

Bridge over Black[ened] Water: A New Refrain for NGOs

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In 1970, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel released their award-winning album, “Bridge over Troubled Water.”[1] Although the album’s title song was not produced as part of a social marketing campaign for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), its lyrics seem well-suited for that purpose. For example, the first verse and refrain state:

When you’re weary, feeling small
When tears are in your eyes,
I will dry them all
I’m on your side
When times get rough
And friends just can’t be found

Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down (Simon and Garfunkel, 1970)

In particular, the lyrics above could be used to promote one of the images of NGOs – those “new great organizations” – that I mentioned in my contribution to the first issue of *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (Ginsburg 1998). Such NGOs could be described metaphorically as a bridge, available to help people in need to cross over, whether the troubled water refers to hunger, disease, poverty, or inadequate education. The conception of NGOs as “new great organizations” is informed by a preference for “privatized” democracy (see Sehr, 1997), and can be contrasted with a view of NGOs as “no good organizations,” which undermine opportunities for people to engage in “public” democratic (Sehr, 1997) processes to shape state policy and action. Simon and Garfunkel’s song is less likely to support this latter image of NGOs, however, unless the troubled water is seen as the workings of authoritarian and corrupt states.

I still feel comfortable with what I wrote ten years ago, that how one views NGOs depends on one’s perspective, and thus my reflections here will focus more on extending the analysis, rather than revising it. I will do this by considering three relatively recent developments, which in different ways have provoked me to keep wrestling with the question posed in that 1998 article: “what’s in an acronym?”

The first development connects to my activity as a journal editor and a scholar. In working with David Suarez on his manuscript that was eventually published in the *Comparative Education Review*, I came to appreciate how intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) can serve as “receptor sites for transnational ideas... promot[ing] and diffus[ing] ... global models at the national level” (Suarez, 2007, p. 53). Building on Suarez’s analysis of the role of NGOs in developing and diffusing ideas and practices in human rights education, Mayumi Terano and I analyzed the role of NGOs in mobilizing participation in UNESCO’s Culture of Peace Programme, specifically in India and Japan (Terrano and Ginsburg,

2008). Through this activity, I encountered further evidence to support a positive image of NGOs. Here are cases where NGOs are playing a “great” role – promoting human rights education and encouraging people to organize their lives in support of peace. Moreover, they are doing this sometimes in coordination with an intergovernmental organization or a nation-state, though their efforts are sometimes focused on the non-human rights and non-peaceful agendas of some nation-states.

The second development has been associated with changes in the institutional location of my professional work. Between 1976, when I received my doctorate, and 2004, when I began working on the Education Reform Program in Egypt, I based my professional life in universities. Most recently, in September 2006, I took up a position at the headquarters of the Academy for Educational Development (AED), a “nonprofit organization working globally to improve education, health, civil society and economic development ... collaborat[ing] with local and national partners ... [and] serving people in all 50 U.S. states and more than 150 [other] countries” (AED, 2007). Given its core values (passion, respect, results, integrity, innovation, diversity, and excellence) and its mission (“to make a positive difference in peoples’ lives by working in partnership to create and implement innovative solutions to critical social and economic problems”) (AED, 2007), it seems appropriate to view this NGO as an example of a “new great organization.” However, the situation is more complex in that most of AED’s international education activities are performed under contract from bilateral organizations (especially, U.S. Agency for International Development), multilateral organizations, ministries of education, and corporations. Because there may be contradictions among these organizations as well as between these organizations and groups of educators and other citizens in given countries, the nature of AED’s activities may be viewed positively or negatively by the various stakeholders. For example, providing technical assistance – as part of a USAID-funded Education Reform Program – to Egyptian faculties of education in their efforts to develop and implement institutional improvement plans could be seen as a positive and professionally productive contribution or a negative and culturally destructive intervention. This is particularly the case because of the different views (e.g., by equilibrium and conflict theorists – see Ginsburg, 1998) of the contributions of international organizations in this arena. Nevertheless, as is the case of workers in most organizational contexts (Ginsburg, 1988), I and other AED staff strive to meet the challenges of existing or potential contradictions. (E.g., in a case where the U.S. government “negotiates” with another government to provide technical assistance, training and research; then contracts the work to NGOs, who hire U.S. and local country staff; and then activities are organized via some form of participatory decision making with local educators and community members within a contractual framework and under U.S. and other government observation, whose interests are really being served?)

The third development has perhaps had the biggest impact on my thinking, if not as much yet on my actions. This deals with the revelations of the role of Blackwater Worldwide and other NGOs[2], which have been the recipients of U.S. contracts for security work in Iraq. Here I do not want to discuss the legitimacy of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, which has been the subject of disagreements among governments and among citizens in a variety of countries. I also will sideline an assessment of the reasonableness of the level of force used against Iraqis by Blackwater employees in several incidents, though this is the subject of official investigations as well as informal debates (see Johnson and Broder, 2007).[3] Instead, I want to highlight the issue of a government contracting out (combat-zone) security duties, in the case of Iraq, creating “the largest private security force ever employed by the United States in wartime” (Fainaru, 2007). [4] At least in comparison to providing education and other social services, it seems less likely that the use of NGOs (in this case, private firms) is more cost-effective; certainly the contracted

employees are paid much more than regular military personnel, not to mention national guard troops. And it is hard to argue that private security firms can measure up better than government-run operations in terms of the degree of citizen (democratic) control that can be exercised over its activities.[5] In this regard, note that since June 2004, contractors have had “immunity from Iraqi law” (decreed in CPA Order 17, signed by L. Paul Bremer, 27 June 2004) and that “the laws governing security contractors ... have not been clarified” (Fainaru, 2007). Therefore, I am inclined to conclude that whether or not one generally favors a role for NGOs and whether or not one is a proponent of privatized or public forms of democracy (see Ginsburg, 1998; Sehr, 1997), that contracting out combat-zone security functions to nongovernmental organizations pushes privatization too far. Indeed, it pushes this matter “over the rail,” transforming even the most hopeful image of NGOs as providing a “bridge over troubled water” into one where U.S. and Iraqi people will have to struggle to build a bridge over the now “black[ened] water.”

In revisiting my contribution to the 1998 CICE special issue on NGOs, I still can see the “new great” and the “no good” notions of “what’s in an acronym.” If anything, it becomes clearer to me that the issue of whether or not an organization is a nongovernmental entity, though relevant, may be less important than the nature of its work (human rights, peace education, development, security, military combat) and the government or other sources from which it obtains the resources (human and financial) to do such work. In this sense, we are likely to see – from different perspectives – NGOs both contributing to troubling, muddying, or even “blackening” the waters as well building bridges over such troubled waters to enhance the lives of humans and other living things.

Notes

- [1]. This was the final album by Simon and Garfunkel. It was released in January 1970 and “reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart on February 28, 1970, and stayed on top of the chart for six weeks” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bridge_over-Troubled-Water_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bridge_over-Troubled-Water_(song))), p. 1 of 4; accessed 6 January 2008.
- [2]. Blackwater, founded in 1996, is a for-profit organization, and thus some might not include it under the heading of NGOs. However, although the United Nations definition of NGOs excludes for-profit organizations, as Willets (2004) observes, “many NGOs generate income from commercial activities” and “a few intergovernmental economic organizations do allow an individual company to have access under their provisions for NGO.”
- [3]. Much attention has been focused on the incident on 16 September 2007, when “Blackwater guards opened fire ... at a Baghdad traffic circle, killing 17 Iraqi civilians,” but there were previous incidents that have been noted, for examples, 7 February 2006 in Kirkuk and 24 May in downtown Baghdad (Fainaru, 2007).
- [4]. Fainaru (2007) reports that “[p]rivate security firms rushed into Iraq after the 2003 invasion [because the] ... U.S. military, which entered the country with 130,000 troops, needed additional [human resources] to protect supply convoys, military installations, and diplomats. ... The [U.S.] Defense Department has paid \$2.7 billion for private security ... [and the U.S.] State Department has paid \$2.4 billion for private security ... since 2003.”
- [5]. My point is not that U.S. (let alone Iraqi) citizens can completely control the security work (or other activities) of the U.S. in Iraq. That for many months the majority of U.S. citizens did not support the war or the occupation is a clear reminder of this. The point is that U.S. citizens have even less direct control over the actions of private contractors, who some argue are not even effectively controlled by U.S. government authorities (see Fainaru, 2007).

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