

Editorial

TEN YEARS AFTER: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE THIRD SECTOR IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

This issue of the journal offers a collection of articles, representing revised versions of the best of the papers prepared for the fifth *Voluntas* symposium, which took place at Charles University, Prague in October 1999. The symposium was timed to mark the tenth anniversary of the many far-reaching changes that took hold of the region in the fall of 1989, when, constitutionally, liberal democracy replaced “really existing socialism”. In the context of the fundamental reorganization of economy, polity and society that has taken place since then, we sought to explore the role that nonprofit organizations have been able to play over the last decade. Expectations had been high that, freed from the suffocating embrace of the *nomenklatura*, civil society would have room to flourish, although it was to be anticipated that it would be a difficult and immensely time consuming process (Dahrendorf, 1990, 1997). Moreover, different countries had contrasting pre-transition and even pre-Communist institutional inheritances upon which to build, suggesting considerable variation was to be anticipated in the ease with which the desirable patterns of behavior and organizational forms could be established and nurtured (Anheier and Seibel, 1998).

Readers will recall how some important aspects of the emerging policy environment for the third sector in the region in the 1990s were outlined in an earlier issue of *Voluntas* (Kuti, 1999; Regulska, 1999). Characteristic features have included extensive evidence of the anticipated intra-regional diversity in terms of organizational resources and capabilities; policy turbulence, unpredictability and ambiguity in some countries, fuelled as many national and local governments have been either unwilling or unable to provide sustained political or financial support (sometimes despite symbolic or rhetorical commitment); and the exertion of powerful influence by agencies from outside the region, including foundations and EU institutions (see also Quigley, 1997; ISA Consult, 1997; Hyatt et al, 1998). This special issue of *Voluntas*, building upon those initial assessments, seeks to explore in more depth the patterns, trajectories and models that have emerged in and around the third sector among the countries in the region. We wish to examine how – and why - these differ from what has been observed in Western Europe and other parts of the developed world.

The development of thinking in this area is not only important for scholars and policy makers within the region itself, for at least two reasons. First, the debate on the meaning which can be attached to, and consequences of, civil society and the institutions of the third sector has become increasingly cosmopolitan. The excitement around the topic was already spawning a build up of interest before the formal collapse of communism (Keane, 1988). More recently, specialist researchers from both Western Europe and the US have been increasingly eager to look to this part of the world as they seek to make more general sense of these phenomena (see, respectively, Keane, 1998; and Ehrenberg, 1999; Schechter, 1999); while the assessments of leading “insiders”, including intellectuals and journalists, about the health of civil society in their countries have generated tremendous interest amongst far more general audiences (for example, Michnik, 1999). This is no surprise, since one of the most distinctive cultural features of

the region has been the pivotal role of its intellectuals in times of transition, historically and more recently (Crawford, 1996).

Second, there is the question of third sector theory relating to organizations. While a significant body of putatively “general” theory about the third sector has emerged over the last two decades, these approaches have typically been developed for, and applied to, Western market economies (for an early exception, see Kuti, 1990). Prominently, the heterogeneity and trust-related service provision theories as well as the interdependence and supply-side theories all focus primarily on the implications of these organizations formal character as “private nonprofits”; assume stable and robust State-backed legal frameworks, and well developed markets for inputs and outputs; and take for granted the existence of rational State decision making responsive to individual and collective citizen actions. To the extent these conditions do not apply, or involve inappropriate assumptions – as the recent analyses of Kuti (1999) and Regulska (1999) have indeed already suggested – then Western theoretical third sector orthodoxy is inadequate and in need of, extension, modification, or reformulation.

Moreover, a number of the themes developed, from different starting points, in this issue in studying the East Central European third sector will clearly be important for theorising the role of the third sector in other parts of the world too. Examples include, first, the extent to which historical legacies shape current possibilities for third sector development. This is an important aspect of Martin Potucek’s portrayal of the case of the Czech Republic. Second, the role of political-economic systems, ideologies and social networks in both enabling and constraining voluntary action in varied ways (cf Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990 on the different forms of “embeddedness” and Potucek, 1999 on the influence of leading political ideologies – “choices of society” - on institutional changes), as teased out, in different ways, by most of the contributors. Third, the search for legitimacy in providing human services under conditions in which uncertainty is pervasive and technology unclear, highlighted by Sokolowski in his new institutional account of the part played by the nonprofit form and social proximity, in Poland in the first half of the 1990s. And fourth, the relevance of attending to the flow, from abroad, of resources and (adopted or adapted) ideas in understanding domestic situations, an aspect with which John Glenn deals with in analyzing the varied complex influences of overseas financial and in-kind philanthropic support on the development of Czech and Slovak political life. The frameworks for analysis that these scholars employ undoubtedly hold important lessons for third sector and civil society researchers from other parts of the world.

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