Book Review

Young, Dennis R., Elizabeth A. M. Searing, and Cassidy V. Brewer, eds. 2016. *The Social Enterprise Zoo*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing

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The *social enterprise* concept has become very popular, especially after the economic crisis of 2008/9, not only in the world of practice but equally so in the academic literature: Hundreds of publications – journal articles and entire journals as well as books and even book series are devoted to it. But despite that intense academic treatment of the term, it is far from being clearly defined. To quote another book reviewer: “If there is one thing that links almost every single academic article, book or chapter discussing social enterprise, it is the importance that all authors place not only on defining their understanding of the term but also lamenting the fact that they have to do so” (Adderley 2016, 335).

Given the varieties, the complexities, the cultural and political antecedents as well as other variables, Young, Searing and Brewer chose a creative way to circumvent the definition of the concept – they use the metaphor of a zoo to explain and illustrate it.

A metaphor is defined as “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The use of metaphors is not new; the famous cave allegory was used by Plato over 2400 years ago. The role of metaphors in the social sciences is to provide an analogy that is well known and through it, enable individuals to “see” interactions in a new way; this should help them interpret reality meaningfully. A metaphor does not have to fit entirely the real object – it should serve as an introduction, as a framework with which the reader is familiar, that helps explain not only what the new concept is but also how it works. Indeed, the authors have taken the zoo metaphor very seriously and delved into the literature of the history of zoos and their administration (including the tensions and dilemmas managers of zoos face!) to demonstrate the parallels to the social enterprise domain.

In discussing the social enterprise domain, the authors make the utmost use of the zoo metaphor. They not only discuss the fact that a zoo contains a large variety of animals/social enterprise types, but also that different animals need different habitats/socio-economic contexts in order to thrive, that certain animals do not fit to live with others, that they need different kinds of food/

economic resources and above all, that there is a curator and a manager/regulators of the zoo who make decisions regarding who will be accepted into the zoo, what kind of space will they occupy and how they should be displayed. Thus, the zoo metaphor provides a smooth way to introduce and analyze the concept of social enterprise and helps the reader ease his/her understanding of the complexities of the social enterprise domain.

But putting aside the creative use of the zoo metaphor to introduce the reader into the world of social enterprises, this book is an excellent analysis of the concept of social enterprise as an emerging field – an idea that comes across very clearly. Many countries attempt to institutionalize it in some way, but find it difficult because of its complex nature and the many interpretations of the concept. The fact that it is an emerging field expresses itself in what the authors depict as its “chaordic”¹ nature (9–12). Unlike the Third/Nonprofit Sector, which was at a similar stage of development as a distinct construct in the early 1990s but was focused around specific organizational entities, the social enterprise concept defies such simple categorization and can rather be seen as an “embodiment of a series of values that manifest themselves in different forms within different environments” (Adderley 2016, 336). This calls for a fresh, unconventional approach – a challenge that is taken by the authors.

Against the natural tendency to look at social enterprises as a distinct organizational form, in the second chapter entitled “Designing the Zoo”, Young and Longhofer come up with a creative principle to develop an initial description of this field. Their “Social Efficiency Frontier” (p. 24) suggests that all entities that combine social impact and profitability can be measured on both and when that measure is combined, one obtains an “efficiency frontier” which could serve as a criterion to frame the social enterprise domain. This approach, very different from the attempts not only to depict social enterprises as a “Fourth Sector” but also to map that “sector” (Urban Institute 2017), provides a much more sensible way to approach the issue of setting the boundaries of this new domain. In fact, such an approach leads the way for all business entities to eventually seriously engage in creating social impact.

The book is divided into four parts – Concepts and Content, How the Zoo Functions, Managing and Governing the Zoo and Performance of the Zoo, each containing three chapters and a Conclusion chapter. These cover the wide spectrum of issues pertaining to the existence, functioning and contributions of social enterprises, all analyzed within the zoo metaphor. Thus, in Chapter 3 that deals with the legal status of social enterprises, Brewer starts with the story of the *duck-billed platypus*, an animal that is partly bird partly mammal, which,

1 Governed by or combining elements of both chaos and order.

when discovered in the early nineteenth century, defied zoologists' conceptions of animal categories. The analogy to the difficulties in classifying social enterprises is obvious. The good news is that the *platypus* was eventually classified as a mammal, which suggests that, given the growing interest in the social enterprise phenomenon, the controversy around the type of organization social enterprises are, will eventually be settled too... . In Chapter 4 that deals with habitats, Kerlin, Monroe-White and Zook suggest that natural habitats influence the presence of specific animals and their numbers, which is easily translated to the world of social enterprises, demonstrating how changes in government and shifts in the economy as well as entrepreneurial opportunities brought about changes in the social enterprise domain in different parts of the world. In Chapter 8 Searing and Young analyze the feeding of the animals in the zoo, suggesting that different forms of enterprise need different financial and other material resources to survive. The chapter goes on to list the large variety of resources different types of social enterprises can use at the start-up stage, as investments or for ongoing operations. The chapter ends with a proposition for a theory of social enterprise finance.

The use of metaphors in academic writings is unfortunately not very common, yet for Dennis Young this is not his first case. In an earlier book (Young 2004) he takes the reader into the concert hall and shows how organizational principles are used in the context of music, both in form and in substance. In another publication (Young 2012, 25) he uses the metaphor of hills and valleys to demonstrate the unstable state of social enterprises (also used in the current publication on page 239). I found that the use of the zoo metaphor in this book to be an excellent way to introduce and analyze the complex concept of "social enterprise" for a wide and varied audience and enable a creative discourse around it.

References

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