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Book Review by Jorge Sousa

Understanding the Social Economy: A Canadian Perspective. *By Jack Quarter, Laurie Mook, and Ann Armstrong.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. 344 pp. ISBN 9780802096456

One of the challenges instructors face when attempting to structure a course that focuses on the social economy has been the absence of accessible content appropriate to serve as an introduction as well as provide in-depth information. As a result many have questioned whether a discipline focus to understanding the social economy is possible. Fortunately, there has been an increase in books and courses exploring different facets of the social economy.

Understanding the Social Economy: A Canadian Perspective, by Jack Quarter, Laurie Mook, and Ann Armstrong serves as both a reader and a textbook with content rich enough to inform pedagogy and to serve as the foundation for relevant social economy curriculum materials. This review provides a broad overview of the book's content, touches on its potential teaching use, and discusses how the authors address the contested nature of the social economy.

There are many reasons to recommend this book to instructors. It can be used as an introductory text and is also useful for those seeking greater clarity on the scope of the social economy. By focusing on the important contribution that socially oriented organizations and businesses make to Canada's economy, this book meets the need for a social economy text within business schools, which is the explicitly stated goal of the textbook. However, its utility can extend beyond those boundaries, as the interdisciplinary content prepares individuals across disciplines to understand the nature and scope of Canada's social economy.

The book is divided into three sections: an overview of the social economy; a detailed description of the components which make up the social economy; and a discussion of critical issues within the social economy.

The introductory section (chapter 1) establishes a clear framework for the book's content, including a Venn diagram that is very useful and is elaborated on throughout the book. The introduction also provides some rich historical details - an important context for the more contemporary issues which follow in later chapters. The introduction addresses the relationship that social economy organizations have with the private and the public sectors. Many of these relationships are at the core of what makes the social

economy unique in Canadian society. However, in explaining this relationship, the authors also reveal what makes a generally agreed upon definition of the social economy so difficult to achieve.

In the second section, “Components of the Social Economy,” Quarter, Mook, and Armstrong use actual cases of social economy organizations or initiatives to provide vivid and thorough details of the individual components introduced in the first section. Throughout the chapters in this section (chapters 2-6), there are detailed descriptions of the key government policies and programs that demonstrate how various aspects of the public sector infrastructure support the social economy.

In the book’s third section (chapters 7-9), the authors focus on critical issues that are directly relevant to social economy actors: organizational design and governance, social finance and social accounting, and accountability. What makes this book particularly unique is “A Closer Look,” which features mini case studies, an excellent introduction to important organizations and community-based initiatives.

An added feature for instructors is a resource section on the publishers’ website that provides a sample course outline, suggested readings, and PowerPoint slides. The resources are clearly aimed at providing instructors with some guidance on how to use this book as a course text. The example of the course outline represents a useful guide to developing a course around this book. The PowerPoint presentations serve as excellent templates that are not prescriptive, and each PowerPoint has learning objectives, which are clearly laid out. The individual slides reveal what the authors consider key points in each of the chapters. These presentations provide an instructor with a good starting point from which to build a lesson plan. However, the instructor will have to make some effort to integrate the mini case studies and search for visual aids.

The idea of the social economy continues to be highly contested, and we appear to be no closer to reaching consensus beyond agreeing to disagree. This book demonstrates why we do not necessarily need consensus on a definition. The authors have chosen to take a utilitarian rather than a social movement orientation to the social economy. As such, it complements books that do take the latter perspective. The book’s primary theoretical contribution is the authors’ focus on the interaction between the social economy and the private and public sectors. Quarter, Mook, and Armstrong represent their position by conceptualizing the social economy as a bridging concept that is accessible and intuitive and not an end unto itself.

This book makes it is become increasingly clear that the social economy has the potential to increase its relevance to not only business school curriculums, but anywhere where the components of the social economy are more fully explored, including public administration, social work, and adult education. This text is an important contribution to the emerging academic status and credibility of the social economy.

About the author

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