

RECENSIONI

Theodora VETTA | *Democracy Struggles. NGOs and the politics of aid in Serbia*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, 2018, pp. 240.

Vetta's book offers a refreshing and much-needed class-informed analysis of the NGO world in Serbia. The monograph comes out of fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2010, testifying to the end of the first decade of the country's "democratic transition" that began with the overthrow of Milošević. Having moved away from their anti-regime stance of the 1990s, NGOs have mainly come to play the role of state partners in the scope of the country's postsocialist transformation.

In the Introduction Vetta contextualizes her field by providing a brief overview of broader socio-political developments and the emergence of civic organizing. Situating the NGO phenomenon in post-socialist and post-conflict Serbia, she also contextualizes it with reference to the global aid industry. In Chapter 1 she uses the material from an NGO training seminar to critically analyse power relations embedded within interventions of "empowerment". While constructing and pathologizing certain cultural traits, such as apathy, the training sought to promote entrepreneurial citizens who would work on social change through NGO project framework. In Chapter 2 Vetta argues that the term "NGOization" implying conservative transformation of once activist organizations does not capture well the trajectory of Serbia's NGOs. Rather than NGOs losing their authenticity due to donor conditionalities, she points to the continuity between pre- and post-2000 periods, showing how NGOs kept liberal democracy and EU integration on top of their agendas. In Chapter 3 Vetta argues that the positionality of local NGO workers was greatly marked by the conditions of precarity. She sees them as *projectariat* coping with unstable living conditions, rather than as an elite with privileged access to resources. However, the contradictions underlying the NGO world often remain



invisible behind the widely shared discourse presenting NGOs as bearers of normatively loaded ideas of European values, democracy, modern identities, etc. As the argument goes, this discourse is part of concrete power struggles as it serves to legitimize NGOs as ideal means for achieving desired social interventions. In Chapter 4, Vetta shows how those supporting nationalistic political options, seen as the adversary to the NGO political project, often do so in response to dispossessions which they witnessed. Those working in public sector and state-owned enterprises, rather than falling victims to populist manipulation, supported the Radical party, the only one vocally criticizing the ongoing privatizations, as a response to precariousness which they were experiencing. Chapter 5 discusses the way in which development interventions, represented as participatory, can suppress and deny “local” voices when they are not aligned with these interventions. In the case discussed, the project supporting grassroots activism, while in fact promoting the devolving of state functions to the local NGOs, discredited already existing structures of community organizing, which viewed the state from the perspective of rights and entitlements. The last Chapter criticizes the assumed clash between the state and the NGO sector. Focusing on welfare, Vetta argues that the real division line is between those actors that are working as service providers, and those that circulate in the realm of expert policy making. However, the discourse of state-NGO clash is perpetuated as a strategy of stigmatizing the state and valorizing what is seen as efficiency-driven NGO practices. The concluding chapter highlights some of the analysed contradictions related to the NGO phenomenon in Serbia, such as the way in which this sector took part in stigmatization of secure labour and precarization of work, and contributed to volatility of service provision. The project of democracy promotion built on existing premises of non-representative and non-accountable expert intervention is seen as fundamentally failed.

The book provides essential class-informed analysis for anyone interested in the working of aid industry in the context of post-socialist transformations. Much of the intellectual production on post-socialist Serbia (and more generally the post-Yugoslav region) deploys “culturalist-identitarian” register, working with categories such as ethnicity, religion, nationalism, and often placing emphasis on the perceived traits of “local” culture and subjectivities. In contrast to this, Vetta traces structural processes, such as public sector restructuring, as factors shaping social relations. In doing so, she joins an emerging anthropological scholarship which provides fresh lenses to the transformational processes and social divisions in post

Yugoslav space (see Stef Jansen, *Yearnings in the meantime*, 2015; Marek Mikuš, *Frontiers of civil society*, 2018; Čarna Brković, *Managing ambiguity*, 2017).

I find her analysis of the resurgence of the Radical party in relation to the dispossessions brought about by the privatization particularly groundbreaking. Rather than ascribing it to people succumbing to populist nationalistic rhetoric, which was a widely accepted explanation at the time, she points out how this political option succeeded in harnessing resentment towards privatization and more broadly towards the mainstream liberal transition model.

Furthermore, as a former NGO worker turned researcher and consultant, I find her analysis of labour patterns within the NGO sector very much called for. Vetta provides us with a fresh perspective on how precarity and inequalities are perpetuated and resistance is quieted behind NGO normative rhetoric. In doing so, she charts the territory for future research, as these topics unfortunately still remain largely unpacked. This can at least partially be explained in relation to the fact that a lot of what we know about NGOs comes from a hybrid network composed of scholars, policy-makers and consultants who are themselves often part of the NGO realm.

This opens up the question of a potential dialogue between Vetta's contribution and NGO practices. Although critically uncovering structural conditions of the development world might seem irreconcilable with development practices, which instead require a closure of alternatives, I still find the possibility of engaging with NGO practitioners worth considering. While reproducing normative rhetoric and instrumental rationality in their daily work, they are also often painfully aware of the normative dissonance pervading their professional environments. In a broader sense, such a dialogue may constitute an opportunity for contestation and for transforming NGO practices so that plurality of narratives are enabled.

Vetta's methodological choice was to engage with multiple interlocutors across the NGO sector rather than conduct in-depth participant observation within a particular organization or project. She provides compelling explanation of this choice: for example, she rightly notes that in an atmosphere of competition for donor funding, working with a single NGO might have limited her access to other organizations. However, I got the impression that in some cases, such as the training analysed in Chapter 1, the research would have benefited from prolonged engagement with the training participants. Such engagement could have revealed the way in which the empowerment framework was being negotiated, translated and carried through beyond the training itself.

Lastly, it is interesting to combine the reading offered by Vetta's monograph with the one of Mikuš (2018). Working on a similar topic (civil society in Serbia), but looking at a later period, he testifies to the way in which NGOs became more confrontational *vis-a-vis* the state in the context of the authoritarian turn of the 2010s. Moreover, there was a rise of voices critical of the liberal capitalist transformation, which were connected to NGO circles, which speaks to the need to continue unpacking the NGO realm as a non-linear process and a continual site of struggle.

Tijana MORAČA

Independent scholar
tijanamoraca@gmail.com