



Chapter 3 - From anti-globalisation to anti-capitalism

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At the other end of the spectrum are tiny groups of anti-globalisation vigilantes, running websites and monitoring and dogging the actions of corporations, international financial institutions or governments. NGOs - once called charities, voluntary associations, or campaigns ? are nearly as old as capitalism itself.

Direct ancestors of today?s American and European NGOs fought the slave trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. More recently, NGOs spearheaded the 1998 treaty banning land mines and the Rome treaty setting up the International Criminal Court and are key players in delivering aid in Kosovo.

NGO is a negative definition ? all organisations not part of the state should (theoretically) be included in it. In practice, however, this definition excludes political parties, churches/religious bodies, and businesses.

NGOs are seen by themselves and their supporters as the organisations of ?civil society? par excellence. The concept civil society was developed out of French and English enlightenment where it came to mean the sphere of social life dominated by the economic interests of individuals and classes as opposed to those of the state which, it was claimed, represented everyone.

Alexis de Toqueville ? an central early ideologue of political liberalism ? saw early nineteenth century democracy in America as resting on a rich and varied network of voluntary non-state bodies.

During the second cold war of the early 1980s intellectuals in both Western and Eastern Europe took up the concept of ?civil society? as a critique of and ideological weapon against communist totalitarianism. They proclaimed it as the inevitable product of a market economy and necessary to the flourishing of democracy.

Under Gorbachev?s Presidency in the USSR (1985-91) and on into the restoration process of the 1990s the development of ãcivil society? was proclaimed as the way to westernise and bring the market to all the countries that had hitherto defied the spread of the US model.

Oppositions in the Third World also took up this term and goal against dictatorial or single party regimes. The ideology of civil society is in this sense a bourgeois liberal ideology, designed to cover up the reality of the division of society into classes and above all to cover up the class struggle. Populists and social democrats are only too willing to pick up this liberalism ÷ showing thereby their greater closeness, when the chips are down, to the bourgeois order than that of the working class.

At the same time neo-liberal governments in Europe and North America were praising voluntary organisations, and encouraging them to replace state provision, arguing that this course was the only way to achieve a civilised society. G7 governments and the many large corporate and private charitable foundations which fund the major NGOs, have, as a result, considerable leverage over them.

Some function virtually as subcontractors to western governments, e.g. the U.S. Wildlife Fund gets over half of its budget from USAID, to do work that a government could do. Many governments are now ãmandated? to consult with NGOs, as are the World Bank and the IMF. The World Bank for example involves NGOs in about half its projects.

The expansion of the role of the NGOs went hand in hand with the reduction of direct aid from the imperialist countries and the pressure by the IMF to reduce state spending within the semi-colonial countries themselves. The large well

financed western NGOs worked hard to depoliticise the activists fighting poverty and debt in the third world.

Consciously or unconsciously they sought to replace national and international political and class movements and organisations with an amorphous "civil society". They also had the effect of promoting the "westernisation" of recipient countries and communities ? i.e. advocating western style liberal democracy and western-style capitalism.

The "elite" NGOs set out to by-pass national governments, especially in Africa, seeing them as corrupt and inefficient. Whilst this was all too often true this failed to acknowledge that the source of much of this lay in super-exploitation, the role of western corporations, secret services, etc. Again failing to see things in class terms and precluded from honest and open political involvement, they could not see that only if the workers, poor peasants, the students took power from the corrupt semi-colonial "elites" could the question of development be addressed.

And from day one this would mean settling accounts with the corporations and the pro-imperialist government. Instead they acted more like the old "benevolent" colonial administrators or like an aid-dispensing MNC.

Many NGOs may have started out as independent of, and even in sharp opposition to, their own home states, but have become virtual agencies of them. Today they are providing the welfare services which the state has abandoned, receive money from it and are thus sub-contracting "social work."

In the US they collaborate with MNCs in drawing up codes of conduct and standards of employment and deploy more inspectors than the government. But, whilst they may expose and report abuses, integration into the state's functions weakens their opposition to and campaigning against the state.

The international spread of the NGOs in the 1990s was dramatic. The involvement of many thousands of idealistic young people, the activist ethos and above all the fact that western democratic imperialism and its MNCs would inevitably betray their hopes and illusions, meant that a crisis was bound occur, sooner or later, in the relations between many of the NGOs and their imperialist masters.

The Earth Summit, held in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, was a critical event in the evolution of their role and their tendency to interrelate and form coalitions. Representatives of more than 1,000 NGOs, approximately one-third of them from the Third World, attended the summit itself and even more attended a parallel NGO summit ? the Global Forum ? which took place simultaneously with around 9,000 organisations.

These gatherings produced thirty-nine "alternative treaties" to the official agreements on a wide range of environmental, developmental, social and human rights issues. Thus Rio marked the advent of NGOs as powerful players in international negotiations, the use of electronic communication as a democratising medium, and promoted "citizen activism".

Last but not least the sheer fact that, led by the USA, most first world governments began a cynical spoiling campaign against the very decisions and pledges they had signed at Rio radicalised many of the NGO activists and e-communication-especially after the development of the internet in these same years.

Prominent academics, journalists, and organisers of the NGOs have played an important role in the anti-corporate globalisation movement. In the USA Lori Wallach (of Ralph Nader's Global Trade Watch for Public Citizen), Mark Weisbrot of the Washington-based Preamble Center, and Charles Arden-Clarke of the Geneva-based World Wide Fund for Nature are among them.

Behind them stand thousands of activists and lobbyists working for the NGOs, sometimes alone, sometimes in coalition. It is they who have targeted the many negotiations going on around the world, often in secret, aimed at developing rules for the global economy which promote the interests of the great corporations. These activists are often outmanoeuvring the corporations, government officials and neo-liberal think tanks who until now have had rule-making all to themselves.

The self-appointed role of the NGOs is to burst into these negotiations, claiming to represent civil society and a democratic alternative. The problem is that they themselves are not really democratic organisations, they are themselves privately financed and in the last analysis are answerable, not to the recipients of their aid or campaigning but to their funders.

Their greatest victory to date, is the scrapping of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. Six hundred NGOs working together defeated an attempt by 29 of the world's richest nations, including the United States, to write a treaty on foreign investment. They exposed how MAI would override local and national laws on the environment and the rights of women and minorities and would devastate the economies of many third world countries. The NGOs won and the talks collapsed.

After Seattle, the IMF and World Bank have launched a "dialogue" with their critics which has amounted to little more than an attempt to draw in the more respectable and bourgeois NGOs into drawing up a common reform programme in order to rescue the legitimacy of these multilateral institutions in the eyes of those subject to their interventions.

Several of the most important were already present at the summit inside the Castle in Prague in September 2000, bemoaning the radical actions of the protestors in the streets below, preferring instead to place written reminders of the scale of the debt problem on the drinks table at the delegates' reception.

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