

Book Review: Volunteering in the United Kingdom: The spirit of service, by Mohan, J.

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Book Review: Mohan, J. (2024). *Volunteering in the United Kingdom: The spirit of service*. Manchester University Press. 320 pp., £20.00, ISBN: 9781526145529 (paperback)

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The United Kingdom is one of the West's most centralized nation states. While there have been some recent efforts at devolution, especially to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, central government from Westminster continues to control an extraordinary amount of policy and spending decisions, as opposed to local or regional governments. This state of affairs is often held up as one of the factors behind the UK's weak economic growth and stagnation over the last generation, but it does mean that when government sets a new policy course, we do see how that change brings effects across a whole nation. Since the New Labour government of 1997-2010, volunteering has played an increasing role in UK government policy, often held up as a 'panacea' for various problems, including youth unemployment, absent community cohesion, lack of civic engagement, local regeneration, and, in 2025, migrant assimilation.

Tracking this policy environment over the last generation has been John Mohan, who, in his work as Director of the Third Sector Research Centre at the Universities of Southampton and Birmingham, has undertaken numerous research projects, making use of rather innovative qualitative and quantitative methods, exploring who volunteers in the UK, what they get out of it, what promises are made about the benefits of volunteering and how true are they, and what the overall effect of this—to borrow Jeremy Kendall's phrase—'hyperactive' burst of policy has been. This new volume is the culmination of much of this work, and serves as a touchstone text for new and experienced researchers wanting to know all about volunteering, both in the UK, but also as a comprehensive case study for wider global reflection.

The book starts and ends with William Beveridge, author of the mid-World War Two report which served as the foundation for much of the UK welfare state. Beveridge also wrote a report on voluntary action in 1948, arguing that 'the spirit of service' was within the British people, as evidenced by the well of support that citizens held ready to contribute, if the security of the new welfare state could provide structures and opportunities to give (p. 5). It's one of many examples of Mohan's ability to take the long view: using historical examples and cases to illustrate change and stasis today. His work with Rose Lindsey, making use of the Mass Observation Project's qualitative data which asks ordinary people to respond to prompts at various historical moments, is threaded through the book, and helps explain how volunteering policy ideas are understood by the general public, and the discordances that are thus highlighted.

The book is organised around four sections, bookended by a stimulating introduction and conclusion. *Frameworks*, serves to explain how volunteering is defined and

conceptualised, and present the statistical story of participation rates, making use of national level surveys. *Contours*, explains the diversity and inequality seen within volunteering, uncovering the reasons for uneven participation, along demographic and geographical lines, and also explains personal trajectories through volunteering, through the life course for example. *Impacts* looks at the consequences of voluntary action, looking at the policy areas of employability, health and civic engagement, and cautions against expecting too much personal or social transformation from volunteering. Finally, *Changing Contexts* looks at specific challenges to volunteering, such as the role of attitudinal change, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mohan doesn't shy away from addressing the limits of volunteering, and how, in British politicians' exhortation of it, volunteering is almost always seen as a response to the superficial manifestation of social problems as opposed to tackling root causes. This depoliticization speaks to the problem of the 'third way' approach to politics that has shaped contemporary Britain, and also leads to the citing of Gramsci's reflections on the 'cult' of volunteering and the hegemony of capital. The political-economic story of the UK in the last 30 years is 15 years of relative prosperity, and 15 years of uneven austerity. Much of Mohan's analysis comes full circle, to question the extent to which voluntary action can be transformative without real community empowerment. Despite all this attention to volunteering, rates of participation are currently worrying low (with adult annual formal volunteering dropping from 45% in 2005 to 28% in 2023 [p.38]), which, I would argue, contributes to the UK's current malaise.

The word comprehensive doesn't really do the book justice. It is jam-packed with references, examples, detailed overviews of studies (both Mohan's own and others'), and explains both the fundamentals of volunteering (such as its definition and conceptualisation, participation rates, modern trends, benefits and impacts) alongside politicians' engagement with volunteering, and volunteering's social duty, such as its role during the 2012 Olympics and voluntary responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mohan is to be commended for making a subject that can at times be both technical and statistic-heavy into a prose that is light and quickly-paced. One's attention rarely drops. Mohan also doesn't suffer fools gladly. Where a claim—about the supposed benefits of volunteering to the volunteer for example—has been made that does not add up, he says so directly and with evidence, rather than awkwardly dancing around it with caveats. It makes the book much more readable, accessible, and useful, especially as a text that students will be encouraged to use. In teaching, *Volunteering in the United Kingdom* will serve as a broad overview, an example of critical policy analysis, a guide to constructing good data visualisation, and as a multifaceted methods exemplar.

Two small criticisms would be that: the book doesn't always flow *between* chapters—there's a lot of cross-referencing as certain studies are returned to again—which makes reading it as a linear experience slightly harder than expected, and necessitates

thorough use of the index; and second that international comparisons are lacking. For someone versed in the context that isn't a problem, but for people unaware of the specific shape of British social life and politics, they may find it harder to immediately grasp some of the nuances and power at play.

But these are micro-concerns against the huge contribution that Mohan's new volume makes to our understanding of volunteering and the glue holding us together at a community level. This book deserves to be on reading lists for a generation.