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Civicness, Third Sector and Social Economy: the Civic Perspective and the Search for its Special Ingredient

Sebastiano Citroni
University of Insubria

ABSTRACT: La prospettiva civica ('The Civic Perspective') is a rich and multifaceted research volume written by 26 authors, divided into 14 chapters under the scientific coordination of three editors. The volume's research outcomes include, on the one hand, empirical evidence concerning various aspects of non-profit associations and voluntary participation in Italy and, on the other hand, the development of new interpretative categories to analyse this data. In this paper, an overview of the book and an illustration of some of its numerous research findings show how La prospettiva civica offers a consistent lens to revisit the well-trodden field of inquiry of Italian civic engagement and non-profit associations. The volume is discussed in relation to three recent debates: the study of civic cultures and its ethnocentrism; internal differentiation within the Italian third sector and possible emerging forms of its re-composition; and both the potential and weaknesses of the recent frame of the social economy. Through these discussions, the paper highlights La prospettiva civica's contribution to the exploration of the distinctive features of the widely heterogeneous universe of contemporary Italian non-profit organisations.

KEYWORDS: Civicness, Non-profit Associations, Participation, Social economy, Third sector
CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S): sebastiano.citroni@uninsubria.it

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1. Introduction

The volume *La prospettiva civica (The Civic Perspective)* is aimed at a variety of audiences, including volunteers, civic activists, social workers, scholars, public decision-makers and simply those interested in the topic. The book offers a range of contributions spanning a spectrum with two extremes: on the one hand, the *empirical* evidence concerning various aspects of non-profit associations and voluntary participation in Italy; on the other, the *interpretative* categories developed to analyse this data. The copresence of these two types of contribution is one of the main novelties to emerge in recent years in Italian studies on civic and third sector groups (Author 2026) and it is effectively summarised in the book's short final paragraph, from which two quotations can be drawn:

"if the question, then, is whether this book is useful, the answer lies in its empirical findings";
"this, then, is the purpose of this book, to step back and adopt another perspective: the perspective of those who join together to bring about change" (Vitale p. 302).

These concluding words make explicit to whose viewpoint the *civic perspective* in the volume's title refers. This is the main subject of the *interpretation* put forward by the book, in its theoretical effort to revisit and redefine the well-trodden field of inquiry of Italian civic engagement and non-profit associations. Moreover, from the volume's subtitle the reader learns that, together with this first subject, the *interpretation* also applies to a secondary dimension, concerning what is seen through the investigated *civic perspective*. Indeed, the subtitle states: "Italy seen by those who come together to change it". This statement is vital for grasping the research operation developed in this volume but, it should not be taken literally. Doing so risks disappointment for the reader, given that the book's 344 pages contain little data or findings about current conditions in Italy outside the world of civic engagement and associationism. Instead, the subtitle indicates a deliberate choice to distance this work from the general tendency to view the civic realm as a sort of 'younger brother' (Vitale 2024a): something whose value, characteristics, actions and associated outcomes are interpreted in relation to something else – be it the 'big sister' represented by welfare systems, inequalities, employment markets, forms of poverty, GDP dynamics or other variables detailing general societal conditions (Campedelli Sgritta 2016; Citroni 2026). So, the implicit yet fundamental message conveyed by the subtitle is to avoid focusing on similar conditions – and related variables – when looking at, and accounting for, civic engagement; instead, the volume proposes *overturning* this frame and taking the *civic perspective* as the main focus for examining Italy from this viewpoint, deepening the investigation and considering what light it sheds on a variety of current social conditions: for example, urban inequalities (Pratschke De Falco 2024), political attitudes (Boldrini *et al.* 2024), generational differences (Casavecchia Serini 2024), mental health care systems (Zucca 2024), tackling early school-leaving (Caltabiano 2024) or fighting for better working conditions (Ficcadenti 2024). The importance of these and similar issues should not hide the fact that the aforementioned *overturning* is among the distinctive features of *La prospettiva civica*'s research approach.

Keeping this general point in mind, we can now delve into the details of a complex research volume: written by 26 authors, who contributed to 14 chapters under the scientific coordination of three editors. My general aim in the pages below is to help orientate those who have not (yet) read and explored *La prospettiva civica* by themselves, highlighting in particular some insights which I believe to be particularly relevant with respect to recent debates on civicness, the third sector and social economy in Italy. The main goal of this paper is to provide a review of the volume, and this will be pursued as an operation which is not neutral: on the contrary, as already exemplified, the proposed revision is openly shaped by the author's sensitivity to the inquired topics and related debates. Specifically, the first section will provide an overview of the work, taking into account both its internal diversity and, above all, the *civic perspective* as the general framework that unites and links

its various constituent parts. This will be followed by a section dedicated to illustrating some of the numerous research findings presented in the book; subsequently, a further section will discuss the volume in relation to specific recent debates that the author deems particularly relevant and that concern the risk of ethnocentrism in the study of civic culture, non-profit institutions' differentiation and social economy in Italy. Finally, the last section will show how *La prospettiva civica* may contribute to exploring the distinctive features of the widely heterogeneous world of contemporary Italian non-profit organisations.

2. La prospettiva civica within the tradition of IREF's reports on social associations

Looking first at *La prospettiva civica* in its entirety, it may be useful to frame this work in relation to the specific research tradition from which it is derived, and which it also significantly revitalises. This tradition consists of the series of reports on non-profit social associations produced by the Institute of Educational and Training Research (IREF) – an organisation founded by the Christian Association of Italian Workers (ACLI) in 1968 – the first edition of which dates back to 1985. More than fifteen years after the ninth and most recent edition (Caltabiano 2007), the reports have now returned with a book that is the 'result of a research project co-funded by Fondazione Cariplo […] and ACLI, under the patronage of the National Forum of the Third Sector and the National Council for Economics and Labour' (Caltabiano, Vitale, Zucca 2024, p. 13). The general research objectives remain the same as the past, that is to offer detailed mapping of non-profit associations in Italy, analysing their main organisational and political dimensions, as well as those relating to individual – volunteer and paid – participation and the various areas of intervention in which it takes place. The approach to this mapping also remains faithful to the past: indeed, 'a distinctive feature of IREF's reports on associations, which has remained unchanged over time, is the adoption of a 'broad-based' research approach that includes the various forms of social participation and voluntary action without any distinctions regarding the different organisational forms through which associative participation takes place' (Bassi, Lori 2024 p. 35). It is, therefore, a non-sectoral view of the worlds of non-profit associations (ibid.); it does not identify it as a social sphere (Alexander 2006) with clear boundaries, but rather as a pluralistic expression operating across multiple sectors, including 'institutional contexts' like those examined in the third part of the volume, such as schools, mental health care and the self-organisation of cultural workers.

Whilst the research objective and general orientation of this latest report are consistent with the previous works, the methodology is innovative due to the variety of sources and research techniques adopted in the various contributions to the volume: several official statistical datasets; two longitudinal surveys; three qualitative case studies on associations operating in the aforementioned institutional spheres; a comprehensive survey encompassing four major Italian cities (Milan, Rome, Naples and Florence), involving over 700 activists from 130 associations; and finally a piece of photo reportage to conclude the volume, with 28 pictures.

Given the possible impression of excessive heterogeneity in the methodology adopted, it is worth clarifying that 'this variety of methods is not due to a generic choice of methodological eclecticism, but to a reasoned choice of mixed methods aimed at capturing the plurality of levels of reality necessary to describe the civic perspective of those engaged in social associationism' (Vitale 2024b, p. 294). In short, the variety of methods adopted stems from a desire to approach the 'civic perspective': the cornerstone concept of this research that is well summarised at the start of the volume as 'the capacity of social associations to engage with problems by seeking solutions, rather than withdrawing in indignation at the gap between reality as it is and as it ought to be' (Manfredonia, Petracca 2024, p. 11).

This work's emphasis on the *civic perspective* gives rise both to the variety of research methods adopted and – among these – to the particular prominence assigned to the conducted surveys, with their focus on association activists: those 'who are directly engaged within an association […], a component that has been little

analysed even though it is the linchpin of associative life' (Caltabiano, Zucca 2024 p. 30). Understanding 'the perspective of those who are involved in associations' (Vitale 2024b p. 293) requires that we move the focus from the viewpoint of external scholars and observers towards approaching that of those who join associations to change Italy – the *civic perspective* that gives this work its title.

In general terms, investigating the perspective of associations' members is certainly not a novelty for IREF's research reports; on the contrary, it represents a line of continuity that firmly anchors this latest work to the previous editions (Caltabiano 2007; Iref 2001; Iref 1995; Biorcio Diani 1994). At the same time, however, the fact that this focus is now explicitly framed – as a *civic perspective* – constitutes a significant leap in reflexivity compared to the past. Indeed, it is clear that this work is not naïve in its study of the *civic perspective*: rather, it is a conscious choice that take seriously the variety of forms in which this perspective manifests itself across associations' internal diversity (Vitale Zucca 2024, p. 114). Moreover, the work is conscious of the impossibility of directly engaging with the perspectives under investigation, and of the subsequent need to resort to categories, hypotheses and research tools that are never neutral with respect to the subject to which they applied (Vitale 2024b, p. 293).

Once one understands the decision to frame the study of non-profit associationism in terms of analysing the viewpoints deployed through its practices, it becomes easier to grasp the work's methodological and content-related choices. For example, in addition to the aforementioned prominence of surveys over the other research techniques employed by this study, it becomes clear why interviewers questioned those present at the association meetings: to capture the perspective of the activists, 'those who are truly committed, who attend the meetings' (Vitale 2024b, p. 293). Moreover, one understands the rationale behind the book's overall structure: its division into three parts, the most substantial of which (five chapters, compared to three in the other parts) presents the results of the survey on activists, whilst one is dedicated exclusively to a qualitative exploration of three specific areas of association activity. One also gains a better understanding of the choice of themes addressed in the various chapters and their role as points of observation for approaching the civic perspective from different angles: for example, how this takes shape in relation to very concrete aspects, such as the time devoted to association activities, the various forms of civic activism practised (Casavecchia, Serini 2024) and the tasks in which they are expressed (Donati Polizzi 2024); or the obstacles perceived by activists regarding greater involvement in associations (ibid.), and their relationship with politics (Boldrini, Mete, Milani 2024), with religious faith and with their local context (Pratshke De Falco 2024).

The overall framework underpinning this work also helps one understand the specific approach taken to the research topics being studied: for example, why it is relevant to investigate the extent to which those involved in associations take into account the – generally distant – perspective of the beneficiaries of their work (ibid.). Indeed, this original aspect is the most important for understanding the *civic perspective*, and its analysis exemplifies how *La prospettiva civica* is attentive to both the 'objective' dimensions of non-profit associationism and its subjective aspects, with these two dimensions constantly analysed in relation to each other.

It is this specific combination that, in my view, provides this work's most interesting research findings: for example, whilst the strong investment in the local sphere by non-profit associations was already known (Bassi *et al.* 2025; Fazzi Rosignoli 2025), this research tries to approach this aspect through the meanings attached to it by the studied civic activists and volunteers, that is in terms of a 'reinvention of the local' (Vitale 2024b, p. 297), a specific form of this investment that contrasts with the localist insularity typical, for example, of NIMBY-style collective action. Similarly, the research findings on what studying the *civic perspective* tells us about today's Italy derive specifically from a combination of objective and subjective elements so tightly interwoven they are difficult to disentangle: for example, the historical overview of civil society in Italy over the last 40 years refers to a variety of general changes that have taken place in relation to this phenomenon during this period, to the trends in various forms of participation (social, civic and political, volunteering, charitable giving, etc.) and to their generational dimensions (Casavecchia Serini 2024), but also systematically

comparing what has happened in Italy with respect to the rest of Europe (Bordignon, Ceccarini and Salvarani 2024).

The second part of the volume ('Associations and the City') details the choices and research process regarding the survey conducted on activists (Vitale and Zucca 2024). It reconstructs their profile (Accorinti et al. 2024), investigating their associative life, its organisational forms, its timing, its routines and its relationship with the online sphere (Donati and Polizzi 2024). This is followed by an analysis of the socio-spatial structuring of non-profit associationism and, finally, by an examination of the activists' relationship with politics (Boldrini, Mete and Milani 2024). The third and final part ('Associations and Institutional Contexts') is devoted to three qualitative analyses, carried out with the aim of examining associations that are active within specific institutional contexts, understood as settings where they must relate to regulations and procedures more than elsewhere. Specifically, these concern mental health care (Zucca 2024), education (Caltabiano 2024) and the labour market in the cultural sector (Ficcadenti 2024). Qualitative analyses are not entirely new in the context of IREF studies: take, for example, in the previous report (Caltabiano 2007), the significant analyses offered on the self-organisation of families (in housing construction, energy consumption, and solidarity with those in need), on the anti-Mafia movement, on civil society's engagement with the media and information, and on the acquisition and self-management of businesses by their workers. Once again, a fundamental feature of IREF's reports on civil society acquires greater value in this work thanks to its reinterpretation through the lens of the *civic perspective*, the study of which requires one to delve into the specific areas in which it takes shape. Among the many possible areas that could have been chosen, the decision to focus on some of the most heavily regulated proves effective in highlighting the existence and specificity of a *civic perspective* which – embedded within the problems and the institutions that officially deal with them – manages from this position to carve out new opportunities and possibilities for action. Finally, the volume opens and closes with contributions from its editors, dedicated to presenting the general framework of the proposed study, contextualising it appropriately (Caltabiano and Zucca 2024) and summarising its main research findings in relation both to the specific nature of the *civic perspective* under investigation and to the image of Italy that this perspective projects today (Vitale 2024b).

3. The civic perspective in research findings

The first part of this work shows the importance of contextualising non-profit associationism in Italy over the last 40 years, in particular with respect to regulatory changes (with particular attention to the reform of the third sector), shifts in organisational forms – such as the proliferation of foundations in recent years (Bassi Lori, 2024 p. 38) - and the evolving perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation: in particular, the disappearance of major national observatories (from the National Centre for Volunteering in Lucca to the Italian Foundation for Volunteering in Rome), coinciding with the growth of available Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) data sources (two censuses, a permanent archive and five-yearly in-depth studies). Thanks to these sources, we are able to carefully position the associationism examined in this volume within the broader universe of non-profit organisations, accounting for 85% in terms of the number of organisations, but only 4% in terms of paid staff.

The phenomenon under investigation is evolving: according to ISTAT data, between 2011 and 2021 it grew in terms of the number of organisations (+13%) and even more so in terms of paid staff (+30%), but saw a decline in the number of volunteers involved (–5%). This latter figure puts into perspective the shocking data that emerged in May 2023 (according to which, based on ISTAT data, the number of volunteers in Italy fell by 15.7% between 2015 and 2023, corresponding to almost one million people), but it signals a clear trend that the work under discussion takes very seriously, seeking to account for it in relation to a series of hypotheses and, even more importantly, by being as detailed as possible with a systematic confrontation of ISTAT data

on census on nonprofit organizations between 2011 and 2021. Thus, it is shown how the trend in the decline of volunteers has mainly affected large organisations, with many volunteers, embedded in second-tier networks, with stable relationships with public authorities, and with a lower proportion of paid staff. With regard to areas of intervention, the diachronic confrontation of ISTAT data shows that the presence of volunteers is declining particularly rapidly in international cooperation, but in other areas, for example in the education sector, it is actually increasing.

In addition to these general figures, the first part of the volume – through analysis and elaboration of ISTAT data, from both census and *Multiscopo* surveys on families – distinguishes between different forms of participation and compares their trends from 2013 to 2023 to confirm both the decline in volunteering (over 10% up to 2018, and just under 8% through to 2023) and in civic/political engagement (from 67% to 60%), but also the increase in social participation (family, friendships and social connections in general), which rose from 22% in 2013 to 26% in 2023 (Casavecchia Serini 2024). The current picture of participation confirms that it is most intense in northern Italy, among men, and among those with higher educational qualifications, who express greater confidence and satisfaction with their lives (ibid., pp. 63-69). Organised volunteering is mainly carried out by older people (17% of those aged 65–74, compared with 5% of those aged up to 19), but it is not true that young people do not participate: the participation index for environmental, civil rights and cultural themes stands at 21% among those aged up to 19 (compared to 15% in this age bracket who are completely inactive), thus demonstrating 'the demand for social change from this age group on these issues' (ibid., p. 64). In particular, the in-depth analysis of youth participation shows that young people have a high level of civic engagement on specific issues, such as those mentioned above, and a low level of political engagement (ibid., p. 72): thanks to this study – and its particular focus on the perspectives of the subjects studied – we also know that the data on participation do not show that young people believe politics is generally useless, but rather that they do not believe it offers them adequate opportunities to play a role. Furthermore, data on the entire population show that participation in non-profit associations is linked to more optimistic future outlooks, but not to a higher level of trust in institutions (ibid., p. 70).

The final point I wish to highlight from the first part of the book is the picture that emerges from an international comparison (drawing on two sources: the *European values study* and *European social survey*) and, in particular, the fact that in Italy the main trends in participation consistently run counter to those seen in the rest of Europe (Bordignon, Ceccarini and Salvarani, 2024). The most general finding concerns membership in any type of association: whilst in Western and in Central and Eastern Europe membership of cultural associations, trade unions, political parties, environmental associations and professional and trade associations has increased over the last 25 years, in Italy membership of all these types of organisations has declined. Consistent with this, looking at the period from 1981 to 2021 and constructing a composite participation index, it is clear that the trend in Italy is always the opposite of what is happening in the rest of Europe: where one increases, the other decreases, and vice versa (ibid., p. 92). Among the numerous international comparisons and analyses of different variables, the specific data regarding the low level of multiple memberships in Italy stand out, in other words the small number of Italian activists affiliated with more than one association (ibid., p. 93).

The second and third parts of the book delve into the heart of the *civic perspective*, examining both the involvement of activists in four major Italian cities and how non-profit associations are embedded and operate within the specific fields of mental health, education and the cultural sector. Regarding the activists studied, a new survey focused on "associative worlds" (Vitale Zucca 2024, p. 114) has been designed and carried out directly by Iref, thus producing new relevant data concerning both activists' more traditional aspects (e.g. their socio-demographic profile, the significance they attribute to their involvement, their class position and their relationship with politics), and other particularly relevant dimensions that are generally less explored in Italian social research (Citroni 2026). These include, for example, the difficulties faced by field researchers and the significance of various activists' 'reluctance' to collaborate with the study (Vitale Zucca 2024); the more

challenging aspects for further development of the participation under investigation, such as 'organisational difficulties' and the obstacles to greater active involvement arising from the difficulty of reconciling work and family commitments with civic involvement (Donati Polizzi 2024); and finally, the importance of the territorial dimension in accounting for participation, conceived in terms of the class composition of the local areas where the associations studied operate (Pratschke De Falco 2024).

The focus on the socio-spatial structuring of the associative engagement inquired in Iref's surveys brings to light important findings such as participants' relative homogeneity in terms of their positions in the labour market, the role of associative participation in the social reproduction of the 'new middle classes', the distance separating those who take action from the beneficiaries of their activism (in terms of the relative privilege of the former over the latter) and, consequently, the question this provokes regarding whether associative engagement can actually counter urban inequalities, thus healing the social fractures within the urban fabric (Laryea Brandtner 2024). This is such an important question that, in comparison, the associationism studied risks being perceived – once again – as the 'younger brother', thereby reproducing the aforementioned risk of only residual attention being paid to associative engagement, secondary to issues deemed of primary importance, in this case the mending of the social fabric. This risk is, however, averted, because the focus of this analysis also remains anchored in the *civic perspective*: indeed, the examination of socio-spatial structuring focuses largely on how those participating in associations relate to it, and in particular the fact that the activists interviewed were seemingly well aware of this dimension (Pratschke De Falco 2024, p. 185). The distance between civic activists and those benefitting from their engagement is shown to be perceived and addressed by the studied associationism, for example through specific participatory mechanisms aimed at fostering community leadership in deprived neighbourhoods: e.g. the weekly assemblies of the 'common goods' initiative in Naples (Ibidem., p. 186).

The aforementioned risk of the focus shifting from the *civic perspective* to other issues is perhaps even greater when addressing a general theme such as the relationship between activists and politics (Dekker 2019); yet, even in this case, the risk is avoided by adopting a dual focus: on the one hand, investigating the extent to which activists' self-representation is defined in political terms, and on the other, studying the broader relationship between social activism and political participation (Boldrini *et al.* 2024; Diani 2015). Regarding the first of these two points, we know that activists' distancing from political meanings was already perceptible in the early 2000s, when a form of volunteering increasingly oriented towards meeting self-fulfilment needs was emerging both in Italy and elsewhere (Hustinx Lammertyn 2003). Today, the data from this study indicate that this trend has not become prevalent and that participation in associations remains, in many cases, a bulwark against the spread of anti-politics (Boldrini, Mete Milani 2024). Furthermore, we also know that the proportion of activists who do not identify as either right-wing or left-wing, who are left-wing voters, and who say they talk about politics every day is in each case very high compared to the Italian population as a whole.

When it comes to the relationship between social activism and political participation (Biorcio Vitale 2016), there is a general self-selection effect whereby those who join associations tend to be people with higher levels of education, income and occupational status. However, among working-class activists, the much-celebrated 'school of democracy' effect (Tocqueville 1982) persists, whereby participation in associations entails that well-known redefinition of one's own self-interest so as to better include the perspectives of others (Bellah 1996). As might be expected, and as confirmed by the data provided, this type of process occurs primarily within social associations rather than recreational ones, and is more prevalent amongst volunteers than amongst paid staff. In summary, the most significant finding of this analysis is that members of these associations exhibit both more positive feelings towards politics than the rest of the population, and, at the same time, largely critical attitudes towards this sphere of activity: to put it succinctly, the activists studied appear 'critical but not resigned' – as the title of the relevant chapter puts it (Boldrini et al. 2024) – and, as we shall see in the

following pages, this is a fundamental attitude for grasping the distinctive features of the *civic perspective* explored in this volume.

In my view, the remaining parts of the volume cannot be summarised without doing them an injustice, as they consist of chapters offering qualitative analysis of specific institutional spheres, which reveal these spheres' internal structure and stratification and the way non-profit associationism has become embedded within them over time, right up to the present day. The final chapter then raises some general issues that summarise the analyses and the trajectory presented in the preceding pages: these are of primary importance as they concern, above all, the kind of Italy that emerges from the perspective of those who join associations, with particular reference to the way in which associative engagement at a local level reveals a specific orientation, which counters both the commodification of social life and parochial insularity (Vitale 2024a). Rather than further summarising these highly effective overviews, and simplifying the richness of the three qualitative studies presented in the volume, I would encourage readers to read these contributions for themselves, given that – together with all the other research findings presented in the volume – they are fundamental to approaching *the civic perspective* and, through this lens, seeing a fresh image of contemporary Italy.

4. Dialogue with debates

4.1 Beyond ethnocentrism in the study of civicness

The research findings presented in *La prospettiva civica* are so rich they speak to a variety of debates, relating to both points of this work's dual focus, that is on the one hand non-profit associationism and civic engagement and, on the other hand, general transformations and emerging trends in Italy in the political, historical and cultural spheres (Heywood 2024). Halfway between the realm of civic participation and that of Italy's transformations lies a dimension to which this work offers one of its main contributions, corresponding roughly to the notion of 'civicness' that is at the heart of a long tradition of scholarship, and which in part originated in Italy in relation to Banfield's (2010) well-known study 'The Moral Basis of a Backward Society', which advanced the grim category of 'amoral familism'. Without reopening the complex debate that has developed since that work (Porcellana 2022), it is important to emphasise that – despite its many limits (Rimoldi Pozzi 2022) – it remains fundamental in structuring the notion of civic culture and, in particular, a specific way of conceiving it, which is still very much present in much public discourse in Italy today (Busso 2024). This approach, like the work discussed here, views civic participation as a lens through which to understand a country's broader social conditions and, in particular, to account for its political configuration and, above all, the health of its democracy. Close to the crudest stereotypes and – perhaps for this very reason – easy to confirm empirically, this approach sees civic culture as a specific configuration of values, capable of nurturing the democratic nature of political institutions, as revealed by the studies of Robert Putnam and, in particular, by the popularity of his notion of social capital. Despite the many weaknesses of those studies (Edmondsonn 2001; Lichterman 2006; Smith Kulynych 2002), today that notion of social capital is in some ways hegemonic, both in common journalistic parlance and in the specialist knowledge of various academic disciplines that deal only tangentially with civic participation. Compared to that notion, *La prospettiva civica* marks a fundamental shift, capable of broadening the public discourse in Italy on civic engagement and the third sector and of offering a breath of international fresh air that is more necessary than ever today: indeed, according to recent literature on the sociology of civic life (Cantori 2025, p. 14), the civic realm consists of a set of meanings and symbols that make up civic culture. Yet, unlike previous work that has sought to identify a single, democratic set of values that would propel democracy forward (Almond Verba 1989; Walzer 1992), recent work has demonstrated that, on the one hand, political cultures are embedded and nurtured by different social relations

and interaction styles (Cefai Lichterman 2006) and, on the other hand, that '[d]ifferent forms of civic culture perpetuate, or weaken, different social structures, different forms of inequality' (Lichterman 2005, p. 384). This pluralist view resonates with the focus on the *civic perspective*, as its study requires that activists' viewpoints are taken seriously; however, this focus is far from the normative and ethnocentric idea of civic culture as a specific configuration of values, which serves as a benchmark for measuring the 'backwardness' of all others.

4.2 Differentiation and recomposition in the third sector

The debate on the Italian third sector encompasses a range of perspectives, which nevertheless converge on the fundamental observation that this phenomenon is becoming increasingly standardised (Psaroudakis Salvini 2024), but also ever-more polarised (Vesco Belloni 2024) between, on the one hand, the more professionalised and institutionalised component of the voluntary sector and, on the other, the component more closely linked to active citizenship, volunteering and activism (Barbetta et al., 2016). Many trace the origins of this trend back as far as 1991 (Frisanco 2013), the year in which the laws on social cooperation and voluntary organisations were promulgated, with a gradual intensification in the following decades (Ranci 2015), particularly in relation to the emergence of Italy's specific 'third sector regime' (Savini 2011). In this regard, *La prospettiva civica* proposes an interpretation of the diversity within Italian non-profit associations that fits neatly into the debate concerning the growing internal differentiation within the Italian third sector, confirming this trend, documenting and detailing it, but also refining and completing it, showing its developments to date and highlighting the complementary emerging forms of recomposition of the internal divisions within this universe.

This trend is made clear from the very first chapter of the book, through the metaphor – borrowed from Diani (1988) – of an associationism landscape made up of islands in an archipelago that are drifting further and further apart, becoming independent of one another, or at the very least increasingly viewing themselves as self-sufficient. This evidence is well documented by the data presented in the book on the relationships maintained by the associations studied, according to which just over half of non-profit organisations report having links with other bodies. The book then investigates this trend in more detail, clarifying how the 'disruptions' in the 'system of connections between the islands of the third sector' (Casavecchia Serini 2024, p. 26) primarily concern two aspects: the standards introduced by the third-sector reform for access to registration in the relevant national register and activists' growing fragility, particularly in relation to 'specific socio-demographic segments: young people, women, people of foreign origin' (Caltabiano Zucca 2024, p. 27). Thus, the regulatory requirements and the vulnerabilities affecting certain social categories emerge in the book as the main dividing lines that run through the vast territory of Italian non-profit associationism. Together with elements such as integration into welfare systems and the repertoire of action adopted (Busso de Luigi 2019), these are well-known dimensions of the internal structure of the Italian third sector: what *La prospettiva civica* adds is to emphasise how such traditional classifications, or others that are even more established relating to organisational forms or sectors of intervention, do not 'fully capture the divergence and differentiation of associative models' (Caltabiano Zucca 2024, p. 27) currently underway in Italy.

This is where *The Civic Perspective* offers a dual contribution to the debate on internal differentiation within the third sector. Firstly, in line with the book's general framework, there is the idea of breaking down this phenomenon in a way that is closer to the meanings attached by those who experience it, leading to the distinction between eleven 'associative worlds': planets within the universe of Italian non-profit associationism that differ in the meanings attributed to them by their protagonists, influenced by their various neighbouring satellites; in particular, the religious, trade union, political, legal/rights, consumerist, communitarian, ethnic, sporting, environmentalist, social/educational and health worlds (Vitale Zucca, 2024 p. 114).

Secondly, the focus on forms of differentiation is accompanied by attention to emerging recompositions, with the concept of associative worlds integrating with that of a civic perspective to give rise to the hypothesis that what characterises and distinguishes these worlds is the sharing of a specific perspective by those who participate in them, an 'orientation towards social action' (Caltabiano Zucca 2024) that manifests itself both in the issues addressed and, particularly, in the way they are addressed: in the repertoire adopted, in the subjects with whom one engages, in the styles of everyday association-making (Citroni 2025), but also in the formalised mission, and so on. Indeed, the *civic perspective* presented in this book does not seek to identify itself as a 'definitive picture of Italian associations' (Caltabiano Zucca 2024, 31), but rather as a general framework that needs to be adapted and applied, in response to the invitation explicitly set out in the volume to 'give credibility to the idea that there are different non-profit worlds, each with its own perspective' (*ibid*.). Thus, in combination with the notion of associative worlds, the pluralism intrinsic to the *civic perspective* takes shape by engaging with the Italian debate on internal differentiation within the third sector (Fazzi, 2026), and contributes to it by refining and developing it with the goal of indicating a specific line of analysis for exploring possible emerging forms of recomposition.

La prospettiva civica offers further general contributions to the recent Italian debate on the third sector, particularly in relation to its sometimes excessively abstract nature. This is clear when it dwells on the broad rhetorical formulations that risk overlooking specific practices and real actors. Consider, for example, the document 'Il terzo settore oltre il fare' ['The third sector beyond action'] recently published by the Third Sector Forum (2025): the problem, of course, does not lie in the title, but in the slant it conveys and which, to varying degrees, the contributions adopt, even though they are formulated by eminent scholars of and close witnesses to the third sector (in alphabetical order, from Giuliano Amato to Stefano Zamagni), capable of offering otherwise very important insights. Instead, it is (partly) in 'action' that the third sector daily expresses its capacity to transform the existing order, and going 'beyond action' is useful only if one first passes through it, understanding its empirical dimensions in their various manifestations (Cefai Lichterman 2006). As anticipated at the beginning of the chapter, the work discussed here is significant both for the data and empirical findings it presents, and for the interpretative frameworks it proposes through these analyses, starting with the more general 'civic perspective', which takes the commitment of activists and their daily efforts seriously and demonstrates that these practices deploy an interesting perspective, one worth exploring for its intrinsic richness and also because it enables us to better understand Italy at this specific historical juncture.

4.3 Towards a social economy perspective?

Another area where *La prospettiva civica* offers important insights is that of the social economy – a field attracting growing interest, driven by significant legislative measures, but which, at least in Italy, remains rather vague (Citroni et al. 2026). It lacks a clear definition (Florio 2025), and its uncertain boundaries imply it is devoid of solid statistical data. This situation means that, apart from a few individual aspects or local studies in specific areas (Bertulessi 2024), the level of rhetoric surrounding the social economy is generally very high, celebrating its contribution in terms of social inclusion and the creation of quality jobs, levels of internal democracy, and even its influence on Italy's environmental and digital transitions (ibid.). In reality, we know very little about these aspects of Italy's social economy: if one pauses to consider what we actually know about issues such as working conditions in the third sector, the democratic nature of decision-making processes in the social and non-social cooperative world, or Italian associations' low level of digitalisation, there is a strong temptation to set about dismantling that rhetoric, and to overturn its meaning (Curcio 2022; de Leonardis 2025; Muehlebach 2012).

Rather than giving in to this temptation, it might be more useful to draw on data from studies such as the one discussed here to identify what they reveal about an important component of Italian civil society, namely

the non-profit associations (which account for 85% of Italy's non-profit organisations), highlighting the relationships and thus the boundaries between this component and related phenomena, such as the social economy. Alternatively, one could view *La prospettiva civica* as an example to be adapted and applied specifically to describe the social economy in Italy today, and thus its outlines, its internal structure, the interventions it carries out, and the meanings with which this phenomenon is experienced by its key players. While demanding, an effort of this kind could address at least some of the most serious gaps in our understanding of the social economy and, in so doing, begin to tackle one of the most significant implicit criticisms levelled at this category: namely, its vastness and internal heterogeneity, which is even broader than the already wide scope of the third sector, given that, for example, it also includes non-social cooperative enterprises (Locatelli Uselli 2026).

If, moreover, one were to borrow the approach and general research hypothesis from the book under discussion here, the aim would be to investigate the lived experiences of the protagonists of the social economy, the meanings with which they participate in it, and the emerging forms of reconstruction of the internal fragmentation typical of this phenomenon, or to seek clues to a possible *social economy perspective* across its various sectors. This line of inquiry would be entirely consistent with the findings of the Italian debate on the social economy (Citroni et al. 2026), which explicitly suggests that 'it would be worth adopting measures that do not negate what is distinctive about different organisations, so as to avoid the short-sighted imposition of standardised approaches that are unlikely to be effective, given the considerable fragmentation of the Third Sector, which is made up of extremely diverse types of actors and organisations' (Florio 2025).

When relating *the civic perspective* to the social economy, it is important that the former does not become a further factor of fragmentation within the latter, a further fault line in an already highly heterogenous landscape. At the same time, the internal diversity typical of non-profit associations and the Italian social economy in general must be preserved, and *La prospettiva civica* points to a specific possibility in this regard. In other words, just as the focus on the *civic perspective* demands that we take the viewpoint of those involved in non-profit associationism seriously, this focus also deserves to be treated seriously as a research approach, and possibly applied in other fields as well, such as the social economy.

5. The civic perspective as a possible logic of action, in its own cultural context

Beyond the specific themes mentioned above and the related debates, *La prospettiva civica* also implicitly addresses a more general and cross-cutting issue: the vexed question of the specificity of non-profit and third-sector associations and what it is that makes this universe distinctive (Busso 2024; Citroni 2026), defining its otherness with respect to both the private sphere of economic efficiency and the public/bureaucratic realm marked by universalism and the related requirement of transparency (Bordandini 2025). The issue is so cumbersome that it is raised less and less explicitly, except in the already well-worn terms of a third sector which, in its self-representations in a variety of Italian public discourse, distances itself from its uniquely benevolent image (Morniroli Scancarello 2025) – something openly questioned some time ago by the widely debated novel significantly titled *I buoni* ['The good ones'] (Rastello 2014; Citroni 2026, p. 615). When non-profit actors distance themselves from their representation as *i buoni*, they generally do so by emphasising their mature and economically robust entrepreneurial identity (Morniroli Scancarello 2025). Recent research findings show how this shift is not entirely convincing for most of the Italian population (Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore 2025) and it has even unintentionally contributed to exacerbating the loss of Italian public support for non-profit associationism. Indeed, today – following a series of legal and, above all, media investigations into non-profit organisations (Busso 2024) – Italians' trust in the non-profit sector has reached an all-time low: IPSOS data show that in 2020 only 39% of the population trusted the sector (down from 80% just two years earlier), with 56% of respondents considering non-profits to be driven by economic motives and only 22% believing them to be inspired by humanitarian ideals (Paini 2024).

The deterioration of the non-profit sector's image also points to the difficulty of clearly recognising what makes it distinctive, with challenges in terms of representation and public recognition. This is often defined as a crisis of sense-making (Fazzi 2023; Benasayag 2025; Pantrini, 2025) in today's non-profit associations: a huge issue, which also manifests itself in the difficulty the third sector currently faces in clearly indicating the shared direction it is pursuing, the capacity to publicly recognise the kind of transformation of the existing order it aspires to achieve (Citroni 2026b).

The vastness of the question of the third sector's 'sense' – or 'direction' (Fazzi 2023) – makes it today a sort of elephant in the room, difficult to handle and understandably avoided (Citroni 2026b). However, it is worth recalling how, until recently, the problem of pinpointing that elusive distinctiveness of non-profit organisations was central to much sociological research and public discourse on the phenomenon (Fazzi 2012). For example, from the 1980s through to the early 2000s, there were numerous sociological discussions that sought to characterise the non-profit sector of the time, not merely applying established categories (e.g. the failure of the state and the market, solidarity as a relic left over from the past), but rather developing new theoretical perspectives suited to the novel aspects of the phenomena they sought to describe. Some of the best-known examples of these perspectives are perhaps the relational sociology approach (Donati 2011) or the 'Challenging Codes' (Melucci 1996) emerging from associative practices and capable of heralding – almost prophesising – the changes underway in the forms of social bonds; the idea of a 'new third sector' (Fazzi 2023) that departs from Italy's established political cultures, replacing the moral duty to assist the needy with citizenship rights; the focus on 'identity and service' (Ranci et al., 1991), integral parts of the new associationism, yet inevitably in tension with one another; the emergence of 'solidarity-based choices' (Ambrosini 2005) as a new individualistic focus for the orientation of voluntary action… These are just a few examples of a broader flourishing of attempts to grasp the specificity of what this book calls 'associative worlds'. If that period was a spring-like blossoming of ideas, the current age seems more like autumn: apart from a few more or less spontaneous green shoots, there appears to be a retreat from the need to define what is distinctive about current non-profit associationism, an issue that might even appear outdated today, precisely when the advance of new phenomena – such as the emerging social economy– is profoundly reshaping the boundaries, organisational configurations and interventions of Italy's third-sector associations (Citroni Bontempi 2026). Ignored, the elephant in the room is in danger of becoming more of a bull in a china shop (Citroni 2026, p. 621), and demands the kind of attention – as a primary focus, not an afterthought – that *La prospettiva civica* gives it, right from the book's opening contribution:

> A review of the now vast body of scientific and popular literature on the third sector in Italy reveals recurring questions concerning three phenomena: bureaucratisation, professionalisation and depoliticisation. The recurring response is 'yes, but…': whilst there is a risk that third-sector organisations may lose their true nature, researchers, academics and experts almost always identify an element that eludes analysis, something that does not fit within the framework of economic rationalisation. What does this *special ingredient*[1] of associative life consist of? (Caltabiano Zucca 2024, p. 28)

The idea that this *special ingredient* can be approached in terms of the *civic perspective* is a complex proposition, one that cannot be reduced to the formulation of yet another abstract viewpoint, or simply a mere 'matter of perspective' (Pantrini 2025). Instead, it is a specific positioning, involving engagement not only of the eyes but also of hands, feet and entire bodies that are in close proximity and direct contact with the problems and needs addressed in civic engagements. In other words, it involves a concrete embeddedness within the

[1] The author added the italics, highlighting a possible translation for the Italian phrase 'quid associativo'.

settings of the associative worlds (Caltabiano Zucca 2024, p. 29), from which peculiar viewpoints emerge that add up to an overall *civic perspective* that arises from situated positioning.

Thus, framing the elusive 'special ingredient of associative life' in terms of a *civic perspective* means adopting a highly situated stance, located within the contingencies of civic action, in order to propose a general idea, an overarching framework. The idea of a contingent – and therefore openly biased – positioning as a general framework may seem paradoxical, but there are at least two reasons why it is not. Firstly, this proposal stems from a specific research tradition that focuses on the practices of everyday life without, however, interpreting them as being of exclusively microsociological significance (Jedwloski 2009; Lichterman 2005; Citroni 2025). Secondly, the paradox is only apparent insofar as the book articulates the idea of a civic perspective being understood as 'a representation that entrusts readers with the task of articulating its meaning' (Caltabiano Zucca 2024, p. 31), to lend credence and substance to the hypothesis of associative worlds held together by 'specific ways of seeing' (ibid.) developed through practices of daily association-making (Citroni 2025).

Rather than considering it in isolation, *La prospettiva civica* reveals its full heuristic potential when combined with some of the many other categories mobilised throughout the volume. In addition to its relationship with the idea of 'associative worlds', *La prospettiva civica* benefits from dialogue with another powerful interpretative framework offered by the book: to put it succinctly, the 'critical but not resigned' attitude that encapsulates the relationship with politics of the activists under investigation (and which gives its title to the relevant chapter by Boldrini, Mete and Milani). In summary, it follows from the combination of the aforementioned categories that associative engagements framed in terms of a civic perspective refer to – imply and express in practical terms – 'critical but not resigned' attitudes. This means that those who participate in non-profit associationism are critical, not naïve, which is consistent with the fact that a high level of education remains statistically the most significant variable explaining participation in associations (Caltabiano, Vitale, Zucca 2024). This makes it most likely that those who join associations have a critical awareness of the link between, on the one hand, the concrete problems and needs addressed through their direct involvement and, on the other hand, the structural variables from which these problems and needs originate. Although this stems from the activists' high level of education, in terms of its consequences, this awareness also implies a realisation that their involvement in associations cannot directly influence those structural variables. They are not that naïve. At the same time, however, this critical awareness does not translate into resignation and fatalism: instead, they participate in non-profit groups and persevere in addressing and seeking to alleviate the specific needs and problems these structural variables produce.

Whilst this may appear inconsistent or even contradictory on a logical and discursive level, at the practical level of the activities through which the *civic perspective* unfolds, one can discern a reference to an attitude typical of contemporary activism: in particular, to a version of what has been defined as a 'democracy of action' (Dekker 2019), though here interpreted in terms that are not necessarily populist, given that the associative commitment emerging from *La prospettiva civica* suspends – without necessarily eliminating – the weight of structural variables. All this is fundamental to exploring and identifying how that 'special ingredient of associative life' manifests itself in terms of a specific logic of action, whose internal contradiction is actually illusory: by staying close to problems and attempting to find concrete solutions for them, civic engagements tackle structural variables which, as such, remain unaddressable and unavailable for manipulation at will, but which are nonetheless addressed in their situated manifestations and implications. It is therefore a form of civic engagement that constantly comes up against 'the uncontrollability of the world' (Rosa 2020): an involvement that is used to deal with social problems, needs, relations or resources that have a life of their own and thus cannot be entirely controlled, managed or planned. More precisely, the *civic perspective* expresses, on the practical level of associative commitment, a specific logic of action accustomed and able to relate to social matters that must be cared for (Citroni 2026a), as they cannot be manipulated at will, but also do not unfold randomly.

Delving into the practical perspectives of those engaged in civic activities, the volume here reviewed contribute to bringing to light precious general insights about what may be distinctive of current Italian non profit associationism. Indeed, the "sensitivity to uncontrollability" (Citroni 2026) expressed through civic and care practices is not something automatically inherent to all non-profit associations and all activists; nevertheless, it represents a specific logic of action that characterises many interventions in this sphere, or at least a possible hypothesis to detail that 'special ingredient' of associative engagement that *La prospettiva civica* helps to bring into focus. In other words, the hypothesis formulated is to be empirically tested and placed in dialogue with other recent efforts to approach that elusive 'special ingredient' (Citroni 2026a). In particular, the proposal is to be situated within the specific discourse order to which it contributes (Busso 2024; Bassi *et al.* 2025): the cultural context of the options available nowadays in Italian public discourse to represent non-profit associationism, its features and actions; or the narratives that are deemed to be legitimate and which must be adopted to be heard, believed and understood when speaking about civic engagement and non-profit groups. The analysis of this cultural context goes far beyond the scope of this article, but we can at least hint at one of its defining feature discussed elsewhere (Citroni 2026). In short, this is the fact that this context is increasingly characterised by imperatives of transparency and accountability that take on a dual meaning that is generally taken for granted (Citroni 2026, 59). These imperatives do not solely involve making the work of the third sector and the voluntary sector knowable, accessible or measurable, but also making it modifiable – that is, plannable, manageable and optimisable – in short, increasingly open to being manipulated, engineered or industrialised (de Leonardis 2025) at will. It is this type of cultural context that we must examine if we wish to understand the underlying reasons for the crisis of sense-making in the contemporary third sector, the growing disaffection towards it and, in particular, the current difficulties in its public recognition (Borzaga *et al.* 2023). Indeed, alongside other factors, this context plays an active role in making that 'special ingredient' of associative life particularly elusive today (Citroni 2026, p. 635); perhaps adopting the *civic perspective* may help us uncover it.

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Notes on Contributor

Sebastiano Citroni is associate professor of cultural sociology in the Department of Law, Economics and Cultures, at Insubria University (Varese-Como, Italy). His research focuses on ethnography, civic action, urban studies, civil society and leisure. He has published widely on civil society, everyday practices, environmental issues, tourism and urban events.