Using a Socio-psychological Approach for Understanding the Influence of Civil Society on Economic Activity

ANDREA WERNER**

Verstehen zivilgesellschaftlicher Einflüsse auf Wirtschaftsaktivitäten mittels eines sozialpsychologischen Ansatzes

This paper proposes a socio-psychological approach for empirical research into the influence of civil society contexts on the practices of individual economic actors. This methodological approach is based on social theories that explicitly take into account the link between structure and agency, and the paper explains how such framework can be utilised in qualitative interview-based studies. To illustrate the usefulness of such socio-psychological approach, the paper reports on the findings of a research project that used this methodology as it sought to investigate the influence of Christianity on SME owner-managers’ conceptualisations of practice.

Keywords: Civil Society, Interview-based Research, Structuration Theory, Discursive Psychology, Christianity, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

1. Introduction

There has been growing interest in recent years in civil society institutions and their potential to solve collective problems and, more specifically, to have a moderating influence on economic activity (e.g. Giddens 1998; Münkler/Fischer 2002). Observers are increasingly concerned over socially and morally unconstrained economic behaviour and its potentially destructive consequences both for society at large and for economic activity itself (Bakan 2004). Moreover, nation states, which have been considered the main institutions that have the ability and means to keep economic activity in check, seem to be less and less able (and willing) to provide the desired constraints due to the increasing globalisation of business activity and the proliferation of the free market model (Castells 2003). As a result, greater attention is being paid to those organisations, institutions and activities that make up civil society and their capacity to safeguard the well-being of societies and individuals.

Civil society may be broadly understood as the arena of “uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values” (LSE 2004). As such it is conceptualised against the sphere of the market, where human action is presumed to be guided by

* The article has been subject to a double blind peer review process. Date of submission: 6th September, 2007; revisited version accepted for publication: 7th May, 2008.

** Dr. Andrea Werner, Institute of Business Ethics, 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1BE, UK, phone: +44-(0)20-77986062, fax: +44-(0)20-77986044, e-mail: andrea_werner@gmx.net, fields of expertise: the influence of socio-cultural institutions on business practice, ethics of SMEs, cross-national comparative studies in business ethics.