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Book Review — Accepted Manuscript (Postprint)

Book review: NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects ed. by Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor

Journal for the Study of Radicalism

Suggested Citation: Klimczuk, Andrzej (2015) : Book review: NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects ed. by Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor, Journal for the Study of Radicalism, ISSN 1930-1197, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, Vol. 9, Iss. 1, pp. 173-177,
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/567004>

This Version is available at:
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BOOK REVIEW

NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects

Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor, eds.

London and New York: Zed Books, 2013; 248 pages. \$35-95 (paperback), ISBN
9781780322575

The main topic of this book is the growing professionalization, depoliticization, and demobilization of movements for social and environmental change termed “NGOization.” Editors Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor adopt a critical approach toward non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by focusing on analysis referring to the dependence and/or complicity with state, market, and multilateral/international institutions. The volume includes articles adopting common assumptions about the role of NGOs in globalizing capitalist colonization territories, nature, peoples, and cultures in the early twenty-first century. This book fills the gap in the literature regarding the negative effects of NGOs.

The volume includes articles by scientists, activists, and educators whose studies include themes such as economic planning, NGO evaluators, gender, ethnography, human services, food system governance, the future of democracy, social and environmental justice, capitalism, colonialism, and development assistance. Case study chapters include different geographical and political contexts such as the United States, Mexico, Canada, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Philippine Serbia, and Kyrgyzstan.

The book includes nine contributed chapters and a preface. Sangeeta Kamat, in the preface, discusses the synergy between neoliberalism and the rise of the NGO sector, which has an important role in the transformations of states and the economy. She shows that the basic problem of NGOs is they are the favored institutional form through which every social problem can be addressed. But this NGOization obstructs the processes of authentic democratization. Kamat underscores the perspective of the authors of the book, particularly the thesis the “NGOs belong neither to the state nor to civil society but are contested sit in the struggle between the interests of capital and people’s aspirations for a just and humane world” (xi). In this context, NGOization is analyzed as an always unfinished and unstable project.

Choudry and Kapoor, in the introductory chapter, seek to move beyond dominant “civil society” concepts of politics and action by critic analyses of NGOization to reconceptualize resistance against capitalism and colonialism. The editors show the limitations of building NGO typologies as well as of analyzing their relationship with governments and the private sector.

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Importantly, they demonstrate the widespread NGO commitment to economic and foreign policies strategies of democratization by building civil society by professionalization and depoliticization community-based organizations. Those processes include, for example, displacing, destroying, or neutralizing social movements by NGO lobbying of governments or international institutions and privatization of the notion of public interest. Choudry and Kapoor show that an important challenge is to move beyond the dichotomy between NGO and social movements. The authors describe several critiques of NGO, analyzing them as agents of capitalist colonization of material space, as the professionalization of dissent, and as knowledge colonization for capital. Those strategies are more or less reflected in further case study chapters.

Choudry, in his chapter (“Saving Biodiversity, for Whom and for What? Conservation NGOs, Complicity, Colonialism and Conquest in an Era of Capitalist Globalization”), describes how environmental NGO serve economic and political elite interests by colonial practices and discourse. He discusses the cases of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand and Conservation International, headquartered in the United States. Both of them include the struggles of indigenous peoples to save biodiversity and describe the violations of environment and human rights by NGOs, as well as their facilitation of green-washing and human rights by NGOs, as well as their facilitation of green-washing corporations and intellectual property rights projects to identify species and natural resources to commercial interests.

Kapoor, in the second chapter (“Social Action and NGOization in Contexts of Development Dispossession in Rural India: Explorations into the Un-civility of Civil Society”), shows the NGO role in creating Special Economic Zones in India, which accelerated the rise of development displaced person population. NGOs serve to represent citizens in national and international forums as well as to address social services for displaced persons. NGOs are also spying on communities for miner extraction and undermining social movements with anti-displacement and anti-colonial political orientations because they often serve as an agent of state-corporate capital penetration. Kapoor also raises several questions that can be used to further research NGOs in rural contexts.

Sharon H. Venne, in “NGOs, Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations,” focuses on the history of indigenous peoples’ rights development. Venne shows how those rights were colonized by NGOs partners of state governments at the United Nations and the difficulty of their decolonization. NGOs have a lot of limitations in representing the public interest of

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indigenous peoples, such as limited time for presentations, consultative votes, or networking to create a statement without the input of indigenous peoples.

Luke Sinwell undertakes the theme of changes occurring in relationships between social movements and NGOs in “From Radic Movement to Conservative NGO and Back Again? A Case Study of the Democratic Left Front in South Africa.” Sinwell shows how the investigation of alternatives to the NGOization of movements took place in post-apartheid South Africa during the global economic crisis in and aft 2008. He claims that NGOization arises not only by the agency of NGO but also by their interactions with academics, lawyers, and experts from state institutions. Their consultancy changes movements to less radical.

In the next chapter, Sonny Africa describes the development of Philippine civil society movements in “Philippine NGOs: Defusing Dissent, Spurring Change.” Africa shows how NGOs helped create political conditions for implementing neoliberal policies but do n address main social problems such as inequality, poverty, and oligarch and patronage politics. NGOs are too weak and chronically unable to generate incomes, so their operations may be independent of external subsidies and sponsors.

“Disaster Relief, NGO-led Humanitarianism and the Reconfiguration of Spatial Relations in Tamil Nadu” by Raja Swamy analyzes NGOization as a component of postdisaster respatialization with more complex outcomes than depoliticization or dispossession. This case study is based on NGO involvement after a tsunami that was seen by planners and policy-makers as an opportunity to change coast spatial relations. The region was transformed by industrial, infrastructural, and tourist development agendas that were far from their fisherman-community expectations.

In “Seven Theses on Neobalkanism and NGOization in Transition Serbia,” Tamara Vukov analyzes how both military humanitarianism and NGOization in the post-Yugoslav region engages a new Balkanism rhetoric that Serbia is a chaotic and brutal land. Moreover, NGO played a role in restructuring and democracy promotion, which led to the destruction of workers’ self-management, mass layoffs, and displacements.

Elena Kim and Marie Campbell focus on the role of NGOs in social services directed to women in “Peace-building and Violence again Women: Tracking the Ruling Relations of Aid in a Women Development NGO in Kyrgyzstan.” NGOs built a network of crisis centers for women that should reduce domestic violence. However, their policy, by pursuing donor goals, loses sight of actual people.

In the last chapter, “Alignment and Autonomy: Food Systems Canada,” Brewster Kneen

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shows NGO relations with transnational food trading corporations, suppliers, farmers, and citizens, and suggests the analysis would be applicable to other countries. NGOs serve in a system such as delivery vehicles for welfare programs or humanitarian aid.

The book includes a wide range of examples of NGOization. However, there is still room to work on studies including welfare state model differentiation, informal economy, social economy, and social entrepreneurship, new forms of social organizations, as well as more quantitative comparative studies of global and regional levels. A chapter involving analysis of support for non-governmental organizations member states of the European Union would be a good addition.

This volume, by gathering studies of NGOization as a new research direction, should be particularly interesting for academics and practitioners working in public policy, education, corporate social responsibility, human rights, justice, and development assistance.

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