

Labor Organizations and Collective Action

Carmen Sirianni

In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism. By John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. 862p. \$95.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

In the Interest of Others sets out to understand why some organizations, formed to further the instrumental interests of a specific group, are able to take actions, at some cost and risk, for a greater good extending beyond this group (typically defined in terms of broader social justice norms). The book is quite brilliant in terms of the rigor of its analytic argument and its use of a variety of methods to test and further revise core assumptions. I cannot do justice here to the complexity of Ahlquist and Levi's arguments, nor to the degree to which they (and their team of graduate and undergraduate research assistants) have thrown new light on several major cases in trade union history that constitute the main empirical evidence. This evidence spans over a century and includes comparative case study research across two continents and several paired cities, archival research, contemporary survey data, and qualitative research. The book is itself a major achievement of collective (research) action to which anyone working on these kinds of questions ought to pay special attention.

The core of the argument, in highly stylized form, goes something like this: Organizations – and especially certain kinds of trade unions – can develop the capacity for repeated action (games) on broader public goods over relatively long periods of time if they have leaders with strong normative and political commitments (formed especially in early struggles), do not seek excessive monetary leadership rents (salaries, perks, payoffs), and develop governance structures that are participatory (with *ex ante* and *ex post* accountability), deliberative (through various media of communication), and tolerant of dissent. These factors permit leaders considerable leeway in asking membership to take risks – to ask for political leadership rents – such as losing a day's pay in a sympathy strike,

spending time in jail for a politically motivated boycott, or taking positions (e.g. criticizing free trade) that seem to go against members' own material interests. In doing so, leaders have the potential to expand considerably the "community of fate" (p. 2) in which organizational members imagine themselves entwined. Leaders can do this, to be sure, only if they first secure industrial success.

The two cases that best exemplify this dynamic are the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), on the west coast of the U.S., and the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF, now merged into a larger federation) in Australia. Their governance structures and strategic choices over time are contrasted with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) in the U.S. and the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), in east coast American ports, both much narrower in terms of goals. The ILWU and the WWF each had formative struggles in their early histories where highly politicized leadership – by Communists, socialists, Laborites, and/or anarcho-syndicalists – proved especially important to securing the industrial power of the union, establishing broad norms of solidarity with workers and other social movements beyond sector or nation, and institutionalizing participatory governance structures.

My main concerns with this book center on its claims of applicability and relevance beyond a relatively narrow band of civic associations and even unions. Ahlquist and Levi, to be sure, have anticipated certain limits and provide a useful conversation with other analytic traditions. But let me put on the table a few salient concerns. First, few existing unions and, likely, few emergent ones, meet the conditions of contingency highlighted in the analysis, such as strong left-wing political founders and current leaders, gang work systems, dense ties to proximate neighborhoods around the docks, nepotistic hiring practices that strengthen family and neighborhood networks, and extraordinary leverage in the national economy and global supply chains. Some of these conditions were modified over time, but nonetheless

Carmen Sirianni is Morris Hillquit Professor of Labor and Social Thought, and Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at Brandeis University.

lend strong path-dependence to the analysis. Second, the model does not seem to extend very well to the production and legitimation of a whole host of other public goods, such as those provided by teachers unions that have to engage multi-stakeholder publics of taxpayers, employers, and parents; health care unions that have to manage collaborative relationships across very diverse skill sets and professional identities in the interests of affordable and effective care (Kochan, et al. 2009); or largely female clerical and technical worker unions that also have to manage complex service relationships on an everyday basis, as in the case of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (Eaton 1996). Forging the kinds of global solidarities that are so impressive in the ILWU and WWF is critical. But the challenges of producing, distributing, and legitimating public goods, which are so central to democratic national and local polities and which will likely come under even greater strain as we attempt to democratically manage adaptation to climate change, are not especially well clarified by the cases and core concepts of *In the Interest of Others*. Finally, while Ahlquist and Levi provide a wonderful analysis of the governance structures of the ILWU and WWF in terms of rents, dissent, and learning, and while they recognize that other organizations might

generate “functional alternatives” (p. 262), it is less clear that their core analytic pillars contribute much to broader theorizing on participatory governance (Fung 2004; Sirianni 2009; Weber 2003).

References

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