REVIEW ARTICLE

NGOs, NGO-ing, and NGO-ography in Serbia

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Marek Mikuš. *Frontiers of civil society: Government and hegemony in Serbia*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2018.

Theodora Vetta. *Democracy struggles: NGOs and the politics of aid in Serbia*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019.

The conventional wisdom about nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is that they are the shock troops of democracy and the juridical incarnation of "civil society." The NGO scene is dominated by young, educated cosmopolitans engaged in battling a rigid state apparatus above and, below, a patriarchal, clientelistic, ethically based society invariably considered "resistant to change." With politically progressive rhetoric, NGOs, being market-oriented and invariably Anglophone, are depicted and view themselves as pursuing universal values of individual rights and freedoms, democratic participation, civic uplift, and cosmopolitan multiculturalism in what now goes under the rubric of "European values." NGOs are funded and celebrated for their watchdog activities, making sure these values are respected, and their many projects seek to fill gaps that state social services will not offer or target groups that they cannot reach. In the conventional understanding of donors and activists, NGOs exist in order to help citizens in need, foster civic education, promote tolerance of ethnic or sexual minorities, make people aware of their rights, push for bureaucratic transparency, and hold governments accountable. In this conventional view, the enemies of NGOs are the inefficient bureaucracies, the corrupt state elite, the greedy business interests, and the neotraditionlist, ethnonationalist, populist groups and their followers who fail to grasp the need for "reform."

No doubt, many of the anthropologists reading these lines will see themselves and share sympathies with this kind of NGO project. Many of us (myself included) have worked directly with NGOs in our research, joined them in their activism, or advised them in obtaining project funds and in the routines that Dorothea Hilhorst (2003) has termed "NGO-ing." Unlike many of those "others" whom we anthropologists study, the challenge of studying NGOs is not so much entry and rapport-building but maintaining analytical distance. NGOs and NGO activists/staff are often much like us in ideology, outlook, lifestyle, and life situation. Inasmuch

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as they are activist and seek to do good, NGOs gain our sympathy, so we might be hesitant to criticize NGOs as organizations with their organizational hierarchies and power struggles. How do we achieve ethnographic engagement and still maintain the necessary analytical distance? The two books under review offer valuable solutions to deal with this problem.

The anthropological literature on NGOs, colloquially known as NGO-ography, is hardly as naïve as the conventional wisdom described above. Ethnographers have expertly analyzed the effects of the discourse of the Western, rights-based approach, and of the export of "the NGO form" to developing or transition countries. They have revealed the many gaps between laudable ideas of donors and the harsh realities of the NGO scene (for an overview of the field, the reader can fruitfully consult Bernal and Grewal 2015; Lashaw et al. 2017; Lewis and Schuller 2017; Schuller and Lewis 2014). The "real world of NGOs" (to copy Hilhorst's 2003 title) is marked by the professionalized staff, the backbiting and careerism, the hierarchies between foreign expats and local staff, the mystical authority of parachuting consultants, the patronizing attitude of the all-knowing trainer, the Anglophone jargon, and the project-based technologies of budgeting, grant-managing, SWOT sessions, and audits.[1]

NGO networks, research has shown, tend to get too cozy with each other, with the foreign donors, and even with the state functionaries, often losing sight of the people they are supposed to help or represent. Many state organs end up creating their own ersatz NGOs or hiring career-oriented NGO managers in official positions. The continuing workshops and meetings, the awareness-raising sessions, the rushed grant applications and project administration all become a world unto themselves. In this world, NGO office staff and activists tend to isolate themselves with those like them or with the foreign donor representatives, and in many cases come to be perceived as a foreign body inside the society. As a result, even the most well-meaning NGOs can either become irrelevant to local concerns, or they can undermine locally based social movements. Citizens are left in the dark and become hostile to the NGO groups and their "awareness raising." Even more perilous is the hostility of the states in which NGOs operate: recent government laws in many countries have now classified NGOs as "foreign agents," harassed them, or expelled them outright (notably Russia, Venezuela, Hungary, and most recently Nicaragua). The popular antipathy toward NGOs among large segments of the societies they are supposed to be helping, and the failure of NGO activists and staff to fully understand this antipathy, is yet another symptom of the need for a truly anthropological understanding of the NGO form. How does the broader category of civil society (here understood as NGOs plus social movements plus informal networks) operate in concrete societies? How is "civil society" discourse applied and manipulated for both strategic and nefarious ends? In the early 1990s, NGOs were originally viewed with great promise. They *were* the very incarnation of "civil society." Thirty years later, there is an NGO cynicism, a critique and suspicion about NGOs and NGO activists. Is NGO-ing a waste of money? Are NGO activists just out of touch? Have they become some kind of new class, imposing colonialism and neoliberalism on innocent societies? Are NGOs a solution or a problem?

The two monographs under review attempt to address these questions. Although both are based on fieldwork in Serbia, do not be fooled into thinking that they are only about Serbia. In many places, if not in entire chapters, the processes taking place in "Serbia" could be replaced by events taking place in a dozen other countries, not only in postsocialist Eurasia but in much of the Global South as well. These two monographs show how the NGO form and "civil society" discourse have specific characteristics due to Serbia's recent political history as a former socialist state. Yet the two books also show that civil society is now a truly global assemblage that requires a wide-ranging anthropological analysis. In fact, if NGOs are a "productively

unstable category," as David Lewis and Mark Schuller argue in their 2017 overview article, the same applies to "civil society" and to probably most other categories of social action. These categories are made by and then affect the actors who use them. They are discursive frameworks but also political tools. In order to understand what NGO-ing is all about, we need to look beyond discourse, language, and categories; we need to watch people in action. Marek Mikuš and Theodora Vetta, on the ground in Serbia, do this for us.

NGO imperialism?

Mikuš's *Frontiers of Civil Society* is an ambitious work on how civil society operates and penetrates Serbian political life. The daily work of NGOs, NGO-ing, lies at the center of his book, but equally important is the way NGOs interact with the state, with the market, with political parties, with various interest groups, and with the influential foreign donors who sponsor them. The project of civil society in Serbia, Mikuš argues, is to unify various groups into some kind of "common interest." This task of remaking society is usually the job of states, but in post-Milosevic Serbia, with a discredited, ineffective state, it was carried out by Western-funded NGOs invoking the liberal discourse and policy of building "civil society" (and the invitation to eventually join the European Union). Under all this "civil society" talk, argues Mikuš, what is really taking place is a two-pronged onslaught: neoliberalization and transnational integration. NGOs pursue the neoliberalization project by introducing the project-oriented form of activity (with its technologies of audit, insistence on transparency, incessant trainings, fundraising campaigns, advocacy, program impact measurements, etc.). Meanwhile, state welfare functions devolve to NGOs under the rubric of "partnerships" and the obligations now imposed on "communities" to become more self-sufficient. Individual citizens who once counted on various entitlements, however minimal, now have to navigate ever new, complicated bureaucratic "options." In this environment, NGOs are the agents of neoliberalization.

Meanwhile, the transnational integration project is led by the European Union, whose continued demands backed by a liberal market model merge with the NGOs' liberal individualist model (obviously, the EU integration horizon makes the NGO scene in postsocialist Europe different from the NGO scene in the Global South). What Mikuš terms the "frontier" between civil society and the state moves back and forth, as Serbia succumbs to the two-pronged neoliberalization and transitional integration onslaught. What looks like a "reform" of a traditional stiff administrative system is in fact the imposition of a neoliberal project under the ever-receding horizon of European integration. It is a colonization, an occupation without a military, with NGOs as the advance guard.

The Serbs described by Mikuš are acutely aware of what is going on. Individuals and communities, viewed as "resistant to change," fight back against this international, cosmopolitan agenda. An uncivil society protests the Belgrade Gay Pride parade, which they see as undermining Serb national/religious sovereignty in a campaign carried out by subversive, Euro-loyal, cosmopolitan NGOs. The Serb organizations of disabled persons protest the emphasis on abstract rights, endless project applications, competition with other organizations, and the pressure to become "independent" and "responsible" (i.e., lose state funds), viewing this as a ploy to reduce their former state entitlements and the autonomy they once had. The villagers subjected to NGO "advocacy" campaigns regard the NGO activists as interlopers in what were once autonomous communities under Yugoslav self-managing socialism, which, despite its deformities, was a system with which people were familiar.

In sum, while civil society activists tout the nonpolitical, technical nature of their project, Mikuš shows the inherently political nature of civil society as a hegemonic project in Serbia, one based on European values and on "com-

mon sense," market models of efficiency, and accountability. Civil society and NGOs are neither nonpolitical nor as universal as they present themselves to be. There is a class basis to the Serb NGO activists (and their foreign advisors). NGO staff are recruited from the formerly well-heeled socialist middle class, whose members now appropriate new positions as well-paid NGO functionaries who obtain grants, travel abroad, and enter key state positions. The Serbian state becomes "projectified." Read Mikuš and you will see clearly why ordinary Serbs are suspicious of Western-funded NGOs and the European project, a syndrome hardly limited to Serbia. Citizens' suspicions of NGOs and, worse, state legal restrictions on NGOs as "foreign agents" and expulsions of NGOs have taken place in several countries, both those that are illiberal (Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Hungary) as well as more ostensibly democratically inclined states such as Georgia and Ukraine.[2]

Mikuš's monograph is not without some weaknesses. He has the usual nostalgia for the old-fashioned, secure socialist welfare state, which may have granted entitlements, but was also riven with corruption and inefficiency. We also learn little about why Europe was so interested in democratizing Serbia in the first place: a decade earlier, the Serbian political leadership had carried out the worst genocide in Europe in 50 years. And although this book is certainly not any sort of program evaluation, we get the impression that the entire civil society/NGO/Europeanization project has had absolutely no effect—or even negative effects—on the life of ordinary Serbs. I think this is an exaggeration for which Vetta's book provides evidence. Finally, the book is replete with some of the jargon and sloganeering of so many "critical" anthropologists who routinely deploy the epithet of "neoliberalism," along with the jargon of "hegemony," "counter-hegemony," and even "sub-hegemonies," as some kind of explanatory device. We do not need this kind of overkill. Nor do I think that the "frontiers" metaphor is helpful in describing the interactions between state interests and NGO practices. It is clear that "civil society," both as discourse and category, is of a different order than the specific state bureaucratic organs and project units that interact. I do not see where the frontier metaphor clears up anything. To his credit, however, Mikuš reminds us that the false consciousness prevailing in the NGO scene needs to be exposed for what it is: not a disinterested project of aid and civic education but an overtly political project driven by political actors pursuing their own class interests (in a series edited by Don Kalb, the focus on class is certainly expected and laudable). Also valuable is Mikuš's reminder that the Foucauldian focus on discourse and governmentality may distract us from the real practical struggles going on when Western democratic interventions, NGO/civil society initiatives, and European integration make their inroads into countries with weak states and insular societies that were isolated, or, in Serbia's case, stigmatized or boycotted. Here lies the immense value of Mikuš's book. In several chapters, using numerous cases, he is on the spot, from an NGO fundraising meeting, to an advocacy seminar, to the anti-Gay Pride meeting, to a protest against Belgrade gentrification. Discourse aside, nothing beats being there, on the ground.

NGOs and subjectification

The political nature of the NGO project is also highlighted in Theodora Vetta's *Democracy Struggles*. Vetta's fieldwork focuses on the daily work of Serb NGO activists working in "community development" projects. For long periods, Vetta is right on top of the day-to-day life of being inside a project and of the personal engagement, uncertainties, and insecurities of her NGO activists, staff, local officials, and "target group" citizens. Although NGOs are shown to be outposts of and unwitting shock troops for global neoliberalism in Serbia, she argues that we should not see NGOs as some kind of foreign body implanted in an effort to subvert or transform the Serbian economy and state to remake it in the European Union's image. Rather,

the NGOs become part of the Serbian political landscape, embedding themselves in the struggle for political resources both locally and among state agents and donors. The projects to mobilize citizens for a USAID-funded community development program are used by the NGOs to pursue their own interests and to combat their opponents. The NGOs behave as local political actors while also being part of a global cosmopolitan class. Their strategy is what Vetta calls "practical cosmopolitanism," a term that encapsulates how global, European values are used to combat what are perceived as provincial attitudes and practices. NGOs, says Vetta, represent "an ideal neoliberal subject . . . modern, active, self-initiated" (196). In the meantime, the NGOs must cope with the Serbian citizens' "resistance to change" and their former state entitlements now reinterpreted as "dependency." And the NGOs must meet the demands of their international donors to show rapid results and measurable impact.

Vetta's monograph is not as expansive as that by Mikuš, who discusses issues of philanthropy, democracy, reform, fundraising, advocacy, anti-gay activism, uncivil society, and state administration, invoking Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. But this kind of ambitiousness has its pitfalls. Vetta stays on message. She gets us up close, really close, and we get to know these NGO activists as persons, with all their aspirations, frustrations, and insecurities. The reader follows them and empathizes with them. We are not just flies on the wall, observing meetings and practices; we are part of the action. And while NGOs can be criticized, we also see how NGO-ing gives young activists a sense of engagement, even a sense of mission.

Both these books demonstrate how the notion of the NGO has operated as a shifting category—unclear, flexible, and manipulable—a point emphasized by Hilhorst (2003) and reiterated by Lewis and Schuller (2017). Both Mikuš and Vetta have shown precisely how the NGO and civil society categories shift among their Serbian actors. We see the emergence of a major distinction between twenty-first-century NGOs, with their project-speak, market orientation, and fundraising workshops, and the traditional voluntary organizations of, say, the blind, the hunters, or the football supporters. The more power gained by the NGOs, the less space there is for grassroots organizations.

So what kinds of questions should anthropologists of NGOs be asking in 2022, three decades after the archetypal civil society movements of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary? How do we understand the NGO scene now that the single most important figure stimulating the growth of NGOs and civil society and civic education projects in Eastern Europe, namely Mr. George Soros and his foundation, is now vilified in his homeland by a politician who himself received a Soros grant? What to do?

The future of NGO studies

First, I think we need to step back from the moral discourses and social justice rhetoric and remember to look at NGOs as organizations. Like all organizations, NGOs have features in common with bureaucracies and firms. They construct their own rationality; they articulate a mission; they pursue professionalism; they fear amateurs, interlopers, and reformers; they keep secrets; they guard their reputations; they construct enemies; they form alliances; they undergo periodic reforms; and they can implode and disappear. All organizations do this. NGOs are no exception. Therefore, an anthropology of the NGO form needs to incorporate the anthropology of organizations. Take the trivial question of how NGOs collapse or dissolve. Our preoccupation with the rise of NGOs tends to overlook the more silent implosion or dissolution of such organizations. The conventional wisdom is that up to 90 percent of registered NGOs are in fact inactive. There is a dark side to the NGO world as well.

Second, most NGOs promote themselves as movements or movement-oriented. NGOs are therefore platforms for personal engagement. It is this kind of engagement—a mission to help others, provide services, protect minority rights, save the nation, achieve democracy—

that is supposed to make NGOs different from states or firms, and is supposed to link them to social movements of a counter-hegemonic character. There are still NGOs out there that, even with their professional, project-based character, are playing a key role as allies of progressive movements. It is not all cynical professionalism, and we need to highlight how and why such organizations can actually be part of social movements. There are NGO success stories and failure stories. Anthropology needs to give us more narratives of—to use project jargon—"best practices" and "lessons learned."

Third, the question of NGOs as a specific kind of class project needs to be studied further. Are NGOs indeed the shock troops of global neoliberal restructuring? Or are they a refuge for a displaced middle class who could not find a place in the hollowed-out state or the unbalanced market in the postsocialist period? By watching NGO staff go to their trainings abroad, pursue master's degrees in public administration, enter state official positions, or train other NGOs and by observing the emergence of their middle class, cosmopolitan lifestyle, we might certainly conclude that a new social class has arisen with its own set of material resources, socialization milieus, and identification rituals marking them as enlightened civil society representatives. They contrast vividly with a retrograde "them" of corrupt bureaucrats, greedy businesspeople, or unenlightened villagers. Being in an NGO, forming an NGO, running an NGO, moving from one NGO to another, commuting from NGO work to state work to private consulting, and back again, finishing off a political career as head of an NGO or Western foundation, all of these activities are now obligatory parts of a CV for this rising global middle class. NGOs are what Swedes call a "class journey." As one of my Swedish students asked me: "I want to improve my CV, could you recommend an NGO I could join?" One is reminded of membership in the Communist Party as an avenue to promotion, or in any case, as a kind of insurance that one would not be passed over.

Nevertheless, the focus on NGOs as some kind of powerful middle class needs to be put into perspective. NGO resources are dwarfed in wealth and power by those of entrepreneurs, oligarchs, and even minor state officials. Watch what happens to well-heeled NGO staff and activists when projects wind down and the donor funds dry up, as they inevitably do. It should be recalled that the entire civil society aid budget of any given country would not match the aid given to purchase a few tanks or a single jet fighter. Civil society building remains a minor enterprise compared to military and security aid, energy or infrastructure projects. Before one talks about NGOs as a class with power and resources, we need to take account of these major differences in scale.

Fourth, our focus on NGOs has often been limited to the more progressive groups, those with whom anthropologists sympathize and support. But with the emergence of so many populist movements of all kinds, we need more anthropology of uncivil NGOs and how they operate. Uncivil society is also political participation. The anti-Gay Pride movement in Belgrade, the Catholic family marches (against abortion) in France, the "Straight Pride Parade" in Boston, the Russian pro-family groups, and the dozens of populist, identitarian, white pride, racist, and cultural nationalist groups, not to mention the anti-mask and anti-vaccine mobilizations, are also "civil society." They provide an entry point for understanding what makes these groups both different and similar to the so-called "progressive" NGOs that anthropologists are so fond of studying.

Finally, we need a reflection on why exactly studying NGOs is useful. I believe that studying NGOs can be a window into the larger society, a sort of vector that we can conveniently immerse ourselves in as anthropologists. But we still have to ask: what is the study of NGOs a window into and for? One obvious issue is that of the concept of civil society and the way the term is deployed as a weapon in struggles against or within the state. "Civil society" rhetoric has been used to garner support from idealistic foreign donors who are suspicious of illiberal tendencies in authoritarian states. In this rhetoric, civil society

and NGOs are viewed as some kind of island of democracy within an authoritarian or autocratic regime. Civil society can be trusted as an ally in the neoliberal project: the businessmen, clannish networks, and state bureaucracy cannot (the idea that civil society can be trusted is itself fascinating). Mikuš sees "civil society" as this kind of weapon in the hegemonic strategy of the neoliberalization and transnational integration of Serbia. It is, as such, hollowed out or, at best, an empty signifier. Yet for anyone who has observed or participated in social movements, there is some kind of social energy, a mixture of utopianism and improvisation, a rush of resources that signals that this thing is not just an empty shell or a shape-shifter. Civil society can come alive. NGOs can become the organizational continuity and bulwark of this social energy, at least for a period. And this is why anthropologists need to examine civil society and the NGO world from a longer-term perspective, now that the project management ethos has taken over NGO life, the mystique worn off, and NGO project thinking has penetrated state administration.

It is these issues that Mikuš and Vetta raise for us in Serbia. This is what makes their work relevant to anthropologists interested not only in civil society and social movements, but in the nature of the state, in hegemonic projects, and in everyday struggles for people to live a normal life.

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Notes

1. SWOT = Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.
2. On Russia, see Tysiachniouk et al. (2018); on Venezuela, see https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2021/01/25/why-is-maduro-harassing-venezuelan-NGOs/; on Nicaragua, see https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/nicaragua-cancels-permits-for-us-european-NGOs; and on Georgia and Ukraine, see https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/are-some-NGOs-really-foreign-agents-heres-what-people-georgia-and-ukraine-say.

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