Exporting Civil Society, Globalizing the Nonprofit Sector: Eastern Europe as a Laboratory

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In 2000 six U.S. private foundations established a public charity, the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe to support nonprofit sector development in seven Central and Eastern European countries. Yet the $75 million endowment it entails signals not an upsurge in civil society aid to these countries, but rather marks the exit of many American private foundations that have been active in democracy promotion in the region since 1989. The paper argues that it was in Eastern Europe after 1989 that civil society development was first identified as a target for philanthropy and foreign aid, and thus Eastern Europe was the laboratory where templates for strengthening civil society were first developed and tested. Democratizing agents had a profound trust in civil society but it remains understudied what they meant by civil society, what assumptions were underpinning their aid efforts and how their exported notions meshed with indigenous conceptions in the receiving contexts.

This paper analyzes the contribution of U.S. foundations to post-communist institution building in the field of civil society development in Eastern Europe. Studies of institutional diffusion have focused primarily on the transfer of more tangible institutional elements such as regulatory and policy reforms, while paying less attention to ideas and other cultural-cognitive items (Busch, Jörgens and Tews 2005; Gilardi 2005; Henisz and Zelner 2005; Tolbert and Zucker 1983). They have furthermore focused primarily on the receiving side of diffusion, and paid less attention to the sending side. This study seeks to address these gaps in the diffusion literature by focusing on the sending side of the transaction, and on the ideas that were transmitted.

I will explore whether, as critics argue, U.S. foundations sought to transplant a uniform institutional model for their own vision of civil society to the post-communist world, without consideration of specific local needs or grassroots organizations (Abzug and Webb 1996; Roelofs 1995). Three types of ideas are the focus of this analysis: the normative frames deployed by foundations to legitimate their programs, the programs that they developed and supported, and the underlying paradigms that structured these prescriptive, programmatic ideas (Campbell 2004). It also outlines how abstract ideas were translated into prescriptions and strategies for action. One major finding is that critics of U.S. foundation grantmaking tend to oversimplify the situation, and indeed are probably misled by the foundations’ own rhetorical deployment of ideas. In particular, critics were confused by the foundations' powerful frame that conflates civil society and nonprofit sector development and portrays itself as focused on creating a non-contentious, professionalized nonprofit sector. In reality, a wide range of programs were implemented in the name of civil society that focused on empowering citizens, especially minority groups, and on nurturing grassroots activism and community decision making.

Yet foundation-sponsored civil society development programs helped transfer the nonprofit sector frame from the United States to post-communist societies. Historians argue that the idea of the nonprofit sector, that puts all private organizations pursuing public purposes into a single category, is a recent cultural construction in the American polity (Hall 1992). The ‘nonprofit sector’ frame was invented and promoted by large private foundations in the U.S. in the late 1960s in an effort to ward off congressional scrutiny. From the early 1970s nonprofits – public charities and private foundations – started to form trade associations, coalitions and advocacy groups that share the vision of sectoral organizing and collective advocacy. The nonprofit sector frame gained further leverage by the emerging nonprofit studies field that foundation philanthropy helped to nurture in the United States. The study tracks how American foundations transport an expectation to the private, non-governmental recipients of
their largesse overseas that there needs to be nonprofit sector for stronger civil society and ultimately stronger democracy in their countries.

In its conclusion, the paper addresses concerns about the diffusion of the U.S. model of the nonprofit sector to countries where nonprofit sectors are in their early stage or in other ways in flux. What is the U.S. model of a nonprofit sector and how does it impact civil society development in other countries?

References


