Book Review

The Third Sector in Europe
Adalbert Evers and Jean-Louis Laville (eds),


This collection of essays and critical commentary introduces the reader to developments in the European ‘third sector.’ As is well known among analysts of welfare policy there, the West European welfare state has been in trouble for at least two decades because of budget stringency and dissatisfaction with the quality and scope of services, as well as broader developments such as the integration of formerly socialist Central and Eastern European states, the decline of western social democratic parties, and the privatization/commercialization of much welfare provision.

The editors posit a distinctly European view of the third sector in Europe, one that is based on empirical observations and a ‘historical dynamic’ perspective focusing on developments within specific societies. Thus, they reject the applicability to European conditions of American analytical categories, based on US experience, and contend that the American for-profit/non-profit binary distinction and emphases on government and market failures do not fit Europe’s history or present reality. Rather, their analyses reflect the frequency of profit and surplus sharing in Europe’s third sector, the unique historical experiences of Western European societies, and the key roles of sociological and political perspectives among European analysts, policy makers, and the general public. With such concepts in mind, they examine the evolution of various types of third sector institutions across a number of European societies – for example, associations, cooperatives, mutual aid societies, charities, charitable foundations, and voluntary agencies.

Their launch point is the idea of a social economy in which the state, the market, and the third sector interact rather than operate independently. The third sector is not subordinate to the other two; it is not something outside the normal operations of society, polity, and economy. Rather, it is intermediary in a system of many types of embedded civil society institutions. Indeed, Evers and LaVille reject the idea of a single civil society, asserting that there are many types of civil societies. In their view, the third sector holds a coordinate place in society and may operate in concert
or in tension with the state and market, reflecting numerous players, many types of organisations, national histories, and the varying roles of state, market, and citizen organisations. These patterns of interaction give rise to ‘plural economies’ in which three economic principles may be operative: (1) the market featuring prices set by demand and supply and in which production is distributed by contractual relations between suppliers and customers, (2) redistribution in which a central authority allocates output, and (3) reciprocity in which production is allocated on the basis of social relations typified by the family. Third sector development is often influenced by forces of bureaucratisation and commercialisation, too. The power of this analytical section is enhanced by graphic displays of the Welfare Triangle (Evers), the overall structure of the plural economy (Roustang et al.), the welfare mix (Pestoff) and the civil and solidarity-based economy (Eme, Laville).

For the editors and for many of the essayists, the 1970s were a watershed. A new dynamic, influenced at least indirectly by France, appeared which echoed citizen dissatisfaction with marginalisation of many segments of society, the potential exclusionary aspects of the market, the intensity of corporatist bureaucratisation, and the exclusivity of entitlement based on employment or membership in a specific group – for example, as members of a given occupation. In this new dispensation, users of services came together as new types of citizens bonded by feelings of common necessity – for instance, for child care or housing – and refused to function as mere clients, patients, or taxpayers. Part of the imperative emerged from a weakening job market in traditional industries and from the parallel growth of ‘relational’ industries and occupations emphasising closer relations between users and suppliers who are often one and the same. In some instances, old institutions are used for new purposes, being redefined in the process. Or, entirely new types emerge, as in the Swedish community or cooperative day-care arrangements. Very interesting is the discussion of the transformation of the Dutch sectarian and other group ‘pillars’ in ways that enhance participation in an otherwise particularistic environment. For Italy, the role of the Catholic Church in Italy in the light of Vatican II and of younger Italians is quite illuminating. A perceptive essay on the United Kingdom sets forth the powerful effects of legislation affecting the possibility of change and an examination of the need for reform of the laws concerning charitable foundations.

The end of the volume contains additional analytical and theoretical essays assessing the usefulness of differing approaches to the history and evolution of third sector institutions and policies. Jane Lewis’ essay on the state and third sector was very helpful here, as was the editors’ last offering.
on social services provision by social enterprises, which are often hybrids of
the state, the market and the third sector.

The penultimate essay by Ralph Kramer usefully examines four
approaches to looking at the third sector in a mixed economy: political
economy, neo-institutionalism, organisational ecology, and open systems
models. Analysing the various sectors in terms of ownership is of limited use
for maximising democratic participation and solidarity or enhancing useful
‘personal control’ (after Svetlik) of social services.

This set of essays and theoretical formulations provides productive
insights on the transformation of the welfare state, of elements of market
capitalism, and of broad sets of social institutions such as the family and the
local community, linking developments to individual national histories and to
underlying political and economic changes, some fostered by globalisation.
For those wishing to trace the path of change in individual Western European
societies, the individual essays are very useful. For those wishing a more
global view of change and evolution in European welfare states, though,
the sheer volume of detail can be daunting. In this regard, the editors could
have established categories of institutions and services to be employed more
clearly in mapping changes across Europe. Additionally, the theoretical
sections could have been tighter and more restrained in using jargon. The
otherwise rejected American analytical categories and approaches often
are more parsimonious in qualitatively classifying data and events, as in
Kramer’s essay. Overall, though, this is a highly useful book and should be
consulted by anyone wishing to trace third sector changes in individual
societies in Western Europe. It also offers productive ideas on which
additional analytical models could be based.

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