

CHAPTER 2

Global Justice? Contesting NGOization: Knowledge Politics and Containment in Antiglobalization Networks

Aziz Choudry

Introduction

More insidious than the raw structural constraints exerted by the foundation/state/non-profit nexus is the way in which this new industry grounds an epistemology—literally a *way of knowing* social change and resistance praxis—that is difficult to escape or rupture.... [T]he non-profit industrial complex has facilitated a bureaucratized *management of fear* that mitigates against the radical break with owning-class capital (read: foundation support) and hegemonic common sense (read: law and order) that might otherwise be posited as the necessary precondition for generating counter-hegemonic struggles. (Dylan Rodriguez, 2007, p. 31)

This chapter discusses struggles over power and knowledge among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements contesting capitalist globalization. Building on a review of an emerging body of critical literature on NGOs' implications in capitalist relations and the professionalization of social change, and the author's activist engagement, it argues that processes of NGOization and professionalization, and hierarchies of power and knowledge

within “alternative” milieus often reproduce rather than challenge dominant practices and power relations, and serve elite economic and political interests instead of constituencies which these organizations claim to represent. It identifies and questions aspects of hegemonic NGO practices, primarily among “civil society” networks contesting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)¹ forum in the 1990s, in which I was an activist. In interrogating “alternatives to globalization” advocacy positions advanced by nongovernmental actors ostensibly committed to social transformation, I argue that critical attention to texts and actual practices reveals that many NGOs are tied to what I refer to as an ideology of pragmatism which normalizes and reinforces dominant ideologies of liberalism and liberal democratic nation-states with regard to their current and historical implication in colonialism and global capitalist relations. In contending that many such “alternative” actors claim a positional superiority for a small, professionalized NGO/activist elite, this chapter highlights how NGO texts and actual practices can socially organize, conceptually coordinate, fragment and compartmentalize struggles for social and environmental justice, undermining or constraining more critical systemic analysis. The concluding section discusses some challenges to these trends arising from knowledge, power, and movement activism from below.

NGOs, Neoliberalism, Pragmatism, and Compartmentalization

During the 1990s, NGOs and “civil society” organizations and rhetoric mushroomed exponentially worldwide, alongside an expansion in the formal or de facto subcontracting of NGOs by states and international financial institutions. Increasingly, governments, intergovernmental organizations, and international financial institutions promoted “strengthening civil society” and “good governance”—both intrinsic pillars of a neoliberal policy environment. The dominant notion of “civil society” emphasizes the rights of individuals to pursue their self-interest rather than collective rights, and simultaneously upholds and obscures the interests of state and capital. It facilitates what Kamat (2004) calls the privatization of the notion of public interest. Wood (1995) warns:

“Civil society” has given private property and its possessors a command over people and their daily lives, a power enforced by the state but accountable to no one, which many an old tyrannical state would have envied. . . . [T]he cult of civil society also tends to reproduce the mystifications of liberalism, disguising the coercions of civil society and obscuring the ways in which . . . state oppression itself is rooted in the exploitative and coercive relations of civil society. (pp. 254–256)