



Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research  
Revue canadienne de recherche sur les OSBL et l'économie sociale

## Book Review by Stephan Dobson

**The Worth of the Social Economy: An International Perspective.** *Edited by Marie J. Bouchard.* Social Economy & Public Economy, 2. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. 263 pp. ISBN 978905201580.

This volume is the outcome of three years of work by the Centre international de recherches et d'information sur l'économie publique, sociale et coopérative (CIRIEC), specifically its Working Group on Methods and Indicators of Evaluation of the Social Economy. Compiled by Marie Bouchard, Canada Research Chair on the Social Economy at the Université du Québec à Montréal, who also served as the coordinator of the Working Group, the authors of individual chapters are all heavy-hitters in the social economy field.

The first part of the book provides theoretical overviews of the topic under the heading of "Conceptual Frameworks," and the second part provides national case studies of trends, practices, policies, laws, and the like from seven countries—France, Québec (Canada), the United Kingdom, the United States, Brazil, Portugal, and Japan. Ms. Bouchard has written the introduction and co-authored, with N. Richez-Battesti, the concluding essay. In part, the intention throughout is to address a gap identified in previous studies: that is, information on how evaluations *should* be conducted, but not much on how evaluations are being accomplished *in practice* and on the norms embedded therein.

In addition to the customary discussion of definitional issues surrounding the social economy, the Working Group's important framework for examining evaluation in the sector is provided by Bouchard in her opening contribution to the first section of the book. While the group readily admits that their survey is not exhaustive, readers will surely be sympathetic to the enormous undertaking that their project represents and to the insistence that evaluation is never neutral.

Much attention in the various chapters is devoted to funders as drivers of and for evaluative accountability, and also to the widespread move in practice, theory, and ideology from input to outcome measures and indicators. The conceptual chapters in particular attend to the importance of democratic debate arising from evaluative practice and the relationship of this to governmental policy formulation. The group distinguishes between organizational (micro) and sector-based (meso) levels of evaluation, generally bracketing off the macro level (although the Human Development Index [HDI], for example, does appear in B. Perret's theoretical study) and so avoiding the vexed relationship between macro evaluation and policy. While attention is given to historical periods and generations in the development of measurement tools, indicators, and ideology, including New Public Management in the U.K. and the "re-inventing government" trend in the

U.S., some attention to wider macro dimensions and aggregates such as Quality of Life (QOL) and the role of international agencies such as the OECD would have been useful for readers.

The theoretical chapters make for often dense reading, perhaps too dense for a practitioner audience, the exception being Bouchard's "Methods and Indicators for Evaluating the Social Economy." She emphasizes the importance of the context in which evaluation occurs, presenting the group's framework (including the three dimensions of evaluation: organizational performance, social utility, and institutional factors), evaluative approaches, and paradigms. Perret analyzes the "complex rationality" of the social economy and its evaluation. The social economy has among its aims impacts that are not monetary, and therefore the economic assigning of monetized value is problematic. Perret addresses the rational evaluation of the social economy through a study of public policy and related programs. He then applies Amartya Sen's capabilities theory so as to arrive at a way to evaluate the common good and social welfare.

B. Enjolras' contribution is primarily concerned with normative foundations in evaluative paradigms and the tension between these social economy organizations' foundations as ideals and the current normative goals of public policy. B. Eme sets his sights on the issue of autonomy of the sector and the ambivalence between quantitative and qualitative evaluative approaches, arguing that evaluation needs to change. His call for "communicative courts" based upon Habermas' theory of communicative action seemingly raises more questions than it answers in terms of tensions identified in the chapter, and the argument would probably be well served by further development. For example, just who exactly would sit in these "courts," or is the notion a metaphor for an abstract social process?

A partial, implied answer to this question is provided in the first chapter in the national case studies section, "Evaluating the Social and Solidarity-Based Economy in France: Societal Balance Sheet–Social Utility and Identity Trial," written by Richez-Battesti, H. Trouvé, F. Rousseau, B. Eme, and L. Fraisse. In France, evaluation is a mode of regulation—hence the term "trial" in the chapter title, presumably. The two tools in use are largely experimental: *bilan sociétal* (social balance sheets) are used by co-ops and mutual organizations for self-evaluation and decision-making; social utility (the satisfaction of needs not adequately met by the market) is used by nonprofits to demonstrate contribution to the general interest in opposition to fiscal ideologies. In this way, aggregated measures tend to be avoided, evaluation is either self-evaluation or participatory, and evaluation is linked to definitions in the field, modes of regulation, and issues of legitimacy.

The chapter on France demonstrates the richness of detail and analysis within the national treatments in the book and how much we in the Anglo-North American world can learn from other national experiences. Bouchard's chapter on Québec is also revealing; her treatment of the "Quebec model" reminds us of just how well developed the social economy is in Québec, and her framework for her discussion (e.g., the three tendencies in evaluation: in relation to objectives; according to social mission; and according to institutional and organizational specificity) is applicable to any overview of evaluation.

R. Spear's resource dependency analysis of social accounting and social auditing in the U.K., the merits of his discussion of the national context aside, is a brilliant theoretical development expanding on the work of Karl Polanyi and of Raymond Dart's work on types of legitimacy. The chapter must be read even if the reader is not particularly interested in the U.K. context, and this essay alone is worth the price of the book. C. P. Rock tackles the massive U.S. nonprofit sector by tracing financial flows, showing how those who control the money—governments and foundations—often have control over evaluation, for good and bad.

A. Kurimoto's discussion of the evaluation of co-operatives in Japan makes us painfully aware of how important the national legal envelope is for our sector. M. Serva, C. Andion, L. Campos, and E. Onozato discuss Brazil, a context developing out of a history of fascism and later influenced by the evaluative practices of international NGOs, among much else. And I. Nicolau and A. Simaens discuss their country, Portugal, yet another with a history of fascism, and the important role of social solidarity organizations for social cohesion. Readers will be amazed at how Bouchard and Richez-Battesti, in their concluding chapter, manage to aggregate the rich, dense, and variegated findings in the collection.

The individual authors and the Working Group as a whole are to be commended for bringing us this volume on the "worth" of the social economy. The number of themes treated is mind-boggling: from qualitative and quantitative indicators through to legitimacy, normative foundations lurking behind practices, participation in evaluation, issues of public policy and governance, the influence of CSR, the role of market failures, the bluster around Social Return on Investment (SROI) (much talked about in the U.K. but rarely used), environmental accounting, right down to the nitty-gritty of how evaluation is conducted, among so much else. And Anglo readers are sure to learn a great deal from the French authors and sources.

Some chapters will be very rough going for those outside the academic world, and even Anglo academics will have difficulties at times. The title of the book is a case in point; an English reader might expect "value" rather than "worth." The ideal Anglo reader will be familiar with Boltanski and Thévenot's *De la justification: Les économies de la grandeur* (1991; translated in 2006 as *On Justification: Economies of Worth*). Boltanski and Thévenot study how individuals justify their actions to others according to principles and how these justifications are evaluated. This is an important text in France that has influenced and is cited by many of the French authors in Bouchard's book, but the influence of Boltanski and Thévenot in North America has been uneven, meaning that the nuances of some arguments may be missed by some readers. And a number of English books now use "worth" in a sense close to the use in this volume, beginning for example with Remick's edited volume, *Comparable Worth and Wage Discrimination* (1984) and including Acker's *Doing Comparable Worth: Gender, Class and Pay Equity* (1989). A reader not familiar with these and other such works will occasionally lose the thrust of authors' arguments. Simplistically put, the theory states that value evaluation is monetized; worth is social.

Indeed, one major value of this book is its rich bibliography. Anglo academics will be excited to have important citations on evaluation, both from the French and also internationally. The book does exhibit the not-unusual plague of missing bibliography entries, not uncommon in our sped-up times, but it is frustrating to turn to Enjolras' bibliography and find that it ends with Kant: the entire p. 62 of my review copy of the book was blank. Worse, readers will often—sometimes too often—be tripped by grammatical, syntactical, or idiomatic issues. While patience with particular sentences will usually result in sense, there are occasions when a reader will likely give up in frustration and move on.

Chapters that have had the services of a translator (e.g., Bouchard's chapter on Québec, translated by K. Simon) are certainly easier going, but other chapters unfortunately have a number of passages that are incomprehensible, at least to this reviewer. Although the lack of an index is not unusual for an edited volume, one wishes that a prestigious publisher like Peter Lang would have taken a bit more time with the editing. That said, there is a certain irony in evaluating *The Worth of the Social Economy* in a book review, which is not lost on this reviewer, but any effort a reader makes to read this book will certainly be worthwhile.

### References

Acker, Joan. (1989). *Doing comparable worth: Gender, class, and pay equity*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Boltanski, Luc, & Thévenot, Laurent. (2006). *On justification: Economies of worth* (Catherine Porter, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Remick, Helen (Ed.). (1984). *Comparable worth and wage discrimination: Technical possibilities and political realities*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

### About the author

**Stephan Dobson**, PhD Candidate, York University. Email: [sdobson@rogers.com](mailto:sdobson@rogers.com)