need, that activate a check, an answer and consequent actions on the institutions' side. *Implementation of bodies and procedures provided by laws* refers to law instruments that can be effectively implemented thanks to citizens' intervention. Varying on the base of national (or EU) legislation, they can regard for example the access to information, the quality standards of services, the ombudsman, etc. *Lobbying* is a well known tool consisting in pressing political and administrative authorities to change laws, regulations, and public budgets in favor of a right or a common cause, with reference to a specific decision-making process. *Legal action* is the use of jurisdictional resources by citizens as individuals and/or as organizations. According to the various national judicial systems, opportunities to use criminal, civil, or administrative action to protect a citizens' right, to constrain the judicial system to fill gaps and clarify ambiguities in laws and regulations, to shed light to concerning but not known situations, to force powerful actors to change their behaviors are available.

Challenges

Due to its growing relevance in contemporary societies, civic action is challenged by some questions of the utmost importance. Three of them can be mentioned and summarized as follows.

Civic Competence

People engaged in civic actions require a growing amount of knowledge and expertise in order to effectively face the problems they are dealing with. But this competence is not taken for granted. On one side, in general there are several information asymmetries that affect all the actors of the public realm, including citizens. On the other side, the ability of citizens to have an adequate expertise is often questioned. This lack of ability is supposed concerning three different elements (Dahl, [1998](#)): the moral competence (the knowledge of what is good and what is bad for public interest); the virtue (the agency needed to pursue the common good); the technical competence (the know-how needed to make effective that virtue).

On the contrary, it can be argued that citizens engaged in public problems that directly affect them are able both to develop a specific knowledge of situations on their own, and to use the advice of experts to get into the "black box." Moreover, the task of protecting rights and caring for common goods is related to a moral competence, i.e., a perception of the general interest related to specific situations, and a commitment, or an agency, to the general interest as well (Caddy, [2004](#); Moro, [2004](#)).

In addition, according to Aaron Wildavsky ([1993](#)), when citizens' participation is intended not as a general, holistic (and therefore unworkable) attitude, but as a policy-centered one, it is possible to satisfy the basic conditions for citizens' participation: understanding what is at stake, distinguishing between big and small changes (so that perceiving the utility of participation), and being continually involved, thus learning from experience. In public policies, citizens - acting as "analysts" - are indeed able to choose an issue, to collect and accumulate information and to use it acting together with other citizens, influencing the course of them.

Representation and Representativeness

In spite of the idea that direct citizens' action is the opposite of representation, it is a matter of fact that citizens engaged in civic actions, especially as organized entities, do exercise representative functions. These functions involve both the meanings of the concept of representation: "to speak for" and "to act for" someone or something else. Among the "speak for" phenomena, there can be mentioned several civic actions that are carried on with the aim to give voice to weak or marginal people (e.g., illegal immigrants or prisoners), or even to the whole society (for instance, in consumer issues) when not to subjects not yet living (the future generations in environmental actions). Among the "act for" phenomena there can be mentioned agreements and memoranda of understanding signed by citizens' groups with public or private actors, implying that measures are effective for the whole concerned people.

A number of problems, though, raise: overrepresentation of the stronger and wealthier parts of population, living room to the "extreme voices" rather than to the average citizen, lack of accountability of those that take action, priority given to the leaders to the detriment of the targets, and so on (Skocpol & Fiorina, [1999](#)).

These problems would be addressed clarifying the standards and requirements that make a civic action representative of the affected people. On the other side, focusing on the actions rather than on the subjects carrying them out, it could be noticed that what is really important is not the representativeness, but rather the relevance of the action undertaken to face a specific problem or situation.

Definition of Civic Action Standards

In the last years civic action has become more and more diffused, recurrent, and influential in public life at local, national, regional, and global levels. As a consequence, it has affected governments' core operations much more directly and continuously than in the past. This circumstance has given place to negative or suspicious attitudes towards civic action, often considered as a threat or an obstacle for the functioning of public institutions and the activity of the representative democracy actors.

On this regard, the need for the definition of a set of standards of civic action especially when it interacts or interferes with public institutions, has emerged.

For example, the European Charter of Active Citizenship, promoted in 2006 by Active Citizenship Network (ACN, FONDACA, [2006](#)), establishes a set of rights to civic action vis-à-vis public institutions. The most relevant is the right to intervention: "Whenever citizens' rights and general interests are at stake, autonomous citizens' organizations (ACOs) have the right to intervene with opinions and actions, as well as publicly disclosing the actions and/or omissions which may have an effect on such rights and general interests." Other relevant rights included in the Charter are: the right to carry out prevention activities, to consultation, to access, to evaluate, to a qualified interlocution, to respect of time, to trust and equal dignity, to facilitation and support measures.

These rights, or others set up in similar documents, can be considered as starting points for defining standards for civic action in the public realm.

International Perspectives

The major difference in civic action, as it results from the international debate and consolidated knowledge, is the one between American and European perspectives (cf. Tocqueville, [1969](#); Putnam, [1993](#), [2000](#)). It can be summarized as follows: while civic action is a constitutive element of American democracy as relevant part of the attitude of citizens to get together and set up associations, in Europe it is a more recent phenomenon, coming from the weakening of traditional political and social forces, such as political parties and trade unions.

The main differential factor is the role of the State in facing public problems and in legitimizing non-state actors, which is much more relevant in Europe rather in the United States. As a consequence, in Europe civic action still tends to be considered at the same time as a resource and a threat for the sake of public institutions (Active Citizenship Network, [2004](#)).

Future Directions

Future directions in research on civic action involve mainly a reinforcement of the concept and a more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. This development can be expected, because of the growing attention towards the role of autonomous citizens' initiatives in the public sphere, with emphasis given to practices rather than to forms.

In this framework, various topics could be dealt with. One is the meaning of civic action, going from the constitutional (horizontal subsidiarity) to the operational one (participatory governance). Another concerns the relationships with interlocutors of civic action, focusing on the conflict-cooperation continuum. A last one regards impacts and knock-on effects of civic action.

Cross-References

[Advocacy](#)

[Citizenship](#)

[Civic Culture](#)

[Civic Participation](#)

[Collective Action](#)

[Lobbying](#)

[Participation](#)

[Social Audits](#)

[Social Capital, Definition of](#)

[Subsidiarity](#)

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