Establishing the Conceptual Framework

The renaissance of civil society during the late 1980s has entailed a resurgence of interest in this concept not only among political scientists and social theorists, but also among the political leaders of, and the activists in, newly democratizing countries. However, the growing body of literature in academic studies and the wide usage in political discourse of the concept of civil society thus far has mainly considered this concept from the angle of democratization and its promotion. Accordingly, the civil society debate has been restricted to the liberal-democratic context, within and for which the empowerment of civil society organizations is a dominant issue.

This is also the case with the EU and its civil society policy, which can be observed in a more unambiguous fashion, in particular starting with the eastern enlargement. This chapter illustrates the origins and the development of the contemporary use of the concept of civil society in the West and thereby provides a general framework for the conceptual background underlying EU civil society policy. In so doing, this chapter enables us to better assess in the coming chapters the predicaments of the current EU civil society policy in the Turkish context. In this respect, this chapter begins with a brief overview of the historical conditions amenable to the emergence of civil society in Western Europe. This is followed by a brief overview of the leading political theorists of the civic-liberal tradition and an analysis of how the concept of civil society developed in the light of the conceptual divide between civil society and state. Particular attention is given to a neo-Tocquevillian understanding, which provides the existing theoretical build-up to the concept of civil society in the EU.
Emergence of the concept of civil society

The first use of the concept of civil society can be traced back to Ancient Greece, in the *Politika* of Aristotle under the heading of *politike koinonia*, political society/community, which the Latins later translated as *societas civilis*. Aristotle regarded *politike koinonia* as the ethical-political community of free and equal citizens living under a legally defined system of rule in which the concept of civil society did not distinguish between state and society, but constituted an ‘all-encompassing social system with nothing except natural relations outside’ (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 84). Accordingly, the state represented the ‘civil’ form of society, where the ‘civility’ indicated the requirements of good citizenship. This tradition of equating civil society with ‘politically organized commonwealths’ in which the people lived under law-governed associations protected by the state, was also present in late medieval thought (Edwards, 2004, pp. 6–7).

Civil society is a product of the long-term evolution of socio-economic life in Western Europe. Thus, each development in the history of Western European urban life may be regarded as a threshold not only in the flourishing of civil society in this geography, but also in our understanding of the concept of civil society.

The first determining factor in this respect was the rise of towns in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Towns during this period provided the arena for self-organization and for networks of social relations to develop. Accordingly, both guilds and neighbourhoods in Western European towns served as means of popular organization. From the early thirteenth century onwards, the craft-guilds began to assume more control of towns, first in Italy and then in Northern Europe (Çaha, 2001). The growing commercial life and accumulation of capital gave impetus to the prospering and flourishing of these medieval towns, in parallel to which they assumed more autonomy (Mardin, 1995, pp. 280–281). This autonomy constituted an initial step for the creation of a space outside of the state’s authority.

A second decisive factor in the flourishing of civil society in Western Europe was the emergence, at the same time, of a new class of bourgeoisie under conditions favourable for them to prosper. These conditions included increased production based on new production techniques; cheaper raw materials following the discovery of new routes to the Far East; and the flow of precious metals from conquered lands. The rise of the towns was a transformation taking place alongside the revival of economy and the emergence of the bourgeoisie. In that sense, in tandem