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Review of Artisans of Democracy: How Ordinary People, Families in Extreme Poverty, and Social Institutions Become Allies to Overcome Social Exclusion

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Review of *Artisans of Democracy: How Ordinary People, Families in Extreme Poverty, and Social Institutions Become Allies to Overcome Social Exclusion*

Abstract

As a longtime reader and contributor to *NVSQ*, I have been occupied for quite a while with trying to select what book is worthy of a review in *NVSQ*. So many new books cover aspects of the nonprofit sector or voluntary action, or both, that the list of books alone would take the entire space allocated for book reviews. Rarely do I encounter a book that is unknown by most scholars in the field yet that is pivotal to what we collectively stand for. Rosenfeld and Tardieu's book epitomizes the entire nonprofit sector—from one determined volunteer to an impressive international movement that refuses to co-opt and maintains a spirit of care and respect.

Comments

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Artisans of Democracy: How Ordinary People, Families in Extreme Poverty, and Social Institutions Become Allies to Overcome Social Exclusion, by Jona M. Rosenfeld and Bruno Tardieu. Lanham, VA: University Press of America (now Rowman and Littlefield), 2000. 276 pp. \$52.00 (cloth), \$24.50 (paperback).

As a longtime reader and contributor to *NVSQ*, I have been occupied for quite a while with trying to select what book is worthy of a review in *NVSQ*. So many new books cover aspects of the nonprofit sector or voluntary action, or both, that the list of books alone would take the entire space allocated for book reviews. Rarely do I encounter a book that is unknown by most scholars in the field yet that is pivotal to what we collectively stand for. Rosenfeld and Tardieu's book epitomizes the entire nonprofit sector—from one determined volunteer to an impressive international movement that refuses to co-opt and maintains a spirit of care and respect.

The introduction tells the story of a nonprofit organization named International Movement ATD Fourth World. The aim of the organization is to work with families and communities in extreme poverty and join with them to end their social, political, and economic exclusion. The abbreviation ATD stands for *Aide a Toute Detresse* (Help to All in Distress). Its Asian branches revisited this acronym and changed it to "All Together for Dignity." The term *fourth world* refers to families in extreme poverty as opposed to *third world*, which refers to poor countries. Fourth world also implies that even in the midst of affluence and economic prosperity, one can find extreme poverty. Although this name has its roots with the powerless "Fourth Estate" of the French revolution, it also counters the American pejorative "underclass."

The organization was founded in France in the 1950s by the late Father Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988). Father Wresinski formed the grassroots organization in a suburb of Paris where extremely poor and forgotten families resided in an isolated field at the end of a muddy track. Father Wresinski lived with the poor families and established the first principle of the organization: living with the extremely poor and sharing their lives. The founder was a most charismatic and dedicated individual and his commitment to the cause attracted many people. His impact on the movement is so pervasive that his ideas and experiences still guide activists. In fact, one of the drawbacks of the book is the reverence and glorification the authors ascribe to Father Wresinski. At times, I felt like saying "enough!"

All current projects and interventions are collaborations between permanent volunteers, allies (members of the movement who are disturbed by persistent poverty), and residents working together and emphasizing the shared process. This manifests another principle of the organization that everything comes from shared life, never from theory. Currently, the movement has 200,000 members (grassroots leaders) in 22 countries, half of whom live in extreme poverty. The organization has 350 staff members known as "permanent

volunteers." Given the low salaries and high level of commitment needed, working for the International Movement ATD Fourth World is labeled as "permanent volunteering" (Rosenfeld, 1989).

A guiding principle of the movement is "only the best for the poor." An American reader may find it astounding that Father Wresinski proposed that the French government subsidize paid vacations for poor families. This idea, although unlikely to be realized, serves to suggest that the way we view poor people is not as equals nor as people having the same needs. The movement eloquently distinguishes between poverty and misery. Whereas the former is an expression of economic disparity, the latter is a result of systematic exclusion and disregard for the poor that culminates in the notion that the poor cannot and do not want to be anything but what they are at present. This view puts the poor outside common humanity and simultaneously blames the poor for their situation. The authors argue that this exclusion is more painful than mere economic hardship.

One of the innovations of the movement is the "Street Library." In poor neighborhoods, where kids are not accustomed to borrowing books and are not encouraged to read, volunteers open suitcases with books, videos, and magazines on the sidewalk (see also Fanelli, 1990). They talk with kids and their parents and they read books aloud. Other innovations are poverty workshops, youth training centers, family vacations for poor families, and international gatherings. The centers are stocked with the best computers, best quality books, and dedicated staff to demonstrate respect for their clients and to provide them with the best.

The book is a carefully crafted analysis of how people and groups committed to social change and to helping the extremely poor can do so. Based on 12 case studies in six counties, from the community level to international organizations, the cases are presented to distill principles of action for voluntary actors and organizations. In each case study, an endemic problem is described that accompanied a sense of powerlessness. Perseverance and "thinking outside the box" were needed to implement solutions that alleviated the problem at a systemic level.

For example, the first case depicts poor families and caring teachers in northern France who cared deeply about their children's education. However, instead of finding a common language, the parents and teachers blamed each other for problems. The children failed school and felt betrayed by the educational system. A committed permanent volunteer managed to access and persuade the regional person in charge of education to take action. Together, the volunteer, the regional education person, and other people that they managed to recruit reformed the system and made it more likely for children from poor families to succeed. The process was by no means an easy success. The dedication and care required to make an impact lasted over many years. Yet it was achieved.

The other cases described a campaign to stop utility companies from cutting service to poor families who could not pay their bills on time, employment

maintenance for a homeless person in a small business, bringing the mainstream media to cover issues pertaining to poor people, and including low-wage and unskilled laborers as members in the local labor union as equal beneficiaries.

The key purpose of the book is to unravel and minimize the “six degrees of separation.” Many grassroots practitioners, professionals, and volunteers are often frustrated that they do not know how to reach the person or group that can solve the community problem, and, if they know who the person or group is, they are denied access. Based on successful cases, the authors attempt to provide us with actionable knowledge. In an era when practitioners and scholars attempt to communicate better, the authors are to be commended both for working with practitioners to elicit success stories and for distilling the stories into strategies and tactics that can be replicated by other voluntary organizations and community practitioners.

The final section of the book is somewhat too academic in its discussion of the ingredients of success. Many ingredients are identified: Some are process oriented and some are more practical. Some of the ingredients deserve to be highlighted, as they stand contrary to existing philosophies. In all the cases, the local activist was encouraged by the movement philosophy and supporters but was left alone to devise the relevant course of action. The fact that the movement’s organizers did not pressure local activists to take any specific course of action and allowed freedom of experimentation as well as unlimited time and support yielded innovative results, collaborations, and strategies that no outsider could have perceived as possible. The freedom to innovate is practical only when the values and mission of the movement are so powerfully lodged and accepted by the permanent volunteers and allies. In this respect, the term “social movement” is accurate as a description of those individuals around the globe who share the same mission, believe in the principles established by Father Wresinski, and strive toward the same end. Under these “working” conditions, permanent volunteers can take the time needed—years—without being questioned or ordered to be “more effective” in their efforts to achieve loyal and committed relationships within the neighborhood. In this atmosphere, alternative means to achieve goals and break impasses are found and harnessed to solve human problems.

In other words, in reading this book, I was immersed in the movement culture and felt its power to embrace an individual and unleash his or her potential to assist others in extreme poverty. I believe that many nonprofit organizations and human service professionals have chosen their career path hoping for such an experience and have had to compromise somewhere along the way. Although the authors emphasize secular humanism, the movement has the characteristics of a religious movement, especially the glorification of its founder, who was a religious person. It is comforting to know that there is an organization that has managed to actualize the dream and maintain the spirit of movement while focusing on the neediest members of society.

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