H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Aseem Prakash, Mary Kay Gugerty, eds. *Advocacy Organizations and Collective Action.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xvi + 318 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19838-7; $31.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-13967-0.

Reviewed by Joel Pruce (Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver)
Published on H-Human-Rights (November, 2011)
Commissioned by Rebecca K. Root

This collection sets out to challenge and reorient the study of advocacy groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by deploying a rational choice framework in an area commonly associated with constructivist thought. The premise relies on the theory of the firm as a model for explaining the emergence and behavior of advocacy organizations. A central claim is that NGOs are venues for collective action, and even organizations built on normative imperatives operate with instrumental directives, comparable to those of for-profit commercial entities. Essentially, NGOs are formed by individual actors who wish to effect change and advance norms, and these objectives are best served by joining with others because acting alone has high costs and a low likelihood of success. From this genesis, NGOs are engaged in a competitive, marketized environment of supply and demand, under conditions of resource scarcity, which further compels self-interested decision making, often at odds with the foundational moral claims that justify the organization's inception–or so the editors suggest. This review will take seriously these charges, as well as the specific claims made by the volume's contributors. In sum, the merit of this particular application of the rational choice approach rests on how far we are willing to extend the metaphor: the strongest chapters apply the metaphor loosely, while the weakest chapters take it entirely too literally. The reader is presented with a series of new questions worth asking and an array of insights that complement–but do not disprove–existing literature on the subject.

Editors Aseem Prakash and Mary Kay Gugerty frame the volume with an introductory chapter situated in opposition to traditional approaches to the subfield of advocacy studies in International Relations; namely, the research agenda that springs from Margaret Keck's and Kathryn Sikkink's *Activists beyond Borders* (1998). Keck and Sikkink established a program based around a constructivist conception of the role of NGOs and NGO networks in world politics that has generated a robust range of academic activity. Prakash and Gugerty suggest that such constructivist work is committed to an image of NGOs as driven by moral impulses, at the expense of a rationalist perspective that appreciates a view of "advocacy NGOs as special types of firms which function in policy markets" (p. 3). Since advocacy groups "look and behave like firms," microeconomic theory may well have something useful to say (p. 16). After all, professional NGOs have bureaucratic structures, hierarchical decision making processes, and material concerns expressed in their pursuit of funding. This being the case, the editors propose that NGOs can be better understood by stripping out the "principled beliefs" for which they were established and focusing on these firm-like qualities that tell us more about their strategies and operations (p. 5).

The problems with this framing chapter are multiple, and forecast themes deployed in the volume's least persuasive chapters. Most significantly, there is an underlying assumption that, because advocacy groups are driven by principles and morals, people believe they operate like hand-holding, tree-hugging anarchists' collectives, rather than political organizations. For this reason, it follows, NGOs should and do eschew business-like considerations, such as hiring protocols and accounting, in favor of unfettered commitment to the cause, as if NGOs are run principally by volunteers and charity workers, rather than lawyers and nonprofit managers. In the first chapter, Prakash and Gugerty use the example of a job posting on Amnesty International's Web site as evidence that NGOs are "organized like bureaucracies" and therefore comparable to firms (p. 10). How should Amnesty conduct hiring: with smoke-signals and carrier pigeons? Later, the editors seem surprised that Amnesty does not decide on issue adoption based on severity of suffering; rather, the NGO considers questions such as, how effective can they be given constraints (p. 18)? This does not suggest that NGOs are like firms, but rather that NGOs are reasonable and strategic. Simply because an NGO has a human resources department, it does not follow that it

is comparable to a corporation. There are reasons why the firm analogy is useful, but this notion that organizations cannot and should not be both moral and pragmatic is based on a false dichotomy that is persistent throughout the volume.

At best this is a straw man that allows the editors and several contributors to proceed with analyses that are ahistorical and apolitical. The truth is that advocacy has not always taken this form, but rather has evolved over the past fifty years. Organizations that began as "mom and pop" operations have grown into dynamic players with deep pockets and global reach. This is particularly clear in the instances of Oxfam and Amnesty International.[1] In both of these cases, the leaders within each organization confronted the pressures of competition and growth in a changing environment. The professionalization of advocacy is a more recent phenomenon than advocacy itself and is best appreciated historically.

There is also a glaring lack of attention paid to the role of power and geopolitics in the composition of the advocacy world. To relegate the role of principled beliefs, as the editors do, is to purposefully ignore the central source of power for NGOs. Morality is more than a talking point or a brand. In a world of states, NGOs lack coercive power (guns and money), instead successfully leveraging their moral authority as productive power.[2] Striving for legitimacy and relevance, their authority is derived from the deontological moral position assumed by the organization and its workers: we are fighting the good fight because it is the right thing to do. By eliminating the important role played by normative considerations from the constitution of advocacy organizations, we might be left with firm-like actors, but these actors exist somewhere outside of politics and fail to resemble their own selves.

These critiques not withstanding, the volume contains valuable insights that propel the field of advocacy studies in new directions. McGee Young ties the emergence of NGOs to the existence of a market for their issues, including opportune timing and a willingness among the public to participate. Clifford Bob highlights the role of supply and demand factors, which helps explain when NGOs adopt certain issues instead of others. Maryann Barasko explains how notions of identity and branding motivate organizations to select strategies, often based on the characterization of themselves as either insiders or outsiders. Alexander Cooley and James Ron feature the negative, unintended consequences of a robust civil society that are produced by increased competition between NGOs. These four chapters are those that utilize the firm analogy in its loosest manifestations and are, in my opinion, the most modest and most convincing.

Ultimately, the editors take the collective action model to its logical end at the expense of persuasive analysis. There is a disconnect between the literal nature of the metaphor in the framing chapter and the way it is largely employed elsewhere–most chapters being more subtle and nuanced than the introduction. As Thomas Risse plainly argues in his "critical comment" at the end of the book, "principled believers are no dummies" (p. 286). That advocacy organizations have instrumental concerns and go about their business strategically does not suggest that their moral constitution is irrelevant. In fact, the principled basis for NGO work remains its most interesting quality because of its uniqueness and relevance in a world of rent-seeking and power politics. This volume succeeds at the points that combine the moral and the pragmatic, emphasizing rational decision making in the context of deeply held beliefs. Constructivism is effective not when it ignores rationalism, but when it argues that rational actors are more than just robots, with norms constituting interests in a dynamic and profound way. *Advocacy Organizations and Collective Action* will be convincing to those readers already convinced by rational choice approaches, and should push others to wrestle with the essentially practical nature of NGO activity.

Notes

[1]. Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam: The First 50 Years* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992; Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[2]. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in Global Governance," in *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Joel Pruce. Review of Prakash, Aseem; Gugerty, Mary Kay, eds., *Advocacy Organizations and Collective Action.* H-Human-Rights, H-Net Reviews. November, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33490

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.