

The NGO-Industrial Complex - Canada and beyond

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***Paved with Good Intentions: Canada's development NGOs from idealism to imperialism.* By Nikolas Barry-Shaw and Dru Oja Jay. Fernwood Publishing, Black Point, NS, 2012. 302 pages, \$24.95 (Canadian) paperback.**

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IN ONE SENSE, I came of age with regard to the problems with Canadian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) around the same time that Nikolas Barry-Shaw and Dru Oja Jay's new book *Paved with Good Intentions* was conceived. In late 2003 I had stayed for four months in Johannesburg, South Africa on a journalism internship where I hung around with dedicated grassroots activists who, after years of struggle against apartheid, were organizing against the policies of the African National Congress.

Their struggles were against privatization and displacement, and in favor of economic justice. Every meeting, demonstration, dinner and march meant an inspiring mix of old school trade unionists and commies, militant women, and younger anti-capitalist and anti-colonial fighters. I began to learn what popular resistance against the state and capitalist democracy looks like.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) would not have approved, but it funded the trip and a monthly stipend, organized through the Montreal-based NGO Alternatives. Yet not long after I returned from South Africa, I learned that the same person responsible for setting interns up with the comrades and fighters in Africa was also promoting groups in Haiti hostile to the leftwing Lavalas movement, publishing an article reprinted in a major Montreal newspaper criminalizing the resistance movements and those close to ousted president Jean Bertrand Aristide.

Upon learning about this seeming contradiction, I joined other former Alternatives interns in signing off on a letter expressing my discontent with the organization's role in Haiti. It seemed to me at the time that the people and organizations of Haiti were being sacrificed by Alternatives staff in order to secure money that would allow them to do the projects they really cared about, in South Africa or elsewhere.

My experience with Alternatives taught me that very few things with regards to Non-Governmental Organizations are clear cut or straightforward. Barry-Shaw and Jay's new book is a useful starting

place from which activists can broaden our understanding around one segment of what INCITE Women of Color Against Violence dubbed “the non-profit industrial complex.”

Structures of Cooptation

Identifying the patterns and recounting the history of development NGOs in Canada brings the systematic tendencies of these organizations into focus. Understanding the structural features of these groups can help us build a stronger analysis of how we can effectively support each other and avoid the co-optation of peoples’ struggles.

Paved with Good Intentions sets out to “avoid the risk of over-generalizing by laying emphasis on those relationships and characteristics that are common to virtually all development NGOs: their professionalized, bureaucratic structure and their dependence on government funding for maintaining that structure.” This challenging task results in a text that often feels detail-laden, but for those interested in the intricacies of the politics of development, this is also part of the book’s richness.

The two Montreal-based writers meticulously document the rise of Canadian NGOs, which they posit accompanied the imposition of austerity programs and neoliberal economic policy in the majority world. In step with the International Monetary Fund’s Structural Adjustment programs, they write, there were 146 “IMF riots” throughout the global south between 1976 and 1992.

“In some places anti-IMF protests forced snap elections or toppled governments, while in other places police or military repression was used to contain social unrest,” write Barry-Shaw and Jay. “NGOs were identified as ideal vehicles for tackling ‘social costs’ on the cheap.” Canada was on the leading edge of the transformation of NGOs into agencies responsible for promoting “adjustment with a human face.”

As neoliberalism became entrenched, the role of development NGOs began to expand, becoming what geographer David Harvey calls “privatization by NGO.”

The Case of Haiti

Haiti, which the authors say has the world’s highest concentration of NGOs per capita, provides a complex case study in everything that can go wrong with foreign aid. This critique extends deep into the decimation of local social movements and the repeated undermining of democracy, as President Aristide was twice ousted and his Lavalas party demonized. “Loud, public, and deeply exaggerated criticism of the Lavalas government seemed to be a requirement for receiving foreign funding,” write Barry-Shaw and Jay.

Arriving in Port-Au-Prince, signs of NGO dominance are all over the place. “White 4x4 SUV bearing the logos of various organizations clog the streets of Port-au-Prince, while billboards declare, ‘Avis is the preferred rental car company of NGOs!’”

An internal brain drain created when educated young Haitians began to choose higher paying NGO jobs meant “the weaker and more hollowed out the state became, the more justification the donors had for routing aid around the government.”

NGO involvement in Haiti deepened with the January 12, 2010 earthquake that devastated the country. “Before the earthquake, there were an estimated 10,000 NGOs operating in Haiti, but since

12 January it has been simply impossible to keep track of the number,” according to Kevin Edmonds at the University of Toronto.

One particularly telling example of how aid can be deadly came when the U.S. government pressured the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti to destroy all of the island’s “Creole” pigs during an outbreak (1978) of African Swine Flu.

“The hearty Creole pigs subsisted on food waste and foraging, and functioned as a savings bank for peasants to pay for expenses like funerals, doctor’s visits, or school fees: when the time came, they could slaughter or sell the pig,” write Barry-Shaw and Jay. “The eradication program effectively wiped out the savings of virtually the entire peasantry.” CIDA and USAID tried to introduce a new pig stock in Haiti. The project failed miserably.

It is in these specific stories that *Paved with Good Intentions* is at its strongest, providing concrete examples of how so-called development assistance in practice creates dependency, serves one or more fractions of the economic elite, and further impoverishes the world’s poorest people.

The example of Haiti’s Creole pig cull demonstrates how international governments conspired to make life a whole lot harder for the Haitian poor, and suggests that in Haiti’s Creole pig economy was a source of resources and autonomy among the poor.

Self-Help or Fightback

Later on, Barry-Shaw and Jay retreat into a strange dichotomy between the role of the state and NGOs with regard to informal economies in the south more generally. This dichotomy seems to arise as a function of their astute critique of micro-finance as a form of “NGO assisted self help.”

The authors describe the informal economy as “home to countless tiny labour intensive ‘businesses’ — roadside vegetable stands, home-based artisans, open-air repair shops, street corner hawkers — whose prospects for growth were severely limited.” They quote Thomas Dichter, who states that “The informal sector in most places is in fact a default mode, a function of failing economies...These markets are not the way out of poverty; they are driven by it.”

The solution, it is intoned, would be in increased government participation in providing services to the world’s poor. Barry-Shaw and Jay note that a study on microfinance “found little evidence for the presumed superiority of NGOs over governments, whether it was with respect to quality of services, reaching the poorest, or efficiency.”

While their critique of microfinance is right on, informal economies and their role in the global south are far more complex and vibrant than a lineup of desperate vegetable hawkers in default mode.

Indeed, the very terminology of the informal economy privileges state capitalism. “To call it ‘informal’ suggests ceding a central place to the established economy, hegemonized by the ruling classes,” writes Uruguayan social movement theorist Raul Zibechi. Zibechi draws from Peruvian writer José Matos Mar, who centers these non-official economies and describes them as oppositional — not just to microfinance programs and NGOs but also to the army, trade unions, established businesses and the state.

Barry-Shaw and Jay’s treatment of the informal economy is an off-key side note in an otherwise strong work, but it provides one example of where there is room for more developed thinking and reflection around alternatives to NGO privatization and to stronger state control over autonomous

sectors.

The intricacies of issues like the informal economy are often illuminated through conversations and personal relationships, which the authors appear to have with regards to Haiti. Parts of *Paved with Good Intentions*, however, rely heavily on experts and academics, which may be useful from an informational point of view but which are generally far less compelling than real life examples.

Blunting Resistance

Barry-Shaw and Jay convincingly argue that Canadian NGOs actively avoid encouraging meaningful participation of their members in anything beyond fundraising. They shift the lens to the role of development NGOs in blunting resistance movements in Canada, with a focus on summits like the Asia Pacific Economic Conference in Vancouver in 1997, the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit in Quebec City in 2001, and the now famous World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999.

Paved with Good Intentions refutes the oft-repeated notion that NGOs deserve credit for the convergences around these summits. "Once swelling protests became large and militant enough to scare Western elites pushing trade agreements, development NGOs donned the mantle of 'global civil society'... NGOs lent their credibility to elites as part of an effort to 'rebrand' neoliberalism while denouncing direct action protesters in the same terms they used to describe police violence."

Barry-Shaw and Jay take a microscope to Oxfam, producing revealing details about corporate funding, the organization's cozy relationship with the World Bank, and its institutional swing towards promoting a gentler form of capitalism.

They note that federal funds for development NGOs in Canada grew from less than \$90 million in 1980 to more than \$662 million in 1992. These impressive numbers back up the authors' perspective that development NGOs have taken on an increasingly imperialist role over the past decades.

That said, it is hard to put these numbers into context without being able to make a comparison between Canada's aid funding and, for example, that of the United States. That Canada spends less than its southern neighbors does not absolve it from responsibility, but in order to put these programs and Canadian imperialism into context, some comparisons with the U.S. and other nations' foreign aid programs would have been of use.

In the final chapters, *Paved with Good Intentions* places Canadian NGOs firmly within the frame of counterinsurgency, arguing that the "distinction between warfare and development work was effectively erased by Western counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan." The book ends where it started, in Haiti, with a final look at how Canadian NGOs helped put a friendly face on an unelected government, even as violence became so intense that the morgue in Port au Prince was overwhelmed with as many as 600 bodies in a day.

One of my outstanding questions after reading *Paved with Good Intentions* is the usefulness of the term Non-Governmental Organization. Barry-Shaw and Jay introduce the difficulties at the outset. "The term 'non-governmental organization' is notoriously vague; it defines organizations by what they are not, and its porous boundaries can cause much confusion," they write.

In fact, as Barry-Shaw and Jay point out, the organizations they refer to as NGOs are generally government-funded. It might have been useful for the authors to give some more careful thought to using an alternative language around NGOs — developing something akin to INCITE's "non-profit

industrial complex," perhaps.

Ten years after I took the plane to Johannesburg, I continue to write about popular movements and repressive strategies. Today, most of my work is centered around Mexico [1]). One of the most consistent reflections I have at the level of writing about what is taking place in Mexico, or elsewhere, is how the language we have to describe much of what is taking place language that comes from the state.

"Talking like a state," as it is described by Paul Gootenberg, can prevent accurate, efficient communication about systems of repression as well as modes of resistance. Undoing state language by re-naming NGOs something closer to what they in fact are may have made the contribution of Paved an even more important one.

On balance, Barry-Shaw and Jay find that "NGOs do more harm than good overall," a strong position that is sure to be met with a certain level of resistance by NGO workers and their allies. Whether you agree or disagree, Paved with Good Intentions is an important resource, filled with well-researched examples that go a long way towards backing up their conclusion.

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Sources

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* From Against the Current n° 164, May/June 2013.

Footnotes

[1] See "Drug War Capitalism," ATC July/August 2012, Available on ESSF (article 25849), [aer 25849](#).