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Introduction

Observing world politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seem to be everywhere, and they often work in mysterious ways. If omnipotence remains yet out of reach, it is not for lack of effort, since NGOs cumulatively claim to be able to do almost anything in world politics, from feeding famine victims and protecting endangered species, to eliminating nuclear weapons and AIDS, to democratizing Russia and the Arab world.

NGOs are both prominent and obscure in world politics. They are prominent, for example, in organizing massive street protests in February 2003 against the U.S. “War on Terror.”¹ NGOs are also obscure, for example, as shadow partners in international legal maneuvers. Chilean General Augusto Pinochet found himself stranded in London for more than a year—from November 1998 to January 2000—while the British government considered whether to extradite him to Spain. Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon had charged Pinochet with crimes against humanity for acts of torture and killing after the 1973 coup, which overthrew Chilean President Salvador Allende. While the affair was ostensibly a negotiation between two governments, the deeper political process was catalyzed at every stage by human rights NGOs. Operating largely behind the scenes, a network of NGOs had initiated the original indictment in Spain, and promoted Pinochet’s extradition across Europe and North America. However, Amnesty International—the prominent human rights NGO based in London—had penetrated the case so deeply that a decision by a panel of British law lords was reversed when personal links by one of the lords to Amnesty were revealed.² Britain finally denied the extradition and returned Pinochet to Chile for health reasons. Nevertheless, a spokesman for Human Rights Watch declared, “The Pinochet decision was a wake-up call to dictators around the world. If you torture somebody today, you can get arrested for it tomorrow almost anywhere.”³

NGOs are actively engaged at both the top and the bottom of world politics. At the top, the U.S. National Security Council guiding American foreign policy consisted of 99 policy assistants in 1999, more than a third of whom were on loan from non-profit think-

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tanks and NGOs.⁴ During the Rwandan genocide from April to July 1994, Alison Des Forges of Human Rights Watch briefed both the UN Security Council in New York and the U.S. National Security Council in Washington, DC with real-time information on the course of the killings.⁵ The bottom of world politics is so densely populated with grassroots NGOs operating in every region that counting them has become a cottage industry among scholars and officials. For example, Charles William Maynes, president of the Eurasia Foundation, reports that 80,000 NGOs have somehow sprung up in Russia since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁶ UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali pleaded for help from tens of thousands of grassroots NGOs to persuade member nations to support United Nations activities: "I wish to state, as clearly as possible—I need the mobilizing power of NGOs."⁷

The NGO organizational form has become so irresistible that a broad assortment of notables, missionaries, and miscreants are creating their own NGOs. Middle-power governments are privatizing some of their diplomatic functions to NGOs. For example, International Crisis Group, an "early warning" NGO headed by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, strives to head off emerging conflicts by collecting and analyzing information whose sensitivity ranges somewhere between investigative reporting and strategic intelligence.⁸ Christian churches in Africa undergo "NGO-ization" as African clergy rely on networks of international relief and development NGOs for communication, transportation, and general support.⁹ At the same time, some of the shadier operators in world politics cloak criminal activities under NGOs to gain the veneer of respectability. Before his mysterious murder in January 2000, Arkan, the Serbian paramilitary leader, indicted war criminal, and smuggler/businessman, founded and supported his own charitable foundation, "The Third Child."¹⁰ The U.S. government has frozen the assets of certain international Islamic charities, accusing them of channeling aid to terrorist groups.¹¹ Top Israeli leaders have been accused of illegally passing foreign campaign donations through non-profit organizations.¹²

NGOs do work in mysterious ways. While they sometimes achieve much more than promised, frequently they accomplish much less. Their real significance is that *NGOs often create inadvertent political consequences whose impact is more important than either success or failure in reaching official goals.* The influence of NGOs in world politics is greater than either their boosters or their detractors claim.

If NGOs are rarely what they seem, then political analysis of NGOs ought to include a measure of skepticism, even irreverence, concerning the sacred global norms they claim to serve. For example, NGOs are conventionally categorized according to the norms articulated in their mandates. Government officials, international organizations, scholars, journalists, and the general public all follow this lead and conceptualize NGOs within issue-areas of related normative goals, such as human rights, humanitarian relief, or environmentalism. With a dose of agnosticism introduced into our internationalist faith, we may find it conceivable that these issue-area boundaries are not the best points of departure for analyzing the politics of NGOs.

This book aims to analyze NGOs across all these issue-areas. The point of departure here is not the norms NGOs proclaim, but the structure of transnational action they share, a common structure that forms the basis of seemingly infinite tactical variations. Norms and ideas are not disregarded (this is not a materialist analysis), but neither are they taken at face value.

This structure of transnational action shared by all NGOs is spelled out in chapter 2. One element of that structure may be touched upon here, however, to indicate the unconventional approach taken in this book. Whatever its issue-area, every NGO articulates a promise of future progress and gives supporters a taste of that promise today. NGOs move people and influence events as much by evoking a progressive future as by taking action in the present. To make a better future *feel possible*, or at least a bit less impossible, may be enough to sustain an NGO project. For example, Amnesty International and the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina promise a world of universal respect for human rights; CARE, Oxfam, and Save the Children promise a better life for the poor; Greenpeace promises protection for endangered species and ecosystems.

With all due respect to these authentic human aspirations, which I happen to share, the NGOs that evoke them take rather tiny steps toward utopia in any particular year or decade. Moreover, at the level of NGO operations, to make even these small steps requires amalgamating the conflicting self-interests of societal and political partners in several countries. One core challenge for NGO professionals, therefore, is to infuse very small steps with very large meanings, and thereby either to transform or obscure the self-interests of partners.

This challenge is to evoke a progressive future and to make that future present today. In this view, the NGO pledging “sustainable

development” by distributing condoms is attempting something like the sacramental rite of the priest evoking the Kingdom of God, the revolutionary praxis of the agitator prodding history toward the classless society, or the medieval alchemist mixing base ingredients to make gold.

And yet—if it would not ruin the magic—one is tempted to ask a few political questions: Who benefits from faith in progress in this particular form? What alternate political faith is displaced? What is the impact on local society of importing money, ideas, and international linkages? I would suggest that another metaphor is most apt: NGOs are wild cards in world politics—their impact is up for grabs, and they attract local and global actors who compete, and sometimes cooperate, to play, capture, or neutralize them.

As NGOs have proliferated in numbers and influence, especially in the last decade, a growing body of scholarship has addressed the NGO bloom (see chapter 2). However, many analysts tend to celebrate and promote the NGOs they profile. The tendency by scholars to credit utopian promises based on mundane practices reflects the self-understanding of NGOs themselves. Such scholarship identifies too closely with NGO goals and reiterates in theory the self-legitimizing discourse of NGOs. The tunnel vision of such approaches fails to reveal the politics of NGOs in its full range and complexity. This book, in contrast, portrays NGOs and their networks as international institutions in which political conflict is inherent, not incidental. Instead of tunnel vision, it cultivates “peripheral vision” to perceive unintended side effects. The proliferation of NGOs does indeed transform world politics, but often not in the directions that NGO advocates claim.¹³ In sum, this book seeks neither to bury NGOs nor to praise them, and still less to reform them. Its purpose, rather, is to understand the actual consequences and uses of NGOs in world politics.

Chapter 1 begins with examples of NGO action from several fields, in the form of “Your NGO Starter Kit.” It spells out the claims and contradictions involved in initiating any international NGO. Specific examples of NGO politics illustrate the need for a fresh analytical approach formulated with greater independence from the worldviews of NGOs themselves. Chapter 2 offers a new structural theory, portraying NGOs as sites of institutionalized political conflict at three levels: within themselves as organizations; in the networks they create; and in the regional and global systems they inhabit. Chapter 3 examines historical origins of NGOs prior to 1945, emphasizing the

religious roots of modern NGOs, the stamp of American government and society on NGO origins, and the shifting norms of progress that NGOs have enacted.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 illustrate three distinct power relationships between state and society embodied by NGOs, the most significant consequences of which fell outside official NGO goals. Human rights and other NGOs inadvertently transformed the authoritarian regime in Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s (chapter 4). NGOs permeated the wars of Yugoslavia's collapse during the 1990s, shaping the conflicts by being incorporated in the strategies of all the warring parties and outside powers (chapter 5). Several groups of NGOs are joined in a growing "NGO war" to reengineer sexual relations, women's fertility, and families on a global scale (chapter 6). Chapter 7 addresses the future of NGOs, including emerging trends of NGO–corporate partnerships, the resurgence of religious identities in NGOs, the post-humanist trend, and NGOs in the "War on Terror."

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