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A very brief (book) review essay

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A VERY BRIEF (BOOK) REVIEW ESSAY

Jennifer Clarke*

Linda Milbourne, *Voluntary sector in transition. Hard times or new opportunities?*, Policy Press Bristol and University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013, 264 pp.

Susan Phillips and Steven Rathgeb Smith (eds.), *Governance and Regulation in the Third Sector International Perspectives*, Routledge, New York and Abingdon 2011, 286 pp.

In her monograph *Voluntary sector in transition*, Milbourne, a senior lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London, discusses the effects of changing policy and politics on voluntary and community organisations in the UK over the past two decades. Central concerns of the book include the effects of the retreat of the state from welfare provision; the more sudden shock of recent dramatic cuts in state funding to the voluntary sector; and the implications of emerging forms of governance for the role of the non-profit sector. Although the analysis focuses explicitly on the UK, these are clearly themes that have a wider relevance internationally.

While there has been considerable scholarship devoted to the voluntary sector in the UK over recent years, an important novel contribution of Milbourne's work is to link the changing macro-level context to the experiences of everyday actors and organisations, through grounding her analysis in three local area studies, from which organisational case studies and examples are drawn. In one of these studies, the fate of local voluntary organisations is followed for over a decade, from 1999 up to 2011, enabling rare longitudinal insights to be gained. Milbourne's ap-

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proach also gives voice to voluntary sector practitioners, who are often under-represented in academic research in this field. Milbourne thus offers a powerful account of the unique characteristics of local-level voluntary organisations and their potential for understanding local contexts, developing relationships of trust, and, as a result, meeting the needs of groups that both state and private sector providers tend to class as 'hard to reach'.

The book has an ambitious theoretical scope, incorporating multiple conceptual frameworks, including those relating to performance, risk, trust and resilience, all viewed from the perspective of small voluntary organisations. Thanks to a clear thematic structure and conceptual exposition, Milbourne manages to integrate these perspectives into a coherent and comprehensive account.

Throughout the book, Milbourne sets out to challenge dominant policy rhetoric in the UK and to highlight the complex, ambivalent reality of everyday experience. In Chapter Five, for example, she explores how the prevalent 'performance culture' may undermine the relationships of trust and downwards accountability to users that has hitherto been one of the distinctive characteristics of the voluntary sector; and in the following chapter she offers insights into the everyday challenges involved in collaborative working, often conceived as an ideal without taking account of the diversity of local conditions and of inequalities in power relations. In chapter 7, Milbourne questions the assumption that growth and expansion are always the best approach to developing organisational resilience in hard times, since this strategy poses its own risks of mission drift and loss of grassroots connections. Within Milbourne's studies, the most important factors for developing organisational resilience were rather clarity of goals and the ability to achieve a balance between excessive compromise and resistance (p 176).

Rather than trying to maintain a neutral stance, Milbourne is explicitly critical of power inequalities and the pressures of dominant organisational arrangements on small voluntary organisations. While much of her argument is persuasive, a limitation of this stance is that policy tends to be viewed only in terms of its negative outcomes. For example, whilst the negative implications of recent cuts in state funding, especially for disempowered groups, are made very clear, there is little exploration of any positive impact of the rapid growth of voluntary sector income

in the UK over the previous two decades. Similarly, the recent cuts in funding to the UK's well-developed voluntary sector infrastructure are criticised (p. 227), but the state's previous investments in voluntary sector capacity building programmes - under which the same infrastructure organisations flourished - are also mainly viewed in negative terms as an isomorphic pressure (eg p. 144). Those readers hoping, on the basis of the book's title, for an exploration of opportunities as well of hard times, may be disappointed, as positive examples are few and far between.

However, this should not detract from the considerable value of this book, both in terms of offering a valuable overview of contemporary social and organisational theory in relation to the voluntary sector, and for the detailed empirical insights it affords.

As part of the series 'Routledge Studies in the Management of Voluntary and Non-Profit Organizations', *Governance and Regulation in the Third Sector* takes a more macro-level approach to exploring the evolving nature of relationships between governments and the third sector. More specifically, a central purpose of this edited volume is to assess the empirical evidence for the much-discussed shift from market-orientated 'New Public Management' approaches to collaborative or relational governance, and to explore the implications for the third sector.

The volume comprises mainly of chapters focusing on specific countries, selected to represent a wide spectrum of approaches and experiences. These include: England (Chapter 2), Scotland (Chapter 3) and Ireland (Chapter 4), seen as leaders in creating collaborative models; Hungary, a transitional country which has made some progress in establishing mechanisms for greater collaboration (Chapter 6); Germany and France, where long-established patterns of collaboration within corporatist arrangements are merging with newer trends towards marketisation and relational governance (Chapter 5); Canada (Chapter 9) and Australia (Chapter 10), seen as 'laggard' regulatory states; and the US, where the combination of market approaches with strong political support for the third sector has resulted in a 'mixed model' (Chapter 8). A chapter on the supra-national European Union jurisdiction (Chapter 7) is placed somewhat incongruously in the midst of the other case studies.

These are complemented by the editors' introductory chapter and a final chapter by Douglas Rutzen, which takes a global perspective, emphasising in particular the challenging conditions for the third sector in

the many developing and transition countries in which autocratic governments have increased restrictions on civil society organizations.

Despite the fact that this volume grew out of a panel at the International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM) (p. 30), there is little sense of a dialogue between contributing authors. There is limited reflection within the individual case studies on how the identified characteristics of the specific contexts are shaped by and contribute to broader cross-national trends; greater attention to this would have strengthened the overall coherence of the volume and highlighted the wider relevance of the case studies. A more important limitation of the volume, however, given its global scope, is the disproportionate emphasis on Anglo-Saxon countries. It is evident from Ingo Bode's analysis in Chapter 5 that the hypothesis of a generalised shift from New Public Management to relational governance has only limited validity in much of continental Europe. The inclusion of only one study of only a 'transitional' country, Hungary, means that the volume misses the opportunity to reassess in any degree of depth the much-vaunted role of civil society in the 'third wave' of democratization across central Europe and Latin America. The volume also overlooks the evolution of state-third sector relationships in Southern European, where the legacy of dictatorial regimes and the predominance of the church and family in welfare provision create specific challenges.

On the other hand, Phillips and Smith offer an extremely incisive first chapter, which not only identifies the cross-cutting themes of the subsequent chapters but also highlights a number of issues that have wider cross-national resonance. One interesting observation that they make is that the key factor differentiating those jurisdictions that have developed more constructive state - third sector relationships is 'a vision of the role of the third sector that sees it as more than a social safety net or delivery agent of services, but that advances the value of the sector for democracy and citizenship and/ or economic development' (p. 24). Beyond that, investment in capacity building is seen to be important, since: [t]he ability to be effective partners in governing requires mechanisms for representation and engagement *within* the third sector, as well as *to* governments. It also requires a capacity to conduct research so as to have a value in policymaking that is increasingly evidence based and an ability to monitor the state-sector relationship' (p.27, *italics in the original*).

They also flag up some of the challenges that can be observed across different national contexts as the relationships between state and third sector shift. One problem is how to reconcile increasing demands for accountability with a growing interest in collaborative and decentralized approaches (p. 25-6). Other challenges include the inability of legislation to keep up with the rapidly changing realities of the third sector, such as emerging forms of social entrepreneurship (p. 26) and the tension between state funding and independent advocacy role of the sector (p. 29).

Such themes are likely to have a wide resonance for the foreseeable future, both in and beyond the countries specifically included, and as a result the volume will be a valuable resource for all those interested in the evolution of the third sector.