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Book Review: Sievers, B. R. (2010). Civil society, philanthropy, and the fate of the commons

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Sievers, B. R. (2010). *Civil society, philanthropy, and the fate of the commons*. Medford, Mass. Hanover [N.H.]: Tufts University Press University Press of New England.¹

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In this book, Bruce R. Sievers displays both the characteristics and the weaknesses of academic political philosophy as a tool for investigating civil society. He also raises troubling perspectives about philanthropy and the national foundation subculture within which the book embeds itself. The author treats the problems of civil society and philanthropy as problems in political philosophy, and offers a portrait of philanthropy that suggests a kind of privately accessed shadow state capable of determining and acting upon the common good.

Sievers' book will, no doubt, be of greatest interest to students in political theory courses and professional staff at the largest national and international foundations who see themselves as the appointed guardians of the American national common good. His perspective, particularly in the final three chapters, will be less satisfying for political pluralists of all stripes and those who share well-founded doubts that logical arguments amid critical reviews and commentaries on the history of political thought can provide definitive answers to the questions the book addresses. The book will be least useful to readers outside the American context, smaller local and regional foundations, donors, nonprofit and voluntary organizations and other denizens of the ordinary plural social worlds of civil society and philanthropy who see themselves in less Olympian terms than as keepers of the fate of the common good.

The book consists of an introduction and seven chapters: Institutional Structures, Normative Traditions, The Emergence of Civil Society in the Dutch Republic, The Enlightenment Legacy, Civil Society in America, Private and Public Goods in the Twenty-first Century and Philanthropy, and Civil Society and the Commons.

The selection of civil society institutions (which Sievers refers to as strands) around which the volume is woven is interesting because it contains several novel elements in a novel combination: civil society is said to consist of philanthropy, the common good, rule of law, nonprofit and voluntary institutions, individual rights, free expression and tolerance. His thoughtful comments and observations on these strands should give pause to those readers of this journal who are inclined to think of civil society only in terms of nonprofit organizations or voluntary associations.

¹ A revised and edited version of this review was published at *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 40(4), 776-779. 2011.

Apart from Sievers' singular notions of civil society and philanthropy as agents of *the* common good, this reviewer finds the list altogether worthy of further attention.

Particularly in the chapters on the Dutch Republic and the Enlightenment, Sievers has also given readers good reason to augment the list of authorities on their citation lists, which too often include only Ferguson, Tocqueville, possibly Hegel, and the contemporary authors of the distinctive Tufts Civil Society series, of which Sievers' volume is the latest contribution. Cato, Mandeville, Grotius, Thomasius, Pufendorf, Leibnitz, Wolfe, Kant, and Spinoza are the most important of the long list of philosophers Sievers brings to the increasingly sumptuous civil society feast; however, this is also somewhat problematic. For as clear as their connections to civil society in a 17th century Dutch context may be, their respective contributions to philanthropy remain murky and unconvincing. Nevertheless, Sievers' focus on the Dutch theoretical contribution does add one important anchor that has been missing from most discussions by underscoring the importance of tolerance as a strand of civil society.

The Dutch chapter is the richest and most innovative of the book, and addresses the profound cultural transformations crafted and reported by the Dutch intellectuals of the 17th century "Golden Age." Regrettably, the equally rich empirical realities of Dutch public affairs and civil society that were the focal points for the philosophers are mostly ignored or dismissed with broad, sweeping, abstract observations like, "Private associations were also strongly tied to philanthropy in the Dutch Republic" (p. 60). Throughout this chapter, Sievers hints at but does not explore the ways in which medieval Dutch notions and the practices of Dutch guilds, monastic and monarchical foundations, and religious charities were transformed into modern institutions of civil society, including voluntary associations, various media of publicity, and modern social movements.

This book will be considered important reading for political philosophers, doctoral students and theorists interested in the connection of civil society and philanthropy. It outlines more clearly than most previously published work the implications of the conception of philanthropy as pursuit of the common good by private means. This befits a work that embraces the unitary world view of those Lippmanesque experts who would claim to know the common good without an authority or institution to determine it. This book never takes seriously, or even indicates awareness of, the degree to which things look differently to those whose view of philanthropy is a plurality of private interests deploying common resource pools in numerous commons, rather than *the* commons of *the* common good. The term "commons" is tricky in that regard, being a *plurale tantum*, or term in which the singular and plural forms both take the plural form (with its s ending). But from the title forward, Sievers makes clear that in his conception the common good is a unitary thing.

Yet, the book fails to consider or identify the agencies of philanthropy that enable a plurality of philanthropists with differing minds, thoughts and agendas to arrive at such a unified conception of *the* common good. This is where the limitations of its underlying approach become most obvious: when the philosophers

settle their arguments, apparently the solutions will be made obvious to the rest of us. Whether in the hands of a political philosopher or a wealthy and powerful foundation, this perspective has its distinct charms, but much of contemporary political philosophy (little of which is referenced here), and in particular the resurgence of American and European forms of pragmatism, runs counter to this view. This is precisely the philosopher's world view that Benjamin Barber cautioned against in *Strong Democracy* (1984), and before him similar cautions and dismissals came from John Dewey and several Congressional committees.

In the final three chapters, as he moves from the past into the present, Sievers' attempt to engage contemporary civil society as either a practical or theoretical concern is altogether too limited. Although there is brief (and important) mention near the end of the importance of localism, and the concept of *metis* is introduced, these concepts leave the perspective of civil society and philanthropy as shadow state under the control of the philanthropists undisturbed.

Although the concepts of the commons (singular) and the common good figure large in Sievers' book, beginning with the title and the strands of civil society, the reader should not conclude that these are connected to other interdisciplinary conversations on commons (plural) perspectives. At least within the civil society and philanthropy literature, his is a distinctive and free-standing treatment of the commons and the common good grounded primarily in medieval and early modern philosophy. Despite the book's title, more recent perspectives on commons that display more pluralistic tendencies do not fit easily with the argument. Garrett Hardin figures briefly and appropriately as the source of a perspective on public (common) good, although much of commons theory stemming from Hardin takes a different tack. My book *The Commons* (1992) is mentioned in a footnote that appears to indicate a misreading grounded in Sievers' belief that my approach is an argument for the same unitary commons and common good he advances. I concur fully with Sievers' conclusion that my work on commons theory makes no contribution to his perspective of the commons and the common good; nor does the work of other contemporary commons theorists. The Nobel prize laureate and foremost exponent of commons theory, Elinor Ostrom, is mentioned only in passing as the source of Sievers' definition of the commons. A host of other important commons theorists, including Benkler and Lessig, get no mention at all.

In sum: the identified strands of civil society Sievers identifies merit further careful attention as a useful model; the Dutch chapter is a must-read; and the Enlightenment chapter is only slightly less interesting. But the conception of philanthropy in civil society commons as the private pursuit of the common good makes plain what many critics of philanthropy in Congress and elsewhere have been most concerned about. As such, it raises far more troubling questions than it resolves.

References

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