

**Handbook on Hybrid Organisations by David Billis and  
Colin Rochester (eds) (2020) [Book review]**

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## **Handbook on Hybrid Organisations**

Edited by David Billis and Colin Rochester

Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar

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576 pages

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In recent years, several publishers have started commissioning and accepting large 'handbooks' on a specific subject. Comprising a substantial number of original chapters, and offering comprehensive analyses of each topic, the aim of bringing dozens of authors together (53 different authors in this case, across 29 chapters) is similar to the subject-specific encyclopaedia model.

I'd always been slightly confused as to the purpose of these handbooks. Slightly overwhelming and off-putting in the sheer mass of content they include, and too bulky to carry round to take notes in cafes and parks, they'd always seemed to me a collection for collection's sake, the modern pre-packaged volume serving as the equivalent of the dusty leather-bound volumes one would find adorning the library room of a Victorian estate. Nice to have, but not to be read.

While the idea of reading this new *Handbook on Hybrid Organisations* edited by field luminaries David Billis and Colin Rochester *cover-to-cover* still fills me with a certain apprehension, I do, after spending many enjoyable hours selecting its glinting contents like a very singular magpie, see the point. Because what this volume contains, I am sure, is every academic thought, argument, and research agenda, one could hope to think about how hybrid organisations work and what they mean. It is laid out in a way that encourages the pick and mix approach, providing something that will help the new researcher wanting to get to grips with notions of hybridity for the first time, alongside chapters that take a very specific argument or organisation type and run with it.

In their introduction, the editors discuss many of the contradictions and issues associated with studying hybrid organisations, and note how this field of research 'would benefit from additional and more structured ways of discussion and dissemination' (p.26). Such an issue may be because hybridity is perhaps not always the issue driving the research, rather the work of the organisation is, but that this means the gap between theory and reality grows wider, as new hybrids and instigated and encouraged (especially by governments) emerge around the world, in an ever growing diversity of forms. Giving us the tools to look across this looser and baggier monster is something this handbook provides.

Following the extensive and detailed introduction, the book is organised into four main sections: the first three are on public sector, private sector, and third sector hybrids respectively, followed by the fourth on more cross-cutting issues such as volunteering, geographic specificities, and an interesting developmental chapter from Billis himself, concerning the connection between notions of hybridity and the personal world, focused on book groups. Such an order is probably the only sensible way one could organise the material, but of course the nature of their hybridity means much of the work is cross-cutting. Space does not allow for a full exploration of the whole book, but several chapters are worthy of special mention. Curtis Child's work on the dilemmas of social enterprise is a surprisingly normative argument about the moral concerns one can have with this sector. Through an innovative application of Michael Sandel's work on marketisation, Child cautions that perhaps

social enterprises 'work against the public-spiritedness that ought to govern how we address the problems that vex us' (p.215), but then presents arguments against this framing through economic logics made by Zelizer, who posits that consumption choices can make life meaningful. It's a really vibrant argument about the marketisation of moral life. Another significant chapter is that on the rise of the Dutch East India Company by Patrick Vermeulen and Arlette Cindy van Lint. This contribution is a really nice change of pace, as it is ostensibly a piece of economic history in a collection otherwise driven by social science and organisation studies. Vermeulen and van Lint examine how the Company, which existed from 1602 to 1799 and was a national trading company set up to monopolise trade from the East for the Dutch economy, adopted by the state and backed by private shareholders, balanced the competing logics of state and commerce. It's a fascinating and singular case study, and points well to the richness and possibilities in applying notions of hybridity across both national or local contexts, and through time.

Billis and Rochester should be commended for the work they have done here. Corraling this much material into a sensible order with all the permissions required is a huge undertaking and one that has paid off. One minor criticism would be that most chapters do replicate much of the same introductory definitional and conceptual work (with Battilana and Lee cited ad nauseum for instance). Some tighter editorial work here was perhaps warranted, although this does mean chapters can stand on their own more easily. But overall, if you are working on hybrid organisations in some way, or don't know where to start, it now goes without saying that this is where you should start.

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