

## **Elusive spaces and organisational forms: a partial recovery of the history of the 'third sector idea'**

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### **Abstract**

The third sector is variously conceived of an institutional space between state, market and household or as a collection of organisations with particular values and structural characteristics. Against the backdrop of the recent growth of interest in the third sector, this paper begins by exploring the genealogy of the term from diverse work by writers such as Etzioni, Levitt and Bell in the United States during the 1970s. It then discusses how the term 'third sector' was rediscovered and gained wider usage during the 1990s as part of a wave of 'non-governmentalism' (Lewis 2005) that also encompassed ideas about non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international development, civil society and democracy, and the role of the voluntary sector in the mixed economy of welfare within industrialised societies. Some advocates stress the primacy of social ideas and values as the defining feature of the third sector, while others have taken a metrics approach to trying to measure its dimensions and growth.

What all these terms/discussions have in common is that they form part of an increasingly ubiquitous way of framing institutional landscapes and policy parameters that rests on various versions of a 'three sector model' - whether in terms of the World Bank's 'good governance' agenda or the UK government's current vision of public service reform. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ways in which the third sector idea may still be an area of contestation between those who see it as an instrument for forms of neoliberal restructuring between states and citizens, and those who view it as a site of resistance to such efforts.

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