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Institutionalizing

NGOs and Global Publics

Nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, have been central to the creation of publics, counterpublics, and their globalization. NGOs and the people who work within them have raised awareness about climate change and human rights, protested against systemic racism and sexual violence, provided services such as medical care and legal aid to migrants, and promoted pleasurable hobbies (for example, the Nigeria Flying Disc Sport Association). NGOs serve as a unique case study into the processes through which publics have institutionalized, including but not only through legal registration. An analysis of NGOs also points to potentials and limits in the concept of "globalizing publics." Problematizing these limitations has application beyond the particular scope of non-governmental organizations.

Analyzing NGOs as agents of global (counter)public-making focuses our attention on three points. First, it emphasizes limitations and contradictions in how publics have globalized. This, in turn, disrupts overly rosy depictions of globalization as always smooth, always integrated, and always characterized by connections. Second, a focus on NGOs emphasizes the roles of money and legalities in determining which publics have been able to institutionalize and how. Finally, NGOs draw our attention to the (neo)liberal fantasies and denunciations embedded in some scholarship on NGOs and global publics. In all three cases, NGOs reinforce the continued, if contradictory, role of nation-states in historical and contemporary processes of global public-making. They show that the relationships between publics, globality, and states have been messier than the stock narratives of liberal romanticism or neoliberal doom would have us believe: respectively, NGOs as civil society agents who exist to curb abuses of power from autocratic states in a Cold War and post–Cold War world, or NGOs as pawns of neoliberal capitalism or imperialism, undermining welfare states and national autonomy.

A focus on NGOs insists that we analyze the globalization of publics not only through lenses of communication and the transgression of national boundaries, but also through lenses of misunderstanding and the re-entrenchment of borders.[1] Such a move builds on broader calls to interrogate the ways in which globalization has not always or only entailed

Figure 12. Journalist Jim Lobe writes about the American Enterprise Institute's war on its fellow NGOs in a 2003 article that appeared in the *Institute for Policy Studies and Foreign Policy in Focus*.

a smooth process of integration—it has also facilitated disintegration and the hardening of boundaries (for example, widening class-based inequalities that globalization has nourished).[2] NGOs help to demonstrate the mutually constitutive processes of connection and disconnection that have characterized how publics have formed and (de)globalized. Dorothy Hodgson's work is particularly instructive. Writing about NGOs that members of the Maasai community in Tanzania created in the late twentieth century, Hodgson explores how people at these NGOs positioned themselves as part of the global public of the indigenous rights movement.[3] They did so to bolster the legitimacy of their long-standing claims to gain legal rights—often to land—from the Tanzanian state, the international community, and donors. In turn, the Tanzanian state acted as a limiting agent that prevented the Maasai NGO advocates' smooth or unchecked participation in a global public and in the political outcomes of their work. Rather than serving as civil society organizations that joined global networks in ways that simplistically checked the power of the nation-state, Maasai NGOs laying claim to indigenous rights saw their own power curtailed in the midst of a complex web of state power—itself constrained by neoliberal austerity—and donors with "contradictory" and shifting agendas.[4] Hodgson's writing casts doubt on idealized, and often liberal, tales of NGOs and other institutions in the public sphere serving primarily as democratic checks to state power. Exchange, mass communication, and the crossing of state boundaries have characterized certain aspects of globalizing publics. So, too, have interruptions, silences, and the re-entrenchment of those boundaries.

In Hodgson's work, NGOs have served as agents promoting global public-making while the nation-state has been the limiting agent; however, we could think of examples in which NGOs, as institutionalized publics, have also operated as limiting or contradictory forces. Two US-based NGOs, the American Enterprise Institute and the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies, provide a case in point. They have called themselves "think tanks," but they meet common definitions of NGOs as not-for-profit institutions that are not directly controlled by a nation-state and are not houses of worship. Politically connected to the administration of US president George W. Bush, the two NGOs launched a war on their fellow NGOs in 2003. They created a website calling out other nongovernmental organizations that had "progressive" agendas and promoted what they called "global governance."

Here, we see a battle of NGOs, with one side forming a counterpublic that positioned itself against particular notions of "the global" and that sat in opposition to what its members imagined to be the unchecked power of "international NGOs" working with institutions such as the UN to undermine the exertion of US political power.[5] Despite their protests against globality, the American Enterprise Institute and the Federalist Society had global connections and visions of their own—working with likeminded international NGOs, promoting "free-market capitalism," and supporting the interests of the Bush administration and the United States internationally. This example points to the contestations, limits, and ruptures in "the global" and in the publics and counterpublics that have either operated at this scale or imagined their relationships to it. It also points to a messier configuration of relationships between NGOs and nation-states than simplistic narratives celebrating NGOs as always serving to check overzealous state power, would have us believe.

In addition to this insistence on complicating our understanding of the relationships between NGOs, states, and globalization, NGOs shift our attention toward institutions and the roles that they have played in global public-making. Much of the literature on global publics focuses on mass communication and the technologies that have enabled it since the nineteenth century. Without detracting from the importance of this work, NGOs show us that we also need to think about institutions and organizations—those that make the creation of global publics possible and, again, those that limit them. This further draws our attention to money. Like language, financing has been one of the most consistent barriers to entry and participation in globalizing publics across time and space. It costs money to form a public. Mass communication itself costs money—newspapers, pamphlets, books, telegrams, radios, broadcasting centers, electrical grids, phones and phone lines, websites, the Internet, computers, and listservs—and the employees to create, operate, and translate them—all require financing.

For many publics, institutionalizing via the creation of an NGO has served to raise and distribute money legally. This has generally occurred via registration as NGOs or as nonprofits with various nation-states and international institutions, often providing tax-based exemptions for both the donor and the recipient. Becoming an NGO has also generally offered publics more recognition and legitimacy. Yet forming an NGO has not always served as a financial or legal panacea. In my research in the archives of Nairobi-based NGOs that have operated since the 1950s, lamentations about budgetary shortfalls, inconsistent funding, and political pressure from various nation-states abound. Many of the NGOs have used short-term planning strategies as a matter of necessity; donor priorities shifted as new buzzwords cropped up and then died out in the ever-evolving landscape of NGO work and the technical jargon that has accompanied it. This often led to the creation of a shadow set of priorities for an NGO—what they actually did with the money they received—that was different from their official, donor-facing

or government-facing descriptions of their work. Some publics have failed to remain institutionalized, as NGOs have shuttered their doors or severely curtailed operations due to either a lack of funding or political repression. Others have had to tailor their programming and advocacy to fit the desire of donors—including state donors—and governmental institutions that have felt threatened by the operations of the NGO. This has sometimes blurred the line between publics, generally assumed to be non-state actors, and the governments and international agencies that have funded, regulated, and granted them legal and political legitimacy.

Many historians are more comfortable thinking about links between the historical actors we study and politics in the past than we are with naming the relationships between knowledge production, our own subjectivities as scholars and students, and the often unspoken and uninterrogated aspirations we bring to our readings of the past. As Emma Hunter notes in her contribution to this *AHR* History Lab forum, liberalism as a political project and a set of fantasies has sometimes implicitly guided existing scholarship on publics. We see this in a variety of ways. Uncritical romanticization of, as Hunter notes, the growth of the "free press" in frameworks that are as liberal as they are Eurocentric provide one example. Starry-eyed narratives of activist networks curbing illiberal, autocratic exertions of state power through human rights frameworks promoting liberal notions of individual autonomy and equality under the law—narratives that flourished at the end of the Cold War—provide another.

A focus on NGOs helps to interrogate the political stakes and fantasies attached to scholarly understandings of globalizing publics and their relationships to state governments, in part because the literature on NGOs has often followed a different political script. Many studies build on liberal assumptions about the role that NGOs play as civil society organizations in democratization. Yet other literature calls NGOs essential to the institutionalization of neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s and beyond. The latter have critiqued the "NGO-ization" of social services that facilitated or legitimized the shrinking of welfare states and the devolution of responsibility for social welfare programming away from the state or the international sphere and onto individuals and NGOs. Still other strands of scholarship celebrate or condemn NGOs for serving as agents that have challenged or upheld imperialism in an international system forged through the structural violences of colonialism and capitalism.

Srila Roy's work shows that many of these narratives—of NGOs helping to create global publics in the service of or in contradiction to (neo)liberalism and imperialism, often guided by presentist political desires—fail to map on to the messy realities of the past. Accepted wisdom within many activist and academic circles is that, once a group or public has institutionalized via the formation of an NGO, the radical politics of the public have eroded in the face of bureaucratization and

the professionalization of activism. Such sweeping generalizations are often tied to condemnations of the NGO boom in the 1970s and 1980s for being part and parcel of the globalization of neoliberal capitalism. Roy comments upon this NGO-ization of publics in her work, noting that NGOs in the Indian women's movement have become so omnipresent that the "boundaries of Indian feminism as a social movement" and NGOs are impossible to separate from one another.

And yet this totalizing influence of NGOs has not spelled neoliberal doom for Indian feminism in Roy's analysis. Instead, she argues that narratives of NGO "co-option" of feminism have hidden from view some of the "successes of this social movement."[6] Among these successes have been the fact that gender as a concept became widespread within "mainstream political discourse from the 1990s," including in large chunks of the Indian government's programming.[7] So, too, have NGOs provided spaces for many women to be able to earn relatively stable incomes through work outside of the home.

Yet neither should the NGO-ization of Indian feminism be "naïvely celebrated" through one-dimensional, triumphalist liberal narratives. Instead, Roy calls on scholars and activists to recognize the "heterogeneity, diversity, plurality and fundamentally impure character" of Indian feminisms and of the ways in which "NGOs actually operate in relation to different publics and at different scales of intervention."[8] Roy's work on NGOs and the institutionalization of publics serves as a powerful reminder that, if not named, acknowledged, and problematized, the current politics of academia—and, in this case, the politics often attached to globalizing publics either in service of liberalism or against neoliberalism—can elide our ability to understand the past in all its complexity.

Where does this leave us? First, a focus on NGOs reminded us to pay attention to the limits—and to the mutual processes of integration and disintegration—at work as publics have globalized and formalized. Second, NGOs turned our attention to the institutionalization of publics and the roles of financing and legality in constraining and shaping such institutionalization, at times making the borders between (counter) publics, states, and international agencies blurry. Finally, NGOs placed into view the scholarly stakes involved in working on global publics, as implicit support for or opposition to liberalism, neoliberalism, or imperialism have often elided more complex and realistic relationships between NGOs, states, and globality.

The most basic aim of this essay has been to encourage scholars to pay attention to NGOs as institutionalized publics and the politics, money, and legalities they mediate. A deeper aim has been to leave us with an ability to sit with discomfort, ambivalence, and contradiction in and between the past and present. The creation of publics, their institutionalization, and their globalization have not been linear affairs characterized by smooth communication or connection. Nor have they followed simplistic narratives of disconnection or disintegration.

Whether in the Maasai indigenous rights movement in Hodgson's work, in the US-based NGOs' opposition to "global governance" in the wake of the American-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, in the Nairobi-based NGOs' struggle to find funding and selectively woo or fend off attention from various nation-states, or in the institutionalization of the Indian women's movement, NGOs have served as contradictory spaces of global public-making. They move us away from binary understandings of publics and public spaces as inherently serving as checks on the power of the nation-state or always serving the interests of neoliberal capitalism. They instead encourage us to look at the context-specific ways in which NGOs as institutionalized publics have come together and chafed against state governments and international agencies in sometimes surprising configurations. When viewed alongside broader debates over the utility of "globalizing publics" as an analytical concept, NGOs remind us that nation-states, institutions, and borders still play central roles, although rarely in cut-and-dried ways, in a world structured by the Cold War and its aftermath, (de)colonization, and capitalism.

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1 Valeska Huber and Jürgen Osterhammel, introduction to *Global Publics: Their Power and their Limits, 1879–1990*, ed. Valeska Huber and Jürgen Osterhammel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–60.

2 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

3 While Hodgson does not explicitly use the term "global public," she builds on debates both on publics—in her engagement with Mbembe's theorizing of postcolonial "public spaces"—and on the global and globalization. Dorothy L. Hodgson, *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous: Postcolonial Politics in a Neoliberal World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). For long-standing debates about the existence of multiple public spheres and publics within a particular space and time, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), esp. introduction and chap. 1, and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 244. Hodgson, *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous*, chap. 3 and conclusion.

4 Hodgson, *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous*, chap. 3 and conclusion.

5 Jim Lobe, "Bringing the War Home: Right-Wing Think Tank Turns Wrath on NGOs," *Institute for Policy Studies*, June 13, 2003, https://ips-dc.org/bringing_the_war_home_right_wing_think_tank_turns_wrath_on_ngos/. The same article was published on the same date by *Foreign Policy in Focus*, https://fpif.org/bringing_the_war_home_right_wing_think_tank_turns_wrath_on_ngos/.

6 Srila Roy, "The Indian Women's Movement: Within and Beyond NGOization," *Journal of South Asian Development* 10, no. 1 (2015): 96–117, here 98.

7 Roy, "The Indian Women's Movement," 99.

8 Roy, "The Indian Women's Movement," 110–12.