Book Review

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Third Sector, Partnerships and Social Outcome: The cases of Italy and Ireland, edited by Lucia Boccacin. E-Book Published by Vita E. Pensiero, Milan, Italy, 2014, 131 pages

Third Sector, Partnerships and Social Outcome: The cases of Italy and Ireland edited by Lucia Boccacin is an e-book of 131 pages. The book comprises three essays each cast as a stand-alone chapter. The chapter contributors are Lucia Boccacin, professor of Family and Communitarian Relations, Faculty of Education, Università Cattolica, Milan Italy; Andrea Bassi, Associate Professor in Sociology at the Department of Sociology, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy and Fred Powell dean of social science and Martin Geoghegan lecturer in the School of Applied Social Studies both at the National University of Ireland, Cork – Ireland.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I am working on a book based on the point-of-view of experienced nonprofit executives engaged in partnership arrangements in the United States. The narrative of voices in my research highlights a *nonprofit first* perspective of partnership. That is, partnership as understood and practiced by nonprofit sector organizations. The themes of my work touch upon many of the collaboration, social network, civil society and third sector themes that Boccacin and his colleagues broach in their comparative study. Most importantly for this review, my view of partnership and collaboration is that it is a process that is legitimized by the nonprofit actors who tend to contribute hard work and effort well beyond monetary benefits of the collaborative endeavor.

The premise of the Boccacin book is to offer a perspective on social partnerships trends in two countries – Italy and Ireland. As described by Professor Boccacin the volume editor and contributor, the cases of national social partnership character are analyzed “...to understand experiences of social partnerships, different ways of their realization, risks or critical points and opportunities.”

The research underlying the content of all three chapters appears extensive and each of the authors drills down deeply into a scrutiny of the subject matter related to partnership arrangements involving third sector institutions in Italy and Ireland.

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The audience as reflected in the research methodology and writing style of this book very clearly is intended for sociologists interested in the intricacies of social networks and the social value of collaboration where at least one partner is a non-governmental, private organization.

The two chapters on Italy by Boccacin and Bassi respectively comprise three quarters of the book and are seemingly translated from Italian into English. The Boccacin contribution offers several useful passages that offer clarity for concepts that are frequently quite fuzzy. One example is the quick and efficient definition for social capital on page 8. A second is the casual but meaningful discussion linking partnership and social systems starting on page 22.

The Bassi chapter offers several significant points of clarity that readers may find intriguing. Table 1 for example casts collaboration and social network concepts of third sector organizations that seldom are presented together in a single printed space. A second example is the use of a civil society *diamond diagram* method that offers a visual model to compare the value of third sector organizations cross nationally.

The final chapter by Powell and Geoghegan offers the promise of advancing our thinking on the ways corporate structure origins of social partnerships contrast with organizing principles that are at the heart of private voluntary groups as they coalesce into institutional forms. These few examples offer researchers like me useful secondary source material for limited citation.

However, there are number of problems with this volume. First and most importantly, it is not really clear why these cases and these countries offer models for scrutiny other than for descriptive purposes. In other words, the essays lack a context, adequate preliminary discussion or a hardened research question that places it within the existing literature of the nonprofit or third sector organizations.

There is also a disturbing closed system tendency by the authors to cite their own writing as source material for this volume. There are glaring omissions of the important and well-known scholars of the nonprofit sector here in the United States who also have carried out comparative research on nongovernmental organizations around the globe. Burton Weisbrod, Walter Powell, Lester Salamon, Dennis Young, Brian O'Connell, Elizabeth Boris, David Horton Smith, Jon Van Til, and Helmut Anheier are just a small sampling of writers who should have been consulted to inform the thinking of the authors.

Allowing great latitude for the writing style due to translation from Italian to English for two thirds of the book, there is still a very uneven quality to narrative and the arguments presented. There are numerous instances of dense, technical writing. Just one example is the definition for the term *partnership* in the introduction which reads as "...a place where different social subjects refer to

a structural configuration, characterized by the co-presence of different social subjects and by a reciprocal and collaborative social action, aiming at achieving project goals and based on the implementation of mostly medium to long term relations.”

After spending considerable time with the literature of the field on partnership, nonprofit partnership, public–private partnership and the like, I can suggest that a comparative cross-national scholarly study would be a welcome addition to our understanding of this very important element of the nonprofit and social sector. This book is a very modest start in that direction.