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Book Review by Jorge Sousa

Canadian Public Policy and the Social Economy. *Edited by R. Downing.* Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2012. 427 pp. ISBN 9781550584530.

Assembling Understandings: Findings from the Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships, 2005-2011. *Edited by M. Thompson & J. Emmanuel.* Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2012. 165 pp. ISBN 9781550584578.

Understanding Canada's social economy as it exists today has been an ongoing challenge for academics, practitioners, and the general public. While there lacks clear consensus on what the social economy is, there has been no lack of effort to demonstrate its ubiquity. There have been several edited and authored books exploring different facets of the social economy released over the last number of years, many of which have been reviewed in this journal. I have found that keeping track of the diverse perspectives only adds to the confusion. What makes the three volumes recently released by the University of Victoria and the Canadian Community Economic Development Network different is that the multiple perspectives illustrative of the discourse of the social economy are fully evident throughout. The set serves as a good introduction to the different areas associated with the social economy. An added advantage is that they are available free of charge.

This review will be for two of the three volumes: *Canadian Public Policy and the Social Economy* and *Assembling Understandings: Findings from the Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships*. A review of the third volume, *Community-University Research Partnerships: Reflections on the Canadian Social Economy Experience*, already appeared in this journal (Wasniewski, Ewa (2013)). Specifically, the two volumes of the set I review here summarize public policy issues and research findings in Canadian social economy research in recent years. The different chapters in both of the volumes are accessible to a variety of readers and lay out the different areas associated with the social economy. In fact, all chapters have the involvement of both practitioners and academics. These two volumes represent one of the many outputs of the five-year project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, referred to as the Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships. Regular readers of this journal will know the project that I am referring to, so I will not go into any more detail other than opening the discussion and providing evidence concerning two of the primary objectives associated with the partnerships: research findings and public policy. I encourage new readers to refer to earlier volumes of this journal for more details on the research partnerships.

What the reader will quickly notice in these two volumes is the absence of a clear definition of the social economy. A strength of the books is that the authors meet the challenge of naming or characterizing the social economy head-on. While there appears to be incongruence with respect to definition, there is agreement in the following areas: the social economy exists within Canadian society and the crucial goals are to help identify it as a movement and to identify its efficacy on the well-being of Canadians. While the authors each explain the social economy in their own idiosyncratic way, they help add clarity to the confusion for the general public about whether the social economy represents a legitimate part of the economy, or if it is a humane alternative to the alienating affects of the private sector or a paternalistic public sector.

The two volumes demonstrate what I would refer to as two pillars of the social economy: public policy and evidence-based research. Both of these are covered quite extensively in the texts through the sharing of direct experience, as well as examples of how the social economy is manifested in everyday life. In the volume entitled *Canadian Public Policy and the Social Economy*, Rupert Downing assembled ten interesting and comprehensive chapters that range from descriptions of public policies as well as an understanding of key considerations in the development of public policy that are supportive of the social economy.

While it may seem peculiar that a volume should be devoted to public policy, the authors provide a concise and comprehensive demonstration to the reader of the breadth and scope of the idea of social economy in the public domain. In the ten chapters, the different authors were able to capture the key ideas associated with the social economy and its relevance to the public discourse in areas of social, environmental, and environmental policy. The volume offers both international and national ways of understanding the scope and breadth of the social economy.

I have often wondered why the social economy needs to be reliant on government to ensure its success. While I am not convinced that the social economy should be characterized as a public policy issue, the authors do make a strong case for why a discussion of the social economy needs to include public policy. For instance, Crystal Tremblay's chapters, ("Advancing the Social Economy for Socio-Economic Development: International Perspectives" and "Public Policy Trends and Instruments Supporting the Social Economy: International Experiences"), provide both overviews of public policy issues as well as the actual tools that utilize policy levers aimed at supporting the social economy. However, one of the concerns that I continue to have is the expectation that the social economy can transform society. I have often asked whether public policy should be involved in efforts leading or encouraging social transformation.

The volume outlining some key research findings, *Assembling Understandings: Findings from the Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships*, takes the reader on an interesting journey to different areas of research. Editors Matthew Thompson and Joy Emmanuel have concisely assembled many of the key findings and understandings that emerged from the research partnerships. The eight chapters represent an impressive effort at synthesizing issues (e.g. financing and governance), functions (e.g. presence in the capitalist market), and institutions (e.g. co-operatives and indigenous contexts) that form the social economy. Their thorough review of numerous research outcomes provides an excellent introduction to some of the key debates and successes associated with the social economy. While it is clear from this volume that public policy contains useful levers to support the social economy, the different examples used throughout this volume provides a broad view of how the social economy could be understood as a self-reliant sector, as much as the public and private sectors are.

As an educator and academic practitioner, I am appreciative that these volumes have been released. However, I do find that the three-volume set suffers from the same shortcomings as many other similar texts

on the social economy. Here, I am referring to the absence of a coherent focus and framework linking the ideas. While the text and content is crucial for any individual interested in learning more about the social economy, the analysis is not theoretically grounded, even though much of the analysis is quite sophisticated. This sophistication may prevent the average reader from truly understanding the nature of the social economy. For instance, even though the authors all have experience in the social economy in one form or another, it does little to help aid a newcomer in understanding the embedded social and political critique that underlies much of our work. Furthermore, while these volumes will be of great use for practitioners and students, they do little to advance the field from a theoretical standpoint. I want to be clear that I am not implying that sharing experiences of best practices is unimportant and incongruent to theory. But in these volumes the reader is left to wonder what lens or framework could be applied in order to appreciate the different areas that form the social economy.

I feel the benefits of having these volumes released far outweigh any potential shortcomings. However, I believe it is important to remind readers that the social economy should be understood as being more than organizational forms or financing market reform. The social economy needs to be seen as equally integral as the public and private sectors in Canadian Society, and this will happen through evidence of successes as well as evidence of how the challenges are being addressed by social economy actors. We are much further ahead as a society because of the work of the research partnerships.

REFERENCE

Wasniewski, Ewa. (2013). Community-University Research Partnerships: Reflections on the Canadian Social Economy Experience. [Book review]. *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research*, 4(1), 97-99.

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