21st Century Perspectives on Radical NGO-NPO Management Theories: A Literature Review

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In the late 20th century, the discourse on NPO – NGO management ranged the full spectrum of topics from board effectiveness and governance; budgeting and fundraising; and mission statements regarding ideology and values, to external communications with constituents; strategic goal setting; and management of community and social service projects. Although most often ensconced within the language of practical management sciences, third sector researchers have increasingly discovered that social constructionist models and emergent theories of organizational behavior best explain organizational phenomenon unique to this sector, among them unconventional structures and styles of management embraced by politically active organizations within their civil societies (Eng 2005; Forbes 1998; Herman and Renz 1997, 1999, 2000; Jackson 1999; Smith 1999a, 1999b).

Concurrent with management research of third sector organizations has been the creation of a body of scholarship in the fields of organizational communications, sociological theory and organizational analysis. Inspired by Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) sociological paradigms, organizational theorists have established and developed new organizational paradigms rooted in politics rather than management science. These organizational responses do not reflect standard models of management or ideals of the nation state, but rather are reactions against bureaucratic structures and state policies, including such organizational phenomena as radicalism, post colonialism, feminism, racio-ethnicity, post-modernism and ethnocentrism (Mills, 2002). This may help to explain the contradiction with management theorists, who have long held that an organization’s bureaucratic and institutional structures most often reflect the assumption that the nation state is the primary unit of political competency and legitimacy, thus rationalizing regional differences among institutional players within defined cultural and socio-political-economic boundaries (Whitely 1999, 2003). The third sector is often at odds with the nation state, not only nations of the South and emerging democracies, but also established Northern regions of the world.

The author begins with the theoretical underpinning that in both the North and South, inhabitants of the third sector with their public interest groups, NGOs, formal and informal networks at local and grassroots levels and social movements are deeply engaged in the delivery of social services, spawning of public dialogue, and participation in the political democratization within civil society (Choi 2005; Eade 2002; Korten 1987), others argue that the assumption that democratization follows from such localized efforts and influences is not always the case (Escobar 2004; Hadiz 2004; Tomquist 2000). With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent devolution of the Communist economic model, the world is continuing to experience rapid and dramatic change beginning with the materialization of new non-Western agendas and anti-Western ideologies, and the singular event on September 11, 2001 that shook the world to its core. On the heels of “9/11” have come widespread disillusionment and growing distrust of corporate governance of capital markets triggered by the Enron and WorldCom debacles in 2001-2002 through to the global financial meltdown of 2008. In the eyes of critics of American and European scholarship, these events have further eroded confidence of western systems of management, accountability and governance.
Contemporary research and scholarly articles published about third sector responses in this new global climate reflect a wide range of perspectives: global and community; rich and poor, influential and marginalized, for-profit and not-for-profit. Since the last decade, writings and research on both sides of the non-profit and for-profit “divide” are revisiting and recasting old themes that first appeared in the mid to late 20th Century. These include such discourses as globalization, Gramscian social-political theories, imperialism, internationalism, neo-institutional corporatism, neoliberalism, neo-third worldism, orientalism, post-Eurocentric modernity, and social democratic corporatism.

Management science attributed the study of organization to Max Weber, whose sociological agenda justified organizations as extensions of society, their organizational formats derived from religious beliefs, power and status-- organizations whose functionalism is rooted in the practical, functional disciplines that seek ways of controlling and making more efficient the organization’s production of goods and services (Robbins 1990). Seeking the third way between government and private enterprise, the mandates of the third sector are providing services and representing the needs of civil society. Thus, the sociological and political roots of radical, social constructionist and humanist approaches to organizational theory have origins that are different from Weberian management science. Rather, the third sector is focused on the societal consequences of organizations and the dynamics of globalization, social movements, power and intellectual change (Eng 2005).

How the ideological structure of organizations and alternative structures of control affect different organizational interests and outputs is a topic that begs examination in depth according to organization scholars, Hinings and Greenwood (2002). The purpose of this literature review is to gather a compendium of current research and writings on the subject of alternative third sector management and organizational theories and practices. By comparing and contrasting these different and often competing perspectives, it is the author’s hope that this review may contribute in some small measure to scholarship and understanding of the roots and evolution of local and globalized third sector responses to the many civic challenges of the early 21st century.