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NGOs, Social Movements and the Neoliberal State: Incorporation, Reinvention, Critique

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Introduction

As the global financial crisis turns a decade old, economic and political polarisation has intensified. The nature of neoliberalism as a mode of accumulation that penetrates virtually all aspects of economic, political and social life has meant that the global financial crisis is, of course, not limited to the economy. It has come to be accompanied by full-scale political and social crises in both the Global North and South (Cahill and Konings, 2017; Mirowski, 2014), and a crisis of neoliberalism itself (Saad-Filho, 2011). Despite the intellectual vacuity of neoliberalism as a system capable of explaining the world, and its declining legitimacy the world over, the neoliberals themselves appear to have no alternative to neoliberalism, except authoritarianism. The question is whether the managers of the system are capable of containing the crisis – or otherwise allowing the emergence of even more reactionary, xenophobic forces to assume power – or whether the crisis will be resolved through mass opposition to the neoliberal state. A progressive opposition will include the range of social movements, trade unions and political parties, and the building of alternative institutions, throwing neoliberalism into further crisis. Within this frame, what makes NGOs distinct is their ambivalence: the fact that they are, on the one hand, a ‘favoured institutional form’ (Kamat, 2013: ix) of the neoliberal state and, on the other, capable of building alliances against neoliberalism, particularly in times of polarisation and crisis (Beinin, 2014; Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014). In a global context where NGOs are subject to further subsumption as ideological weapons of the state and ‘material complicity with capital’ (Choudry and Kapoor, 2013: 14), and yet where there is growing class conflict and an increasing rejection of the status quo, we cannot assume their political affinities and affiliations; instead we must consider whether and how exactly they engage in oppositional politics and under what conditions.

The neoliberal venture of the past four decades has been devastatingly successful in reinforcing the transfer of wealth and power from public to private, from poor to rich and from labour to capital. In the process, this phase of capitalism has brought forth deepening financialisation and commodification, intensified planetary destruction and war, including the threat of nuclear war. Racism, repression and the strengthening of borders are on the rise in some contexts, with associated far-right, nationalist and authoritarian trends (Ahmad, 2016; Bruff, 2014; Davidson and Saull, 2017). As austerity politics have realised a renaissance and intensified neoliberal policies, one factor that has been given less attention – the wild card that has proven difficult for governments, commentators and financial markets to predict – is the popular response to austerity and persistent crisis. This is the weakness of neoliberalism: it has given rise to a generalised political consciousness, mounting research and analysis over its disastrous effects, and growing protest (Bailey, 2015; Cox and Nilsen, 2014). At the electoral level, with the collapse of the so-called extreme centre (Ali, 2015; Anderson, 2017; Chomsky, 2011) in many parts of the world, right-wing parties are on the rise, but left-wing parties are also making gains. It is in this turbulent (and in the case of Trump, unrestrained) global climate that NGOs are analysed. The special issue presents case studies from Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, China and the United States, contributing to an examination of processes of contestation and co-optation and providing insights into the challenges facing left struggles and social movement politics today. Together, the articles advance three arguments. First, that the crisis of neoliberalism has made NGOs liable to further incorporation into the neoliberal fold, whereby they occupy a structural position – through ideological and material means – of neutralising dissent. Second, that an analysis of the balance of class forces in society, including the interaction between domestic politics and global geopolitics, enables an understanding of the role of NGOs. Finally, that where NGOs dominate a particular political and social culture, the left needs a strategy for how to deal with NGOs.

Authoritarian States and the Crackdown on NGOs

If neoliberalism was a response to the working-class struggles of the post-war decades, a means of restructuring class relations, restoring the conditions for capital accumulation and reinforcing class power (Harvey, 2005; Panitch and Gindin, 2008), then the ‘authoritarian fix’ (Bruff, 2014: 125) in certain neoliberal states has partly been a response to increased resistance and aspirations for alternatives to neoliberalism and imperialism since the financial crisis. Authoritarian neoliberalism has expressed itself in at least three principal ways, with palpable implications for NGOs. First, the non-market institutional forms employed by the neoliberal state have often taken the guise of a reactionary nationalism, accompanied by the use of a rhetoric around opposing so-called antinational elements: the ‘terrorist threat’, corruption and the dominance of foreign NGOs. The fear of economic insecurity, held by the vast masses as a result of liberalisation, has been transferred to fears around national security, which the state can control and regulate. This new incarnation of nationalism, while it plays out in different ways in different national contexts, emphasises an aggressive entrepreneurialism, mobilising populations on the basis of division and chauvinism. The donations and activities of NGOs in an increasing number of countries – Egypt, Ethiopia, Hungary, India, Kenya, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Turkey, Venezuela and elsewhere – have come under greater scrutiny as they have worked to expose government misconduct.

Second, the reconfiguring of the state under authoritarian neoliberalism has involved the shift towards constitutional and legal mechanisms and the shift away from seeking consent (Ahmad, 2016; Bruff, 2014), serving to undermine democracy. The ruling classes under authoritarian neoliberalism are arguably ‘less interested in neutralizing resistance and dissent via concessions and forms of compromise that maintain their hegemony’ (Bruff, 2014: 116); rather, exclusion and marginalisation of the poor, people of colour, Dalits and others – including those who dissent – is legislated. Ostensibly democratic institutions have further institutionalised social relations based on class power and dominant identities. There is also evidence to suggest that where governments are fighting competitive elections, the outcomes of which could risk political survival or strengthen opposition to authoritarian rule, restrictive legal mechanisms against NGOs in particular have increased (Dupuy et al., 2016). NGOs are seen by authoritarian governments as part of wider civil society opposition.

Finally, the unpopularity of regimes imposing austerity in different forms, as a result of failures to deliver on economic promises, has led to a general crackdown on resistance and dissent. Examples include outlawing spaces for protest, arbitrary arrests on spurious grounds and disproportionate responses to peaceful protest. The targeting of NGOs as part of this familiar crackdown is indicative not necessarily of the progressive political orientation of NGOs, but how neoliberal regimes are turning authoritarian in response to even moderate demands. In several cases, the crackdown has worked: in India, Modi’s Hindu nationalist government was successful in banning the Ford Foundation and Greenpeace from continuing operations, serving to warn other NGOs to fall into line. Under these circumstances, NGOs need a more co-ordinated and collective strategy to contest the advances of neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

There are contradictory processes at work. Accompanying the crackdown is the unabated growth of NGOs, and both the current deployment of and crackdown on NGOs by the neoliberal state demonstrates their continued relevance as vital aspects of capitalism and for stabilising the neoliberal order. On the one hand, governments have the right to scrutinise NGO funding: the use of funds for the spread of anti-communist propaganda and projects has been widely recognised and documented. With the backing of imperial powers, NGOs have at times been participants in attempting to persecute, weaken or oust left-wing or previously non-aligned governments across the developing world. Funding that furthers the aims of imperialism and war is perhaps the most egregious use of NGOs (Petras, 1999), and governments have the right to political control (Dupuy et al., 2016). On the other hand, authoritarian regimes work with particular NGOs that further the interests of the right, either in terms of nationalism or conservatism but almost invariably combined with austerity policies. As the centre ground attempts to reconstitute itself in response to political and social polarisation (Anderson, 2017), those NGOs that are willing to support or co-operate with authoritarian or centrist regimes, or work with corporate, financial and political elites, are consolidated. In this sense, they can be understood as forming part of the extreme centre, as it struggles to find new forms of rule (Ali, 2015). Yet where the neoliberal state vilifies NGOs that are working at some level to expose the excesses of the state, and in which they avoid being instrumentalised, then NGOs must be defended. The contradictory space of the NGO sector must be consistently negotiated – sometimes from within, sometimes from without – but always with the aim of trying to develop a hegemonic strategy of opposition.

NGOs, Social Movements and the Left

Over the past 30 years, as the global NGO sector has grown in size and diversity (Lewis and Schuller, 2017), the left and social movements broadly speaking have developed more nuanced positions towards NGOs. Whereas left parties tended to see NGOs as ‘agents of imperialism’ – in Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East – they have developed a more complex reading of NGOs in line with the complexity of the sector. Social movements have at times allied with NGOs, especially international human rights and advocacy NGOs, to gain domestic political leverage. The Dalit movement in India is an important example, successfully using this strategy to mobilise political pressure for Dalit rights at national and global levels, as well as to sustain the movement at home (Waghmore, 2012). Social movement activists, feminists and the left have also used the ‘NGO form’ (Bernal and Grewal, 2014: 6; Alvarez, 2009) as a method of survival during times of repression. In the current conjuncture, it is unclear to what extent such tactical alliances made by the left with the NGO sector will be viable. As erstwhile democratic states adopt more authoritarian measures, emboldening the far right within their borders, the extent to which international NGOs will be able to support national NGOs and movements against the state is an open question. Moreover, while progressive NGOs are being demobilised and declared anti-national, NGOs that partner with businesses and multinational companies through ‘corporate social responsibility’ and ‘public-private partnerships’ constitute a growth sector. The balance of forces has shifted significantly, placing NGOs allied with popular struggles at significant risk, particularly in the Global South.

The growth of the NGO sector as a pillar of the neoliberal state has been established by a number of scholars (Bernal and Grewal, 2014; Elyachar, 2005; Jalali, 2013; Kamat, 2004; Rankin, 2001; Schuller, 2013; Sharma, 2008). At a basic level, the state’s retreat from welfare creates the conditions for NGOs to serve as providers of services that people desperately need. This in itself has come to justify the ubiquitous presence of NGOs, particularly in the face of humanitarian crisis (Edmonds, 2012; Klein, 2008; Krause, 2014; Schuller, 2013, 2017). In times of economic precarity, NGOs appear as relatively stable sources of employment and NGO experts represent the ‘intellectual leadership’ of an instrumental and technocratic variety (Moore and Moyo, this issue). The corporatised, professionalised and specialised NGO reframes movements and struggles to fit within an apolitical ‘global policy language’ (Mannan, 2015; see also Kapoor, 2012; Karim, this issue). Left activists working in movement organisations with a mass base recognise the contradictory space of the NGO sector and can resist being absorbed into the bureaucratic structures of NGOs, as the Maoists in Nepal and the Dalit NGOs in India testify, albeit with different implications for their struggles (Ismail, this issue; Jaoul, this issue). It is in this context that the term ‘NGOisation’ has gained popularity and it is not uncommon for left activists, who may be employed in NGOs, to recognise the effects of NGOisation and be discomfited by it. This marks a shift from the first generation of NGO studies when such self-reflexive insider critiques were uncommon. In these cases, as in the analyses of labour NGOs in China and worker centres in the US (Pringle, this issue; Frantz and Fernandes, this issue), important contextual factors include the movement histories and backgrounds of the leadership and their intellectual formation in left organisations.

While taking various forms, NGOs themselves are thus a contradictory set of institutions: the disjuncture between their funding streams and the social spheres from which they draw their support and in which they operate makes them peculiarly open to abuse by powerful interests that want to instrumentalise them to influence social developments or opinion on the ground. The influence of NGOs can lead to the corruption of genuine mass movements through the NGOisation of their leadership or the distortion of their political aims. Left organisations and mass movements must, therefore, approach NGOs with caution and clarity. They must understand NGO dynamics and work out ways in which their operations can be scrutinised and, where possible, controlled by mass, democratic, organisation. That US-based movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, which represent a radical yet broad political spectrum, are unequivocal in their rejection of the NGO form, reflects an understanding of what the political stakes are in building effective resistance against the violence of the state.

NGOs may be theorised as one more institutional form of civil society through which class relations are contested and reworked. Despite the material and ideological constraints imposed by funding, NGOs do possess a degree of agency that can influence the conditions in which they operate: the decisions they make can either further class struggle or undermine it. How political alternatives are crafted depends on national conditions, which are influenced by the balance of class forces, including the strength of the neoliberal state but also the strength of the left.

Conjunctural Analyses for a Left Strategy

The articles in this issue contribute to an understanding of how NGOs are positioned in the current conjuncture, how they are part of shaping this conjuncture, and how the resistances that develop within and against NGOs are part of broader oppositional politics. The overall aims are to further theorise NGOs as part of the balance of class forces that impact oppositional politics at national and international levels, put NGO agency at the centre of this theorisation and consider whether and how NGOs in different contexts can be won over to being part of the project of resistance to neoliberalism. The articles are, therefore, not studies of NGOs per se but conjunctural analyses that foreground the political economy of particular national contexts with the purpose of clarifying left strategy and advancing left politics (Flohr and Harrison, 2016; Cox and Nilsen, 2014). NGOs interact with the neoliberal state and deepening inequality in distinct ways, given the vastly different politics of each national context. At the same time, NGOisation and depoliticisation are shared concerns, and the case studies reveal how these processes are negotiated, mediated and resisted by political actors within and outside NGOs. Further, as critical scholarship on NGOs suggests, including the cases discussed here, it is important to scrutinise the ways in which NGOs have contributed to the demobilisation of radical politics and undercut opposition to neoliberalism. What NGOs do in response to the crisis of neoliberalism is significant, and makes a difference to how the crisis will be resolved.

The contributions consider the contradictions of state–NGO relations under weak and/or authoritarian regimes such as those in Zimbabwe and Bangladesh; the influence of both funding and ideology on the party and non-party left, as in Nepal and India; and finally, the adoption by NGOs of neoliberal rationalities, which undermine more militant forms of organising, but which under other conditions are resisted, and interventions forged that further workers’ rights and confrontational politics, such as in the cases highlighted in China and the US. Where there exists a class-conscious leadership within an NGO, one that seeks to promote the principles of solidarity, worker-led agency and resistance from below, contributions towards social justice are possible, as the examples in the US, China and India show. Where there is a corporate orientation, one that is sustained by donor funding and a refusal to challenge the ideological premises of capitalist expansion, as in the examples in the US, Zimbabwe and to some extent Nepal, oppositional politics is curtailed. The deepening crisis of the neoliberal state has thus produced on the one hand, NGOs that are willing to contest the status quo in different ways and, on the other, NGOs that are used by the state to destabilise and demoralise forces that could present serious threats to the status quo, such as the organised left and wider social movements.

What are the factors that influence the political direction that NGOs take? How are they being situated by the neoliberal state in the growing class conflict? Are there examples of NGOs reinventing themselves to maintain or pursue radical politics, and are they adopting new ideas and ideologies in the current conjuncture? Both the objective conditions – liberalisation, democratisation and the nature of the regime in power – and subjective factors, including the political orientation of the leadership of the NGO and the capacity to develop strategies under given political constraints, are crucial. As politics polarises, political consciousness has heightened across the broad left, including amongst NGOs. Yet for NGOs reliant on external funding, the chronic dilemma is whether to be pragmatic and focus on material survival, or whether to pursue a strategy that could risk funding, but make social and political gains. NGOs today straddle both the imperialist and neoliberal ambitions of the aid regime and the popular mobilisations – in both coherent and distorted forms – in opposition to them, and which at times dominate the political landscape. This means not limiting our analysis to NGOs but focusing on strategic questions that will further anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist struggle and, where NGOs are involved, whether and how they further or undermine this struggle.

While the special issue is by no means representative, the articles represent diverse national contexts and provide insights into the distinct trajectories of NGOs in each context. In each case, the spectre of economic crisis looms large and NGO dynamics are theorised as part of a contested terrain of class conflict, state power and global geopolitics. David Moore and Zenzo Moyo develop a Gramscian analysis of the convergence between NGO–state interests under conditions of extreme precarity. The authors make a compelling case for situating state–NGO dynamics within national and global contradictions and the resulting crisis. They elaborate an original and insightful analysis of state–NGO relations in Zimbabwe. By focusing on the subnational scale and recasting NGO workers and state workers in the countryside as ‘rural intellectuals’ who exercise a certain kind of moral leadership in a crisis-ridden situation, Moore and Moyo are able to explain the discrepancy between a national government that expresses a virulent antipathy toward NGOs and the understated forms of state–NGO co-operation and mutuality that prevail in the countryside. As the crisis in Zimbabwe enters a new phase with the end of Mugabe’s regime, whether NGOs will reinvent themselves to further a more progressive and democratic politics remains to be seen.

Lamia Karim highlights how changing state–NGO relations in Bangladesh, which are dependent on the particular government in power and its relative strength or weakness, have undergone dramatic shifts since the early 1990s. When Bangladesh began to develop its manufacturing base in garments for export, it could rely less on foreign aid, creating leverage for the state to become more autocratic and reclaim power over NGOs that had become well-funded and influential power brokers at national and international levels. She describes how smaller, independent community-based NGOs inspired by leftist and feminist ideologies are quickly disciplined and contained by an assertive state, while powerful and controversial NGOs such as the Grameen Bank are skilfully brought within the ambit of the state, attenuating NGO agency and capacity for engagement in official politics. Under conditions of an increasingly authoritarian government, working within the acceptable limits of development – of which microfinance is one of the main preoccupations in Bangladesh – ensures the continued existence of NGOs. Those NGOs that resist these constraints and develop autonomy from the state and corporate sector risk survival.

Feyzi Ismail traces the history of donor intervention in Nepal over the past half-century, a major strategic aim of which has been to subvert communist struggle, ever since the establishment of the Communist Party of Nepal in 1949. From the 1990s, NGOs emerged as indispensable participants in the anti-communist project, despite – or rather because of – the fact that the Maoist’s People’s War had clearly resonated with large sections of the population for a time. The tragedy is that as NGOs became increasingly influential in Nepal’s political culture, the left parties were contained, even at the height of their popularity. Although they had recognised how embracing NGOs and NGO ideology could contradict the prospects for revolution, the Maoists neglected to think through the implications of the dominance of NGOs. Ismail suggests that this was as much to do with the influence of NGOs as it was to do with the Maoists’ revolutionary theory, which is based on a theory of stages. Not only did the Maoists become incorporated into the parliamentary system, but the NGO industry consolidated itself in Nepal, particularly after the war and the earthquakes in 2015. The Maoists, conversely, once a revolutionary force that threatened the status quo, have been disarmed, in literal and figurative ways. This experience points to the necessity for the left to develop strategies for dealing with NGOs.

Nicolas Jaoul speaks to the importance of social movements being able to resist the culture of NGOisation while also appropriating the NGO space to advance a political cause. Chronicling Dalit struggles for dignity and self-respect, which are accomplished partly by establishing Dalit-led NGOs to participate in international fora and gain support for the Dalit cause and partly by resisting NGOisation, he reveals how Dalit activists straddle neoliberal modes of functioning required by a professionalised and corporatised aid regime while remaining committed to political organising and movement building. The capacity for navigating this terrain draws on a long and established history of Dalit activism in India and experience organising within left parties that is embedded in a rich tradition of Dalit resistance. This informs the Dalit NGOs’ political sensibilities to actively resist professionalisation and donor dependency. Resisting NGOisation is paramount, since it allows Dalit NGOs to maintain a political connection with the daily struggles of the Dalit community. Jaoul points to an experience that cuts against the traditional critiques: how donor funding could be diverted towards more radical political work in previously politicised contexts. Contrary to the depoliticising pattern of the professionalisation of NGOs in India, the Dalit movement in Uttar Pradesh made tactical adjustments that fulfilled the terms required by funders under the label of women’s empowerment, but were ultimately engaged in radical local experiments that developed confidence among Dalit women.

Tim Pringle also presents a case that diverges from traditional critiques. A survey of the literature reveals the breadth of the ongoing debate about labour NGOs in China, which encompasses critiques arguing that labour NGOs are an ‘anti-solidarity machine’ and endorsements arguing that labour NGOs have been effective in community organising. The argument put forward by Pringle is that labour NGOs in Guangdong, which emerged in the early 1990s, have been able to concentrate on aspects of labour organising that are within the bounds of the law (and the restrictions imposed by the state-sanctioned All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)), but have managed to advance working-class interests. They have done this through engaging in collective negotiations, legal activism, building solidarity networks and transnational campaigning. These activities, Pringle argues, have been crucial to supporting the nascent labour movement because they have prioritised worker-led agency. Although labour NGOs have not been able to develop into trade unions under the repressive labour regime in China, they have developed sophisticated interventions that directly benefit working-class interests.

Courtney Frantz and Sujatha Fernandes highlight contrasting examples of non-profits in the US. They describe how worker centres, which evolved in the context of a declining welfare state and weakening trade union organisation in the US, were expected to challenge exploitative working conditions, but instead embraced

neoliberal rationalities. In return for being able to obtain strategic funding from foundations, worker centres at the national level are ultimately less inclined to engage in contentious politics. Those that continue to work at local levels and develop alternative funding sources are able to maintain confrontational positions. Even as they accommodate the NGO form, activists are alert to the ways in which the professionalised and corporatised requirements by funders conflict with direct action, political organising and a leadership that is accountable to its members. Questions of funding, leadership, scale and political orientation are significant issues in determining the political positions of organisations, but these are decisions in which NGOs exercise a degree of agency.

Conclusion

Dissent is on the international agenda and continues to grow, whether in the form of the populist right or social democratic left, and serious prospects of an alternative to neoliberalism herald the possibilities of systemic change. While the neoliberal system has a remarkable capacity to survive and reinvent itself in the face of crisis (Cahill and Konings, 2017; Crouch, 2011) and incorporate dissent, it also contains a structural weakness: the *experience* of neoliberalism can force people to organise against it. The relationship between NGOs and states, parties and movements continues to be negotiated in this era of protest (Bailey, 2015; Cox and Nilsen, 2014). The contention here is that the existence of an organised left makes a difference, shaping both the political history and the political space that is occupied by NGOs. The extent to which movements can influence wider politics also depends on the relative strength, organisation and consciousness of the left and its ability to promote an alternative – however tentative – that can reach the mass of the population, and begin to break entrenched ideas. Opposition of all forms is needed more than ever, especially where neoliberalism confronts a potential existential crisis. While the role of NGOs will not necessarily be decisive, the political space they decide to occupy can influence the extent to which this crisis is resolved towards the left, rather than the right. The process of resolving the crisis, through both electoral means and non-electoral movements, could give rise to possibilities and forms of social organisation beyond a post-neoliberal world.

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