Book Review

Roger A. Lohmann, *Voluntary Action in New Commons: Democracy in the Life World Beyond Market, State and Household,* Skywriters Press, Electronic Edition PDF 1.2.2, 2015, 359 pp.

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The first challenge of reviewing a work of the scope and ambition of Roger Lohmann's *Voluntary Action in New Commons* is deciding where to start. The overall aim of the book, as I interpret it, is to lead us through a process of re-conceptualizing fundamental aspects of the third sector.[1] Building upon and moving beyond his 1992 work, *The Commons*, he seeks to expand our grasp of what exists and takes place in this arena beyond typical descriptive concepts such as "nonprofit," "philanthropic," "NGO," "civil society," or other standard terms used to describe the organizational forms and normative stances that intersect with his concepts of "commons" and "voluntary action." This is clearly a big project.

One might begin by considering definitional issues: How is Lohmann using the history-laden and often contested concepts of "commons," "voluntary action," "third sector," "life- world," "civil society," and even "democracy?" Long traditions of interpretation lie behind these terms, and the traditions one selects can lead to particular conclusions about the terms' applications in the modern world. Exploring the meaning the author ascribes to these terms in relationship to alternative meanings is one possible path of inquiry. (I will return to an examination of the concepts of "new commons" and "voluntary action" below).

An alternative approach might be to discuss the pros and cons of proposing a new grand theory of the third sector. As the field of third sector studies evolves, it periodically undergoes conceptual reframing driven by a combination

1 I make this statement with some caution, since Lohmann was critical of my characterization of his earlier work, *The Commons: New Perspectives on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992) as a "misreading of his intent." In my reference, I was attempting to clarify the distinction between the way I understood his use of "the commons" from the way I employ the term in my book, *Civil Society, Philanthropy, and the Fate of the Commons* (Lebanon, NH: Tufts University Press, 2010), but obviously did not do it very well. I will seek to be clearer in this review. As he states emphatically, "merely shortening the label for a third sector consisting exclusively of tax-exempt corporations was never my intention and it still is not."

of empirical findings, evolving practices, and new insights. But such reframings always raise fundamental questions about theorists' philosophical assumptions and about whether revising foundational concepts will yield a demonstrable benefit. Those questions certainly arise here.

A third approach would be directly to engage Lohmann's central argument. Beginning with an exploration he began 23 years ago in *The Commons*, Lohmann states that the purpose of this new work is "to lay out in one place a complete revised statement of my entire commons approach to the third sector" and further "... to set down...a new statement of what I now call the new commons theory of voluntary action." He pursues this goal systematically throughout the book. How well does the argument succeed?

An adequate review of this book actually calls for discussion of all three topics. I will address each, in reverse order.

1 The Argument

Although it is very difficult to capsulize Lohmann's 350 page analysis in a brief summary (I will inevitably omit many complexities and nuances), the following outlines the thread of the argument: Starting with a revised view of his original treatment of the concept of the commons, Lohmann begins by exploring in depth the close relationship of the commons to voluntary action. He then describes how both concepts connect with the essential character of democracy and in its present manifestation and possible future evolution. Consistent with his past writings, he sharply distinguishes the "nonprofit model" from the third sector as a whole – the latter as the arena to which he argues the commons is intrinsically connected. His discussion of "new commons" at the end of chapter two and all of chapter five begins to break new ground. This leads to further explication of how common resource pools and the production of common goods are related to the interpretation of third sector relationships. The remainder of the book is devoted to exploring ways in which this new commons manifests itself (for example, as "knowledge commons"), encompasses or relates to other dimensions of the third sector (for example, philanthropy), or intersects with other topics that bear historically or philosophically on the role of new commons and voluntary action (for example, civic humanism and pluralism).

Fundamental questions arise as one seeks to follow this creative, thought-provoking, and sometimes puzzling argument through the book: Do I agree with the thread of argument as Lohmann presents it? What added insight into the conceptual structure or activity of the third sector results from this analysis?

On the first, my answer is yes and no. It is easy to agree that there is inadequate theoretical understanding of the third sector, illustrated by the emptiness of such negative definitions as *non*-profit, *non*-market, *non*-governmental, and that the common practice of identifying it with the realm of nonprofit organizations is seriously inadequate. His detailed description of the evolution of thinking about what is now called the third sector is convincing, and his effort to describe what lies positively at its core, new commons and voluntary action, pursues an intriguing theoretical goal. The book's emphasis on local communities, associational activity, philanthropy (in the normative sense beyond simple financial donations), and the production and sharing of common goods points to the vital dimensions of third sector activity often overlooked in standard descriptions of the "nonprofit sector." His goal of incorporating normative, historical, philosophical perspectives – in short, insights about the depth and breadth of the human condition – into consideration of the purpose and activity of the third sector seems eminently beneficial to thinking about the field.

On the other hand, the limits of this analysis are, in my view, its hyper-focus on the "commons" and "voluntary action" (more on these concepts below) posited as centrally defining characteristics of third sector activity. Granted, freely chosen action, associational activity, and the production of common goods are centrally important to much of what goes on in the third sector, but so are characteristics such as protecting private rights (against the state), complementing state services, forming public opinion, experimenting with new solutions to "wicked problems," and other features typically more closely identified with civil society rather than with the commons. Perhaps this is just a matter of emphasis and interpretation, but it remains a question as to why Lohmann's central focus on the commons and voluntary action should be considered the most significant defining feature of the space beyond market, state, and household. We are left with the question: Does the book's argument convince us that our vision of the field should be revised to prioritize new commons and voluntary action as centrally defining qualities? Despite the sophistication and depth of analysis of the book, to this reviewer the fundamental argument remains un-compelling.

2 The Role of Theory

How valuable and needed are new theoretical constructs? On the one hand, it can be argued that the field of third sector studies is evolving rapidly, and there is need for better self-understanding of the kind that this form of conceptual analysis provides. As Lohmann correctly observes, the growing dominance of rational choice and positivist models threaten to distort our comprehension of the true nature of

the field, and that there is a clear need for the explanatory power of the kind of historical, normative, and anthropological perspectives that he offers. His approach can offer a counter influence to reductionist tendencies that result from the increasingly market-dominated mindset of our time. On the other hand, one can question how receptive the field will be to the introduction of new layer of large-scale theory. The farther one must stretch to follow an author into the alleys and byways of dense theory and vocabulary, the more difficult it becomes to convince participants in the field, including many scholars, to see the utility of new terminology and analytical constructs, especially if that terminology is used in unconventional ways, as is often the case in this volume.

The act of constructing general theory faces the challenge of developing a coherent logical structure while, at the same time, grounding speculative claims in empirical reality. Lohmann seeks to do both, connecting his arguments to a vast range of literature in a wide spectrum of fields, offering many concrete examples, such as the enclosure of open space in suburbia, medieval communes, Hull House, scientific societies, Stalin's *khvost*, and *Boy Scouts v. Dale*, to name but a few. He relates his general theory to the ideas of a multitude of other theorists, from Aristotle to Ferdinand Tönnies to Jürgen Habermas, to a degree that sometimes becomes dizzying.

This style of presentation poses a dilemma most succinctly described by Michael Walzer in *Thick and Thin* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006) – the tendency for abstract (thin) concepts to interact with each other in a kind of rarified conceptual space that allows us to nod in agreement until we place them into lived context, at which time fundamental differences in meaning and implications for action arise. When one takes a particular interpretive framework and relates it to another interpretive framework invoking yet another term, and so on, a highly complex linked analytic scheme emerges that can creatively shed light but can also become impenetrably eclectic.

3 Concepts and Language

Finally, one of the strengths of the book – creative use of language – is also one of its potential weaknesses. I will focus on the two key terms that form the core of his argument: "new commons" and "voluntary action." In a book designed to encourage thinking to move into a new direction, it is not surprising that Lohmann's basic concepts take on special meanings to advance this purpose.

In this case, his use of "new commons" and "voluntary action" invites us to reflect on fundamentals. Building on the meaning of "commons" proposed in the

original book – as "universes of discourse" (*The Commons*, p. 63) – he further develops here a distinction between "old" and "new" commons. Differing from the older sense of pre-existing physical common pool resources, we are given to understand that the new commons "highlights the groups and associations, assemblies and voluntary action involved and elaborates the production of non-universal common goods." (*Voluntary Action in New Commons*, p. 89). This is as close as we come to a specific definition – there is actually no single paragraph in which the term is precisely defined; rather it tends to be illustrated discursively through references dispersed throughout the text. Used in this way "new commons" does dual work: It suggests a kind of flexible resource that both connects people through associational relationships and conveys a spirit of coordinated action.

Lohmann invokes the term "*bricolagé*" ("a collection of objects made from available materials") to characterize his approach to describing the new commons. This is appropriate for a work that seeks to incorporate a variety of strands of theory into a comprehensive new formulation of a concept and of a field. (As he states, "A key feature that ties all of the otherwise diverse elements and themes presented here together is the notion of a commons." – *Voluntary Action in New Commons*, p. 25). But his use of the word "commons" arguably differs from the conventional sense of "commons" as a resource or set of resources or goods shared by a group of people (both providing benefits and incurring costs). In the standard use, commons refers to a domain of (originally physical) resources rather than a category of social organization or universe of discourse, i.e., the commons is a resource *acted upon* by organizations rather than the organizations themselves. For example, Elinor Ostrom and Charlotte Hess, who are cited frequently by Lohmann, define the "commons" as "a resource shared by a group of people" (*Understanding Knowledge as a Commons*, p. 4). The question remains open as to whether Lohmann's novel sense of "new commons" can carry the theoretical burden that he places on it as the centerpiece of theory about the third sector.

The concept of "voluntary action" poses a different kind of problem. Together with new commons, the term suggests a kind of vibrant animating collaborative force that inhabits the third sector. It connects directly to an overarching theme that Lohmann repeats throughout the book: that the activist dynamic of the third sector has the potential to transform democratic life. But this concept of "voluntary" raises old definitional questions, such as: Does voluntary mean any *unconstrained* human action? If so, basic questions arise about the nature of motivation and free will. For example, interests that incentivize (and constrain) action – honor, financial benefit, good will – are present in all three (or four) sectors, not just the third. Alternatively, is the emphasis to be placed on *self-guided* action? In that case, actions in the for-profit arena surely can be considered as much self-guided as those in the

third sector. In short, it is unclear why *voluntary* plays such a preeminent role in describing the essential character of third sector activity. It does convey a sense of benignly pro-social activity, particularly when combined with the concept of *commons*, but the case for considering these two descriptive elements as *primus inter pares* in the terminology of the sector leaves the reader (at least this reader) unconvinced.

Further to emphasize the uniqueness of this analytical approach, Lohmann introduces many unusual terms, some coined, some borrowed from others, such as *benefactories, reformatories, moeuratoria, autopoieis, allopoiesis, canopies, baudekin*, and so on, in effect inventing a special vocabulary to convey this new framework of ideas. Using language in this way can emphasize the uniqueness of a vision capable of jolting us out of complacent use of standard terms and frames of analysis. But should we follow him there? I would like to say yes, because social theorizing is a constantly evolving enterprise that can expand our mental horizons precisely to the degree that new uses of language can yield novel normative and empirical insights. But the above noted qualms about the proposed basic conceptual structure prevent acceptance of the full vision and language proposed.

4 Conclusion

In sum, Lohmann's book clearly draws upon the author's long and distinguished career of reflecting on, criticizing, and generating fundamental ideas about the essential features of the third sector. The comprehensive synthesis that it provides is creative and insightful, and it encourages us to think deeply about basic assumptions that lie at the root of our understanding of the field. It can be provocative and enlightening, even if sometimes overly entangled in intricate layers of allusions and intellectual detours.

One can debate the interpretation of particular concepts and the centrality of this or that element to a definition of what constitutes the third sector. On the whole, however, the book is worth reading for the many creative ways in which he invites us to connect ideas, schools of thought, and unexpected intellectual points of contact.

Most important, while we stand awash in a flood of empirical analyses of functions and strategies of the third sector, this book reminds us that we live and work in socially constructed reality. Much like the work of philosophers John Searle or Hans-Georg Gadamer, it illuminates the way language and interpretation fundamentally constitute our world, especially that part of our world comprising social institutions. Whether the book succeeds in moving us to consider new commons and voluntary action as centerpieces of conceptual structure of the third sector, however, I leave it for the reader to judge.