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NGOING DEVELOPMENT: NARROWING CIVIL SOCIETY WITHIN DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

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The author examines the fate of one of the main actor in the modern discourse of development, answering the question why and how civil society has been narrowed to NGOs and what are the possible outcomes of this narrowing.

Автор розглядає долю одного із провідних акторів сучасного дискурсу розвитку, дає відповідь на питання чому і як громадянське суспільство звели до НУО, а також які можливі наслідки цього процесу.

Автор рассматривает судьбу одного из ведущих актеров современного дискурса развития, дает ответ на вопрос почему и как гражданское общество свели к неправительственным организациям, а также какие возможные последствия этого процесса.

Ключові слова: розвиток, НУО, громадянське суспільство, неолібералізм, Україна, суспільні рухи.

Developmental turn

After the Second World War capitalist economy of the core countries was ruled by Keynesianism as an approach to practical policy. Within this approach state planning and state intervention played one of the central roles on the microeconomic level. Hence, state was the main actor of development. However, the financial crisis of 1973 gave birth to the neoliberal turn [16] which changed the scope of national and international economic policy greatly by its theoretical and practical attack against the state as an active and powerful actor.

Neoliberalism changed the rules of economic game in general and the rules of the development policies in particular. Some authors go so far to announce that these new rules “undermined the foundations” of development theory and practice because they left the process of the development for the impersonal market, which hardly could be perceived as an actor of the development, and international organizations which preferred market-oriented intervention [12]. This shift left national level without legitimate actor which could manage the general chronic instability generated by modern financial market [7] or neo-liberal system as a whole [6, chap. 3] and which could at least partly replace the state in the development process. Others, however, point out that “outsourcing” and “rolling back” of the state during the last decades of the 20th century positioned NGOs as recipients of power within civil society [3].

NGOing Development: Theoretical and Practical Tricks

Thus banning state intervention in the process of the development, discourse of the development went to state's classical opposition – civil society. I am not going to cover here the debates whether this “ban” is an appropriate approach toward the development, but will revise theoretical and practical consequences of this move.

To start with, one should remember that analytical opposition between civil society and state is in itself not so clear both theoretically and practically.

Making critical analysis of classical theory of relations between civil society and state by Antonio Gramsci, Perry Anderson points out that within this theory civil society can be viewed as contrasting with state, encompassing with state or identical with it [1]. Only the first variation makes precise theoretical sense for the way civil society is appropriated by the development discourse as “the segment of society that interacts with the state, influences the state and yet is distinct from the state” [Chazan as quoted in 4, 447]. The second variation can make sense but should take into consideration the level of the development of civil society itself on some continuum, for example, encompassing/autonomy in case if within discourse it is assumed that this level can vary and these variations are important for the functioning of civil society as development agent. Finally, the last variation destructs discursive relations between state and civil society completely and challenges the very hegemonic approach toward civil society and its potential role in the process of the development.

From practical perspective James Ferguson makes [3] some important remarks on the empirical reality of civil society in Africa. He argues that analysis of this empirical reality gives

arguments against and challenges the whole theoretical conception of the “vertical of power” according to which civil society plays the role of bridge between family and state. This ideal theoretical model does not correspond to the real networks of relations where civil society is supported by the international organizations, financial institutions, foreign governments and even local governments. It is still perceived or presented as “local” and “grassroot” but the relations of power and interests are completely different because of the real state of affairs.

One more important point about the relations of theoretical and empirical level of the development discourse is its twofold character. On the broader scope theorists of the development still can speak of civil society but in practice this actually means speaking mainly about one of its actors – so called “nongovernmental organizations”. This kind of narrowing of the concept is interesting in both its causes and consequences. Among the first one can name number of issues but I will mention only some of them which seem to be the most essential and controversial for me.

Emphasis on NGOs can be explained by the interplay of two factors: suspects about the role of the state, which I have already mentioned above, and long-lasting approach to the development process as the realm of practical, technical solutions which would be more or less prompt in their effects [12]. Hence, something was needed to replace the state as an actor which organize and plan the development process. Organizing and planning – are additional sub-factor in this respect, which automatically refer to institutional actor.

One more issue which could probably lead to the realm of civil society is critical, including anthropological, rethinking of the development processes. This critical rethinking often emphasizes on locality and local knowledge as aspects which should be heavily taken into consideration during development intervention [5]. However, it is hard to say whether the influence of this factor really took place, but I assume that it is used in the circle of defense: critics point out the importance of locality and development experts point out that they take this aspect seriously by using grassroot organizations as the main actors. And it seems this circle is not broken yet because NGOs, as mentioned above, are often not as grassroot and local as experts want to present them.

Pass toward NGOs as the one of the main actors in the discourse of the development was made in the framework of discourse itself with some probable appropriation of its critique. Neoliberal turn gave the most general direction for this pass through its supreme doubts about the role of state in policy-making and through analytical (vertical) opposition between the state and civil society which can be challenged both theoretically and practically. Framework of the development approach narrowed this pass and finally led it to NGOs as more or less institutionalized part of civil society which, as some critics point out, has “much more to do with management, good “governance”, and control” [5, 169].

Situation with development of “underdeveloped” appears to be even more dramatic if taking into account the position of those scholars who reasonably doubt the very possibility of successful developmental projects without the leading role of the “developmental state” [11, chapter 9]. In this case neoliberal structural adjustment programs for developing countries with their mantra of cutting expenses can put an indestructible obstacle on those countries’ way to any sustainable progress.

NGOing Development: Critical Approaches Toward Consequences

There are three main analytical perceptions of NGOs as actors in the development processes. The first is represented by those experts who support the idea of NGOs as appropriate means of managing the socio-economic processes. Proponents of the second camp approach NGOs more or less critically, arguing, however, that they have both potential and obstacles in their way of dealing with development. The last approach is skeptical and suspicious about the whole idea of NGOs being the most successful actor who deals with developmental issues. From the critical perspective the last two approaches seems to be important to elaborate on. Hence, I will deal with two articles which represent more or less and the most skeptical evaluations about the role of NGOs in the development theory and practice.

William Fisher in his article *Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practice* [4] speaks about “quite revolution” which led to the socio-political reality in which states lost their authority over civil society. He tries to deconstruct the concept of NGO as both ““favored child” of official developmental agencies” [4, 442] and controversial agent within the networks of power, interests, organizational and symbolic structures. He refers to both civil society and NGOs as too generalized and oversimplified notions on theoretical level which seem to refer to a great variety of different agents in reality which can not be evaluated all together as positive or negative from the position of developmental processes. Fisher argues that only through studying NGOs in the particular context and at the same time through placing them within broader field of power, information and resources one can make some conclusions whether they can contribute to changes in power relations in general and to emancipation and empowerment of people in particular. Fisher's conclusions are rather optimistic [4, 458]:

Some NGOs face routinization, bureaucratization, and institutionalization that encourage the drift toward oligarchy or sap them of their creative potential, while other NGOs are in a process of permanent resistance against that which is “never inherently evil but always dangerous”.

I believe that this position is rather plausible as it gives contextual perspective on the most controversial questions regarding NGOs – power and empowerment. This position, for example, can be found in Andreas Däfinger study of development projects in Burkina Faso [2, chapter 1-4] where he demonstrates how local power relations influence the availability of resources in general and development resources in particular. In the case of Burkina Faso these power relations are heavily shaped by ethnicity through mediation of state structures; in other cases it can be shaped by something else and this shape should not be applied uncritically within development processes.

One more important point which Fisher mentions in his article is the point of main attack in the second article I would like to elaborate on. Fisher notes that modern scholars in the field of social movements try to rethink the link between NGOs and social movements and their contribution to the processes of democratization. James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer in their work *Bad Government, Good Governance: Civil Society versus Social Movements* [15] present radical critique of nongovernmental organizations and their role in the neoliberal hegemony. Scholars provide near the same critique of these developmental actors which Fisher and other authors give in their works: depoliticization instead of empowerment, serving the interests of international and notional authorities instead of local population, etc. However, they are less optimistic and more radical in their conclusions by stating that strong pro-NGO emphasis within the hegemonic discourses has one important consequence which is based on all of these failures which, in their turn, are in general plausible for powerful actors. Petras and Veltmeyer argue that NGOs are “agent of global neoliberalism” in that sense that they are “alternative to the social movements and their radical antisystemic politics” [15, 9]. They conclude [15, 27]:

[NGOs] play a critically important role in advancing the imperialist agenda. In the 1970s many were converted into frontline 'development' agencies – to spread the gospel of the virtues of social and political reform and, within the context of local development micro-projects, help offset growing pressure for revolutionary change.

In my opinion, among these two approaches the first one makes more sense because it tries to avoid generalizations and argues for systemic contextual and empirical based evaluation of the role of NGOs in the process of the development. However, the second approach points out one extremely important consequence of NGOing the development which is the one I have mentioned above – narrowing the civil society. It also places the question of narrowing in the context of uninstitutionalized actor which should be considered within civil society, by which I mean social movements. But I also think that Petras and Veltmeyer are too uncritical and general about the impact of pro-NGO discourses on the level of social movements; precisely this point I will try to demonstrate in the context of contemporary Ukraine.

Civil Society and Development in Ukraine

Civil society in Ukraine is generally considered to be poorly developed. There is a tendency to explain it by Ukrainian historical context in which the USSR put obstacles in the way of civil society both directly through oppressions, and indirectly through system of corruption, compulsory participation in meaningless or ineffective organizations, etc [e.g. 14]. It is also explained by contemporary socio-economic context by referring to small middle-class (which is considered to be the “core” of civil society), lack of appropriate legal framework, oligarchic politics of the state, corruption, etc [8].

What is interesting, however, is that Ukrainian context gives a lot of support for the “narrowing” thesis. While speaking about civil society, authors sometimes mention other types of institutionalized actors, such as trade unions [e.g. 8] or use definition of civil society in its classical general form which can potentially include broader scope of actors [e.g. 9]. However, even those authors elaborate almost exclusively on the analysis of NGOs while presenting it as analysis of civil society. Hence, it is not surprising, taking into consideration statement about low level of its development and “narrowing” consequences, that scholars make conclusions of the civil society dynamics on the basis of statistical data about the number of NGOs in Ukraine, which is “small, although steadily growing” [14, 8]. In this context a very powerful developmental discourse emerges – discourse about the development of civil society, meaning NGOs. And this discourse is mainly about developing skills and knowledge regarding how to plan and presents activity in order to get financial support from international and local institutions [13, 7]:

Although NGOs understand the importance of ensuring financial support, they still must learn to develop coherent, consistent and continuous plans for fund-raising that fit their organization's mission. Overall, survey data show that Ukrainian NGOs demonstrate certain ability to attract diversified financial support. But, on whole, organizations still lack a systematic approach to planning.

Ukrainian context also gives support for the thesis that NGOs are often not as grassroots as local as their advocates want to present them. For example, to test NGOs' embedment into local and grassroots context, one can refer to issues they care about. And even more useful would be to refer to issues they care about outside their institutionalized activities. Because on the latter they report to their sponsors and this fact makes information less reliable, potentially involving the phenomenon of presentation and imitation. So, here statistics on NGOs' participation in protests can be referred to. According to Ukrainian Protest and Coercion Database Project [17], in 2012 NGOs participated in 17% of protest action in Ukraine, while parties and politicians took part in 35%, and 35% of all protests involved only apolitical informal initiatives. Going further, only 17% of NGOs' street activism were related to socio-economic issues. At the same time, this type of issues is the most popular on Ukrainian streets – 43% of all protests in 2012 were related to socio-economic problems. However, NGOs did not follow the tendency and in 2012 were the most interested in ideological protests, which aggregated 26% of their protest activities. Hence, NGOs in Ukraine are not quite in touch with local problems. Referring to their sponsors – often international or overseas – NGOs partially fail in referring to their supposed beneficiaries and their main concerns.

NGOing development and peculiarities of NGOs in Ukraine produce rather controversial outcomes in the level of interaction between NGOs and other actors. I suspect that the scope of these actors is great but I would like to refer only to social movements in order to go back to the issue which I have mentioned above – discursive and practical relations between NGOs and social movements within narrowed civil society. In order to do this I would like to bring an example of Save Old Kyiv (SOK) – protest initiative which was created in 2007 in Ukrainian capital in order to protest against chaotic illegal constructions of elite apartment houses and malls.

This protest initiative united different kinds of people, however, great number of that people were members of different radical left groups (Marxists, anarchists, etc.). This wing of the initiative shared generally one discourse which can be called anti-NGO discourse. They were very suspicious about NGOs in Ukraine and referred to their representatives as grant-guzzlers (grantozhery), meaning that in their perception NGOs were effective only for getting financial support from donors with the help of “projects planning” and could not produce any positive outcomes. I do not want to go too deeply into this question but would like to demonstrate this discourse by one example.

After one of the first public gatherings organized by SOK regarding one of the most scandalous constructions, there was a conversation between organizers: activists of the initiative and a lawyer from one NGO. That lawyer suggested his help in determining strategic goals and actions for the initiative. This proposition was rejected and he asked for explanations: did they have goals at all, what were that goals and why they did not want his help. The lawyer was a little bit shocked by the answers to the second question which were something like “to make people believe in themselves”, “to inspire the process of communal self-organization”, “to create space for grassroots action”, “to make revolution”, “to build civil society”. Regarding the last answer lawyer commented that there is civil society in Ukraine already. Not surprisingly, he did not accept that kind of answers and continued asking what the goals were. Finally there was a dialog between that lawyer and one activist (recreated from memory):

L.: So, what are your goals?

A.: What is the goal of love?

L.: Pleasure?...

A.: No, pleasure it is when quickly and for money (activists laughing).

This example shows different controversial issues. First of all, it shows that these activists reject classical NGO-like approach of planning of short-term practical paid intervention (and, I should add, they reject institutionalized action in general, preferring so-called “direct action”). They reject the narrowed concept of civil society, and state that it needs to be developed in Ukraine, meaning not development of NGOs, but of people self-organization in form of uninstitutional initiatives. But what is the most interesting about this example is that even left-wing activists of SOK, being rather critical about NGOs, cooperate with them in situations when institutionalized approach is required, for example, in cases of public gatherings, courts, and other legal procedures.

One more important aspect of the quoted dialogue is the language of “goals” itself. It is so often used not only by NGOs, whose members should write proposals, submit reports and state exact goals of their activity to clearly justify their own existence and get funding for it. However, the problem of “goals” is broader than that of NGOs' efficiency. As stated by Kutuev [10],

the language of “goals” ... is intimately connected with an excessively rationalist worldview inherited from the Enlightenment and Marxism. The contemporary version of this style of thinking is

transitology with its naive belief in the feasibility of goals of societal development once they have been stated.

Hence, the language of “goals” is not only about NGOs’ way of thinking. It refers to broader ideological construct in which a decontextualized country with decontextualized actors is moving gradually forward, to take its place in a pastel and harmonious world. A very peaceful picture, though completely out of reality. Reality, in which NGOing development together with many other global and local contextualized factors and processes create not a pass forward, but those “lost in transition”.

Concluding Remarks

Hegemonic vision of NGO as one of the main instrument within civil society in the process of the development was shaped by historical peculiarities of developmental theories and practices. This hegemonic vision, as I have tried to show, is potentially dangerous because of its narrowed concept of civil society and oversimplification of NGOs; these result in uncritical perception of NGOs as the most (the only?) effective, neutral and decontextualized actor of the development within civil society. However, as critical analysis shows – such vision is far from reality. In order to correct this vision, one should go back to reality with the means of systematic and contextual research which can help to understand and to evaluate the whole complexity of theoretical and practical issues regarding civil society, NGOs, and NGOs as part of civil society with the potential to cooperate with its other parts.

Brief exploration of these issues in Ukrainian contexts shows that NGOing development, discourse of transitology and peculiarities of Ukrainian NGOs’ bring controversial outcomes. One of them is the relative break between NGOs’ activities and local problems. Another is complex relationships between NGOs and grassroot movements, which are based on slight mutual distrust and sporadic cooperation. Yet others worth further research.

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