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politicaycultura@gmail.com

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Hirsch, Joachim

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The State's New Clothes

NGOs and the Internationalization of States

*Joachim Hirsch**

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are a growth industry, not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of their significance for journalists and political scientists. The concept is enjoying popularity comparable with that of “new social movements” or “civil society” a couple of years ago. Some people have come down to earth again in the meantime, but many still place their hopes in NGOs to bring about liberating social change. NGOs are thought to guarantee the development of a more rational and democratic society. This applies especially at the international level, which is becoming increasingly important in the age of globalization, although there can be no talk of democracy even in theory.

That people have such high expectations of NGOs no doubt has something to do with the fact that they present an ideal surface for political projection and also serve as a subject which enables social scientists some sort of self-legitimation. Social scientists are often closely in touch with the NGO world and are at any rate quite closely allied to it socially, culturally and politically. But the popularity of the NGO concept reflects above all the fading of hopes for major change which were last placed in “new social movements”. So many hopes for fundamental social change have been disappointed and now the “new social movements” are also seen as a failure. To this are added: the difficulties, since 1989, of political orientation in the face of neo-liberal globalization; the collapse of “actually existing socialism”; and what seems to be the final victory of capital-

* Universidad de Frankfurt, Alemania.

ism. As in the case of the (re)discovery of “civil society” at the end of the 80s, the focus on NGOs appears in a sense to be an expression of resignation, of making do with what is feasible given the basic – apparently unchangeable – structures of society.¹

There is some truth in Peter Wahl’s² remark that NGOs therefore became “the most overrated actor of the 90s”. This overrating results not only from a politically distorted viewpoint but also from an associated lack of theory. A lot of research is done on NGOs using totally inadequate theoretical concepts of state and society. This serves to perpetuate the deficiencies which have already characterized the debates about “democratic civil society” since 1989. It is therefore difficult to analyse correctly the transformation processes to which states are subjected in the course of so-called globalization.³ Fundamental changes are taking place in the relationship between “state” and “society” and in the modes of political regulation. Associated with this is a major change in the structures of liberal democracy. Non-governmental organizations are both an expression of and an actor in these processes.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE “NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS”?

The growing significance of NGOs reflects the increasingly frequent intervention of formally private organizations in political processes at both national and international levels. There is nothing new in the existence of these organizations, but they are taking on new forms and functions. “Non-governmental organization” has, however, become something of a catch-all term, which carries a hotch-potch of connotations, some applied by outside observers, some by NGOs themselves and some with considerable ideological overtones. Descriptive and normative concepts are often mixed up together to such an extent that it is impossible to tell them apart. Nevertheless, “non” indicates a dialectic which should be taken seriously. In a way NGOs indicate how formally private organizations take on the characteristics of a state or how organs of the state become “privatised”. “Non” is therefore an ambiguous term rather than a clear descrip-

¹ W. D. Narr, “Vom Liberalismus der Erschöpfung”, *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 2, 1991, pp. 216-227.

² P. Wahl, “Mythos und Realität internationaler Zivilgesellschaft”, in E. Altvater *et al.* (eds.), *Vernetzt und verstrickt. Nicht-Regierungsorganisationen als gesellschaftliche Produktivkraft*, Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1997, p. 293.

³ J. Hirsch, *El Estado nacional de competencia*, México, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2001; J. Hirsch, *Vom Sicherheitsstaat zum nationalen Wettbewerbsstaat*, Berlin, ID-Verlag, 1998; Ch. Görg and J. Hirsch, “Is International Democracy Possible?”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 4, 1998, pp. 585-615; J. Hirsch, B. Jessop and N. Poulantzas, *Die Zukunft des Staates*, Hamburg, VSA-Verlag, 2001; J. Hirsch, *Herrschaft, Hegemonie und politische Alternativen*, Hamburg, VSA-Verlag, 2002.

tion of the place of NGOs within the structures of state and society in general and in relation to the state and state organizations at the national and international levels in particular. In addition to this, the term “NGO” usually serves as an unspecific label which is attached generally to a wide variety of organizations. The dilemma associated with this is ironically brought out in acronyms such as GONGO (governmentally organized non-governmental organization) and Quango (quasi non-governmental organization). Indeed, “NGOs” are from time to time if not set up by governments at least financed by them and used for their purposes. In dependent countries on the periphery, for example, the founding of an NGO which is more or less independent of the state is often a precondition for obtaining international aid. Similar things apply to the capitalist centres and their burgeoning NGO business. NGOs serve often enough as “the long arm of the state”. This is especially apparent in logistical and political support for so-called “humanitarian military intervention”.⁴ Indeed it is extremely doubtful whether NGOs would exist in such numbers, if they did not receive government funding or have funds channelled through them. This raises the question as to whether NGOs are really organizations of “civil society” rather than state organizations or whether they are in fact part of a governmental and regulatory complex and should be identified as parts of the “extended state” in the words of Gramsci.⁵

According to Wahl⁶ NGOs are voluntary associations which are: independent of the state or political parties; charitable; non-profit oriented; and non exclusive in terms of race, nationality, religion and gender. This is admittedly, however, a normative and self-descriptive set of criteria, which in practice can rarely be met in full.

If one wants to examine the role of NGOs in the context of new forms of political regulation at national and international levels, it is necessary to choose a more narrowly defined and analytically accurate term, which does not simply relate to a nebulous negative characteristic (“non-governmental”). Using Wahl’s definition as a starting point, I will describe as an NGO any formally private organization, which is active in politics at a national or international level and exhibits the following characteristics:

- non-profit orientation (charitable status);
- engaged in advocacy and not representing own material interests;

⁴ Th. Gebauer, “Die NGOs und die Perspektive internationaler Solidarität”, in Ch. Görg and R. Roth (eds.), *Kein Staat zu machen*, Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1998, pp. 484-502.

⁵ A. Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebook* (ed.), Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1986; A. Kramer, “Gramscis Interpretation des Marxismus”, *Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Marx’schen Theorie*, 4, 1975, pp. 65-118; P. Anderson, *Antonio Gramsci: Eine kritische Würdigung*, Berlin, Olle & Wolter, 1997.

⁶ Wahl, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

- organizationally and financially independent of the state and commercial enterprises;
- professional competence and permanence as an organization.

The last of these characteristics is particularly significant. The self-interest of the organization, e.g. in maintaining the jobs and the income of the employees, carries considerable weight, so that there is a basic tension between this and the aim of representing particular interests or serving public welfare. As a rule NGOs are not only idealistic agents of the interests of humanity, however these might be defined, but they are inevitably also “moral enterprises” which operate on the basis of economic and financial constraints.

This definition makes it possible to distinguish (though perhaps not very clearly) between NGOs and other organizations, in particular other “non-state” organizations which are active in the political arena: private commercial enterprises (although there are hybrid organizations, e.g. consultancy firms with charitable status); associations and groups which only represent the particular interests of their members – i.e. large bureaucratic associations such as trade unions and grassroots initiatives; and many other forms of temporary or loosely organized political initiatives and campaigns. It is more difficult to distinguish between NGOs and social movements, which are usually defined as a complex network of a variety of actors as opposed to a single organization. NGOs can be – but don’t have to be – part of a social movement. Sometimes they form a more or less stable element of a movement network or may be seen as an organizational expression of movement infrastructure.⁷ In the other hand they are often regarded instead as a product of the disintegration of social movements.⁸ And they may indeed be seen as being in opposition to a movement, if the movement is independent of or even in conflict with the established institutional system, including associated NGO structures.⁹

The “internationalization” of the state

The neoliberal restructuring of capitalism – referred to as “globalization” – has subjected the political structure of bourgeois-capitalist society to major modification. It includes a process of denationalization and privatization of the state and an internationalization of policy regimes which can be described as interna-

⁷ R. Roth, *Demokratie von unten: Neue soziale Bewegungen auf dem Wege zur politischen Institution*, Köln, Bund-Verlag, 1994.

⁸ U. Brand, *Nichtregierungsorganisationen, Staat und ökologische Krise*, Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2000.

⁹ Görg/Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 606ff.

tionalization of the state.¹⁰ This finds expression in the growing importance of international organizations, regimes and other forms of international cooperation and in the development of increasingly complex links between regional, national and supranational levels. A main characteristic of this process is the internationalization of the state apparatus itself. In the course of neo-liberal globalization and the deregulation and privatization which go with it, individual states are becoming increasingly dependent on international financial markets, whose primary actors – above all the “strong” states and multinational companies – determine the policies of individual states to an increasing extent by means of effective economic mechanisms. They are able to do this in a more or less non-political manner independent of any mechanisms of democratic control or decision-making. This finds institutional expression in significant shifts in the configuration of the governmental apparatus of individual states. A significant part of this process is the growing weight of ministries of finance and of central banks which are largely independent of democratic political decision-making processes. Both are closely linked to the interests of international capital and act as mediators between international capital flows and the policies of individual states, or even simply as transmission belts. This is above all the institutional expression of an administrative internalization of global imperatives in the political processes of individual states.

The nation state – as an integrated entity with centralized power and decision-making competences within a society with geographical borders – is not about to disappear. But it seems to be subject to strong forces of reconfiguration, disintegration and fragmentation. The transformation of the nation state into a “national competitive state”¹¹ is connected with increased geographical and social diversification of political functions and levels of government. The nation state – with its monopoly of physical force – is still the main guarantor of the existing social order and social cohesion. It is still the main centre for the regulation of the relationship between classes. And it still has the task of ensuring the provision of the basic conditions for production: infrastructure, research, technology, etc.¹² The regulation of conflictual relationships between classes and groups within society is still basically a matter for the individual state and guarantees that the world market remains a system of national “production sites”

¹⁰ See Hirsch, Jessop and Poulantzas, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Hirsch, 2001.

¹² S. Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in the Age of Globalization* New York, Columbia University Press, 1996; R. Boyer and R. J. Hollingsworth, “From National Embeddedness to Spatial and Institutional Nestedness”, in R. J. Hollingsworth and R. Boyer (eds.), *Contemporary Capitalism: The Embeddedness of Political Institutions* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 433-484; P. Hirst and G. Thompson, “Globalization in Question: International Economic Relations and Forms of Public Governance”, in R. J. Hollingsworth and R. Boyer, *op.cit.*, pp. 337-360.

with very unequal conditions for production and processing, which is still a fundamental basis for global exploitation and accumulation.

The differentiation of levels of government and of the functions of the state – in comparison with the historical phenomenon of the fordist nation state – nevertheless has significant consequences where political processes are concerned. The transformation into a “negotiating state” and the increasing importance of international organizations and networks is seriously undermining the democratic systems which are still confined within the bounds of individual states.¹³ This is leading to a crisis in the structures of representation and a growing lack of legitimacy of the political system. These developments are a significant reason for the growing importance of NGOs. With growing inequality across the globe and the resulting waves of migrants and refugees, the democratic systems of the strong metropolitan states are tending to degenerate into an association of relatively privileged citizens, whose primary aims are to maintain a fortress of the rich by shutting others out and to guarantee national security and economic prosperity by means of military intervention in the crisis regions of the periphery. Access to physical resources plays a central role in all of this. The “national competitive state” therefore also arms itself to become a “national security state”.¹⁴ It is important to stress that individual states are not simply passive objects, but rather strategic actors in this process. They are indeed the key actors in the international political system, because they have final control over military forces.

The internationalization of the state is both cause and effect of a fundamental restructuring of class relationships on a global scale. Within individual states the restructuring of the administrative apparatus of government entails a weakening of the institutions such as social service ministries, political parties and corporate structures of social partnership – which play an integrating role and represent the interests of the broad mass of the population – in favour of financial institutions.¹⁵ At the global level the system of individual states is becoming more and more a basis for dividing the exploited and subjected classes within and along national boundaries. Globalization has facilitated the international flexibility and mobility of capital. This makes the processes of fragmentation and division more obvious, whilst workers and workers’ organizations still do not see beyond national borders. The relationship between “state” and “capital” is nevertheless also undergoing transformation as a result of globalization

¹³ Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 2001; Hirsch, Jessop and Poulantzas, *op. cit.*, 2001.

¹⁴ Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 1998.

¹⁵ A. Baker, “Nébuleuse and the Internationalization of the State in the UK?: The Case of HM Treasury and the Bank of England”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 1, 1999, pp. 79-100; A. Lukauskas, “Managing Global Capital: Recent Scholarship on the Political Economy of International Finance”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 2, 1999, pp. 262-287.

and internationalization. But it would be a mistake to assume that capital is becoming “stateless” or to a large extent independent of the state in the course of these developments. In the course of neo-liberal globalization and deregulation international capital has indeed largely freed itself from state regulation of the accumulation of capital and state regulatory institutions have been seriously weakened. And transnational companies are in a better position than ever to behave flexibly within the global multi-state system by promoting and exploiting the comparative advantages of individual states as “production sites”. But they remain dependent on the power of the state and its organizational capacities, both for the protection of their interests and for their political legitimacy.

States still have an important role to play in the formulation of a “politics of capital” which transcends competing interests. They also provide a base for particular groups of capital within the world market. The fragmentation which this implies becomes less significant, however, when it is seen how international capital is increasingly referring to international organizations such as the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO. The policies of these institutions are still determined to a very large extent by the interests which are bundled within individual states, however. Transnational companies are less strongly tied to national markets, to the associated conditions for production and to social contracts. This enables them to act more independently in relation to states and to play states off against one another. Thus, the internationalization of production and circulation calls into question the validity of the terms “national capital” and “national bourgeoisie”.¹⁶ The relationship between states and (international) capital has taken on a new shape, without there having been any reduction in the degree to which capital and the machinery of state are intertwined. Transnational companies still depend on states to guarantee the provision of conditions for production which cannot be provided by the market, to maintain social order and, if necessary, to secure their interests by force. It is no accident that almost all transnational companies are based in or operate from the powerful states within the global system.¹⁷ This enables them to benefit from the military strength of these states and from social structures established by them, e.g. a suitable environment, especially within the military-industrial complex, for advanced technological development. They may even go almost as far as using the state as an instrument to serve their own interests. The relationship between transnational companies and states nevertheless remains contradictory, for it is characterized by both cooperation and conflict.

¹⁶ See N. Poulantzas, *Les classes sociales dans le capitalisme aujourd'hui* Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1974, and B. Jessop, “Survey Article: The Regulation Approach”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 3, 1997, pp. 287-332.

¹⁷ Sassen, *op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 1ff.

The conflicts inherent within capitalism are therefore reproduced not only within individual state apparatuses but also – because of the complex interconnections between international capital, states and international organizations – at the level of international relations between states. This is made clear, for example, by the attempts of companies from the capitalist triad to become established in the USA as the dominant superpower. When examined more critically, the “OECD world”¹⁸ is also – as political scientists tend to forget – very much the world of the multinationals. One example of the conflictual relationship between states and multinational companies stands out: the failure (until now) to agree on the Multinational Agreement on Investment (MAI). MAI should be seen above all as an attempt by the industrialized (metropolitan) countries to force through the interests of transnational capital against the states of the periphery. The failure to reach agreement on MAI was due not only to the worldwide mobilization of public opinion and the resistance of peripheral countries (which is slowly becoming more organized), but also to the divergent interests of the metropolitan states and – one may assume – the companies which they represent. There were similar reasons for the failure of the WTO conference in Seattle in the autumn of 1999. Besides the conflict of interests between the metropolitan and peripheral states, the conflict between the US government and the interests of the companies represented by the EU, e.g. in the field of genetic engineering, played a most significant role.¹⁹ The transnational companies do not form a united block, but are in competition with each other. This competition also takes place within the international system of states and within international organizations. On the whole, the contradictory relationship between capital and state leads to a decreasing coherence of the capitalist class system.

NGOs and “international civil society”

NGOs are widely regarded as “organizations within a weakly developed but globally oriented civil society with a vision of global citizenship”.²⁰ The lack of state theory in research on NGOs is demonstrated especially clearly by the way in which the terms “international” and “global civil society” are used. The pro-

¹⁸ M. Zürn, *Regieren jenseits des Nationalstaates* Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1998.

¹⁹ P. McMichael, “Sleepless Since Seattle: What is the WTO About?”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 4, 2000, pp. 466-474; R. Chakravarthi, “After Seattle, World Trade System Faces an Uncertain Future”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 3, 2000, pp. 495-504.

²⁰ D. Messner and F. Nuscheler, *Global Governance. Herausforderungen an die deutsche Politik an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert*, Köln, Weltforum, 1996; see also J. Habermas, “Jenseits des Nationalstaats? Bemerkungen zu Folgeproblemen der wirtschaftlichen Globalisierung” in U. Beck (ed.), *Politik der Globalisierung*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1995, and Y. Sakamoto, “Civil Society and Democratic World Order”, in S. Gill and J. H. Mittelmann (eds.), *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 207-219.

cesses of transformation of the state and of the global system of states which have been described undoubtedly have a significant impact on the relationship between “state” and “society” on both the national and the international level. The internationalization of production, the development of economic relationships within the world market, the growing number of global problems and dangers, the flows of migrants and refugees, growing dependency at the international level and improvements in transport and communication are all serving to strengthen a great variety of links and connections across the globe. But this development is also characterized by the fact that “global society” is extremely heterogeneous and fragmented and is full of unequal relationships in terms of power and dependency.²¹

If “society” is taken to mean more than just a collection of people, organizations and institutions, i.e. a social structure with a basic value system, an integrated economic development and a relatively coherent system of political institutions, it is hardly possible to apply this term at the international level. Following Gramsci's terminology of “civil society” in a stricter sense, it can only be used to refer to a coherent political and institutional system, i.e. the “extended state”, with all its inherent contradictions.

At the international level there is no “state” with a “monopoly of legitimate physical force” (M. Weber) and such a “state” would indeed be incompatible with the capitalist relations of production. This fact is of crucial importance. The continuing fragmentation of economic, social and political institutions, levels and structures is an important feature of what I call globalization. Economic globalization is not accompanied by the development of a comprehensive and coherent system of political institutions, but continues to be determined by the existence of individual states. This means that one should not – as is often done – use the term “global civil society” as if it were analogous to “civil society” within the nation state.

According not only to Gramsci but also to classical liberal theory of “civil society”,²² the function of “civil society” within the limits of an individual state is – on the basis of freedom of expression and freedom to organize – to create the conditions for institutionalised opinion-forming and decision-making processes and in this way to build consensus and hegemony. This, however, requires the existence of a centralized system of state institutions, in which decisions are made and implemented according to formal rules and in which hegemonic projects can be realized and maintained. The transformation of the state in the

²¹ M. Bonder, B. Röttger and G. Ziebur, “Vereinheitlichung und Fraktionierung der Weltgesellschaft: Kritik des neuen Institutionalismus”, *PROKLA* 23, 1997, pp. 327-341; Ch. Görg and J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 593; D. Slater, “Post-Colonial Questions for Global Times”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 4, 1998, pp. 647-678.

²² J. Keane (ed.), *Civil Society and the State* London, Verso, 1998.

course of economic globalization has brought about major changes in this system of building consensus and creating hegemony and political legitimacy. This is especially apparent at the international level, so that various authors refer with good reason to “neo-feudalism” or simply “structured anarchy” rather than “global civil society”.²³

The term “global civil society” is sometimes associated with the evolution of particular actors: an international managerial class which includes managers of commercial companies, scientists, the staff of international organizations, and parts of state bureaucracies and a wide variety of “private” organizations including NGOs.²⁴ It is assumed that we are witnessing the evolution of a relatively coherent social group, which is developing “a particular form of self-direction”, so that it can implement its own “particular project of establishing global consensus and a global state project”, thus contributing significantly to the transformation of the system of nation states.²⁵ This international managerial class is indeed building its own institutions, in the form of the Davos “World Economic Forum”, for example. This makes it possible to begin to develop socio-political visions and strategies of domination at the global level.²⁶ In any case, these structures have played a significant role in establishing the dominance of the neo-liberal socio-economic model.²⁷ But at the same time it is necessary to note that the international managerial elite remains dependent on the existing – and still extremely viable – system of state regulation. And its internal structure will remain subject to the economic and social fragmentation of global capitalism. In summary: the use of the terms “state” and “civil society” in relation to global politics is extremely problematic.

NGOs IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL REGULATION

The role and function of NGOs cannot be understood simply on the basis of the structure and aims of individual organizations. They can only be understood in the context of post-fordist transformation processes. There is a crucial lack of regulation and legitimacy within the international system of nation states at both

²³ Ch. Görg and J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 1998, pp. 600ff.

²⁴ R. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations”, in S. Gill (ed.), *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 49-95; L. Sklair, “Social Movements for Global Capitalism: The Transnational Capitalist Class in Action”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 3, 1998, pp. 647-678; A. Demirovic, *Demokratie und Herrschaft*, Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1997, pp. 246ff.; Ch. Görg and J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 1998.

²⁵ Demirovic, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

²⁶ Demirovic, *op. cit.*; Slater, *op. cit.*; K. Van der Pijl, “Transnational Class Formation and State Forms”, in S. Gill and J. H. Mittelman, *op. cit.* pp. 115-137.

²⁷ D. Plehwe and B. Walpen, “Wissenschaftliche und wissenschaftspolitische Produktionsweisen des Neoliberalismus”, *PROKLA*, 115, 1999, pp. 203-235.

national and international levels. This is the main reason for the growing importance of NGOs.

NGOs harness (scientific) knowledge and understanding, which state bureaucracies do not possess. They play a significant part in the identification and definition of social problems and threats. They thus find themselves involved in setting the agenda for political negotiations and decision-making. They represent interests which do not have a voice or are not listened to in established political institutions.²⁸ And they monitor international negotiations.²⁹ In this way NGOs represent a reaction to the crisis of representation which accompanies the post-fordist transformation of the system of nation states. They play a major part as channels of communication between the regional, national and international levels of political institutions in relation to a wide variety of problems and interests. As a result they come into contrast with a great many actors: international organizations, states, grassroots groups and other NGOs.³⁰ And finally, NGOs are engaged in practical projects – especially in the fields of development and relief work – which state administrations are unable to or do not wish to undertake, or which they delegate for reasons of political legitimacy.

NGOs have few formal opportunities to participate in political decision-making and most of them are dependent on donations and grants and therefore have an insufficient and insecure financial basis. It is therefore the knowledge which NGOs possess and their ability to influence public opinion which are the main ways in which they can exert power and influence. They possess knowledge as a result of scientific and technical expertise and also thanks to their familiarity with local and sectoral structures and problems. On this basis NGOs may either cooperate or engage in conflict with governments and international organizations: in defining problems, in decision-making and in policy implementation. The crucial resource of power which NGOs possess is their ability to mobilize public opinion. Indeed it is only as a result of the pressure of public opinion that NGOs can enter the political arena. Obtaining and fighting for media attention is therefore a key objective of NGO policy.³¹ But they lack their own material resources and are therefore dependent on the cooperation of a powerful media industry and have to adjust to its ways of working. This can be seen in

²⁸ U. Brand and Ch. Görg, "Nichtregierungsorganisationen und neue Staatslichkeit", in J. Caließ (ed.), *Barfuß auf diplomatischen Parkett. Die Nichtregierungsorganisationen in der Weltpolitik*, Loccum Protokolle, 9, Loccum, Evangelische Akademie, 1998; T. Princen and M. Finger, *Environmental NGOs in World Politics, Linking the Local and the Global* New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 34.

²⁹ U. Brand and Ch. Görg, *op. cit.*

³⁰ U. Brand and Ch. Görg, *op. cit.*, p. 101; T. Princen and M. Finger, *op. cit.*, pp. 38ff; A. Brunnengräber and H. Walk, "Die Erweiterung der Netzwerktheorien: Nichtregierungsorganisationen verquickt mit Markt und Staat", in E. Altvater (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 64-85.

³¹ P. Wapner, "Politics Beyond the State: Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics", *World Politics*, 47, 1995, pp. 11-34; A. Brunnengräber and H. Walk, *op. cit.*; P. Wahl, *op. cit.*; U. Brand, *op. cit.*, 2000.

the field of development aid, for example, where it is difficult to gain public attention for long-term, “sustainable” and therefore unspectacular projects, whilst catastrophes which are dramatized by the media can gain a lot of attention and attract much more in the way of donations. This inevitably influences the priorities of NGOs, as is evident in the expansion of the international emergency aid business during the past couple of years. The example of Greenpeace shows that media-oriented “transnational NGOs” can carry considerable weight in opposition to governments and commercial companies, but they do so at the cost of having to set their priorities tactically according to media-oriented criteria.

The wide variety of NGOs makes them to a major factor in the development of consensus and compromises, especially at the level of international regulation. As a result, a broader range of interests is taken into account and decisions are made more rationally. NGOs can be recognized as an important new actor in the political arena.³² They are very different from traditional social organizations such as states, parties and associations and contribute significantly to the transformation of the relationship between “state” and “society”. But the question arises as to whether NGOs are truly independent of state institutions or whether they are to be seen as part of the “extended state”.

The relationship between NGOs and the state is largely determined by the fact that – as professional organizations with a degree of permanency – they usually require financial resources beyond that which can be obtained through donations alone, especially where large-scale projects are concerned. As a result they become dependent on states, state federations (such as the European Union), international organizations or even associations and private companies. This dependency makes it possible for donors to use NGOs to serve their own interests. Indeed some NGOs are even founded and controlled by donor states or organizations. NGOs also play a significant role in conflicts within and between national administrations and international organizations. They may for example be used by metropolitan states to circumvent the activities of governments of peripheral countries and sometimes they are mobilized by national governments in opposition to international organizations or vice versa.³³ NGOs tend to be “state-oriented”, not only because they are financially dependent but also because they often depend on the legislative and executive power of the state and/or the goodwill of private companies for the realization of their objectives.³⁴ Their effectiveness depends to a large extent on the willingness of states to

³² T. Princen and M. Finger, *op. cit.*; P. Wapner, *op. cit.*; U. Brand, *op. cit.*

³³ K. Bruckmaier, “Nichtstaatliche Umweltorganisationen und die Diskussion über die Neue Weltordnung”, *PROKLA*, 95, 1994, pp. 227-241; H. Walk, “‘Ein bißchen bi schadet nie’: Die Doppelstrategie von NGO-Netzwerken”, in E. Altvater (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 195-221; P. Wahl, *op. cit.*; Ch. Görg and J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*

³⁴ U. Brand, *op. cit.*

cooperate. And this always entails the risk of being used by states for their own purposes. This is demonstrated by the fact that the creation of NGOs is very much “demand led”, i.e. NGOs most often come into being where states have an interest in cooperation to meet their needs for information, legitimacy or regulation.³⁵ So it may not be altogether wrong to regard NGOs, in a certain sense, as forefield organization of the state. But this is only one side of the coin: They can only perform their functions – organising, representing particular interests, sharing knowledge and gaining legitimacy for groups and issues – adequately so long as they do not simply become organs of state, but maintain a certain level of financial, political and organizational independence.

It follows from this that it is hardly possible to assess the role and function of NGOs according to the traditional model of state and society at the national level and within the bounds of the associated concepts of “civil society”. On the other hand, Gramsci’s concept of the “extended state” is also of limited usefulness, because there is no integrated state at the international level. NGOs are part of a complex system of “global governance” and their effectiveness results largely from the “internationalization” of the state. The evolving international regulatory system is extremely heterogeneous and full of contradictions and conflict. This is the main “strategic gateway” for NGO-politics.³⁶

The staff of international NGOs can to some extent be seen as part of a globally active managerial class. At the very least they share areas of work, forms of behaviour, cultural orientation and jargon. This is a precondition for NGOs to gain access to both formal and informal negotiations and decision-making. The structure of the NGO system is also a reflection of hierarchical international economic and political power structures. In particular, “northern” multinational NGOs are not only better equipped with technical and financial resources; they also possess “cultural capital”, which can enable them to be more effective.

Up until now at least, specialization on a single issue has been one of the main requirements for success in the work of international NGOs. But this may cause broader problems and concerns to be ignored. It is possible that NGOs contribute to the division and diminution of the forces of protest and resistance in this way.³⁷ The fact remains that at the international level NGOs are bound up in political processes of representation and negotiation which lack formal democratic structures such as criteria for representation and rules of decision-making. They may be able to obtain a hearing for concerns and views which have been suppressed or neglected. But this happens in a context of powerful negotiating fora which are not at all transparent, where – given the lack of understandable

³⁵ Ch. Görg and J. Girsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 602ff.

³⁶ Brand, *op. cit.* See also P. Wapner, *op. cit.*; U. Brand and Ch. Görg, *op. cit.*

³⁷ A. Demirovic, *op. cit.*; P. Wahl, *op. cit.*

and transparent decision-making processes – a rather anarchic system of “sub-politics” has grown up.³⁸ NGOs therefore play a significant part in the “refeudalization” of international politics. In conclusion, NGOs can at best be regarded as a form of “catalyst for democratization of the international system”.³⁹ NGOs “have no formal democratic legitimacy”, but – “in the face of the tendency of ‘global society’ towards fragmentation” – they have to some extent become “a *substitute* for democracy”.⁴⁰

The stronger presence of NGOs both at the national level and on the international stage can therefore be interpreted as a result of the post-fordist, neo-liberal restructuring of states and the international system of states. This has led to a far-reaching privatization of political processes of decision-making and implementation and thus to a fundamental change in the relationship between state and society. The growth in the number of NGOs and in the amount of attention given to them, both by political scientists and in society as a whole, can rightly be regarded as part of the neo-liberal paradigm which has now become dominant. Given the existing political and economic structures, growing economic and social fragmentation, and – last but not least – the position of overriding importance which nation states still possess, the significance of NGOs should not be overrated, especially when their democratising influence is concerned. Nevertheless, NGOs are an increasingly important part of the international regulatory system which is evolving in new directions, so they are more than just a “marginal phenomenon of globalization”.⁴¹

DEMOCRACY BEYOND THE NATION STATE?

Liberal democracy is closely associated – though in a most contradictory way – with the capitalist nation state, both from the point of view of its historical roots and in terms of its basic functional requirements. The evolution of the nation state created societies with fairly clear geographical boundaries, a relatively closed economic system, a politically defined population subject to central control, and a government with executive powers which is therefore – in principle – responsible and subject to control. It is therefore generally agreed that the internationalization of the state in the current process of globalization is undermining some of its important foundations.⁴² This in turn has an impact on the orga-

³⁸ Ch. Görg and J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*

³⁹ P. Wahl, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

⁴⁰ Ch. Görg and J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 605.

⁴¹ P. Wahl, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

⁴² J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 2001; J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 1998; Ch. Görg and J. Hirsch, *op. cit.*; M. Zürn, *op. cit.*; W. D. Narr and A. Schubert, *Weltökonomie. Die Misere der Politik* Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1994;

nization of social and class relationships, and thus on the conditions for social reproduction in general.

The ever growing dominance of the market relations carries within it the seeds of the destruction of their own natural and social foundations. In the past this development was countered by the evolution of oppositional forces (social movements, such as the labour movement and workers' parties) and more or less well established democratic structures within the nation states.⁴³ When these particular political structures are undermined in the process of the internationalization of the state, important preconditions for the development of a constellation of oppositional forces are lost. One may assume that this will cause a comprehensive and long-term social crisis of global proportions, which should be recognized as a complex of mutually related economic and political processes. There can be no doubt that global capitalism requires new forms of international political regulation. But, given the existing system of states (which is undergoing internationalization) as a basis, one can hardly expect such new forms of regulation to be anything more than a makeshift response to crisis which does not have any impact on the foundations of a world order which is going off the rails. Above all the structural lack of a democratic basis will mean that nothing can be done to work against the destructive consequences of uncontrolled market forces.

As it is known, there is not much sense in hoping that a capitalist crisis or the collapse of capitalism will be the starting point for processes of liberation. So the question remains as to how it might be possible to work against these destructive developments politically. Simply to restore the old system of nation states with its inherent mechanisms of oppression, division and exclusion would not be a very promising solution – even if it were possible in spite of the dominance of international capital and the radical change in class structure which has taken place. The worldwide growth of movements for democracy and human rights and the revival of democracy as an issue in political debate are significant developments at this juncture. It is true that these developments are full of contradictions: on the one hand it is an expression of the OECD's attempt to establish its dominance in a "new" world order; on the other hand it is a form of protest in reaction to the undermining of liberal democracy and the social fragmentation and degradation associated with globalization. The significance of "human rights" is both historically and socially ambiguous. The development and realization of a democratic order beyond the bounds of the liberal capitalist

D. Archibugi and D. Held (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; D. Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; S. Sassen, *op.cit.*

⁴³ K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: Politische und gesellschaftliche Ursprünge von Gesellschaften und Wirtschaftssystemen*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1990.

nation state – a democratic order which will necessarily differ considerably from conventional models of democracy – is therefore on the agenda. New forms of democratic politics must be developed, especially because of the internationalization of the state which is now taking place. These forms of democracy must be more independent – in terms of organization and activities – of state systems of administration at both national and international levels. This will only be possible, if the political imperatives associated with liberal democracy – the separation between private and public spheres, the basic principles of representation and decision-making processes – are fundamentally reformulated. This means that the international cooperation of organizations and movements which are independent of both states and private companies must be developed, strengthened and institutionalised in new ways, so that the “global civil society” which is so often referred to can begin to live up to its name. Such an undertaking cannot be limited to the international level. It must indeed be preceded by basic processes of democratization at local, regional and national levels, which similarly extend beyond the horizons and limitations of bourgeois liberal democracy.

The question is, what can be expected of NGOs? Both in scientific literature and in political discussion NGOs are expected to make a major contribution to the civilization and democratization of international politics.⁴⁴ Analysis of the structures and processes which are actually developing does in fact show that, in some areas at least, NGOs have become – or are at least becoming – an important part of international regulatory systems. The extent to which they have a democratising influence is nevertheless open to question. The question is whether NGOs can be regarded as democratic and autonomous actors, quite apart from their function as part of an international regulatory system. If one equates democracy with functionality and rationality in political processes and decision-making, as is being done increasingly often in the more recent discussions of the theory of democracy, then NGOs are clearly “democratic” organizations in this restricted sense. After all, they do cause attention to be given to a broader range of interests. And they contribute to greater rationality in processes of problem definition and decision-making. This also applies if one understands democracy as a pluralistic system of checks and balances with limited possibilities for participation.

But if one understands democracy as a system which allows every member of society the highest possible degree of freedom and autonomy, then things are more complicated. So long as NGOs remain dependent on bureaucratic state administrations at the national or international level and are fundamentally state-oriented, their ability to develop and pursue strategies for fundamental social

⁴⁴ See, for example, J. Habermas, *op. cit.*

change will remain limited.⁴⁵ Even if they are internally democratic and close to the “grassroots”, one may question the extent to which they are representative and possess democratic legitimacy, because there is a total lack of appropriate institutional mechanisms. It is difficult for them to relate closely to the needs of the people whom they are supposed to represent, not least because of the considerable self-interest of the organization itself. And of course there is nothing to stop NGOs bringing interests into play which have no democratic legitimacy or are partisan. It should also be noted that until now the activities of NGOs have been largely confined to “soft” issues in environmental, social, development and human rights policy, whereas they have played a relatively minor role in the “hard” issues of security, defence, technology and economics – not least because states have little or no interest in their cooperation in these areas. This is beginning to change, however, as the most recent debates about the policies of the IMF, World Bank and WTO have shown. To some extent this was already the case with the international landmines campaign.⁴⁶ Finally, one should remind that NGOs vary considerably as regards political capacity in terms of resources and scope for action. This is particularly obvious when one compares “northern” and “southern” NGOs and observes the frequent financial and organizational dependency of the “southern” NGOs. There is also a hierarchy of power amongst NGOs, which leaves powerful “transnational NGOs”, which are usually based in metropolitan centres, at a considerable advantage over smaller and weaker organizations at local and regional levels. The NGO system reflects to some extent the imbalance of power which exists between nation states.

It is clear that the democratic nature of the NGO system depends not only on the aims, internal structure and operating conditions of individual organizations – even if their internal structure is democratic – but just as much on their position and function within the broader international system of political regulation. From the point of view of the theory of democracy NGOs are only one of many actors. There is also a great variety of NGOs which are often in opposition to each other. As a general principle, the more NGOs are able to maintain their material and political independence in relation to states, international organizations and private companies, the greater is the role they can play in democratic processes. This is by no means easy. It requires that NGOs remain independent of state grants and subsidies where their administration and core functions are concerned and that they avoid at the same time too great a dependence on the media for fundraising. This means above all that they need to be able to rely on the support of an active political base of social movements and initiatives. This cannot be provided simply by direct mailings and televised benefit concerts.

⁴⁵ P. Wahl, *op. cit.*; U. Brand, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Th. Gebauer, *op. cit.*

What is necessary is that accurate and critical information be made available to those who are interested and that public discussion takes place about NGO activities, the conditions under which they are working, the difficulties which they face and – if necessary – the reasons for their failure to achieve certain objectives. Only on this basis will it be possible to build up sufficient countervailing power over and against state administrations and private companies – political power which is more than symbolic. This is a precondition for the development of political visions and ideas beyond the limits and regardless of the imperatives of the existing system of regulation and domination. This would also be a precondition for meaningful activity within the “hard” policy areas which are of decisive importance in relation to the global socio-political order and where NGOs cannot be certain of help and offers of cooperation from state institutions. A strategy for liberating social change would require a fundamental extension of the concept of “politics” to address issues such as production processes, consumption, lifestyle and gender relations and, combined with this, the promotion of social learning and activities aimed at consciousness raising. This requires political orientation and action which are not limited to lobbying within state dominated negotiating fora.⁴⁷

The dependency of NGOs on states and international organizations can only be reduced sufficiently by the creation of international coalitions for cooperation and action.⁴⁸ Here again the international landmines campaign serves as an important example.⁴⁹ And then it is particularly important to work on making the complex and obscure negotiating channels in the international system more public and transparent. Finally, the degree to which NGOs are democratic correlates with the closeness of their relationship to those whose interests they claim to represent. It is possible to represent interests and provide material aid in such a way that the “beneficiaries” become even more dependent and lose whatever opportunities they may have had to organize themselves politically. It can be shown that this is often the case where development aid and relief projects are concerned. NGOs can on the other hand aim to promote self-organization, although this is less spectacular from the point of view of media interest and is likely to lead to conflict with state authorities. And even this approach remains full of contradictions: to start with, it is not at all clear that outside intervention can indeed serve to promote political self-determination. And there is always the risk of being used in conflicts between governments or, to be more accurate, in the exploitation of weaker states by stronger ones. Nevertheless this orientation is of crucial importance:⁵⁰ the democratising influence of NGOs depends

⁴⁷ T. Princen and M. Finger, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ T. Princen and M. Finger, *op. cit.*; P. Wapner, *op. cit.*; P. Wahl, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

⁴⁹ Th. Gabauer, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ P. Wapner, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

largely on the extent to which they are able to support local and regional political structures. But so long as NGOs remain part of the "extended state", as one might say, it is an illusion to imagine that they might engage in political opposition to the state. The best that can be expected of NGOs is that they become politically engaged "within and against the state". This path is just as difficult as it is full of risks and conflicts.

It has to be noted that it is misleading to suppose that NGOs can be an "increasingly important alternative to radical action".⁵¹ They can at best be part of broader movements or networks. This implies a somewhat complex relationship as, for example, in the case of the ambiguous role of NGOs in connection with the relatively successful mobilization of protest at the WTO/IMF/World Bank/G7/8 conferences in Seattle in 1999, in Prague in 2000 and in Geneva 2001. This ambiguity was apparent in the need for NGOs, having played a key role in organizing the protest on the streets, to work hard to maintain their image as serious partners in negotiations with governments and international organizations. If it is a question of overcoming global dominance, exploitation and dependency, then there can be no substitute for radical action, i.e. direct action outside institutional structures, which transcends the limits of dominant political agendas, destroys consensus and attacks the extensive and complex system of domination at national and international levels. Least of all can a substitute for such action be found in the corridors of diplomacy or at negotiating tables. The structure and function of NGOs prevents them from engaging in such action except in rare circumstances. At best one might expect NGOs to bring the results of radical action, including the more powerful position which they then enjoy, to bear – in so far as far as they are willing and able to do so, in accordance with their internal structure, political activities and orientation – on international negotiations and in confrontations with governments and international organizations. Radical social movements, which refuse to allow their capacity for protest and resistance to be tied down in institutions, are still one of the basic foundations of democratic development. This leads to the paradox that the democratic nature of the NGO system tends only to have a significant influence when NGOs come into lasting conflict with more radical political initiatives and movements. If one examines closely the observation that the growth of the NGO sector is a response to the decline of radical political movements, it can be seen that it implies considerable scepticism in relation to their potential for promoting democratization.

⁵¹ T. Princen and M. Finger, *op. cit.*, p. 65.