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The Non-Profit & The Autonomous Grassroots

Eric Tang

Once upon a time, being labeled an affiliate of the state was a nasty indictment in radical movements. Today some of the movement's best and brightest openly and proudly claim membership in organizations whose link to the state—either through direct public funding or mere tax-reporting—are unambiguous and well-documented. I am speaking of the impressive number of radical-minded grassroots groups that, while continuing to sincerely abide by the ethos of "our movement," have assumed the form of a Non-Profit (NP) entity.

Non-profits, also known as non-governmental organizations (NGO), are often stripped down to their barest and most essential nature as a tax category. This official registration with the government grants the accreditation needed to receive government funding and funds through private philanthropic foundations. In exchange, the grassroots non-profit must adopt legally binding by-laws, elect a board of directors modeled after corporations, and open board minutes and fiscal accounting to the public. Previously considered anathema to the grassroots Left, these practices are accepted governing principles of many community organisations. While we have yet to precisely assess the effects of incorporating an autonomous movement, experience suggests the non-profit poses as many challenges to organizing as it solves.

Fractured Left

"We, the Left, have been described as being, weak, fractured, disorganized. I attribute that to three things — COINTELPRO. 501(c)3 Capitalism,"deadpans Suzanne Pharr at a conference, entitled

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The Non-Profit &The Autonomous Grassroots, *Eric Tang,* Left Turn Magazine. http://www.leftturn.org/Articles/Viewer.aspx?id=698&type=M#top [C.ELDOC1.0602/DD1-3non-profits10.html]

"The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex" in May 2004. Few grassroots organisers can claim a tour of duty more impressive than Suzanne Pharr, whose work traverses the past thirty years. She is an author, founding member and director of the Arkansas Women's Project for nineteen years, and former director of the Highlander Research and Education Center. During her days in Arkansas she participated in the internal struggles that eventually led her anti-domestic violence organisation to adopt the non-profit model.

After years of effectively organising a grassroots core, Pharr had reached an impasse. She struggled with the need to have a greater impact in the movement to end violence against women, which required working with the array of political forces outside the grassroots. Becoming a non-profit represented one major step in that direction,

facilitating the political goals of "credibility...the approval of churches, clubs, and even law enforcement." Yet, she debated if registering as a non-profit would deliver these goals or take them away. Time would tell. "I've seen the loss of political force and movement building," says Pharr, reflecting on the over-saturation of non-profit models within today's New Left struggles. The most troubling aspect of these losses, she says, is that they were not so much based on sharp difference on key political issues, but rather "the dreadful competition among organizations for little pots of money."

Years ago the Left made a decision to go down a certain road towards non-profit incorporation. There were some victories but also a good number of political casualties, according to those who took part in that turn. Yet open dialogue on the complex challenges posed by the non-profit has often taken a back seat to the immediate need of getting important work done. Resultantly, a new generation of leaders inherit the unresolved dilemmas.

Heavy legacies

New activists in community, labor, and justice struggles are soon made aware that they bear heavy burdens. They must carry forth movements that ended Jim Crow, created environmental justice, and inspired mass anti-war protests. The young organiser can take a course that covers Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the United Farm Workers and learn that all union members, even the lowest paid, contributed regular membership dues. Chavez insisted, "this is the only way the workers will 'own' the organisation." Young activists will inevitably take a hard look at grassroots organising that lives on foundation grants, hires a development director to raise funds to free others to do the real work, and adopts management systems which are foreign, if not

alienating, to the values and skills-set of the grassroots base. Contradictions will be analysed:

Why do we apply for a police permit to protest the police?
Because if we break the law, our board is liable.

Why can't we lobby?
Because that would violate our 501(c)3 status and the conditions of our grant.

Why not just take the streets?
Because insurance doesn't cover it.

The non-profit is cast as the straw man against a multitude of political frustrations. With the severe limitations (shackles) placed on the Left today, defense against right-wing attack must be accompanied by the exorcising of 'untidy' internal contradictions.

Nonprofit blues

Indeed, the majority of organisational leaders I've sat down with over the past year and a half—whose work ranges from defeating the onset of neoliberal policies in public schools, to the ongoing struggle against police violence, to defending the rights of immigrant communities—have experienced, to varying degrees, an onset of the NP blues. They are concerned about the ways in which the priorities of philanthropy tamper with the organising work, or how NP governance makes impossible the principle of unity which calls for youth and working class people at the centre. Worse still is how hiring and promotion

policies have led to competition and individualism among the ranks.

Still, despite the seeming ubiquity of the dilemma, a broad and consistent public discussion is absent. Each finds his or her own way to manage the contradictions. In my conversations with participants who attended the “Revolution Will Not Be Funded,” many lefties talked of participating in the NP as a tactic on the “down low,” a temporary ride toward a more radical end. Yet candid discussions on just how long we ride this Trojan horse, or how far we’ve actually traveled, are few and far between. For those who have steadfastly refused to go NP, they too maintain silence for the most part.

Perhaps it would be beneficial to return to the historical moment in question. The origin point can be found at the dawn of the Reagan era, somewhere in the early to mid 1980s. This was the juncture at which significant strands of the New Left decided to turn down the NP road. What were the internal conditions that led to that turn? There are three interrelated factors that standout — the deconsolidation of the party-builders and the proliferation of New Social Movements, Baby-boomers with loot, and the question of legitimacy. What ensues is a very rough sketch of each.

New movements

Throughout much of the 1970s, there was a strong current within the New Left that sought to harness and consolidate the political energies of the late 1960s into the revolutionary party. The years 1965-1969 were those mercurial years, which saw the rise of numerous liberation struggles led by groups such as the Black Panther Party (and the ensuing “Panther

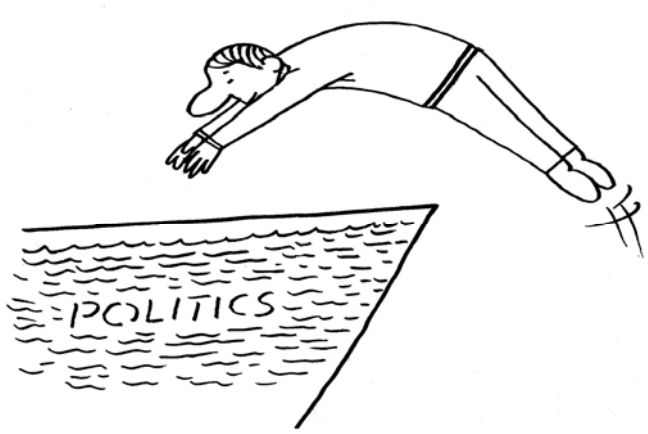
effect:" Young Lords, I Wor Kuen, Brown Berets), the Women's Liberation Movements (some led by white women, others by Third World sistas), Lesbian and Gay Liberation struggles and the meteoric rise of the anti-war movement. Max Elbaum describes the period as "Revolution in Air"—it was a feeling, a texture, of multiple resistances, each with its own brilliance and complexity.

By the 1970s many of the self-identified revolutionary forces within this New Left turned their attention to party building efforts aimed at consolidating the many movements in an effort to strike a unified revolutionary blow against the establishment. But for some, party-building came at the cost of extracting valuable time and attention from community-based struggles. For others, it meant erasing or subordinating the particular character of race, gender, sexual, and class oppression for the sake of a "higher degree" of unity. And for others still, party building would mark the beginning of deep sectarian fighting between different cadres, not to mention the abuses of power within parties and revolutionary organisations.

The troubled efforts of the party-builders paralleled the rise and proliferation of "New Social Movements" (NSMs)—led by those who had either departed from, resisted, or simply ignored the push to consolidate the revolutionary party. By the early 80s, with many party building efforts in decline, the NSMs continued to grow and proliferate, codifying their struggles under semi-new banners such as: Environmental Justice, Racial Justice, No Nukes, Housing Organising, Youth Development, Community Development and Anti-poverty. These would provide for the new social justice categories that would eventually be adapted by the philanthropic foundations.

Institutional power

During this same period, it got in the heads of some on the left that in order to have impact, the movement needed to take on the sharper image. It needed to get with the times (or the Times) and make an impression on institutional power as opposed to being its incessant pain in the ass. Instead of “mau-mauing” the suits for big promises that amounted mere bread crumbs, it was suggested that the left try donning a suit and grabbing a seat at the table to win big.



The new lefties who ran for political office during the 80s and 90s, deciding to work with instead of against the Democratic Party. For those with slightly smaller egos but no less ambition, the mission became to start influential non-profit organisations that could press for the incremental gains that would perhaps lead, finally, to those Marxian qualitative leaps.

Of course, there were those who pleaded in vain with their erstwhile comrades not to go the route of legitimacy—to hold out just a little longer. For many of them the story abruptly ends here. Their

generation simply “sold out,” as the crabby expression goes, forever abandoning the good idea of revolution. But sell-out talk—which is absolutist in both its form and intent—does little to guide us through our present-day dilemmas.

Alternative Spaces

The “whole sell-out theory crowds out the discussion of burn-out,” remarks Makani Themba-Nixon, director of the Washington D.C.-based Praxis Project, referring to those who were exhausted by the internal political processes and abuses of institutional authority in various revolutionary parties and collectives. Many people sought alternative spaces to carry out their work. According to Themba-Nixon, “women in particular needed a way to get away from the sexism, the exploitation, the rough stuff” found within revolutionary organisations. Internal problems were “more the issue behind people leaving than the external politics,” she says. The emergence of the non-profit, Pharr explains, provided the opportunity to continue to “do smart work, practical work, in a way that allowed you to survive. This was especially important after witnessing those who did not survive.”

Themba-Nixon’s observations would caution against sweeping calls for the New Left’s full retreat from non-profits. Autonomous movements are not inoculated from sharp power imbalances (typified by middle-class leadership), competitiveness, and internal exploitation. In fact, the New Left’s failure to implement and sustain anti-hierarchal principles, to care for the long-term development of all members, and to promote a diverse movement culture of participation led many to create non-profits as alternative spaces for effective organizing.

Civil society

These days, there's a small movement storm brewing in Atlanta, Georgia. In the summer of 2006, the city will play host to the first United States Social Forum (USSF), a gathering projected at 20,000 participants from a wide cross-section of the grassroots including labor, environmental justice, immigrant rights, racial justice, anti-war, youth and student, women, LGBT, international solidarity. Although the USSF will not take up resolving the NP dilemma as a stated objective or "thematic area" it may provide a space to shed some much-needed light on the matter.

The USSF is an official regional forum of the World Social Forum (WSF) which, for the past six years, has coalesced social movements from around the world to discuss an array of locally derived "global strategies" to defeat the agendas of world trade, war, and the new imperialism. The groups that comprise this new global movement are not political parties or government representatives of left-leaning nation states. Rather they consider themselves part of a new "civil society"—an array of locally based struggles and supporting NGOs.

NGOs and social

On January 1, 1994, the world caught a glimpse of this new civil society in action, as a relatively small band of indigenous Mayan freedom fighters from the Southwest state of Chiapas known as the Zapatistas led the once improbable people's uprising against globalization. The Zapatistas would advance the idea that those who were to defend the people in this "Fourth World War" were not the national liberation armies of old but rather a new Mexican civil society comprised of indigenous social movements completely independent of the public and private sectors.

This concept of civil society included non-indigenous Mexican civilian groups who saw their own futures inextricably linked to that of the indigenous

struggle against neoliberalism including NGOs. Under the auspices of Mexican civil society, the autonomous social movement and the institutionalized NGO strive for balance—each understands the specific and complementary role it plays in articulating the new social formation.

Complementary role

The NGO is not the subject of the social movement, but rather the political and technical support for the struggle. The NGO leverages funds to the autonomous grassroots groups, helps the movement build connection to those beyond the borders of the nation-state, provides training, education, and infrastructural support (the development of health clinics, schools, alternative media centers, etc.), and serves as a liaison between government officials and autonomous movements.

Yet, before we take heart that the new paradigm of civil society and its WSF provide a solution for our generation, it is worth noting that, here too, contradictions abound. The WSF has been criticized for its heavy presence of NGOs—most of whom can afford to send large delegations by plane—while the members of their nation's autonomous movements have less access, often arriving to the forum after weeks of traveling over rough terrain.
There are indeed NGOs throughout Latin America, Asia, and Africa that have come under fire for at times tipping the balance, eclipsing the autonomous movements. Writer/activist Arundhati Roy, for example, has been a particularly harsh critic of NGOs operating in India, noting the ways in which they can often serve the neo-liberal "developing nation" agenda.

We must address the imbalance between autonomous movements and non-profits. This is an ontological question: can a non-profit give life to that which is a precondition of its own existence? The non-profit

can clear the path for revolution by dismantling its own policies and practices that prevent grassroots movements from truly impacting political institutions—from the electoral college, to the denial of proportional representation, to the collapse of the social welfare state, to the roll-back on civil rights.

No, the revolution will not be funded. We would need to find it first.

About The Author

Born, raised, and living in New York City, Eric Tang is a community organizer, teacher, and occasional scribe. Working in the Southeast Asian neighborhoods of the Bronx, he helped to found the first Asian-community-based youth organizing project in the New York City. He currently provides training and capacity building support to grassroots youth groups across the country.

NGOs and social