Voluntas (2008) 19:211–217
DOI 10.1007/s11266-008-9062-z

Book Reviews

Published online: 25 April 2008
© International Society for Third-Sector Research and The Johns Hopkins University 2008

John Keane (Ed.), *Civil Society: Berlin Perspectives*, Berghahn, New York and Oxford, 2007, 262 pp., index, $29.95

Any book on civil society in Europe has a lot to contend with. For the continent has a rather tortuous history, a history that has, on the one hand, given us much in our current ideas of civil society, but that has also witnessed different totalitarian and fascist regimes. This project of explication becomes even more complicated when you incorporate the ongoing process of the construction of a supranational entity like the European Union. While the task is a difficult one to take on, the book under review does not balk at it. In 10 chapters, it offers different perspectives on the diverse aspects of civil society, perspectives ranging from the deeply reflective to the empirical. Rather than leave the reader with comfortable answers, the contributions in the volume problematize a lot of issues that scholars of European history and comparative studies of civil society will have to take up. What one gets is a feeling of "matters arising;" a conversation has been set off. This is the second in a series of volumes focusing on civil society in Europe, and features contributions from authors who are currently working in Berlin-based institutions, are affiliated to institutions based in the city, or have worked in academic institutions in Berlin at some point.

The book opens with an essay by Jürgen Kocka, who takes a historical perspective and explores the relationship between civil society, capitalism, the nation, and the state. He starts with a brief exploration of the history of the concept, after which he defines civil society as a social sphere related to but explicitly

Book review editor: Ebenezer Obadare.

Department of Sociology, University of Kansas, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd,
722 Fraser Hall, Lawrence, KS 6604-7556, USA
e-mail: obadare@ku.edu

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-008-9062-z Published online by Cambridge University Press

different from private life, capitalist ventures, and government. He cautions that the idea of civil society does not equate to "real, existing societies" (p. 41). For real societies also include elements that are chaotic, fanatic, and violent. The tone this chapter sets reverberates through the volume. For instance, the relationship between civil society, civility, and violence forms the crux of Reichardt's chapter.

Paul Nolte's concern in his chapter is the relationship between civil society and social inequality. He calls for research that will synthesize, analyze, and historicize data on inequality and civil society in Western societies since the end of the Second World War. He also calls for a methodological shift that transgresses the qualitative/quantitative boundary, that combines both social research and social theory, and that melds contemporary analysis with historical contextualization. This kind of research, he says, will provide a better understanding of the relationship between civil society and social inequality. In the same vein, Hans Joas and Frank Adloff present empirical data that seem to confirm the fact that inequality is a breeding ground of sorts for civil society, and that civil society has not so much departed from its founding days when the *Bürgher*—the bourgeoisie—was the social faction that constituted it.

Although Kocka, in his own chapter, concedes that there are social movements, networks, and NGOs that extend beyond national borders, he nevertheless concludes on a skeptical note about the possibility of the emergence of a European civil society. One reason he gives for this skepticism is the fact that Europe, being essentially multilingual, lacks a single language through which the public spheres of its countries can interact. Claus Offe's contribution also raises the same issue. His investigation stems from what he calls the "disarticulation between societies and political regimes" (p. 172), the legacy of distrust and disaffection between citizens of member-states of the European Union, and, crucially, the lack of a common language for civil society.

Private businesses find a presence in Dieter Rucht and Susanne-Sophia Spiloti's separate contributions, and their roles are given different interpretations. In the former, they are part of a group that is the butt of criticisms from civil society organizations, and in the latter they make up what the author calls "corporate civil society." Spiloti derives this categorization from the actions of the German Business Foundation Initiative that broke from the state-centric approach of retributive justice and accepted that private businesses are "continuous, long-standing and inter-generational association[s] with moral duties" (p. 59).

All the writers in the book, save one, focus on civil society in Europe. Shalini Randeria, the exception, attacks the Eurocentricism of assumptions that civil societies do not exist in places other than Europe, and argues for multiplicity in the conditions of possibility of civil societies, drawing the conclusion that Western societies do not have a monopoly to the claim of having achieved civility in the public sphere.

The book carries much of the local in its flavour, perhaps on the understanding that Europe is one place where the differences between local and continental are becoming harder to distinguish. The volume sets out to present different perspectives on civil society, engaging the challenges, achievements, and current understandings of the phenomenon. In that regard, it is certainly a major

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-008-9062-z Published online by Cambridge University Press

contribution by scholars in Europe to the analysis of the idea of civil society and how its social instantiation is currently being shaped and reconfigured in and by certain forces on the continent. Although one or two more contributions along the line of Randeria's corrective view would have been most welcome, one has to concede that the book's aim is to examine civil society *in* Europe.

Olumide Abimbola
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology,
Halle/Saale, Germany

John E. Trent, *Modernizing the United Nations System: Civil Society's Role in Moving from International Relations to Global Governance*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Opladen & Farmington Hills, 2007, 285 pp., bibliography, index

More recent literature on international relations has begun to accept the idea that decision-making in the global arena is no longer just a responsibility and a prerogative of states. Traditional state-centric theories have been challenged and increasingly, researchers have gained an interest in the role of non-state actors in a new global governance system. Multilateral organizations have long been the subject of study of scholars who are interested in the relationships between states and supranational, overarching institutions. The United Nations (UN) is one of the most studied multilateral organizations, and it would seem as though this is just another book attempting to understand the complexities of the UN.

This volume attempts to examine the UN using an analytical lens that tries to bridge traditional and newer theories of international relations. Trent's overall argument is that there is a pressing need to reform the UN, and that the best solution to this urgent and much needed reform is "for citizens to band together to press corporations and politicians to work on the reforms" (p. xvi).

Although weak empirically, there are positive elements to the book. It is written in a style that appears to be like a personal account of the author's ideas on how the UN should be reformed. Admittedly, the book does provide an extensive literature review on international relations theory and provides an overview of the works that have emphasized the new role of civil society in the global governance system. Chapter 1 in particular sets the analytical framework.

As the book moves forward, there is an increasing emphasis on a descriptive account of the history of international institutions (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 argues that we are moving from domestic operations (transactions) to international/global policy arenas. The bulk of the book's analysis is presented in Chapter 4, where Trent makes numerous criticisms and offers suggestions as to how the UN's shortcomings should be tackled. Chapter 5 speaks to the global issues that require institutional development, including peace and security, sustainable development, and democracy; and it is here that the author robustly develops the idea that civil society can be a key actor in the complex issue of UN reform. Chapters 6 and 7 describe the main areas of reform, as well as who should play the major role in reforming the UN. Chapter 7 brings the book to a close with a description of the lessons learned.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-008-9062-z Published online by Cambridge University Press