

Boston University

OpenBU

<http://open.bu.edu>

Sociology

CAS: Sociology: Scholarly Papers

2006-11

Book Review: Unequal Partnerships: Beyond the Rhetoric of Philanthropic Collaboration. By Ira Silver

Barman, Emily. 2006. Book Review: Unequal Partnerships: Beyond the Rhetoric of Philanthropic Collaboration by Ira Silver. *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 3 (November 1): 938-940.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/1222>

Boston University

American Journal of Sociology

Unequal Partnerships: Beyond the Rhetoric of Philanthropic Collaboration. By Ira Silver. New York: Routledge, 2006. Pp. xii+148. \$70.00.

Emily Barman
Boston University

As the welfare state has been dismantled in the United States, the responsibility for addressing social problems has been taken on by other actors, using both established and novel tactics. Ira Silver's book constitutes one of the first systematic analyses of comprehensive community initiatives, a model by which private philanthropy sought to meet community challenges in the 1980s and 1990s. The book focuses on the case of the Chicago Initiative, one of about 50 comprehensive community initiatives put in place across the nation's cities that were intended to address poverty in a systematic manner through collaboration between funders and community-based organizations at the local level. The book provides a fascinating, albeit disillusioning, insight into whether or not private actors can successfully address the issue of poverty in contemporary America using this particular method.

Silver provides a systematic assessment of the history of the three-year project, initiated in 1992 by local elites as an attempt to prevent the spread of the Los Angeles riots to the city of Chicago. The project, overseen by the Chicago Fund, consisted of foundations and community-based organizations addressing issues surrounding poor youths in Chicago. Given full archival access and drawing from interviews with a sample of participants, the author focuses on answering two interrelated questions: first, why and how the Chicago Initiative ended up focusing on the short-term goal of preventing youth violence rather than the long-term goal of antipoverty reform. Silver frames this empirical question as a means by which to address a more theoretical question—that of whether or not the Chicago Initiative's intended goal of collaboration was actually met. Noting that collaboration was initially devised as an organizational model able to withstand the tendencies of elites to co-opt others to their own ends, Silver presents the Chicago Initiative as a rare instance of inclusive and egalitarian decision making in philanthropy being made possible across class lines. But, just as the Chicago Initiative focused predominantly on the short-term goal of preventing youth violence, so too did it result in co-optation. While the Chicago Initiative seemed to provide community-based organizations with the means to influence funding flows, Silver instead finds that this situation instead led to the reproduction of the local elite's power.

The substance of the book is not only to demonstrate this finding but also to investigate the processes by which it came to be. How, in a moment when there was a discourse of antipoverty reform and when community-based organizations held real power, did funders manage to enact their class interests? Silver begins by placing the formation of the Chicago

Initiative, and the growth of comprehensive community initiatives as a whole, within the larger, historical context of changing understandings of the responsibility for community need. Tracing out the respective roles of government and private philanthropy in addressing poverty, Silver delineates how the withdrawal of the federal government led to a local commitment to antipoverty reform, as led by private interests.

The book next addresses why funders and recipients came to participate in the Chicago Initiative. An assortment of local foundations acted to gain prestige by not only actively addressing inner-city poverty but also including recipients in problem solving. Silver shows how they obtained legitimacy by presenting their participation as not stemming from their own interests (i.e., their fear of riots) but out of a moral responsibility to respond to community leaders' purported concerns of violence. While leaders of community-based organizations were initially skeptical of the intended goal of collaboration, they participated in the Chicago Initiative given that they were otherwise pressed for resources. Moreover, in order to obtain this funding, Silver tellingly shows how community leaders affirmed the interests of the local elites by espousing their discourse of community concern about riots. At the same time, however, they also attempted to harness the Chicago Initiative to their own goal of long-term antipoverty reform.

Despite the initial enthusiasm of its funders, the Chicago Initiative ended after three years. The book concludes with a consideration of how the lessons of the Chicago Initiative can also be found in the philanthropic response to the Indian Ocean tsunami.

The strength of the book lies in its trenchant and clearly written analysis of how this move from collaboration to co-optation came about. The book provides a stellar example of the social relations perspective on philanthropy, by showing that co-optation resulted as much from the actions of recipients as funders. To do so, Silver innovatively extends prior work on the role of culture and resistance in the reproduction of class interests, such as that by Paul Willis and James Scott, to the study of the nonprofit sector. In the process, Silver also displays a commendably keen eye for the processual nature of action, emphasizing the role of history and order to explain key events.

However, although the book illuminates how class interests get reproduced in the realm of antipoverty reform, it overlooks several processes that would have complicated its central argument. First, the book might have been fruitfully extended by an examination of how racial identity, and not simply class interests, figured into the relationship between donors and recipients. The author could also have emphasized how comprehensive community initiatives fail as a result of the larger expectations faced by funders, as a quite distinct matter from their class-based position. As Silver notes, foundations are limited in their choices by the contemporary pressure to support new and measurable projects, hampering their ability to engage in sustained community change projects. In all, by showing

American Journal of Sociology

how comprehensive community initiatives fail as a means of antipoverty reform and in its attention to how class interests come to be reproduced in philanthropy, this book will prove useful to scholars of the nonprofit sector, urban sociology, social stratification, and political sociology.

Pump and Dump: The Rancid Rules of the New Economy. By Robert H. Tillman and Michael L. Indergaard. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005. Pp. 337. \$25.95.

Alex Preda
University of Edinburgh

Investment funds established in Caribbean tax havens in order to keep losses off books and stock prices up; large-scale market manipulations; blatant conflicts of interest; pressurizing analysts to deliver favorable reports irrespective of their true beliefs. All this classic stuff (and much more) of corporate and financial scandals, which has only sporadically attracted sociological attention, raises a series of extremely interesting questions situated at the interface between economic sociology and the sociology of deviant behavior. These questions concern, among other things: conflicting (formal and informal) norms and rules of economic transactions, quasi-closed informal business networks within formal networks, public regulation versus self-regulation, the role of interest groups, and the creation of new transactional entities and the definitional issues influencing their regulation.

Cases like Enron or WorldCom have often been perceived as either caused by individual deviant behavior (greed, mostly), or as proof of the ultimate failure of the "New Economy." In this timely and valuable book, Robert H. Tillman and Michael L. Indergaard disprove such popular perceptions by reminding readers that these cases are not isolated episodes, but part of a recurring pattern of deviant behavior in corporate and financial life. Arguing against the "few bad apples" theory as legitimating decreased regulation, the authors see recent scandals as the continuation and generalization of classic fraud schemes like "pump and dump." Such schemes, which profit from the public's trustfulness and lack of (full) information, are taken as an analogy for two basic features of the New Economy: the multiplication of tradable entities disconnected from the production of material goods, and the increased reliance on quasi-closed business networks with their own informal norms.

The perceived primacy of internal norms over societal ones created conflicts and boundaries of trust which led to a climate of normalized corruption, and to the erosion of existing regulatory arrangements. The loopholes left by hasty and deficient deregulation were fully exploited by market players; groups which were supposed to be neutral informational intermediaries (like analysts) were co-opted in informal networks oper-