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Book review: *Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations*, edited by Thomas Davies

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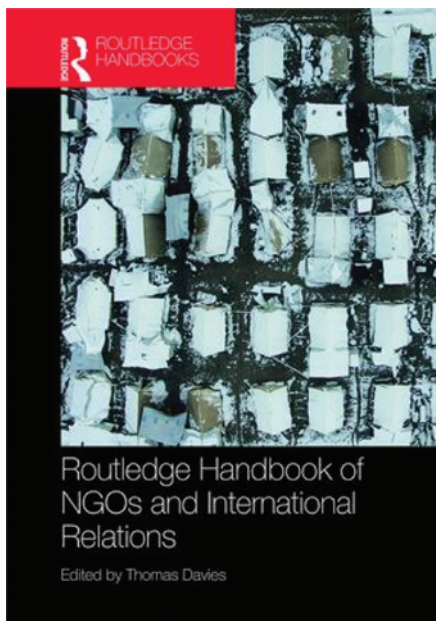
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Book review

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Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations, edited by Thomas Davies

Abingdon: Routledge; 2019; 684 pp.; ISBNs: 978-1-13828-550-7 (hbk); 978-1-31526-892-7 (ebk)



The *Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations*, edited by Thomas Davies, is an extensive volume that provides a comprehensive review of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The book spans 43 chapters and boasts 57 contributors, all of which cover a wide range of perspectives, regions and sectors. Chapters are organized under five umbrella categories, making it easy for readers to identify areas of interest in what is a vast and diverse field. The first section, 'History and Contributions', establishes the historical context of NGOs and provides readers with a timeline, tracing the beginnings of modern-day NGOs back to the United Nations Conference on International Organization in 1945. Chapters in this section explore the shifting focus and fluidity of NGO form and purpose, including their work with state actors and global governance, and their place in transnational (non-state) politics. This is followed by a 'Theory and Analysis' section, which situates NGOs within assorted theoretical frameworks, including constructivist international relations theory, post-positivism and social movement theory.

A particularly interesting range of topics is addressed in 'Issue Areas and Sectors', where the role of NGOs is examined through labour movements (a topic that

could easily be applied to teacher unions), global trade, human rights, humanitarian work, peace, religion and education. Within the education sector, authors Will Brehm and Iveta Silova provide an overview and analysis of the sometimes conflicting roles of NGOs within the field. Five generations of NGOs are identified: (1) organizations that provide support to people in acute need; (2) organizations that aim to build the capacity of target communities through education; (3) organizations that extend beyond local solutions and involve making changes in policy; (4) organizations that coordinate activities through local, national and global networks; and (5) the emergence of organizations that either perpetuate or fight a rising neo-liberal capitalism agenda. Some NGOs, such as Teach for America or Teach for All (its global counterpart), have been selective – for example, in drawing from a capitalism framework in their attempt to (unsuccessfully) deregulate teacher certification. The authors delve deeper into this latter generation of NGOs, tying it to the emergence of ‘philanthrocapitalism’, the integration of philanthropic organizations with corporate business models. Examples that come to mind are the massive donations from Bill Gates to the Common Core educational movement in the United States. Indeed, the influence of philanthropic donors, grants or the state on NGO initiatives is a contentious area that is highlighted in the chapter.

In ‘Regional Perspectives’, chapters explore NGO activity by geographic region. This includes the United States, the European Union, Eastern Europe, Russia, Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia (Central, East, South and South-East). Comparing the emphasis of regional NGOs can reveal important information about the priorities of each region. In the US, for example, there have been initiatives to downsize and decentralize government involvement in public services. As a result, NGOs have operated in a favourable environment where they are seen as a way of outsourcing certain public services, thereby lifting the burden from the state and, arguably, improving efficiency. NGOs in the US are listed as public charities and enjoy tax-exempt (501c3) status. This contrasts with Latin American models, which often require NGOs to work under authoritarian regimes that may grant political rights to citizens but that ignore universal civil rights and social rights. Finally, the section ‘Contemporary Challenges’ has chapters dedicated to NGO accountability and legitimacy, the role of NGOs in democratic versus authoritarian regimes, operation in security/conflict zones and the effect of global terrorism on providing services to those in need.

The audience for this book is wide-ranging and is in no way limited to those in the fields of political science or international relations. As this book demonstrates, NGOs span a wide range of diverse fields, including public health, the environment, trade, education and the professions, to name only a few. While the term ‘NGO’ typically conjures up images of a human rights discourse fuelled by grass-roots movements, it becomes increasingly evident through this volume that organizations have different purposes and, as a result, are quite often designed to achieve different ends. This highly informative book reveals that while civil society and grass-roots movements hold incredible power, they must ultimately contend and negotiate with other actors who also exert power and may have very different agendas.