research

A strategic unity: defining the third sector in the UK

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Academics, policy makers and practitioners often stress the need for definition to inform analysis and policy. This paper explores recent debate on the identification of a third sector of organisational activity in the UK. It reviews some leading academic models that have sought to locate this sector alongside others, and then examines attempts to identify the sector as a focus for policy and practice. The importance of policy discourses in shaping debate and constructing definition is explained and the potentially fractured nature of these discourses is explored. These are then contrasted with discourses from practice. A distinction is made between exogenous and endogenous approaches to definition, and the implications of each discussed. The paper identifies a strategic unity within discourse in the UK over the last decade and argues that this has been effective in constituting a unified third sector within policy and practice, albeit one with underlying diversity and potential longer-term instability.

The need for definition

Academics, policy makers and practitioners all need to be able to define the terms they use in discussion, and in particular to be able to delineate the key concepts that they rely on. Academic debate is often focused on disagreement over definition of core terms, and differences found in academic research are often the product of different definitions and approaches underpinning research questions. Too often perhaps academics end up talking at 'cross purposes', using the same terms to mean different things, and this is true for practitioners and policy makers too. It seems sensible therefore to begin by trying to define key terms, and this may be particularly important for a relatively new field of academic research such as third sector studies.

The focus of this paper is on the use of the term 'third sector' in the UK. It seeks to explain why this concept has arisen in recent academic debate and to explore how we might understand and even define it, differentiating this from other key terms such as the 'voluntary sector' and the 'community sector'. This is a contested field, however, and both the definition and the existence of a third sector have been subject to debate and disagreement. There is debate and disagreement because there are different perspectives being brought to bear, including the perspectives of policy makers, practitioners and academics; and more broadly in international debate there are distinct cultural and political legacies arising in different national settings. Differing perspectives are based to a large extent on the beliefs, agendas and constraints that drive protagonists. For instance, the aims of policy makers (and more especially politicians)

may be to introduce wide-ranging policy instruments that can bring about major change in social and economic activity; whereas practitioners in particular settings may be seeking to defend the mission and structure of their organisation against pressures to change or disrupt it. By contrast, for academics the pressure is to establish a reputation for developing new, and perhaps controversial, approaches to research.

These different agendas mean that the notion of a third sector is inevitably a contested one, and may lead some to challenge the relevance of the concept itself. These challenges are expressed in discourses – the language and the messages that we use to communicate when we write or talk about our concerns. It is through discourses that concepts are created and exchanged, and within discourse we can identify the different definitions that protagonists produce from within the agendas and constraints that they are operating. (For a general discussion of critical discourse analysis, see Fairclough, 1995; Finlayson, 2007.) As we might expect, within these various discourses the notion of a third sector has been differentially defined – it means different things to different people. However, not all discourses are of equal importance or impact. Those of powerful interests speak more loudly, and perhaps more articulately, than others. We will return later to examine the ways in which more powerful discourses in the UK have been shaping our understanding of a third sector in recent years, in particular through the policy actions that have flowed from these interests; and we will explore, to some extent at least, why this has been happening.

However, this is an academic paper and it is informed by the legacy of academic debate about the notion of a third sector and the key differences and core themes that have emerged within this. There has been quite extensive academic debate about the ways in which a distinctive sector might be identified and defined, and about the relationships between definition and measurement, and definition and policy, which flow from this. Understanding this legacy can help us to understand how current debates can be identified and explained.

Academic debate

Some of the important academic literature on concepts and definitions predates current concerns with the notion of a third sector. In the UK, earlier academic debate was frequently focused rather on the voluntary sector or the voluntary and community sector, and, as we shall explain shortly, these concepts too have been the subject of contested discourses. But the principles informing the search for a distinct sector remain common and have clearly informed current debates. In a review of research on the voluntary sector in the UK, Halfpenny and Reid (2002: 535) posed the question 'what organisations comprise the sector?' and briefly reviewed a number of different definitions and perspectives, concluding that the sector was very diverse and that the temptation to impose homogeneity may be questionable and lead to the exclusion of some potentially important dimensions. In practice, however, they argued that definition was to some extent a pragmatic question based on the available data being researched and the questions being explored, and no principled definitional consensus could be found.

This lack of definitional consensus is not just a practical matter, however. A number of commentators on the sector have challenged the very notion that a homogeneous sector can be found. In a conference paper, Grotz (2009) rejected the notion of a homogeneous third sector and pointed out that some of its most revered commentators also seemed to share his scepticism about the idea of essential unity. In an early discussion, the US economist Levitt (1973: 48–9) described the third sector simply as 'an enormous residuum', located beyond the private and public sectors, and we will return shortly to this negative or default notion of the sector. In the UK, the Wolfenden Committee (1978: 15) on *The future of voluntary organisations* opened with the claim that 'it is not helpful to imply that there is anything like a unified voluntary movement with a common philosophy guiding its work'. In his *Report of the commission on the future of the voluntary sector*, Deakin wrote that 'There is no single "authentic" voluntary sector for which a simple master plan can be drawn up' (Deakin Commission, 1996: 16).

These led Grotz (2009) to conclude that there was insufficient evidence of an established consensus on the existence of a third sector. However, the negative approach that he identifies has in practice been a common feature of the way in which the sector is described, and even defined. To distinguish third sector organisations from the public sector, they are sometimes referred to as *non-governmental* or *non-statutory* organisations; and to distinguish them from commercial market activity they are referred to as *non-profit* organisations. These negative definitions have wide currency, and to some extent are linked to the broader political and cultural contexts within which the sector is being discussed. For instance, 'non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) is the concept often used to refer to international agencies engaging in overseas development work, where it is important that they are separate from the national government agencies within countries. The 'non-profit sector' is the concept often used within US literature on the sector, where the primary concern is to distinguish organisations from the profit orientation of the market. And this can be contrasted with the European literature where relations with the public sector are more developed and the notion of a non-statutory sector is more common (see Evers and Laville, 2004: chapter 1). Evidence of this can even be found in Beveridge's (1948) seminal text, where he describes 'voluntary action' as 'private action, that is to say not under the direction of the State' (1948: 8).

The problem with negative definitions of course is that while they might tell us what a sector is not, they are not much help in trying to understand what it is; and this is also true of some of the more formal legal definitions such as those based on the non-distribution of profits to shareholders. These essentially negative categorisations all adopt an *exogenous* approach to definition of the sector, describing it in relation to other sectors or other social or legal forms. These can be distinguished from an *endogenous* approach to definition, which seeks to identify what might be the core elements of 'voluntary action' (to use Beveridge's term). As we shall see, in practice both exogenous and endogenous approaches have been adopted in debate about the identification of a third sector, and, as we will argue, it may be that a combination of the two is necessary to develop a rounded theoretical understanding too. It is also important to bear in mind the political and cultural context within which debate

(and definition) take place. The description of the non-profit sector in the US is not just a product of conceptual narrowness; policy and practice in the US are closely concerned with the role of profit in determining legal and organisational status. In the UK too the concept of a third sector is the product of a particular constellation of political and cultural forces – and, of course, these contexts can change over time.

The reviews of academic literature by Halfpenny and Reid (2002) and Evers and Laville (2004) reveal not only that different terminology is associated with the different contexts of the sector, but also that this can lead to differences in what is or is not therefore included within it. For instance, Evers and Laville (2004: 13) point out that the non-distribution constraint leads to the exclusion of cooperatives and mutual aid societies from the US sector, whereas these are central to the European tradition. The exogenous approach also leads to attempts to define the sector in terms of its relationship with other sectors of social organisation, in particular the state and the market, although these too are of course subject to definitional debate and challenge.

From the exogenous approach a number of well-crafted models of the sector, or more accurately the location of the sector, have emerged, and have been influential in both academic debate and policy development. Perhaps the simplest is the sector triangle most recently deployed by Paton (2009) in a paper on a theory for the sector (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Three sector model
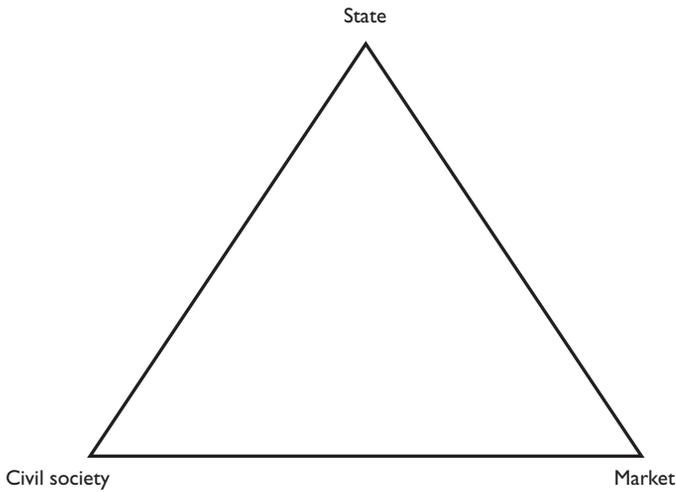

Source: Paton (2009)

Paton argued that different principles and values are associated with three different sectors, which he referred to as the state, the market and civil society:

- state – formality, regulation, coercion, redistribution;
- market – entrepreneurship, investment, accumulation, competition;
- civil society – association, mutuality, altruism, democracy.

The distinctiveness of these points of the triangle makes some intuitive sense, and clearly there are differences between the underlying values of the public, private and third sectors; although, as many have pointed out, values also infuse across boundaries – the public sector invests and competes, and also encompasses altruism and democracy. The alignment of the third sector with civil society is also somewhat complex and controversial (Evers, 2010). There is much debate in any case about what constitutes civil society, which we do not have time to review here (see Deakin, 2001; Jochum et al, 2005). It is most often associated with social action and social values, rather than particular organisational forms – as the sum of social relations that make up the good society rather than any particular organisational expression of these. More recently it has been promoted in the UK by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Carnegie UK Trust as a site for empirical measurement and policy planning (the NCVO Almanac now contains data on civil society organisations; Kane et al, 2009). Nevertheless, for Evers and Laville (2004: 6), for instance, there can be no 'civil society sector'.

Evers and Laville also adopt a triangular model to locate the sector; but in their model, which itself is based on earlier work by Pestoff (1992), the third sector is in the middle of the triangle situated in between three other poles (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The welfare mix
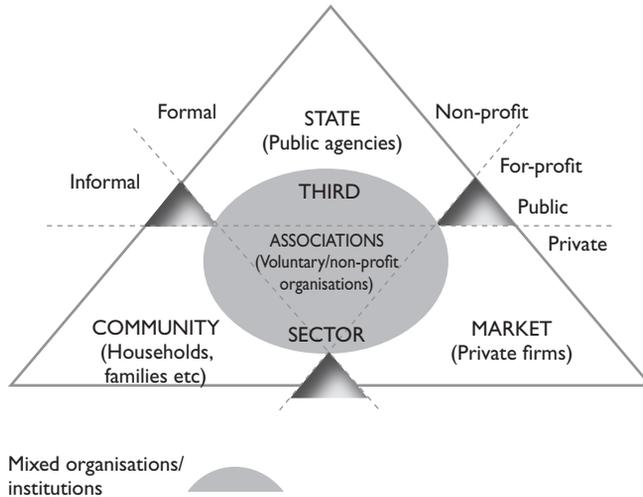
Source: Evers and Laville (2004: 17)

Here the third corner of the triangle comprises the community sector – households, families and other informal relations. The cross-cutting axes reveal that the third sector is distinguished from these relations by its formality, from the state by its private nature, and from the market by its non-profit orientation (for a more general introduction to these four sectors in the context of UK social policy, see Alcock, 2008: part II). The third sector is thus located in between the other three sectors, and is related to,

and distinguished from, each; but is part of a mixed economy of welfare provision in which a plurality of organisational forms co-exist to implement policy and provide social services. The cross-cutting axes also reveal that organisations can exist within the boundary areas in each case. Here, organisations may exhibit both third sector and public (or private or informal) characteristics, with the values of each posing challenges for organisational activity and effectiveness – what Evers and Laville (2004: 22) refer to as 'tension fields'.

This notion of the potential for overlapping or porous boundaries between the sectors has also been taken up by Billis (1989), who uses circles rather than triangles to represent the relationship. Initially, these boundaries were represented by four circles representing the four sectors above (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The overlapping boundaries of the voluntary sector
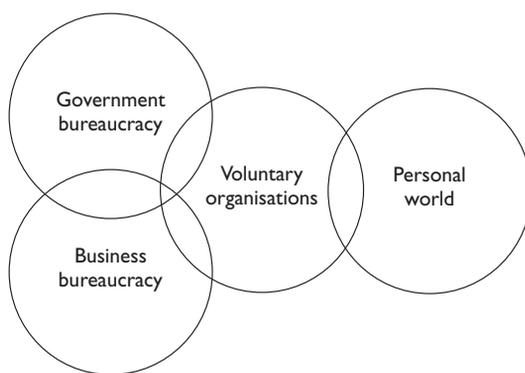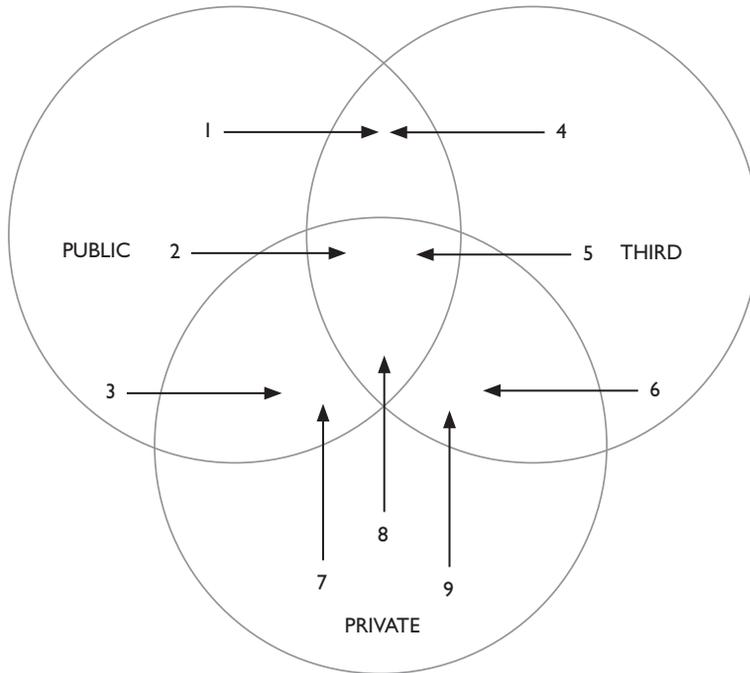

Source: Billis (1989: 20)

What Figure 3 demonstrates is that the circles can overlap, and that organisations can operate within the overlapping segments, as in Evers and Laville's tension fields. Evers and Laville (2004: 37) have referred to these organisations as 'hybrids'; and in his most recent work, Billis (2010: forthcoming) has taken up and developed this notion of hybridity as an expanding aspect of the complex and overlapping relations between the state, the market and the third sector within the mixed economy of welfare promoted by UK social policy in the new century, which may even be challenging and supplanting the core features, and values, of a distinct third sector. Billis develops a new version of his circle model to capture this expanding hybridisation, within which nine new hybrid zones are identified, although hybridity with informal activity is overlooked (see Figure 4).

All of these models aim to capture a similar notion of a third sector (although not all use this terminology), and to distinguish this from the public and private sectors (and in some an informal sector too). Most of the models also seek to capture the potential overlap between the sectors (Evers and Laville's tension fields) and the challenges of hybridity that this brings. This means that the notion of a third sector may not

Figure 4: The three sectors and their hybrid zones

Key: The hybrid zone

1 Public/third	4 Third/public	7 Private/public
2 Public/private/third	5 Third/public/private	8 Private/public/third
3 Public/private	6 Third/private	9 Private/third

Source: Billis (2010)

always be clear cut; but equally, a clear space or field for third sector organisation does exist for all. The exogenous approach to definition does therefore identify a place for a third sector.

Endogenous approaches are less commonly found in the academic literature; but one such attempt to identify a sector can be found in the largest and most widely used international study of third sector organisation developed at the Johns Hopkins University in the US (Salamon and Anheier, 1997). This study identified organisations by four linked themes: formality, independence, non-profit distribution and voluntarism; and then used these to develop an International Classification of Non-Profit Organisations (ICNPO). This ICNPO in fact constituted a list of 12 different fields of non-profit activity (itself a negative notion), including areas such as culture and recreation, health, social services and religion; and it was primarily used to compare the size and structure of these activities across a number of developed countries, using locally gathered data (see also Salamon et al, 1999). From a different perspective, therefore, it nevertheless employed the concept of a distinct sector, albeit

one comprised of an aggregation of different fields; and, as we shall see, this has also been influential in more recent UK conceptions of a third sector.

Historical dynamics

The contributions to Evers and Laville's (2004) review of the third sector make clear that definitions of a sector are always a product of the political and cultural contexts under discussion. They are also a product of historical dynamics and the legacies of political and cultural change. Paton (2009) takes up the implications of historical change in what he calls a 'sedimentary theory' of the sector. Over time, the values and activities of the sector have changed and developed – from the friendly societies of the 19th century to the recycling enterprises of the new century. But over time these different forms have accumulated, like layers of sediment, to become something 'solid and durable'. Not all have endured, but collectively those organisations and activities that have now constitute an identifiable whole. Like all social phenomena, therefore, the third sector is in part a product of history.

What is more, historical change is ongoing. Reshaping of the sector is still taking place – with new layers added and old ones shifting. For instance, Billis's (2010: forthcoming) discussion of hybridity is based on his concern that recent changes in the relationships between the sector, the state and the market are fundamentally altering the contours of the sector through the introduction of regulation and competition. Third sector organisations change over time of course; but it is in particular the changing boundaries with the state and the market that have been significant in changing conceptions of the sector as a whole in the UK.

Changing relations with the state were explored by Lewis (1999), who identified three major shifts over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries; and Harris (2010) has more recently revisited this history and catalogued in more detail this changing nature of state and voluntary sector relations. Kendall (2009a) examined changes over the more recent post-war period, again identifying three phases, ending with the current phase of 'hyperactive mainstreaming' under the Labour government. In her contribution to the Evers and Laville collection, Taylor (2004) discussed how the nature of the sector in the UK has been defined in large part by its relationship with the development of welfare state provision, the reforms to this, and the more recent development of a 'third way' for welfare policy in the country. All see the broader welfare policies of the state as a clear driver of change for the third sector.

Changing relations with the market have also been important in shaping the sector. In the 19th century, the development of cooperatives and mutual societies were a product of the limitations of the market economy in providing for particular social and economic needs, such as social insurance protection and mortgage borrowing – although, as boundaries changed again, some of these activities were themselves taken over by the state (through National Insurance) or the market (through the restructuring of banking). The changing nature of sector relations does not only shape the notion of a third sector of course. The recent rise of social enterprises has been in part a product of market restructuring because of the failure of some markets to develop ethically and environmentally sensitive products and practices.

Policy discourses

The changing relations between the sectors discussed by the authors cited above focus on the changing policy discourses that have been developed to describe these. Lewis (1999: 259–60) talks about the terms used to describe these changes in the early 20th century by Sidney and Beatrice Webb in 1912: the 'parallel bars' and 'extension ladder' models. More recently, as already noted, Kendall's (2009a) three phases have led to 'hyperactive mainstreaming'. These are policy discourses about the nature of state and third sector relations – or attempts to summarise such discourses in simple metaphors. It is through such discourses that we articulate our ideas and concepts and share these with others, and it is through the collective impact of discourses that our knowledge and perceptions of the world are constructed and shared.

Behind the discourses are our ideas and concepts, and these are located within our ideologies. Through ideologies we make sense of the world and give shape to it, and seek to reconcile our interests with those of others. Through discourses we share these ideologies with others and so shape social perceptions, and articulate our interests. We all have ideologies and engage in discourse; but in the social world some ideologies and discourses, and the interests they articulate, are more powerful and influential than others (see Fairclough, 1995; Finlayson, 2007). Academic discourse is important in shaping academic debate and providing a learning environment for students – as the articles cited here reveal. Practice discourses shape how third sector (or other) practitioners engage in activity – for instance, among other things, trade journals tell us about the latest trends in or ideas for organisational development. However, it is policy discourses that are most important for our purposes in seeking to understand definitions of the third sector, for the views of politicians and policy makers, formally expressed, carry the weight of government power and the democratic process – policy makers aim to shape perceptions and to change practices.

We have already discussed the extent to which different discourses can construct different notions of a third sector. Most recently, as Kendall (2003, 2009a) has discussed, the policy discourse in the UK has moved through three phases. First there was a move from incremental 'charity-centric' institution building with no clear broader sector scope, to 'voluntary sector' oriented incremental consolidation, influenced critically by the Wolfenden Report of 1978. Then, since 1997, influenced by the Deakin Commission (1996) and Michael's Labour Party paper on partnership (Labour Party, 1997), there has been a shift to the discourse of partnership and a more directive policy regime that Kendall (2009a) calls hyperactive mainstreaming and the creation of a third sector.

Kendall has been following the developing UK policy discourse for over a decade (Kendall and Knapp, 1996; Kendall 2003, 2009a). He explains how the terms used to describe and delineate the sector have altered from voluntary sector to voluntary and community sector, and then to third sector, in each also expanding the scope and scale of the sector and the policy landscape. The first phase of this was explored in an influential article by 6 and Leat, which was published in 1997, before the more recent Labour-led policy discourses. 6 and Leat analysed the role of leading intellectuals and key sector spokespersons in articulating the concept of a 'voluntary

sector' in the UK over Kendall's period of incremental consolidation from the end of the 1970s to the mid-1990s. They focus in particular on the Wolfenden (1978) and Deakin (1996) committees, arguing that they were instrumental in constituting and legitimating the notion of a unified voluntary sector where none had existed before, creating in effect a unity of discourse around the sector from a unity of purpose in reviewing and promoting it – and, as we shall see, similar processes have been under way since then in constructing the third sector.

Mirroring, to some extent, these developing discourses have been changes in the formal titles of the leading government departments responsible for implementation of policy. In effect, institution building has followed policy rhetoric here. Most significant has been the shift from the Voluntary Services Unit (VSU) to the Active Communities Unit (ACU) (and the Directorate; ACD) located within the Home Office, followed in 2006 by the creation of the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) within the Cabinet Office. Here too change has included expansion, with a massive increase in the budget administered and a broadening of the scope of the policy brief for OTS to include social enterprise, as discussed below.

This changing policy discourse applies to England only since 2000, following the delegation of third sector policy to the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Separate units delivering separate national policy initiatives now exist in each of these other countries, with both discourse and institution building taking place separately across the new (dis)United Kingdom (see Alcock, 2010).

To use the terminology developed by Kendall (2009b), the third sector has become a 'decontested' policy space within the UK in this first decade of the new century. There has thus been a consensus emerging about the use of the term 'third sector' to describe an entity with a number of common ideological features and, more importantly perhaps, to support a common policy response. As Carmel and Harlock (2008) argue, in part this is a product of a new discourse of governance through which agencies previously outside of formal policy planning can be instituted as a 'governable terrain' and therefore a site for policy intervention and, potentially, control. Policy makers have taken an active interest in securing the sector as a distinct entity. But it is not just policy makers who have contributed to this new consensus. In 6 and Leat's study of the earlier invention of the voluntary sector, practitioners also played a leading role; and, as Kendall (2009a and 2009b) discusses, many of the leading protagonists in academic debate and practice have a shared interest now in promoting and supporting the notion of a third sector as a homogenous entity.

Academic debate on the sector (as mentioned above) has sought to identify and locate the sector as a whole; political and policy commitment to welfare pluralism has promoted the sector as an alternative to the state and the market; and leading sector agencies and their representatives have benefited from collaborating to lobby for public recognition and support. Convergence has also taken concrete form in the development and implementation of major policy initiatives that seek to manage and support the sector and its relations with the state and the market – and in so doing also to shape and define it. These include the Compact, which is in large part a product of the Deakin and Michael reports mentioned above, and has been embraced by both government and leading sector agencies. They also include a major

programme of support for the sector as a whole – sometimes now referred to as the 'builders' programmes: Futurebuilders (now the Social Investment Business), Change-Up (Capacitybuilders) and more recently Communitybuilders. Sector practitioners have a shared interest in promoting these programmes in general as of relevance to the sector, as all potentially may benefit from them – although as we shall see, not all of course do.

The power of this new consensual discourse can perhaps be seen most clearly, however, in the merger of responsibility for social enterprise and the voluntary and community sector in the new Office of the Third Sector, where the creation of a broader third sector beyond the voluntary and community focus of the 1990s was translated into institutional form. Social enterprise had been developing as a significant feature of economic and social activity in the UK since the late 1990s, openly and increasingly supported by government as an alternative both to narrow profit orientation in the market and unresponsive bureaucracy in the state (see Peattie and Morley, 2008; Lyon, 2009). It had been supported by a separate Social Enterprise Unit (SEU) in the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and was promoted by powerful lobby organisations, notably the Social Enterprise Coalition (SEC). However, in 2006, the SEU was merged with the ACD into the new Office of the Third Sector, and policy for these two areas merged into a united third sector policy. Since then, this has largely been embraced by key interests in both areas – not the least because significant additional resources for the united sector (both financial and advisory) have flowed from this.

The joining of social enterprise and voluntary action may have been a marriage of convenience, but for the most part thus far the couple have been making a go of their life together. However, this is in part a strategic alliance, based on the shared benefits to be accrued from a unified third sector policy discourse. It may mask some underlying differences; and these may emerge more strongly in a different policy environment. Not all marriages survive the changing experiences of life together.

Fractured unities

The convergence of new support for the third sector and the decontested policy discourses that underpin this may therefore be something of a fragile consensus. It is interesting to note too that much of the above has in practice been increasingly an English discourse, led by English agencies; and, despite the similarities in developments in the other devolved administrations, the convergence agenda has not been quite so rapidly embraced within the other three countries of the UK. For instance, the merger of social enterprise and voluntary action within a new Third Sector Unit in Wales occurred much later than in England, and in Northern Ireland policy, and discourse, for the two remain separate. This raises the possibility that there may be a distinctly English dimension to the creation of a third sector in the UK, although in practice much policy discourse has thus far been common across the new national boundaries within the UK (Alcock, 2010).

More generally, however, as Kendall (2009b) discusses, the ideologies that underpin the third sector policy discourse are in practice fractured. Within the overall discourse

about a third sector in the UK, he identifies an unfolding ideological differentiation, with three different 'constellations' or 'camps' now emerging:

- consumerist discourse – largely based on quasi-market service delivery concerns, promoting the sector as an alternative to state and market failure;
- civil revivalist discourse – with a state-led focus on third sector contributions to civil order, promoting the sector as a response to a perceived democratic deficit;
- democratic renewal discourse – with a community focus on group action and engagement of local citizens, promoting the sector as a vehicle for community empowerment.

These all embrace rather different notions of what the third sector is and what it should be doing within the broader social and economic order. They can also be identified in the tensions expressed within some of the recent policy documents on the sector. Contrast, for instance, the service delivery focus of the HM Treasury cross-cutting reviews (HM Treasury, 2002, 2005) with the Home Office (2003) report on building civil renewal, and the attempt to bring together these two strands in the joint HM Treasury and Cabinet Office (2007) report on the future role of the sector in social and economic regeneration.

Within discourses of practice too, the unity of support for and benefit from a common third sector policy space may be fragmented. Some of the leading third sector practice bodies, such as the NCVO, the SEC, and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO), have been strong supporters of, and contributors to, the third sector discourse. However, it is the larger more well-established organisations, which they largely represent, that have been the major beneficiaries of recent policy and support. Smaller more community-based organisations have been less likely to secure government contracts for services or gain significant support from the 'builders' programmes. Some of the bodies representing these organisations, such as the Community Sector Coalition (CSC) and the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA), have been more critical of these developments and of their potential to exclude smaller community groups from the new third sector policy agenda and its potential benefits. There has been talk of a 'bifurcation' within the sector and a growing gap between insider and outside organisations, with the latter largely excluded from the new third sector discourse – although, as Craig et al (2004) explain, this differential impact of the new policy regime may be more complex than the bimodal insider/outsider model suggests.

The recent policies for support and regulation that have promoted and sustained a third sector discourse have been for the large part what Kendall (2003) has referred to as *horizontal* initiatives, intended in principle for all third sector organisations whatever their mission or service focus. These he contrasts with *vertical* policy support, which is provided for or focused on organisations operating within particular policy fields. Such support is in practice widespread in the UK (and elsewhere), and in fact has been of much longer standing than the horizontal initiatives, which have largely arisen in the last decade or so. Vertical support coordinates, and shapes, the activities and the structures of organisations that operate in particular policy fields. For instance, housing

associations are subject to distinct regulatory and budgetary regimes; until 2008 they were also largely supported and controlled by The Housing Corporation (which has now been divided into two tenant and funder bodies); and they are coordinated by a single national body – the National Housing Federation. And Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx) have been coordinated and supported since their foundation over half a century ago by a national body, now called Citizens Advice.

For organisations such as housing associations or CABx, the coordination and support provided within these vertical policy fields is for the most part more important than that provided by the horizontal agencies and programmes discussed above; and this is true for other fields too such as sports organisations, and arts and museums. As we shall see, this mission-focused unity is also more likely to dominate perceptions and discourses within these policy fields. It is another source of fragmentation and tension within the broader third sector policy discourse.

Third sector discourse has a fractured unity therefore. It is also a temporal phenomenon. Recent UK policy discourse dates largely from the late 1990s and the coming to power of the Labour administration, and especially from the creation of the OTS in 2006. Policies can change, in particular when the politics informing them change. As discussed above, there is a long history of shifting policy regimes for the third sector in the UK (Lewis, 1999; Taylor, 2004; Harris, 2010). We can anticipate that in the future there will be further shifts, which may reshape the current hegemony within third sector policy discourse – although whether this would happen under a possible future Conservative administration is perhaps an open question.

Discourses from practice

Whatever their convergence or fragmentation, policy discourses remain for the most part within an exogenous approach to third sector definition. To a large extent, as Carmel and Harlock (2008) argue, the sector is being created and imposed by the politicians and policy makers who wish to govern it. This can be contrasted with endogenous approaches to the definition of the sector, which seek to identify core features or values within the activities of those organisations that might constitute a sector, such as that developed in their ICNPO by Salamon and Anheier (1997) and employed to compare and classify such activity internationally. Such an endogenous approach can be found to some extent within discourses that seek to identify and promote key elements within a collaborative approach to practice. Practitioners may be more likely to conceive of a sector being unified on the basis of its intrinsic features or values, and to place these at the forefront of debate and definition. This raises the question of whether from such perspectives we may be able to construct a third sector from the bottom up.

A research literature based on practitioner definitions or bottom-up perceptions of the sector is more difficult to find, however – most practitioners probably think that they have better things to do with their time than engage in definitional debate about the extent to which they are operating within a unified sector. As discussed above, however, there is some evidence to suggest that practice discourses do not consistently share the unified third sector model. While some sector voices like ACEVO (2004)

have warmly embraced the government's notion of a proactive third sector and the roles it can play in a mixed economy of welfare, there has been concern among others such as NAVCA that these new policy discourses are having differential and potentially more damaging consequences in some other parts of a practically diverse sector (see Craig et al, 2004).

Of course there are in fact a multitude of discourses of practice; and within these it may be more difficult to establish the power or influence, still less the hegemony, of any than in the government–dominated policy discourses. What is clear from virtually all qualitative research is that the experiences and perceptions of third sector organisations are diverse; but are also generally closely tied to intrinsic features such as mission and values, professional identity, or organisational sustainability (see Alcock and Scott, 2005). Not surprisingly, practitioners are likely to identify more closely with the core activities of the organisations within which they work and associate any broader allegiances with this mission. Thus, from the example above, workers or volunteers in CABx are likely to see themselves as operating within an advice (sub) sector and to look to similar agencies and national bodies, such as Citizens Advice, to promote and support their work.

Such allegiances are also common in other fields, from housing associations to social care providers to environmental campaigns. It is the issues and values of their organisational practice that act most to unify practitioners and also to dominate debate about needs for support and development; and these are not just service based, they include also professional activities and identities, such as fundraising. What is more, these allegiances are frequently reinforced by the role and activity of umbrella or infrastructure agencies that have been developed to promote and support them. Some infrastructure agencies, such as the National Housing Federation, operate within these vertical policy fields; others, such as the Institute of Fundraising, offer support for professional activities; and others operate to define and promote broader potential subsectors, such as Voice4Change England, which seeks to represent a black and minority ethnic (BME) subsector.

There have been a growing number of infrastructure agencies operating within the broader UK third sector in recent years working primarily within different subsectors. And they are not only national agencies. There are local agencies, some with long histories, again both generic, such as the local Councils for Voluntary Services, and service specific, such as local advice centre umbrellas. More recently, as regional policy devolution has developed, regional agencies have been established too, to some extent sponsored by the government-established regional development agencies. Not all such coordination is bottom-up in practice, indeed the national Change-Up programme was specifically designed to promote and support infrastructure agencies across the sector.

Strategic unity

It is therefore perhaps because of the more contested nature of practice discourses that, despite the developing pressure for voluntary sector unity identified by 6 and Leat (1997), the Wolfenden and Deakin reports nevertheless questioned the existence of

any underlying unity within the sector. There is a contradiction at the heart of these comments, however, since, as 6 and Leat (1997) explained, both were reporting on, and indeed seeking to promote, the notion of a unified sector constituted from a broader conglomeration of these different agencies and interests. The same contradiction exists within the Change-Up programme, which is a sector-wide scheme to support a range of forms of infrastructural support – and has been a challenge to Capacitybuilders, the agency delivering the scheme, which has inevitably been accused by some of concentrating support in only some quarters of the sector.

The contradiction here is that while these actors may be aiming to promote and support distinct subsectors, they are operating across a supposedly unified third sector to do this. Their discourses of practice may protest that there is no underlying unity within the sector, but when they engage with the policy discourses they provide in effect an 'overlying' unity.

This overlying unity is a product of strategic alliances between practitioner representatives, policy makers, political actors and academic researchers. All contribute to the creation of the decontested space to which Kendall (2009b) refers, as all have an interest in defending the unifying ideology of a third sector, from which political profile, policy support and financial backing for this broader sector can be extracted. All have an interest in promoting a discourse of unity as all may potentially benefit from its higher profile and greater social penetration. In this sense therefore the notion of a third sector in the UK is the product of a particular constellation of interests and alliances within the context of a developing broader policy regime, focused on a particular vision of a mixed economy of welfare.

As Evers and Laville (2004) have argued, the different policy regimes of different countries have led to the construction of different models of a third sector elsewhere. For instance, they contrast the non-profit sector of the US with the social economy model of Western Europe – although both are of course conglomerate models of a unified sector. Policy discourses are a product of the policy regimes within which they are located. They are also a product of the changing balances of political power and policy debate within regimes. As discussed above, historical dynamics shape the construction of discourse too.

In the UK, the current construction of the third sector is a product of the recent changes in political power and policy direction brought about by the Labour government and its commitment to the hyperactive mainstreaming of horizontal support for the sector. This has been bolstered by the influence of a wider range of key policy and practice actors both within and outside the sector, such as the Deakin Commission and the NCVO (notably its chief executive, Stuart Etherington) supported by other leading sector voices such as ACEVO chief executive officer, Stephen Bubb, and including too politicians such as David Blunkett (2008), and civil servants such as Kenneth Stowe. Kendall (2009a) refers to these influential actors as policy *bricoleurs*, blending together a discourse of third sector unity, rather than acting as individual entrepreneurs for narrower interests, much as others had in the earlier phase described by 6 and Leat (1997).

This bricolage has therefore come together to constitute a particular model of a third sector in the UK at a particular point in historical time. It is not necessarily an

entirely clear-cut model. The location of the sector is something of a 'tension field' between other sectors and the boundaries between all are porous and overlapping (Evers and Laville, 2004); and as Billis (2010: forthcoming), for instance, argues, this can lead to a hybridisation of the sector, which may challenge any potential core values of voluntary action or social enterprise. But blurred boundaries are still boundaries, and for the most part most commentators are agreed about what is within (and outside) them.

What is more, the current constellation of policy and practice discourses on the third sector is a product of the particular policy context of 21st-century UK politics. The third sector that has been constructed within these discourses today is not the same as that constructed at the end of the 19th century, when very different politics and ideologies were at play (Lewis, 1999; Harris, 2010), or indeed in the 1980s when in policy discourse the voluntary sector was seen more as a market alternative to state welfare than as the partner it has since become (see Billis and Glennerster, 1998). And future political and policy change may reshape the notion of a sector again, particularly perhaps if cuts in public expenditure lead to the withdrawal of some of the horizontal support that has united the sector in strategic alliances.

The discourses that have constructed a united third sector in the UK are therefore very much a product of strategic alliances within and across the political, policy and practice divides. There is a strategic unity in defending a particular ideology of a single sector that these discourses spell out. But, as we have discussed, this is a fractured, and potentially fragmentary, unity, constructed in large part by practitioners and policy makers who know that there is much that divides as well unites them; and who are aware that in different circumstances, those divisions may rapidly come to the fore in discourses of deconstruction. Indeed, there are some who may argue that this has already happened, albeit that their voices are not those with most power and influence.

However, it is powerful and influential discourses that dominate debate and create hegemony. In the current conjuncture these powerful discourses have established hegemony around the notion of a homogenous third sector. The third sector has been constructed as a site for policy intervention and policy support and as a space for actors to share experiences and strengthen practice – third sector actors can learn from and support each other, and together can influence others, even while acknowledging internal diversity. Most significantly perhaps, internal diversity has been incorporated into the presentation of a sector constructed with a breadth and profile to stand alongside, and even to challenge, the public and private sectors. For instance, the annual NCVO Almanac has over recent years catalogued the inexorable growth of the sector in terms of all measures of income, expenditure, employment and more – and has recently been extended to report on a broader civil society sector, including universities, trades unions, sports clubs and political parties (Kane et al, 2009). Never before perhaps has the sector felt so strong and been so respected; and these are powerful drivers for strategic unity, which even political change or reduction in financial support may find it difficult to displace.

Conclusions

That the third sector has been constructed as the product of strategic unity rather than intrinsic features may be a depressing conclusion to reach for some, who want to believe that the sector can be distilled to some pristine Beveridgean notion of voluntary action. But as discussion of tension fields and hybridisation reveals, such a notion has no accepted theoretical currency; and as subsectoral allegiances and practice debates testify, it cannot be constructed from a natural aggregation of operational values. The notion of a third sector in the UK in the 2000s is a product of its particular time and place and of the strategic interests of most of the major protagonists in creating and sustaining it.

Nevertheless, strategic unity is effective unity, and it has changed the way in which third sector organisations are understood and supported in the UK, leading to extensive horizontal support for sector organisation and closer contact with government policy makers – a seat at the partnership table. It can also be identified in both exogenous and endogenous approaches to the problem of definition. A third sector has been constructed as what it is not, by policy discourses that distinguish it from the state and market and seek to promote the values that they associate with this. But it has also been constructed by discourses from within by those who wish to appeal to the shared strength that a distinctive sector can bring and from this to defend an ideological space that permits them to speak to government on behalf of a broad and indispensible constituency – as the 'summit meetings' with OTS ministers on the impact of the recession organised at the NCVO in 2008 and 2009 testify (and from which a package of support for the sector came; OTS, 2009). Strategic unity seems to be working here.

All fields of policy and practice are of course constructed through discourse. As 6 and Leat (1997) revealed, the current focus on the notion of a third sector is only the most recent manifestation of construction in this area in the UK, and one developed rapidly over just 10 years, as Kendall's (2009a) 'hyperactive mainstreaming' suggests. This raises the question therefore of whether this constructed third sector is more fractured or unstable than some other policy fields. Only time will tell here; but the differentiation within ideology identified by Kendall (2009b) above and the differential impact of key policy measures across the diverse organisations that make up the sector suggest that this may be a particularly unstable strategic unity. It could be contested from outside by a change in UK government policy and by further and more distinctive policy change within the devolved administrations. The extensive programmes of horizontal support are temporary, for instance, and could be cut by a future government concerned to curb expenditure commitments. This could reduce support for strategic unity inside the sector and lead to a re-emphasis on vertical support and a re-emergence of subfields.

Finally, this analysis also raises the question of what academics should be studying when they engage in research on a third sector. If our definition of this is the product of strategic unity, then what are the research questions that flow from this? Can we measure and analyse an entity that is only constructed through discourse and which is inevitably politically unstable? Can we describe and assess the collective impact of

third sector organisations, if the idea of a sector is primarily the product of strategic alliance? Should we not rather concentrate our efforts on the identification and activities of subfields, or focus more directly on the impact of hybridity? For the large part of course, these are not new challenges for academic researchers. Most are only too well aware that the concepts with which they work are always contested and that the data on which they rely are inevitably partial. This has not stopped us in the past, nor should it prevent us in the future. But it should make us aware that conceptual contestation and data reliability should be at the centre of our concerns and our questions, and never taken for granted.

Acknowledgements

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