



**Q&A with
Lester M. Salamon, co-author of
Explaining Civil Society Development
*A Social Origins Approach***

Question: Why did you decide to write this book?

Lester M. Salamon: Existing theories purporting to explain civil society development from place to place could not account for the variations in civil society size and shape revealed by the body of cross-national empirical data on this sector generated for the first time by our research over the past 25 years. We wrote the book to test these theories against actual data and to find our way to a more persuasive and effective explanation.

Q: What were some of the most surprising things you learned while writing/researching the book?

LMS: Sentiments of altruism do not vary that much across societies and religious traditions and therefore cannot explain much about variations in civil society strength or character. Prevailing economic theories that see civil society development shaped by consumer preferences in the market for services and citizen choices expressed through elections do not explain much of the variation in civil society development. Rather, we found compelling evidence that a country's civil society is shaped by power relationships among powerful social and economic groupings.

Q: What is new about your book/research that sets it apart from other books in the field?

LMS: This book brings brand new empirical data into the analysis of the scope, scale, and patterns of development of the civil society sector on a global basis. It also refutes prevailing economic and cultural explanations of the rise and expansion of the civil society sector and brings a novel comparative historical "social origins" approach to an analysis of the evolution of the civil society sector globally.

Q: Did you encounter any eye-opening statistics while writing your book?

LMS: Several, yes. *First*, the civil society workforce is the second or third largest of any industry in most advanced industrial countries; *second*, the civil society sector in Europe is larger than that in the U.S. when measured as a share of the working age population; *third*, government has emerged as the largest single source of support for civil society organizations in most of Western Europe and easily outdistances philanthropy even in the United States; and *finally*, volunteer work, i.e., the giving of time, outdistances the giving of cash by a factor of 2:1.

Q: Does your book uncover and/or debunk any longstanding myths?

LMS: This book debunks several long-standing myths that permeate the understanding of the civil society sector around the world, including:

- That civil society is predominantly an American phenomenon—in fact many other countries have larger civil society sectors relative to the size of their economies than the U.S.
- That Europe has a “welfare state”—In fact, it has built a massive “welfare partnership” relying heavily on nonprofit organizations to deliver state-financed services.
- That a zero-sum relationship exists between nonprofits and government such that an expansion of government leads inevitably to the displacement of private, nonprofit groups. In fact, these two sectors are mutually reinforcing.
- That private philanthropy is the largest source of financial support to nonprofits, especially in the United States. In fact, even in the U.S., this is far from the case. Philanthropy accounts for no more than 13-15% of nonprofit revenues in the U.S., and is the dominant source of funding in only one country that we studied (Mozambique).

Q: What is the single most important fact revealed in your book and why is it significant?

LMS: That the development of the civil society sector in a country is fundamentally shaped by power relationships among powerful socio-economic groupings.

Q: How do you envision the lasting impact of your book?

LMS: One of our reviewers put the answer to this question most succinctly:

“In its macro-level focus and mixture of historical and empirical explanation, the book offers a theoretical approach to the study of civil society that should be useful and appealing to scholars and audiences outside of the traditional nonprofit studies field, or to those in the field who have been looking for a less economics-heavy and more holistic approach to theory making. In particular, the theory’s firm emphasis on power dynamics begins to offer a more critical lens for viewing the evolution of civil society and the nonprofit sector around the world—a crucial step for the field and a useful source for sociology, political science, and other disciplines.

We have been missing a macro-level, cross-national examination of civil society that addresses civil society development in a systematic, empirical way. For those who have been developing curricula on nonprofit sector theory, this book is very timely indeed.”

Q: What do you hope people will take away from reading your book?

LMS: I hope that readers will gain an appreciation of the enormous cross-national diversity of civil society forms but also be introduced to the existence of a body of theory with which to explain this diversity and predict future evolutions with reasonable confidence.