

Non-State Actors: Agents of Reform or Global Governmentality?

While drinking coffee just before I sat down to think about what I was going to say today, I read a short piece in the American Anthropological Association's *Anthropology News* that had just come through my letterbox. It was a contribution to a debate section about anthropology and human rights written by Gerald Hyman, the Director of USAID's Office of Democracy and Governance. Hyman's view was that anthropologists contributed little to 'the development of human rights themselves', given their reluctance to embrace universalism, and at best, only made indirect contributions to the improvement of the human rights regime, generally by criticising its workings in practice. What we tend to do instead, he complained, is endlessly harp on about how the human rights regime is a hegemonic instrument used to constitute a form of 'moral imperialism', whilst shamelessly exploiting it ourselves in efforts to practice advocacy on behalf of marginalised or subaltern groups. At the end of the day, we do nothing concrete to improve an undoubtedly flawed but still noble effort to create a better world.

Quite a lot of people who work in NGOs would certainly feel the same way about academic anthropologists. The question posed by my title immediately betrays a predisposition to view this particular kind of non-state actor as an important element in a North Atlantic hegemonic project while at the same time absolving from the general charge those NGOs that work in ways that we approve on goals that we approve, once again, usually those that we consider genuinely beneficial or 'empowering' to marginalised or subaltern people. At one level, it is difficult for an academic researcher not to feel uneasy about these objections. We do not, by and large, deliver anyone any material services such as food or clean drinking water, even if our work might sometimes give particular groups of people a higher visibility to those that do. And we do not do a great deal directly to strengthen people's capacity to claim rights or defend themselves against those who would violate their rights – unless, of course, we engage with some kind of NGO dedicated to a rights-based approach in a more hands-on way. Yet perhaps it isn't really as simple as that. What I want to talk about here is the importance of academic research for highlighting the

unintended consequences of what may be perfectly well intentioned actions which are nevertheless conditioned by a wide range of structural factors that need to be brought into view in contemplating concrete actions in the world. Critical talk of this kind can often seem negative. It can begin with the empirical point that the boundary between state and non-state actors is not always clear in the contemporary world, or with a much more thoroughgoing theoretical critique of the opposition between ‘the state’ and ‘civil society’ as not merely Eurocentric but arguably an ideological construct forged in particular Western European societies. But the purpose of such critical thought is not that of sneering at noble aspirations but of promoting reflection on how to avoid efforts to do good actually causing harm.

To give an example: what could be simpler at first sight than the task of a human rights worker in a situation in which paramilitaries are roaming around murdering people? Yet there *is* a problem if the human rights worker doesn’t actually understand how and why, in this particular local context, people have got to the point of killing each other. Equipped with a model of the political interests that the paramilitaries should represent formed in some distant city on the basis of an understanding of regional or national politics, the human rights worker may read the local situation in terms of that general model without bothering to explore what this particular conflict actually means to local people and how it might be rooted in particular local historical problems, such as competition for access to land. Our paramilitaries may have decided to identify themselves with the non-local political label for the purely contingent reason that rival factions had already appropriated the other available positions in the larger spectrum of choices. None of them may be organically linked in any serious way with these external actors. Worse, the label ‘paramilitary’ itself may be flying around as a local means of disqualifying leaders and members of rival factions who in fact have neither the means nor intention of resorting to violence, making it more likely that they themselves will, in fact, be killed, possibly with the unintentional help of the human rights worker who wrote the name down in her notebook and reported it to a journalist a few days later. At first sight, this seems to be an argument about the need for local knowledge that cannot easily be obtained without extended research. But it is also an argument about the tyranny of categories of the kind that anthropologists often make, to the irritation of those with more

immediate interventionist ends. Let loose the word 'paramilitary' and we know where we are. Except that all too often we don't.

This writ very small, is one of the nightmare scenarios of projects of global governance based on the principle of intervention from afar. I do not want to deny that Human Rights NGOs much more often do save lives and help to bring those who abuse others to book. But one lesson to be learned from NGO failures is perhaps that NGOs are sometimes very imperfect substitutes for the kinds of processes of state reform that would create better conditions for local 'hot spots' to pacify themselves. Nevertheless, NGOs, particularly local ones, clearly can play a role in bringing those conditions about. Furthermore, it would seem that they are more likely to be able to do this if the national state and its regional extensions can be persuaded or coerced into providing minimal security guarantees for members of all contending parties, so we easily get back to proposing international intervention as noble cause. That it may have ignoble underlying motives in a particular case and that Northern interventions seem to be carried out globally in a selective way that highlights possible hidden agendas of an economic or geopolitical kind does not necessarily invalidate the principle. Furthermore, unless one adopts the view that all interventions are ruthlessly directed with perfect foresight by a single command and control centre that can determine the behaviour and motivations of all the actors who will eventually play a role in it, the messier scenarios likely to eventuate can have positive as well as negative consequences, albeit often unintended ones.

Let me turn, then, to the most negative argument of all, the one that argues that some of our non-state actors are, in fact, agents of a North Atlantic derived project of 'global governmentality' in Foucault's sense, or as the anthropologist Charles Hale once put it, the neoliberal equivalent of Bentham's panopticon. There are various ways of approaching this issue, but let me start with some pessimistic views that have been advanced about the implications of the transition from military rule to electoral democracy in the region in which I work, Latin America. The argument runs something like this. Before democratization, a variety of urban and social movements were the only vehicle for expressing dissent and pressing demands for a fair society, because conventional party political life was proscribed by the dictatorships. Once that institutional political life was restored, still fragile electoral democracies

produced weak governments that had to deal with economic crisis, and those governments had little alternative but to embrace neoliberal economic policies. Socio-economic polarization increased more frequently than it was reduced, and already inadequate public service provision was cut back, in a period when rural-urban migration was increasing again, real wages were falling, steady jobs in the cities were disappearing, and the informal sector was growing in both legal and illegal forms. Into that breach stepped a wide variety of NGOs. Some were service delivery substitutes for the state, either offering handouts or implementing a neoliberal agenda of ‘helping the poor to help themselves’ by fostering micro-credit schemes and the like. Others, particularly towards the end of the Nineties, had no real resources to offer but aimed to promote ‘empowerment’ by pursuing a rights-based agenda that would enable poor people to claim their citizenship rights and ‘participate’ more effectively, either as individuals or collectives, such as urban residents’ associations or indigenous communities. Considerable attention was also placed on women by these organisations.

These new NGOs had a wide variety of origins and sponsors. Some emerged from previously independent social movements, and their leaders now faced various dilemmas. How could they maintain an independent and radical stance when they needed to negotiate with government agencies for access to resources? The alternative was to become dependent on international donors, though the interest of some of these waned after democracy was restored. But where the interest did remain, the new NGOs had to become professional enough to make proposals and bid for funding, had to adapt their aims to those that foreign sponsors would approve and had to learn how to navigate neoliberal audit cultures. This is another kind of institutionalisation that has some ‘state-like’ qualities, one of which is that certain kinds of demands and programmes come to be seen as *too radical*. There were also some social contradictions in this increasing articulation to an international regime of foundations, charities and foreign governments. Grassroots activists tended to be drawn out of the original social movement base and gained access to new kinds of lifestyles as they navigated the NGO circuits and came to see moving on and up within them, perhaps even out of the country, as a way of securing personal betterment. Time and again, we see, for example, how rural activists become increasingly alienated from their kin and neighbours, move off to a city and end up pursuing agendas that are less and less

relevant to the actual needs and aspirations of the people that they claim to represent. But there were effects on the communities that the NGOs sought to serve as well. As families became increasingly impoverished, traditional kinds of self-help based on helping kin and neighbours get through a crisis through everyday reciprocities became increasingly difficult to sustain. Such social perspectives need to be at the centre of anthropological approaches to studying political change.

In this kind of context, the NGO service provision substitutes became centres of clientelistic relations, because people competed with each other for access to their resources. Here some NGOs proved less independent than others, since some were in fact tied to political party machines and others to a variety of churches that had an interest in gaining members. Nor was the state itself entirely out of the game, especially when it had World Bank social development and poverty alleviation funds to target at potential voters. Perhaps the most revealing example of what is possible in this respect is the strategy of the Kirchner government in Argentina, which faced the problem of a massively mobilized society whose middle class had been reduced to poverty by the economic meltdown of 2002. Kirchner reached down to the social movements themselves and persuaded some elements of the movement of the unemployed, the *piqueteros*, to take responsibility for administering his workfare programmes. This did not simply diminish the kind of challenge that those who accepted the offer faced to the government, but provoked a bitter rift between them and those *piquetero* groups that refused.

The process of ‘NGOization’ did not, therefore, necessarily strengthen an independent ‘civil society’ as envisaged by those who saw a strengthening of this kind of ‘non-state actor’ as a way of achieving more profound reform in the judicial and administrative apparatus of the state itself. Indeed, various kinds of new actors, in particular charitable foundations offering citizens cheap food, healthcare and locally manufactured pharmaceutical products, have emerged as vehicles for furthering the political ambitions of both established groups in the political class and emerging players from the ranks of the business community. All that reinforces the need to think carefully about what is too often assumed about the category ‘non-state actor’ itself. So does the fact that social movements themselves are not necessarily wholly independent and spontaneous expressions of ‘grassroots organizing’: many have been

fostered and promoted by churches or middle class activist groups, and some even by activists tied to political parties. Furthermore, democratization created spaces for social movement activists to enter government, sometimes as functionaries, sometimes as political representatives at local or national level. For many analysts this simply spelled an inevitable process of ‘political silencing’ of ordinary poor people and renewed clientelization.

Democratic regimes did not only open up spaces for previously dissident elements to be included in institutional politics, but tended, in contrast to their authoritarian predecessors, to proclaim both the desirability and possibility of the poorer citizens participating in more open and democratic systems of, in particular, local government. With the multilateral agencies driving fiscal and administrative decentralization programmes, these spaces for participation multiplied, but so did the processes of professionalisation of social movement and NGO activity and the business of speaking for popular constituencies in town halls and government departments. NGO interventions do not necessarily promote individualization, since ‘rebuilding community’ and ‘thickening social capital’ became central to a variety of neoliberal perspectives in the later 1990s that were, in effect, efforts to address some of the more obvious mess created by the earlier emphasis of neoliberal policies on state downsizing and economic shock therapies. Nevertheless, the rise of, for example, neoliberal multiculturalism created its own problems, by ‘fixing’ and sometimes essentializing identity categories and ethnic and racial boundaries, whilst building on established collective identities was perfectly compatible with a deeper process of privatization of citizenship and leaving the poor to help themselves.

All this could be seen as a process of ‘deep neoliberalization’ of the logic of governance that has the Foucauldian property of creating self-regulating subjects whose consciousness is thoroughly colonized by the principles of a market society, in the sense that incremental resources are to be obtained through self-organization and self-help. One could argue this is often a *simulation* of democracy, since even where popular organizations are included in consultations and public debates about, say, future urban planning, all the talking may simply disguise where the real power still lies, along with all the ingrained social models of class and racial difference that will keep urban space ever more violently policed and segregated. Seen from this

perspective, then, non-state actors play a vital role in fortifying a neoliberal project of ‘government at a distance’, to use Nikolas Rose’s term. Such a project not only makes it easier to keep government expenditure down, but creates an optical illusion of consensus about institutional politics, since everyone is now included as an ‘empowered’ participant and constant efforts are being made to strengthen the ability of each and every citizen to participate. Anyone who is not happy with this dispensation becomes a radical and an extremist.

A further subtlety of neoliberal systems of rule is that radicals can become state assets. For example, in Mexico the new government agency in charge of social development programmes for indigenous peoples often employs people with strong past track records of militancy in independent indigenous movements and puts them in charge of state-funded efforts to foster ethnic consciousness and self-organization to defend themselves against human rights abuse by other agencies of government. Furthermore, in some contexts, the Mexican government has declined to exercise the taxonomic functions of the state and now accepts self-ascription as a basis for claiming an indigenous identity. At first sight, this seems tremendously progressive and good, but rather less so when one looks at where these programmes are being implemented.

For example, there is a large migrant population from southern Mexico working on the agribusiness farms of the northern border states. There is also a large urban population in the city of Tijuana, which is not targeted by these programmes since they concentrate on farm workers, who enjoy lower pay and inferior conditions to non-indigenous workers that are legitimated through ethnic stereotyping. Why one asks oneself, does the Mexican government seek to ‘empower’ these indigenous workers, apparently by discouraging them from doing what they otherwise seem inclined to do, that is, merging culturally with the rest of the local population, when it is their apparent ‘difference’ that underpins their inferior treatment? Since this inferior treatment actually violates Mexican labour laws, why does the state not act directly against the employers? The answer is probably not that there is an official conspiracy based on enthusiasm for Foucauldian theory in the cabinet, but that public policy is shaped in the first instance by the interests of big capital and what emerges beyond those parameters is a secondary response to what in this case is an appalling situation

that has been a source of industrial militancy, adverse press reports and complaint by national and foreign NGOs. Best, then, to be seen to be doing something.

This is, however, where the Foucauldian governmentality perspective begins to reveal its limitations. Even if some of what I have talked about might be considered a conscious project for regulating the conduct of people whose social fabric has been torn apart by two decades of neoliberal economic restructuring, and if not completely demobilizing them, at least channelling their mobilization in less threatening directions, it does not seem to be one that is working terribly well. At one level, demands for, say, indigenous autonomy and recognition might be seen as compatible with the reduced public service commitment of neoliberal states and the enthusiasm of the World Bank for administrative and fiscal decentralization. Yet we only need to look at recent developments in Bolivia to see that things can easily go pear-shaped. Bolivia's decentralization, implemented by a model neoliberal government, was seen as a great success story in Washington, yet with hindsight it clearly contributed strongly to regime change. Today we are told by George Bush that democracy is under threat under the first President to have achieved a majority of the popular vote in Bolivian history because private property is under threat, while the 'white' elite of Santa Cruz wants complete self-government not only to protect its lands and energy riches but to prevent 'decent people' being dictated to by the bunch of Indians who so embarrassingly still constitute the majority of the national population. Nowhere in Latin America has been more socially and economically pulverized by neoliberalism than Bolivia. Nor, probably, has anywhere been more heavily colonized by NGOs with a very explicitly neoliberal agenda. As a number of insightful anthropological studies have shown, the contradictory social consequences of all this are far from negligible, and include an enthusiasm for lynchings amongst the poorest sections of the population that are the despair of human rights activists. Yet none of this has been sufficient to prevent Bolivians from embarking on a course that is deeply disconcerting to the kind of global governance project envisaged by Bush and Blair, which entails the complete privatization of all natural resources, including water and energy, and complete opening of those markets to foreign capital. In fact, whether we are talking about the British Prime Minister's recent comments to Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales in Vienna or his plans to save that strangely homogenized place called Africa, let alone Anglo-American operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is pretty

apparent who is currently making the biggest contribution to spoiling the plot of securing global governmentality as a revitalized form of North Atlantic hegemony.

This suggests, however, that we should probably not dismiss everything that that hegemony has produced in the world to date as a cynical cover for imperial ambitions. Listening to George Bush on Bolivian gas it is easy to forget that Franklin Roosevelt, in contrast to His Britannic Majesty's government at the time, responded to the Mexican oil nationalization of 1938 by publicly acknowledging the right of all nations to full sovereignty over their natural resources. The anti-corruption discourse that underpins much North Atlantic talk on aid conditionalities may perform a number of neat tricks amongst the ingenuous, including transporting problems in which the North is as implicated as the South to an elsewhere of social atavisms and institutional immaturity. Yet it has its own autonomous but not completely autonomous voice in as resolutely a non-state actor as subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation as he tours around Mexico calling on all dissident forces from indigenous people to sex workers to rebuild society from the ground up, because state institutions and the political parties that form part of them are, irretrievably, corrupt. Most social movements are not as radical as the EZLN in insisting that their members have no truck whatsoever with government and should shun the 'handouts' offered by the state. This does not, however, mean that they are all co-opted or imprisoned in some iron cage of neoliberal governmentality within which no substantive changes can be negotiated. Indeed, at least in Latin America, and contrary to the pessimistic scenarios that dominated the interpretations of trends at the end of the 1990s, that negotiation has come to be increasingly focused on what would be required for root and branch state reform and the 'democratization of democracy' and it has not proved possible to separate that question from economic issues through the artifices of neoliberal governmentality strategies.

If one adopts a strictly Gramscian view of what hegemony is, as advocated by the late William Roseberry, it is about struggle and negotiation rather than consensus. This enables us to see how historically states themselves are shaped in ways that reflect the role of non-state actors in configuring systems of rule. What hegemony constructs is a minimal consensus about the terms under which negotiation and struggle should take place. Here there is still scope to explore the traps of Foucauldian governmentality

and those that are created by the diffusion of categories that are ethnocentric or based on oversimplified models of social and political realities. Yet the deeper problem is ultimately not at the level of manipulation of noble ideas for ignoble purposes or the unintended consequences of noble visions of universal rights constructed in terms of categories that do not have universal cultural meanings or substantive contextual social similarities, such as 'childhood'. It lies, I think, in the contradiction that persists between the social consequences of the present global economic order and the rights-based regime itself.

Most of the people I have worked with recently would be very pleased if they could secure the services of a national or transnational human rights NGO to protect them from military and police forces that quite frequently subject them not simply to gratuitous physical violence but a sexualized kind of inhuman and degrading treatment that reflects deeply racialized models of class and ethnic difference. They would like a reform of the justice system and many of the other things for which NGO workers are actually working, often at considerable personal risk. Men can also, usually, be persuaded that there may be a problem with their own treatment of women and that women should play more public roles. More significantly, women themselves have become increasingly assertive of that view. Whatever specific criticisms can be made of past NGO interventions for cultural or class bias, and for lecturing people rather than listening to them, I would certainly see the results of these interventions as largely positive in most cases, over the long term, not least because they have generally triggered the kinds of internal debates that are necessary for people to find their own ways of embracing change and making it durable. The problem is that people who think that *they* should have human rights do not necessarily think that others deserve such rights.

Doubly victimized by a state that is as likely to persecute as protect them, poor people are the most frequent victims of crime, and poor people whose social worlds have been ripped apart are particularly prone to suspect strangers that they do not know of being up to no good. Hence the lynchings and frequent denials that human rights should be extended to criminals, which, in a country like Brazil, can lead to a paradoxical acceptance of police extra-judicial executions on the part of people who themselves suffer at the hands of these guardians of order. And Brazil is perhaps the

perfect case with which to end this discussion, since it brings all the paradoxes together, from lively social movements that have become increasingly estranged from a supposedly reformist government that has stuck to a neoliberal course in politics and economics but has also made genuine efforts to ‘democratise democracy’, through the full gamut of NGO variations, to a brutal reality in which organized crime is better armed than the police, and very large sectors of the public agree when policemen say, in the heat of the latest confrontation, that they should be allowed to go into the gaols and kill all the inmates. We might say that political corruption in Brazil is a reflection of the difficulties of reforming a party system that is configured in the way it is for perfectly intelligible historical reasons and is being reproduced by contemporary processes of social change, such as the growing strength of ‘prosperity theology’ evangelical churches. Just about everything else in Brazil can seem equally intractable from that kind of perspective. But at the end of the day grotesque social inequality is the root of this intractability. Non-state actors can press demands for reform of many kinds, including challenges to the meanings given to that inequality in terms of embedded ideas about class and race. Whether we’re talking about Brazil or Chávez’s Venezuela, it is vital to recognize that middle class people not only exist in these societies, but often play a role that is disproportionate to their size as a group in reformist rather than reactionary politics, even if they are also susceptible to the ‘politics of fear’ that pervades everyday life. Poorer working people are also not a socially homogeneous group, but the most marginalized and stigmatized amongst them can and do demand to be respected and not subjected to stereotyping as criminals in a variety of ways, ranging from participation in popular movements that celebrate subaltern culture in music and theatre to joining a Pentecostal church and dressing austerely. Social changes that begin as efforts simply to cope with impoverishment and violence can produce unexpected effects: for example, although Pentecostal churches are often seen as vehicles for spreading individualistic neoliberal values, their members seem to become more critical of racialized inequalities in the larger society. Yet the limits of what noble ideas and projects can achieve are still set by the fact that the global centres that claim, rather contestably in my view, to be their point of origin, continue to insist that their fulfilment depends on the deepening of the very socio-economic conditions that undermine their full acceptance, not merely by the powerful but by the comparatively powerless.