



**Claire Dunning.** *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.

Government is “more like hardware stores than master builders. . . . We simply give people the tools to do it themselves,” said Vice President Al Gore in characterizing the Empowerment Zones of the Clinton era, the administration’s program in establishing the nonprofit as among the chief arbiters of investment in poverty-stricken neighborhoods (235). Such quips like that of Gore are emblematic of the decades-long and central tendency in the practice of U.S. governance: to outsource government functions to private not-for-profit corporations, and the asymmetries in power and economic and race relations this begets.

It is precisely the abdication of a strong administrative state, the patchwork of local nonprofits arisen to mitigate the dearth of social services provisioning, and the political conflicts spawned by the ensuing exacerbation of class and racial tensions, that prompt Claire Dunning’s novel inquiry in *Nonprofit Neighborhoods*. Where nonprofits may be treated as tangential to either analysis of broader patterns in governance, or in questions probing at the mechanisms of social services allocation, Dunning instead places nonprofits at center-stage in the unfolding of the neoliberal revolution—whether or not the people who staffed and directed them realized this uncomfortable truth (17).

One way to read *Nonprofit Neighborhoods* is as a survey of the political economic processes by which private, not-for-profit organizations—operating in the minority and lower-income neighborhoods of Boston, Massachusetts—provisioned social services within their constituencies and proxied as *ersatz* exercises of state power for disaffected communities. Dunning eponymously terms the “nonprofit neighborhood” as the primary unit of analysis in which nonprofits interface with the state, financial markets, and local constituencies, although the depth of punctilious detail to which the author goes portrays a state of affairs far more complex than a simplistic picture of siloed interactions between discrete organizations (14–15). In Dunning’s analysis, the nonprofit is itself “structural[ly] embedd[ed] in urban governance” (*Ibid.*), and a host to contests between the economic needs and political realization of constituencies—all transpiring alongside the inexorable march of neoliberalization defining the U.S. political economy of the late twentieth century (17).

Consistent with the line of thought of “policy as ideology,” it is through the grantmaking process that the undercurrents of a neoliberal political economy play out (11). The trajectory in Dunning’s narrative begins with the devastation wrought by the Great Depression in Boston, honing in on middle-class, predominantly Black communities in South End and Roxbury. In the milieu of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, the federal government’s grantmaking capacity through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) rendered it “a major philanthropist,” and would come to epitomize national policy on poverty mitigation: the conscientious decision to delegate the burden of poverty mitigation to nonprofits, and to have the issuing of grants be conducted through a competitive process (77). The OEO would be one of many “systems” in which social services would be delivered, from the Model Cities program (120) to the Little City Halls of Boston (138); the latter two, importantly, represented a turn from the direct nonprofit contracting by the federal government to greater control in municipal governments needing “on demand” services (146). These systems are distinguished from “structures.” While time and again, efforts to technically reform the systems for services delivery and metrics for evaluating “success” appear to manifest as novel and innovative solutions, they are bereft of any serious challenge to the structures undergirding the political economy of poverty (246).

*Nonprofit Neighborhoods* is replete with institutional detail, incorporating an “alphabet soup” appendix of initialisms representing Bostonian neighborhood nonprofits, rivaling that of federal government agencies. In the ecosystem of actors comprising the body politic of a municipality, nonprofits saw a confluence of interests ranging from the radicalism of grassroots activists, tenants, federal technocrats, and the old guard of monied bankers and institutional capital (18). Each chapter proceeds to historicize the relationships cultivated, strained, and exploited by these actors and nonprofits toward varying ends.

Relationships between two institutions command particular attention. The first is the community development corporation (CDC), organizations created by Black and Puerto Rican Bostonians throughout the 1960’s as vehicles for affordable housing development (102). As to the second, one elucidating chapter investigates the phenomenon of *intermediaries*, middleman nonprofits that bridged relations between activist nonprofits and bank lenders to finance the work of the former (149). By example of Bob Whittlesey and Greater Boston Community Development, Dunning illustrates the transition from a regime of grant-issuing by the federal government to one in which CDC dependence on financialized revenue streams—facilitated by intermediaries—was instrumental to their continuing survival (Ibid.).

Contradictions abounded from the marriage of activism touting a radical politics and the upper-class echelons of Boston's finance sector. In one stark example, Mel King (formerly director of the United South End Settlements neighborhood youth program (80) and later representative in the Massachusetts legislature), although championing greater state funding toward impoverished communities, advocated for doing so by way of the financial markets (152). Through King's efforts, the Massachusetts Community Development Finance Corporation (CDFC) would come to finance CDCs through loans and debt and securitized equity investments and inaugurate an approach throughout the state of Massachusetts of business-savvy entrepreneurship to remedy social crises (153). Such tensions underscore an evergreen dilemma posed to grassroots organizers: the tenability of a "radical" politics operating within a system inherently stymied by its inertia and artificial constraints to an economically liberating fiscal policy.

At the outset of the exposition, Dunning is careful to clarify that the intent is to not outwardly indict the efforts of nonprofits or to laud them as a panacea to society's ills (23). Indeed, Dunning articulates the critical point that "improving outcomes is not the same as eliminating causes" (Ibid). However, it is also true that, even in a general macroeconomic setting of austerity, nonprofits can deliberately act in nefarious ways while masquerading under the guise of pursuing a mission for social good.

For context, I came to Dunning's work in two capacities: first, as a scholar of law and political economy, specializing in how corporate litigation—including that of not-for-profit corporations—and the collective jurisprudence of corporate actors molds the legal-economic relations of workers and employers, the state and businesses, and all of those with society at large. Secondly, as a public servant in the New York State legislature, I have witnessed the political economic processes of urban nonprofit services provisioning in my own professional life—including nonprofits themselves as progenitors of profound injustices such as criminal wage theft from immigrant workers. As such, my perspective on social services nonprofits is one of rendering the system of delegation of public authority to private entities obsolete and rebuilding the administrative state to provision such services on a *universal*, not neighborhood, basis.

As an institutional survey, Dunning's work is of impeccable rigor. The author's inductivist method to scrutinizing the actions and politics inherent to the manifold institutions examined in the book is precisely the contribution to the research literature needed, in contrast to reductionist tendencies to homogenize institutions into simplistic categories. Readers will find their priors

challenged and their analysis of nonprofits evolve from one of vessels for individual moralism and charity, to institutions whose existence and actions have profound implications for reconstituting the U.S. political economy.

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