William E. DeMars and Dennis Djikzeul (eds.), *The NGO Challenge for International Relations Theory*  

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The contributors to this edited volume provide an original approach to non-governmental organisations (NGOs): all of them share a common experience of observing NGOs in the field. This observation led them to the conclusion that existing, conventional, International Relations Theories, be they realist, liberal or constructivist, fail to explain what NGOs are and what NGOs do. Indeed, the politics led by NGOs is unintelligible to these theories taken individually, and NGOs therefore represent a challenge for International Relations Theorists.

All four conventional theoretical approaches, identified as realist, liberal institutionalist, pluralist constructivist and globalist constructivist, cannot encompass the reality of NGOs because they regard these actors monolithically and as homogeneous entities. This proves to be insufficient especially since NGOs are themselves “multiple realities”; NGO politics is a matter of threefold overlapping: institutional bridging, power shaped encounters between partners organised in networks, and the transformation of all actors involved in the process. The realist theory appears to be myopic in that it considers the power of NGOs as negligible compared to that of states; liberal institutionalism considers NGOs as secondary actors who only accompany the spread of international institutions, and do not substantially take part in building and shaping them; pluralist constructivism merely considers a bottom-up flow of NGO power from society towards states; lastly, globalist constructivism cherishes the idea of a top-down flow from international norms towards states. Neo-realist and neo-liberal theories also have shortcomings, since they are not state-centric enough, and therefore fail to encompass the diversity of fields in which a state may exert and project its power. More specifically, when considering NGOs they overlook the projection of a state’s model of liberal state-society relations onto other states. Indeed, they tend to remain focused on the hard power components of inter-state competition. To fill some of these gaps, in his case study on NGO agency in colour revolutions, William E. DeMars proposes the principle-agency theory as a way out of theoretical homogenisation of actors, issues or norms.

The contributors revise the definition of NGOs, by providing us with case studies encompassing the historical dimension (Bob Reinalda provides a review of NGO evolution since the American and French revolutions), the geographical diversity
OECD countries, Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Liberia, DR of Congo, the Middle East, Ukraine, Russia, China), and the diversity of situations vis-à-vis states and international institutions and the variety of fields of intervention (e.g. labour rights advocacy, peacebuilding, colour revolutions, gender-based violence). Erik André Andersen argues that defining NGOs is a necessary categorisation exercise that cannot be separated from the following methodological question: “whose tool is it?” According to the contributors, “NGOs are not things but processes and instead of asking what an NGO is, the more appropriate question becomes how ‘NGOing’ is done” (p.20); hence a rephrasing of concepts is necessary. Indeed, the authors do not write “International NGOs are” but “International NGOs happen”.

Two core criteria need to be identified in order for an international NGO to exist: first, “private actors claim to pursue public purposes”, second, “they link with societal and political partners in at least two countries” (p. 23). The first element means that NGOs mobilise the power of those they claim to represent, the second implies that NGOs link themselves to societal and political partners precisely by the authority of their normative claims. And the links and networks established by NGOs are extremely dense and numerous: Andersen qualifies them as “myriad relationships” (p. 60). Thus, the key notion in this book is that of NGOing, that is to say of NGO practice. The idea of linking and bridging is crucial, and is at the heart of any development on theorising NGOs. NGOs shape the networks and are shaped by them in return: “NGOs are not only socially constructed entities, but are constantly in the making” (p. 60). NGOs should therefore not be treated as things, or as a category in order to observe or analyse a situation, but as a “site in which to investigate practices” (p. 59). NGOs are bridges in practice and perceived as such, as Patrice C. MacMahon shows in her contribution on the role of NGOs in peacebuilding in Bosnia: bridges between groups in post-war societies, bridges between civil society and newly rebuilt states, bridges between international ambitions and local realities. In turn, the existence and dynamism of local NGOs constitutes a good indicator of stability, reconciliation and peace. However, these NGOs also fail to bridge because they may be manipulated. Nonetheless, for Dennis Dijkeul, NGOs remain a key interlocutor in the field because of their knowledge of the ground, “with dirty hands, and open eyes” (p. 283).

Anna Ohanyan argues that academic studies focusing on the quantitative rise of NGOs in world politics have so far tended to overlook the qualitative impact of that increase. Network institutionalism appears to be a relevant tool to bridge the gap between NGO studies and international relations, and offers four directions for further research: mechanistic bridging (the NGOs can do the job), regulative bridging (predictability of NGO success because of their knowledge and track record of the field in which they intervene), normative bridging (donors try to build legitimacy by becoming involved with the NGOs), and mimetic bridging (networks and organisational fields are reproduced from one country to another). Ohanyan also challenges the commonly held idea in network institutionalism according to which political gains on the side of NGOs result in power losses on the side of states. The author argues, on the contrary, that while they may reduce state capacities in some areas they actually reinforce state power in others.

Reinalda refutes the idea that the challenge of NGO to state power is a recent one. Indeed, the phenomenon of NGOing, in the sense given by DeMars and Dijkzeul of establishing private organisations with public purpose, dates back to the eighteenth
century in its national manifestation and to the nineteenth century in its international expression. Moreover, we have witnessed a co-evolution of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and non-governmental organisations, although the former are the ones establishing the rules of the game. This unequal relationship seems to be accepted by most actors. However, NGOs have taken the leadership over IGOs and states at specific junctures in time, and over specific fields such as human rights, and Amnesty International in the twentieth century.

NGOs are regulated differently from one country to the next, and this heterogeneity also affects relatively homogeneous countries in terms of political, economic and social development such as the member states of the OECD. Indeed, Elizabeth Bloodgood argues that given the diversity of both collaborative and contentious interactions between states and NGOs, there are necessarily different processes to constitute NGOs in various countries. The power relation between states and NGOs cannot be the same in the three specific case studies scrutinised by Bloodgood: the United States which is the archetype of common law, Japan which is the archetype of corporatism and Poland which epitomises recent democratic transition. In all three cases however, the mutual benefit of states and NGOs is expressed by the fact that NGOs are not regulated out of existence. Regulations constrain NGOs, are constantly challenged and rewritten by both sides, but they also confer rights and legal protection to NGOs within the states. New institutionalism and new economics enables us to surmount the simplistic view of classic IR theories who see states in control of INGOs on the one hand, and efforts led by INGOs to subvert state authority on the other hand. Here too, as discussed in Ohanyan’s contribution, NGOs are not seeking to weaken the state. On the contrary, they seek state regulation in order to obtain legal rights and protection.

Studying NGOs, and analysing NGOing and the influence of NGOs, must not lead us into the trap of the mesmerising effect of NGOs. Indeed, NGOs are watching, “making visible [the] largely ‘invisible’ people” (p. 206) as in Shareen Hertel’s case study on labour rights advocacy, “casting light on abuse”, “prick[ing] the consciences” (p. 207), but “Who is watching the watchers?” (p. 295). Attention should be drawn to responsibility, accountability but also to the hypocrisy which often accompanies them. Karen Mingst and James P. Muldoon show that the literature on global governance is growingly concerned with the accountability of global actors. MacMahon points at the shortcomings of the principle-agent theory to explain why, despite their lack of success in peacekeeping operations in Bosnia, NGOs kept their support from their donors. She also shows that theories of accountability cannot be fully applied to NGOs because they do not possess the necessary requirements for them to work. Short of being condemned as totally suffering from an accountability disorder, NGO’s dynamism may be explained by the fact that their partners consider them as “accountable enough”. MacMahon and Cristina M. Balboa both show that accountability does not work both ways with NGOs. While holding others accountable, their own accountability remains elusive. In the same way, transparency is not one of NGOs’ strengths: latent agenda are constitutive of NGOing (Balboa).

The contributors to this book, while challenging existing IR theories, offer innovative theoretical perspectives to reconcile NGOs and IR theory. They appeal to direct empirical observation and relational theory to do so and propose new perspectives to better explain the reality of NGOs and complexity and dynamism of world politics.