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Book Review

by Lina Ochoa

Policy Initiatives Towards the Third Sector in International Perspective. Edited by Benjamin Gidron and Michal Bar. New York, NY: Springer, 2010. 223 pp. ISBN 978-1-4419-1258-9.

The third sector has come to play an increasingly significant role, not only for international development assistance policies in developing countries, but also in developed countries as part of everyday domestic politics. It is to these national processes of policy initiatives that this new book, edited by Benjamin Gidron and Michael Bar, is devoted. *Policy Initiatives Towards the Third Sector in International Perspective* helps us understand a policy actor, the third sector, that has become increasingly visible and influential, yet has been subject to multiple interpretations and misguided assessments. Overall, the third sector has been viewed in a sort of dual manner: either through a paternalist, condescending lens, which has prevailed mostly in poor countries or whenever the sector is rather incipient, or through a “managerialist” lens, pretending to be an apolitical and socially neutral force, concerned more with the private sector standards and trends. Challenging these biased and incomplete approaches, Gidron and Bar present us with this new book that compiles policy initiatives toward the third sector in eight countries (Canada, the U.S., Germany, Japan, Ireland, Hungary, Israel, and the U.K.) over the last three decades. This research addresses the political processes aimed at third sector organizations, based on the analytical framework laid down by Kingdon (1995) and that of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999), to refute conventional models of policy design and implementation. The main issues addressed in each case study are the conditions under which policy change took place, the “windows of opportunity” that opened up, and how different policy players exploited these opportunities with various degrees of success.

The key argument throughout the book is that these policy initiatives are complex, uncertain, and unforeseeable, resulting in unanticipated and/or undesired outcomes. Such initiatives are developed in processes that are permanently affected by disputed leadership and interpretations, and thus do not fit the usual approaches for policy analysis. Building on an actor-identification exercise, not only collective actors but also individuals—epitomized in the figure of the “policy entrepreneur”—recurring dilemmas and conflicts are highlighted between the third sector and government and private sector players. The ensuing lack of confidence, divergent expectations, and lack of commitment between various agencies are dealt with using the tools of organizational theory and discourse analysis. At the end of the volume, these theoretical approaches and the observations from each chapter form the basis of six theses on the evolution of policies and politics of the third sector.

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The authors make an array of figures and data on the percentages of the third sector in employment, income, and shares of sub-sectors, as well as a detailed account of the agenda-setting/problem-definition stages, politics and policy issues, and bargaining and conflicts among bureaucratic agencies. Yet, given the importance of data and “hard” facts to support any policy decisions nowadays, it would have been helpful for the reader to find what the primary sources’ criteria and information-gathering process looked like. As we know, “objective” measurements are affected by subjective criteria and this is also part of the politics and policy process, no matter how scientific and rigorous the numbers might seem. One also expects that going forward, as this branch of research develops, more quantitative evidence will become available, even if it is subject to the aforementioned caveat. The issue of the role of language and the overall image of the sector is also in need of deeper scrutiny; in particular, the impact of mass media, since they are critical in portraying social actors and identities in specific ways. Issues like the use of buzzwords, raised by Gidron and Bar in their chapter about the experience in Israel, are a key component in any critical understanding of the third sector and policy design in general.

Another issue with this text lies in the fact that the narrative is not equally fluid across the chapters. Here and there, one gets bogged down in too many facts and a very descriptive account that does not always allow space for more exhaustive analysis. The country context also follows different schemes, in part due to different emphases and problems in the history of the sector in each country. However, we need to determine what the relevant time horizon is when studying third sector and contemporary philanthropy phenomena. Some authors provide very long timelines, and while this sets the context to appreciate the evolution of the sector and its main values and social trends in the country, at times it makes the analysis lose focus. It is clear that in the last four decades there has been a shift of power among institutions, affecting *inter alia* the relative influence of the Church and family networks. There have always been mechanisms of solidarity that have operated separate from the market. What is interesting for research today are these third sector trends at a time when a generally agreed concept of citizenship and rights has arisen, and convergence to private sector standards is growing increasingly evident. A century ago, service provision was driven more by a benevolent, charitable sentiment; today, it is underpinned by a notion of civil society and a sense of legitimate social rights.

The identification of all the participants involved in the policy process is certainly a crucial part of the research in this book. That is why when it comes to social identities of beneficiaries or target populations of third sector organizations, the reader might feel there is something missing. Affirmative and collective action issues are critical in determining the creation and strength of civic organizations and non-profits. Over the years, specific population groups have come to the centre of policy concerns for diverse reasons (youth, women, disabled people, children, and so on). There is no clear mention of how the participation and representation of these particular groups have evolved in the countries under study. However, to be fair, most of the third sector work is oriented to basic social services (e.g., health care, basic education), as the authors show, particular groups probably come to a subsidiary place. Perhaps the case of Japan is an exception to this rule; Yamauchi and Kitara make clear that a great deal of third sector activity in recent years has been devoted to serving the senior population. We hope that future research will show how and to what extent the politics and policy spheres are shaped by the target population and minorities, rather than just the organizations in the sector.

The role of academics and their language cannot pass without comment. It is noteworthy, for example, that Kendall and Taylor, in the chapter about the English experience, talk about the “policy activist” instead of “policy entrepreneur” and think of the “agency and activism” in the third sector more like a “bricolage” than “entrepreneurship,” so highlighting the collective aspect of the construction of the third sector, and somehow undermining the individual drive implicit in the notion of “entrepreneurship,” used by most of the authors. As

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this literature develops, there is no doubt we will get more material to carry out this self-critical task, which is also necessary to understand better these topics.

Despite these limitations, *Policy Initiatives Towards the Third Sector in International Perspective* is an important contribution to the literature. This book provides us with an international, contemporary perspective of the third sector, and constitutes an effort to elucidate some key trends both in the policy realm and the inner workings of the sector in each country and also from a cross-country standpoint. Yet, the editors point out that it only deals with “initiatives,” since all the national processes under scrutiny are underway. As such, it sets the expectation to see the next developments so that we can confirm or qualify the assessment made so far and gain a deeper knowledge of the incorporation of the third sector into the policy process worldwide.

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