What would a perspective on management studies look like, when expressed from Latin America? I would like to explore this very broad question in terms of a specific theoretical object, that of the “non-governmental organization” (NGO).

Latin America constitutes an important site for understanding distinct alternative conceptions of management processes and objects. One important such object is the NGO. There has been a phenomenal growth of NGOs around the world, with their significance noted as specialized organizations implementing developmental goals, offering social welfare and versions of the public good, promoting democracy (Kamat, 2003; Mercer, Mohan; Stiles, 2002; Lewis, 2005; Roberts, Jones & Frohling, 2005). Due to the historical orientation of much of the South American continent in terms of the role of the developmental state, the subsequent trajectory of both the state and forces of civil society have differed from the countries to the north (Sader, 2008). The region therefore offers a good site to explore the actual diversity of the organizations labeled as NGOs, while also juxtaposing such diversity on the ground with the theoretical straitjackets imposed on the actual term NGO (see Uphoff 1993; Vakil 1997 for a discussion on the problems of defining these organizations). In particular, countries like Venezuela and Bolivia offer the possibility of understanding how organizations based within civil society may serve as distinct alternatives to neoliberal visions of development, alternatives not best represented by terms like NGOs.

**Paper’s approach**

In the paper I will engage constructively with those who study matters of civil society and management in Latin America. Such engagement, by offering a mutual enriching of perspectives, contributes towards a hybrid theorizing that can push against and challenge efforts to
romanticize or reify notions of the local. As an author with limited exposure to the continent, and with no facility in either of its major languages, Spanish and Portuguese, the purpose is not to offer an authoritative reading of NGOs or civil society in Latin America. Instead the paper is based around an approach of epistemic openness, to thoughtfully explore the possibilities Latin American offers, in common with other regions, to understand NGOs in terms of alternatives to neoliberal development.

As the ‘call for papers’ stated, studies of international management can veer between two extremes: that of universalism, generating concepts for a global dissemination and standardization of management knowledge and practice; and that of localism, identifying a unique and stable definition of management rooted within a particular culture, bounded by a region or nation-state. This paper’s position of epistemic openness supports the call for hybrid theorizing, recognizing the necessity of negotiating our received concepts of organization and management, with the experiences and contexts where these concepts are enacted.

In this context I believe the call’s labeling of the latter extreme of localism as “postcolonial” is erroneous. The postcolonial names many matters including a form of textual critique, a locale, a set of political movements, a distinct stage of history, and perhaps as a mixture of these in terms of a set of allied theoretical projects in management studies. For these reasons the postcolonial remains a potential resource, among other theoretical streams, to indeed establish a middle position in between the universalism and localism.

The structure of the paper
I begin with a brief introduction (1) that tracks the rise of the phrase NGO, used to capture diverse forces of civil society, both nationally and globally. I argue that the phrase emerged with the establishment of the United Nations and has today become identified with a primary definition, that of non-owned organizations, driven by professional interests, committed to fundraising, committed to a technocratic notion of social change, that is one based on professional expertise and technical advice, rather than social movements, divorced from politics (Cooke, 2004; Kothari 2005). The next section (2) argues that this primary definition became dominant during a period when neoliberal visions of international development were first voiced and then naturalized. The NGO in the sense of this primary definition, is actually
well equipped to promote the marketization and private enterprise sought by neoliberal ideologues. After all what is better than private “do-gooders”, in terms of meeting the obligations expected by the state? More charitably the decline of the public sphere, the rise of contracting as the primary mechanism of state funding, and the decline of social spending in both funds and legitimacy, are all associated with both the rising influence of NGOs as well as the specific manner in which they are imagined, as representatives of civil society in a context of neoliberal policies.

The third section (3) turns to Latin America, and using the examples of Venezuela and Bolivia tracks the innovative legislative and policy efforts of the Chávez and Morales administrations, respectively. I argue that the common thread across these efforts and allied ones such as of Correa in Ecuador, is the effort to stem marketization, and strengthen the public sphere (albeit through different visions of it). I make an effort to also contrast these two experiences with those of more “moderate” leaders such as Lula in Brazil and Kirchner in Argentina. The point here is to show that the national experience of the continent has been one where neoliberalism was successfully established in only a few striking examples (such as Chile, Mexico and Argentina). Even in these examples a history of socialist governments, populism, at times authoritarian governments (military coups), social movements at times in direct resistance to governments, all encouraged the state to play a more active role in the governing of the economy and society. In this sense the state did not quite fit the role expected by neoliberalism (Selbin 1997). At the same time in some other countries neoliberal ideas never quite took strong root, making it easier to consider alternatives, such as in Bolivia and Venezuela (Sader 2008).

The final and concluding section (4) explores possible organizational contours of the NGO in the future, in terms of the emerging Latin American experience. I argue for renewed attention to a secondary definition of the NGO, as an “organizational arm” of amorphous social forces including trade unions, social movements, worker cooperatives, state-funded social programs, and so forth. I argue that Latin America offers some understanding of such different conceptions of “owned organizations” that are not professionally-driven, nor based in fundraising nor accomplishing government directives for funds. Instead they are rooted in political struggles of recognition and redistribution, often with an
accompanying commitment to alternative forms of expertise (for instance by eschewing technocracy, by focusing on popular involvement, and by wedding politics into daily actions). I also argue for a tertiary definition of NGOs, as contributing to the diversity of the associational ecosystem of civil society (Edwards, 2004), for instance by allying with different types of organizations, including ones that participate in the market or shape the state; or by cross fertilizing their activities, such that innovations in one sphere shape those in another; or by simply widening the sphere of public discourse, enhancing the sensitivity of participants to alternative ways of imagining the forces of civil society, and their relation to the state.

References


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