

The Accomplishment of Lester Salamon

Review Essay:

Lester M. Salamon, S. Wojciech Sokolowski,
and Megan A. Haddock, *Explaining Civil Society
Development: A Social Origins Approach*
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,
2017).

xv + 321pp. Hardcover \$64.95 USD

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MIRCS Working Paper #2019-01

January, 2019

The perseverance and output of Lester Salamon in his project on non-profits over the last twenty-five years is a remarkable achievement. This latest book, co-authored with two other research staff at the Centre for Civil Society Studies, is presented as the “capstone” output in a long series of working papers, country reports, and interim volumes. First conceptualized at a Bonn Conference in 1992, this project has involved dozens of collaborators, country advisory committees, and funding agencies, conducting sub-projects in one country after another to support a single evolving research study.

The master project is really composed of two projects. The one is descriptive: developing profiles of the historical development, scope, and size of the non-profit sector in a cross-section of countries representing a range of social types. The other is explanatory: testing a particular “social origins” theory of civil society. This dual purpose is evident in the publication history of the project. On the one hand, there have been efforts to develop a better data model for the system of national accounts (UN, 2003; ILO, 2011; most recently, see UN, 2018); on the other hand, there has been an intent to formulate and test a sociological theory of non-profits (Salamon and Anheier, 1998; Anheier, 2005; Salamon, Sokolowski and Haddock, 2017). This dual character of the project is not uncommon. Where theories depart from existing frameworks, it is often necessary to create your own database. What is bracing about this enterprise, though, is that the cross-national scope of the project required developing common definitions and datasets across what is now 41 countries. In short, the study is paradigmatic for the “professional sociology” model which Michael Burawoy (2005) delineated.

The synthetic output of this work has been published in a series of reports, now with the latest capstone volume (1997, 1999, 2004, 2017). There has been an informative shift in terminology, though, from the first volume which defines the nonprofit sector to the last volume which explains civil society development. The verb indicates a mature shifting in focus from description to explanation, but the noun suggests an effort to adapt to a broader discourse.

Nonprofit is defined negatively as the sector that is not-the-market, and betrays the study’s theoretical roots in the economic paradigm. Commenting on a question he had himself raised about why nonprofit organizations exist, Helmut Anheier, an early partner of Salamon in the endeavour, underscores this economic focus:

The proposed agenda, while interdisciplinary in intent, invited economic models first and foremost – the majority of available theories of nonprofit organizations are economic in nature, i.e. they involve some notion of utility maximization and rational choice behavior (2005: 115)

However, the negative definition locks the theorist into a search for the failures of self-interest, working within the economic model. It is precisely for this reason that other theoretical traditions have worked at building a positive definition with the language of civil society.

Social theory as it developed in Germany in the late nineteenth century, then the leading centre of economic theory, had more than a century ago transcended the economic error that defines rationality solely as “orientation to a system of discrete individual ends” ([1947] 1964: 115). Max Weber, standing at the apex of German historical economics, had already distinguished such *zweckrational* behaviour from *wertrational* behaviour – “rational orientation to an absolute value” ([1947] 1964: 115) “determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior” (1978: 24-25).

Civil society, understood in this positive definition, is the domain where *wertrational* behaviour is cultivated. While absolute values differ from one culture to another within a society – particularly so in this moment of extravagant pluralism – *wertrational* behavior is essentially religious. Civil society is a field of competition between the different value-orders, but is irrevocably organized around the meaning-making function. Civil society is not auxiliary, therefore – not a fix for market and state failures and subordinate to those aims – but a distinct order which serves meaning-making and existential functions.

Given their jumping off point from economic theory, the

social origins theory of Salamon and his colleagues has been developed along different lines. Social Origins theory sociologizes the economic paradigm by developing an analysis of the class coalitions which developed historically to yield the variances in the national scopes and distributions of nonprofit organizations, something the micro-theories of economics have not satisfactorily explained. This is a significant contribution.

While the authors make a nod to the role of religion, it is, at best, conceptualized, though, as an “ideal interest”. In recent work, Philip Manow and Kees van Kersbergen (2009) have done something similar with class coalitions as the independent variable and different forms of the welfare state as the dependent. They go beyond social origins theory, however, by employing a more complex model of class coalitions explicitly theorizing state-church cleavages, and this introduces some degree of *wertrational* agency (cf. Manow, 2015; van Kersbergen, 2011). A stronger approach to the causal role of value-rationality has been taken by Sigrun Kahl (2005, 2009)¹ who elucidates the differences in early modern religious doctrine among the Catholic, Protestant and Reformed churches and shows how differences in religious adherence led to different configurations of poor relief and social assistance (cf. Hien, 2014).

A different theoretical criticism concerns the role of the family. Anheier defines civil society in the following way:

Most analysts would probably agree with the statement that modern civil society is the sum of institutions, organizations, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests (2005: 9).

¹ But see the limits of Kahl’s own analysis in her recent review (Kahl, 2012).

Already thirty years ago, however, Carol Pateman was arguing that “the ‘individual’, ‘civil society’ and ‘the public’ have been constituted as patriarchal categories in opposition to womanly nature and the ‘private’ sphere” (1988: 102). Or as Paul Ginsborg more recently complained, “What is extraordinary about most of the literature on civil society is that the family is simply left out” (2008: 153). The demand of this literature is for an expansion of the concept of civil society.

More recently, Power, Muddiman, Moles, and Taylor (2018) have built on work by Foley and Edwards (1998) to argue that the family is “the cradle of dispositions”, “the provider of welfare” and “a site and focus of activism” (p. 203), and, therefore, central to the activities of civil society. Seen in this light, they suggest that “the relationship between the family and civil society is not only close but to some extent mutually constitutive” (p. 204). It is a position at odds with the conceptualization of Salamon and his colleagues.

Recognizing these criticisms, what are we left with in an overall assessment of the book? The magnificent effort to mobilize dozens of people throughout many countries of the world in a project of inventory and description has resulted in a significant advance on our state of knowledge. The slow reordering of national accounts for better counting of the flows and financial positions of the voluntary sector will contribute greatly to better information in the years to come. The theoretical framework that has been deployed to explain the data, however, is not adequate. In part because the task of data development was so large and took so long to accomplish, time passed such that the light of theoretical inquiry moved on. Their theoretical moves have played an important role in building a robust historical account that goes beyond the inadequacy of the economic theories that were much in play twenty-five years ago. Theoretical advances in the meantime, however, demand even more.

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