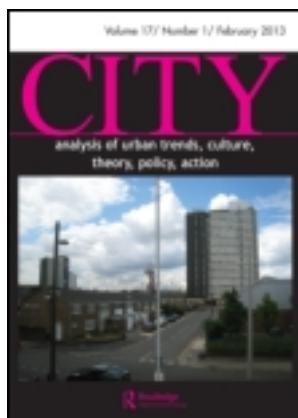


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Publisher: Routledge

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## City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20>

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Version of record first published: 08 Apr 2013.

To cite this article: Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2013): NGOs and social movements, City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action, 17:2, 258-261

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.777551>

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# NGOs and social movements

## Convergences and divergences

Marcelo Lopes de Souza

Practitioners involved with or working for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) usually believe their activities are supplementary to those developed by social movement activists. Some of them even regard their organisation as somehow being part of a specific movement. In contrast to this position, activists belonging to emancipatory social movements have often (and increasingly) made criticisms against NGOs and what seems to be the ‘structural role’ of NGOs under contemporary capitalism and governmentality. In his contribution to this *Forum*, though he rejects ‘any simplistic analysis that presents popular movements as automatically emancipatory and NGOs as automatically part of a system of containment’, Richard Pithouse (South African urban activist and philosopher, lecturer at Rhodes University, Grahamstown) nevertheless expresses himself in a clear way, when he says that even if ‘there are reactionary popular movements and there can be self-interested, authoritarian, ethnic or gendered currents in generally emancipatory movements’, and even if there are ‘some NGOs that have thought deeply about their praxis and which do extraordinary work’,

‘this should not blind us to the fact that NGOs cannot substitute themselves for movements in terms of constituting an emancipatory political force because significant progressive change is seldom possible without sustained popular mobilisation. Moreover while movements can be democratic, and sometimes are,

NGOs are very seldom able to attain democratic modes of working given that they are overwhelmingly professional organisations driven by funders, boards and directors rather than members.’

As he then concludes, ‘[f]or these reasons, amongst others, popular movements do have a political priority over NGOs’. He speaks from the standpoint of his very intensive experience within popular movements in South Africa, where ‘[i]n recent years popular urban movements have often had fractious relations with NGOs’. However, the problems to which he refers in his text ‘NGOs and Urban Movements—Notes from South Africa’, are to be found in many other countries as well, for they seem to be part of the same global ‘logic’ and, despite national and local particularities, they are highly influenced by the same international factors. Focusing primarily on the situation in Latin American countries, Petras and Veltmeyer (2005) are among those who have discussed the structural and historical role of NGOs worldwide in a very critical light. They argue in a consistent way to show that NGOs are actually part of the same neoliberal dynamic and agenda.

By the way, to what extent are NGOs really ‘non-governmental’? ... Very often they are only *seeming*-independent, while de facto strongly connected with (and financially dependent on) state apparatuses and capitalist firms; at the same time, however, they are often more or less disconnected from national, regional and local requirements and governmental control in countries of the ‘global South’. Peter Hallward

brilliantly discusses some aspects of this problem in his book on Haiti, *Damming the Flood*, offering, for instance, the following wide-range remark:

‘Usually managed by well-connected members of the elite in conjunction with international parent companies or partners, much of what they [NGOs] do [in Haiti] is effectively independent of government scrutiny. Most of what they do, moreover, is extremely fragmented. All by itself, the complex multiplicity of the NGO sector discourages incisive evaluation. The fact that there are so many NGOs, each with their own priorities and projects (which are often quite foreign to actual Haitian requirements), makes it almost impossible to develop a coordinated policy in any given field. There are some exceptions [...]. More often than not, however, the power and multiplicity of NGOs serves to undercut if not simply replace government initiatives, and in doing so helps reinforce the prejudice that aid or development money is better funneled through “reliable” NGOs than through corrupt and inefficient departments of state.’ (2008, 178)

It is no accident that NGOs (and their supporters in academia) tend to cultivate an understanding of ‘civil society’ (as opposed to the state apparatus but often to the ‘market’ as well) in a way that is clearly ideological in two interrelated senses: first, ‘civil society’ is simplistically understood as *complementary* to the state apparatus (and private enterprises) rather than as a source of potentially disruptive forces and energies—sometimes radical/revolutionary forces and energies which challenge the status quo, instead of only trying to ‘supplement’ it; second, the presence of the state apparatus (and of private capital!) in ‘civil society’ itself is usually minimised in the context of a naive, apparently altruistic self-image which is the basis of the ‘third sector’ discourse as a whole. That is the reason why Esteves, Motta, and Cox (2009), among others, have become increasingly discontent with the concept (or rather *notion?* ... ) of

‘civil society’, though there are also examples of emancipatory social movements which do not abdicate this expression in their radical parlance (the Mexican Zapatistas, for instance).

In fact, beyond the issue concerning what Richard calls the ‘political priority’ of social movements in his text, there are conceptual aspects which help us to see the question on the different roles of NGOs and (emancipatory) social movements from a relatively objective point of view. (That is not to say that the central issue of worldviews and values can be entirely overcome sometime; the preferential commitment to/sympathy towards NGOs or social movements has very much to do not only with specificities in terms of expertise and personal experience, but also with political–philosophical and ethical options and beliefs.)

From a conceptual viewpoint, a non-governmental organisation is—I must apologise for this truism—, as the name suggests, an *organisation*, while a social movement is something which can be adequately understood only at another ‘scale level’: it refers to *a larger or smaller part of an entire society*, a part which does not accept its ‘place’ in the existing ‘social order’ and sometimes does not accept the ‘social order’ itself (that is, the ‘system’ as a whole), more or less (and explicitly or tacitly) questioning problems related to aspects such as exploitation, social injustice, power asymmetries, identity stigmatisation and so on. A social movement may contain organisations, while an NGO is an organisation in itself—therefore, as I said before, a matter of ‘scale’ or ‘magnitude’ (and of complexity as well).

A second point speaks to the fact that though we have had different kinds of NGOs (operational organisations that deliver services, campaigning organisations, technical assistance organisations, etc.), they have in common the circumstance that they have historically been managed and populated by middle-class professionals (from social workers to environmental experts to urban planners), while a different type of organisation has emerged

from the popular struggles themselves: *favela* and neighbourhood associations and networks in many countries (for instance, a shack dwellers' organisation such as Abahlali baseMjondolo, mentioned by Richard in his text), *asambleas populares* and *piquetero* organisations in Argentina, *sem-teto* organisations in Brazil, etc.

Abahlali baseMjondolo, the organisation with which Richard Pithouse has cooperated for several years, has demanded from the middle-class left—both in the universities and the NGOs—'Talk to us, not about us.'<sup>1</sup> This slogan has its roots in justified resentments. From the perspective of many grassroots activists, and poor people in general, NGO staff have increasingly become objects of deep political suspicion precisely because of a certain kind of ambiguity, clearly exemplified by the coinage of acronyms such as 'GONGO' ('government-operated NGO'), 'QUANGO' ('quasi-autonomous NGO') and 'BINGO' ('business-friendly international NGO').

Nevertheless, is the possibility of convergences and cooperation a mere illusion, or is there at least some (real or potential) room for manoeuvre regarding collaboration between NGOs and social movements? It is clear that neither Richard Pithouse nor, for instance, Peter Hallward deny the existence of NGOs which are truly (self-)critical and, therefore, deserve to be seen as part of an emancipatory process. However, as they explicitly point out, we are talking here about *exceptions*.

Be that as it may, it would be wrong (either naive or/and highly ideological) to suggest that 'emancipatory social movements' are something like the perfect and immaculate expression of 'good guys', while NGOs are only apparently (regardless of the existence of exceptions) 'good guys'. There is a second, probably less evident meaning of the word 'convergence' that should be mentioned here: *convergence in terms of at least some problems*. Peter Hallward said (remember the long passage quoted earlier) that '[t]he fact that there are so many NGOs, each with their own priorities and projects [...], makes it almost impossible to develop a coordinated

policy in any given field'; in Brazil in 2005, a movie (half a fiction movie, half a documentary) brilliantly depicted precisely the tragicomic situation of disputes between NGOs that take the form of competing declarations that 'these poor are mine!'<sup>2</sup> However, it is fair to admit that in many situations we can adapt the sentence to the reality of social movements:

[t]he fact that there are so many social movement organisations, each claiming to be the best expression of the movement as such and each with their own priorities and projects [...], makes it almost impossible to develop coordinated, truly effective actions in any given field'.

I could mention different examples, from Brazilian *sem-teto* to Argentine *piqueteros*, to show that divisions and disputes are a daily-life phenomenon in the realm of social movement organisations, too; and the final result is a waste of popular energy and of opportunities, not to mention the cases of authoritarian organising and manipulative 'leadership'. Richard Pithouse is right when he says that not every social movement is emancipatory; that is a basic conceptual wisdom, because if we define 'emancipatory' in a sense that is more or less inherited from the Enlightenment tradition, we can find several social movements which were or are animated by patriarchal, conservative, fundamentalist values and beliefs—for instance, the Tea Party Movement in contemporary USA. However, we must go further and acknowledge that the content of 'emancipation'/'emancipatory' is in itself a contested territory as well. There are more different types and styles of organisation ('horizontal' vs. 'vertical'), different worldviews and political–philosophical backgrounds (Marxism, [neo]anarchism, autonomism and so on) ... All this is, to some extent, inevitable, and the existence of divergences is very often a good thing, not a bad thing; above all, of course, that is not an excuse or an alibi for what seems to be NGOs' 'systemic complicity'. However, in terms of social movements, and even in terms of emancipatory social movements, is it not a matter of fairness and prudence

to admit that our contemporary political landscape is so complex and often confusing that both Manicheism and one-sided narratives must be avoided? ...

## Notes

- 1 See Pithouse (2007) and Ndabankulu, Nsibande, and Ntseng (2009). A more complete variant of the slogan is: 'Talk to us, not about us, not for us.'
- 2 *Quanto vale ou é por quilo?* (2005, directed by Sérgio Bianchi).

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