NGOs: What's In An Acronym? [1]

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In recent years nongovernmental organizations or NGOs have become increasingly visible and active in various sectors of social life, including education. As Edwards and Hulme (1996) report, there has been a "[r]apid growth in NGO numbers (…) accompanied in some countries (…) by a trend toward expansion in the size of individual NGOs and NGO programs" (p. 962). At the same time, NGOs have received greater attention in government and international organization reports and policy documents, as well as in scholarly literature. In this burgeoning literature, NGOs are characterized and evaluated in quite different ways. Sometimes the acronym, "NGO," seems to serve as shorthand for "New Great Organization" and other times it appears to refer to "Never Good Organization." [2] One might summarize the case for and against NGOs by way of a parody of Shakespeare's statement about roses: an NGO by any other name would smell as sweet - or as rancid.

Different Cases?
Part of the reason for the contradictory representations of NGOs is that they constitute a heterogeneous set of institutions, and not just because of the different sectors in which they work or the gender, racial/ethnic, and social class characteristics of participants (e.g., see Stromquist, 1996).[3] They include: (1) grassroots operations intricately linked to social movements aimed at challenging and transforming unequal social structures; (2) nonprofit businesses run by "professionals" that provide work and income opportunities for the disadvantaged in an effort to incorporate them in extant political economic arrangements and (3) some NGOs are locally-based institutions that operate on a shoe-string budget derived from the resources of those involved, while others are international entities with sizable budgets built from grants and contracts from international organizations (e.g., development banks, UN agencies, and foundations) as well as national governments (foreign as well as domestic to the locale of any particular project being undertaken). [4]

Different Paradigms
NGOs are also characterized differently in the literature because authors bring different perspectives to their analytical task. Thus, even when scholars are examining the same NGO or similar types of NGOs, they may emphasize different elements of their operations and they may conclude with contrasting appraisals. For instance, Carroll (1992) describes how NGOs in Latin America contribute invaluable, practical assistance to local grassroots groups involved in economic development activities, while Petras (1997) portrays similar NGOs in Latin America as "competing with socio-political movements for the allegiance of local leaders and activist communities" (p. 10) and linking "foreign funders with local labor ([via] self-help micro-enterprises) to facilitate the continuation of the neo-liberal regime" (p. 25).

The difference in perspectives is to some extent captured by typologies or mappings of social theory paradigms (e.g., Epstein, 1986; Ginsburg, 1991; Paulston, 1977 and 1996;

Stromquist, 1995; Morrow & Torres, 1995). For example, analysts employing equilibrium perspectives (e.g., functionalism) tend to paint a different portrait of NGOs than those using the lens of conflict theory (whether feminist, Marxist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist). [5]

Privatized versus Public Democracy
However, analysts--even those who are grounded in similar paradigms--may depict and evaluate NGOs differently because of differences in their conceptions of space available for "democratic" participation within the state versus within civil society. [6] For some authors, NGOs are lauded because they constitute "an integral component of civil society and an essential counterweight to state power" (Edwards & Hulme, 1996, p. 962). For example, Petras (1997) notes that NGOs "during their earlier history in the 1970s … were active in providing humanitarian support to the victims of the military dictatorship[s] and denouncing human rights violations" (pp. 10-11).

Such enthusiasm for NGOs' efforts to carve out more space for civil society may, in general, make sense in the context of authoritarian regimes. [7] But in the context of (at least potentially) democratic political systems, one would applaud the increasing role of NGOs only to the extent that one viewed the state or the public sector as unresponsive or inefficient. In the writings of some conflict theorists the state is portrayed as meeting the needs of national or global capitalists or other dominant groups, and thus not responsive to the needs of workers, women, and minority racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Althusser, 1971), while in neo-liberal versions of equilibrium theory the state is characterized as inefficient because government bureaucracies are not subject to market forces and profit motives (see Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 961). [8]

In contrast, one might be more inclined to criticize the role of (certain) NGOs to the extent that one perceived the state and the public sector as a desirable or the most likely terrain on which democracy can be achieved. [9] Edwards & Hulme (1996, p. 966), for instance, report that NGOs' increasing dependence of funding from "foreign" donors (e.g., other governments, UN agencies, corporate and other private foundations) and pose the questions of whether this represents a "strengthening of civil society or (…) merely an attempt to shape civil society in ways that external actors believe [are] desirable." [10] In this sense, NGOs are likely to be less accountable to the people in local, state/provincial, and national communities than governments that at least to some extent can be characterized as democratic--in procedural and/or substantive terms. [11] As Petras (1997) explains, some "NGOs depoliticize sectors of the population (…) [and] undermine democracy by taking social programs out of the hands of the local people and their elected officials to create dependence on non-elected, overseas (…) [or] locally anointed officials" (p. 13).

While those subscribing to each of these perspectives may want to claim that only their viewpoint operates with democracy as a core value, it seems more appropriate to say that each side bases its arguments on a different conception of democracy and citizenship--privatized versus public. These conceptions, at least within European cultural traditions, can be traced to the writings of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to Sehr (1997), "privatized democracy minimizes the role of

ordinary citizens as political actors who can shape their collective destiny through [direct] participation with other in public life" (p. 4). This privatized notion of democracy is based on: (1) "fears about the people's ability to govern itself" (p. 32) in a manner that would "effect the 'mutual preservation of lives, liberties, and estates"(p. 32) and (2) a belief in egotistic individualism, and a glorification of materialism and consumerism as keys to personal happiness and fulfillment" (p. 4). [12] In contrast, "public democracy … sees people's participation in public life as the essential ingredient in democratic government. Public participation arises out of an ethic of care and responsibility, not only for oneself as an isolated individual, but for one's fellow citizens as co-builders and co-beneficiaries of the public good" (p. 4).

Conclusion
In this essay I have answered the question--What's in an acronym (specifically NGOs)?-- by saying that it depends (1) on which case one examines, (2) on which paradigm (e.g., equilibrium or conflict) one brings to the examination, and (3) on which model of democracy (privatized or public) one values. While perhaps in a post-modern era such a conclusion (viz., "it depends") might merely be accepted as the "reality," I want to encourage us to go beyond merely recognizing multiple "realities" and develop ways for struggling "politically" (Ginsburg, Kamat, Raghu, & Weaver, 1995) around these issues. [13] This is because the way we (and others) come to understand and act on these issues in relation to our work with, in, and on NGOs is likely to have real consequences for the quality of life, making life on this planet sweeter and/or more rancid.

Notes
[1] This paper is an elaboration of a presentation made at part of a symposium, "Are NGOs Overrated? Critical Reflections on the Expansion and Institutionalization of NGOs," at the Comparative and International Education Society annual meeting, Buffalo, New York, 18-22 March 1998.

[2] It is curious that in English the acronym for nongovernmental organizations is not "NO" rather than NGO, though perhaps this would carry too negative of a connotation. Of course, the acronym, NGO, is not really translatable into other languages, even those using the same alphabet. For example, in Spanish the acronym would be (ONG or ON) for Organzaciones Nogovernmentales.

[3] Kamat (1998) observes in her study of activists involved in rural India that some groups actually create two parallel organizations--one for social change efforts involving political protest, lobbying, and electoral work and one that seeks grants from government and other sources to support economic enterprise initiatives.

[4] Thus, "[i]n reality non-governmental organizations are not non-governmental (…) [in that they] receive funds from overseas governments or work as private contractors" (Petras, 1997, p. 13). Interestingly, some NGOs self-consciously eschew funding from "foreign" sources, because of fear of their corruptive influence, but at the same time secure funding from provincial and national governments or foundations without a parallel concern for being corrupted by such funding sources (Zachariah & Sooryamoorthy, 1994).

[5] We should be cautious about adopting too overly-deterministic a perspective. As with the case of studying imperialism and colonialism, when investigating NGOs, there is a need to pay attention to how individual and collective actors may engage in transactions, even within unequal power relations, that yield other consequences than might be expected if one assumed that social structures completely determine human thought and action (see Ginsburg & Clayton, 1998).

[6] I would distinguish my focus here from that discussed in Edwards & Hulme (1996, p. 965) concerning whether NGOs in fact promote involvement in "democratic" political systems or whether NGOs function internally in a democratic manner.

[7] I say "may make sense" if such action within civil society involved struggle to democratize local, national, and global states (and economies) rather than initiatives to create havens from the heartless world of the state apparatus, which would remain controlled by political economic elites.

[8] It may also be that those espousing neo-liberal or conservative equilibrium views prefer using the NGO route because, at least from the perspective of some elites, "too much" space has been opened up in the political system for workers and other oppressed groups to make demands for and shape the character of public services. And as Petras (1997, p. 11) observes: "There is a direct relationship between the growth of social movements challenging the neo-liberal model and the effort to subvert them by creating alternative forms of social action through the NGOs."

[9] Moreover, foreign government and international organization support for NGOs must be seen in relation to structural adjustment programs, privatization projects, and other moves to delegitimate the state and destroy public sector employment (and the relatively better, unionized jobs associated with it). And domestic government funding for NGOs--representing a form of contracting out of public service work - can be seen as in line with a similar philosophy regarding the state and the economy. According to Petras (1997, p. 13): "In practice, 'non-governmental' translates into anti-public-spending activities, freeing the bulk of funds for neo-liberals to subsidize export capitalists while small sums trickle from the government to NGOs."

[10] Of course, the external funding sources do not comprise a homogeneous set with respect to the power they wield or the interests they might be seen to serve.

[11] Here I follow Highland (1995, p. 67) in conceiving of a power structure as democratic to the extent that all person "have equal effective rights in the determination of decisions to which they are subject." Furthermore, Highland (1995, p. 2) notes, this necessitates "both procedural entitlements to participate in a decision-making process and adequate access to a wide range of [material and symbolic] resources that would enable a person to utilize her or his procedural entitlements."

[12] Note that for Locke human life and liberties are included along with estates as forms of "property."

[13] There is perhaps some irony that the only "reality" acknowledged by many post-

modernists is that there are multiple realities.

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