The phenomenon of “NGOs”: Perspectives from Latin America

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Submission for 6th International Critical Management Conference;
Critical International Management: A perspective from Latin America
“Ideologically the triumph of liberalism has imposed its own interpretation of the world as a hegemonic monopoly: democracy could only mean representative parliamentarism; the economic could only mean the capitalist market economy; the client and the consumer occluded the citizen and the worker; competition replaced rights and the market subsumed the public sphere”.

-- Emir Sader (2008)

“Poetas y mendigos, músicos y profetas, guerreros y malandrines, todas las criaturas de aquella realidad desaforada hemos tenido que pedirle muy poco a la imaginación, porque el desafío mayor para nosotros ha sido la insuficiencia de los recursos convencionales para hacer creíble nuestra vida. Este es, amigos, el nudo de nuestra soledad”.

-- Gabriel García Marquez (1982)

This paper asks what perspectives Latin America offers in terms of questions of management, particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The paper is organized as follows. A brief introduction offers a ‘secular critique’ of management studies of non-profit and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The phrase NGO, used to denote diverse forces of civil society, nationally and globally, has gained prominence, I argue, during a rise of neo-liberalism. I then discuss a stream of research from Latin America that theoretically and empirically challenges such a conception of NGOs. The common thread across this research is an effort to stem marketization, and strengthen the public sphere (albeit through different visions of it), in resistance to neo-liberalism. The final section broadens, tentatively, the organizational contours of civil society past the common understanding of NGOs, through examples from Latin America.

Secular critique and localism
What can students of nonprofit management learn from Latin America at present? In posing this question I am deliberately pushing against two trends within management studies and English-language studies of Latin American culture and history. Within management studies it should be a commonplace to note the severe under-representation of research on organizations and management practices in most of the world outside Anglo-America and Europe, for instance of the BRIC countries (Brazil, India, Russia and China). Research remains under-represented not only in terms of research publications but canonical impact. That is, management studies remains perceived, globally, overwhelmingly in terms of American and Western European referents, presuming their social context, government policy, market structures, and cultural norms are generalizable to the rest of the world. Therefore the trend in management studies remains one of inattentiveness if not ignorance of the diversity of organizations and managing styles, extant globally, including in Latin America. It is perceived as a top-down flow, where management studies serves to funnel knowledge towards the receptive South, with very little shared in the other direction.

At the same time and in a pleasing irony, scholars of Latin American cultural studies have embraced wholeheartedly postcolonial concepts that originated in another part of the South, India. Mallon (1994) and Rodríguez (2002) argue for the relevance of the subaltern studies project for Latin American studies. Subaltern Studies is a largely South Asian initiative to challenge elite historiography through perspectives from local marginalized people, to develop local histories (Chakrabarty, 2002). Inspired by it, and by postcolonial studies, scholars seek to bring out the indigenous histories of the continent, before the conquistadors, as well as

1 “Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude”.

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challenge prevailing notions of nationalist identity. In this spirit Mignolo (2005) argues that forms of epistemic colonialism have shaped Latin America historically, disguising its racial diversity within nationally cohesive notions. He also tracks transformations in such identity, now profoundly oriented to the United States. To these authors an engagement with South Asia’s own colonial experience enriches their understanding of Latin America’s colonial past. So the trend here has been to link the colonial experiences globally, to address Latin American identity through an engagement with postcolonial theory. The flow is lateral though mediated significantly by core centers based in the United States.

I am deliberately pushing against both these trends by posing a bottom-up question of knowledge—what can Latin American experiences tell us about a theoretical object taken for granted in management literature, that of nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations? I pose this question in a spirit of secular criticism. Edward Said (1983 eloquently argued for a politics of identity critical of nationalism, indeed of all totalizing creeds, yet able to somehow imagine a politics of belonging, particularly that sensitive to detachment and an outsider status. He called it secular criticism. Unlike orientalism and contrapuntal reading, secular critique is a less discussed aspect of Said’s work (Mufti, 1998). But it is crucial to the question I am posing. First it points to a way of reading management literature, one suspicious of nationalist and contextual presumptions. Such a form of reading enables us to expose management literature to a rigorous critique, to question the extent it is sensitive to its acontextual use of concepts and languages that are profoundly contextual. We will shortly see that this is the case with concepts such as NPOs and NGOs. But it also allows us to be wary of any uncritical celebration of notions of the local.

Studies of 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. As the initial 'call for papers' for this stream asserted, management literature seems witness to an antinomy of the acontextual and the local; indeed following Said one could argue that such an antinomy serves to totalize equally both ends. More productive would be appreciating how knowledge based on experiences in one geographical region, can strengthen critique of knowledge in another.

This paper’s position supports hybrid theorizing, recognizing the necessity of negotiating our received concepts of organization and management, with the experiences and contexts where these concepts are enacted. Presenting Said’s notion of secular critique also reminds us 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. We should therefore distinguish a critique of postcolonial studies (in particular its investment in textual analysis and politics of representation) from Said’s own contribution. Not a study of literature and historical texts at the expense of social context (as is the overwhelming case with Latin American subaltern studies theorists) or just critiques of Western representations (in terms of Orientalism for instance), Said’s postcolonial contribution remains and profoundly so, a commitment to exposing questions of identity and knowledge in terms of what we study and what we write. For these reasons engagements such as with Said are a resource, among other theoretical streams, to indeed establish a middle position in between the universalism and localism.

A secular reading in this specific sense presumes epistemic openness, a detachment from rivaling regimes of knowledge, in the hope of theorizing that can push against and challenge efforts to romanticize or reify notions of the universal or the local. As an author with very limited
exposure to the continent, and with no facility in either of its major languages, Spanish and Portuguese, a secular reading is also part of my own effort to avoid an authoritative reading of Latin America, and traps of expertise and sole epistemic jurisdiction.

NGOs and market liberalism
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, 2002; Mohan, 2002; Stiles, 2002; Lewis, 2005; Roberts, Jones & Frohling, 2005). They have rapidly increased in influence within the sphere of international affairs, with “at least 2,250 NGOs hav(ing) consultative status within the UN” (Brinkerhoff, Smith & Teegan, 2007:13; also Fowler, 2000; Lewis, 2005).

But what are they? Its vagueness and “general meaninglessness” (Mageli, 2005: 252) have contributed to the usage of ‘NGOs’ as a ubiquitous signifier of voluntary action in international development. When first used by the United Nations in 1945 the term specified a role, of consultants not representing national governments (Lewis, 2001). But today it describes a wide variety of organizations, greater than originally intended, brought into prominence thanks to the rapid increase of non-state actors. Indiscriminate usage obscures the heterogeneity of these actors, collapsing their differences, for instance in terms of whether they are member-owned, professionally-staffed, allied to political parties, decentralized, fragmented. Instead we are given the impression of a single organizational type that somehow represents these various organizations (Srinivas, 2009).

The dominant impression of this organizational type is of one relying on professional staff, volunteers, formally registered, with tax-free status, claiming applied expertise in social policy, in terms of delivering social services or advocating specialized solutions (for example, Desmarais, 2007: 23). This is apparent in the key response within non-profit management studies to the vacuity of the term, a sectoral definition. Salamon & Anheier (1999) argue for a ‘structural-operational’ definition, definitive organizational features common to a global third-sector distinct from the market and the state. Brett (2000), Lewis (2003), Fisher (1994), Najam (1996), Uphoff (1989) expand on such distinctions, arguing for the existence of a unique voluntary communitarian ethos, that functions through “commitment of their workers, volunteers, and members and not primarily through financial remuneration based on profit making” (Lewis, 2003: 328). The effort here is to make a distinction between the third sector and the state and market. But at the very least these typifications ignore internal heterogeneity within the third sector; blurring the distinction, for example, between membership-based organizations and principled outsiders (Chen, Jhabvala, Kanbur & Richards, 2007; Mintzberg & Srinivas, 2009). But they also draw firm boundaries between concepts of the market, the state and the voluntary sector, when in practice these boundaries are fluid, at times severely tested (Oxhorn, 2007).

Of course it should also be noted that the majority of the research cited in this paper and extant on nonprofit management originates in the United States, and is therefore emblematic of one of the primary efforts of market liberalism, initiated by Republican administrations starting in the 1980s. The energy behind these distinctions has therefore emerged at a time of growing market liberalism, and of two notable trends, contracting, the transfer of state responsibilities to civil society organizations, and fiscal accountability, holding civil society tightly accountable for funds offered. Both trends naturalized notions of privatization, presuming the value of private initiative at the expense of collective responsibility, and of marketization, presuming that all activities can somehow be monetized and exchanged within a market. I would therefore argue that the rise of the NGO as well as the semantic association of the term with professional
organizations claiming a public good, but independent of the clients served, has not only occurred during a period of market liberalism but in significant ways exemplifies market liberalism. This is not to say NGOs are bad; rather it is to note the ideological effects of using such a term uncritically, and believing it encompasses sufficient civil society actors. This is why through “the 1980s, NGOs were seen as appropriate vehicles for targeted welfare for the ‘victims’ of structural adjustment. As private, non-state organizations, they fit well with the new policy agenda of decentralization and privatization” (Howell & Pearce, 2001: 203; also Hearn, 2007).

The rise of this view of NGOs has also been allied with a specific view of management, one attuned to professional dominance. From Critical Management Studies (CMS) a relatively coherent critique has emerged of the consequences of neoliberalism. CMS has studied the rise and dominance of professionally trained managers in different sectors of modern life (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Grey, & Willmott, 2005), and of ideologies of governance that assume markets and marketization are the best means to coordinate societies (Parker, 2002). Specifically it has led to an ideology of governance, managerialism a belief that trained managers and formal techniques of organizing are equivalent to managing, able to solve persistent social problems. The core assumption of managerialism is that certified professionals are needed to enable social progress (Parker, 2002: 10), that social progress requires greater control of the natural world and of human beings. Such dual control is possible only through organizations that efficiently coordinate “people and things in order that agreed collective goals can be achieved” (4). Coordination, in turn, requires staff trained in the specialized techniques of management. Therefore managerialism is an ideology allied to neo-liberalism, seeking to free the market through social actors who control social ends through claimed expertise.

A similar critique of neo-liberalism from Critical Development Studies (CDS) tracks growing ‘technicization’ of international development, through procedures that formalize fiscal accountability (Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Kothari, 2001, 2005; Cooke, 2004). They include the logical framework, a project planning tool that is now pretty much mandated by aid agencies evaluating proposals (Gasper, 2000; Roberts, Jones & Frohling, 2005). Such techniques serve an important purpose—they isolate developmental outcomes and link them to discrete actors to be held accountable for attaining them, in return for funds granted. So civil society representatives, grassroots organizations comprising local community members, for instance, must ‘deliver’ results on developmental funds offered to them. Leaving aside the question of whether such ‘technicization’ generates development-related results, it is important to note that this process enables further marketization of development interventions, treating local social actors as paid contractors.

To CDS scholars this increasingly managed quality to developmental interventions enables the prominence of particular organizational actors, notable specialized expertise-based agents, the sort often termed NGOs (Mercer, 2002; Kamat, 2003). Emphasizing such external specialists has a political effect. It downplays grassroots-politics and the heterogeneity of civil society, which can include social movements, grassroots cooperatives, village councils and informal credit associations (Mohan, 2002; Mercer, 2002; Mintzberg & Srinivas, 2009). The shift of attention away from grassroots-based representational activities is de-politicizing, emphasizing administration over politics, service-delivery over advocacy, welfare policy over popular democracy in development initiatives (Srinivas, 2009).

The NGO in the sense of the dominant definition, is well equipped to promote the marketization and private enterprise sought by neoliberal ideologues. After all what are better than private “do-gooders” to meet the obligations expected by the state? The decline of the
public sphere, the rise of contracting as the primary mechanism of state funding, and the decline of social spending, 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. Such an imagination is deeply shaped by the prominence of American experiences with civil society, where donors “use their funds to reshape associational forms…(to) reflect a script written mostly in the United States…(where) NGOs and grassroots movements…have to become less ‘critical’ and less ‘political’… trained and professionalized” (Howell & Pearce, 2001: 222-223).

**Latin America and market liberalism**

Latin America, “a privileged territory for neoliberalism, where it was first applied—in Chile and Bolivia—(has) rapidly turned into the leading arena not only for resistance but for construction of alternatives to neoliberalism” (Sader, 2008: 5). Neoliberal development policies involved “opening up the economy to international trade, financing and investments; privatizing public enterprises and services; eliminating government interventions and regulations; and liberalizing the markets for goods, services, and factors of production. In brief it was believed that minimizing the role of government and maximizing that of markets… would guarantee freedom, democracy and economic development” (Sunkel, 2005: 55). To some the intimate experience with neoliberalism constitutes Latin America as a unique location. Due to this unique orientation of much of the South American continent in terms of the developmental state, the subsequent trajectory of civil society has differed from countries to the north (Sader, 2008). It has entailed a focus on the social construction of citizenship, according to Oxhorn (2007: 103), where “conflicts over basic citizenship rights are central yet unresolved issues”.

Such uniqueness can be described in terms of a crisis of the state and of the market (Oxhorn, 2007). Historically the continent was characterized by a form of citizenship based in cooptation, controlled inclusion (104), and populism (Howell & Pearce, 2001: 206-207). But today it is based in a form of citizenship based on consumption, where citizens are “understood as consumers, spending their votes and limited economic resources to access what normally would be considered minimal rights of democratic citizenship” (Oxhorn, 2007: 106). As a result the power and will of the state to provide for its citizens has declined. Instead Latin America is facing a widespread crisis of confidence, with citizens severely dissatisfied with the state, attested by different surveys (see Oxhorn, 2007: 111; Santos, 2005: 56). Such loss of faith is manifest in a lack of confidence in the provision of basic services, in the prevention of crime and maintenance of law and order, and the lack of implementation of a just and fair law.

This weakening of the state is accompanied by a freeing up of resources for market investment, often at the expense of local rights. The violence in Peru in early summer 2009 is one instance of the continuing battle between those who resist marketization, in this case seeking to preserve traditional title for forest and land resources, and those who seek further privatization, wishing to free land titles for enhanced global investment and economic growth. But when citizens are consumers, naturally the engagement with the public sphere is measured through the market, with an emphasis on competition and individualism and an attendant increase in inequality and decrease in rule of law. The consequence is a stark one, with the government seeking votes but offering few credible rights in response (Oxhorn, 2007).

The continent’s uniqueness can also be described in terms of broadening “the canon of democracy” (Santos & Avritzer, 2005: xxxiv), so as to avoid restricting “broad forms of participation and sovereignty in favor of a consensus on electoral processes”. In this argument, the post war period saw a specific view of democracy emerge, which identified “democracy with
the rules of the electoral process” (xxxix). Indeed, it is such a conception that has also encouraged the prevailing notion of nonprofit organizations as a tax-free status, given on the basis of recognition by the rules of the state, that they are representative of a public good.

Indeed the rise of neoliberalism has been accompanied by a loss of demo-diversity, where democracy’s intrinsic value and diverse meanings, has been replaced with an instrumental quality. Mercer (2002) has shown how such an instrumental view of democracy has been promoted by donors in terms of encouraging the rise of NGOs in Eastern Europe past the fall of the Berlin Wall. Again the notion here is of a “low intensity democracy” (Santos & Avritzer, 2005: lxv) associated with the promotion of a unitary notion of civil society, professional apolitical actors committed to delivering specific services. Politics thus “becomes a private activity, performed by professionals... responsible for society’s ‘management’ ” (Sader, 2005: 453). Unless they address “the capital accumulation processes, this type of initiative can only aspire to mitigate the effects of what is, in fact, an exclusion producing machine” (465). The response needed is to “expand the social grammar” of democracy, recognize alternative and diverse formulations of popular representation, of “demo-diversity” (Santos & Avritzer, 2005: xlii, xlvii, lxiii; also Santos, 2005: 58).

Broadening civil society
The experiences of civil society in Latin America suggest that resistance to neoliberalism has involved broadening notions of civil society. “Social movements, voluntary associations, and even many NGOs working with them, on the whole (have) remained deeply political organizations... concerned with the overall direction of their society as much as particular policy issues” (Howell & Pearce, 2001: 215). It has also required a specific focus on political activism and militancy, since “limiting the field of action to the ‘social’ as opposed to the ‘political’, proclaiming the autonomy of social movements as a principle, means condemning oneself to impotence, and ultimately to defeat” (Sader, 2008: 15).

There are at least three ways in which such broadening has taken place. They all seek to strengthen the state but within a different vision, one based around “the rehabilitation of the public domain, the universalization of rights and thoroughgoing de-marketization” (Sader, 2008: 23).

First is the role of civil society actors as an “organizational arm” to amorphous social forces including trade unions, social movements, worker cooperatives, state-funded social programs, and so forth. This is brought out well in the example of Via Campesina, which is simultaneously an alliance of dispersed civil society groups, a transnational social movement, and registered organizations, all seeking to protect the rights of “peasants, small and medium-scale farmers, rural women, farm workers and indigenous agrarian communities” (Desmarais, 2007: 6), of “people defined by place” (198). Second is an understanding of civil society as “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). An example is the Universidad de la Tierra in San Cristóbal de las Casas, which offers training in practical trades (carpentry, car mechanics, music) to the youth of indigenous communities, while strongly arguing against the elitism of accredited education2. Another example is the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), social movement for the

2 From data gathered on my visit and interviews, February 16th 2009.
landless, advocating the non-violent seizure of land, and a vision of land that seeks to foster a local commons while rejecting global trade (Stedile, 2002). Like Via Campesina it opposes a market-driven neo-liberal model of development from what it espouses, “a more humane, rural model based on a ‘rediscovered ethic of development’” (Desmarais, 2007: 33), with a focus on food sovereignty, “what food is produced, how it is produced and at what scale” (34).

Third, experiences that show for instance how different types of organizations both ally and compete with each other, adopting innovations from one sphere into another. The Brazilian government’s historical response to the rise of the MST has indeed been to offer an alternate form of land reform, PROCERA, based in the purchase of land through long-term subsidized loans. (The MST has strongly rejected this approach, but ironically the reform was a response precisely to the MST’s own visibility). These rivaling initiatives differ strongly in their approach to marketization, with MST deeming land a basic right, and as a resource for sustenance and autonomy from the market, while PROCERA makes land an affordable asset, and not solely allied to food production for self sustenance (Ondetti, 2008). In this way, such conflicts widen 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. Indeed initiatives such as MST contrast strongly with Sader’s (2005: 465) critique of “piecemeal, localized, compensatory policies… that hold ‘civil society’ as their reference and not the state”. Similarly the Peruvian state has benefited and supported the communal kitchens known as the comedores populares, in complex ways.

Conclusion
Just as Latin America was at one time as a laboratory for free market liberalist policies, notably in post-Pinochet Chile with the ‘Chicago Boys’, today it is a marker of the crisis of neoliberalism, of a declining state and encroaching market, met with severe social disensus and increasingly militant responses from civil society. Neoliberalism’s project is to create “another kind of society that stimulates efficiency, competitiveness, and individualism…the boundaries of the private and individualistic sphere are extended at the expense of the public sphere…everything becomes marketable. The public interest itself is privatized, disappears or is severely weakened (Santos, 2005: 68).

This paper has argued that Latin America signifies resistance to such a project of neoliberalism, offering a diversity of civil society that belies the theoretical straitjackets imposed on it through labels such as ‘NGOs’. Secular critique can challenge the hegemonic monopoly of market liberalism noted by Emir Sader, in the first epigraph to this paper. Yet, accompanying secular criticism is the expectation that the imagination and perspectives offered by such critique will be made credible, through resources, epistemic and material, accessible to all, as García Marquez reminds us. And it is the lack of these resources, and a sense of being beholden to those more powerful and elsewhere holding such resources, that still remains the crux of the solitude of the South, in critique, in praxis.

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