The Social Origins of Civil Society:

Explaining Variations in the Size and Structure of the

Global Civil Society Sector

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Summary

This panel will review work applying the “social origins theory” formulated by Salamon and Anheier (1998,) Salamon and Sokolowski (2002,) and Salamon and Sokolowski (forthcoming) to explain cross-national variations in the scope, structure, financing and social role of the civil society sector. This theory uses comparative historical methods and goes beyond existing theories emphasizing either sentiments (e.g. altruism and trust) or preferences (e.g., demand for public goods) as the causes of variations in the development of the civil society sector and focuses instead on the relative power of organized interest groups and political institutions.

Abstract

Prevailing theories of nonprofit development have tended to focus on the presence or absence of certain cultural sentiments (e.g. altruism) or preferences (e.g. different demands for collective goods). But these theories do not provide very convincing explanations of the significant variations that exist in the scope and structure of the civil society sector among countries, particularly in settings where democratic political systems and functioning market economies do not exist. A common shortcoming of these theories is that they assume a degree of flexibility in institutional choice that seems belied by the historical record. Choices about whether to rely on market, third-sector, or state provision of key services are not simply made freely by individual consumers in an open market as advocates of the economic preference theories seem to assume. Rather, these choices are heavily constrained by prior patterns of historical development that have been shaped by complex interrelationships among social strata and social institutions. Civil society organizations, after all, do more than provide services. They also affect the balance of power among social groups and between them and the state.

Reflecting these concerns, Salamon and Anheier (1998) and Salamon and Sokolowski (2002) have suggested an alternative set of explanations drawing on the insights of comparative historians of the “social origins” school. Like the social origins explanations of democracy, this perspective sees the scope, scale, and role of the civil society sector as a function not simply of sentiments or preferences but also of power among social groups and institutions, including socio-economic classes, socio-demographic groups, government bureaucracies and political parties, organized religion, and, in some instances, the core and the peripheral states. The main potential benefit of this theoretical approach is a better understanding of the relationship between the civil society sector and the state in an actual historical setting.
While still in its formative stages, the social origins approach has gained a number of adherents and stimulated considerable discussion. This panel will examine the latest paper by Salamon and Sokolowskki, which expands its theoretical framework and applies to some 40 countries examined through the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project and papers by two other scholars utilizing the “social origins” framework.

Paper No. 1:

“Social Origins of Civil Society:
Explaining Cross-National Variations in the Scope and Structure of Civil Society Organizations”

This paper tests the applicability of “social origins theory” to the observed pattern of civil society development in forty countries studied as part of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project. The paper first draws on the data generated by this project to identify five more or less distinct “patterns” of civil society structure in the forty countries on which data have now been assembled. It then explores two alternative sets of theories available in the literature to explain the variations that are apparent among these different patterns—first, sentiments theories emphasizing the presence or absence of cultural traits such as “altruism” and “trust”; and second, preferences theories emphasizing the preferences of consumers and suppliers for various public goods and for various institutional mechanisms to provide them. While acknowledging that these theories have relevance in some situations, the paper also identifies their limitations in accounting for the much more substantial variations that exist in civil society patterns across the broad array of developed and developing countries for which this Project has now accumulated data. Instead, it posits a “social origins” theory that emphasizes the role of power in the development of civil society. More specifically, the paper explores the impact of four sets of power relationships at critical turning points in societies' development as the keys to the size, structure, and role of civil society organizations in a society. These power relations include those among social classes; among other social groupings such as ethnic, racial, or kin groups; between State and society, including organized religion; and between core and periphery countries. The paper then applies this framework to the five “models” of civil society development and finds ample confirmation that the social origins theory can help elucidate key variations in the size and shape of the civil society sector cross-nationally.
Paper No. 2:


The historical evolution of the Israeli third sector reveals an array of traditional and modern entities, functioning side by side, and reaching out to recipients from various social and cultural backgrounds. Members of the Jewish pre-state community and Israeli citizens post independence were affiliated with different organizational settings and many of the traditional entities developed inter-relations with the political center, both before and after statehood and enjoyed the status of a recognized service provider. This spectrum of institutions was intrinsic to the growing Jewish community in pre-Israel Palestine from the late nineteenth century onwards, up to this very day. Its fundamental structure survived changing governing rules and shifts in political ideologies.

This research incorporates the principles of the Social Origins Theory in order to provide an explanation for this comparative consistency while attempting to suggest a fifth nonprofit regime pattern, one that reflects the experience of “New states” that achieved independence after WW2 in the midst or second half of the 20th century, and following a period of foreign colonialist rule.

While observing the historical experience of nations, Salamon and Anheier, through their Social Origins approach (Salamon and Anheier, 1998), pointed to a central factor—interrelations among classes and groups in society—as the source of influence on the pattern of state–society relations, and, as such, a factor from which one may adduce the characteristics of the third sector that developed in the country at issue.

The theory followed the track of European experience and presumed that the main players in history, those that influenced the development of the pattern of relations between the third sector and the state, were the landed elites, the rural peasantry and urban middle class elements. They postulated that the third sector followed a constant historical pattern of development vis-à-vis the ruling sovereign amid nineteenth-century modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. An important player in this domain was the Church and its affiliates, which developed back in the Middle Ages and, in the modern era, once again have cemented their status vis-à-vis the state and its authorities (pp. 227-228).

The study that follows wishes to apply Salamon and Anheier’s way of thinking, with emphasis on the non-European historical experience for an understanding of contemporaneous third-sector patterns in a broader geo-political context. As the Jewish community in pre-Israel Palestine developed its third sector, rulers succeeded each other, and traditional and modern identities intermingled in the social reality. As European influences trickled into Ottoman Palestine, various Church institutions served the indigent and pushed a missionary religious agenda. Still, Christianity did not become the dominant faith; institutions aligned with other faiths (Judaism, in this case) became central in terms of the representation that they afforded their members and their ability to provide distinct services.

Thus, I take up the Jewish case in Palestine and Israel to show that additional social origins should be taken into account – origins unique to the younger states that were established after World War II and the war’s adjunct, de-colonialization (Springhall, 2001).
Latin America poses an interesting challenge to the social origins theory of the civil society. Latin American countries share the common history of Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese) colonization, which resulted in the transfer of the “old world” institutions and class relations, in which landed gentry played a prominent role. Therefore, from the social origins point of view, they should have developed a similar model of the civil society sector. Yet the data show a different picture. On the one hand the civil society in Argentina and Chile display some features that may be considered characteristic of the liberal model, which prevails in English speaking democracies. On the other hand, the civil society in Brazil and Mexico have some features that relates to the statist model, which developed in countries where the state played a key role in economic development and repressed the civil society. But in both cases it is necessary to make some caveats in placing them in a single pure model. Therefore it is more likely to find different kinds of hybrid models.

This paper argues that these differences resulted from the policies of the national governments, sometimes in alignment with the dominant social classes (landowners and industrialists) and sometimes independently of it. Thus, in Argentina and Chile, the military dictatorships that took power in the 1970s embarked on the set policies of undermining labor and populist elements that threatened the elite interests. These policies included, on the one hand, repression of civil society activists which resulted in significant reduction of the civil society capacity. On the other hand, the military dictatorship followed neoliberal policies who aim was privatization many government functions, which resulted in a reduction of government patronage of civil society institutions that developed prior to the military takeover.

In Mexico and Brazil, the national governments embarked on economic development oriented policies that curtailed, to some extent, the power of landed elites, but it undercut to an even greater extent the civil society sector. In Mexico, The National Revolutionary Party that came to power in the 1930 inherited a strong state apparatus that relied on the army and enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy from other social elements. In order to cement its political hegemony the PRI incorporated subordinate classes into the structure of the party, thus co-opting opposition and preventing the independent articulation of lower class interests. Brazil followed a somewhat similar trajectory in the aftermath of the 1930 coup that curbed the role of the landed elites and established a centralized state, to promote industrialization and mitigate social conflicts. Government control forestalled the development of independent workers organizations. When democratic forces threatened to break through, moreover, the government resorted to authoritarianism and military rule. As a consequence, the development of civil society sector in both countries remained highly constrained by the state.

These development suggest that in addition to class interests, the social origins theory must account for the action of the state, whose actions may be relatively independent of the interests of the domestic elites.

References:


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