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Book Review

By Ashley Rostamian

Government-Nonprofit Relations in Times of Recession. Edited by Rachel LaForest. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2013, 2016, pp. ISBN: 978553393276.

Government-Nonprofit Relations in Times of Recession seeks to illustrate the relationship fostered between governments and nonprofits prior to, during, and following the 2008 economic crisis. The edited collection effectively maps out and interrogates, both historically and contemporaneously, the relations between government and nonprofits. The book also investigates organizational trends both globally and in different national contexts.

The book consists of a series of essays emerging from the 10th Annual National Forum of the Public Policy and Third Sector Initiative conference, held in Toronto in 2011. Published in 2013, it is the sixth volume of the Public Policy and Third Sector Initiative series from the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University. Previous books in the series have also addressed the role of the social economy in the wider policy landscape. By way of comparative illustration, *The New Federal Policy Agenda and the Voluntary Sector: On the Cutting Edge*, published in 2009 by the same editor, Rachel LaForest, examined the relationship between the government and social economy organizations during Stephan Harper's Conservative era. This earlier edited book differs from the editor's newer publication in both time and place. Whereas the first book understands changes in the government-social economy relationship through a Liberal versus Conservative lens, LaForest's second edited book in the series, *Government-Nonprofit Relations in Time of Recession*, approaches the dynamics of the relationship from a pre- and post-2008 recession perspective. Moreover, the former book considers policy issues in Canada, whereas the latter explores the policy climate in an array of national arenas. Given the impact of the 2008 crisis on the nonprofit sector on a global scale, this book is valuable for further understanding the implications of financial and administrative challenges and losses for nonprofits caused by the recession, while illustrating and proposing effective responses to these challenges.

LaForest's 2013 edited book can be treated as examining three dimensions applicable to government-nonprofit interactions: funding, workforce, and the ecology of the nonprofit and public sectors. First, the administration of funding is perhaps the most telling sign of the state of government-nonprofit relations, both historically and post-2008 recession. The chapters describe the variety of ways that funding losses may occur, how they consequently endanger the survival of nonprofits, and the ensuing responses of government. Second, the nonprofit labour pool is another dimension considered throughout the collection. In this regard, the chapters explore the ways in which the

nonprofit workforce has undergone structural and contextual changes as a result of the 2008 recession, how these changes challenge nonprofit organizations, and ultimately, how these changes challenge their relations with government. Third, and consistently examined throughout the chapters, is the effect of the 2008 recession on the wider network of government-nonprofit relations; that is, the “ecology” (including networks) that encompasses multiple levels of government and a wide array of nonprofit organizations. This macro-level dimension allows authors to delve into the ways that the 2008 recession has not only impacted relations *between* individual organizations and governments, but how the crisis has also had rippling effects *beyond* these relations, thus transforming the landscape in which all actors interact. Combined, these three dimensions lend the reader crucial insight into the far-reaching scope and nature of government-nonprofit relations. Although these three dimensions—funding, workforce, ecology/networks—normally exist in government-nonprofit relations by convention, attempts have been made to formalize these relations, leading to their institutionalization. However, as all of the authors note, even though the formalization of government-nonprofit interactions might be seen as an avenue for more cohesive social policy, there are complications and consequences that may arise in the institutionalization of these relations.

Although each chapter can be read as a stand-alone piece to illustrate the consequences of the 2008 recession on government-nonprofit interactions in a specific country, the collection in its entirety allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the three dimensions—funding, workforce, and ecology/networks—found in those interactions, making important contributions to the literature on government-nonprofit relations. For instance, the book taken as a whole underscores the complexities in government-nonprofit relations, and how nonprofits may successfully, or unsuccessfully, navigate political, social, and financial change in such unpredictable times. In response to the key question implicitly asked by each chapter of the book—what do recessions, cutbacks, and claw backs mean for social economy organizations and their interactions with government and other organizations?—the authors collectively conclude that the effects from the tightening of funds due to recession may prompt social economy organizations *to take both defensive and proactive steps* to counteract external rationalization efforts. Indeed, as Gemma Donnelly-Cox and John A. Healy explain in their chapter “Post-Partnership Ireland: Organizational Survival and Social Change Strategies in an Era of Economic Restraint” (p. 97), social economy organizations employ adaptation strategies to survive, both as a response to, and as an influence on, the environment. These strategies include: *economizing* to deal with situations where increased demand for services include declining income; *harmonizing* by focusing on local economic regeneration; *diversifying* to widen the funding base and acquire resources, and also by increasing the reach of activities to appeal to new groups and in new areas; and *monopolizing* to gain control of the field by merging to reduce the complexity of exchanges and increasing concentration of resources. Thus, Donnelly-Cox and Healy conclude—in an argument resonating in other chapters in the book—social economy organizations demonstrate a rather great degree of agency and pragmatism to adjust in, and to account for, less-than-ideal conditions.

One of the book’s drawbacks is that, while it examines the relations between government and *nonprofit* organizations, most of the authors also spoke of other social economy businesses, such as civil society organizations and cooperatives, among others. The lack of clear distinctions between social economy organizations may mislead readers, or may cause misinterpretation. It would thus have been helpful to readers if the authors clarified which organizations are being referred to as “nonprofits.” For example, is “nonprofit” used as an umbrella term for all social economy organizations? Are the organizations being referred to indeed strictly public or supported nonprofit organizations, or is the book also considering other types of social economy organizations, such as cooperatives or social enterprises where some degree of market activity is also engaged in? In short, it is not completely clear if, and when, the book is directly engaging with social economy organizations that are strictly nonprofits or merely legally structured as such. Framing the book along a typology of social economy organizations,

such as that offered by Jack Quarter, Laurie Mook, and Ann Armstrong's (2009) *Understanding the Social Economy: A Canadian Perspective*, may help to further situate nonprofits within a universe of social economy organizations. That is, a clearer distinction among the different social economy organizations could strengthen the argument that certain organizations faced more pronounced losses than others during recessionary times and in light of a plurality of revenue sources. Another drawback is the lack of diversity in countries used as case studies. For instance, there are no Asian countries, nor South American countries featured in the book, two regions where the social economy—and nonprofits in particular—have played an increasingly important role in development and rethinking government-community relations in recent years. However, as the collection is based on papers delivered at a conference, it is likely the selection of texts was constrained by what was presented.

Despite these drawbacks, this book is a valuable tool for more deeply understanding the nature of government-nonprofit relations with an eye to the situation faced by the social economy throughout the crisis caused by the 2008 recession. It first and foremost provides an overview of the nature and structure of the relations between government and social economy organizations, whether that is characterized as: diminishing (Chapter 2); transitional (Chapter 3); interdependent (Chapter 4); devaluing (Chapter 7); or otherwise. The book's chapters thus show that there are ample ways to interpret this interaction. Overall, the book underscores the multidimensional and complex interactions and interconnections within the greater arena of social policy governance. In sum, *Government-Nonprofit Relations in Times of Recession* provides readers with theoretical and empirical openings for critically inquiring about the state of affairs in the interaction between government and social economy organizations. The book is thus essential reading for any researcher, social economy practitioner, policy maker, or student seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the political, social, and economic realities faced by social economy organizations in relation to government in turbulent economic times.

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