World Culture in the World Polity: A Century of International Non-Governmental Organization

Background of Authors:

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Boli and Thomas seek to identify in their article, World Culture in the World Polity: A Century of International Non-Governmental Organization, the ways in which the culture of the world is shaped around social organizations that operate at the global level. The operations, purposes, and the structures of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) provide some of this insight.

INGOs are private, not-for-profit organizations that focus on international issues. They are largely made up of individuals who use their expertise in a particular area to fight for a cause they feel strongly about. There have been over 25,000 INGOs since 1850. Some of which are the International Exhibitions Bureau, Commission for the Geological Map of the World, Tug of War International Federation, etc. The International Olympic Committee and the International Red Cross are a few that are widely known. An INGO may consist of a few dozen members from 3 or 4 countries to millions of members from 20 or 30 countries. Historically, INGO foundings and dissolutions tend to go along with the ‘state of the world’. The number rises with expansion and falls with crisis, such as before the eruption of war.

INGOs are made up of individuals that have clear, rationalized goals who volunteer their time to achieve these goals. They operate under an open membership and through democratic decision-making. The idea is to spread ‘progress’ throughout the world.

INGOs have not only helped shape the world culture but have also had an impact on state organized government organizations. IGOs (International Government Organizations) receive information, expertise, and policy alternatives from INGOs and use this to shape IGO activities. Thousands of INGOs consult with agencies of the United Nations and have a major influence of IGO decisions.

INGO structures and ideologies are underlined by 5 basic world-cultural principles:

1) Universalism
   - “Humans everywhere have similar needs and desires, can act in accordance with common principles of authority and action, and share common goals.”
   - Anyone can become a member of an INGO and everyone has the potential to enhance the capability of an INGO
- The purposes and actions of an INGO are universal – they can be useful across every sector

2) Individualism
- most INGOs accept only individuals as members or associations of individuals
- use democratic, one-person-one-vote decision-making procedures
- assess fees on members individually
- downplay national organizations in their publications and conferences

  • combo of Universalism and Individualism leads to the idea of humanity as a whole. INGOs routinely bring forth the common good of humanity as a goal.

3) Rational Voluntaristic Authority
- INGOs formulate a particular cultural model when taking action to influence others
- This model is a collection of individuals, who through radical procedures, “can determine cultural roles that are just, equitable, and efficient, and that no external authority is required for their legitimation”
- INGOs have little sanctioning power in actuality – their authority stems from the principles of world culture
- Yet though their determination they act as if they have been authorized in the strongest possible terms

4) Human Purposes of Rationalizing Progress
- simply stated – INGOs seek rational progress through ‘development’
- development of economic growth, individual self-actualization, collective security, and justice
- “Rational social action is the route to equality, comfort, and the good life”
- tension forms between rational and irrational efforts
- the irrational seems to conclude rationally in the end

5) World Citizenship
- strongly egalitarian
- “Individuals vary in their capacities, resources, and industry, but all have the same basic rights and duties.”
- World citizens look to national states for protection of their rights - INGOs back up these rights

I feel that many INGOs have only had a positive impact on the world culture as a whole, such as Greenpeace International and the International Red Cross. It would be interesting to see if other organizations, although claiming to be fighting for humanity, have hidden agendas for individuals belonging to that group. It seems to me, that in a society shaped around capital, such as ours, this concept may be inevitable.

Questions for Discussion
1) What does Boli and Thomas mean by ‘rational’ actions taken by INGOs?
2) How are INGOs funded?
3) Why do you think that active INGO members are sometimes looked negatively upon (such as animal activists)? Is it because they seem too pushy?

WHAT ARE TRANSNATIONAL NON-PROFILE NGO'S?

TYPES: Organizations can be defined by their territorial outreach.
- National vs. transnational: (a) state based (intergovernmental) and (b) non-state based transnational orgs,
- Non-profit, (ii) profit-based transnational orgs.

IMPORTANCE: Transnational NGO's are the basis of civil society.

NGO's indicate inadequacy of state-centric model of world politics and international relations=
- Links b/w local, regional, national, supranational, global, private and public, domestic & foreign, political & economic & social

ORIGIN: Non-profit NGO's formed by private individuals and groups operating across national borders to promote specific interests or press specific agendas.

FUNCTION: breaking down barriers among states & between cultures and people. Lead to the creation of a new influential global elite.
- Non-profit NGO's are often associated with UN. BUT they are older than UN.

EXAMPLES: Roman Catholic Church, Freemasons, Red Cross, International Federation of Airline Pilots' Association, International Council of Scientific Unions, International Frequency Registration Board, Ford and Rockefeller Foundation

GROWTH:
- Growth related to the expansion of communication technology and international transport facilities, strong growth of non-profit NGO's particularly after 1960.
- 1891: ca. 100
- 1930: 300
- 1950: 1200
- 1980: 4500
- 2000: 6000

Groups with international membership grew exponentially b/w 1953 and 1993.
- International human rights (N=33 to N=168)
- Women (N=10 to N=61)
- Environment (N=2 to N=90).

LOCATION: wealthier and more democratically countries (North & West)

PEOPLE INVOLVED: tens of millions. Development of cosmopolitanism but also reinforcement of ethnocentrism and prejudice
PROBLEMS: Lack of representation & popular mandate, motivations/interests=humanitarian, sectarian, particularistic, universalist, reform-oriented, conservation oriented, right-wing/left-wing

WHAT ARE TRANSNATIONAL FOR-PROFIT NGO'S?
DEFINITION: Special type of transnational non-state NGO engaged in for-profit business, in transactions and operations across national borders involved in transfer of goods, money, credit information, and persons, among them multinational corporations such as Ford Corporation, CocaCola, McDonalds, DaimlerChrysler.

NUMBER: N=1500 depending on definition (number of countries, earnings, manufacturing facilities, sales, overseas assets etc).

POWER BASIS:
For-profit NGO's are increasingly recognized as significant international actors controlling sources that are greater than many "sovereign" nation states or local/regional govs with detrimental effects.
TNC's have great flexibility moving goods, money, investment, personnel and technology across borders. Because of their centralization they can put pressure on national governments re: tax payments, balance of payments, currency value, credit policies, employment, job skills, economic planning, protectionist policies, laws, and politics. Trade off between wealth and national sovereignty.
Only few governments tried to regulate TNC's (Helms Burton re: Cuba, Iran/Iraq boycott) or through nationalization (Iran Anglo-Iranian Oil Co vs. Mossadegh in Iran 1950's), Chile vs ITT/CIA, Central America vs United Fruit Company)--not very successful.

EXAMPLE: GM sales in 1986 > than GNP sum of Argentina, Austria, DK, Norway, South Africa

ORIGIN: As in the case of non-profit NGO's, they are older than modern capitalism, e.g. British East India Company, Spanish and English New World Colonization Agencies=global expansion of capitalism and growth of world markets & trade.

PROBLEMS:
How to democratically control or regulate TNC activities for public good?
How to mobilize them for economic development in collaboration with UN agencies and NGO's?
How to make sure they do not interfere in domestic affairs of LDC's and challenge their sovereignty or relegate them to permanent dependency?
How to make sure they comply with environmental regulations (Kyoto) and labor standards? (sweat shops = Nike, Firestone, Levy Strauss, GAP)

REGULATION ATTEMPTS: UN ECOSOC Commission and OECD tried to come up with codes of conduct to prevent blackmailing, corruption and establish uniform national standards of accounting and reporting on TNC's or to establish public-private joint ventures.

RESISTANCE: Alternative anti-corporate transnational social movement organizations (TSMO's) are developing since the WTO 1999 Seattle meeting. Recent trends of govt. repression of protesters at global negotiations the closing of opportunities for citizen participation and global institutions (UN) the relocation of international financial meetings to sites where public protests is more difficult =these trends signal a backlash against the forces of global democracy.
RELATIONSHIP OF TRANSNATIONAL NON-PROFIT NGO'S AND UN?

Article 71 of UN Charter grants NGO consultative status in ECOSOC
BUT not in the UN General Assembly

ECOSOC deals with social development, human rights, narcotic drugs, status of women, science and technology for development, sustainable development, statistics.

ECOSOC has a series of regional commissions and standing committees along with subsidiary committees, such as the UN Development Program, UN Children's fund UNICEF, IAEA, UN Conference on Trade and Development

NGO membership increased from 21 (1965), to 54 (1973). Members elected for 3-year terms. Meet once a year in Geneva and NYC. Decisions by simple majority vote.


UN Resolution 1296 made arrangements for 3 categories
(a) multifaceted goals and activities reaching all areas of ECOSOC
(b) specialized NGO's (health, human rights)
(c) orgs with an occasional interest in UN activities

NGO's have consultative status so they can attend meetings, submit written statements, testify, or propose items for agenda in limited cases. NGO's cultivate relationships at headquarters and in the field.

Influence of all categories through formal/informal lobbying of General Assembly delegates, are active on global conferences or parallel conferences on environment (1972, 1992) or women's issues (1975, 1980, 1985, 1995)

Participation is changing. Resolution 1996/31 establishes expanded procedures and criteria for selecting NGO's in legislative ECOSOC process. Also proposals to permit NGO delegates to sit on main committees, provide them official docs, and address bodies. Currently rather ad-hoc. Resentment among powerful and P5 members (U.S., UK) against NGO participation. Giving NGO's more power requires Charter Amendment which is blocked by P5 veto.

Hypocrisy that largest and oldest democracies prevent fresh wind of democratic representation

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION AND IMPORTANCE OF TRANSNATIONAL NON-PROFIT NGO'S?

Provide key sources of information, data, and technical expertise, of research, and other forms of division of labor
=collect grassroots info not available to governments
=advocate specific policies and alternative channels of participation, propose petitions
=provide leadership for change of policies and public awareness
=mobilized mass public, organize protest (Seattle WTO 1999)
=distribute assistance in disaster relief and to refugees
=monitor human rights or environmental regulations, warn of violations
=develop increasingly regional and local networks
=are active in process to reform UN (UN Association of the U.S. report 1988 with 30,000 members in 165 chapters and a 130-member council, Ford Foundation
IMPORTANCE:
=represent democratization of international relations
=promote involvement and empowerment of ordinary people over those of states and powerful interest groups and TNC's (= "global civil society")
BUT since NGO's are not elected themselves they may also represent particularist interests and issues (middle-class, North). Though most activists take very seriously the challenges of expanding participation, equality, and inclusion in decisions at the inter-group level if not within their organizations

EXAMPLES where NGO's were effective:
1978, 1982, 1988 UN Special Sessions on Disarmament
1992 Rio conference on Environment and Development
1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development
1996 Beijing Conference on Women
Recently changes in the issue focus of NGO's on Human Rights, Environment, Women's and Multiple Issues

Table 1: Issue Focus of Transnational Social Movement Organizations

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<tr>
<td>Human Rights</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>World Order/Law/Language*</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Women’s Rights</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multi: Global Justice/Peace/Env.Sustainability</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self Determination/ Ethnic Unity</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right-wing**</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multi-issue organizations</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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SOURCE: Yearbook of International Associations, in: Jackie Smith Transnational Social Movement Organizations and Global Democracy, SB University 2001)
*Half of the groups in this category are those promoting the use of a universal language – most often Esperanto. Remaining groups are working to advance international law and institutions.
**Because many right-wing organizations are secretive otherwise averse to making information about their work widely available, such groups are likely to be under-reported in the Yearbook. The most recent issues of the Yearbook rely in part on searches of organizational websites, and therefore have been able to include more of these types of groups that are unlikely to respond to requests for information.