The civil society sector—made up of millions of nonprofit organizations, associations, charitable institutions, and the volunteers and resources they mobilize—has long been the invisible subcontinent on the landscape of contemporary society. For the past twenty years, however, scholars under the umbrella of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project have worked with statisticians to assemble the first comprehensive, empirical picture of the size, structure, financing, and role of this increasingly important part of society.

In addition to drawing together this sizable array of empirical data on the civil society sector in 42 countries, this book takes the important additional step of addressing the crucial analytical question of what accounts for the enormous cross-national variations that these data reveal in the size and contours of the civil society sector around the world. Drawing on the project’s data and other sources, Salamon, Sokolowski, and Haddock raise serious questions about the ability of the field’s currently dominant “preference” and “sentiment” theories to account for these variations. Instead, the authors advance an alternative “social origins theory” that attributes the variations in civil society sector strength and composition to the relative power of different social groupings and institutions during critical turning points in national development and then tests this theory against the newly available evidence and comparative historical materials.

What emerges is the discovery of a set of distinctive patterns of civil society development traceable to identifiable constellations of social group power and influence. Part II then reports on 10 countries for which new data are available and assesses how well the social origins theory accounts for their civil society patterns. The result is a pioneering volume offering a critically needed lens for viewing the evolution of the civil society sector around the world that should interest not only nonprofit sector students and practitioners, but government officials and students of sociology, political science, public policy, and other fields as well.

“In its macro-level focus and mixture of historical and empirical explanation, this exciting book offers a theoretical approach to the study of civil society that should be useful and appealing to scholars and others. Logically presented and well written, this book is exciting for nonprofit scholars and a useful source for sociology, political science, and other disciplines as well.”

~ Femida Handy, coauthor of Philanthropy in India: Promise to Practice

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