

Review Paper

Explaining Civil Society Development: A Social Origins Approach

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Lester M. Salamon, S. Wojciech Sokolowski, Megan A. Haddock and associates, *Explaining Civil Society Development: A Social Origins Approach*,



Over the past 25 years, the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, working in cooperation with a broad team of local associates through the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, has generated a powerful body of new systematic comparative data on the scope and structure of the nonprofit, or civil society, sector in more than 40 countries scattered widely around the world. Now, in a new book entitled *Explaining Civil Society Development: A Social Origins Approach*, authors Lester M. Salamon, S. Wojciech Sokolowski, Megan A. Haddock and associates draw on this sizable body of new data to test a variety of theories about what causes a number of intriguing puzzles that this research surfaced.

Why is it, for example, that the paid workforce of the civil society sector in Belgium stands at a whopping 10% of the country's effective workforce but only 2.5% in Sweden, even though these two countries are at roughly similar levels of development? Why does government account for 65% of nonprofit revenue in Germany and only 36% in nearby Italy? And how is it that the overall size and shape of the civil society sector in Mexico is virtually identical with that in Russia, a country seemingly worlds away?

More generally, in generating the first systematic, comparative data on the size, structure, financing, and role of the civil society sector, these data made it possible for almost the first time to test the major existing theories about the causes of nonprofit development. And what these data revealed flatly contradicted many of the central expectations flowing from these theories.

Thus, one of these groups of theories—which we dubbed “sentiments theories”—attributes variations in the scope and character of the civil society sector to the presence or absence of religious or cultural sentiments emphasizing altruism and caring. But we could find no religious tradition in the world that failed to emphasize these values, and some of the countries with dominant religions displaying the strongest emphases on such values happened to have the smallest civil society sectors.

A second line of theory—which we dubbed “preference theories”—attributes variations in the size and contours of the civil society sector to the preferences for various “collective goods” on the part of consumers and voters operating in the marketplace and the voting booth. This theory predicted that the greater the heterogeneity of a population, the greater the inability to reach consensus on the supply of various collective goods by government, hence the smaller the scale of government spending and the greater the size of the nonprofit sector. Unfortunately, the facts failed to confirm these expectations: most of the countries with the largest levels of government social welfare spending turned out to have the largest nonprofit sectors.

To account for the observed variations in the scope and contours of the civil society sector, the authors turned to an alternative line of theory that they dubbed the “social origins” approach and which emphasizes not sentiments and preferences, but power dynamics among social, economic, and political groups. In articulating this new theory, *Explaining Civil Society Development: A Social Origins Approach* argues: first, that underlying the apparently random cross-national variations in key dimensions of the civil society sector lie some identifiable patterns; and second, that these patterns are strongly associated with distinctive constellations of power relationships among a variety of socio-economic groups and institutions—including landed elites, middle-class commercial and industrial interests, peasants, workers, and governmental institutions—that are embedded in societies during critical periods of societal development. Nonprofits are thus firmly “embedded” in prevailing social, political, and economic structures, that are welded together by the relations of power that exist.

As outlined in the graphic below, the book identifies at least five different patterns of civil society development, each of which can be traced to a particular configuration of social, economic, and political power among key social actors.

In testing this theory, Part I of this book shows that these historically-embedded structures of power relations account exceptionally well for the cross-national variations in the identifiable patterns of civil society sector size, contours, functions, and support structure evident in the empirical record of the 40+ countries for which data have so far been assembled.

Part II of *Explaining Civil Society Development* then examines how well this social origins theory accounts for the observed dimensions of the civil society sector in ten countries—Switzerland, New Zealand, Australia, The Netherlands, Chile, Austria, Denmark, Russia, Mexico, and Portugal—

for which new or updated data have recently become available. The result is a new, empirically validated framework through which to view the evolving character of this important social and economic sector.

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PATTERNS OF POWER RELATIONS & CORRESPONDING PATTERNS OF CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT

This type of power relationship...	...results in this pattern of civil society development...	...which is characterized by these key features of the civil society...
Power concentrated in the hands of premodern landed or traditional elites	Traditional	Workforce size: Small Type of workforce: Mercantile Principal funding sources: State Dominant function: State
Power concentrated in the hands of industrial and commercial elites	Liberal	Workforce size: Moderate Type of workforce: Mercantile Principal funding sources: State Dominant function: State
Power of industrial, landed, and commercial elites threatened by working class opposition	Welfare partnership	Workforce size: Large Type of workforce: Partly religiously-affiliated organizations Principal funding sources: State Dominant function: State
Power firmly in the hands of middle class professionals and workers in a context of small holder agriculture	Social democratic	Workforce size: Moderate Type of workforce: Highly skilled Principal funding sources: State Dominant function: Economic
Power concentrated in the hands of a governing party and state bureaucracy	Statist	Workforce size: Small Type of workforce: State enterprises Principal funding sources: State Dominant function: Economic