

Analysis of Key Topics in the Research on Nonprofit Organizations: From Efficiency to Hybrids

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Abstract

Research in the nonprofit sector is a relatively young discipline. Nonetheless, a number of research schools of thought and movements have formed over several decades, several outstanding research institutions have come into existence, and many books, articles and studies dealing with the nonprofit sector have been written. The first social science to try and understand the nonprofit phenomenon through its research methods was economics. This article analyses the causes of the interest that economists started paying to the nonprofit sector and the nonprofit form of companies. It examines how the areas of interest of the research have been changing, trying to identify causes of such changes. It demonstrates that, since its very beginning, this research has been very strongly influenced by actions taken by interest groups and has been significantly interconnected with the public policy towards the nonprofit sector. Its primary objective is to demonstrate significant shifts in the research emphases and to articulate the author's view of the tendencies in the development of the area studied.

Keywords: nonprofit sector, public policy, interest groups, research trends

Introduction

Theory is not value-neutral. It is inevitably appropriated, constructed, or appealed for purposes related to the configuration of institutional power and the interests of stakeholders.

Hall (1995)

The nonprofit (also third) sector refers to the sphere between the state and the market where the following two principles meet: private voluntary activities and non-profitability. This article analyses the transformation of the pillars which the research in this specific area has been based on. It provides

an overview of the progress in the understanding of the phenomenon as facilitated by leading figures in the nonprofit research, identifying the causes of changes in the orientation of the research and, last but not least, it is a critical analysis of the influence of interest groups on this research.

The terminology of the area we have been dealing with herein is still inconsistent, and probably will remain so. In the literature written in Czech, the overview of terminology is best compiled in (Skovajsa 2010). It should be noted that terminology may pose one of the biggest risks of incomprehension in discussions about the nonprofit sector, especially in the situation when the multidisciplinary approach has been growing in importance. Each of the social sciences has its own terminology, yet different meanings are assigned to the same concepts (Muukkonen 2000) points out that the terminology refers to the sector on the one hand and to actors, entities operating in this sector, on the other hand, and that it also reflects different cultural and historical experience. The terms as used throughout this paper are private nonprofit organizations and the private nonprofit sector or just nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector. For the rationale see for example Rosenmayer and Pospisil (2006).

Materials and Methods

The article is not based on any ad hoc executed empirical research; on the contrary, it examines the background of researches in the order in which they gradually emerged. Therefore, the secondary analysis has been selected as the main method. To draw up the sections of this paper that analyze the principles of individual theories, the author followed from his own research methods applied in the following two grant projects where the author served as principle investigator: Podíl nestátních neziskových organizací na zabezpečování veřejných služeb /The Share of Non-Governmental Nonprofit Organisations in Securing Public Services/(GA402/05/0974) and Revize teorií neziskového sektoru jako východisko formulace veřejné politiky vůči neziskovému sektoru /Review of the Theories of the Nonprofit Sector as the Basis for the Formulation of Public Policy towards the Nonprofit Sector/(GA402/09/0941).

This contribution does not aspire to be an exhaustive analysis; accordingly, it cannot contain the proposal section either. It rather has a theoretical and conceptual as well as summarizing character. At the same time, it defines the space for another of the author's planned activities, specifically for an in-depth research in the links between sources of research funding and the themes or issues comprising the agenda of the research.

Of course, this article utilizes mostly the American research tradition and derives some results from it. It can be the limiting factor and it can be challenged by rights. Yes, European, or even the Czech, research tradition is different. But the main problem remains the same – government and interest groups, very often the nonprofit ones, influence the “independent” research strongly and con-

tinually. And such influence doubtlessly deserves our attention and critical analysis.

Results

Economic Research of the Nonprofit Sector

With a certain amount of exaggeration, it may be stated that economics was really the first social science which started exploring the space “between the state and the market” in a systematic manner. The statement is characterized as a slight exaggeration because economics has a lead of no more than ten years at the maximum. Political scientists, sociologists and, naturally, historians come up with their theories as soon as in the course of the 1970s. They are primarily general theories, political macro theories, organizational theories, etc. Of course, emphases in these sciences were also shifting, most significantly during the late 1980s when international comparative studies became the priority, exploring differences in terminology, legislation and cultural and religious backgrounds.

Economics, however, was the first one, mainly due to the strong impulses of economic nature, which culminated at the turn of the 1960s and the 1970s in the USA, where the nonprofit sector has a rich and strong tradition. In the American context, the nonprofit sector can be understood primarily as a tax-exempt field. It was the potential threat that the government posed to this space which became the most significant impetus launching the economic research in the nonprofit sector.

Quantitative expansion and a change in the structure of incomes

Before we proceed to analyse the above specified impetus, it is necessary to mention some other, though probably not as substantial, impulses. The first was undoubtedly the quantitative expansion of nonprofit organizations, which already started in the 1950s. As an illustration, it may be stated that the number of tax-exempt nonprofit organizations grew from 50,000 in the 1950s to about 300,000 in the mid-sixties and 700,000 in the mid-seventies (Muukkonen 1999).

Another impetus launching serious researches was a change in the nature of some significant types of U.S. nonprofit organizations, mainly in the field of health care services. While in the 1950s, the health care sector consisted mainly of organizations working on traditional principles of charity, significant changes occurred in the next decade, mainly because the Medicare and Medicaid systems had been deployed. This, as Hansmann points out, entailed liberation of nonprofit hospitals from their dependence on charitable contributions (Hansmann 1987), allowing them to become potentially profitable (in terms of cost-effectiveness, see Vaceková 2013) institutions that receive most of their income from patient payments. With a substantial change in the structure of incomes, changes in the economic behaviour of organizations can also be expected, so this fact can be considered to be one of the causes underlying the interest of economists.

Both of these impulses were significant: the numbers of entities of the clearly defined institutional type became more significant; therefore the need to explore the causes of the growth and for example also the fields where the institutions were operating, was self-evident. Medicare and Medicaid in turn significantly changed the structure of incomes, hence also the fundraising and marketing strategies of the organizations concerned.

The Tax Reform 1969 and its impacts on the subject-matter of the research

But there was yet another impetus that caused the boom of the economically-oriented research. And it can be assumed that this was the major impetus. It was a tax reform which would have far-reaching consequences for the tax-exempt space. Specifically, they were consequences for endowed entities, enjoying the comparatively largest benefits among all charity entities.

Private foundations became subject to regulation, specifically so called operating foundations, often founded by wealthy individuals. Regulators, legislators came to believe that these entities pursued interests of their founders rather than public interests, all this with intensive support in the form of indirect (tax) public aid. The introductory part of the text of a voluminous report of the U.S. Congress is telling (United States, Congress 1970):

Increasingly in recent years, taxpayers with substantial incomes have found ways of gaining tax advantages from the provisions that were placed in the code primarily to aid limited segments of the economy. In fact, in many cases these taxpayers have found ways to pile one advantage on top of another. The House and Senate agreed that this was an intolerable situation. It should not have been possible for 154 individuals with adjusted gross incomes of \$200,000 or more to pay no Federal income tax on 1966 income. Ours is primarily a self-assessment system. If taxpayers are generally to pay their taxes on a voluntary basis, they must feel that these taxes are fair. Moreover, only by sharing the tax burden on an equitable basis is it possible to keep the tax burden at a level which is tolerable for all taxpayers (United States, Congress 1970, 1–2).

As a result, for the first time, the Tax Reform Act 1969 imposed restrictions on private foundations. Under the Tax Reform Act 1969, private foundations are required to make minimum contribution. For example, 5% of assets must be distributed in a qualifying distribution each year at the present time. The minimum distribution rule replaced a system where foundations could lose their exempt status for excessive accumulations (Agard 2010).

According to Agard, *The Tax Reform Act of 1969 defined the fundamental social contract offered to private foundations. In exchange for exemption from paying most taxes and for limited tax benefits being offered to donors, a private foundation must (a) pay out at least 5% of the value of its endowment each year, none of which may be to the private benefit of any individual; (b) not own or operate significant for-profit businesses; (c) file detailed public annual reports and conduct annual audits in the same manner as a for-profit corporation; (d) meet a suite of additional accounting requirements unique to nonprofits (Agard 2010, 409).*

The response by the foundation sector representatives to the measures was very fast. Two special commissions were set up in sequence: The so-called Peterson Commission (Commission on Foundations and Private Philanthropy) was formed by John D. Rockefeller III in 1969, and its activities had rather limited impacts, largely because they released their report as late as after the tax reform measures became effective. The declared aim of the Commission was an unbiased research into endowed entities and their role in the society. Neither the government nor foundations themselves were to influence the research. This independence was to lend credibility to the Commission, which was undoubtedly necessary for potential influencing of the Congress in its decision-making about foundation activities.

However, more recognized today are the outputs of the Filer Commission (Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs). It was established in 1973 to explore private philanthropy and its role in the American society. These researches and the insight into the inherent laws of the philanthropic sector were intended to help formulate recommendations on the ways leading to an increased level of private giving. The composition of the Committee then reflected the efforts to achieve diversity of opinions and diversity resulting from professional experience. Hence, its members were for example leading representatives of significant endowed entities, universities, but also people with a political background, etc. Let us touch on the fact that approximately \$2,330,000 was spent on the activities of the Commission, which were officially completed in 1975 (Dunbar 1976). The Commission produced over 80 studies and articles; however the most important is their final report (Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Need 1975).

In addition to the formulation of a number of recommendations, mostly aimed at encouraging donations and philanthropic institutions, the Commission's activities also had other impacts. For example the Program on Nonprofit Organizations (also known as PONPO) of the Yale University was launched thanks to its scholarship fund. The project, which involved approximately 150 scientists not only from Yale but also from other institutions, brought among other important works such as *The Economics of Nonprofit Institutions* collection issued in 1986 and edited by Susan Rose-Ackerman (Rose-Ackerman 1986).

The impulse for research: partial summary

Initiation of the Independent Sector, an umbrella organisation bringing together endowed entities, other nonprofit organizations, and representatives of companies, i.e. representatives of the private market sector, may be then seen as the effort to institutionalize the influence of interest groups. It can be concluded that the five-year operation of the Filer Commission especially had a long-term effect, not only on the US nonprofit sector, but it also became a source of inspiration and information for interest groups in various parts of the world. It is an extraordinary example of how a sense of threat and regulatory measures introduced by the government can stimulate private activities,

both in terms of significant expenditures and scientific and research activities. As a matter of fact, a base was created and stabilized for mutual contacts between researchers and academics on the one side, and non-governmental entities on the other. It can be perceived both positively and with a certain critical detachment, to say the least.

Peter D. Hall (1995) makes the following observation on that: *“Although a few scholars studied philanthropy, voluntarism, and nonprofit organizations simply because they found them interesting, most members of the research community were attracted to the field by the incentives provided by nonprofit leaders as they sought to defend the charitable tax-exempt universe against legislative attack.”* (Hall 1995, 9). This suggests that research questions began to be asked “to order” in a way, with representatives of powerful interest groups standing on the customer side. Although the quality of a wide range of researches from that period has been time-proven, there are prominent authors who have not lost their critical perspective such as Barry D. Karl (1987) in the second half of the 1980s: *“In some cases it is questionable if the word “research” had the same meaning for foundation leaders and scholars. Many times it was a question of advocacy and evaluative nonprofit justification.”* (Karl 1987, 984).

Karl further points out that the current terminology will be gradually amended. For example, hired theorists involved in the field substituted the term “charity” with the term “nonprofit organization” because the term “carries an organizational conception modelled on business enterprise, which is presumably efficient, subject to cost accounting standards of performance and principles of effective management” (Karl 1987, 984).

American Micro-Economic Approach: Principles

In any case, these efforts to research the nonprofit sector have been successful and have grown to considerable proportions. A whole stream of theoretical concepts has been formed which we call the **American micro-economic approach** today. Its essence is an analysis of the “nonprofit company”, based on the principle of non-distribution constraint, specifically the analysis of the ways in which this condition affects behaviour and fulfilment of the functions of an organization.

This approach emphasizes the issues related to costs and efficiency, for example studies of public, for-profit and nonprofit service providers are very important. The main feature of these theories is that they are trying to be **universal**, valid under all conditions, i.e. in different countries and in different times.

As regards terminology, Hansmann’s distinction between the *donative nonprofits* and *commercial nonprofits* can especially be considered to be inspirational (Hansmann 1987). This division, as well as further elaboration of this principle, caused very contradictory reactions. On the one hand, recognition from the side of the academic and professional community, on the other hand, not very friendly and disapproving reactions from the side of some NGOs. The reason is that Hansmann’s distinction clearly refers to the heterogeneity

of the nonprofit sector and theoretically justifies the regulation of the sector and the selective approach of the government towards its individual parts. It was, of course, often perceived as a threat to the autonomy of nonprofit entities.

Two basic streams of economic research in the nonprofit sector had been profiled by the end of the 1980s. The first primarily examined **the causes underlying the existence** of nonprofit organizations, the second dealt with the **behaviour** of these organizations, i.e. their functioning and how their operations were influenced by the non-distribution constraint condition. A typical representative of the first approach is the heterogeneity theory (also called the public goods and government failure theory), mostly associated with the name of Burton Weisbrod (Weisbrod 1987). The behaviour of nonprofit entities is then a subject-matter for example of the supply side theory (also called entrepreneurship theory), a representative of this approach is for example the above mentioned Hansmann.

Further Transformations of the Subject-Matter of the Research

As compared to the previous detailed section of the paper, the following part is slightly less detailed. One of the reasons is that, starting from the second half of the 1980s, economic research in the nonprofit sector stops being more or less coherent and becomes more fragmented, and especially multidisciplinary. In addition, as noted by Anheier, the period from 1985–1995 was not the decade of any major theoretical innovations; this work was carried out mainly from 1975–1985. Rather, they are two different developmental traits that characterize the later period. First, previous theories were further refined and developed. Second, a substantial pool of empirical works that either test theoretical approaches, or supply evidence about correctness and key aspects of this or that theory has been gathered (Muukkonen 1999).

Anheier formulated transformations of the research agenda in a very precise manner (Anheier 2013). It is evident that the research agenda is closely linked to the prevailing public policy:

Initial Agenda (– 1990s)

This phase of the research encompassed a range of absolutely crucial issues, which the economy of the nonprofit sector could not do without in the subsequent years. We can say that fundamentally new topics have appeared only rarely since then, and when they have done so, they have often taken the form of variations on the themes of this initial period. Typical for this phase is especially the following:

- focus on organization and organizational behaviour,
- alternative ways of providing services,
- formulation of several fundamental theories,
- emphasis on the role of values shared by individual types of organizations,

- analysis of the issues related to multiple stakeholders, multiple revenue sources,
- efforts to identify comprehensive impacts of activities implemented by non-profit organizations.

According to the quoted resource (Anheier 2013), the key findings include especially the following:

- There are good reasons why nonmarket firms exist in market economies.
- They require an adequate legal and policy framework to bring their advantages to the forefront (direct contributions, positive externalities), and avoid shortcomings and failures.

1995 – 2005 Agenda

This phase of research was very popular among researchers in particular and showed to good advantage a number of interesting analyses based on the principles of New Public Management. The main objective was to make use of nonprofit organizations not only for market reforms but also in the efforts to redefine the social state system. Generally, it may be stated that the research concentrated on the role of the nonprofit sector in remedying some of the shortcomings of the other systems, but also on the possibilities of partnerships established among organisations in individual sectors. Briefly, the following became the main research themes:

- Privatisation and PPP: efficiency, efficient delivery of public services;
- Social Capital, Civil Society: cohesion, self-organization;
- Social Accountability.

The key findings of this phase include especially the following:

- Nonprofits are useful tools of government reforms (Privatization).
- Nonprofits can be used for market reform as well (quasi-markets).
- They are also good partners in PPP.

Since 2005 until today

This phase is mainly based on the welfare state crisis. The basic idea is that the problems of modern states can be addressed only in the context of all three sectors. These problems are nevertheless quite serious because the current governments have been losing their ability to meet their – previously typical – roles. The following especially have become the main issues:

- How do societies invest in their own future when governments are no longer able or willing to take either leading or primary roles?

- Deployment of entities from all sectors in addressing socio-economic issues, and their cooperation. Exploration of the effects and forms of this cooperation.
- Establishment and operation of so called hybrid organizations, entailing characteristics typical for various institutional types.

Conclusion

The above outlined transformation of the agenda shows, among other things, that we have been getting away from the initially relatively clearly defined topics to issues that are rather fragmented and problems which are much less clear-cut. We can come up to the assumption that the future belongs to hybrid types of organizations. For researchers, this means a much greater challenge than that they used to face over the last decades. It seems that the only way how to come up with new knowledge and understand the changes that have been taking place is to implement methods of interdisciplinary research. This, of course, is sure to entail complications resulting from a combination of individual methodological approaches and specifics.

And in conclusion a minor reflection. The research in nonprofit organizations was supposedly launched by private finance initially, however the situation today is fundamentally different, especially in the European environment. Of course, research still partially relies on private donors, particularly large foundations, today as it did in the past. More often, we however encounter with other sources, primarily in the academic environment. They are public budgets, or rather – more and more frequently – supranational budgets.

The subject-matter of the research has also been changing. In particular, if the entity providing the funds is the government, including the supranational one, its priority is to solve problems of contemporary welfare states. These problems can be very diverse, from the plight of the poor, throughout the problem of high and long-term unemployment, to for example an inflexibly functioning system of the providing of public services. In any case, it seems that we have recently witnessed researchers and nonprofit organizations themselves increasingly concentrating on the priorities of governments, national or supranational, in order to obtain funds. This, among other things, is also a reason why social innovation and social economy are prominent themes today. They are the topics that have not got very crystallized so far and are seemingly new. The public and private sectors have been blending into each other in an interesting manner, and so are research methodologies and political interests, with the applied terminology having been affected too.

This conclusion, although hypothetical, is certainly debatable. However, it can become the springboard for a new perspective on the reality of nonprofit organizations. For example, there already exist researches proving how European funds have been distorting missions, activities and organizational structures of NGOs (Škarabelová et al. 2008).

In any case, one more, again somewhat speculative conclusion can be drawn. The beginnings of the economic research into the nonprofit sector are asso-

ciated with the sense of a threat to institutional freedom and independence. Fears of regulation launched a very prolific creative process. Today, this sense of threat is missing. In general, nonprofit organizations are not in a situation when they would have to justify their “place in the sun”, on the contrary, they have been gradually becoming an integral part of the social and political system that is respected by the public policy. The research itself has then been increasingly dependent on public funds and thus must reflect the topics preferred by the government/state. Can any substantial or even ground-breaking theories be expected to come to existence in such an environment? Can the research on the concerned issues be still characterized as free and independent? Let us conclude this reflection with the hypothesis that ground-breaking or substantial findings, theories and concepts are consigned to history for the reasons outlined at the end of this paper.

Researchers will probably always reflect the expectable and ongoing legislative and institutional changes, the effectiveness and efficiency of alternate institutional forms and settings. But they shouldn't resign to offer both general and partial concepts and theories, they should still try to broaden our knowledge and they should do it regardless of whether or not it reflects current government's or interest groups' demand. In this context, this article strived to prove that the government can influence the nonprofit sector both directly (financial subsidies/tax exemption or other types of the support) and indirectly (by such a legislative change which can cause similar reaction as in the case of the US Tax Reform Act). Both of those ways can influence the essence of the research too. That's why the government, public policy and regulation ought to be permanently examined as well – and it is not the challenge only for economics itself. Such a complex issue must be closely and regularly examined multidisciplinary. The importance of independent and critical research is even much more important in the situation where the nonprofit sector and related legislation are still very much in flux. This is undoubtedly the Czech case, where we witness the efforts to completely change the nature and structure of many nonprofit institutions. And, as an acknowledgement of above concluded, we cannot be sure how the political and special-interest factors will finally influence the “space between the state and the market”.

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Analýza klíčových témat výzkumu neziskových organizací: od efektivnosti k hybridům

Výzkum neziskového sektoru je relativně mladou disciplínou. Přesto se za několik desetiletí vyprofilovala řada výzkumných proudů a směrů, vzniklo několik významných výzkumných pracovišť a bylo vyprodukováno mnoho knih, článků a studií zkoumajících neziskový sektor. První společenskou vědou, jež se pokusila uchopit neziskový fenomén pomocí svého aparátu, byla ekonomie. Tento článek analyzuje příčiny toho, že se ekonomové začali o neziskový sektor a neziskovou formu firmy zajímat. Zkoumá, jak se měnily oblasti zájmu tohoto výzkumu a snaží se identifikovat příčiny těchto změn. Prokazuje, že tento výzkum je od počátku velmi výrazně ovlivněn působením zájmových skupin a že je výrazně spjat s veřejnou politikou vůči neziskovému sektoru. Jeho základním cílem je prokázat výrazné posuny v akcentech výzkumu a artikulovat autorovu představu o směřování zkoumané oblasti.

Klíčová slova: neziskový sektor, veřejná politika, zájmové skupiny, nonprofit organization theory

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