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Roger A. Lohmann

West Virginia University, [roger.lohmann@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:roger.lohmann@mail.wvu.edu)

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# A Third Sector Imaginary<sup>1</sup>

Roger A. Lohmann  
Emeritus Professor  
West Virginia University

The term nonprofit, whether as a modifier of organization or of sector, has always been troublesome. Originally the province of the esoteric world of legal and tax specialists, it began to achieve wider recognition as an object of attention in the age of public grants that got underway in the 1960s. Beginning in the late 1980's a variety of management scientists in the U.S. specializing in tax exempt entities touted the supposedly greater accuracy of the modifier "not-for-profit" while social scientists in many countries outside the U.S. sought other alternative terms, choosing not markets but states to contrast with and coining the terms nongovernmental organization and sector. Despite the formidable ideological role of the state in this view, the term non-state sector never seems to have caught on.

Suddenly in the 1990s each of these was eclipsed by the sudden, meteoric reemergence of the archaic 18<sup>th</sup> century term civil society, which provoked a large number of suggestions that nonprofit or nongovernmental sectors either were other names for, or essential components of civil society (Anheier, 2005; Van Til, 2007). The term commons arose within roughly this same timeframe but its applicability to voluntary action was considerably less dramatic, although its fortunes continue to rise. Others have toyed with a wide variety of other terms like social sector, caring sector, societal sector, philanthropic sector and others none of which have ever been widely used.

A basic theoretical challenge for third sector scholars today is to speak in general and consistent terms about the institutional and normative orders forming in numerous countries, regions and urban centers around the world in recent decades. In perhaps the most recent example, Huang, et. al. (2014) trace the emergence of what they term a

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Workshop on Theoretical Variations in Voluntary Sector Organizing, Queens University, Kingston Ontario, October 20, 2012. It incorporates ideas from a forthcoming book by the author, entitled *Voluntary Action in New Commons*.

nonprofit sector in contemporary China, even as they note substantial caveats and deviations from conventional thinking about what constitutes non-profitness. Like many others before them, these authors work hard to shoehorn the facts of the situation in China into the received categories of the nonprofit model. The approach in this chapter is a slightly different, more critical, one. It proceeds from the position that the theorist's job is "to speculate and to interpret the facts as he [*sic*] sees them" (Pennock, 1969: 285-286, quoted by Van Til, 2012).

The third sectors of the world have formed in the social, economic, political and cultural spaces apart from (variously also said to be outside or between) markets, governments and households in light of a range of distinctive local conditions, including history, culture, law and other factors. A growing international group of scholars has produced a convincing, although more limited and partial than they will admit, model of a third sector based in the linked concepts of nonprofit organization, nonprofit sector and nondistribution constraints (Salamon, 2003; Hall, 2013; Wagner, 2012). This nonprofit model is an impressive and unprecedented intellectual achievement, yet it is only one of a number of institutional frames to enter the collective imagination of theorists, researchers, practitioners and policy makers in recent decades. One approach to this spreading proliferation of models is to treat them as contenders or competitions for a single right answer. The approach taken here is quite different from that; to suggest that several, perhaps even all of these models are in fact complementary and refer to distinct, but overlapping ideal types meant to characterize empirical realities.

Although it serves many purposes, the nonprofit model is too narrowly cast to give a full account of the rich diversity of events, activities and institutions that occur in the empirical, institutional and historical reality of the spaces outside governments, markets and households. The nonprofit model fails to give an adequate account in particular of those dimensions that are not formally organized, not legally recognized as corporations, or that occur beyond the legal, historical, geographical and normative bounds presumed by the model. This includes a broad range of activities, institutions and organizations that are tentative, preliminary or short-lived and those that are primarily "informal" social and cultural institutions and practices.

One ongoing objective of third sector theorizing in the recent past that is threatened by the growing hegemony of the nonprofit model is

surveying and building a *wunderkammer*, or encyclopedic collection of diverse findings and concepts exploring the range and outer limits of the third sector. We should pay great heed to the diversity and complexity of this newly invented sector in its full range before we can expect to succeed in describing and explaining it more systematically as has already been done with the family, market and government. Arbitrarily using the nonprofit model to cut off such explorations does not serve that end.

### **The Nonprofit Model**

The third sector is a term increasingly used by politicians, researchers and activists to describe at least partly the social, economic, political and cultural spaces outside the intimate sphere of households, the public sphere of command and control in government and the price-guided exchanges of the market order. The nonprofit model of the third sector posits nonprofit organizations as composing *the* third sector or *the* civil society (Anheier, 2005; Hall, 2013; Salamon, various publications).<sup>2</sup> This nonprofit sector model has been an important success in the U.S. where it originally arose and in a number of other locations around the world. It appears to recently have converged with a voluntary sector model that originally emerged in Great Britain (Beveridge, 1948; Billis, 2010) and is still in widespread use in Canada (Elson, 2011; LaForest, 2011) and elsewhere. Its very success as a research paradigm has reinforced an endogenous theoretical perspective that is scientifically sound, although more limited than its most ardent supporters admit.

The third sector offers an account of reality that both researchers and those involved in nonprofit organizations appear to find convincing and are able to locate themselves within, regardless of other differences of mission or program. The nonprofit sector model is explicitly framed within but as an expansion of the pluralistic post-WWII development model of markets and states (Anheier, 1987; Lindblom, 1977) and is, in part a critical response to the “crisis of the welfare state” (Cohen & Arato, 2000; Evers & LaVille, 2004; Evers, 2010; Evers, 2011; Evers, 2013).

In less than four decades, the idea of a third sector of legal, social, economic, political and cultural institutions distinct and apart from households, governments and markets has captured the imagination of a

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<sup>2</sup> I have no quarrel with the descriptive and explanatory aspects of the claims made by either of these authors or others about the nonprofit sector. My questions go to the issue of whether either does justice to the full range and domain of the entire third sector. I am convinced critics of this idea are correct that it does not.

broad variety of researchers, politicians and practitioners across the globe. Over that time, the nonprofit model has gone from a novelty to the unofficial regnant paradigm for third sector studies, receiving at least lip service from a wide variety of authoritative institutions. It is an approach characterized by multi-method and multi-disciplinary studies of local, regional, national and international nonprofit organizations, nonprofit corporations, nonprofit management, the macro-economic and statistical environments of national nonprofit sectors and institutional governance and leadership issues faced by nonprofit entities.<sup>3</sup> By the nonprofit model, I include any research design or conceptual perspective or model organized around three principal structural terms: nonprofit corporation, nonprofit organization, and nonprofit sector; and a crucial legal and economic parameter, the nondistribution constraint. The nonprofit model is typically also focused on governance, management and leadership as key economic, political, and to a lesser extent social and cultural processes.

Within the nonprofit model, management and leadership are typically treated as instrumental principal-agent relations between CEO's, governing boards, other managers, staff and draws sharp distinctions between limited categories of actors or roles. Boards of governors or directors are responsible for the overall organization from positions seen as largely outside "the organization" itself, while staff or personnel are paid employees who constitute or are 'inside' the organization. Staff, and in some instances, volunteers, are said to "deliver" services to designated clients or beneficiaries who are generally viewed as passive receptors rather than active agents and "outside" the organization. Particular attention in the nonprofit model is paid to these and other social roles that are conceived as groups who are collectively labeled stakeholders. In the nonprofit model, the sociological term nonprofit organization is used more or less interchangeably with the legal term nonprofit corporation, and both are theorized as distinct species of *formal* organizations and distinctive third sector institutions. Social relations in the nonprofit model are treated largely in rational, instrumental mission and program terms as strategic, goal- and outcome-oriented. Other merely social relations are

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the credit for initially shaping and forming the nonprofit model goes to a small network of scholars associated with David Horton Smith, AVAS/ARNOVA, an institutional group centered around Lester Salamon, Johns Hopkins University, a working group that began at INDEPENDENT SECTOR in Washington DC and a working group led by David Billis and Margaret Harris at the London School of Economics and Political Science (whose very name enshrines what is here termed the two-sector model).

characterized as “informal” or simply ignored. Five principal characteristics are said to uniquely define nonprofit organizations. They are formally organized, private (not governmental or public), self-governing entities, that do not distribute surpluses or profits to shareholders, and are characterized by voluntary participation (Salamon 2003; Anheier, 2005, 38ff).

A widely-shared assumption among researchers working within the nonprofit model is that insights regarding organization and management studies adopted from business management and public administration can be extended to the third sector along at least two dimensions: First, third sector institutions are to be understood by analogy with existing knowledge of public bureaux and private firms (particularly corporations). Thus, social, political, economic and cultural dynamics in the other two sectors are expected to apply also to the third sector with suitable notations and explanations of exceptions that arise.

This successful and convincing model has been the predominant one in leading journals and research organizations like ARNOVA for more than 30 years.<sup>4</sup> The dissemination of the nonprofit model has influenced the naming and mission of other journals, notably *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *Nonprofit Management*, and *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, and has proliferated in nonprofit special interest sections in the Academy of Management, the American Society for Public Administration, the American Economics Association, and numerous other professional associations. As an indicator of the maturity of the nonprofit model in the U.S., several textbooks have recently been published to aid in teaching the nonprofit model to students, thus assuring its continuity for at least another generation (Anheier, 2005; Holland and Ritvo 2008; Worth 2009; Young 2007; Zietlow 2007).

The nonprofit model first coalesced theoretically in the late 1970s and was already pretty much *theoretically* complete by the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While a great deal of work continues there have been no major new terms introduced in recent years, no major new reformulations of the model, no major new hypotheses suggested, and the perspective no

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<sup>4</sup> The year 1989, when the European civil society revolutions got underway, ARNOVA was created through a re-organization of the earlier Association for Voluntary Action Scholars (AVAS) and at least two major journals were founded, offers a useful and convenient, if only slightly arbitrary, demarcation point for this purpose.

longer seems to provoke major “ah ha” moments (that is, the excitement of the truly novel) or talk of “paradigm shifts” among its leading adherents. This is certainly not to suggest, however, that the research program of the nonprofit model has been completed; Only that it has attained a certain level of maturity. As the Kuhnian paradigm change paradigm would suggest, the nonprofit model of the third sector is also accumulating a growing congeries of anomalies, exceptions and deviations suggestive of a possible future paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970).

## **A Critique**

We can expect the nonprofit model to be a source of ongoing research for many decades to come, due to such factors as constant variation in the number of organizations established and eliminated, the number and size of donations, and other important empirical and measurable questions. That is hardly the whole story, however. As a model of the third sector, the nonprofit model privileges a narrow set of corporations and mainstream institutions that are the most highly organized, best funded and institutionally closest to and most like existing business corporations and government bureaux. In so doing, the nonprofit model omits or downplays a vast range of economic, social, political and cultural phenomena that are less closely tied to established political and economic interests, less easily tabulated and thus less clearly observable.

The nonprofit model also fails to provide a sufficiently comprehensive or convincing account of the full range of activities occurring outside of markets, states and households, including not only some nonprofit corporations, but also cooperative and mutual organizations, many foundations and considerable portions of philanthropy. It also miscasts philanthropy as simply fundraising and foundations and totally ignores all manner of volunteering, mutual, self-help, social, recreational, educational, cultural, religious and artistic activities as well as most types of individual initiative other than the entrepreneurial and leadership behavior of nonprofit CEOs, and various forms of collective behavior, including religion, advocacy, political association, civil engagement and voluntary action. A full and complete paradigm of the third sector would not leave all of this out.

Legal treatments have long left a place for individual initiative and informal associations in charity law, the law of trusts, doctrines of corporate ‘personality’, and other matters of third sector law, but the

nonprofit model places great stock in the idea of incorporation, privileging, in particular, the importance of nondistribution constraints (Anheier, 2005; Hansmann, 1980; Hansmann, 1981). The nonprofit model also makes no provision whatever for 'peaceful assembly', an important legal concept in the U.S. Constitution, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and similar legal and constitutional documents in other democratic nations.

Paradoxically, although they account for a considerable portion of all formal nonprofit corporations, whether measured by revenue or by organization or personnel counts, the actual, highly complex and multidimensional organizational nature of universities, hospitals, and religious organizations may be vastly understated by the statistical approach to the nonprofit model. In what sense is a university or a church a single organization or enterprise as opposed to a network or community consisting of multiple entities? Is a university a single organizational entity in name only? Is Harvard, or Oxford, or West Virginia University one organization, or a network of numerous organizations and hundreds of groups? Are they not vast and complex congeries of diverse smaller entities; work groups, corporations, trusts, networks and other arrangements in some semblance of economic, political and social order under a common identity? Likewise, to argue that any given religion (e.g., Catholic, Baptist, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist or Mormon) is a single organized entity in some objective sense appears to fly in the face of reality and ride roughshod over important theological distinctions (e.g., the Parish, Synagogue or Presbytery). It also tends to prejudge and attempt to settle by definition longstanding issues and questions that are, more properly, left to the determination of those involved.

Likewise, the informal or social organizational dimensions of social movements and even social problems receive inadequate coverage in the nonprofit model. Social movements and the organized social action and cultural institutions associated with social problems are often neglected or ignored until they provoke formal organizations or corporations. Yet they are treated in the nonprofit model (when they are treated at all) as preludes: precursors of more formal organizational mission and institution building; incidental or preliminary stages of informal organization destined either to fail or result in formalization. Thus, for example, the

nonprofit model has been at a loss to adequately describe, explain or account for protest movements like the worldwide outburst of “Occupy” movements, since they have produced so few formal organizations to date.<sup>5</sup> The spontaneous anti-corporate uprisings in many nations associated with the “Occupy” movement have attracted only minimal attention among third sector scholars. Both social problems and social movements have been historically important to the contemporary third sector, and both movements and social problems routinely display a shifting variety of organizational forms including assemblies, focused publics and audiences. The same is true of important aspects of Islamic populism, including the Arab street (Palmer, 2011).

Altogether, the narrow focus of the nonprofit model has clarified a great deal about one part of the third sector. It is also the case that much of a genuinely meaningful third sector is omitted, downplayed or misrepresented in its narrow lens. Thus, a primary task for future theorizing of the third sector should be to bring these and other neglected dimensions of the third sector into the light and more fully into theoretical focus in order to understand more clearly how they relate to and differ from the organizations privileged by the nonprofit model, and from one another, as well as to elaborate more clearly their relations to markets, governments and the intimate sphere.

## **Policy and History**

In the academic milieu, the predominant theoretical narrative out of which the nonprofit model arose and that continues to give it legitimacy is found at the interface of market economics and liberal democracy as characterized by the two-sector model of private markets and public states (c.f., Lindblom 1977; Salamon 2003). This implicitly normative perspective is more historically and geographically situated than may generally be acknowledged by its most prominent advocates. In practical political terms, the entire ideological conflict known as the Cold War was at its most general levels often posed as conflict between the same twin

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<sup>5</sup> Maecklinberg (2013, p. 75) says “Large-scale protests have engulfed the world over the past few years. People across the globe took to the streets as the effects of the global financial crisis became visible at the end of 2008 and especially in early 2009. People in and beyond the Arab world revolted, and in some cases occupied public squares, to demand the fall of their regimes in 2010 and 2011. A few months later, people all over Spain assembled *en masse* to call for “real democracy now” on May 15th 2011. That same year, the Occupy movement followed suit in the United States by gathering in Zuccotti Park near New York City’s Wall Street on September 17th. One month later, at least 951 squares were occupied in over 82 different countries as part of an internationally coordinated “day of rage” on October 15th.”

polarities: Marxist-Leninism offering “statism” on the one side and “free market capitalism” offering the virtues of the market order on the other with a pluralist ad mixture of the two in the variations of the welfare state. From this perspective, the end of the Cold War opened a gaping theoretical space that was quickly occupied and colonized by advocates of the civil society and nonprofit models (Wagner, 2012). Other contending perspectives were in distant third and must be reconciled in some fashion

Deconstructing the regime dominated by the two-sector model and weaving in additional third sector possibilities has been a pervasive master narrative not just in third sector studies but also in public life in the advanced democracies of the developed world. This study is among the more far-reaching such perspectives. The two-sector narrative contrasting private and public sectors and its underlying rationality of self-interest, has been foundational to a fairly broad range of modern social science disciplines including not only economics and political science, but also management science, public administration, public health, accounting, tax theory, corporate law social policy, and several other fields. It is a mistake, however, to see merely adding in the public/private nonprofit sector as an adequate solution to the third sector problem.

The two-sector model is but one of a number of contending narratives of modernism (Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 2007) Other models of modern society and culture not built upon the dualisms of public/private, economics/politics, market/state dichotomies emerged during the long 19<sup>th</sup> century in anthropology, history, sociology, social work, philosophy and the humanities and cultural disciplines, all of which have consistently embraced alternative master narratives of modernity. Modern meanings of altruism, charity, community, mutuality, philanthropy, solidarity and numerous other key third sector terms are all embedded, in whole or in part, in these alternative perspectives. Even public, private and self-interest have broader connotations than political and economic rationalism will allow. Scholars working within the rationalism and dualism of the two-sector model have had to devote considerable effort – without notable success – to reconciling these ideas to their worldview.

Achieving at least a limited degree of practical reconciliation (a “working consensus”) between these multiple, divergent outlooks has been one of the most remarkable contributions of third sector theory with its model of four distinct sectors. Continued tolerance for variation, diversity

and difference in the sector is at least as important at this juncture as concern for reasoned consistency that seems to have driven the two-sector model. Further accommodation of these differences should continue to be a major challenge of further third sector theorizing.

For a broad variety of disciplinary specialists in economic, political, social, cultural and legal fields amendments and departures from the two-sector model continue to offer a rich, meaningful, and powerful multi-disciplinary context for ongoing conceptualization and conversation about the nonprofit sector as a third sector without disturbing the basic, public-private dichotomy. Only a portion of work on social capital, for example, has been conducted within the political economic disciplinary matrix, working with exact definitions of capital. Others see social capital or human capital in exclusively social psychological, social structural, or cultural terms (Cairns, Van Til & Williamson, 2003; Coleman, 1988; Edwards & Foley, 1998; Onyx, 2000; Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Robinson, 2011). Conceptions of philanthropy as private action for the public good have also tried to take note of the paradoxical nature of the third sector without directly challenging the private-public dichotomy or self-interest (Payton, 1988).

The nonprofit model with its rationalist underpinnings has become so pervasive in our field that those interested in third sector studies in dissenting fields have been forced to embrace it nominally or acknowledge it regardless of their concerns about its limits. From the intellectual revolution after 1992 that followed from the political revolutions of 1989-1991, the two-sector model with the addition of a third, or nonprofit, sector fashioned largely from the outsourcing of the two has functioned as a research and teaching paradigm (Anheier, 2005; Kuhn 1970; Wagner, 2012).<sup>6</sup> In this vein, civil society and philanthropy adherents has sometimes sought to frame what they see as alternative paradigms on roughly the same ground with approximately the same conceptual base; i.e., “civil society organizations”. The two-sector model has furnished the background and contextual assumptions for virtually all of the main political, legal and policy strategies regarding the formation, maintenance and development of nonprofit organizations, and many of the social and

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<sup>6</sup> Antonin Wagner (2013) has argued that, for teaching purposes, the field currently has only two major paradigms – nonprofit organization and civil society. Although his perspective is too limited, his observations on those two ‘paradigms’ are, nonetheless very interesting (Lohmann, 2013).

cultural program developments fostered by those organizations – including many embraced by large national foundations and international agencies – that have sought to characterize national third sectors over the past half century.

In the decades after World War II the two-sector narrative, coined modern liberalism and later new or neo-liberalism, was gradually adapted to embrace the idea of a third sector of either nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations of mixed private/public provenance, swept along by an unprecedented wave of affluence and other factors. This theoretical and conceptual process was aided a great deal by increased public funding of nonprofits on the one hand (Boris and Steuerle, 2006; Smith and Lipsky, 1989), and continued pressure for nonprofits to “be more businesslike” on the other (Beatty, 1998; Cordes and Steuerle, 2009; Drucker, 1964). Incredible as it may seem, there have been *no* calls in recent public life (outside academic writing, that is) for third sector institutions to be themselves or to do what they are capable of doing best.

In the long wave of postwar economic advancement, the original two-sector model spread widely and popularized the dichotomy of economic and political systems characterized by initiatives of private capital and economic growth contrasted with the regulation, planning, stimulus and counter-cyclical activity of the public sector (Lindblom 1977; Tomás-Carpi 1997, cited in Monzon and Chaves 2008). In this political-economic worldview, the particular concerns of distinctive third sector missions, whether voluntary charity, education, arts and culture, religion, or even assembly for purposes of public conversation or advocacy, have never been dominant foci. It has often been easy to see the thirdness of this sector as, in some way derivative from the first two, as in the assorted “failure theory” claims that sprouted in the 1980s (Anheier, 2005, pp. xx; Salamon, 1987). The “welfare state”, mixed economy, counter-cyclical policy, anti-poverty policy and numerous other topics that have framed the nonprofit as the third sector have generally sought to blend economic growth with social welfare, particularly in the anti-statist decades following the “civil society revolutions” of 1989-1992. But, above all, the role of the activist state has been central, and independent voluntary action has been seen as supportive, enabling and facilitating.

Particularly after 1989 references to the third, nonprofit, nongovernmental or civil society sector began regularly appearing in

discussions of the master narrative and have been embraced by various international bodies including the United Nations, the World Bank and the European Union. Multi-sector strategies for health care, education, work training and employment, and anti-poverty programs implemented by a third nonprofit sector have become widespread. However, a variety of alternative policy approaches, notably post-Thatcher and post-Reagan privatization, civil society and social enterprise schemes, as well as recent observations regarding sectoral convergence and hybridization (Billis, 2011) that highlight the independence or autonomy of the increasingly visible third sector have not fit especially well within the bi-polar limits of this narrative. They may, in fact pose theoretical time bombs threatening to burst the current three sector model entirely at some point in the future. It is not clear, for example, why elected and appointed representatives in a democracy or business executives in large corporations should have privileged positions or greater say in the activities of “civil society” or “social economy” programs than the ordinary citizens who plan, organize, carry out, and seek stable funding for such third sector activities. The cynical expression of a new golden rule – those that have the gold make the rules – is often heard in today’s nonprofits and points up certain moral limits of the present configuration. These and other heretical thoughts underlie notions of the third sector as an equal or autonomous sector partner with business or government.

Kramer (2004) elaborates a number of distinctive features of the sector concept as viewed through the lens of the nonprofit model. “Typically,” he says “it emphasizes the rapid institutionalization of the third sector as the core of civil society, as the state’s primary partner in the provision of human services and the promotion of culture and the arts.” We need not concern ourselves at this point with the long list of third sector institutions missing from this list. We are instead concerned here with his critique of the sector concept itself. Kramer cites three reasons to question the sector model based on ownership: Sector convergence stemming from growing dependence of government funding; privatization of government; and the establishment of nonprofit subsidiaries by businesses. To this we might respond that while largely accurate at the current moment in U.S. history none of these claims offers any reason, in principle, for rejecting the possibility of a third sector of voluntary action largely or completely outside government, business, or for that matter, the intimate sphere. It may, as Kramer suggests, give us reasons to doubt the veracity of a model

of an autonomous third sector of nonprofit organizations distinguished by ownership. (On this point, see also, Billis, 2013)

The current nonprofit sector model also highlights and tends to valorize the roles of CEO's, governing boards and professionals (as true or real "leadership") and downplays the importance of citizenship, other participants, volunteers, and clients. In the current model, for example, nonprofit organizations of paid staff are seen as dealing externally with volunteers, clients, publics, and even board members, rather than as truly corporate entities that include these others within the organization. Such a view is possible only by emphasizing the distinct but arbitrary boundaries of the nonprofit model as expressed in current managerial and legal views and ignoring the real networks of political and social interaction and cultural exchange involved. Despite its formidable presence and great success, the nonprofit model thus offers numerous reasons for believing that it accounts for and explains only a portion of the entire space outside of households, markets and governments. Now that the model is more-or-less complete and its research program stable and continuing, third sector scholars ought to take the occasion to ask seriously what else there is in this space we call the third sector?

### **The Third Sector Imaginary**

One suitable place to begin more fulsome consideration of the third sector is with a notion first outlined by one of the leading Canadian social philosophers of the past century. In a charming little volume entitled *The Social Imaginary* (2004) Charles Taylor called attention to the role of imagination in social behavior and theory, introducing a term he called the social imaginary. What is a social imaginary? In Chapter 2 Taylor defines this as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together and how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor, 2004:23). The social imaginary in Taylor's sense offers an interesting way to begin the task of reconciling the many divergent perspectives of the third sector and furthering the complex challenge of imagining an entirely new institutional realm of human affairs in both practical and theoretical senses that began with the nonprofit model. The third sector offers an interesting example of undirected voluntary action in a collective project by researchers, theorists and practitioners imagining an entire new

sphere of human activity into existence and order. As recently as a few decades ago, there were only isolated, vague and occasional references to nonprofit or voluntary sectors scattered across the world's published social science literature and no one ever bothered to offer a coherent definition or systematic conceptualization of what that phrase might mean.

There are numerous precedents in the social sciences for what has gone on since. Among the most widely known of these would be Adam Smith's distillation of the market order in the industrial dynamics of his day. Equally significant are the imaginings of Hobbes, and many others of the nature of the modern nation state. And then there is the vast imaginary of modern socialism. Beginning with Henri de Saint-Simon's coinage of the term socialism to contrast with *laissez-faire* individualism, the various utopian, anarchistic, democratic, Christian, Marxian and other socialisms as well as the various reactions they provoked over the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, also offered a large and multi-faceted succession of social imaginings of how society should be arranged and changed. From a quite different angle, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and the Scottish moralists initiated a quite different chain of imaginings involving the nature of modern morality. From the standpoint of social theory, the current social imaginary of the third sector theory represents an important branching in both of those long successions. And these are just a few of the many social imaginaries that have shaped and molded modern social science theory and understandings.

Since the 1970s, a large number of people have similarly and collectively imagined into existence an empirical institutional realm and theoretical figure never before seen or understood and that they (and, increasingly, we all) call "the third sector". Some have tied their imaginings directly to an earlier 18th century social construct called civil society (see Cohen & Arato, 1992; Wagner, 2012). These new images and institutions imagined by not only theorists, but also researchers and importantly practitioners willing to act on their imaginings, together with associated evidence and data have outlined in great and increasing detail "how things go on between them and their fellows" with greater and greater attention to the "deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations". What a provocative way the social imaginary offers to summarize what has actually been happening in third sector studies in recent decades!

In an organizational sense, Taylor's social imaginary offers up a description of the social space for collective rethinking and reworking of just about any social realities. The social imaginary might be seen as yet another reworking of the society/individual (or public/private) dichotomy; in this case, a social reconfiguration of Bergson's *elan vitale* placing greater emphasis on the context of interpersonal relations and less on the solipsist exploration of the workings of the inner self. At any rate, both current and future models of the third sector, as well as a host of related ideas like social capital, philanthropy, and social enterprise can be seen as products recently emerging from our third sector social imaginary; the gradual convergence of the social imaginings of many different sources. This does not imply that such imaginaries are in any important sense fictions, like characters in a novel, or fantasies like a six-year old's fantasies of fairies, trolls and unicorns). Most are intended to be rigorously empirical, and solid evidence of their existence is one of the acid tests for the viability of such imaginings. Taylor's social imaginary is more on the order of the visioning and scenario-building exercises popular in some nonprofit management circles.

Social imagining, in Taylor's terms, is a reality-based, complex social process in which selected realities – including organizations, institutions, and social relations not previously noted or understood - are visualized, formulated or reconfigured as plausible, realistic, empirical and researchable constructs; the most creative parts of research design and theory building. Social imagining is a multi-dimensional process involving naming, identifying characteristics, and linking new constructs to other known concepts. A remarkable period of social imagining accurately describes what has been happening with regard to the third sector for the past forty years, and in a less intense sense, for more than two centuries, since Hegel and Ferguson first imagined their quite different constructs and images of civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1992).

Another more current example would be assembly, a legal and constitutional term with many empirical referents in meetings, public lectures, concerts, conferences, parades, pilgrimages like the annual Islamic *haj*, and popular assemblies such as garage bands, jam sessions, rock concerts, flashmobs, and many other comparable gatherings. Apart from the organizing committees and other formal organizations governing some assemblies, the organized nature of this important form of social

organization seems to have garnered no attention among researchers interested in the third sector, and the suggestion that assemblies are an important part of the third sector probably would be quite controversial.

### **Imagining the *Wunderkammer***

Theoretical discussions in the social sciences generally tend to neglect or downplay the important role of imagining new ways to configure known or emerging social realities. However, in the case of the emerging third sector, we might arbitrarily begin a brief review of the social imaginings which together brought us the idea of a third sector with George Hegel, whose re-imagining of his social world in terms of civil society embodies vigorous antecedents of our current notions of households, markets, states (Cohen and Arato, 2000). From there others can also be credited: Alexis de Tocqueville (political and voluntary associations), Karl Marx (revolutionary association), Auguste Comte (*altruisme*), Max Weber (bureaucracy), Robert Michels (oligarchy), Talcott Parsons (his AGIL pattern variables approximate one view of the division among sectors), James Pennock (liberal democracy), and William Kornhauser (mass society) (Van Til, 2012). To this list I would also add, in no particular order, the creative imaginings of Marcel Mauss (gift exchange), Bronislaw Malinowski and Marshall Sahlins (gift circles, cycles or networks), Albert Beveridge (voluntary action), L.J. Hanifan and Robert Putnam (social capital), David Horton Smith (voluntary and grassroots organization), Amatai Etzioni (normative compliance), Kenneth Boulding (threat, exchange and integrative systems), Elinor Ostrom (common resource pools and knowledge commons), Vincent Ostrom (polycentricity and constitutional order), John Dewey (democratic society and culture), Mary Parker Follett (groups in democracy), Kurt Lewin & Ronald Lippitt (democratic group leadership), Richard Cornuelle (independent sector), Burton Weisbrod (nonprofit economics), George Herbert Mead (collective behavior), Hannah Arendt (the distinction of action, work and labor), Jürgen Habermas (systems and lifeworlds), Benjamin Barber (the sovereignty of the political), David Mathews (public deliberation), Anthony Giddens (third way), Elijah Anderson (cosmopolitan canopy), Harold Saunders (sustained dialogue), John Dryzek (discursive democracy), Yochai Benkler (social production) and a great many others including certain concepts of the internet and social media that are still evolving. Without the collective impact of these various imaginings, the modern third sector is literally unimaginable.

Each of these and many other contributions have imagined important bits and pieces added to the increasingly robust idea of a third sector. We can readily add the names of dozens of active ARNOVAnS to this list for their social imaginings – their intuitions, insights and metaphors that serve as contributions to the study of formal organizations and a third sector of institutions. Collectively and imaginatively, all of these people have conceptualized multiple bits and pieces adding to our current understanding of the institutional space(s) outside the household and apart from the market order and government. That is, to the third sector. And what they have suggested to us collectively adds up to a great deal more than simply the important but limited notion of nonprofit organizations and nondistribution constraints.

The emergence and acceptance of the very idea of the third sector has been a collective production of the very type we seek to account for and explain.<sup>7</sup> No one legislated the third sector, commanded it or demanded it. It has no price structure although political and economic systems are quite willing to exploit its relative advantages when it suits their purposes. The practical efforts we call the third sector have been a collective production and our evolving collective understandings – our knowledge – of the third sector are also a collective product. That is not mere metaphor. The idea of a third sector simply did not exist in any form sixty years ago, and now it stands as a major institutional product of modern life in many different communities, countries and regions. Yet, within the narrow theoretical terms set out by the nonprofit model, there is no meaningful way to recognize the entirety of this major production.

In seeing the third sector as a recent and still incomplete act of collective practical, theoretical and legal social imagination – we are concerned with a variety of very real things, an entirely new set of ideas constructing (or, in instances like civil society, re-constructing) an entirely new way of viewing important parts of our collective human experience – what it means to be human. The third sector imaginary has been created out of virtually no prior materials except shared experiences in daily living. The interconnected phenomena of gifts and donations, voluntary association and pooling of common resources in grants, funds, endowments and the like, together with all of the organizations and other

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<sup>7</sup> My own preferred term for describing and summing up such production processes is *knowledge commons* (Hess and Ostrom, 2007).

phenomena associated with the third sector construct register only as details and data. They have had no essential role in the social, economic, political and cultural ideas held together under the broad heading of social and political theory until the past few years. A survey of social and political theory by Kimmel & Stephen (1998) for example, speaks only of state, market and society.

Currently, thanks to the nonprofit model, the basic theoretical paradigm sufficient for understanding nonprofit organizations as *a* (not *the*) third sector is *theoretically speaking* fairly complete, and there are numerous civil society models that deal with citizenship and civic engagement questions. Even so, no adequate general model defines, encompasses or outlines the rest of the third sector or brings it together with the nonprofit sector or civil society perspectives. Unlike 1914 or 1964 when the term nonprofit already existed but no research, theoretical or practice model of any third sector could have been found, by 2014 there is broad, widespread agreement on the basic terms which render nonprofit research intelligible.<sup>8</sup> Something similar can be said for each of a range of other middle-range topics that have received attention in third sector studies, including philanthropy, social capital, voluntary associations, foundations, social movements, collective behavior, citizen participation, social problems, commons, mutual aid, self-help, giving, fundraising, social production, organized religion, civic and political action by citizens, interest groups, and a number of other specific topics, organizations and institutions. Specific, detailed research work within each of these areas can be expected to be ongoing in the future as it is at present. However, there is no reason to expect that a more adequate general model of the third sector will arise from that research. Like the other theoretical figures mentioned, such a wider third sector has yet to be imagined in its entirety.

### **The Third Sector Paradigm**

Part of what we currently lack is a sufficiently robust theoretical paradigm of the institutions of the third sector beyond nonprofit

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<sup>8</sup> These dates are arbitrary and selected as 100 years ago and 50 years ago. The American Institute of Graphic Arts, to take one of many possible examples, was founded in 1914 and the Organization of Afro-American Unity, was founded in 1964 as one component of the overall civil rights movement of the time. Neither founding is particularly well or convincingly explained by the nonprofit model. Even so, policy-makers schooled in the two-sector model still find it altogether too easy to overlook some or all of the third sectors. E.g., see Eisenberg (2013) for a recent example.

organizations. We need to find ways to make the notion of the spaces between households, markets and governments coherent, meaningful or to relate all of these diverse topics together within a genuine three-sector model in something more than a purely cursory manner. Robert Merton's sociological thesis of "theories of the middle range" has made accommodation or at least lip service to the master narrative phrase third sector relatively easy and painless (Merton 1968) without actually solving anything. By de-emphasizing the role and importance of any "grand theory" of the composition of the full third sector the middle range approach makes it possible to justify just about any narrower focus on any immediate, narrow issue or practical problem or topic. Through Merton's hypothesis, we can all, it seems, agree to go our own ways: Even those who reject the institutional pluralism of the three sector model including *Kathedersozialisten*, or academic socialists suspicious of any notion of 'civil society' and market fetishists ready to see price and cost dynamics everywhere can equip themselves to contribute to the multi-disciplinary conversation over the nonprofit third sector without the inconvenience of disruptive contradictions.

To be sure, critical voices from left and right have been concerned with critiquing specific aspects of the liberal democratic sector narrative. Leftist critics following in the footsteps of Gramsci have addressed the hegemonic nature of civil society on the one hand and sought to valorize the instrumental role of government in sector formation and development. At the same time, conservatives and libertarians have raised specific issues of taxation, bureaucratization, and professionalization, and sought to valorize the role of the market order and spontaneous order in general (Brooks 2000; Boettke and Prychitko, 2004; Cornuelle 1965; Ealy 2011). Yet, such monism from any quarter seems misplaced. The fundamental plurality of the mixed economy of markets, states and third sectors remains one of the most essential features of liberal democracy.

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire after 1989, theorists across the political spectrum have sought to frame their own versions of "civil society" as a third institutional sector between the predominant private/market and public/government sectors (E.g., Cohen and Arato 1992; Gellner 1994; Seligman 1992; Srubar 1996). Efforts to revive 18<sup>th</sup> century ideas of civil society and to accommodate them with the nonprofit sector have been ongoing (Van Til 2007; Wagner 2013), and more recently,

others have sought greater attention to another revival, the “social economy” (Lohmann 2007; Monzon and Chaves 2008; Quarter, Armstrong and Mook, 2009).

### **The Continental Critique**

A group of continental European third sector scholars have over the past decade focused and sharpened what is to date the most extensive criticism of the nonprofit model of the third sector, which they term the “North American Model” (Evers and LaVille, 2004; LaVille, 2011). A recent statement by LaVille outlines five principal concerns with this nonprofit model:

- It privileges trust as a nonprofit activity, when in reality many other organizations and institutions that are not nonprofits are equally capable of engendering trust.
- It overstates the theoretical centrality of the nondistribution constraint, which is really only important in some legal systems.
- It places excessive reliance on instrumental rationality
- It is largely conflict averse (e.g., has nothing meaningful to say about Tea Party & Occupy movements)
- It incorporates an implied hierarchy placing the third sector in a secondary or derivative status (e.g., third sector is derived residually from market failure or government failure)

Each of these offers an important criticism of the nonprofit model. The first three statements together offer an alternative entre or rationale for the view expressed here that there is more to the third sector than nonprofit organizations. Religions, social movements, assemblies and a variety of other organized activities and institutions that are not formal organizations have been quite capable of engendering trust among their participants for many centuries before the formal nondistribution constraints of nonprofit corporations were devised. Just as importantly, governments and market-oriented firms are also capable of engendering trust among their citizens and customers. The final two points speak directly to the often-apolitical nature of the “civic” nonprofit model and the circumstances under which the present nonprofit sector arose out of the

circumstances of post-war politics and economics, in which denial of fundamental conflicts was often a major consideration.

We should note first that the continental critique is really only directed at the U.S. version of the nonprofit model which is in no real sense a North American one since the Canadian and Mexican nonprofit sectors are both quite different from the U.S. one. The real target of the critique appears to be rather directly what they perceive as the intellectual imperialism of the Johns Hopkins Comparative studies.

In another recent analysis, Antonin Wagner links this approach directly to Lester Salamon and the Johns Hopkins program and concludes: “It is tailored to serve an economic purpose, namely to gather data on:

- resources (funds, employees, volunteers) obtained by certain organisations and allocated to the provision of goods and services;
- the organisations from which these resources are obtained;
- the division of labour established between different kinds of organisations in providing the services;
- the households to which these services are delivered.”

(Wagner, 2012, 313)

Given the widespread acceptance of the Nonprofit Model in the U.S. and elsewhere, it hardly seems fair to single out a single institution, particular individuals, or group of researchers. So, let us assume that debate over the nonprofit organization model of the third sector should be conducted only in part as a debate over applicability to countries, nations and cultures. From that perspective, there should be no doubt that the current nonprofit model provides a highly viable account of the nonprofit corporate sector in the U.S. and that the questions it raises are of more general interest in the international third sector research community (c.f., Hall, 2013). From this light, LaVille’s critiques might more appropriately be rephrased as the following questions:

1. What institutions and forms of organization are found outside markets, governments and households? And, how do they engender trust?

2. Do any other social, cultural and political arrangements serve the same purposes or social functions (notably, engendering trust and social capital formation) as tax exemption, tax deductions and legal nondistribution constraints?
3. What alternatives to instrumental rationality are evident in understanding the full range and scope of the third sector?
4. What is the appropriate theoretical role for conflict in third sector institutions largely built largely on trust, cooperation and social harmony?
5. Can the third sector be reframed for policy-makers and other adherents of the two-sector model in ways that pose more plausible views of the full sector as something more than just nonprofits?

### **The Wider Third Sector**

Some might suggest that we limit our vision to the nonprofit sector and civil society alternatives. In doing so there is insufficient acknowledgement of the numerous other research paradigms or disciplinary matrices currently extant in third sector studies that are arguably as significant as those two. There is no room to consider the equally seminal concepts and cumulative contributions to understanding the totality of the contemporary wider third sector. The central concepts of a sector concept might include (among others and alphabetically):

Arts and culture (Cameron, 1991; Selwood and Brown, 2001);

Civic engagement and citizen participation (Kettering, 2012; Lohmann & Van Til, 2011);

Common resource pooling (Hess, 2008; Hess and Ostrom, 2007; Lohmann, 1992);

Community organization (Briggs, 2008; Milofsky, 2008; Safford, 2009);

Communitarian perspectives (Etzioni, et. al., 2004; Etzioni, 2009; O'Ferrall, 2000)

Cooperatives and economic cooperation (Quarter, Mook, and Armstrong, 2009; Rothschild and Whitt, 1986);

Development NGOs (Fisher, 1998; Fisher, 2012; Lewis and Kanji, 2009);

Donor wealth and social class considerations (Ostrower, 1997; Schervish and Havens, 2001);

European exceptionalism (Evers and LaVille, 2004; LaVille, 2011);

Foundations (Lagemann, et. al. 1999; Lindemann, 1936 [1988])

Gifts (Titmuss, 1970; Godbout, et. al., 1997);

Grassroots organizations (Clifton and Dahms, 1993; Horton Smith, 2000);

Human services (Beito, 2000; Beito, et. al., 2002; Billis, 1984; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2002; Perlmutter, 1997);

Independence (Cornuelle, 1965; issues of *Conversations on Philanthropy*);

Marketing (Sargeant and Wymer, 2008; Wymer, et. al. 2006) Issues of *International Journal of Nonprofit Marketing*);

Mutual Aid, Self Help and 'Social' Anarchism (Borkman, 1999; Gitterman and Shulman, 2005; Katz and Bender, 1966);

Nonprofit accounting (Mook, 2013);

Organizational culture (Martin, 1992);

Organization theory (Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld, 1998);

Philanthropy (Burlingame, 2004; McCully, 2008; Payton, 1988);

Planned change (Mayer, Moroney & Morris, 1974; Wilson, 1964; Billis, 1980);

Policy (Phillips and Smith, 2011);

Prosocial behavior (Lohmann, 1992, pp. 237-252);

Religious organization and collective behavior (Cnaan, Wineburg, & Boddie, 2001; Harris, 1995; Wineburg; 2001; Wuthnow, 2003; Wuthnow, 2004; Wuthnow & Hodgkinson, 1990)

Small groups (Follett, 1920; Gamm and Putnam, 1999; Harrington, 2004; Olson, 1965);

Service learning (Furco and Billig, 2002);

Social economy (Bouchard, 2013; LaVille, 2011; Quarter, Mook and Armstrong, 2009; Vaillancourt, 2003);

Social enterprise (Dart, 2004; Young, 1983; Sherraden, 2005);

Spontaneous order (De Zerega, 2011);

Systems (Boulding, 1990);

Volunteering (Rochester, 2011; 2012; 2014);

Voluntary action (Van Til, 1988; Horton-Smith, 1991; Horton-Smith, 1992; Lohmann, 1992; 2015; Smith, 1937).

The suggestion here is that each of these perspectives makes contributions to our overall understanding of what the mission statement of *Voluntary Sector Review* calls the wider third sector. There are also important concepts like coproduction, federalism (Ostrom, 2008); hybridity (Billis, 2010), membership (Horton-Smith, 1991; Skocpol, 2003), polyarchy (Dahl, 1971), polycentrism (Ostrom, Tibout & Warren, 1961); self-governance, social capital and spontaneous order (De Zerega, 2009; Lohmann, 2011).

When we encounter the full range and scope of a list like this, we come up against a paradox: All of these diverse perspectives currently have significant research and/or practice communities in place willing to defend their veracity and centrality. However, the wider third sector currently has no research community currently. Thus, it is relatively easy for anyone to make and defend the claim that any one of these ‘paradigms’ can adequately define the third sector. Thus, for example, the claim that nonprofit organization and civil society are the two dominant paradigms and all others are merely terms, concepts or components of those two views is as plausible as the opposite claim that they are merely parts of any of the other paradigms. A full, genuine and mature third sector paradigm will need to find ways and build research and practice communities that take all of these and perhaps more into account. This may be the foremost challenge currently facing the field of third sector

studies, and the contents of this volume offer only one small start in that direction.

### **Conclusion: 'And' Not 'Or'**

In the first issue of the *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* in 1972, David Horton Smith asked “Can there be a theory of voluntary action, or must/should we pay major attention to theories and models about one or another aspect of voluntary action without attempting to put it all together for the moment?” The major implication raised by this discussion is whether the moment to begin to put it all together has arrived?

What are the implications of accepting the view presented here that the nonprofit sector is *a* third sector, not the sum and substance of *the* wider third sector? However, there is one, largely methodological implication that appears to offer an important starting point. That would be to abandon – or more importantly – to adapt the futile search for a “first principle” or primary construct from which the entire nature of the third sector can be deduced, and instead embrace the notion that the third sector is truly polycentric and pluralistic in character. This follows directly from the notion of a sector of self-defining, self-governing entities. Each of what appear at present to be its multiple theoretical cores should be treated as if it has something important to contribute, whether that contribution is derived from traditional academic disciplines like economics, history and sociology, the newer practice disciplines like social work and public administration, specialty fields like art history and sports management, or practice domains with no or very limited academic bases, like volunteering, fundraising and philanthropy.

In this regard, purportedly umbrella concepts like nonprofit organization, civil society, commons, social economy, the social sector, et. al. will continue to offer in the future. But their various advocates (including this author) should agree to abandon any pretense of claims that any particular term or concept holds the key to understanding the wider third sector, or even offers a suitable starting point from which to deduce the order or character of the entire sector.

It has become clearer each year, for example, since the concept of the commons was introduced to third sector studies (Lohmann, 1991; Lohmann, 1992) that the idea of common resource pools controlled by their governing boards but not ‘owned’ by anyone in the full sense legal and philosophical sense of that term, are important parts of the third

sector. But, nothing in the idea of common resource pooling should be read as requiring or demanding abandonment, or worse rejection, of similar insights about voluntary associations, nonprofit sectors, philanthropy, nongovernmental sectors, foundation sectors, civil societies, social economies, social sectors, voluntary action, social production, altruistics, or any of the other candidates for a keystone term. A substantive name for the third sector as a whole is only one of the many questions still to be answered, and far from the most important. So long as adherents of these diverse perspectives can continue producing useful and interesting results, the general field of third sector studies will continue to benefit from such plural outlooks, and representatives of multiple disciplines will find reasons to continue to contribute. Our attitude toward such perspectives should continue to be not which view is correct, but rather so what? If we accept your view that your perspective is important, what insights and understandings does it yield?

Of course, there will come a time (or more likely several times) when choices must be made, insights must be consolidated, and our plural foci will narrow somewhat. It is important to recognize, however, that such consolidations are not exclusively matters of logic and theory. That is one of several important implications of LaVille's suggestion above that we get beyond exclusive preoccupation with instrumental reason. There are also importantly social and political processes and cultural dynamics and particularities involved here, and it would be rather foolish of a group of social scientists and humanists to ignore that. Thus, the particular events that went into the formation of ARNOVA in 1988-1989 and the past or future entry of researchers and scholars from each discipline, country and cultural system into the fertile mix of third sector studies have had major implications growing out of that particular decision to re-define the field from an earlier academic and practice focus on small groups and voluntary action to "nonprofit organizations *and* voluntary action" (the NOVA of the name).

Ultimately, perhaps the most important exogenous impact that the cacophony of third sector studies can reasonably be expected to produce is adjustment or modification in the basic two-sector model itself. To date, these modifications have been limited to a few such adjustments. National economic data, for example, now routinely take into account nonprofit unemployment. However, in several other respects the three-sector model

remains a pride of two lions and one rather easily ignored mouse. Most researchers, theorists and practitioners in third sector studies continue to believe that our mouse is roaring but mostly at an acoustic level that is still well above the range of the lions' ears.

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