

**Thirty years and recent dilemmas:NGOs and Third
Sector in Brazil
(and Latin America)**

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I. Introduction

- NGOs (still)

The “NGOs”, which are now over 30 years old, are still intriguing phenomena and deserving of study.¹ The term – or what it indicates – seems to be falling out of fashion more recently in certain philanthropic circles.² If that is true and if, on the other hand, classificatory terms correspond to social constructs, that is one more reason to revisit the term.

The rapid rise of NGOs – the social recognition they have gained throughout the world, their plasticity, fluidity and polysemy, their visibility in the media – all characterise them as a typical social thing of the contemporary, post-industrial world.

The term is in extremely widespread – or indiscriminate – use and mention of such organisations is often naturalised and ill-defined in the widest imaginable variety of texts and contexts, from the commonsense to the erudite sociological, in connection with all kinds of issues and problems. Thus the permanently renewed challenge to produce new concerns and conceptions on the specific features and roles of these peculiar and changeable forms of association that have been so particularly emblematic of important changes in world scenario over the past three decades.

The well-known changes that societies went through at the turn of the last century – including the retreat from social policies, changes in the world of work, in forms of work-related solidarity, increasing inequality, violence and social disaffiliation (Castel, 1995) – caused upheaval in the terrain of collective mobilisations and humanitarian and philanthropic practices. Intense processes of individualisation and a deactivation of politics were paralleled by the emergence of new matrices of discourse and motivations to collective action and new identity-based social mobilizations. Focalised practices and local action (organised partly by the State) gained strength. Mechanisms for association-based political representation and forms of social mobilisation were reconfigured nationally and trans-nationally. Not only were national borders displaced, but also the lines separating social service and militancy, religion and politics, private and public action, profit and social responsibility. These processes were ambiguous and contradictory: what came into play in the 1990s were practices and

¹ It is common for studies of “NGOs” to have an introduction seeking substantive definitions for the term and, in the process, relating its origin to the United Nations of the 1940s. Our interest here is to seek meanings for this polysemic expression in its resurgence, use and related appropriation in contemporary social contexts after the 1970s and 80s.

² For example, a search for these words in conference titles on the programme of this ISTR conference found 17 references to “NGO” and 80 to “Third Sector”.

representations both suggesting that attributions of the State be delegated to society (which would be functional to neo-liberalism order), along with new institutional and participatory designs on which high hopes were placed for the course of democracy building – issues and debates that are particularly prominent in the Latin American context.

This is the terrain where so-called NGOs have been operating. As is also well known, the 70s and 80s saw a revival of the discussion, both conceptual and political and strategic, about “civil society”, which formed a backdrop of references, discourses and legitimation for the activities of what also came to be called “civil society organisations” (CSOs).

- New trends?

It would seem, however, that the winds are changing and – who knows? – we may soon be able to speak of this 20- or 30-year period as the “rise and fall of civil society”. I am speaking, of course, not of actual social processes, but the ways of thinking about them.

The multilateral or non-governmental international cooperation foundations and agencies – as sources not just of financing, but of the ideas, models and references they produce and spread for research and social action in this field (and others) – seem to be pointing in that direction. The “civil society-building” projects developed in the 90s seem to be losing prestige. In recent years these circles have discovered that civil society is not as virtuous and homogeneous as one was led to believe (the reasons deserve a whole other paper) and that same suspicion has also fallen on NGOs, these “bodiless heads” (Skocpol, 2003) with considerable foreign financing, as regards the overseas, or *outramer* world. The accompanying perception at the global level of the weaknesses and limitations of democratic advances – “at the dawn of the 21st century, democracy is triumphant and uncertain” (Rosanvallon, 2004) – seems to contribute to this picture. Democracy, poverty and inequality would seem to have gone hand in hand at the close of the century. Questions have arisen about the “lack of impact” achieved by NGO action in recent decades, followed by strong demands for material results. Prominence is now given to assistance or economic development projects directed to “overcoming poverty”. There seem to be tendencies to intensify financing for the projects of organisations with business sector connections and governmental public organisations.

- Aims of the paper.

This paper intends to revisit the trajectory of a set of NGOs in Brazil (the organisations that first created a common identity under that label), so as to be able to scrutinise recent trends reflecting a possible weakening and a diminishing legitimacy. It gives special attention to these organisations’ dual-faceted, “national-international” aspect as a feature important to understanding their specific characteristics, roles and changes.

It starts from the general idea that the construction of what are known internationally as non-governmental organisations involves activating relationships *sui generis* between the local and the transnational. These form a complex system of institutions, agents, practices and discourses, which carry certain universalising,

Western logics and ideas to the four corners of the world. At the same time, however, in the various social spaces where they operate, they depend on and activate relationships and processes that are characteristically specific and diversified.

In the Brazilian context, the nature of such organisations can only be completely understood in terms of the internationalised frameworks in which they are constituted, and which are given by relationships with sources of financing in the “North”. On the other hand, however, they also have a history (which too is constitutive of their existence) rooted in a certain field of domestic associations, movements, forces and social actors that gained vigour and autonomy during the period under consideration. During those years, these domestic NGOs played a role in the democratisation processes, which has yet to be evaluated with any thoroughness – among other things because it is a highly politicised subject. That “dual nature” has become an important object for study, particularly if it is true that far-reaching changes are underway today on the plane of international philanthropy.

The growing multiplicity of meanings that the term NGO has acquired complicates any study of the phenomena it purports to designate.³ While the term is voided of meaning by designating what from a sociological point of view are different phenomena, it can gain consistency when considered in specific situations. The approach taken here is to consider a set of organisations that exist and transit in both national and transnational spaces and which have particular characteristics connected with their sources of financing, the particular ways they construct social and political legitimacy and professionalise their agents. They are often confused into a generic notion of “civil society” and thus deserve to be studied more closely in terms of what distinguishes them from other actors present in such spaces (as observed by Mayer and Siméant, 2004, in relation to “for another world” movements). Going back to history and producing a sociology of their agents may be one good methodological route to specifying what we are talking about. Revisiting geneses and trajectories connected with these organisations entails an effort to denaturalise representations and images associated with them, which is all the more important because the whole subject is so permeated by prescriptive discourse (Dezalay 2004). As has been observed before with analogous processes, a return to the past can yield ways to think about what present images (which seem evident) owe to sociologically and historically founded encounters among singular people and work posts in the making (Muel-Dreyfus, 1983).

II. NGOs: specificities in Brazilian public space.

- The 1980s: NGOs and international circulation.

It was during the (latest) period of authoritarian government,⁴ particularly throughout the 70s, that a conjunction of factors made it possible for new trade union and social movements to emerge in the cities and the countryside. These were to be

³ The diversification of the organisations recognised as “NGOs” – and the invitation to deconstruct the term – is the subject of a recent debate. Optimistic views, in the French context, point to “ruthless competition (...) to benefit from this label, given the moral prestige and symbolic capital attached to it” (Mayer and Siméant, 2004). See also Cohen, 2004 ; Hours, 2003.

⁴ Brazil was under a military regime from 1964 to 1985; only in 2002 was there a return to direct elections.

important in shaping public space in Brazil from then on (it is where the political leaders came from that today are in government; Brazil's president himself, for instance, is a former trade unionist and, in 1979, was a founder-member of a new political party grounded in social and intellectual movements and progressive sectors of the Catholic Church). These new autonomous social movements were made possible by factors such as changes in the historical forms of corporatist relations between State and society (the "end of the populist pact"), and also the increasingly rapid processes of modernisation, urbanisation and social diversification, together with expansion of the media and access to university. At the time, sectors of the Catholic Church inspired by Liberation Theology were to give crucial support to these opposition forces that were organising in society (Landim, 1998).

The NGOs – a name that was taken up by a pre-existing set of "Grassroots Education Centres", and then only from the mid-80s onwards – consolidated as this terrain of associations and movements was constructed. They form part of that process, played roles in shaping it and, on the basis of the relationships they established with those movements, built legitimacy in the eyes of Brazilian society and international circles. Not only did they survive, but they drew strength from changing circumstances: from the mid-70s onwards this set of "Centres", which had existed on the basis of ambiguous relations of autonomy from, and dependence on, religious, political and academic fields, was able to reposition itself as the institutions and actors that gave them legitimacy also changed and repositioned on the domestic public stage. Although their origins lie in the leftwing sectors of the Catholic Church, Brazil's NGOs continued to exist even when those church sectors practically disappeared from view. Then, while the boom in "new autonomous trade unionism" of the late 70s and early 80s was a source of alliances and legitimacy (at the time, it was hard to find a trade union without outside "advisers" or "consultants" from NGOs), the NGOs were able to survive the subsequent trade union demobilisations. The same occurred with the wave of urban community association-building that, by the end of the 80s, had also waned. They entered squarely into building the identity-based movements. Although distanced from the State in their origins, they nonetheless repositioned during the re-democratisation process of the 90s and invested strongly in public policy-related activities (co-management, policy proposal and control). These organisations, with their peculiar origins and traits, whose reproduction owes something to certain international alliances, lead an existence that has meshed with the complex dynamics of the interplay of forces and powers in Brazilian public space over recent decades.

Now, on the one hand, it is obviously improper to regard these Brazilian NGOs and their agents as "international subsidiaries", "foreign agents" or something to that effect, although such ideas are often to be found in the international literature on analogous processes. On the other hand, analyses of participatory movements and spaces in Brazil have obscured the determining influences set down by the internationalised dimension (particularly the financing) of these organisations and agents who often occupy positions of leadership in this milieu.

Accordingly, I am dealing here with specific organisations and agents whose common properties are sociologically identifiable.⁵ That is, I am not talking about "Brazilian NGOs", an expression that is losing any meaning today by virtue of a multiplicity of possible meanings, but rather a specific set of organisations and agents that (also) refer to themselves as NGOs. This is the set that first invested in taking the

⁵ The concept of field, as in Pierre Bourdieu, is a source of theoretical inspiration for this analysis.

name in common (and which has fought in vain, in my opinion, to maintain that monopoly) and in forming professional agents of collective and social action.

A great deal was done – seminars, meetings, congresses, networks built – at both the Latin American and international (particularly European) level with the participation of those who would come to be NGO leaders in the 80s. Both Brazilians (and other Latin Americans) and their “international partners” participated in those frameworks where this set of organisations was legitimated and discourses, issues and models of operation were developed.⁶ The multilateral agencies also had a substantial role in calling in these NGOs as partners of development projects. These processes, which had consolidated by the early 90s, express the investment made by agents and organisations in adopting a name, creating a body and occupying a place in the Brazilian public arena – relying on and at the same time asserting international alliances.⁷ This ensemble thus rests on objective relationships forged and solidified over time. Who were these people?

Their trajectories – several of these people still hold leadership positions in NGOs – can be traced back to the 60s, among groups working in “grassroots education” or “popular education” and drawing inspiration from the educator Paulo Freire. Bonds forged through Catholic groups (such as *Juventude Operária Católica*/Catholic Worker Youth and *Juventude Universitária Católica*/Catholic University Youth), and also through ecumenical groups (such as the World Council of Churches), steadily formed a trans-national web of relationships with democratising ideas. Interviews of agents of these NGOs revealed travel to and from foreign parts, short and long periods of political exile, when relationships of trust were built with European and Canadian agencies with a background of “Third Worldism”.

Many of the agents of the “Centres” had built up skills, practical know-how and disposition (a *habitus*) for sharing in the day-to-day of working close to groups at the social grassroots through conversion and modernisation projects, with a range of idea sets ranging from the developmentalism or anti-communism of North American programmes of the 60s, through to the later grassroots “popular” projects mentioned above. The NGOs were constructed in a context of new investments in existing social action endeavours. A whole contingent of heirs to a long tradition of social work was thus introduced into the field of political opposition, bringing with them a religious and relational capital built up through capillary interaction with groups at the social grassroots all over Brazil. This they converted into capital that was significant in entering public space and occupying new positions that were highly valued in certain international circles. They included a new generation of lay or clerical Christians, many belonging to foreign (German, French, Dutch and Italian) orders, who in the late 70s were initiated into the associative movements through their pastoral work in the urban peripheries. To the first NGOs, these clerics brought with them capitals that were invaluable in establishing international alliances.

Steadily then, this process formed spaces of prestige and professionalisation which, at the end of the 70s, began to draw people from Marxist organisations of the then underground left wing, which were extinct or in crisis, people who during this period had undergone prison and political persecution. Coming from university

⁶ These encounters and agents are identified and detailed in Landim, 2002.

⁷ Relevant agencies were: CCFD (Comité Catholique Contre la Faim et pour le Développement, French), Développement et Paix (Canadian), NOVIB (Dutch), OXFAM (British), ICCO (Dutch), World Council of Churches (Swiss), Misereor (German), Brot für die Welt (German), CAFOD (British) etc. See Bailey and Landim, 1995.

backgrounds and better equipped with social and cultural capital than the “grassroots educators”, they contributed to positioning the “Centres” in relation to key institutions such as universities, parties or government agencies. They offered greater skills in positioning in public space and elaborating the discourse through which the “Centres/NGOs” were to particularise and gain social recognition.

This chapter of history began to consolidate from 1979 onwards (the year political amnesty was granted) with the return of the political exiles, who formed part of the web and added yet another kind of capital: relations with external non-governmental agencies.

During the 80s there was further consolidation of this field of organisations which would progressively become “NGOs”, building their existence around the incessant reproduction of “top-down” financing relations and work at the “grassroots”, positioning themselves in the field of opposition to the authoritarian regime, and seeking to set up counter-powers.

In the early 90s, it was not difficult to find evidence of this consolidation: it is enough to examine the lists of organisations and agents organising and participating in events that had a demonstration effect of a Brazilian “civil society”. They are the same, for instance, at the first international meeting of Brazilian NGOs and the UNDP in 1991, followed by “Rio 92”, a conference held in parallel with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). In 1991, that same universe of organisations formalised its identity in public space by founding the Brazilian Association of NGOs (ABONG). In addition to a vocation for “popular”, environmental and human rights movements, in the 80s and 90s, these organisations were to form networks of increasingly diversified identity-based movements (women, blacks, indigenous peoples, people with HIV, homosexuals, youth etc.). In that regard, I believe that the much-discussed “fragmentation of social movements” is less significant in the Brazilian (and Latin American) context, because already a field of operations in public space had formed where the actors belonged largely to the same networks, financing sources and particularly international alliances.

Jumping forward ten years to (nationally important) trans-national events of the period 2001-2003, research has showed exactly the same network of institutional protagonists, generationally renewed (and with their international financial allies), constructing and calling the World Social Forums at Porto Alegre, Brazil, which were encounters of “other world” activism involving tens of thousands of people. These NGOs were built up in the domestic field, at the same time as they constituted institutional spaces for these shifts of resources and agents that were increasingly to “*jouer en permanence de leur multipositionnalité*” (Dezalay, 2004), by the intense international circulation set up since the 1970s.

- NGOs and public policies in the 90s

An enormous field of thematic and institutional innovation developed during the 90s, mobilising these institutions (and others, of course). There were new participatory designs that grew out of the process of political decentralisation instituted by the post-dictatorship Constitution of 1988, which provided for public participation in policy control and management through associative organisations at the municipal, state and national levels. In 1999, there were 24,000 deliberative, policy co-management boards spread through more than 5,000 municipalities in Brazil, addressing education, health,

social assistance, housing, children and adolescents, the elderly, women, the environment and so on, and formed by representatives of government and civil society organisations. In order to function democratically and effectively, these setups – along with similarly new redistributive institutional experiments (the participatory budgets) – depend on the existence of a solid field of associative organisations.

Through these setups, civil society organisations such as the NGOs gained increasing importance in national scene. Various local studies and a few national ones show that, in the first place, these organisations of practitioners of politics mobilised to capacitate other civil society actors in response to the political and bureaucratic difficulties inherent in setting up the policy councils and in exercising this new kind of participatory mandate. In addition, empirical studies point to a significant quantitative presence of organisations classified as NGOs, along with a diversity of other associations (neighbourhood, professional, community, health and education associations etc.), on these participatory public policy councils and budgets.

Official statistical figures showing a considerable increase in the number of non-profit organisations in Brazil during this period have, in my opinion, to be interpreted in this context.⁸ Between 1996 and 2002 the number of such organisations (97% of which were registered as associations) grew by 157%. In 2002 there were 276,000 organisations, classified into the following fields of activity: health, education, social service, religion, sports and leisure, professional, environmental and advocacy, and development.

Although the numbers of all types of organisation grew in absolute terms, what is striking in recent years is the greater relative tendency to a greater density of associations with a local territorial base, as well as growing numbers of groups advocating for specific and diffuse rights, as shown in the table below.

Set of associations that grew by more than 157%* - 1996-2002 - Brazil

Associations	1996	2002	% variation 1996-2002
1 Rural producers	4,412	24,897	464.3
2 Neighbourhood	3,334	14,568	337.0
3 Community assocs. and centres	5,325	23,149	334.7
4 Environment and animal protection	389	1,591	309.0
5 Rural development	267	1,031	286.1
6 Employment and training	127	388	205.5
7 Group and minority advocacy	1,534	4,662	203.9
8 Culture and Art	3,543	10,645	200.5

* total growth in organisations during the period

Table drawn up for this study from source: IBGE / IPEA / ABONG / GIFE, 2002

The items classed in this study as NGOs figure basically in items 4, 5, 6 and 7. Although they are small in number – of little interest to studies designed to measure the economic influence of the “non-profit sector” – they nonetheless display vigorous

⁸ IBGE / IPEA / GIFE / ABONG, 2004.

proportional growth and are certainly important as regards civic association-building. What is striking about the other items is, as mentioned, the rise in locally-based associations. Everything indicates that this growth was due largely to the boom in participatory arrangements mentioned earlier (which does not necessarily mean they are always functioning as democratic mechanisms). The role of the State and public policies in this growth should therefore not be disregarded.

III. 1990-2000: the Third Sector wave

- A new expression, new actors.

The 90s saw enormous diversification in the social action organisations entering the public arena, from the very long-standing social services and philanthropic groups in the private tradition to the very newly-fledged “corporate social investment” organisations.⁹ If private social action is considered as a field of competition, new agents and discourses enter into play, expressed by new names, the most significant being the “Third Sector”

The following observations on these new protagonists in the social intervention field are useful, as will be seen, because they provide a panorama of recent changes in the social intervention field in the context of which the NGOs, the central object of this study, situate and reposition themselves.

As with “NGO”, so “Third Sector” is yet another imported term that has come into use in Brazil (and Latin America). With impressive speed it gained social visibility from the mid-90s onwards (thus ten years after the “NGOs”). Any study of the social and institutional conditions in which this category was produced and spread will certainly have to reserve a key place for agents and organisations connected with the field of North American philanthropic foundations and the domestic wave of corporate social investment. It was through these channels, set up and strengthened at that time, that its use became widespread.

“Third Sector” has specific connotations and a clear nationality – more so than the trans-national “NGO”. It originated in North America, a context in which association-based and volunteer activities form part of a political and civic culture grounded in liberal individualism and where the dominant set of ideas is framed by the principle that society takes precedence over the State. The expression is therefore loaded with assumptions and connotations that complicate its application in the context of Brazilian society with its “statist” political culture.

⁹ Social assistance groups are not examined here, and they form a major universe relating to religious networks (Catholic Church, Kardecist Spiritualists and recently the Pentecostal Evangelical field), and are permeated by the values of Christian charity and financed traditionally by religious organisations, individual donations and the State. I believe they have recently come to be potential and actual clients for financing from business organisations that have entered the social projects field.

The new term is a symptom of the new networks of relations, ideas, practices and strategies being set up for entry into the public space, basically through a group of businesses and foundations. It reflects innovation as compared to the usual, historical forms of relations between the business sector and society in Brazil. These are now institutions that finance and, at the same time, operate projects. They are national and multinational institutions. Up until this point, they had practically no history of relations with social grassroots groups or with civic movements, particularly when compared with the trajectory of the “NGOs” and their European sources of financing: this new field would have to build new links with society and justify itself through social projects. On the one hand, they adopted a discourse analogous to that of the NGOs, in terms of modern values of autonomy and citizenship, and differentiated themselves from the charity approach and its personalised, Christian ethos. On the other hand, their ideas of social action can be seen to be permeated by what approximates to a market logic. Their projects and missions are couched in other terms: social entrepreneurship, social investment, efficiency, results, added value, competitiveness, marketing, coaching etc.

In the same way, the idea of “sector” to designate civil society organisations is very new indeed. “Third sector” evokes collaboration and positive interaction, diluting the idea of conflict or contradiction and tending to undermine the politicised dynamics that has marked the tradition of association-building over recent decades. Unlike the NGOs studied here, for example, whose discourse was directed precisely to differentiating sub-sets of organisations by considering their political projects, interests, roles, alliances in society,¹⁰ the idea of a “sector” is inclusive, tending to homogenise or to minimise differences. “Third sector” is often used, implicitly or explicitly, to produce an idea that the universe of non-profit organisations is a kind of panacea to replace the inefficient State in addressing social problems.

That is the kind of criticism levelled by the organisations that form part of the NGO field (abundant material on the subject has been produced by the Brazilian Association of NGOs, ABONG), and the term “Third Sector”, seen from the inside, from the practitioner’s position, has become a watershed between the two fields.

The institutions, meetings, and national and international frameworks where the field of business social investment is being constructed in Brazil has yet to be the subject of a study. One important landmark was the setting up, in 1995, of the main umbrella organisation, *Grupo de Institutos, Fundações e Empresas* (GIFE, Group of Institutes, Foundations and Businesses Corporations). Its membership has grown by 208% since then. Its priority areas for financing are education, culture, arts and community development, an agenda which, to a point, diverges from the one prioritised by the longest-standing NGOs.¹¹

- Indicators: studies, publications, subject fields.

The dynamics of Brazilian civil society organisations are reflected in the published literature. Note that the documents on NGOs, which defined them and contributed to constructing their identity, have been produced largely within NGO circles by their

¹⁰ In the 70s and 80s, an important frame of reference for NGOs and social movements was Gramscian.

¹¹ GIFE sees the leadership role Brazil is now playing “in private social investment as alliance-building and putting forward new proposals”. It currently chairs WINGS, Worldwide Initiatives for Grantmakers Support (www.gife.org.br).

members, usually with an academic background in the social sciences (anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists), and published through informal channels. The same is perhaps not the case with the business organisations, whose means and styles of self-construction and legitimation are different.

Both the publishing market and academic studies always lag behind events. From sources consulted with regard to university production, for example, it is possible to glimpse characteristics and dynamics of these fields of organisations in Brazilian society. A search was conducted by me on a website containing academic theses and dissertations presented in Brazil, selecting those whose title contained the term “NGO” (in full, singular and plural) and “Third Sector” (Table 1, below). As can be seen, studies of “NGOs” began to appear in 1991, and of the “Third Sector”, in 1996. Note that practically all the studies (93.4%) on the latter subject had appeared in the previous six years, since 2001. This rise was very quick and vigorous by comparison, because in absolute terms they are more numerous than studies on the subject of “NGOs”.

TABLE 1
Theses or dissertations presented,
with “NGO” or “Third Sector” in the title - Brazil

Years	“NGO”		“Third Sector”	
	No.	%	No.	%
1991/1995	13	11.4	-	-
1996/2000	34	29.8	10	6.9
2001/2006	67	58.7	143	93.4
TOTAL	114	100	153	100

Table constructed from source: www.capes.gov.br

A keyword search of thesis and dissertation abstracts yielded a larger output volume (424 mentions for “NGOs” and 265 for “Third Sector”) and revealed differing traditions, in terms of disciplines and institutions, in the use of the two expressions. This corroborates what was said above about differentiated fields of concepts and agents: 39% of the studies using the term “NGO” (168 papers) fall within the field of social science disciplines (sociology, political science, education, journalism, anthropology, history); while only 40 (9.4%) were produced in schools of administration. Of the studies using the keyword “Third Sector”, the trend is inverted: 19% (52 studies) are from the social sciences field and 33% are from Administration (88 studies). Very roughly, it can be said that the recurrent themes in the studies of NGOs are social movements, women’s movements, sustainable development and environmentalism, health (AIDS is prominent), human rights etc. In studies of the Third Sector, the themes are management, business social responsibility, inter-sector partnering, legislation, volunteer work...

IV. Final remarks

This paper has revisited certain aspects of the trajectory, over the past three decades, of specific sets of non-profit organisations engaged in social or collective action, which rely for their existence largely on donations originating in fields of international

institutions. Although the focus has been on Brazilian society, analogies can be drawn with other contexts in Latin America. The history narrated here, running from the “NGOs” of the 1980s – “an institutional innovation on the Latin American stage” (Fernandes and Piquet, 1992) – to the “Third Sector” of the 1990s/2000s, continues to pose the dilemma: are these new social phenomena and/or new classificatory terms that generate new conceptions of the same phenomena ?

The telling has highlighted two intimately interrelated facets: the positions and roles of these sets of organisations in Brazilian public space (and in trans-national networks) and the origins of the funds and alliances formed with their donors. That is to say, the financing, issues, groups and social actors involved, the styles of work and mechanisms for establishing legitimacy are related.

The incalculable funds – certainly billions of dollars, marks, pounds, euros – that have flowed from abroad to these NGOs over these decades have helped them accumulate enormous social capital at the Brazilian national level, in terms of relations with “traditional” movements and associative groups (trade unions, neighbourhood associations, community associations), which they strengthened, as well as a leading role in bringing together and articulating networks of political subjects in defence of specific rights (without these NGOs, it would be hard to understand the movements of feminists, blacks, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, the HIV-positive etc. in Brazil). Studies indicate that this form of organisation we call NGO is present in various spaces that are proposing new participatory policy-making experiments, such as councils and forums throughout Brazil, where their presence makes a qualitative difference. The keywords in this universe of practices and agents have been democracy, civic and social rights, popular and social movements, politicisation of social processes, conflicts, anti-globalisation struggles and so on.

From the mid-1990s, and with increasing vigour, the social projects field was entered by new areas of business-inspired institutions and agents, whose idea sets can be identified as proper to North American philanthropy. As already mentioned, other bywords – “alliance” and “collaboration” – are the rule here, the priorities are material results from social projects, making a difference in poverty reduction, investing in projects that provide social services, produce local development and “generate learning” – such as education or cultural endeavours – and partnering with government agencies in programme execution, all of which points to new horizons, objects and criteria for the donations. Attention to issues of management quality, efficiency and financial accountability also forms part of this discursive matrix. There has yet to be produced a sociology of the trajectories and origins of these agents and institutions in Brazilian society, encompassing the relations they have established with the groups funded: what segments of society, institutions, how these relations are thought out and built up.

The inescapably schematic “separation of areas” outlined here, if pursued to any depth, will show up the contaminations, alliances, and transits between these two “fields”. Nonetheless, one issue has become paramount for the NGOs described here: their reproduction seems to be threatened, insofar as it depends on international sources of funding. Their historical sources of financing have undergone internal upheavals, which have yet to receive the study they deserve. Some of these local organisations are starting to close down and institutional precariousness is being felt in this milieu. The discourse prioritising material “results”; indications of a certain “downgrading” of democracy and association-building as concerns; a resurgence of the idea of the “dangerous classes”, referring here to the “excluded” sectors of society or those at the bottom the social inequality scale; a call for actors who have found a place in various

positions of power to be held accountable – these and other factors seem to threaten the continuity of the NGO universe. The history sketched here may help evaluate the consequences of such processes, should they actually occur.

In a country with an authoritarian State and culture, and weak autonomous civil society, this universe of associative organisations set up in the past 30 years has certainly contributed to the construction of participatory, democratic institutions and designs committed to reducing political and juridical hierarchies and thus the differences of opportunity connected with them.

The discussion that deserves to be pursued in depth and more widely in the field of the actions and agents addressed here is over the relations between, on the one hand, ensuring citizenship for all (which although guaranteed in Brazil's Constitution, has not in fact been achieved), creating association-based, civic culture and, on the other hand, reducing economic inequality and poverty. These are complex issues, which are acknowledged to be the order of the day and which can inform the changes in, and criteria for, partnerships, investments and agendas of the non-governmental social project field in the near future.

(Translated by Peter Lenny MCIL)

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