

Review of *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism*, edited by Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal, Duke University Press, 2014. 379 pp., \$27.95 (cloth)

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*Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* combines cutting-edge feminist research on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and how they have affected the conditions of women's lives and feminist movements. Using an intersectional feminist perspective, Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal, the editors of the anthology, argue that the NGO label has become too broad, causing everything that is good about NGOs to be lumped in with the bad and masking the wide variation in form and function across the non-governmental sector. Bernal and Grewal contend that NGOs have come to be defined by what they are not – namely, not the state.

While celebrated by some, this juxtaposition has been criticized by some authors in this collection. Borrowing from Foucault, Bernal and Grewal propose that NGOs have become a parallel form of governmentality, which makes them a conduit for advancing “neoliberal projects of privatization and state withdrawal” (p. 8). The authors argue that NGOs have become gendered in ways that mirror the division between the masculine public sphere of governance and the feminine domestic sphere of care work.

*Theorizing NGOs* focuses on the uneasy relationship between feminist theory/practice and the NGO sector. Many critics have argued that NGOs have appropriated feminist language to further their own, non-feminist – or at least, less radical – agendas. This is reflected in Sabine Lang's piece on the European Union and the de-politicization of feminist movements. Others have extended this argument to claim that NGOs are pushing Western feminist norms,

while ignoring the political, economic, and social realities of local women. This was the theme of Elissa Helms's chapter on women's organizing in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where women's social groups resisted the "feminist" label while simultaneously pushing for gender equality on the local level. Finally, scholars like Laura Grunberg, while acknowledging some of the problematic elements of the NGO model, still insist that productive work can be accomplished by this form of activism.

The volume consists of eleven chapters divided into three sections, in addition to an introduction and conclusion by Bernal and Grewal. The first section, "NGOs Beyond Success or Failure," looks at the relationship between the state, civil society, and NGOs. The chapters in this section all demonstrate the complications of working both with and against state structures and competing understandings of gender, agency, and citizenship. The second section, "Postcolonial Neoliberalisms and the NGO Form" examines NGOs in the wider global context and their potential to re-inscribe power hierarchies related, but not limited, to gender, class, North-South, and rural-urban relations. This section also critically examines the much-lauded microcredit phenomenon, showing that it is not always a panacea. The final section, "Feminist Social Movements and NGOs," discusses how feminist movements have been both challenged and, in some instances, strengthened by the transnational spread of NGOs. Again, this section points to the need for nuance in analyses of NGOs and feminism, resisting an all-encompassing narrative. Saida Hodzic makes this point particularly well in her chapter, which argues that the "master narrative" of feminists rallying against the specter of neoliberalism actually masks the diversity of women's movements and romanticizes a history of feminism that may have never existed.

One of the most satisfying elements of this collection is its diversity of geographic representation. Bernal and Grewal include pieces that represent almost every region of the world, from

Europe to Asia to Latin America. Much of the literature on NGOs suffers from being either an overly-specific qualitative ethnography or a wide-ranging, yet shallow, quantitative analysis. Placing the pieces together in an anthology like this one allows the authors to situate their particular case studies in context. While this sheds light on unique challenges in each locale, it also confirms existing patterns in the NGO literature, namely the conflict between foreign donors and local NGO staff/clients, the misfit of liberal “global” (aka Western) norms with on-the-ground realities, and the compulsion to throw good money after bad – that is, to fund projects long after they have ceased to be effective.

This is not to say that every author in this anthology negates the value of NGOs. To the contrary, many confirm that NGOs are often the only ally of marginalized groups, such as Aradhana Sharma’s piece on the state and women’s empowerment in India. In her chapter, she shows how a government-organized NGO (GONGO) – a novel hybrid structure – used its connections and institutional knowledge to assist rural women in fighting government corruption and suppression of their land rights. Lauren Leve’s work on Nepalese female sympathizers with Maoist revolutionaries shows how a rural literacy program helped women develop political consciousness, though perhaps not in the way that international donors may have intended. Finally, Sonia Alvarez revisits the Latin American feminist backlash against NGOs in the 1990s, showing how blanket condemnations of NGOs masked the ways they are able to agitate for feminist goals and disseminate previously subjugated knowledges. The alternative – and even conflicting – viewpoints represented in this anthology further confirm the need to question how the scholarship engages with NGOs.

*Theorizing NGOs* adds a critical piece to the literature on NGOs by addressing the implications for feminism and the gendered nature of NGOs themselves. While many studies of gender and NGOs solely examine these organizations’ impacts on women, this

anthology addresses the way new gendered subjects are produced through the process of NGO-ization. This work resists sweeping conclusions and, instead, argues for a nuanced look at the process of interaction between states, feminisms, and NGOs, and is a worthwhile read for scholars of feminist theory, NGOs, and civil society.