Chapter III

"Civil Society," NGOs, and the globalization of social agendas

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The crisis of socialist ideologies together with technological changes and new business administration methods that reduced the role of the industrial workers and weakened the trade union sector led to the "de-radicalization" of party politics and of the left-right schism of the past   In order to win elections, parties had to moderate their discourses, navigate among the most diverse interests, and essentially "deradicalize" expectations. Party   politics, therefore, entered into a crisis of representation, of expressing the hope of social change or moral guidance in the present.

As political parties gradually were depleted or abandoned for lack of ideological substance, "traditional" politics came to be seen in a negative light, as a sphere characterized by vanity and corruption. Its fall from grace was such that, in the eyes of much of the population of democratic countries, most parties and politicians had forfeited authority, respect and admiration and, at the same time, had abandoned the hope and utopian message associated with them throughout the 20th century. Government office no longer evoked the aurea that the exercise of political functions had commanded in times past when power was viewed as an expression of the divine will and to some extent survived until not to long ago.[54]

For decades, the social democratic synthesis merged social solidarity with an economic policy alternative (Keynesian economics). The combination of redistribution policies and capital formation contributed to a convergence, albeit conflictive, between the interests of the working class and those of the dominant sectors of capitalist societies. To this must be added efforts to accommodate economic progress and social progress and to reconcile technological innovation and social innovation for the common good. Perhaps it was an historical anomaly, that at

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[54] See Marcel Gauchet , "Quand les droits de l´homme deviennent une politique".

a particular moment in the development of capitalism, subordinated groups were capable of negotiating with the dominant groups a societal project that benefited the majority of the population. It is not clear if this type of event can be repeated or if this could only have come to pass because the subordinated sectors had attained immense economic-organizational power (through trade unions) and representative power (through political parties).

"Civil Society"[55]

In the current phase of capitalism, we see a growing disconnect between economic progress and institutional systems of solidarity. This disconnect stems from the widening gap between winners and losers (the latter represented by all those whom the economic system has rendered "obsolete" or "non-employable"). The new groups that have been sidelined by the dynamics of contemporary capitalism lack political power and the capacity to bring economic pressure to bear; thus far, they have been unable to translate their interests into a societal project that incorporates their demands into the exigencies of the economic system. While movements such as the Landless People's Movement (Movimento dos Sem Terra –MST of Brazil) or the Zapatistas in Mexico have established themselves as ethical icons or a thorn in the social conscience, they lack the capacity to channel feasible social reform or policy proposals that encompass the majority of the population.

The dissociation between politics and ideals has driven a wedge between the task of government administration, to which political parties must adhere, and the production of moral ideals, a task that has fallen to "civil society" organizations specialized in disseminating a discourse of moral protest. As the producers of "moral causes" increasingly set themselves up as advocates and "representatives" of disadvantaged sectors, the gap widens between the "logic of the system" in which

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[55] For a detailed bibliography and a more updated elaboration of this section see Bernardo Sorj, *Civil Societies North-South Relations: NGOs and dependency*, The Edelstein Center for Social Research, Working Paper No. 1, 2005. www.bernardosorj.com/pdf/Sorj_Article.pdf . For internet available resources on civil society, see OLIVEIRA, Dayse, *Research Sites and Researchers on Civil Society and NGOs*, The Edelstein Center for Social Research, Research Resources on Internet, Report No.1, 2005. www.centroedelstein.org.br/report/Report_civil_society.pdf

parliamentary parties are trapped, and the social demands of excluded groups, channeled by nongovernmental organizations and social movements.

Even when certain political demagogues combine a messianic style with moralistic, apolitical discourse divorced from party politics, (such as Collor in Brazil, Fujimori in Peru, or Hugo Chavez in Venezuela), such experiences often are short-lived and rapidly destabilized by the political and economic dynamics at play. In other cases, particularly in developed countries, political parties born of social movements, such as the "Greens," are perpetually torn between the rationales and "purist" demands of their constituents and the practicalities of parliamentary life and forging alliances in government.

This new context also has featured the proliferation of religious groups seeking to increase their influence in public life. While an analysis of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this work, it is important to contemplate religious groups among the new (or revitalized) actors in contemporary political life, or at least to consider their direct and indirect impact on political representation, particularly taking into account their criticism of the secular values upon which modern citizenship was built.

This "dislocation" of expectations concerning politics is also expressed in the loss of identification with representative political institutions. As a result of this dislocation, we are witnessing a state of apathy, or declining faith in institutions, accompanied by periodic explosions against governments that violate legal or moral principles. When such explosions have occurred—for example, the impeachment of Fernando Collor or the fall of Fujimori in Peru—the mass media, and not political parties or trade unions, have been the main catalysts.

While there is no question that political parties, even as ad hoc instruments of charismatic leaders, continue to be the main mechanism of political representation of the interests and demands of their societies, their capacity to reflect the moral dimensions of politics or to represent the hopes of the most disadvantaged sectors has diminished. The parliament, sandwiched between the Executive Branch with its

monopoly over material resources and techno-bureaucratic capability and the Judiciary, which is the final arbiter in matters concerning the legality of the laws, becomes increasingly fragmented and colonized by the most diverse economic and social lobbies.

In this way, the space for moral discourse in society gradually has been displaced toward a galaxy of groups referred to as "civil society." These groups have found a powerful spokesman in the press, which serves as an invaluable source of support for their mobilizations and for validating their charges or complaints, which are presented in the name of "absolute moral values".

The emphasis on, and proliferation of, self-described "civil society" organizations is emblematic and a symptom of the working classes' dwindling protagonism, the crisis of political parties, and the growing difficulties governments face in tackling the new challenges posed by societies that are simultaneously fragmented and globalized. In the social imagination, "civil society" gradually has become the only institution espousing political virtues, particularly because it is seemingly "apolitical." It is held up as the new agent of historical transformation and the embodiment of libertarian ideals and aspirations of social justice, in contrast to the inhumanity of the market and the State. Due to the deepening wedge between social activists motivated by an advocacy agenda featuring absolute values and political parties, "civil society" is characterized as the "authentic" representative of "society" in the context of a discredited political system.

As a concept, "civil society" traveled a long road, taking on the most diverse meanings along the way, depending on the role assigned to it by each social philosopher.[56] But the history of the different uses of the concept of "civil society" has made a limited contibuiton to the understanding of its meaning in contemporary society. In the 1960s and 1970s, the term was used in academic circles particularly related to the significance attributed to it in Marxist-Gramscian thought. But its dissemination in a form more closely resembling the present-day understanding of the term has been in relation to the struggles against authoritarian regimes in Latin

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[56] See Norberto Bobbio, *O conceito de sociedade civil*.

America, or in communist countries to describe organized resistance groups in society in confrontation with State power.

More recently, the debate over "civil society" in Latin America has been fostered by social scientists eager to introduce a sociological dimension into the discussion of democratization, in the context of a debate that is largely focused on formal political institutions. These authors apply a concept mainly inspired by the work of Habermas and imbued with strong normative connotations.[57] It is based on philosophical constructs that, instead of promoting concrete research on "civil society" in all of its diversity and complexity, present hand-picked "case studies" (and the Brazilian experience with participatory budget and the World Social Forum usually are guaranteed a spot) designed to confirm the general theses.

The enormous prestige that "civil society" enjoys today in the mass media and among virtually all international agencies, cooperation agencies and foundations, frequently has led to the acritical or apologetic application of this concept in the social sciences. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze critically the concept, not to discount it, but rather to explain how it is constructed and why it has such a positive status in social imagery and practice.

In recent decades, arguments emanating from political philosophy that aim to reclaim the notion of "civil society" by appealing to a strong normative content seem to us to be very fragile, at least from the sociological standpoint. Such arguments in general involve deductive constructs that ultimately lead to a concept of "civil society" charged with "wishful thinking." For example, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato,[58] drawing from Habermas' social theory, try to broaden the horizon of democratic practice by identifying "civil society" as a public, nongovernmental space that coexists side by side with the sphere of private interests (the economy) and the State and political system.

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[57] Cf. A synthesis of the evolution of this concept in Brazil is found in Sérgio Costa's book, *As cores de Ercília*.

[58] See Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Arato later accepted several criticisms while still maintaining the relevance of the concept. See "Uma reconstituçâo hegeliana da sociedade civil". In Brazil, this view is maintained by Leo Avritzer, "Alem da dicotomía Estado/mercado" and by Sérgio Costa, op. cit.

According to this perspective, "civil society" is made up of autonomous actors capable of dealing independently with the market or the State and of generating new forms of political participation, social movements and new rights, limiting the trend toward privatization/commercialization and the bureaucratization of social life. There is, as a rule, little clarity regarding the definition of who, specifically, belongs to "civil society." Arato and Cohen, for example, give emphasis to social movements related to new identities, while Habermas focuses more on the role of public space and groups such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In any event, leaving aside the matter of conceptual ambiguity, these analyses are afflicted with the difficulty inherent to the dialogue between social philosophy and sociology, in other words, the problem of identifying concrete social organizations based on theoretical frameworks that define spheres of social action derived from abstract principles. Hence, the three rational dimensions that inform action in modern society—administrative-bureaucratic, market, and social solidarity or inter-communicational—are identified with specific social organizations: the State, the market/corporation, and "civil society." Yet none of these spheres operates in just one dimension (as shown, for example, by the literature from the field of economic sociology on effective business practices) and "civil society" institutions also are not immune to bureaucratic or commercial tendencies.

In social life, no one type of institution holds a monopoly over virtues or vices. The space of the 'life-worlds" that Habermas constantly tries to delineate permeates the pores of all social organizations.[59] Many if not most of "Civil society" organizations, in turn, frequently overlap with trade unions, political parties, churches, or entrepreneurs, or even were created by them, and they also maintain all sorts of ties with the government and the market.

The sociological realities of these organizations vary with each national context and feature many different forms of social and political insertion. The notion that "civil society" constitutes an important component of democratic consolidation is based on the assumption that the diverse subsystems, particularly representative

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[59] Efforts to link agents of freedom and social autonomy to precise social forms is found even in the work of a prominent author such as Alain Touraine. See *Critique de la modernité*.

political parties and the judicial system, are functioning properly. If that were the case, "civil society" would be able to act as a transmission belt between the public sphere and the political system. However, this is not the case in most Latin American countries—or even in many advanced countries—where civil society reflects a hypostatic concept that tends to supplant politics with moral discourse or to disregard, as in the case of religious fundamentalist organizations (part of the "civil society" galaxy), basic democratic values.

The idea of a "civil society" distinct from and at variance with, the State is rife with conceptual difficulties, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, since the notion of State per se is unusual inasmuch as political institutions do not exist independently of society (it is emblematic, for example, that public officials are referred to as "civil servants"). This is not to say that in those countries, the deterioration of party politics discussed earlier has not caused social actors to experience a sense of dissociation from the traditional political system. In the case of countries defined by the continental European tradition, where public administrations inherited a number of privileges and prerogatives from the absolutist State, the critique of the State appears more justified in that it is directed against the persistent authoritarian components and lack of transparency of public administrations.

In the context of the debate surrounding neoliberalism and the way it is played in the media, the concept "civil society" is mobilized as a "third reality" vis-à-vis the State and the market. Antiglobalization movements often present themselves as a concrete expression of "civil society," imprinting this concept with the evocative power of an intrinsically good, immaculate social dimension, untainted by the evils of the State or the market. In reality, political parties—which also create their own NGOs—have appropriated the "civil society" discourse, just as it has become commonplace for politicians and government officials to participate in the meetings of the World Social Forum, which is financed mainly with public sources..

As "civil society" becomes increasingly removed from the political system, and from the political party system in particular, the parliamentary sphere is diminished in importance, social fragmentation intensifies, and the capacity to

develop societal projects is diluted. In the final instance, what emerges is the non idemocratic illusion of a "civil society" able to exist with its back to the State.

The use of the concept of "civil society" by some of its self-proclaimed representatives is tantamount to a negation of the concept of public space. If "civil society" is a dimension of the public sphere, then it cannot be "represented" by any group, as that would mean a contradiction with the notion of an open sphere. The public sphere is public in that it constitutes a space for dialogue and for the debate of conflicting opinions; no one can represent it and no actor can appropriate it without attacking its very foundations, homogenizing a reality whose essential condition is diversity.[60]

The self-representation of "civil society" as a homogeneous structure contributes to this tendency. Since it does not represent itself as a party (in other words a *part*) relative to others, organizations that belong to "civil society" don't need to confront their peers and define themselves in contrast to the State and the market.

The temptation of civil society organizations to assert a monopoly over the public sphere appears stronger in countries with fragile democratic institutions or authoritarian regimes, it is also present in most "civil society" organizations that claim to embody absolute values to the detriment of political parties. In doing so, such organizations can undermine the role of the public sphere as a space for dialogue and the development of policy alternatives and may end up corroding democracy, itself a prerequisite for the existence of an autonomous "civil society."

Meanwhile, in countries where democratic society is firmly entrenched, very few NGOs question the specific role and legitimacy of the political system. This is not the case in Latin American countries, much less in African countries. When governments enjoy scant legitimacy or are undemocratic, "civil society" tends to

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[60] The closest thing to a "representation" of the public sphere is the statistical metaphor of the "public opinion" poll, which should never be confused with the public sphere as such.

consider itself "more" legitimate than the government itself. In certain situations, even armed groups such as the FARC in Colombia claim to represent "civil society." While this political "substitutionism" is inevitable in undemocratic contexts, in democratic regimes it represents a return to practices that could open the door to authoritarian, messianic approaches.

One of the problems with how "civil society" uses the discourse of human rights lies in its political manipulation. Human rights organizations frequently mask clearly defined partisan political agendas, whose priorities are a far cry from those of the universality of extolled values, as was evident during the 2001 conference against racism in Durban. The logic behind these organizations is no different than that of the communist-sponsored "fronts" of years past in that they employ a discourse that condemns the failure to respect human rights, but is associated, in fact, with the struggle against the "political enemy."

"Civil society" organizations and actions should therefore be examined in their specific political and social contexts. Their demands or claims, and utopias may be—and usually are—core components of democratic revitalization inasmuch as they create and defend new rights and values. However, in certain cases, "civil society" actions may, directly or indirectly, advocate authoritarian and reactionary regimes, as demonstrated in past and recent history, from extreme right-wing groups to religious fundamentalists.

The prestige accorded "civil society" is a reflection of its significance as a source of new social practices and a gauge of society's dissatisfaction with its political institutions. In practice, relations between political parties and "civil society" tend to be simultaneously complementary and conflictive. Complementary in that political parties (and governments) act as parasites on "civil society" in their efforts to identify new issues and causes through which to preserve their moral authority, after they themselves have depleted the ideologies that once nourished their creativity and vision for the future.

Although some "civil society" organizations tend to undercut the legitimacy of political parties and established governments, they do not pose a threat to consolidated democratic regimes. They do, however, have the potential to demoralize political life in countries with less solid democracies.

In democratic systems, the convergence of solidarity and individuality, or common values and respect for individual autonomy, is ensured by means of electoral mechanisms through which citizens empower their chosen parties and politicians to defend their particular (individual) and common (group or societal) interests. For a long time, political parties set themselves up as the main collective vehicle for individual expression through collective means as well as being a transmitor of overarching causes or groups interests.   The wedge dividing the human rights organizations and the elected political representatives is both cause and symptom of the crisis of political party representation. This conflict is most obvious when the organized expression of "civil society" is primarily NGOs comprising of an extremely limited number of individuals.

The World of NGOs

NGOs refer to a broad range of institutions which significantly, are defined in negative terms, as private, non-profit organizations. In practice, this universe cuts across the spectrum, from the more traditional, usually volunteer-based philanthropic religious organizations, to foundations and neighborhood associations, and on to what are best described as front organizations, either of politicians who use them to channel public resources or entrepreneurs who regard them as a more lucrative business management approach.[61]

Despite the continuity between traditional forms of philanthropic activity and NGOs, the "modern" NGO, which has proliferated since the 1970s, is a novel social type of organization and political culture.   The contemporary NGO is an institution specialized in the creation, defense, and dissemination of human rights, and often

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[61] On the global dimensions of this sector and the representation of certain national cases, cf. Lester M. Salaman et al*., La Sociedad Civil Global: las dimensiones del sector no lucrativo.*

claims a monopoly in that area of political discourse. **In contrast to traditional civil society organizations (from community based organizations and religious groups to professional organizations and trade unions) they do not represent, nor are they chosen by, the public they claim to represent.**[62] NGOs could be more aptly defined as non-representative political organizations whith legitimacy based on universal moral claims.

Organizationally, NGOs usually are populated by professionals devoted exclusively to "social causes." Behind the NGOs there is a new international actor, one that requires more detailed research and analysis: the galaxy of private foundations and international cooperation resources (both from national states and international agencies) who play a major role in defining the agendas of NGOs, particularly in developing countries.

There are many different types of NGOs, most of them "dwarfs" (consisting of one or two people). One possible typology refers to ascription or origin: there are PNGOs (linked to political parties), BNGOs (associated with business or company offshoots), RNGOs (associated with religious groups), UNGOs (related to trade unions), and so forth. Other classification approaches focus on a) whether they are local, national, or transnational; b) their voluntary or professional nature; c) their sphere of action. These categories illustrate the different tracks guiding these organizations, but in practice, most NGOs do not follow a "pure" model of organization or action.

We can identify two ideal type of NGOs: those focused on defending causes (advocacy groups) and those engaged in developing "exemplary" social practices. The main objective of the former is to carry out activities with a media impact, as a way of mobilizing public opinion around their causes aiming to change policies. The latter group is engaged in the development of concrete social projects, which does not rule out the objective of galvanizing public opinion around their targets of action.

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[62] Philantropic organizations also do not represent their constituencies, but they do not claim to do so.

The NGO world does not represent a closed world inasmuch as it cultivates a variety of relationships—many of which involve direct dependence—with other social spheres. This situation, which in principle is positive, requires a thorough and specific examination of the role played by NGOs in each social context, as opposed to simply elevating them to the status of new agent of historical progress.

International insertion is a typical feature of most NGOs. As Sérgio Costa points out,

[…] only by taking into account the complex game of interpenetrations, social alliances, and transnational alliances is it possible to understand, for example, why issues such as the environment, gender equality, or the struggle against racial discrimination gained a disproportionate level of importance on the Brazilian political and academic agenda relative to the political weight of the social actors they represent in the national context.[63]

The international insertion of most NGOs in developing countries was built on grants earmarked for specific agendas. In a sense, then, the NGO world replicated North-South inequalities. Most NGO agendas (for example, those working on environmental issues or birth control policies) reflect the concerns, sensibilities, and priorities established in their headquarters in the developed world. . Assistance is not always imposed, but their dependency on international funding cannot fail to influence the positions taken by NGOs in less developed countries, in some cases creating local "enclaves" of executors of an agenda defined overseas.

While there are no systematic international studies on the social make-up and backgrounds of NGO leaders and members, isolated studies have shown that, besides serving as a critical source of employment for local leaders from poor neighborhoods or for ethnic minorities, NGOs absorb a significant quantity of college graduates, particularly in the social sciences. In recent years, university courses designed specifically to train future NGO professionals have emerged around the world.

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[63] See Sergio Costa, "A construçao de raça no Brasil".

The role and political influence of NGOs in a particular society, as we already have pointed out with respect to "civil society," depend on the societal context (in most fundamentalist Muslim countries, Syria, China, and Cuba they are, as a rule, either prohibited or State controled). In many parts of Africa, NGOs, where allowed to function, absorb a significant portion of middle class professionals. Supported virtually in their entirety through external funding, they offer "international" salaries, meaning a much higher salary than those earned by public officials. This enables their members to preserve a certain degree of autonomy and a critical distance from the widespread corruption in public administration. In Africa NGO budgets are expanding—a significant portion of international cooperation funding currently is allocated directly to "civil society"—thereby transforming these organizations into genuine power centers with enough clout to question the legitimacy of established governments in international forums.

In Latin America, NGOs generally have less political weight, although their numbr has increased on the tide of democratization processes and deepening social problems, including urban breakdown and spiraling violence. For their part, governments and international agencies turn to NGOs to carry out specific, creative actions, which they make use of to offset dwindling resources and bureaucratic pigheadedness and corruption.

The universe of the NGOs in Latin America has become tremendously diversified since the 1970s when they were funded mainly through external sources and devoted to resist authoritarian regimes. In recent decades, the relative importance of foreign funding has declined, while public funding sources are on the rise, as is support from the business sector, which, influenced by the socially responsible company discourse, has significantly increased its involvement in social projects.

NGOs in Europe, while retaining their significance as sources of employment have less political influence due to the greater solidity of the State-run social services system. In some countries, such as France, NGOs subcontract with the State and/or lay the groundwork for the entry of public services in "difficult" neighborhoods.

Many of the mainstream NGOs in developed countries focus primarily on international cooperation.

Although the complex relationship between the media and democracy has inspired an enormous body of literature and sparked numerous debates that are beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to note the affinity that exists between the mass media and processes that have contributed to the strengthening of "civil society" and the NGOs. Despite the major, obvious differences between these two actors, they share a powerful affinity: both reproduce and expand their radius of influence thanks to the growing rift between public opinion sensibility and political parties capacity to express it.

NGOs depend on access to the media because they lack their own social "bases" and because their ties to their potential constituencies are fragile or are activated in function of specific events. Indeed, the social groups they seek to represent often are unstructured and in most cases lack the resources to directly influence the economic or political system. For this reason, some of their activities are oriented toward achieving an impact in the media. Their very existence is tied to their ability to generate press coverage, even if that means resorting to sensationalism, which sometimes entails acting on the margins of legality, as illustrated, for example, by the actions of certain environmental groups.

In contemporary democratic societies, the media are particularly sensitive to messages involving strong moral content. . Put another way, because of their self-proclaimed role as society's conscience and their real capacity to influence public opinion, the mass media tend to represent themselves as the moral expression of society. However, despite their important social role, the media end up supplanting authentic mechanisms for participation and political discussion.

Most self-proclaimed "civil society" organizations, as we have seen, take a clear stance against neoliberalism and, in general, against globalization. In the past decade, however, the international and corporate institutions associated with

neoliberalism and globalization have waged a crusade against government inefficiency and corruption, including the state role as the direct producer of public goods and services. These institutions, therefore, appropriate "civil society's" criticism of the State and are even willing to fund "civil society" organizations in order to shrink the government's role by diverting its responsibilities to the NGOs.

Indeed, compared to the inertia of the government apparatus, NGOs have the advantage of enormous flexibility and creativity. They are, in addition, social advocates and laboratories for new practices and solutions to the challenges of a mutating world that is constantly faced with new problems. The market equivalent to the work of NGOs in the public sphere are "start-up" companies (small enterprises with enormous capacity for technological innovation), since large corporations face the same problem as the government apparatus: the weight of internal inertia. Nonetheless, while in the case of "start-ups," market dynamics are more inclined to assimilate successful experiments by large corporations, this dynamic is more complicated in the realm of NGO-government relations. In effect, the danger is that, taking into account the scarcity of resources and its own political priorities, the State will use NGOs to relinquish its own responsibilities and, rather than assimilate successful initiatives, will simply "showcase" isolated experiences.

The challenge, then, is to connect horizontal networks (represented by socially porous NGOs with local mobilizing capacity) to the vertical structures of the State, with its resources and national scope, and create a virtuous circle in which their respective spheres are respected.[64] Otherwise, the work of the NGOs will have the paradoxical effect of increasing the heterogeneity and gaps within the poorest social sectors since, in most cases, their activities are concentrated in major cities and operate in certain population groups boasting enterprising local leaders or the ability to absorb NGO programs. Obviously the intention here is not to negate the concrete value of such initiatives, but rather to keep in mind that reducing social inequality is largely contingent upon government initiatives targeting systematically social sectors

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[64] Cf. Bernardo Sorj, *brazil@digitaldivide.com- Confronting Inequality in the Information Society* (available at www.bernardosorj.com) .

less equipped to absorb external assistance, develop proposals, or articulate demands for resources.

Another problem posed by NGOs is that of representation. Essentially, they do not base their legitimacy on the number of citizens they represent, but rather on a moral *ethos* and on the intrinsic value of their causes. When certain NGOs and other "civil society" organizations represent themselves as the expression of "organized civil society," they reproduce all of the errors and defects of the old vanguardist organizations in that they assume the preexistence of a disorganized, homogeneous, and naturally virtuous "civil society" that only needs to be given a voice. But on what criterion is one NGO more representative than another? What is the basis for one NGO's legitimacy, and not another's, to "represent" a "cause" in national or international fora?

Some authors believe that NGOs are the cornerstone of a future international "civil society." This vision is legitimate as an expression of utopian intent,[65] but when it is confused with concrete reality, whether by activists or sociologists,[66] it becomes analytically unsustainable and politically irresponsible. Certain theorists, swayed by the notion of a global "civil society," hastily discard the State in their visions of a cosmopolitan society constructed on an NGO scaffolding. However, NGOs mirror the asymmetries of the international system and the national diversity of democratic consolidation.

Finally, the third problem concerns some NGOs' use of the concept of *empowerment.* This concept, disseminated primarily by the North American feminist movement, is cultivated today by U.S. foundations and international agencies. The difficulty of translating this Anglo-saxon concept into Latin languages is indicative of its links to a given political tradition. In some sense, the notion of empowerment seems to be the liberal-radical equivalent to a variation of Marxist "class consciousness"—which defines social class as a reality that predates its consciousness of itself. Both cases assume the preexistence of the dominated group,

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[65] Such as that expressed, for example, by Rubem César Fernandes in *"Threads of Planetary Citizenship".*
[66] For example, Ulrich Beck, op. cit.

which needs only to be equipped with the right tools in order to take its destiny into its own hands. In the case of *empowerment*, then, women, African Americans, and indigenous peoples are, for example, subordinated groups who can be enlightened so that they begin to promote their own interests as specific identity groups.

The ideology of empowerment echoes the mistakes of Marxist ideology; in other words, it assumes that the group existence predates the ideology and that someone coming in from the outside is in a position to discern the true identity of the oppressed. This contradiction, which is inherent to any type of social intervention that extends beyond the parameters of its own group, poses enormous risks. And since these risks are inevitable, social action projects must constantly reflect on them. The first risk is that of external colonization, due to the export of archetypical identities that emerged in very different societal contexts. The second is the imposition of a political model foreign to local traditions, which serves to further undermine the political representation system of subordinated groups, if not destabilize the entire political system.

Sociological analysis on NGOs and "civil society" is still in its incipient stages. It will be necessary to conduct meticulous research in areas such as political encapsulation processes, channeling and control of national and international resources, internal organizational structures and operations, in sum, on internal and external power relations and the new types of bureaucratization they engender. Critical social analysis should not fail to question the processes that inform the discourse on international "civil society," the issues discussed at its forums and how they reproduce the power relations that criss-cross society and the international system. Critical analysis of NGOs in no way implies discounting their role as one of the main vectors of contemporary collective solidarity, social innovation, and new democratic practices, whether that be as generators of unprecedented social reconstruction proposals, or as promoters or catalysts of authentic social movements or humanitarian actions.

Reconstructing the World through Human Rights or the Market?

The general heading of the "populist period" is used to describe an era that lasted throughout much of the 20th century, during which Latin American countries processed the political and social integration of the lower classes into a civil rights system. These integration processes varied enormously from country to country. In some instances, social integration—particularly in terms of access to education and health—was extremely broad and successful, such as in Argentina, due particularly to the trade union influence in a society that was early urbanized, with a limited labor force. But Argentina failed to consolidate a sense of national civic community due to the chasm opened up in the political culture by Peronism, which itself had been nourished on the legacy of a reactionary elite (including the Catholic church and part of the armed forces) and the misadventures of the radical party in the 1920s.

In other cases, such as Brazil, extreme social inequality and the population's limited access to public services was offset, in part, by a long cicle of economic expansion an open frontier, along with a syncretic religious culture, the racial mix, social and geographical mobility, the emergence of an urban middle class accessible to the lower classes, and a cultural industry that created potential opportunities for interactions across class lines. Due to these factors, the enormous social and economic gap did not translate into a cultural gap and this, undoubtedly, is one of the main virtues of Brazilian sociability.

The Andean world presents very diverse traits. Following the Pacific War, Chile, with its centralized State, demonstrated its enormous capacity for political integration and the generation of national values, despite extreme social inequality. In contrast, in countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador, indigenous populations bore the brunt of a system of large landholdings that left them socially and culturally isolated from a sense of belonging to a national community of citizens. To give just one final example, Uruguay and Costa Rica appear to have had the most success in terms of social, political, and cultural integration.

All of these social integration models collapsed in the 1960s and 1970s, as economic growth trends stalled and it became impossible to maintain the traditional systems of using public resources to co-opt emergent sectors. The urban explosion, raised expectations, and the expansion of democratic values contributed to the crisis of the economic growth model and of the system to integrate the middle and working classes, a crisis which took the form of galloping inflation and economic stagnation.

Inflation was the main symptom of the incapacity of States' to impose discipline on the distributive conflict. It also encouraged profiteers and speculators, dealing a harsh blow to the most impoverished sectors of the population. At the time, the only recipe book available for fighting inflation and securing international loans—developed by international finance institutions and endorsed primarily by the United States—recommended a structural reform package to reduce government spending. This was accomplished through privatization, social security and tax reform, greater economic opening to foreign markets, and labor law reform.

It was an agenda destined to radically transform the social integration model in place in Latin America up until then, in which the State played a protagonist role in the cooptation of emergent social groups. It was possible to implement this new agenda because the old model had been exhausted; it had come to be seen by an increasing number of social sectors as a system for doling out favors, incapable of generating economic growth or ensuring universal access to quality public services. Put another way, people accepted—and even lent their support—to many structural reforms, including privatization initiatives, not only because they were presented as necessary to control inflation, but because the State, which had been key to Latin American development in the 20th century, came to be perceived as a source of cronyism, corruption, ineffectiveness, and bureaucratic oppression.

Although the structural reforms program was carried out, to varying degrees of intensity, throughout Latin America, it had a different impact in each country.[67] The repercussions would depend on the coverage of social rights prior to the reforms

[67] Regarding economic reform processes in Latin America, see Juan Carlos Torre, *El proceso político de las reformas económicas en América Latina*.

(for example, the impact in Argentina, where most salaried employees had been integrated into the social security system, was very different than that in Peru or Brazil, where a substantial portion of the urban population belonged to the "informal" sector). The final outcomes of these changes also would depend on how the privatization efforts were carried out and how the regulatory agencies overseeing public service contracts were set up (in this regard, there are obvious differences between the Menem administration's organized assault on the public coffers and the "civility" of the democratic governments in post-Pinochet Chile and the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration in Brazil). To this must be added the differences in social policies (for example, while primary and secondary public education expanded in Brazil in the 1990s in absolute and relative terms, this sector underwent a strong privatization process in most countries on the continent.)[68]

As a whole, structural reforms did not bring about greater social equality. As a result, international economists and institutions, the World Bank in particular, began to promote "focal policies," meaning that State resources should concentrate on well-defined "target publics," usually the most impoverished sectors of the population or specific groups (women, ethnic groups, etc.).

The opposition between universal service coverage policies and focal policies that informs the debate among economists in Latin America today, clouds rather than clarifies the problems at issue here. In effect, no society has only universal services or only "focal policies." The United States, home of the "focal policies," provides some universal services. In Europe and Canada, focal policies go hand in hand with the predominant universal service policies. While comparative examinations tend to gloss over countless historical factors, their findings in terms of social equality and return on investment (particularly in the area of health) support the universal services approach. The Achilles heel of this model, however, is its sustainability in a context of increased longevity and lower birth rates. Moreover, in countries such as Brazil, seemingly universal policies mask more targeted practices that accord preferential treatment to the richest social segments of the population, like free public university.

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[68] See Bernardo Sorj, "La relación público/privado en el Brasil".

In any event, the structural reforms marked a turning point in Latin American history, calling into question a model informed by State-centrism. The integration of new generations of middle classes into the international business and services circuit, societies with expectations determined by global consumption patterns, and the waning legitimacy of politics and politicians have shaken the relations between the State, society, and different social groups, and call for a redefinition of those relations. This process is currently underway although there increasing signs of return to new (and old) forms of state-centrism.

But even when the so-called structural reforms have represented a step toward greater state and social discipline, they did not constitute a proposal for the organization of society. Realizing that economic reforms had not changed customary practices concerning the use of public resources or ameliorated social problems, international agencies began to acknowledge that there was an issue that needed to be addressed along with the economic reforms. If the orginal reforms proposals put forth by international financial institutions already were problematic from the economic standpoint due to their propensity to apply a universal recipe blind to specific national realities, when it came time to address institutional issues, with their inherently strong ties to local historical circumstances, the resulting proposals were more unfortunate still.

The new institutional agenda focused basically on mobilizing two types of concepts and proposals: a) strengthening "civil society" and "social capital,"[69] applying, in both instances, concepts that would not interfere with the market or the distribution of wealth yet would miraculously improve society; and b) the use of institutional "best practices" and "benchmarks" for public services, including health, education, and justice.

For instance, the elixir of "social capital accomplishes the following: [70]

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[69] See, respectively, www.worldbank.org/civilsociety and www.worldbank.org/wbp/scapital.
[70] http://www.worldbank.org/wbp/scapital/topic/

"Crime/violence: Shared values and norms can reduce or keep low the level of community violence. People who have informal relations with their neighbors can look out for each other and 'police' their neighborhoods

Economics & trade: There is increasing evidence that trade at the macro level is influenced by social capital --a common property resource whose value depends on the level of interaction between people.

Education: Considerable evidence shows that family, community and state involvement in education improves outcomes.

Environment: Common property resource management entails cooperation with a view to ensure the sustainability of resources for the benefit of all community members, in the present and in the future.

Finance: A stable, secure and equitable financial system is a precursor for sustainable growth. Health, nutrition & population: Recent research shows that the lower the trust among citizens, the higher the average mortality rate.

Information technology: ...information technology has the potential to increase social capital – and in particular bridging social capital which connects actors to resources, relationships and information beyond their immediate environment.

Poverty & econonomic Development: ...development and growth specialists are uncovering the importance of social cohesion for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable.

Rural development: Social capital is significant because it affects rural people's capacity to organize for development. Social capital helps groups to perform the key development tasks effectively and efficiently.

Urban development: Urban areas, with their anonymity and fast pace, can be unconducive to societal cooperation. Social capital and trust are more difficult to develop and sustain in large groups.

Water supply & sanitation: Social capital contributes to the sharing of information about sanitation as well as the building of community infrastructure."

The concept of social capital was drawn from a specific theoretical framework, namely, methodological individualism, and subsequently was associated with studies contrasting northern and southern Italy.[71] It is essentially an elaboration of the obvious: a society functions better when its members trust each other; horizontal associativism and cooperation enhance information and social opportunities; and, respect for civic values is a factor in development. At its core, the concept of social capital stresses contemporary social relations and cultural orientations as opposed to formal institutions. Its purpose as an economic development tool is to seek out (and strengthen) virtuous factors external to government institutions.

Transformed into a universal paradigm and delinked from contexts and institutions and from the complex and varied relationships of values presented in every society, like trust/distrust, equality, hierarchy, group solidarity/distrust of others, the concept of social capital fails to incorporate the rich experiences of other cultures. For instance in many Asian countries systems of hierarchical relationships have proved highly effective in promoting economic growth and social equality while in other contexts may provoke state failure.

Studies on social capital operate on the assumption that affiliation with voluntary organizations is a universal measure of the development of horizontal relationships characterized by openness and trust among community members. Yet it is a measure that fails to consider the motives that might lead a person to affiliate with voluntary organizations. For example, in North American societies, where people are constantly changing residence, affiliation with voluntary organizations is a mechanism for establishing social relations. Therefore, it does not necessarily indicate a higher level of trust than that observed in communities featuring less geographical movement, where people do not have to join formal organizations in

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[71] See James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory,* and Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*

order to maintain high levels of trust among themselves (for example, in Japan, Finland, Switzerland, and Germany).

Every society is built around values of trust and distrust and both are equally necessary for a social life but they ultimately depend on and express the overall functioning of institutions and public sanction. The irony is that lack of trust in government institutions frequently is conducive to the high value placed on interpersonal relationships and, as such, is a source of social capital, while trust in effective law enforcement may reduce the subjective intensity of personal relationships. In contexts featuring the essentially anonymous relationships common to contemporary societies, trust in contracts is based on the certainty that government institutions will ensure their enforcement and that illegal acts will not go unpunished. To summarize, it is theoretically and practically impossible to separate out the overlap between government institutions and behavior patterns or between trust among individuals and trust in the public order.

If the elaboration of concepts lacking theoretical substance is nothing more than an intellectual non starter, the adoption of public service models extracted from other contexts entails obvious risks. To think that best practices and benchmarks (cases representing the best positions achieved in a given sector) can be mined from their society of origin and transferred just like that to other local realities is an affront to the social sciences accumulated knowledge. This, not to mention that benchmarks and best practices are, as a rule, highly simplified models of complex experiences along the lines of self-help books, in this case, applied not to individual but to whole societies.

Besides its intellectual dimension there is another factor, , of political nature, inasmuch as benchmarks generally are extracted generally from within one particular society, the United States, which features, relative to other developed countries, high levels of social inequality and one of the worst track records in terms of the efficiency in its health and education systems.

Clearly, our sociological understanding of how international financial institutions operate is precarious, and this makes it hard to explain their intellectual primitivism when it comes to understand how institutions work. We know that one part of the problem can be attributed to the influence of U.S. policy and another to the fact that these institutions are run by economists with limited sociological sensitivity, but much of the problem must be ascribed to an underlying logic of globalized action in which concepts and methods acquire a universal applicability. However, in contrast to the logic of multinational corporations which will be penalized byt the market if they fail and therefore try to adapt to local market realities, in the case of international financial institutions the costs are absorbed by the recipient countries, which must accede to the imposition of conditions under which they will be able to receive funding. Those models periodically demonstrate their unsuitability, eventually leading the international institutions to discard the "old" concepts and create a new method that will set in motion a new cycle of experiences.

International Public Opinion and National Governments

Since its origins in the 18th century, public opinion has been a transnational, intra-European phenomenon with repercussions for the colonial elites. In the 19th and 20th centuries, international public opinion was shaped by the main political ideologies—Liberalism, Nationalism, Socialism, and Communism—and channeled mainly through political parties and social movements (like, for example, the feminist struggle for universal suffrage).

In the past, national public opinion was associated with political parties and expressed through platforms containing proposals for how society and government should be organized. In contrast, public opinion today is associated with "civil society," organized around issue-specific demands directed toward the State, and frequently mobilized through media events. While the old public opinion was ideologically-based and demanded power and/or government reform, civil society-centered public opinion is organized around mobilizations against the government or

demands or claims directed toward the government. Although the new public opinion is capable of reforming certain public administration practices, at the same time, its discourse has the potential to depoliticize citizens and delegitimize political institutions. Human rights ideology and related civil society organizations delink the social sphere from the State and the nation, while new social rights-centered struggles discredit the notion of interest.

The State continues to have *operational legitimacy*—in other words, it is still expected to maintain order and ensure public services and economic growth—but it has lost its halo of *transcendental legitimacy* historically associated with its role as representative of the fatherland and the nation values. The professionalism of armies observed in virtually all developed countries and the end of obligatory military service are the most obvious symptoms of the end of an era.

However international relations continue to be structured around the notion of national interests and the willingness of States to defend them.[72] Human rights and democracy, that is, the use of negotiation to create consensus, can only be fully effective inside a democratic society while, at the international level, the struggle for human rights and democracy coexist with realities that require the pragmatic defense of national interests.

In developed countries, this two-tiered reality of national and international political life historically was evident in the coexistence between internal democracy and external nationalism. As nationalism ceased to be in many countries, in particularly in Europe and Japan, a driving force, the ability of national governments to act effectively, including the use of military force, has diminished gradually.

Deinstitutionalization processes—through which the State forfeits its role as the representative of the general interest, increasingly incapable of uniting the population around patriotic and national values and interests heretofore considered

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[72] Even by going to war, based on the public's willingness to accept that citizens "die for their country," in other words, an expression of a collective interest.

sacred and worth fighting and dying for—are particularly advanced in Europe and Japan, influenced by the traumatic experience of World War II and the colonial wars.

European construction involved abandoning nationalisms and references to a history of wars that no longer can be portrayed as glorious experiences since yesterday's enemies are today's members of the same polity. It is no coincidence that in the European Union, the United Kingdom—a country that emerged from World War II with its national self-esteem reinforced—has the greatest military capacity and a strong sense of national sovereignty. The French strategy, in contrast, has been fraught with ambiguity. Since the Napoleonic wars, France has experienced a relative decline in the international theater due to its waning demographic and economic influence. Following World War II, it entered into a preferential alliance with Germany and tried to solidify its position through the strengthening of Europe, in an attempt to preserve its status as a protagonist country. Implicit in this strategy is the capacity to control or lead the European Union, an increasingly difficult task, since the EU currently is made up of 27 very disparate countries.

The creation of the European common market was premised on the rise of the human rights discourse and the decline of nationalism and national sovereignty. The European Union has tremendous difficulty generating any political will beyond purely economic interests. The geopolitical paralysis induced by this situation was manifest during the crisis in Yugoslavia, when genocide occurring on the very borders of the European Union was confronted only after the United States, through NATO, imposed a military intervention outside the United Nations framework.[73]

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[73] For a comparison between Europe and the United States based on a critique of the European position, see Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power*.