

Engagements with a Productively Unstable Category

Anthropologists and Nongovernmental Organizations

by David Lewis and Mark Schuller

The category “NGO” (nongovernmental organization) is notoriously hard to fix. The term NGO—which defines these organizations in terms of what they are not—masks great diversity and assumes an unproblematic boundary. The use of the term persists, in no small part because several different types of actors involved in a range of fields depend on what we call the “productive instability” inherent to the NGO category. As a discipline, given our history and methodology, anthropology and anthropologists are uniquely poised to grapple with the ideas and practices associated with the inherently unstable category of NGO. Rather than attempting to fix the category or contest the boundaries implied by it, anthropologists are instead beginning to interrogate the meanings behind the contestations themselves. Rather than attempt precise classification or bemoan the uncertainty, we contend that the NGO category is “productively unstable.” We argue that productive work lies ahead in charting similarities and differences within NGOs across aid and activism. This task mirrors an inherent messiness for both NGOs and anthropologists as we grapple with dilemmas of engagement. Such a critically engaged anthropology of NGOs also stands poised to offer useful guidance to the discipline as it struggles over “relevance” in this new century.

Introduction

The category “NGO” (nongovernmental organization) is notoriously hard to fix. The term NGO—which defines these organizations in terms of what they are not (Bernal and Grewal 2014:7; Fisher 1997:441)—masks great diversity and assumes an unproblematic boundary. Following Wittgenstein on the transitory power of language to describe experience, anthropologists such as William Fisher (2014) have now suggested that it might even be time to throw the label away. That said, the use of the term persists, in no small part because several different types of actors involved in a range of fields depend on what we call the “productive instability” inherent to the NGO category. As a discipline, given our history and methodology, anthropology and anthropologists are uniquely poised to grapple with the ideas and practices associated with the inherently unstable category of NGO.

David Lewis is Professor of Social Policy and Development at the Department of Social Policy of the London School of Economics (Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom [d.lewis@lse.ac.uk]). **Mark Schuller** is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies of Northern Illinois University (Grant Tower South A, Room 518, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois 60115, USA [mschuller@niu.edu]). This paper was submitted 30 V 15, accepted 27 I 16, and electronically published 22 IX 17.

Rather than attempting to fix the category or contest the boundaries implied by it, anthropologists are instead beginning to interrogate the meanings behind the contestations themselves. Several ethnographies of NGOs have done an excellent job deconstructing the supposedly unitary category and have opened up interrogations of modalities of power, governance, and pedagogy/ideology within NGOs (e.g., Eriksson Baaz 2005; Hemment 2015; Hours 2003; Karim 2011; Sharma 2008). However, researchers have been slower to attempt to theorize common experiences within what Bernal and Grewal (2014) termed the “NGO form.” This would require a multisited approach that includes perspectives of recipients, staff, and donors, and it is further complicated by the fact that the NGO form straddles the worlds of international aid—humanitarian and development—in addition to various forms of activism, such as feminism, human rights, and the environment. Rather than attempt precise classification or bemoan the uncertainty, we contend that the NGO category is “productively unstable.”

We argue that productive work lies ahead in charting these similarities and differences within NGOs across these various sectors. We suggest that this is a task that mirrors an inherent messiness for both NGOs and anthropologists as they grapple with the dilemmas of engagement. We further suggest that such a critically engaged anthropology of NGOs also stands poised to offer useful guidance to the discipline as it struggles over “relevance” in this new century.

NGOs as Productively Unstable

NGOs are a highly visible feature across most societies in the early twenty-first century. Ethnographic research has deconstructed the category of NGOs, questioning the boundaries of what is and is not an NGO. Two decades of anthropological resistance, nuance, clarification, ethnographic grounding, and deconstruction have not led to a rejection of the term or, importantly, to a decline of the profile of NGOs within activist and policy worlds. On the contrary, studies of NGOs have proliferated both within anthropology and in other social science disciplines, and resources flowing to NGOs have increased.

It would seem that the shine came off the “NGO idea” more widely some time ago. During the period of the mid-to-late 1990s, which some researchers have termed an “NGO boom” period (e.g., Agg 2006; Alvarez 1999), a view had emerged of the NGO as a “magic bullet” (Edwards and Hulme 1996), while NGOs entered the social science sphere with great fanfare. When the astronomically high expectations placed upon NGOs failed to materialize, scholarship turned increasingly critical, rejecting NGOs, particularly within anthropology. Yet these critical perspectives on NGOs among anthropologists are increasingly at odds with the continued growth and resilience of NGOs on the social landscape, wherein NGOs are now a mundane, taken-for-granted presence regularly encountered by anthropologists in a great many settings. One interpretation could be that this signifies the continuing marginalization of anthropology.

We take a different view. We contend that there are particular interests at stake in using an inherently unstable term and that this very instability itself serves particular interests. For example, Aradhana Sharma (2008) has described a specific collectivity that embodies such instability, defining itself sometimes as “NGO” and sometimes as “government” as different circumstances demand, taking on a different shape in particular contexts, to engage with particular audiences, or to achieve particular purposes. The lack of linguistic precision around the concept offers valuable room to maneuver in some cases and opportunity for normative claim making in others. In addition, we note a growing trend within Bangladesh and Haiti, our respective field sites, of actors who increasingly refuse or reject the term “NGO,” testifying to complex and shifting local understandings of what the term connotes.

Rather than reject the label, we argue that it is more productive to interrogate the interests in maintaining the appearance of linguistic continuity and uniformity implied by the continued use of the term “NGO.” While donors and states, NGO managers, contractors, political scientists, or development economists may have interests in maintaining the linguistic fiction, as anthropologists, we are interested in how we have been complicit in clothing the emperor and how we, too, may have benefited from this inherent instability.

In short, NGOs appear as a productively unstable category. It could be that NGOs have remained unchanged despite growing critique within neoliberal global restructuring. Another pos-

sibility is that states, for-profit corporations, and other hegemonic assemblages are taking cues from NGOs, adapting specific techniques, modalities, and self-representations first fashioned by NGOs; they have rebranded themselves to mimic the NGO form. Finally, it could be that we anthropologists are shifting, being inspired or coerced into new forms of engagement as the academic institutions that employ many of us are also becoming increasingly modeled by and forced to respond to market forces; this means, among other things, a reduction in professorships, and so a majority of PhDs are now working outside of the academy.

Answering these questions requires that we chart the trajectories of the NGO form, reflect on how NGOs became objects of research study, and interrogate how they have become present within anthropology.

Historical Development of the NGO Form

NGOs have increasingly come to be seen as important institutional actors in most societies. They are active within domestic welfare arrangements and international development work, responding to humanitarian emergencies, organizing women’s constituencies, protecting the environment, advocating ethical business, and campaigning for human rights, and they act as vehicles for various forms of citizen protest. NGOs are normally characterized in residual terms as nonstate organizations that are distinct from the worlds of for-profit business. But after this, any simple characterization of NGOs tends to run aground, hobbled by the limiting constraints of intrinsic NGO diversity, complexity, and ambiguity. NGOs come in different shapes and sizes. They may appear independent while concealing crucial ties with governments, business, and other interest groups. They may take hybridized forms that make a straightforward identification with a particular institutional “sector” difficult to determine.

Officially named in the 1945 United Nations charter, NGOs have been around for at least two centuries (Charnovitz 1997; Davies 2014). However, they only began attracting serious attention from policymakers within Northern (or so-called “Western”) governments and international institutions from the late 1980s onward. This interest in the NGO sector emerged within two related but distinct contexts of neoliberal public policy. The first was the rise of the so-called “new public management” in advanced capitalist countries that now favored the rolling back of the state and public services. The second was within the international “aid industry,” where NGOs, for the first time, began to emerge as key actors within the fields of international development and humanitarian action. A shift during the 1980s toward promotion of more flexible forms of “good governance” among international development agencies, such as the World Bank, helped to create a climate that began to favor NGOs as private market-based actors to which service provision could be “contracted out” within wider neoliberal restructuring arrangements imposed on developing countries through conditional lending.

Conversely, NGOs also came to be seen as vehicles for those seeking to challenge mainstream orthodoxies with alternative ideas and practices centered on new forms of grassroots development, policy advocacy, and collective action. There was also a third factor that informed the modern rise of the NGO: the post–Cold War rediscovery of the idea of “civil society” among citizen activists, particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America (e.g., Cohen and Arato 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff 1998; Hann 1996; Pelczynski 1988; Schechter 1999). There was an intertwining of this new interest in the concept of civil society with the idea that NGOs could serve as catalysts for people-centered developmental change, and as a result, official funding to NGOs skyrocketed during the 1990s as part of the new good governance policy discourse (Edwards and Hulme 1996).

NGOs as Research Objects

From the 1980s onward, NGOs were also “discovered” by scholars responding to these wider shifts, resulting in an explosion of writings. Academic work on NGOs was initially undertaken within development studies by sociologists and political scientists, some of whom began celebrating the new profile of development NGOs as potentially providing new solutions to a wide range of long-standing development problems (e.g., Carroll 1992; Paul and Israel 1991). Others, taking a political economy perspective, began reacting against what they regarded as NGO hype driven more by ideological concerns than by systematic evidence and analysis (Petras 1997; Vivian 1994). As a field, NGO research soon became one that was unhelpfully polarized between supporters and critics. Much of the work on NGOs was also regarded as compromised by its production within the world of applied consultancy by researchers doing commissioned work. As a consequence, research on NGOs has tended to remain an emerging academic field, and it is still viewed with suspicion in some quarters as being conceptually weak and/or overly normative. There are some interesting regional variations. For example, as Aradhana Sharma (2014) argued, scholars and activists in India engaged in a critical evaluation of NGOs earlier than did those within Europe or North America. One of India’s leading political scientists, Rajni Kohari (1986), argued that NGOs were often used in readying local communities for world capitalists, and Sheth and Sethi (1991) pointed out that NGOs often displaced earlier local traditions of volunteerism and citizen mobilization.

Less normative work on NGOs was, of course, still to be found within wider social sciences and in development studies in particular, and some of the key texts from this period have remained crucial to the field’s growth. For example, Michael Edwards and David Hulme’s series of edited volumes (e.g., Edwards and Hulme 1992, 1996; Hulme and Edwards 1997) were based on a series of development studies conferences held at the University of Manchester. Here, academic discussions were informed by the presence of NGO practitioners and donors and produced conversations that were focused on actu-

ally existing dilemmas of aid agencies: the role of the state, multiple stakeholders, accountability, and autonomy. These texts represent the foundation for much subsequent work on NGOs that emerged within the social sciences. In fact, if there were ever a canon of “NGO studies,” these volumes would undoubtedly serve as essential early explorations and as sources of documentation for the key questions within the changing world of NGOs.

Also crucial to the gradual growth in respectability of NGO research has been the peripheral influence of the field of interdisciplinary “nonprofit studies” that emerged (mostly) in North America and Europe at around the same time as interest in “NGO studies” was gaining ground (Billis 1993; Salamon and Anheier 1992a, 1992b). The rise of peer-reviewed multidisciplinary academic journals such as *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* and *Voluntas* served to institutionalize the field within the university sector (a trend that did not materialize within the counterpart field of “NGO studies”), and this arguably led to a more theoretically informed social science around the subject of nonstate actors and “civil society” (albeit one in which there were few anthropologists present). Writing from within “nonprofit studies,” Olaf Corry (2010) is typical of those who wish to move the third sector research tradition away from “ontologically oriented theorizations” that focus on what is and is not included toward an epistemological approach to the nongovernmental sector that pays more attention to process, practice, and context. Such an approach recognizes the value of seeking to understand nongovernmental actors within the context of wider ideas and relationships, through which it becomes possible also “to analyze the balance of social forces in a society” (Corry 2010:18).

Within a US context, the Association for Research on Nonprofits and Voluntary Agencies (ARNOVA)—itself using a different set of keywords—initially did include anthropologists, including four on the editorial board of the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. Perhaps as a result of formalization and professionalization, the profile of anthropologists began to diminish within the association. One index is meetings: ARNOVA’s annual meetings have steered clear of political science, management, and economics meetings but are usually held at a time that directly conflicts with the meeting of the American Anthropological Association. According to an interdisciplinary set of scholars at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (personal communication), the research agenda also became more focused on demand-driven queries by nonprofit executives, and thus the space dedicated to management case studies grew—a trend that one participant called “pracademic.” It is perhaps not by accident that these processes mirror those in the nonprofit and NGO sector itself.

NGOs and Anthropologists

Though anthropological work on NGOs has long existed, until recently it was sociologists and political scientists who dominated the field. There is, of course, a longer history of anthro-

political work on organizations that overlap with aspects of what we now regard as modern NGOs. For example, Kenneth Little (1965) identified the ways that “voluntary associations” in West Africa served as adaptive mechanisms for members of communities experiencing rapid change, with tribal institutions becoming replaced or supplemented by new organizational forms, such as tribal unions, friendly societies, and occupational and recreational associations. However, broadly speaking, anthropologists have preferred to focus on institutions rather than organizations, including the outmoded term “social organization,” particularly kinship networks and associations. Scholars within what has been called “anthropology of religion” also analyzed institutional forms and processes. On the one hand, there is potential for theoretical cross-fertilization across subfields. On the other, theoretical tools for understanding NGOs qua NGOs have only recently been developed, for the historical reasons noted above.

Despite the long-standing call for “studying up” (Nader 1969), anthropologists have also continued to be more comfortable engaging at the community level rather than with agencies and policy institutions. This has led us either into grassroots perspectives on the presence and effects of NGOs (often informed by a critical view of outside aid and the international system) or toward forms of community-centered or “applied” work. The result is that “NGO studies” and anthropology have had an uneasy relationship that is sometimes riddled with productive tensions and sometimes marked by silences and disjuncture.

The impact of “NGO studies” on anthropological theory has remained mainly limited to the subfield of political anthropology. Foucault’s (1991) posthumously published “governmentality” quickly became a core thesis within political anthropology, often parsed as “the conduct of conduct.” Offering an alternative reading of “governance” to that promoted by official development agencies, governmentality provided scholars a heuristic with which to interrogate the interactions between different groups as part of official projects. A 2001 special issue of *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (Leve and Karim 2001) set out a critical research agenda that challenged the insidious outcomes of donors’ instrumental use of NGOs in a privatization of the state (Bornstein 2001; Karim 2011; Leve 2001; Paley 2001; Peterson 2001). Anthropologists also used the concepts of governmentality in its transnational dimension (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), neoliberal governmentality (Sharma 2006), “nongovernmentality” (Jackson 2005), and “nongovernmentalism” (Lewis 2005).

Another (and associated) trend has been the growth of the “aidnography” tradition within the anthropology of development (Fechter and Hindman 2011; Mosse 2005, 2011), which has begun to chip away at more monolithic understandings of NGOs. But as we shall see in the section below, such work has, until now, tended to focus more on public, private, bilateral, and intergovernmental agencies than on nongovernmental ones. Even within the long tradition of organizational anthropology, the main emphasis has been on business and government or-

ganizations rather than on the so-called “third sector” (a bias that has also operated within wider organization studies and management research).

Long-standing tensions have also existed within anthropology around “applied” work (e.g., Gardner and Lewis 2015; Lamphere 2004; Rylko-Bauer, Singer, and Van Willigen 2006), with which the field of NGO studies has often been associated. This tension is partly a result of suspicion that compromises in research quality are required by work that is commissioned by development agencies and partly a result of the fear that it becomes impossible, within such work, to “speak truth to power.” For a long time, when it came to studying social change and transformation, one would be far more likely to find anthropologists working alongside grassroots social movements—seen as more likely to be taking up the interests of the marginalized and the powerless—than with more formal organizations, such as NGOs, whose motives were characterized as impure.

By contrast, the reach of anthropological studies into NGO policy and practice—in the form of organizational anthropological ideas about culture and learning within development agencies, or the use of “participatory” techniques influenced by ethnographic fieldwork methods—is perhaps more widespread. At the World Bank, the work of applied anthropologist Michael Cernea (1988) was influential in relation to work on involuntary resettlement, and he was an early advocate of bringing NGOs into the development projects of mainstream donors. The World Bank itself took what Murray Li (2011) describes as an “ethnographic turn” when its interest in the concept of “social capital” led it to take a closer interest in the “minutiae of village life” in Indonesia during the 2000s. Yet this field nonetheless remains small compared with other disciplines, and it is largely traceable to individual circuits of anthropologists operating within aid agencies. This is now changing. Political, organizational, and policy anthropologists have each built on these earlier foundations to begin contributing some distinctive insights.

NGOs as Objects of Anthropological Inquiry

What began as anthropology “in” NGOs also evolved further into an anthropology “of” NGOs, following the direction signposted by Fisher (1997). Fisher talks of the importance of work that analyzes “what is happening within and through organizations such as NGOs” (1997:459). As such work has moved forward, the senses in which research “in” and “of” NGOs contrast and interlink—one messy, one critical—become more apparent. The field also later embarked on trajectories that straddled “applied” and “theoretical” research, and this strand has recently seen exponential growth and diversification. As a whole, such scholarship (at least the “theoretical” strand) still tends to be more critical than that found in other social science disciplines, but during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, political science scholarship also began to challenge normative conceptions of NGOs tied to civil society and the “third sector.” The work of Michael Barnett (e.g., Barnett 2011,

2013; Barnett and Weiss 2011) has opened up spaces for critical work within political science, which had long maintained a pro-NGO bias (as a counterweight to states, the typical object of critique, often locked in a zero-sum calculus).

An “anthropology of NGOs” subfield has not fully developed in the same way as other subfields, such as medical anthropology. Where it does exist, North American anthropological scholarship on NGOs emerged as part of the critical anthropology of development associated with the 1990s work of Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson. Drawing on Foucault, Ferguson (1990) outlined how development agencies create representations of a developing country, such as Lesotho, as lacking the qualities that agencies such as the World Bank can provide, portraying it as ripe for project-based intervention. This depoliticizes issues of poverty and inequality, turning them into technical problems. The analysis helpfully shifted attention away from whether development projects “succeed” to understandings of how they work. Escobar (1995) furthered the use of Foucault’s discourse analysis within the study of the post-war history of Western international development ideas and institutions. Anthropologists were particularly open to the dominant message that development institutions were not doing what they claimed to be doing and operated in complex ways with diverse effects, and they set about creating a critical mass of what Ferguson (1990) called “foundational” critiques of development, in contrast to the more “functional” critiques of development being produced by practitioners. Work within this new development critique was diverse and wide-ranging, including addressing issues of power and inequality (Crush 1995), participation (Cooke and Kothari 2001), institutionalization (Feldman 2003), and professionalization (Crewe and Axelby 2013).

Neither Ferguson’s nor Escobar’s foundational texts specifically theorized NGOs; however, their critiques were widely used by anthropologists studying NGOs. William Fisher’s 1997 review article (Fisher 1997) laid the groundwork for a more sustained theoretical conversation on NGOs within anthropology. This text recognized the importance of NGOs as global political actors, elaborating on NGOs’ roles within neoliberal restructuring of governance relationships in the 1990s. Drawing on both Gramsci and Foucault, Fisher showed how states increasingly viewed NGOs as flexible tools for maintaining and extending their power.

Anthropologists draw heavily upon ethnographic case material to build, deconstruct, sharpen, challenge, combine, or retrace anthropological theory. The gold standard for anthropological scholarship remains the ethnographic monograph. Yet there have been relatively few full-scale ethnographic studies of the nongovernmental sector or its organizations, with much work on NGOs appearing instead within chapters, reports, and articles. Perhaps this has been one reason why anthropological work on NGOs has retained a low profile.

Early NGO ethnographies tended to focus on international NGOs (e.g., Fox 1998; Fox and Brown 1998). Fox’s study drew on fieldwork within the offices of four US international development NGOs and suggested an “anthropology of activism” that

engaged with the activists’ values, beliefs, and practices and investigated relationships “between stated intent and actual endeavors” (Fox 1998:2). Crewe and Harrison’s (1998) *Whose Development?* is concerned with an ethnography of two international NGOs to deconstruct the developer/beneficiary dichotomy and to show how structural and historical forces condition ideas about gender, technology, and race. Dorothea Hilhorst’s (2003) *The Real World of NGOs* provided an account of local NGOs in the Philippines, dealing with the everyday politics and multiple organizational realities among NGO workers and the communities in which they work. Hilhorst’s questions and approaches built on conversations within British “social anthropology,” especially the Manchester School “actor-oriented” tradition of development studies, established in the 1970s by Norman Long (1977, 1997, 2001). Like Fisher, Hilhorst was impatient with what she saw as static categories of NGOs within social science research literature that stressed organizational features, structures, and activities. Hilhorst argued instead for a dynamic view that treated NGOs not as things but as “open-ended processes” (2003:4) in which there were shifting boundaries and multiple positioned realities. Focusing on the everyday practices of NGOs, she coined the term “NGO-ing.”

Anthropological work on NGO-related issues continued to build for the rest of the decade with work theorizing on-the-ground inequalities within development, such as hegemony (Kamat 2002), dispossession (Elyachar 2005), or paternalism (Eriksson Baaz 2005). Cultural analyses of topics such as religion (Bornstein 2003) or ethnomusicology (Smith 2001) are also woven through several texts. Later scholarship on the subject within anthropology brought more complexity to analysis of the political form of NGOs and the ways in which NGOs are conduits of power. Part of the complexity lies in the fact that NGOs traverse multiple roles, from “aid” (development and humanitarian) to “activism” (e.g., women’s rights and environmental activism). Common to all threads is an intermediate position; understanding NGOs’ mediating roles provided an impetus for theoretical crystallization, a common theoretical platform for further theory building, and a clear innovation and mandate within “NGO studies,” as distinct from the other related fields (e.g., development studies and the newer humanitarian studies).

Specifically theorizing these common structural positions of NGOs provided a convergence among themes within North American and European scholarship around NGOs by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Some anthropologists also began deconstructing NGOs as “single” entities with monolithic intentions, identities, missions, and effects. Others began to see NGOs as intermediaries, brokers, and points of connection between wider flows and processes. As structures, NGOs can be seen to bring together different and sometimes disparate sets of actors. Anthropologists in Europe, in particular, began to focus on the relationships themselves more than on the actors, and they specifically interrogated the role that NGOs play as intermediaries, translators, or brokers (Lewis and Mosse 2006). Some authors note the role that for-

eigners play in brokering relationships with transnational donors (Davis 2003) or how NGOs fulfill roles typically reserved for states before neoliberalism (Richard 2009). Local populations (Rossi 2006) as well as NGOs (Robins 2009a) were shown to have the ability to shift the contours of international aid. NGOs can be the “glue” to a fragmented neoliberalism (Schuller 2009) or the “friction” as groups across national and cultural boundaries interface (Tsing 2005). Heather Hindman (2013) focuses attention on aid workers and the cultures they create in “expatria.” For Apthorpe (2011:199), NGOs are part of “aidland,” a political, economic, and geographical construct of practices, “languages of discourse, lore and custom” characterized by a “surreal virtuality.”

Anthropologists have also built upon what Didier Fassin, who served on the board of Médecins sans Frontiers (MSF), termed the “moral economy” (Fassin 2012; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). Fassin draws upon E. P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott’s (1977) earlier usages of the term (see also Edelman 2005) but asserts the primacy of the moral as opposed to the economic dimension. Following this trajectory, Erica James (2010) discusses a “political economy of trauma,” and Andria Timmer (2010) discusses the creation of a “needy subject.” Lashaw’s (2013) work discusses the way research on NGO practices offers insights into “the production of morality” and the idea of progress as a “product of struggle.” Peter Redfield (2013) charts the ways in which ethics both centers and decenters the work of MSF, and China Scherz (2014) notes the ways in which NGOs serve as platforms for individuals to stake claims on their moral worth.

Work by anthropologists on NGOs continues to grow in quantity and in theoretical sophistication. Ideas and discourses of the “nongovernmental” and “nongovernmental public action” remain key themes in the early twenty-first century. Work on NGOs can be found within political anthropology, anthropology of development, public policy, humanitarian action, and organizational anthropology. In 2010, a second special issue of *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* on NGOs usefully opened up possible new theoretical directions (e.g., Alvaré 2010; Curtis 2010; Timmer 2010; Vannier 2010). Unlike the first, this collection did not confine itself to a single theme. This is emblematic of the disparate inquiries that characterize anthropological work on NGO issues: on memory (Delcore 2003), identity (Kaag 2008), and public deliberation (Junge 2012). There are increasingly diverse and sophisticated analyses but perhaps, as yet, little cohesion or sustained conversation.

The Value of NGOs’ Productive Instability to Anthropology

While there are many potential directions to continue exploring within an “anthropology of NGOs,” there is no escaping the conundrum that the object of our study is inherently unsettled. As anthropologists, we do not require conceptual, “universal” rigidity; however, we argue that thinking of NGOs

as a “productively unstable” category offers one way out of what Amanda Lashaw (2013) has aptly termed an “impasse.” We propose three such ways in which NGOs are productive to anthropology. The first relates to methodological challenges and a set of opportunities. Second, there are productive instabilities around the idea of NGOs as sites for engaged anthropology, in which the binary logics of pure/applied can be challenged. Finally, NGO research offers new scope for informing theoretical development.

Productive Instabilities around Methodology

Traditionally, sociocultural anthropological research has been based on long-term participant observation with a priority given to subaltern people and perspectives. The fact that anthropological scholarship on NGOs tends to be marginal and more critical than those of other social science disciplines may also derive from issues of methodology (Lewis 1999). Recipients of NGO programs have different and often more critical perspectives than NGO staff, for example. And long-term participant observation—sometimes in the mode of what David Mosse (2001) has called the “observer participant”—sensitizes anthropologists to additional problems and perspectives other than that of NGOs’ “good intentions.”

There are important aspects of productive instability that arise from issues of methodology encountered by anthropologists. There are at least three senses in which this might be the case. First, the study of NGOs lends itself to the feeding of ideas and experiences into debates around the importance of doing multisited, multilevel ethnography—and the challenges associated with this. A central problem that emerges in the study of NGOs is identifying what precisely is “the field” when we study an NGO (Markowitz 2001). Is it the office, the beneficiary populations and local communities, or the donor agencies? And when we are not setting out to study NGOs but nevertheless encounter them, how do we respond? As Aradhana Sharma’s (2014) work reveals, NGOs tend to present themselves to anthropologists in the course of research on a wide range of issues, so that some anthropologists may end up studying NGOs even if they did not set out to do so (see also Lewis, forthcoming). This shows the importance of working on, in addition to in, NGOs—that is, specific theorizing on NGOs in addition to addressing NGOs as part of the ethnographic landscape. Whether or not we anthropologists are looking for them, NGOs are everywhere we are, and in many places, they got there first.

As inherently multisited phenomena, NGOs present methodological challenges to anthropologists, particularly those concerned with representing “local” realities in an inherently “glocal” setting (Kearney 1995). One of these is the need to study the funders and resource relationships that often sustain the NGO. The issues of NGO financing and donorship need further anthropological exploration. This connects both to issues of the “financialization” of poverty (Kar 2013; Schwittay 2014) and to the efforts by states to regulate forms of not-for-profit action (Bornstein 2012). Another challenge is to engage with NGOs

as producers of information, knowledge, and representation: how should the anthropologist engage with the preexisting representations that are produced by NGOs themselves?

Second, the distinction between anthropologists working “for” and/or “with” the NGO is one that Erica Bornstein, in particular, has begun exploring in her work, and it raises important questions about researcher access and positionality. Working “for” may be part of the process of negotiated access to the field and makes possible work “on,” since it responds to those within NGOs who seek to resist or challenge forms of academic extraction. The money logics of NGOs as forms of business enterprise, of course, need to be better understood; at the same time, NGO staff offer a critical view of similar logics within the worlds of academic enterprise that are linked to commodified knowledge production. Within such negotiations, there may be different types of research products that arise, such as the critical internal report by the anthropologist that stays within the organization and is not sanctioned for wider circulation. These are, as Bornstein (2014b) puts it, the various kinds of “delicate spaces” where the anthropologist must tread carefully.

Third, just as James Ferguson (2005) once identified development as anthropology’s “evil twin,” so NGOs offer up a mirror to anthropologists that may be at once familiar and uncomfortable. There are unsettling similarities between the approach taken by anthropologists to their work and that of many development NGOs. Both are open to the criticism that they move more or less uninvited into communities where they try to build relationships with people generally less powerful than themselves. This was precisely the approach taken by the generation of development NGOs run by activists in Bangladesh that Lewis would regularly encounter during his own village-level fieldwork in the mid-1980s, inspired by the ideas of Paolo Freire or by the “participatory” ideologies of the time. NGO field staff tried to build relationships with communities, understand local points of view, and listen to how people saw their problems. The anthropologist-NGO interface may be productive, in that it highlights the importance of ethnographic approaches as contributing to a “methodological populism” (Mosse and Lewis 2006) that might offer a counterbalance to the dominant trends of technocratic or managerialist development approaches. At the same time, there is the potential to strengthen the principles and values of anthropological fieldwork approaches that assert a direct engagement with people.

Given the gaze into the moral economy noted above, it is perhaps not surprising that these dilemmas are about more than access. As noted above, there is an uncomfortable similarity in the praxis of anthropological and NGO fieldwork (Lewis 1999; Markowitz 2001). In addition to methodology and relationships with local communities, both spheres are fraught with moral stakes (Bornstein 2012; Gardner and Lewis 2015). These are not the only similarities, given that moral economies connect anthropologists’ academic worlds with the objects and sites of our study (Lashaw 2013); the space for critical analysis without implicating anthropologists as well is limited. As an-

thropologists who depend on local populations as the objects of our study (Lemons, forthcoming), what are the political, ethical, and moral implications of being dependent on NGOs? With whom do our primary ethical responsibilities, our allegiances, lie?

Productive Instabilities around the Idea of NGOs as Sites for Engaged Anthropology

Here productive instability stems from the difficult issue of how anthropologists should best engage with the world beyond academia. NGOs serve as sites of engagement in terms of both applied and politically aligned or activist anthropologies. Old debates about “applied” versus “pure” anthropology have become increasingly outmoded, and there is now a renewed interest in wider forms of anthropological engagement (e.g., Crewe and Axelby 2013; Low and Merry 2010; Sanday 2003). This shift is being informed by increased pressures on university-employed scholars to engage with the world around them (such as the impact case study component of the UK government’s “research excellence framework”; REF) and by the resurgence of the tradition of the “public intellectual” who is obliged to contribute to wider society beyond the ivory tower. NGOs have been a consistent vehicle for anthropological engagement, including those cofounded by anthropologists, like Partners in Health and Cultural Survival, as well as MSF and Amnesty International, wherein anthropologists play roles on governance boards, to name very few.

This energy to connect with new audiences is also fed by recent events such as the movements against global capitalism and neoliberal globalization that emerged during the 1990s; the 2008 financial crisis; the rise of the Occupy movement; the street-level movements of the Arab world; and a multitactic coordination asserting that Black Lives Matter following the events in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. *American Anthropologist*, for example, has begun carrying a section that aims to raise the profile of “public anthropology.” This is seen primarily as an arena for debate and action “dealing with social problems and issues of interest to a broader public or to our non-academic collaborators yet still relevant to academic discourse and debate” (Griffith et al. 2013:125). NGOs and civil society issues are threaded through many of these new arenas of engagement, as anthropologists see opportunities for engaging in new ways with forms of citizen action.

Moving beyond engagement as simply informing debate, Charles Hale’s (2006:97) version of “activist research” aims to help close the gap between critically distanced cultural critique and different modes of activist engagement. While it has been common for engaged anthropologists to retain a primary academic affiliation while balancing this with political commitment, activist research requires that—however difficult it is to achieve—the anthropologist should strive toward a fuller merging of the two loyalties. For example, Schaumberg’s (2008:206) effort to resolve tensions between involvement and critical distance during fieldwork in Argentina is illustrative: invited by

activists to give his opinion at a public meeting, he writes: “[they] would no doubt have contested the municipality’s injustice without my contribution. Yet, I imagine my contribution encouraged them to stake their claim at a time when morale was very low and mobilization slow. I believe this example highlights how politically engaged fieldwork can help support justified local claims.” That said, as a recent collection curated in *American Anthropologist* has uncovered, activism is often fraught with a range of inequalities, contradictions, privileges, and failure (Checker, Davis, and Schuller 2014).

In a related vein, new interest in “protest anthropology” also urges political engagement that goes beyond mere alignment with “protest movements, revolts, and uprisings” to include trying to become “full-fledged participants in them” (Maskovsky 2013:127). While the assemblages that attract anthropologists’ attention call themselves social movements, dilemmas of engagement by NGOs offer useful methodological, practical, and ethical as well as theoretical guidance. A key arena for this type of activity has been the Occupy movement, within which anthropologist David Graeber (2013) played a key role in the initial discussions and architecture. Occupy reflected concern at social injustice and economic inequalities and aimed to unsettle by moving beyond the formal limitations of mainstream political and civil society organizations to challenge wider complacency around economic crisis and social inequality. The death of unarmed teen Michael Brown at the hands of a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, triggered a national mobilization, an intergenerational coalition of activists, artists, and intellectuals who brought the long-suffered issues of racial profiling and white privilege into mainstream public discourse and public spaces. While this movement was more organic than the carefully planned Occupy, anthropologists and other social scientists have helped transform the discourse, grounding the deceptively simple slogan “Black Lives Matter” in linguistic analysis, critical race theory, and reflections of a reenergized diaspora (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Falcón 2015; Lindsey 2015). Both Occupy and Black Lives Matter are distinguished by resisting NGO-ization.

Assuming that this push for greater engagement within anthropology is sustained, which institutional arrangements will provide the vehicles? Will NGOs continue to serve as platforms for anthropologists? Will this need for engagement discourage critical reflection on NGO-ization? Or can we engage with NGOs as knowledge producers in ways that have useful implications for reconstructing knowledge more widely and for repoliticizing the academy in important ways (e.g., by challenging the norm of distancing as part of an objective research ideology)?

NGO Research as Offering New Scope for Informing Theoretical Development

Anthropological books on NGOs also sometimes offered important glimpses into not only the nascent subfield of “NGO

studies” but also the development of wider anthropological theory. The anthropological scholarship on NGOs has demonstrated various shifts in theoretical trends, grappling with neoliberalism, governmentality, and a reworking of “classic” anthropological themes of religion, the gift exchange, language, citizenship, and ethnicity as well as contemporary discussions of moral economies, identity formation, and hybridity. NGOs’ structural position as brokers, as mediators, potentially offers tools for general theorizing within anthropology on power, globalization, and culture contact, long being interests within anthropology.

For Bernal and Grewal (2014), the way that the framing idea of “NGO” has come to be known is particularly productive. They argue that defining the NGO “by something that it is not” has produced both an artificially coherent and unified view of NGOs (when we know that they are, in fact, diverse and heterogeneous) and a normative insistence that there is “a clear divide between public and private realms of power that is consistent with models of the normative liberal state” (2014:7). The effect is to conceal or deny “the contingent nature of such domains of struggle.” In this way, NGOs can represent entry points for understanding blurred boundaries between state and market and state and society. For example, work on individual “boundary crossing” activists who move between state and civil society makes these connections more visible and explores the contents of such relationships (Lewis 2008). NGOs can also be explored in the context of “interface analysis” (cf. Long 2001) both as relational actors, and as part of the glue that holds together assemblages of neoliberalism (Schuller 2009). Mirroring work within cultural studies, some anthropologists have also come to embrace hybridity and complexity in the study of NGOs. Finally, NGOs can also be understood as “boundary objects,” with the potential power to both unify and divide and to contribute to change (e.g., Cabot 2013; Davis 2003; Hodžić 2014; Morris-Suzuki 2000; Richard 2009; Shrestha 2006).

The wider social science literature on NGOs, briefly discussed at the start of this article, has been accused of being weak and normative—partly because NGOs have been made visible within this literature mainly by practice. More theoretically informed approaches are beginning to emerge from anthropological work, mainly in the area of politics and power. For example, scholarship on the subject within anthropology brought more complexity to analysis of the political form of NGOs and the ways in which NGOs serve conduits of power. Grafting Foucault and Marxist World Systems analysis, Schuller (2012) discusses bureaucratic logics and processes as “trickle down imperialism.” Other work by anthropologists has shown that NGOs can both empower (Hemment 2007) and quell (Nagar and Sangtin Writers 2006) citizen dissent. NGOs can also incorporate individuals into transnational circuits of capital (Karim 2011) or projects that are often “sold” within a capitalist logic and system (James 2010). NGOs can be sites for deliberating on and making claims on the common good (Rajak 2011) or for defining those worthy of assistance (Nguyen 2010). Working through an NGO structure within a strong centralized state, blurring

boundaries, NGOs can play pedagogical roles, fashioning neoliberal citizen subjects (Sharma 2008).

Anthropologists have also been interested in exploring “NGO” in ideational terms. What constitutes an NGO in one setting may not be understood as such in another. Rather than focusing on definitions, it has proved productive to explore how the meaning of the term varies across different contexts and to examine how these meanings may shift over time. For example, the moral universe of the NGO is diverse and refracted, running from common perceptions of “selfless” NGO work undertaking “good” causes to an association in many contexts with opportunism and corruption, recalling Fassin’s reformulation of the “moral economy” discussed above. The idea of NGO as a kind of blank slate onto which different interests and ideas are projected is one productive approach. Yet the commonness of NGO as a category is essentially illusory, because the reality is simply a construction, a discursive formation, and it makes no sense to think of NGOs as stable formations that are spatially bound. Drawing on Abrams’s (1988) classic essay “Notes On the Difficulty of Studying the State,” Sharma (2014) has suggested thinking of “NGO effects,” the discursive functions and productions of NGOs as single, stable entities. Another potentially useful idea that follows from this is that NGOs constitute “portals” into wider social, political, and economic processes. Work on the state, political parties, and social movements offers a set of moving targets in which place is unsettled and personal identities and affiliations are blurred. Here perhaps it makes sense to try to reflect messiness and ambiguity by engaging with both the creativity of mess and chaos (Douglas 1966) and the need to see formlessness as a form (Bataille 1929). Does a notion of “weak theory” (Gibson-Graham 2014) help us to do justice to our subject matter through careful musing that can offset overdetermined theory?

Neoliberal systems with their dominant patterns of flexible accumulation are characterized by a form of “unstable stability” (Escobar 2014). NGOs are central to the analysis of contemporary neoliberalism, since as James Ferguson (2010:168) points out, a governance context has now been produced in which “de facto government” is “carried out by an extraordinary swarm of NGOs, voluntary organizations and private foundations.” The potential for NGOs—as “neoliberal bads,” in Arturo Escobar’s term—to produce “non-neoliberal goods” is a crucial question for our argument around productive instability, and it raises important questions about the point at which such instability might become unproductive. The insistence on residuality at the heart of the NGO category underpins an artificial distinction between states and markets that is now more open to challenge than ever. In whose interests does the “NGO” categorization operate? As William Fisher (2014) has argued, we may find that it is not the NGOs that are the shape shifters but the anthropologists and other scholars of NGOs who have overdetermined and shape shifted the category itself, so that it becomes emptied of meaning and simply means what we want it to mean, following Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Rather than focus on the NGO form itself, it might therefore be useful to think through NGO as a verb (Schuller 2016; Sharma 2014). Examining NGO practices (and relationships), rather than the category itself, may be a more useful way forward. As Hilhorst (2003:5) argued, “NGOs are not things, but processes, and instead of asking what an NGO is, the more appropriate question then becomes how NGO-ing is done.” A common critique after Haiti’s earthquake among people involved in social movements is “*ah! W ap fè ONG*” (you are NGO-ing), by which the speaker usually meant adopting a bureaucratic structure or adopting a project logic, justifying the use of foreign funding. “NGO-ing” (or the related practice of “do-gooding”) might make more sense as a signifier than “NGO” as a noun: NGOs all “act,” and these actions serve as justifications for their existence and use of funds. NGO actions include not only “do-gooding” but maintaining relationships and work done “internally.” Posed this way, the question “what do NGOs do?” as opposed to “what are NGOs?” can lead to a productive set of conversations exploring similarities between entities across sectors and organizational types. Since language both constructs and expresses social worlds, highlighted in a grammarology of NGOs is an analysis of relationships, determining who is envisioned as the subject and who is the object, recalling MacKinnon’s (1989) phrase “man fucks woman; subject verb object.” For example, in humanitarian parlance, the word “actor” is reserved for service agencies, not for recipient populations.

What is distinct about NGOing? How does do-gooding relate to similar collective activity? One point of comparison could be that, whereas a social movement is expected to move, NGOs institutionalize: NGOs create projects (Freeman 2014; Lwiji 2009), write reports (Hodžić 2011), respond to auditors (Shore and Wright 2000; Strathern 2000), mediate contact (Robins 2009b; Schuller 2009), and so on. Even in this more focused discussion, it would be misguided to look for rigid criteria that must always be met. Wittgenstein’s concept, translated as “family resemblances” (2010 [1953]) might be a useful way to think through the similarities of experience while acknowledging that a given NGO may be more or less hierarchical or have greater or lesser bureaucratic structures, not to mention the diversity of funding, national origin, or domain of interventions. This way, similarities can be sought without ignoring specificities. Fisher (2010) took issue with imbuing terms such as “NGO” and “civil society” with high or stable levels of analytical meaning. He argued instead for an approach informed by Wittgenstein’s ideas in the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1998 [1921]) about language, in which Wittgenstein argued that such categorizations are best seen as transitory reference points, serving as ladders that merely help one “to climb up to a new level of understanding and once there [they can be thrown] away” (Wittgenstein 1998 [1921]:252).

Conclusion

We have argued in this article that, given our history and methodology, anthropology is uniquely positioned to confront

the inherently unstable category of “NGO.” As Bernal and Grewal argued, NGOs are shape-shifters, perfectly suited to the changing dynamics of neoliberalism. Given the value systems within academic anthropology, we are taught to embrace hybridity, rewarded for what Geertz (1973) called “thick description,” or Boas’s “science of the particular” (see Hatch 1973). From both epistemological and ontological approaches—discussed above—NGOs are seen to defy categorization and serve as an ideological cover for “non” governments. We have argued that this inherent instability is productive, serving several particular users and uses of the form. NGOs can be used by local populations to channel dissent, advocate for resources, or develop the area. They can also be used by donor groups to weaken states and governments, depoliticize solutions to poverty, and serve as a “fig leaf” to cover the more destructive aspects of social and economic policies.

Perhaps it is we anthropologists who are the evil twin, as we too have made productive use of the contradictions that are found within the category of NGOs. Indeed, much of anthropologists’ writing on NGOs is in a deconstructive mode, pointing out the diversity of social groupings lumped under this category that seems purposefully vague. Anthropologists have been pointing out this inherent categorical instability since at least William Fisher’s 1997 review article. Why are scholars still writing on the subject today, one might well ask? And what does this portend for the vitality of an “anthropology of NGOs”?

We would like to offer some final reflections, admittedly provocative, as an attempt to inspire critical reflection and dialogue and ultimately to open up lines of productive engagement, not only in relation to scholarly inquiry but also through engaging NGO publics. This article has argued that, indeed, “NGO” is an unstable category, and so we share the concern and agree with much of this deconstructive theorizing. However, we are concerned about what appear to be two main sets of consequences. First, studies of NGOs within anthropology seem to continue to be of marginal importance to the discipline. We therefore suggest that NGOs need to be moved out of their marginal place within anthropological research and assume a far higher profile and visibility that is commensurate with their place in the world, their value as sites for theorization, and their potential as sites for reflecting on and rethinking anthropological engagement. Second, we suggest that anthropologists should also reflect further upon the limited impact they have had on the larger academic and policy conversations, both within scholarly journals and within NGOs themselves. We would like to briefly discuss both.

As we have argued in this article, anthropological theorizing on NGOs has reflected broader trends within anthropology. Following the discipline’s engagement with self-critique, particularly of the primitivism and Orientalism of earlier (s)avage anthropology, and certainly the continuing attachment to the exotic Other and the “savage slot” (Trouillot 2003), anthropologists increasingly seek research subjects that are fully connected with the world system. Calls to decolonize anthropology (Harrison 2010 [1991], write against culture (Abu-Lughod 1991), and

“study up” (Nader 1969) have each helped to create a stronger foundation upon which the currently strong focus on “public” or “engaged” anthropologies can rest. Scholarship on NGOs should have provided, and hopefully still can provide, an ideal model for the further elaboration of these movements within the discipline. For example, the study of NGOs as ideas and practices perhaps offers a set of “unconventional subjects and topics” that play to anthropologists’ strengths in the multisited analysis of “uncomfortable ambiguities” (Marcus 1998). However, articles on and not just in NGOs have only recently come to be published in *American Anthropologist* (Watanabe 2015), described as the “flagship” journal of the American Anthropological Association. *Current Anthropology*, the most widely cited journal in sociocultural anthropology, has not offered an article directly engaging the subject since a 1976 article on “voluntary associations” (Kerri 1976). It is also possible to interrogate the funding institutions, such as the Wenner-Gren. Doing so would be an interesting point of departure for further research; however, the top-tier journals are not only more transparent and easier to search for keywords but also offer a final disciplinary stamp of approval.

Anthropological work on NGOs potentially speaks to wider themes across the discipline. What can a deep, anthropological understanding of what Steve Sampson and Julie Hemment (2001) call “NGO-graphy” offer to the core stock of knowledge of the discipline, akin to the Gift, the Kula ring, or segmentary lineages? While it is possible that NGOs are too “messy,” too hybrid and privileged, not “pure” as an anthropological object (and thus, we may still have work to do in further decolonizing our praxis), it is equally possible that academic anthropological work on NGOs may produce theoretical models that engage, challenge, or add to canonical themes within anthropology (e.g., bands-tribes-chiefdoms-states, organic solidarity, kinship, or reciprocity).

Several writers in the Global South, from a wide variety of institutional locations, as scholars, activists and journalists, have posited a more critical rejection of NGOs as tools of neoliberalism and neocolonialism. Sociology and critical cultural studies have opened spaces for critical reflection, and as noted above, there is growing critical attention to NGO issues within political science. A set of radical, “foundational” (Ferguson 1990) critiques build on recipient communities’ disappointment with or suspicion of NGOs as political actors, what INCITE! (2007) termed the “nonprofit industrial complex.” Anthropology has long ceded its monopoly on ethnographic methods and claims of representation of marginalized groups—claims necessarily challenged by feminists, particularly feminists of color (Behar and Gordon 1995; Harrison 2008; Spivak 1988; Ulysse 2015). However, these critical discussions on NGOs have not yet been able to build on the insights of a critically engaged anthropology and on the lessons learned through anthropological self-critique and reflection. Although it could be that anthropology is being lapped by cultural studies scholars, it might also be a reflection of a subtler methodology, with ethnographic grounding tempering outright rejection of the “NGO form” (e.g., Bernal and Grewal 2014).

This is to say nothing of the more mainstream discussions of NGOs in economics, management, and development. While adopting—one might say appropriating—the insights of anthropology and the language of “participation,” mainstream development institutions continue to pursue top-down interventions that displace and impoverish local communities. This approach has long argued for reform of “mainstream” development thinking and practice in ways that are implicitly grounded in anthropological thinking; however, little if any of this “alternative” development has contained work directly produced by anthropologists themselves. It was utopian in character and invested with the hope that NGOs might provide the vehicles for new alternative, transformative ideas. Now that an anthropologist is head of the World Bank, will anthropologists be able to further shift the contours of the engagement, the terms of the dialogue, or will we still be primarily employed as imperialism’s shock troops, mopping up after messes and invited to offer rapid appraisals, evaluations, and impact assessments that do not challenge the assumptions behind development interventions and humanitarian solutions?

If these questions are admittedly loaded, even a little polemical, it is with the goal of engendering critical reflection and dialogue and hopefully encouraging a reinvigorated engagement that includes not only publication of scholarly texts but exchanges with a range of individuals who work with NGOs, from recipients to donors, frontline staff to directors. These exchanges include listening as well as critique, helping to craft research agendas that can bridge these yawning gaps in perspectives and priorities. To do so requires what might be called an anthropological imagination. This imagination acknowledges the ties that bind us and our specific places within the world system, our differential privilege, but also respects our differences. Tracking between the realms of lived experience to the species level, anthropological engagement roots the discussion in both local and global, as they are always intertwined. It is admittedly an ambitious task, but no more so than the study of “humankind.”

Comments

Victoria Bernal

Department of Anthropology, University of California, Irvine, 5251 Social Sciences Plaza B, Mail Code: 5100, Irvine, California 92697, USA (vbernal@uci.edu).

Lewis and Schuller provide a valuable and insightful overview of anthropology’s engagement with NGO research and some of the dilemmas that this raises. I find least interesting their arguments around why a new subfield of our discipline is needed on NGOs. Is it NGOs we really want to understand better, or is it, rather, that in order to understand what is going on in the world, we often need to deal with NGOs in some way? This makes a big difference in the kinds of research questions that will guide our research. I am not convinced that “productive

work lies ahead in charting similarities and differences” among NGOs. To what end? What are the compelling research questions that these similarities and differences could help to answer? The study of NGOs per se may not be the best approach to contribute to the development of anthropology’s methods and theories. The more productive focus might be on questions about power, work, aid, activism, and so on that may traverse NGOs, rather than on NGOs themselves. This may sound odd coming from a coeditor (in collaboration with Inderpal Grewal) of *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* (Bernal and Grewal 2014). However, that interdisciplinary anthology is focused on specific questions about feminist activism and gender relations in relation to the proliferation of NGOs.

Perhaps anthropologists could also take some insights from media studies and pay attention to the interplay between NGOs as a form and the diverse content that form is being used to connect or engage with various actors and audiences. In regard to NGOs, we thus might ask to what extent and under what conditions the medium is the message. In other words, the affordances and the constraints of the NGO form vary because NGOs are not one thing but are incredibly diverse in form and function, and they need to be examined in context. To the extent that NGOs are now an established feature of global and local landscapes of power, our research agendas are moving beyond the initial stage of trying to figure out just what this way of organizing or identifying is and why it has become so popular. New questions about intervention, activism, and north/south inequalities (among others) might productively shift the emphasis to the people, activities, and values involved in NGOs rather than focus on the enigma of the NGO that can be so many different things, including, in some contexts, governmental. For example, the line between NGOs and movements like Occupy, the Arab Spring, and Black Lives Matter may be less distinct than it seems if some of the important actors also are NGOs or become engaged with them around related causes. Activists are not necessarily limited to one means of pursuing their cause. NGOs are important, but there is a danger in taking them a priori as the starting point of research rather than posing a research question and following where it leads, which may include NGOs but not be coterminous with them.

The argument that anthropology—with its qualitative, interpretive methods and focus on taken-for-granted cultural values and assumptions—may have something valuable to contribute to the interdisciplinary field of research focused on NGOs is more convincing. Is it necessary, though, to establish a subfield of NGO studies in the discipline in order to claim credibility and expertise in interdisciplinary circles? Would it not be better to reach that audience by publishing powerful original ethnographic research in interdisciplinary journals? It is a constant lament of anthropologists that the world undervalues our work and pays too little attention to our research. I do not think creating new subfields in our discipline will address that, however. Perhaps we, as a discipline and in our roles as department chairs, hiring and promotion committee mem-

bers, and deans, as well as in other leadership positions, need to place a higher value on interdisciplinary engagement and count publications in recognized interdisciplinary journals with the same weight as publications within the discipline.

The thorniest questions raised by Lewis and Schuller are the profound ones about our own engagement in the world; our solidarity with or possible exploitation of people we study who may have less power, access, and mobility than the anthropologist; and also the question of how to conduct politically engaged, activist, or applied research in ways that produce high-quality scholarship. So far, our discipline has reflexively posed itself these questions, and they are now part of graduate training. There are no universal answers, because of the diversity of situations and of individual researchers. But we can strive, across the board, to make our standards of academic excellence more open and inclusive of a range of engaged scholarship. We need to get rid of modes of gatekeeping the boundaries of the discipline that stifle creative, innovative research that bridges academic, policy, applied, and/or activist contexts.

Erica Bornstein

Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, PO Box 413, Sabin Hall 390, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201, USA (elbornst@uwm.edu). 2 IX 16

Lewis and Schuller's thorough and thoughtful essay offers a useful historical overview of anthropological research with, in, and on NGOs. I appreciate the work the authors have done to generate conversations on the anthropology of NGOs. It is true that research with, in, and on NGOs has facilitated analysis of some of the most pressing issues of our times. For Lewis and Schuller, NGOs are mercurial, formless, "unstable" as a category, defined by what they are not, and "shape-shifters," to quote Bernal and Grewal (2014), and this conceptual ambiguity has produced a fertile arena for ethnographic analysis.

Yet it seems the authors are also doing some conceptual alchemy of their own. While reading the essay, I was reminded of a famous passage on ethnography written by Clifford Geertz, wherein he cautions readers not to mistake the physical world with physics or to confuse ethnographic sites with their content. He writes, "The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods . . .); they study *in* villages" (1973:22). Are NGOs our contemporary anthropological villages? Do we study in them or do we study them? Lewis and Schuller's essay stirs up this conundrum.

NGOs appear in at least four different guises in the essay, in a lexicon of sorts. (1) They are a category, an object of study. Here, NGOs are in the world with or without anthropology and ethnographic interpretation. For example, in my early research on World Vision (Bornstein 2003), the NGO existed in the world with or without my understanding of it. (2) NGOs are a site for anthropological research, a locus of study. World

Vision was a physical site for my ethnographic analysis of faith and development in Zimbabwe. It was an ethnographic location to explore theoretical questions about the role of religion in development in the rapidly changing global economy of the 1990s. (3) NGOs are a research area, an anthropological social construct, a professionalized zone of scholarship: the anthropology of NGOs. My ethnography of World Vision contributes to the anthropology of NGOs. (4) NGOs are a verb, a social process and an active space, referenced by the term NGO-ing. For the purposes of this commentary, I will leave the fourth use aside (as the authors have already discussed it) in order to explore 1–3 above.

The essay blurs boundaries between NGOs as objects of study, loci of study, and as a research area; however, professional institution building is not exactly the same thing as the actual ethnographic study of NGOs (either on or in them, as Geertz might say). The authors have gone to great lengths to build the anthropology of NGOs as a research area. They have, independently and together, started an interest section for the AAA on NGOs and nonprofits (<http://ngo.americananthro.org/about-us/>), organized a biennial conference linked to the interest section, and initiated a book series on the topic. I admit, I have been privileged to participate in many of these intellectually productive forums. Resulting from these efforts, the anthropology of NGOs is quickly becoming a subfield with its own set of debates, ancestors, and lineages. The essay contributes to the institutionalization of the anthropology of NGOs as a research area. It also provokes the following questions: What does it mean to study NGOs? When anthropologists study with, in, and on NGOs, are they studying the institutions as objects and/or sites, or are they studying what the NGOs signify? Here we are back in Geertz's interpretive territory.

To say "anthropologists study NGOs" is to assert they are ethnographic objects of study, social formations anthropologists seek to analyze, interpret and understand. If we assume NGOs are distinct social spaces worthy of ethnographic analysis, what makes them distinct remains an empirical question, and I have a hunch their distinction can be attributed to more than their categorical instability. As I have written elsewhere, our ability to study with, in, and on NGOs and to consider them a discrete category of analysis may be linked to their institutional structures as nonprofits that are donor dependent (Bornstein 2014a, forthcoming; Bornstein and Sharma 2016). What if NGOs were not donor dependent? Would it change the way anthropologists worked with them? I think it would. If the NGOs I have studied throughout my career were mines or shops instead of NGOs, where would the delicate spaces be through which I had to tread lightly as an ethnographer? NGOs are institutions that serve public interest, and their nonprofit motive affects their orientations and priorities and alters the types of research that ethnographers are able to conduct with, in, and on them. Thus, when we study NGOs, we might think more deeply about why we are studying them.

Returning to Geertz, anthropologists today might not be interested in villages for the sake of studying villages. We prob-

ably would not think twice about a proposal to create an interest section on the anthropology of villages—how outmoded! Yet NGOs are considered valid research entities (objects of study) and conceptual sites (loci of study), while villages are not. Why? What do NGOs signify in our ethnographic imagination? I suspect that if we interrogate the anthropology of NGOs a little further we may conclude that anthropologists who study NGOs are actually studying in NGOs, and they are studying what NGOs do: environmentalism, development, defending human rights, social justice activism, and humanitarianism. Anthropologists are also studying what NGOs represent. Because NGOs address the most vexing social problems of our contemporary era, research with, in, and on NGOs enables anthropologists to tackle these issues as well.

Manzurul Mannan

Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Independent University, Bangladesh, Plot 16, Block B, Aftabuddin Sorok, Bashudhara R/A, Dhaka-1229, Bangladesh (manzurulmannan@gmail.com). 16 3 16

“Where Do We Go from Here? Break the Cycle of Global Policy Language of NGOs”

In their overview of anthropological studies of NGOs, Lewis and Schuller conclude that the category of NGO is “productively unstable.” From this determination, they then offer a deep level of introspection for the discipline of anthropology and for finding relevancy in the area study of NGOs and development.

Lewis and Schuller touch on a few significant directions in the area study of NGOs that I would encourage. First, however, I would make a few observations about the authors’ pronouncing the category of NGOs as “productively unstable,” which implies an erstwhile expectation of stability from a social formation that is self-defining. Anthropologists are not tasked to dictate the terms and expectations of NGOs but rather to take clues from the organizations’ malleability as they define and redefine themselves to their stakeholders and the public. A researcher can, then, observe the manipulation of the term (and the object, also, in this case) and associated discourse in whatever context it functions to uncover deeper significance and processes and chart the shifts and varying effects in target sociocultural spheres of operation. Anthropologists are well equipped to provide evidence-based challenges to the constructed illusions and discourse that NGOs and their associates perpetuate. The authors report that such deconstruction efforts by anthropologists have been published, and I contend that this trend will become increasingly necessary in the study of this global phenomenon.

Significantly, the authors’ review essentially poses the question for an anthropology of NGOs of “where do we go from here?” While they hint at some answers, I will suggest more specifically what the discipline might do. Again, a bit of deconstruction of the “productively unstable” description offers a clue.

For whom is the category unstable? It is unstable for specialized groups of Western-based or Western-oriented academics. Herein lies the crux of my argument: the sources informing the label derive primarily from Western anthropologists and institutions usually too embedded in dominant Western discourses of development and the new colonialism—neoliberalism, or globalization—to be able to challenge the status quo adequately. To break from the process of recycling knowledge in the upper stratum of global power—and to grasp the dynamics and effects of NGOs better—anthropology must search across sources of knowledge that are related to NGOs; encourage and incorporate more widely and deeply the voices of the global South (of scholars and targets of aid); and as Issa G. Shivji said, “analyse the objective effects of action, regardless of their intentions” (2007:16); and break the top-down, Western-based cycle of the global policy language (GPL) that informs the “development-scape” (Mannan 2015:8–13) and surreptitiously drives NGOs.

GPL describes a process of knowledge production rooted in Western ideologies, theories, and institutions (Mannan 2015) that informs a target area of development (a development-scape). GPL concomitantly ignores the particular historical and current realities of sociocultural, political, and economic dynamics. This ahistorical, selective foci aspect of GPL creates a vacuum that it fills with its own myths, such as the idea that NGOs, as nonprofit organizations, function as a third sector (in addition to government and the economy) and are, therefore, nonpolitical and have nothing to do with power or production.

GPL is based on information from NGO development projects primarily located in developing countries, which is then articulated, debated, and reconceptualized in Western knowledge-production institutions (e.g., universities, research institutions, and think tanks). Development knowledge then flows back into developing countries through NGOs, development agencies, and organizations. After the completion of a project in 3–5 years, the expected outcomes are often beset by new, hybrid, deeper problems. New problems mean more theorizing and design by the same entities that produced the current problems.

GPL assumes a perspective that aspects of some spheres of recipients’ lives are abnormal (Escobar 2005), which feeds a discourse of negative Orientalism. NGO projects are essentially designed to manipulate poor men and women to transform traditional sociocultural structures and agency in all strata of society. The transformation policies produce new problems and hybridity that benefit NGOs according to the imperatives of development. That is, the organizational structures of NGOs allow them to gain access to material and ideological resources to further their power rather than to concentrate on their originally expressed aim of alleviating poverty in developing countries.

Anthropology is ideally suited to deconstruct how development knowledge is produced through GPL and represented and implemented by NGOs. NGO projects impact people at all levels of their life, and anthropologists, with their keenly honed methods and critical stance, are perfectly positioned to assess the impacts in specific sociocultural, historical contexts. How-

ever, researching or working for NGOs without comprehending global processes within which NGOs are embedded will only further marginalize anthropology to irrelevancy. A good approach for NGO anthropology begins by dropping debate between development anthropologists (those who design, implement, or evaluate programs of change) and anthropologists of development (those who study and critique development agencies and activities) and by converging the areas into a single analytical framework that affords anthropologists a voice in and compatibility with other disciplines in development.

I further recommend that anthropologists engaged with NGOs find relevancy beyond academia and be leaders in challenging the machinations of neoliberalism: NGOs cannot be pro-people and pro-change without also being anti-imperialist and anti-status quo (Shivji 2007). It is crucial for anthropologists to don anew the mantle of activism to give relevancy to their intellectualism.

Reply

We are grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewers for this opportunity to engage in a conversation with eminent scholars such as Victoria Bernal, Erica Bornstein, and Manzurul Mannan. We appreciate their questions and critiques. It was just this sort of dialogue we had hoped for when writing the piece.

We generally agree with most of the comments from all three respondents as useful continuations of the self-analysis and critique that led us to write the article. However, we wish to clarify some points that the helpful critiques raised.

We share with Bernal the interest in interrogating when the “medium becomes the message” and resoundingly endorse her call for interdisciplinarity and recommendations for changes to our praxis. As part of the group that has attempted to convene a more formal conversation about NGO studies within anthropology, we both have also advocated against a ghettoization in favor of publishing within both inter- and interdisciplinary journals. We also share Bernal’s interest in working “through” NGOs to get at “what is going on in the world” in terms of power, work, aid, gender relations, and activism. As noted in our paper, NGOs are important precisely because of the roles they play, and studying them contributes to understanding these wider themes. NGOs can serve as “portals” into these other productive questions.

However, we do not share Bernal’s skepticism about the value of sustained work within anthropology that focuses on NGOs per se. One reason NGOs are important is because they, too, are part of “what is going on in the world”—as participants in social movements, as employers of an educated middle class, and as advocates, developers, and humanitarians in all corners of the world—and therefore need to be understood as such. We therefore prefer not to frame this answer to this question as a binary “either/or.” Both need to be prioritized.

Following from this important dilemma, we believe there is value in charting similarities and differences among NGOs. The process of definition of NGOs can be an inherently political process. We are interested in how such differences are constructed and understood, and we believe that there are important connections to be found between analyzing and understanding these differences (and the meanings attributed to them) and the “people, activities, and values involved in NGOs.” We believe a productive bridge can be constructed between what Bernal describes as the “enigma” of the NGO (that can mean so many different things to different people in different contexts) and the need to identify the sorts of compelling research questions we all agree need to be taken forward.

As critical scholars who have sustained entanglements with collectivities termed “NGOs,” we want to guard against the unhelpful polemics that often arise when discussing the term, which may be related to methodological isolationism. Learning lessons from others’ experiences is at the core of a praxis-oriented engaged scholarship that a comparative frame engenders. For example, are “do-gooders” any more or less likely than “activists” to be dependent on donors? Are both, at least in part, constrained by logics of outputs and visibility? Valuing and providing meaningful spaces for this scholarly exchange is the promise we saw when asking whether a subfield might be useful. We also argue that the subject of NGOs is generating a body of work that could form an effective vehicle for furthering anthropological engagement not only with interdisciplinary research and scholarship but also with arenas of policy and practice. Whether anthropologists engage with undocumented communities, climate justice, or the current refugee crisis, sooner or later we come into contact with an assemblage “NGOing.”

We agree with Bernal that anthropologists need to engage more fully with interdisciplinary scholarship, but we do not see this hampered by the creation of a stronger subfield of NGO studies within anthropology. Again, this is not an either/or situation, and in fact, a strengthened corpus, perhaps more readily identifiable on search engines, can facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration.

Bornstein raises a related set of issues around subject and content. We find Bornstein’s reference to Geertz on the locus of study very helpful in raising the distinction between studying NGOs and studying in NGOs. We appreciate the four-level lexicon she develops here (NGOs as object, locus, area, and verb) as a powerful way to frame and move forward anthropological work in this area. Anthropologists such as Markowitz (2001) and Hilhorst (2003) have similarly focused attention on what constitutes “the field” and how to study it. We argue that NGOs offer unique opportunities to study the architecture of the contemporary neoliberal world system (Schuller 2009). We argue that it should not only be possible but also highly desirable to study both what villages (or NGOs) are and what they represent.

Our concern with the traditional ways in which anthropologists represented “villages” was that they were often hermeneutically sealed. As Roseberry (1989) noted of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz failed to note colonial and postcolonial/na-

tionalist systems of power operating. This is even more true today. Crawford (2008) offers an example of how to study villages within the global economy. Given their rapidly changing links with outside forces and the growing preoccupations of both social scientists and policy makers with all matters urban, now might actually be a good time to study what villages are as well as what they mean, so an anthropological counterpart to “rural sociology” might be timely indeed.

Bornstein flags the importance of the disruptive underpinnings of material resource flows as an important source of instability in addition to the categorical instabilities around NGOs that we discuss in the paper. Her question about donor dependency is poignant and very well taken, as it also conditions the ways that anthropologists work with NGOs. It is worth noting that not all NGOs are externally funded: Lewis encountered a local NGO in Nigeria that decided not to take donor funding despite it being readily available. This decision formed a central part of its organizational identity, which members identified as an important source of its effectiveness. In the contemporary United States, Black Lives Matter and the resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline are deliberately diffuse in their leadership structure, blurring boundaries regarding tax-deductible donations to resist disciplinary functions of the 501(c)(3) designation. In this way, activists consciously attempt to disrupt the “non-profit industrial complex” (INCITE! 2007), as discussed in the 2013 Critical Ethnic Studies conference (incidentally, held months before the first biennial conference that Bornstein notes, also in Chicago). It is precisely these sorts of differences that highlight different forms of activism (to return to Bernal’s earlier point), and anthropologists will also need to question the assumptions that they too bring to the category “NGO.” In this way Bornstein’s suggested framework assists us further in finding workable solutions to the potential problems Bernal raised.

Finally, we could not agree more with Mannan’s statement about the need to overcome the unhelpful divide between development anthropologists and anthropologists of development. This is explicitly the point of the third biennial conference to be held November 2017. Mannan challenges us to pay closer attention to the question of “for whom” the categories discussed here are unstable. His concern is that we may still be too embedded in dominant Western discourses of development and the new colonialism—neoliberalism, or globalization—to be able to challenge the status quo adequately. We accept this as fair critique. Noted in the paper and in Bernal’s comments, there is a critical need to take anthropological work out of the ivory tower to engage with the system of power he usefully describes as “global policy language” by interrogating this in relation to NGOs. We acknowledge the need to communicate the themes of our article, particularly in our respective fieldwork locations of Haiti and Bangladesh, through discussion and debate locally and through translation. But to go back to the earlier point about anthropology’s relevance and power to influence the world, it might also be the case that we are not embedded enough to be able to act in a meaningful way on these forces of global inequality.

There is still, as each set of comments makes clear, plenty to be done. We look forward to continuing to take part in productive conversation and engagement around NGOs.

—David Lewis and Mark Schuller

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