Engagements with a productively unstable category: anthropologists and non-governmental organizations

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Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have increasingly come to be seen as important institutional actors in most societies.* They are active within domestic welfare arrangements, international development work, responding to humanitarian emergencies, protecting the environment, advocating ethical business, campaigning for human rights, and as vehicles for various forms of citizen protest. NGOs are normally characterized in residual terms as non-state organizations that are distinct from the worlds of for-profit business. But after this, any simple characterization of NGOs tends to run aground, hobbled by the limiting constraints of intrinsic NGO diversity, complexity and ambiguity. NGOs come in different shapes and sizes. They may appear independent while concealing crucial ties with governments, business and other interest groups. They may take hybridized forms that make a straightforward identification with a particular institutional ‘sector’ difficult to determine. As quintessentially neoliberal ‘shape shifting’ actors operating across almost all institutional levels and geographies in the early twenty-first century, it is not surprising that NGO definitions are unsettled and that their normative roles both divide and are contested.

In this paper we review the main ways through which NGOs have come to be known in the anthropological research literature. We argue that it is precisely these elusive qualities that make NGOs interesting to anthropologists and anthropological insights important for wider understanding. However we find that scholarship on NGOs remains marginal within anthropology, and that anthropological work continues to be peripheral to the broader field of NGO studies, and even more so to the worlds of NGO policy and practice.

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Academic engagements with NGOs as a field of scholarship

NGOs have been around for a long time (Charnowitz 1997 outlines at least two centuries of activity) but they only attracted serious attention from policymakers from the late 1980s onwards. This interest in the NGO sector emerged within two related, but distinct, contexts of neoliberal policy. The first was the rise of the ‘new public management’ in Western countries that favored the rolling back of the state and public services, while the second was within the ‘aid industry’ where NGOs emerged as key actors within international development and humanitarian action. A shift during the 1980s towards promotion of more flexible forms of “good governance” among international development agencies such as the World Bank helped to create a climate that began to favor NGOs as private market-based actors to which service provision could be “contracted out” within wider neoliberal restructuring arrangements imposed on developing countries through conditional lending. Conversely, NGOs were also seen as vehicles for those seeking to challenge mainstream orthodoxies with alternative ideas and practices centered on new forms of grassroots development, policy advocacy and collective action. This tendency was also associated with a third factor that informed the modern rise of the NGO: the post–Cold War rediscovery of the idea of “civil society” among citizen activists, particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Pelczynski 1988, Cohen and Arato 1992; Schechter 1999, Hann and Dunn 1996, Comaroff and Comaroff 1998). There was an intertwining of this new interest in the concept of civil society with the idea of the NGO as a catalyst for people-centered developmental change, with the result that official finding to NGOs skyrocketed during the 1990s as part of a new “good governance” policy discourse (Edwards and Hulme 1996).

From the 1980s onward, NGOs were also “discovered” by scholars responding to these wider shifts, resulting in an explosion of writings. Academic work on NGOs was initially undertaken within development studies by sociologists and political scientists, some of whom began celebrating the new profile of development NGOs as potentially providing new solutions to a wide range of longstanding development problems (e.g., Paul and Israel 1991, Carroll 1992). Others, taking a political economy perspective, began reacting against what they regarded as NGO hype driven more by ideological concerns than by systematic evidence and analysis (Vivian 1994, Petras 1997). As a field, NGO research soon became one that was unhelpfully polarized. Much of the work on NGOs was also regarded as compromised by its production within the world of applied consultancy by researchers doing commissioned work. As a consequence, research on NGOs has tended to remain an emerging academic field, and is still viewed with suspicion in some quarters as being conceptually weak and/or overly normative.

Balanced work on NGO was of course still to be found within applied social sciences, and some key texts have remained crucial to the field’s growth. For example, Michael Edwards and David Hulme’s series of edited volumes (e.g., 1992, 1996, 1997) were based on a series of development studies conferences held at the University of Manchester, UK. Informed by NGO practitioners and donors, these conversations focused on actually existing dilemmas of aid agencies: the role of the state, multiple
stakeholders, accountability, and autonomy. These texts represent the foundation for
the conversation on NGOs that emerged within the social sciences. In fact, if there were
ever a canon of “NGO studies” these volumes would undoubtedly serve as the essential
early explorations and as sources of documentation for the key questions within the
changing world of NGOs.

Also crucial to the gradual growth in respectability of NGO research has been the
peripheral influence of the field of inter-disciplinary “nonprofit studies” that emerged
(mostly) in North America and Europe at around the same time as interest in “NGO
studies” was gaining ground (Salamon and Anheier XXXX, Billis XXXX). The rise of
peer-reviewed multi-disciplinary academic journals such as Nonprofit and Voluntary
Sector Quarterly and Voluntas served to institutionalize the field within the university
sector (a trend that did not materialize within the counterpart field of “NGO studies”),
and arguably led to a more theoretically informed social science around the subject of
non-state actors and ‘civil society’ (albeit one in which there were few anthropologists
present). Writing from within “nonprofit studies”, Olaf Corry (2010) is typical of those
who wish to move the field away from its emphasis on organizations and effectiveness
towards a more processual, contextualized view of the non-governmental sector in
which organizations are defined in epistemological terms rather than ontologically. The
aim becomes one where non-governmental actors can be understood in the context of
wider ideas and relationships, through which it becomes possible also ‘to analyze the
balance of social forces in a society’ (p.18).

**NGOs and anthropologists**

While interest from sociologists and political scientists has grown steadily,
anthropologists have been relatively slow to engage with NGOs. There is of course a
longer history of anthropological work on organizations that overlap with aspects of what
we now regard as modern NGOs. For example, Kenneth Little (1965) identified the
ways that "voluntary associations" in West Africa served as adaptive mechanisms for
members of communities experiencing rapid change, with tribal institutions becoming
replaced or supplemented by new organizational forms such as tribal unions, friendly
societies, and occupational and recreational associations.

Despite the longstanding call for ‘studying up’ (Nader 1969), anthropologists have
continued to be more comfortable engaging at community level rather than with
agencies and institutions. This has either led them into grassroots perspectives on the
presence and effects of NGOs (often informed by a critical view of outside aid and the
international system), or towards forms of community-centered or “applied” work. The
result is that “NGO studies” and anthropology have had an uneasy relationship that is
sometimes riddled with productive tensions, and sometimes with silences and
disjuncture.

Longstanding tensions have existed within anthropology around “applied” work
(Gardner and Lewis 2015) and the field of NGOs studies has often been associated with
this tendency. This is partly a result of suspicion that compromises in research quality are required by work that is commissioned by development agencies, and partly by the fear that it becomes impossible within such work to ‘speak truth to power’. For a long time, when it came to studying social change and transformation, one would be far more likely to find anthropologists working alongside grassroots social movements – seen as more likely to be taking up the interests of the marginalized and the powerless - than with more formal organizations such as NGOs whose motives were characterized as impure. Even within the long tradition of organizational anthropology, the main emphasis has been on business and government organizations rather than on the so-called “third sector” (a bias that has also operated within wider organization studies and management research).

The impact of “NGO studies” on anthropological theory has remains mainly limited to the subfield of political anthropology, for example in contributing to understandings of “governmentality”. Foucault’s influential concept was posthumously published (Foucault 1991), and “governmentality” quickly became a core thesis within political anthropology. A neologism formed by a truncation of the phrase “governmental rationality,” it has often been simplified as “the conduct of conduct.” Offering an alternative reading of “governance” promoted by official development agencies, governmentality offered scholars a heuristic with which to interrogate the interactions between different groups as part of official projects. A 2001 special issue in Political and Legal Anthropology Review (PoLAR) (Leve and Karim 2001) set out a critical research agenda that challenged the insidious outcomes of donors’ instrumental use of NGOs in a privatization of the state (Bornstein 2001, Karim 2001, Leve 2001, Peterson 2001). Anthropologists also used the concepts of governmentality in its transnational dimension (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), neoliberal governmentality (Sharma 2006), “nongovernmentality” (Jackson 2005), and “nongovernmentalism” (Lewis 2005).

Another (and associated) trend has been the growth of the “aidnography” tradition within the anthropology of development (Mosse 2005, Mosse 2011, Fechter and Hindman 2011), which has begun to chip away at more monolithic understandings of NGOs. But as we shall see in the section below, such work has until now tended to focus more on public, private, bilateral and inter-governmental agencies than on non-governmental ones.

By contrast, the reach of anthropological studies into NGO policy and practice – in the form of organizational anthropological ideas about culture and learning within development agencies, or the use of “participatory” techniques influenced by ethnographic fieldwork methods - is perhaps more widespread. At the World Bank, the work of applied anthropologist Michael Cernea (1988) was influential in relation to work on voluntary resettlement, and was an early advocate of bringing NGOs into the development projects of mainstream donors. The World Bank itself took what Murray Li (2011, p.64) describes an “ethnographic turn” when its interested the concept of “social capital” led it to take a closer interest in the “minutiae of village life” in Indonesia during the 2000s. Yet this field nonetheless remains small compared to other disciplines, and largely traceable to individual circuits of anthropologists operating within aid agencies.
This is now changing. Political, organizational, and policy anthropologists have each built on these earlier foundations to begin contributing some distinctive insights.

In this review paper, we trace anthropological engagements with the broad subject of NGOs and identify two broad themes: (i) the question of how NGOs have come to be an object of anthropological inquiry, and (ii) reflections on what we suggest is the productively unstable category of “NGO” and its uses.

NGOs as objects of anthropological inquiry

An “anthropology of NGOs” sub-field has not fully developed in the same way as other subfields such as medical anthropology. Where it does exist, anthropological scholarship on NGOs emerged as part of the critical anthropology of development associated with the 1990s work of Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson. Ferguson outlined how development agencies depoliticize poverty and inequality, turning them into technical problems. Escobar (1995) furthered the use of Foucault’s discourse analysis within the study of the postwar history of Western international development ideas and institutions. Anthropologists were particularly open to the dominant message that development institutions had failed to fulfill their own missions, and set about creating a critical mass of what Ferguson (1990) called “foundational” critiques of development - in contrast to the “functional” critiques of development being produced by practitioners. Work within this new development critique was diverse and wide-ranging, including addressing issues of power and inequality (Crush 1995), participation (Cooke and Kothari 2001), institutionalization (Feldman 2003), and professionalization (Crewe and Axelby 2013).

Neither Ferguson nor Escobar’s text specifically theorized NGOs; however, their critiques were widely used by anthropologists studying NGOs. It was William Fisher’s 1997 review article (Fisher 1997) that first began to lay the groundwork for a sustained conversation on NGOs within anthropology. This text recognized the importance of NGOs as global political actors, elaborating on NGOs’ roles within the neoliberal restructuring of governance relationships in the 1990s. Drawing on both Gramsci and Foucault, Fisher showed how states increasingly viewed NGOs as flexible tools for maintaining and extending their power.

The gold standard for anthropological scholarship remains the ethnographic monograph. Anthropologists draw heavily upon ethnographic case material to build, deconstruct, sharpen, challenge, combine, or retrace anthropological theory. Yet there have been few full-scale ethnographic studies of the non-governmental sector or its organizations. Early ethnographies were few and far between and tended to focus on international NGOs (e.g., Fox 1998, Fox and Brown 1998). Fox’s study drew on fieldwork within the offices of four US international development NGOs and suggested an “anthropology of activism” that engaged with the activists’ values, beliefs and practices, and investigated relationships “between stated intent and actual endeavors” (p.2).
Dorothea Hilhorst’s (2003) The Real World of NGOs was an account of local NGOs in the Philippines and was a significant exception, dealing with the everyday politics and multiple organizational realities among NGO workers, and the communities in which they work, drawing on the Manchester School ‘actor-oriented’ tradition, established in the 1970s by Norman Long. Anthropological work on NGO related issues continued to build for the rest of the decade with work theorized on-the-ground inequalities within development, such as hegemony (Kamat 2002), dispossession (Elyachar 2005), or paternalism (Eriksson Baaz 2005). Cultural analyses such as religion (Bornstein 2003) or ethnomusicology (Smith 2001) are also woven through several texts.

Some anthropologists also began deconstructing NGOs as “single” entities with monolithic intentions, identities, missions, and effects. As structures, NGOs can be seen to bring together different and sometimes disparate sets of actors. Anthropologists in Europe in particular began to focus on the relationships themselves more than the actors, and specifically interrogated the role that NGOs play as intermediaries or brokers (Lewis and Mosse 2006). Some authors note the role that foreigners play in brokering relationships with transnational donors (Davis 2003), or NGOs' fulfilling roles typically reserved for states before neoliberalism (Richard 2009). Local populations (Rossi 2006) as well as NGOs (Robins 2009) have the ability to shift the contours of international aid. NGOs can be the “glue” to a fragmented neoliberalism (Schuller 2009) or the “friction” as groups across national and cultural boundaries interface (Tsing 2005).

These few anthropological books on NGOs that did emerge also sometimes offered important glimpses into not only the nascent subfield of “NGO studies” but also the development of wider anthropological theory. The anthropological scholarship on NGOs has demonstrated various shifts in theoretical trends, with engagement on neoliberalism, governmentality, and a reworking of “classic” anthropological themes of religion, the gift exchange, language, citizenship, and ethnicity, as well as contemporary discussions of moral economies, identity formation, and hybridity.

What began as anthropology “in” NGOs also evolved further into an anthropology “of” NGOs, following the direction signposted by Fisher (1997). As such work has moved forward, the senses in which research ‘in’ and ‘of’ NGOs contrast and interlink - one messy, one critical - becomes more apparent. The field also later embarked on trajectories that straddled “applied” and “theoretical” research, and this strand has recently seen exponential growth and diversification. As a whole, such scholarship (at least the “theoretical” strand) still tends to be more critical than other disciplines, but late-20th- and early-21st-century political science scholarship also began to challenge normative conceptions of NGOs tied to civil society and the “third sector.” The work of Michael Barnett (e.g., Barnett 2011, Barnett and Weiss 2011, Barnett 2013) has opened up spaces for critical work within political science, which had long maintained a “pro” NGO bias (as counterweight to states, the typical object of critique).
Work by anthropologists on NGOs continues to grow in quantity and in theoretical sophistication. Ideas and discourses of the “nongovernmental” and “nongovernmental public action” remain key themes in the early 21st century. Work on NGOs can be found within political anthropology, anthropology of development, public policy, humanitarian action, and organizational anthropology. A second special issue of PoLAR on NGOs in 2010 usefully opened up possible new theoretical directions (Alvaré 2010, Curtis 2010, Timmer 2010, Vannier 2010). Unlike the first, this collection did not confine itself to a single theme. This is emblematic of the disparate inquiries that characterize anthropological work on NGO issues: on memory (Delcore 2003), identity (Kaag 2008), and public deliberation (Junge 2012). There are increasingly diverse and sophisticated analyses but perhaps as yet with little cohesion or sustained conversation.

The productively unstable category of “NGO” and its value to anthropology: three areas

*Productive instabilities around methodology*

Traditionally, anthropological research has been based on long-term participant observation with a priority given to subaltern people and perspectives. The fact that anthropological scholarship on NGOs tends to be marginal and more critical than those of other disciplines may also derive from issues of methodology (Lewis 1999). Recipients of NGO programs have different, often more critical, perspectives than NGO staff, for example. And long-term participant observation - sometimes in the mode of what David Mosse (2001) has called the “observer participant” - sensitizes anthropologists to additional problems and perspectives than that of NGOs’ “good intentions.”

There are important aspects of productive instability that arise from issues of methodology encountered by anthropologists. There are at least three senses in which this might be the case. First, the study of NGOs lends itself to the feeding of ideas and experiences into debates around the importance of doing multi-sited, multi-level ethnography – and the challenges associated with this. A central problem that emerges in the study of NGOs is: what is “the field” when studying an NGO (Markowitz 2001)? The office? The beneficiary populations and local communities? Donor agencies? As Anu Sharma’s work reveals, NGOs tend to present themselves to in the course of research on a wide range of issues, so that some anthropologists may end up studying NGOs even if they did not set out to do so.

As inherently multi-sited phenomena, NGOs present methodological challenges to anthropologists, particularly those concerned with representing “local” realities in an inherently “glocal” setting (Kearney 1995). One of these is the need to study funders and resource relationships that often sustain the NGO. The issues of NGO financing and donorship is one that needs further exploring by anthropological work. It connects both to issues of the “financialization” of poverty (Schwittay, Kar) and to the efforts by states to regulate forms of not for profit action (Bornstein). Another is to engage with
NGOs as producers of information, knowledge and representation: how should the anthropologist engage with the pre-existing representations that are produced by NGOs themselves?

Second, the distinction between anthropologists working “for” and/or “with” the NGO is one that Erica Bornstein in particular has begun exploring in her work, and it raises important questions about researcher access and positionality. Working “for” may be part of the process of negotiated access to the field and makes possible work “on”, since it responds to those within NGOs who seek to resist or challenge forms of academic extraction. The money logics of NGOs as forms of business enterprise of course need to be better understood; at the same time NGO staff offer a critical view of similar logics within the worlds of academic enterprise that linked to commodified knowledge production. Within such negotiations, there may be different types of research product that arise, such as the critical internal report by the anthropologist that stays within the organization and not sanctioned for wider circulation. These are, as Erica Bornstein puts it, the various kinds of ‘delicate spaces' where the anthropologist must tread carefully.

Third, just as James Ferguson (2005) once identified development as anthropology’s ‘evil twin’, so NGOs offer up a mirror to anthropologists that may be at once familiar and uncomfortable. There are unsettling similarities between the approach taken by anthropologists to their work and that of many development NGOs. Both are open to the criticism that they move more or less uninvited into communities where they try to build relationships with people generally less powerful than themselves. This was precisely the approach taken by the generation of development NGOs run by activists in Bangladesh that Lewis would regularly encounter during his own village level fieldwork in the mid-1980s, inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire, or by the ‘participatory’ ideologies of the time. NGOs field staff tried to build relationships with communities, understand local points of view and listen to how people they saw their problems. The anthropologist-NGO interface may be productive in that it highlights the importance of ethnographic approaches as contributing to a ‘methodological populism’ (Mosse and Lewis 2006) that might offer a counter balance to the dominant trends of technocratic or managerialist development approaches. At the same time, there is the potential to strengthen the principles and values of anthropological fieldwork approaches that assert a direct engagement with people.

Lashaw’s (2013) work discusses the way research on NGO practices offers insights into “the production of morality” and the idea of progress as a “product of struggle.” Anthropologists have built what Didier Fassin, who served on MSF’s board, termed the “moral economy” (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010, Fassin 2012). Erica James (2010) discusses a “political economy of trauma” and Andrea Timmer (2010), the creation of a “needy subject.” As anthropologists who depend on local populations as the objects of our study, what are the political, ethical, and moral implications of being dependent on NGOs? To whom do our primary ethical responsibilities, our allegiances, lie?
Here productive instability stems from the difficult issue of how anthropologists should best engage with the world beyond academia. Old debates about “applied” versus “pure” anthropology have become increasingly outmoded and there is now a renewed interest in wider forms of anthropological engagement (Sanday 2003, Low and Merry 2010, Crewe and Axelby 2013). This shift is being informed by increased pressures on academics to engage with the world around them (such as the impact case study component of the UK government’s “research excellence framework” or REF) and by the resurgence of the tradition of the ‘public intellectual’ who is obliged to contribute to wider society beyond the ivory tower. This energy to connect with new audiences is also fed by recent events such as the movements against global capitalism and neoliberal globalization that emerged during the 1990s; the 2008 financial crisis; the rise of the Occupy movements; and the street-level movements of the Arab world. American Anthropologist for example has begun carrying a section that aims to raise the profile of “public anthropology.” This is seen primarily as an arena for debate and action ‘dealing with social problems and issues of interest to a broader public or to our non-academic collaborators yet still relevant to academic discourse and debate’ (Griffith, Liu et al. 2013:125). NGOs and civil society issues are threaded through many of these new arenas of engagement, as anthropologists see opportunities for engaging in new ways with forms of citizen action.

Moving beyond engagement as simply informing debate, Charles Hale’s (2006:97) version of ‘activist research’ aims to help close the gap between critically-distanced cultural critique and different modes of activist engagement. While it has been common for engaged anthropologists to retain a primary affiliation with academia while balancing this with political commitment, activist research requires that – however difficult to achieve – the anthropologist should strive towards a fuller merging of the two loyalties. For example, Schaumberg’s (2008:206) efforts to resolve tensions between involvement and critical distance during fieldwork in Argentina is illustrative: invited by activists to give his opinion at a public meeting, he writes: ‘[they] would no doubt have contested the municipality’s injustice without my contribution. Yet, I imagine my contribution encouraged them to stake their claim at a time when morale was very low and mobilization slow. I believe this example highlights how politically engaged fieldwork can help support justified local claims’.

In a related vein, new interest in “protest anthropology” also urges political engagement that goes beyond mere alignment with “protest movements, revolts, and uprisings” to include trying to become ‘full-fledged participants in them’ (Maskovsky 2013:127). A key arena for this type of activity has been the Occupy movement, of which anthropologist David Graeber (2014) played a key role in the initial discussions and architecture. Occupy expressed concern at social injustice and economic inequalities and aimed to unsettle by moving beyond the formal limitations of mainstream political and civil society organizations to challenge wider complacency around economic crisis and social inequality.
Assuming this push for greater engagement within anthropology is sustained, which institutional arrangements will provide the vehicles? Will NGOs continue to serve as platforms as anthropologists? Will this need for engagement discourage critical reflection on NGO-ization? Or can we engage with NGOs as knowledge producers in ways that have useful implications for reconstructing knowledge more widely, and for repoliticizing the academy in important ways e.g. by challenging the norm of distancing as part of an objective research ideology.

**NGO research as offering new scope for informing theoretical development**

For Bernal and Grewal (2014) the way that the framing idea of “NGO” has come to be known is particularly productive. They argue that by defining the NGO “by something that it is not” has produced both an artificially coherent and unified view of NGOs (when we know they are in fact diverse and heterogeneous) and a normative insistence that there is “a clear divide between public and private realms of power that is consistent with models of the normative liberal state” (p.7). The effect is to conceal or deny ‘the contingent nature of such domains of struggle’. In this way, NGOs can represent entry points for understanding blurred boundaries between state and market and state and society. For example, work on individual “boundary crossing” activists who move between state and civil society makes these connections more visible and explores the contents of such relationships (Lewis 2008). NGOs can also be explored in the context of “interface analysis” (cf Long 2001) both as relational actors, and as part of the glue that holds together assemblages of neoliberalism. Mirroring work within cultural studies, some anthropologists have also come to embrace hybridity and complexity in the study of NGOs. Finally, NGOs can also be understood as “boundary objects”, with potential power to both unify and divide, and to contribute to change.

The wider social science literature on NGOs briefly discussed at the start of this paper has been accused of being weak and normative – partly because NGOs have been made visible within this literature mainly by practice. More theoretically informed approaches are beginning to emerge from anthropological work, mainly in the area of politics and power. For example, scholarship on the subject within anthropology brought more complexity to analysis of the political form of NGOs and the ways in which NGOs serve conduits of power. Grafting Foucault and Marxist World Systems analysis, Schuller (2012) discusses bureaucratic logics and processes as “trickle down imperialism.” NGOs can both empower (Hemment 2007) and quell (Nagar 2006) citizen dissent. NGOs can also incorporate individuals into transnational circuits of capital (Karim 2011) or projects, often “sold” within a capitalist logic and system (James 2010). NGOs can be sites for deliberating on and making claims on the common good (Rajak 2011) or defining those worthy of assistance (Nguyen 2010). Working through an NGO structure within a strong centralized state, blurring boundaries, NGOs can play pedagogical roles, fashioning neoliberal citizen subjects (Sharma 2008).

Anthropologists have also been interested in exploring “NGO” in ideational terms. What constitutes an NGO in one setting may not be understood as such in another. Rather than focusing on definitions, it has proved productive to explore how the meaning of the
term varies across different contexts and to examine how these meanings may shift over time. For example, the moral universe of the NGO is diverse and refracted, running from common perceptions of “selfless” NGO work undertaking “good” causes to an association in many contexts with opportunism and corruption. Fassin’s notion of the “moral economy” – in which he builds on E.P. Thompson and James Scott’s earlier usages but asserts the primacy of the moral as opposed to the economic dimension - is useful here. The idea of NGO as a kind of blank slate onto which different interests and ideas are projected is one productive approach. Yet the commonness of NGO of a category is essentially illusory because the reality is simply a construction, a discursive formation (cf Abrams 1989 idea of the elusive state) and it makes no sense to think of NGOs as stable formations that are spatially bound. Another potentially useful idea that follows from this is that NGOs constitute “portals” into wider social, political, and economic processes. Work on the state, political parties, social movements offer a set of moving targets in which place is unsettled and personal identifies and affiliations are blurred. Here perhaps it makes sense to try to reflect messiness and ambiguity by engaging with both the creativity of mess and chaos (Mary Douglas) and the need to see formlessness as a form (Beteille). Does a notion of ‘weak theory’ (Gram?? Not sure who this was that was interestingly mentioned by Anu) help us to do justice to our subject matter through careful musings that can offset over determined theory?

Neoliberal systems with their dominant patterns of flexible accumulation are characterized by a form of “unstable stability” (source?). NGOs are central the analysis of contemporary neoliberalism, since as James Ferguson (2009: 168) points out, a governance context has now been produced in which “de facto government” is “carried out by an extraordinary swarm of NGOs, voluntary organizations and private foundations”. The potential for NGOs - as “neoliberal bads”, in Arturo Escobar’s term - to produce “non-neoliberal goods” is a crucial question for our argument around productive instability, and raises important questions about the point at which such instability might become unproductive. The insistence on residuality at the heart of the NGO underpins an artificial distinction between states and markets that is now more open to challenge than ever. In whose interests does the “NGO” categorization operate? As William Fisher has argued, we may find that it not the NGOs that are the shape shifters but the anthropologists who have over-determined and shape shifted the category itself so that it becomes emptied of meaning, and simply means what we want it to mean. Examining NGO practices (and relationships), rather than the category itself, may be a more useful way forward.

Conclusion

As a discipline, given our history and methodology, anthropology and anthropologists are uniquely poised to grapple with the inherently unstable category of “NGO.” As Bernal and Grewal argued above, NGOs are shape-shifters, perfectly suited to the changing dynamics of neoliberalism. Given the value systems within academic anthropology, we are taught to embrace hybridity, rewarded for what Geertz (1973) called “thick description,” or Boas’ “science of the particular” (see Hatch 1973). From
both epistemological and ontological approaches – discussed above – NGOs defy categorization, and serve as an ideological cover for “non” governments. We have argued that this inherent instability is productive, serving several particular users and uses of the form. They can be used by local populations to channel dissent, advocate for resources, or to develop the area. They can also be used by donor groups to weaken state governments, to depoliticize solutions to poverty, and to serve as a ‘fig leaf’ to cover the more destructive aspects of social programs.

Perhaps it is we anthropologists who are the evil twin, as we too have made productive use of these contradictions within the category of NGOs. Indeed, much of anthropologists’ writing on NGOs is in a deconstructive mode, pointing out the diversity of social groupings lumped under this category that seems purposefully vague. Anthropologists have been pointing out this inherent instability in the category since at least William Fisher’s 1997 review article. Why are scholars still writing on the subject today, one might well ask? And what does this portend for the vitality of the field of the “anthropology of NGOs”?

We would like to offer some final reflections, admittedly provocative, as an attempt to inspire critical reflection and dialogue, and ultimately open up lines of productive engagement, not only scholarly inquiry but also engaging NGO publics. This paper has argued that, indeed, “NGO” is an unstable category, and so we share the concern and agree with much of the deconstructive theorizing. However, this is one aspect of what Amanda Lashaw (2013) has identified as an impasse. We are concerned about what appears to be a couple of results: first, studies of NGOs within anthropology seem to continue to be of marginal importance to the discipline. Secondly, anthropologists seem to continue to have limited impact on the larger conversation, both within scholarly journals and within NGOs. We would like to briefly discuss both.

As we have argued in this paper, anthropological theorizing on NGOs has reflected broader trends within anthropology. Certainly as the discipline engaged a self-critique, of the primitivism and Orientalism of earlier sa(l)vage anthropology, and certainly the continuing attachment to the exotic Other, anthropologists are seeking research subjects that are fully connected with the world system. Calls to decolonize anthropology (Harrison 2010 [1991]), write against culture (Abu-Lughod 1991), and “studying up” created a foundation for current focus on “public” or “engaged” anthropologies. Scholarship on NGOs should have provided an ideal model for these movements within the discipline. However, articles on and not just in NGOs have never been published in American Anthropologist, described as the “flagship” journal of the American Anthropological Association. Neither does Current Anthropology, the most widely cited in sociocultural anthropology, offer an article engaging the subject.

While it is possible that NGOs are too “messy,” too hybrid and privileged, not “pure,” as an anthropological object (and thus, we still have work to do in decolonizing our praxis), it is also equally possible that academic anthropology has not produced theoretical models that engage, challenge, or add to canonical themes within anthropology (e.g., bands-tribes-chiefdoms-states, organic solidarity, kinship, or reciprocity). What can a
deep, anthropological understanding, of what Steve Sampson and Julie Hemment (2001) call “NGO-graphy” offer to the core stock of knowledge of the discipline akin to the Gift, the Kula ring, or segmentary lineages?

Writers in the Global South, from a wide variety of institutional locations, as scholars, activists and journalists, have tended toward a more critical rejection of NGOs as tools of neoliberalism and neocolonialism. Sociology and critical cultural studies have opened spaces for critical reflection, and as noted above there is a growing space within political science. These radical, “foundational” (Ferguson 1990), critiques build on recipient communities’ disappointment or suspicion of NGOs as political actors, or what INCITE! (2007) termed the “nonprofit industrial complex.” Anthropology has long ceded its monopoly on ethnographic methods and claims of representation of marginalized groups. However these discussions often do not build on the insights of a critically engaged anthropology, and the lessons learned through self-critique and reflection.

This is to say nothing of the more mainstream discussions of NGOs in economics, management, and development. While adopting – one might say appropriating – insights of anthropology and language of participation, mainstream development institutions. This work argued for reform of mainstream development thinking and practice in ways implicitly grounded in anthropological thinking; however, little if any of this “alternative” development contained work by anthropologists themselves. It was utopian in character, invested with hope that NGOs might provide the vehicles for new alternative transformative ideas. Now that an anthropologist is head of the World Bank, will anthropologists be able to shift the contours of the engagement, the terms of the dialogue, or will we still primarily be employed as imperialisms’ shock troops, mopping up after messes and offering rapid appraisals in impact assessments that do not challenge the assumptions behind proposed development solutions?

If these questions are admittedly loaded, even a little polemical, it is with the goal of engendering a critical reflection and dialogue, and hopefully encourage a reinvigorated engagement that not only includes publication of scholarly texts but exchanges with a range of individuals who work with NGOs, from recipients to donors, front-line staff to directors. These exchanges include listening as well as critique, helping to craft research agendas that can bridge these yawning gaps in perspectives and priorities. To do so requires what might be called an anthropological imagination. This imagination acknowledges the ties that bind us and our specific places within the world system, our differential privilege, but also respects our differences. Tracking between the realms of lived experience to the species level, anthropological engagement roots the discussion in both local and global, as they are always intertwined. It is admittedly an ambitious task, but no more so than the study of “humankind.”

WORKS CITED:


