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Book Review: A Valuable New Look at Non-Profit Growth Theory and Practice

By Juniper Glass

The Nonprofit World: Civil Society and the Rise of the Nonprofit Sector, by John Casey, Boulder, Colorado, Kumarian Press, 2016, ISBN 9781565495302

Every month or so, I get together with other folks who work in national non-profits in a laid-back office in Montreal's Plateau neighbourhood for an evening picnic. It is not just any picnic, but one where we intentionally come together to talk about the big picture. Daily work in the non-profit sector is busy, and we don't often have time to ask questions like, "What is the sector, anyway?" But at these picnics, over baguettes and beer, we make space for them.

What actually constitutes and bounds the third sector is one of the many big picture questions addressed by John Casey in *The Nonprofit World*. It is a textbook in its epic scope and careful treatment of concepts and terminology, theories of non-profit sector evolution, cross-national comparisons, and examples from around the world. I admit I do not usually read textbooks. Each time I cracked this book, though, I got the same giddy feeling as when I arrive at our monthly picnic. We so rarely get to zoom out this far.

The Nonprofit World takes as its starting point the rapid growth in the number of non-profit organizations and their increasing influence on society since the 1970s. The first chapters of the book explore the characteristics of this growth and, to a lesser extent, its meaning and implications for different countries. The book is also an excellent history teacher, particularly Chapter 3, which traces the many influences on sector growth over the last 50 years, including economic, social, political, technological, and resource shifts. Casey is successful in his goal to describe "the evolution of the non-profit sector in the broader contexts of domestic and global public affairs while offering a critical analysis of the work of nonprofits that neither overstates their importance nor uncritically makes claims about their impact" (11).

One of the reasons why the sector has experienced immense expansion is that, across the political spectrum, non-profit organizations are viewed as the answer to many challenges: "Conservatives consider them a key source of nongovernmental initiative for counterbalancing state power and introducing market forces into the delivery of public services. Progressives see them as the embodiment of grassroots activism that can help ensure that social services are effectively delivered to those most in

need” (20). For folks working in non-profit management, such a perspective helps to explain the sense we often have of being answerable to a diverse and often disparate set of stakeholders each with their own expectations. The sense of being pulled in many directions is also illuminated by Casey’s description of four main functions of non-profits: to provide services, to innovate, to uphold values, and to advocate for change. The division between service and expressive functions are “a key fault line” in discourse about the sector.

At one of our picnics, inspired by a group member’s recent travels in Cuba, we discussed the way that political and social contexts produce different kinds of non-profit sectors, and would that term even apply in Cuba? I would have been much more equipped to inform the discussion had I already read Chapter 4, “Comparing National Nonprofit Sectors” and Chapter 5, which explores how the US non-profit model is dominating the discourse and, to some extent, non-profit evolution around the world. The author offers a useful diagram that plots national non-profit sector types based on two dimensions: the influence of their civil society versus the control of the state, and income level. Canada, like the US and Australia, is a liberalist country with high incomes and an active civil society. Grouping developing, emerging, social democratic, corporatist, and authoritarian countries together, Casey illustrates how nations with similar “cultural frames” tend to give rise to non-profit sectors with similar characteristics. He concludes that the cultural frames of each nation “remain as important moorings that cannot be easily cast off” (143). While he predicts the increasing expansion of the non-profit sectors in almost all countries, the author does not expect to see the huge transfer of services nor the wide diversity of voices and contestation that are key characteristics of the American model.

Although the book draws from an extremely wide number and variety of sources, I was disappointed not to find thinkers such as Canadian Henry Mintzberg (*Rebalancing Society: Radical Renewal Beyond Left, Right, and Center*, 2015) included in the 25-page bibliography. Mintzberg offers a counterpoint to Casey’s growth thesis, asserting that the “plural sector” is actually weakening in comparison to the public and private sectors and needs to be revitalized in order to achieve balance in society. That said, Casey’s treatment throughout the book of critiques of the non-profit sector, such as one of the most basic, that non-profits are not necessarily good or humanistic, is excellent. Reality is much more complex than this idealized vision. I appreciated this reminder.

What is the value of a sweeping, global review of non-profit growth theory and practice? The book shakes up assumptions, including that our North American model is the only one. For practitioners, policymakers and partners that work in relation to non-profits, increasing our historical and cross-national knowledge brings greater awareness and care to our work in this vast, evolving sector. These are subjects worth study and discussion, and they go well, in my experience, with baguettes, beer, and good company.