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Rochester, C., Campbell Gosling, G., Penn, A., & Zimmeck, M. (Eds.).
(2011). *Understanding the roots of voluntary action: Historical perspectives on current social policy*. Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press.
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Review by Sarah Gold

Over the past 200 years in the United Kingdom, the voluntary sector's role in implementing social policy has fluctuated in tandem with government philosophy. *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action: Historical Perspectives on Current Social Policy*, edited by Rochester, Campbell Gosling, Penn, and Zimmeck, is a compilation of essays, each of which examines this phenomenon through at least one of four different themes noted in this review, including the shifting roles of the state and voluntary action, personal involvement in voluntary action, organizational challenges, and continuity and change. Through examining these themes over the past 200 years, the authors illustrate the course that voluntary action has taken in the United Kingdom. This book provides an overview of the role of voluntary action, or the third sector, in the United Kingdom's welfare system across a wide range of examples from museums to convalescent homes to polytechnic schools.

The first section of the book outlines the historical "moving frontier between the state and voluntary action" (p. 15). Since the responsibilities taken by the state and voluntary sector have shifted over the past 200 years, this is a worthwhile examination as it provides an analysis of the shifting relative roles of the state and voluntary organizations. Over time, the state's attitude regarding responsibility for the needy has changed. As a result, the state has alternately positioned itself as a caretaker for the less fortunate or relied on voluntary organizations to meet these societal needs. In tandem with service provision, funding for services by the state has also fluctuated over the period examined in this book, meaning that organizations' operations have had to change to meet their financial needs. The authors examine this "moving frontier" (p. 15) through the examples of Beveridge's report on Social Insurance and Allied Services (*Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services, 1942*), child guidance, and how social workers meet children's needs. These examples provide a broad array of information and insight on the history and changing roles of the state and voluntary action in the United Kingdom.

The second section of the book illustrates how individuals become involved in voluntary action. In this section, the authors

discuss the histories and societal impacts of various institutions, including a museum, polytechnic school, the criminal justice system, and the field of child rescue. These chapters illustrate the “why” factor of voluntary involvement: What are the motives behind an individual’s involvement? How does leadership from the top down or the bottom up alter the policies of an organization? The conflict created between the sometimes opposing forces of philanthropic leadership and leadership of those being served by the organization is discussed which offers the reader a deeper understanding of the functioning of various voluntary organizations. This section is devoted to examination of a wide scope of institutions that are tied together predominantly through their identification as voluntary.

The third section of the book addresses organizational challenges faced by voluntary institutions. In these two chapters, specific cases are analyzed in an attempt to formulate a deeper understanding of factors related to the failures and successes of these organizations. These chapters outline issues that are applicable to many voluntary organizations, even today, by addressing a variety of relevant questions: How does management style affect the success of an organization? How do organizations adjust to growth? How do they accommodate reduced income flow? These questions are answered through the case studies in this segment through the examples of convalescent homes and houses of charity.

Finally, in the fourth section, the future of voluntary action is discussed through questioning the existence of a “New Philanthropy” (*p. 182*). This section concludes that philanthropy in the United Kingdom today has many similarities to philanthropy as reviewed over the past 200 years. Voluntary organizations today still require accountability for outlay of funds and are funded by new investors just as similar organizations have been over the past two centuries.

Each of the chapters in the book aligns with the discussion of voluntary or third-sector agencies in the United Kingdom. Each chapter has been intensively researched and reflects the authors’ deep interest in and knowledge of the subjects of their writing. This depth of research offers the reader great insight into each topic addressed. The reader can understand the lessons of each chapter individually, but what can the reader glean from these essays in aggregate form? What do the editors wish to share by including each of these essays in this book?

It would have been very beneficial for the editors to have presented the reader with a strong conclusion to this collection. In such a conclusion, the volume's chapters would be connected to one another, and the lessons to be learned from the compilation of these essays would be discussed. Although each of these essays can stand on its own as a contribution to its specific field, it would have been helpful to identify and discuss the metathemes and lessons inherent in these essays as a collective. Such an analysis would serve to inform the work of voluntary organizations, scholars, and practitioners. A discussion of the lessons learned from each of the essays in this book would address government policies, funding, and leadership; given that all voluntary organizations are affected by these factors, this discussion would prove worthwhile to the field.

Considering the long history of the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom, one might think that there would already be a great deal written about the topic; however, writing on this subject is limited. A quick review of the literature in this field of study reveals only a smattering of books that comprehensively address the history of the voluntary sector. Two of these books are *Voluntary Organisations and Social Policy: Perspectives on Change and Choice* by Margaret Harris and Colin Rochester (2001) and *The Voluntary Sector in the UK* by Jeremy Kendall and Martin Knapp (1996). These books have goals most closely aligned to *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action: Historical Perspectives on Current Social Policy*. Each of these books aims to provide a portrait of the changing history of the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom. *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action* is a needed and welcomed addition to the existing literature on this topic as it provides additional insight into many types of voluntary organizations. This book will also hopefully help to advance the study of the history of voluntary action by supporting researchers new to the field as well as catalyzing additional literature on the subject.

Upon reading *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action* and surveying the available material on the history of voluntary action in the United Kingdom, it seems as though there are many topics for further research in this field. It could be particularly helpful to compare various types of voluntary action: Are there certain fields that seem to be more successful in meeting their goals than others? What makes some types of voluntary action more viable than others? Furthermore, though there is no panacea to ensure the success of voluntary organizations, there are certainly conclusions that can be drawn based on the experiences of the organizations

discussed in *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action*. Another volume utilizing the ideas suggested in this review for a conclusion of this book would provide valuable insight into the changing role of voluntary organizations as well as some of the characteristics that appear to contribute to the success of these organizations.

The editors of *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action* have decades of collective experience in researching the voluntary sector. This book provides a wealth of knowledge about various voluntary sector organizations and could lead to the synthesis of material discussed in the previous paragraph. This would provide a comprehensive examination of the history of the third sector in the United Kingdom through discussing specific cases while also drawing broader conclusions. These conclusions could assist in the success of both existing and future third-sector organizations.

Since this book's focus is centered on examples in the United Kingdom, it may be most appreciated by readers in, or interested in, the United Kingdom. Familiarity with the politics and geography of the United Kingdom will deepen the reader's understanding of this book. That said, the book provides valuable insight into examples of many different voluntary organizations which, though specific to the United Kingdom, are likely to have parallels in whichever country is most familiar to the reader.

Each section of *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action* provides scholars, practitioners, and students with greater insight into voluntary organizations, regardless of the country in which they study. The "moving frontier" (p. 15) discussed in the first section of the book is applicable in all countries as the role of government, wherever it may be in the world, is constantly shifting, dependent on political, economic, and social factors. Similarly, in the book's second section, the impulses that cause people to become involved in an organization vary as much in the United Kingdom as they do in the United States, China, or Uganda; therefore, a conclusion drawn in the United Kingdom provides additional information pertinent to organizations in any other country. The third section of the book may be the most generalizable to organizations in all countries, as it examines the successes and failures of organizations based on leadership and adjustment to change, certainly two primary concerns for voluntary organizations. The final section of the book provides an outlook regarding the current and future status of voluntary organizations. The experiences in the United Kingdom likely align with those of organizations in other countries as accountability of financing of new efforts seems to be a fundamental aspect of all voluntary organizations.

Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action provides the reader with various perspectives on the history of voluntary action in the United Kingdom. These perspectives are important additions to the current body of research on this topic. The compilation of these essays gives the opportunity to draw information from various examples that volunteer organizations can use today.

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About the Reviewer

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