

Towards a relational view of the shadow state

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Abstract

The shadow state concept emerged nearly two decades ago as part of scholars' efforts to critically analyze welfare state restructuring. Recent restructuring has introduced new arrangements of power that have engendered multiple ways in which institutions of the state and civil society interact. This paper seeks to broaden the shadow state concept in order to incorporate the relational interaction of government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Many different types of interaction are possible and this paper elaborates on two through case studies of immigrant-serving nonprofit organizations in the United States. The specific cases illustrate some of the particular differentiated arrangements of power between government agencies and nonprofits, which animate contemporary shadow state relationships in the US. Moreover, the case studies highlight the general value of working towards a relational view of the shadow state to understand the evolving and constitutive nature of relationships between state and civil society in welfare states.

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Introduction

It was almost two decades ago when Wolch (1990) theorized the emergence and implication of the “shadow state.” Geiger and Wolch (1986) pioneered this term to articulate the effects of the increasing importance of the voluntary sector to the operation of the welfare state in both the UK and US during the 1980s. In the US, processes of devolution, privatization, and retrenchment have unfolded over the last decade and deepened this trend (Kodras, 1997).

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Indeed, nonprofits have become an essential part of the government-funded social service delivery system. Moreover, the private sector is also increasingly important in the provisioning of state functions. For instance, private security firms, such as Blackwater USA, in Iraq, and corporate prisons, such as the Corrections Corporation of America in Bay County, Florida, demonstrate that private sector actors are now part of the shadow state apparatus too.¹

These developments in the private and nonprofit sectors indicate that the relationships between state and non-state institutions have grown more complex and are arguably different from those that emerged during the 1980s (Milligan & Conradson, 2006; Milligan & Fyfe, 2005). Moreover, these relationships are not captured by the ideas that Wolch and Geiger introduced to explain the shadow state apparatus. The shadow state still exists today (Wolch, 2006); however, the conceptualization of the relationships between state and non-state institutions is primed for revision. Indeed, the growing complexity of relationships between state institutions and nonprofit organizations, for instance, requires theory that can appreciate the variegated interactions that take place between state and non-state actors. This paper proposes a revised view of the shadow state that conceptualizes the evolving and constitutive nature of relationships between institutions of the state and civil society. I focus specifically on nonprofit organizations that receive government funding to provide services. I thus use “nonprofit organizations” and variant terms to refer narrowly to private organizations with a charitable mission that deliver social services.

I develop a conceptualization of the shadow state that focuses on the relational interaction between government agencies and nonprofit organizations. This conceptual framework is animated by case study research of two immigrant-serving nonprofit organizations in Minneapolis–Saint Paul, a US metropolitan area experiencing a rapid increase in its foreign-born population. The case studies bring attention to the differentiated arrangements of power between government and nonprofit sectors. The case studies also illustrate that there are multiple and sometimes contradictory relationships that connect government and nonprofits. I resolve such contradictions by thinking of nonprofit organizations as spaces in which the hybrid formation of state and civil society relationships takes place. This paper thus promotes a relational view of the shadow state as a way to build on the existing literature and stimulate discussion about how the shadow state can be conceptualized to reflect the complex arrangements that now characterize relationships between institutions of the state and civil society. And while the empirical focus of the paper is directed to these relationships as they have taken form in the particular experience of migrant-serving nonprofits in the US, the relational approach to the shadow state applies to other areas of the nonprofit sector as well as other national contexts in which welfare state restructuring is taking place.

I develop a relational view of the shadow state in three parts. This first part constructs a framework for examining the multiple directionalities involved in the interactions between

¹ Jeremy Scahill's (2007) book on Blackwater USA, raises a number of issues that parallel the concerns Wolch (1990) raises about offloading of services to non-state institutions. Blackwater USA is a private security firm that has accepted contracts from the United States' Department of Defense to provide military functions in Iraq as well as other locations. However, the firm and its personnel often operate outside the scope of the US military's chain of command. Media coverage of Blackwater personnel's unprovoked attack of Iraqis in September 2007 suggests that the firm operates independently and has little to no accountability for its actions (e.g., see Tavernise, 2007). The independence of firms like Blackwater USA has prompted Scahill to term it a “shadow army.” The details of service offloading to firms like Blackwater USA are different than offloading to nonprofits, but the accountability concerns remain the same. Indeed, the offloading of services to non-elected institutions introduces relationships that can and often do present a challenge to the practice of democracy.

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