

On Some Obvious Oxymorons

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If 'socialite' rather than 'socialist'¹ has elicited more public interest these past few years, it is because the socialists have been lagging behind. Baby Arenas lost at the polls, but for an amateur, she has arguably displayed a better grasp of civil society theory than all the factions of the Left combined.

While President Ramos' very special friend busied herself mediating between the citizenry and high-ranking State officials, the leading lights of the New New Left were busy ingesting the latest leftwing theory – it is actually a decade old – which purports also to be about mediation between the citizenry and the State. Whether the local popularizers of the civil society theory got the point is another matter altogether.

This observer had always thought that the faddish equation 'NGOs + POs = civil society' had its roots in a number of misconceptions about hegemony theory. The Mexican intellectual Jorge Castañeda's book *Utopia Unarmed* confirms this prejudice: even in the continent of its origin, he says, the Latin American 'model' is riddled with such theoretical confusion as to make key terms of the discourse interchangeable.² It does not help either to be informed that

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Latin America has this weakness for 'the most fashionable notions, not the more meaningful but less trendy ideas.'⁵ Why cannot Filipinos be more original and import their theories straight from Europe?

The fad will not die out so soon, as the Left needs all the straws it can clutch, but since 'an unexamined theory is not worth implementing,' the following comments are offered as a starting point for debate.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) are just the latest newcomers to the world of 'actually-existing' civil society and, as they are currently constituted, are atypical elements at that.

Insisting on the formula that 'NGOs and POs are civil society' and vice versa is like designating Hawaii as *the USA*, and thus, make 'When I was in Oahu' equivalent to 'When I was Stateside.' Local proponents of the civil-society theory, therefore, preempt all examination of, and condemn to oblivion, *the established*, operational, time-tested civil society which in the Western world – and in the Philippines, to the extent that mainstream Philippine society is, in general, Westernized – has always been bourgeois society. The term 'bürgerliche Gesellschaft' means either 'civil society' or 'bourgeois society,' depending on the context of the user's intention.⁴

Viewed thus in their proper perspective, NGOs and POs are nothing but the good old 'civic' or 'voluntary associations' that flourished in the Western democracies, dressed up in modern garb and with a hint of leftist rhetoric thrown in for good measure. Two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that such associations have reinforced American democracy. The American penchant for getting together in order to 'get things done,' but keeping the government at arm's length in so

many invisible but efficacious ways, has maintained the proper relationship between political society, *i.e.*, the State, and civil society which, in turn, favors the optimal conditions for the maintenance of the free-enterprise system. The tolerance and diversity that characterize extant civil society do not, however, mean that the political environment of free enterprise is pregnant with socialism as it is conventionally defined. This is a common error on the part of the Left.

Interestingly enough, in the Western nations where civil society is most established, even today, very few citizens know and care to use the term much like fishes that remain blissfully unconscious of the water where they are immersed. Filipinos take for granted that the first Rotary and Jaycees clubs and the first stock exchange in Asia were established in this US-colonized country. The young women of Malolos, who a century ago petitioned for night classes, were also civil society in action. The NGOs have invented nothing new.

It should be no surprise to anyone that the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP) claims to be an NGO. In fact, it precedes the NGO phenomenon by at least one generation. Prefiguring the NGO phenomenon are the old and new National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), those umbrella organizations which make possible the different permutations among the media, the Church, civic organizations, big business, moderate trade unions, and pressure groups, among others, all for a 'good cause.' All for clean elections, yes, but also for the subliminal reinforcement of the class rule of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, elections represent the privileged moment when the interests of the State and civil society, *i.e.*, NAMFREL, converge in the closest embrace and reiterate the fundamental compatibility of

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their values. In the Philippines, it is only when the occupant of State power incurs the massive anger of the sectors of civil society, as what happened toward the end of the Quirino and Marcos regimes, that a rupture between civil society and the State ensues. It is enough that the unpopular chief of state be evicted for civil society and the State to effect a quick reconciliation.

As an extreme example of the democratic function civil society fulfills, there is the National Rifle Association (NRA), whose permanent lobby consecrates the hallowed American principle of the primacy of the individual over society. The NRA's defense of the citizen's 'constitutional right' to bear arms flatters even the average

American's sense of freedom: abrogate that right and you do not just hurt the NRA, you tarnish America's reputation as the Land of the Free. In the Philippine setting, even a Ferdinand Marcos appreciated the propaganda value of leaving pretty much alone a critical institution like the University of the Philippines. This icon of democracy and bastion of free inquiry was not to be closed down during Martial Law.⁵

Bourgeois society's ability to elicit from its citizens their subscription to basically the same beliefs, values, standards, and 'common sense' as those of the ruling class is what fascinated Gramsci and other theoreticians of hegemony. In so many words, they posed the question of how the ruling class in the West was possessed of such self-assurance and stability as to dispense with the usual instruments of coercion, *e.g.*, courts, police, penitentiary system, *etc.*, that were used to obtain consent to the rule of the dominant class. The best way to appreciate the importance of this problem is to compare Western governments

with those of the so-called socialist republics of the twentieth century. The Marxist-Leninist ruling bureaucrats felt so insecure in their claim to legitimacy and power that they suppressed all economic and socio-political spaces which could harbor manifestations of independence or autonomy from the all-powerful State or ruling party. Because the State had an insecurity complex, the only private sphere it could tolerate outside of the family was that of the State-created or State-controlled organization: a contradiction in terms. It may be argued that the Bolshevik model succeeded, for a time, only in those countries where very little or no civil society existed.

As tautological as it may sound, therefore, the answer to the hegemony riddle is that, the Western bourgeoisie is dominant because it enjoys hegemony – that moral superiority of a given class freely acquiesced to and internalized, as a matter of course, by all, including the so-called dominated classes; hence, the necessity for Western and semi-Western revolutionaries of adopting a ‘war of position’ strategy which consists of the body of ideas and values that, it is hoped, will make the superiority of socialism, or whatever it is that supposedly supersedes capitalism, in all fields a natural and freely-acquiesced-to proposition. This much can be presumed as the post-Leninist lesson learned by the proponents of ‘NGOs + POs = CS.’ But if it is true, as Castañeda asserts, that socialism is dead⁶, why bother at all to play these war games, and what socialist ideas are still worth fighting for?

A misreading of Gramsci has paved the way, in Western and non-Western Marxist circles alike, for the oxymoronic idea of a *planned*

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civil society. This forcing of a natural process is as feasible in the real world as the mercifully shortlived 'Proletcult,' *i.e.*, proletarian culture, launched in the USSR in the early 1920s.

Taking off from the basically correct premises that (1) the dominant ideas of a given period are the ideas of the ruling class and (2) the bourgeoisie's conquest of State power was preceded by its domination of the civil society that was coeval with its ascendancy, the partisans of 'NGO + PO = CS' have stumbled upon the feeble-minded notion of building a preconceived and made-to-order apparatus for the reproduction of ruling-class values and belief systems that will hopefully hook up somewhere in time with the post-capitalist society in gestation. In short, if the bourgeoisie could do it, the proletariat or its surrogate class also can, equipped as it is with the theoretical tools to map its way to ruling-class hegemony.

But how the projected hegemony would behave, in a manner compatible with and favorable to that future utopia, is

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not and cannot be elucidated by our theoreticians. This is not surprising, for the civil society phenomenon yields no lessons which can buttress post-Marxist prejudices. It obeys laws which function independently of the most cunning socialist's calculations. No conscious blueprint, no set itinerary, no quota precise-to-the-last-decimal attended the founding of the Rotary Clubs, Hollywood, or the Internet, or those other wildly successful solicitors of consent to ruling-class hegemony; yet the new theory, fixated on the do-gooder and voluntarist essence of the non-governmental sector, proffers the possibility that NGOs, presenting yet another environmental

advocacy platform, or POs with, say, a rural livelihood project, can so improve the character of existing civil society as to usher in – what? the classless planet? the non-coercive abolition of exploitation of man by man? the universal use of politically correct language? What ‘alternative lifestyles’ as yet unknown to human consciousness will spring forth from this anticipated hegemony? Well, the age of NGOs is not coincidentally also the age of virtual reality.

Unless skepticism over the Ramos administration’s unfulfilled promises has changed their mind, popular democracy subscribers to the Latin American theory remain the natural promoters, on the Left, of what it euphemistically terms a ‘dialogue’ with the government. Ramos’ cooptation of terms like ‘people empowerment’ and ‘sustainable development’ has apparently gone over very well with the poppems and other moderates, who show willingness to meet him halfway in a shared effort to attain the goal of NICHood by the year 2000. Old ties with a few Ramos advisers also seem to have facilitated the New New Left leaders’ leap of faith.

Skeptical NGOs and POs are urged not to reject *Philippines 2000* out of hand, but to “engage the administration in a wide-ranging dialogue on the issue.” They must also rethink “old Left ideas on import liberalization, devaluation, and nationalist industrialization,”⁷ presumably like the great nationalist-turned-FVR-adviser Larry Henares, who, let it be said, knows a great opportunity when he sees it.

This unsolicited advice revives memories of the ill-advised united front of the *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas* (PKP) with Marcos. It also raises the following question: what makes the New New Left think that Malacañang will sit up and pay

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attention to its spiel? For all their glib talk about mobilizing civil society, the New New Leftists still have to show the government that they can make a difference in the way that development planning is conceived and implemented. What can they say or do about the business of attaining NICHood that Lee Kuan Yew, Mohamad Mahathir, or the NEDA bureaucrats, cannot say or do better?

Having signified through its body english that it no longer swears by Leninist methods, yet remaining outside of the parliamentary struggle, the New New Left is reduced to its self-defined role of 'monitoring and criticizing' government's failures to live up to its proclaimed development goals, and even 'challenging' it to go beyond elite and factional interests. As if government cared to respond to that challenge. As if anybody in the New New Left were seriously 'challenging' anything in State policies, in fact, at the present period, when it is of utmost importance for a self-styled tactical ally to appear as non-hostile to FVR as possible.

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What the Ramos government *might* find some time for, however, is the rejectionists' marginal utility as vehicles of a Leftwing but anti-communist message. These critics of the CPP hard line are trying hard to get the government into initiating 'peace talks' with them. But as the Ramos advisers seem to be thinking, what is there to 'negotiate' with these guys?

In the meantime, the NGO-PO crowd must come to terms with the realization that the NICHood game is best left to the real players: state planners, entrepreneurs, investors, and skilled manpower. The mythical

Philippine 'model' which allegedly blends, in a unique mix for Asia, democracy and development might have to be shelved as the respective comparative advantages of China, Vietnam, and other authoritarian, cheap labor countries become that much clearer to the global market.

The *Philippines 2000* discourse conceals the fact that the country's productive forces are unduly curtailed by a weak, unresponsive, unimaginative State, but whose present occupants are only too happy to see the NGOs and POs deliver the services which state functionaries

are paid by taxpayers to do. The symbiosis makes both bureaucrats and the non-governmental sector happy: the former, because of the unsolicited assistance, making malversation so much easier, and the latter, because of the warm glow they derive from the thought that they are adding another stone to the edifice of civil society. But theory-spouting NGOs or banana-chips manufacturing POs propelling the country on to NICHood? Nothing is impossible in this country – look at all those USAID or Malacañang-funded NGOs, those oxymorons running around – but something tells me it is not going to work.

A word, finally, on 'global civil society.' It is a great slogan, but its viability in programmatic terms remains to be seen. It is fuzzy, it is New Age, and above all it is bound to be expensive for funding agencies. In these times of growing 'donor fatigue,' there is a corresponding rise in the cynicism privately expressed by foundation personnel and First World diplomats about the unproductive junkets of the professional purveyors of

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developmental discourse. With all that it portends of heightened Frequent Flyer networking, the nascent 'global civil society' will one day have to pass the acid test of sustainable funding.

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Jorge Castañeda's advice to the so-called South to look Northwards, specifically USA-wards, for help in its various struggles may yet be regretted by American consulates around the world. Just think of all the potential TNTs among Left-leaning Filipinos, a greater percentage of the population than one might think, whose visa applications will state as their aim for going Stateside: "to empower my NGO's relationship with global civil society."

NOTES

¹ A useful distinction is made here between socialist and communist.

² See Jorge Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, 1994, pp. 195-201.

³ Castañeda, p. 442.

⁴ Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Vol. 1, 1977, pp. 33, 145.

⁵ Although a state institution, the UP "takes no orders from anyone" and cultivates a tradition of autonomy from all sorts of politicians and bureaucrats; these perceived ideas were severely put to a test during the selection of the University president in 1993.

⁶ Castañeda, pp. 240-241, 244, 474.

⁷ "NiChood by the Year 2000: Vision or Illusion?," *Conjuncture*, February-March 1993, pp. 1, 3.