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Surreptitious symbiosis: the relationship between NGO's and movement activists

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Surreptitious symbiosis: the relationship between NGO's and movement activists

15

MARLIES GLASIUS and ARMINE ISHKANIAN 29 July 2015

For now, thanks to surreptitious symbiosis, it is possible to do sustained activism to bring about social change, without becoming part of a 'civil society industry'. From the [Squares and Beyond](#) partnership.



Protest against TTIP. Demotix/Rachel Megawatt. All rights reserved.

The emergence in 2011 of the pro-democracy movements of the Arab Spring and the anti-austerity and anti-capitalist movements captured the public's imagination the world over.

From April-September 2013 we conducted research in Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan and our aim was to build on and expand the existing research on these new movements, not only by including new sites (e.g., London, Yerevan) thus far overlooked by other scholars, but also by examining the relationship of the activists with more formal civil society actors including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, and political parties.

While media and academic coverage have suggested that the protestors were ordinary citizens who had little or no connection with formal civil society organisations, we wanted to look a little deeper into the situation: to ask, **how do today's activists relate to NGO's? Is it possible to do sustained activism to bring about social change without becoming part of a 'civil society industry' through fundraising structures and engagement with government?**

Based on our research in four very different settings, we found some common trends in the ways in which highly institutionalized and highly spontaneous actors interact. We discovered that while at first glance, NGO's seem disconnected from recent street activism, this assessment was only partially correct and that the situation is more complicated.

While NGO's did not initiate the demonstrations in any of the cities where we conducted fieldwork or indeed play an active role in square occupations, there was NGO involvement behind the scenes. NGO's provided non-monetary resources and individual NGO employees participated in their personal capacity. The boundaries between the formal NGO's and informal groups of activists blurred, and there was much more cross-over and collaboration than meets the eye.

Here are some of the main findings in [our explanation of this phenomenon](#), which we call *surreptitious symbiosis*.

Surreptitious symbiosis

15 We found that activists often revile ngo's for their relationship to power and money, and what many described as their loss of values and mission. But on closer consideration, the relationship between activists and NGO's turned out — to be a more complex. Activists rely on NGO's for technical support for things like meeting space and printing to avoid direct reliance on the material logic of fundraising, and at times even for legal aid.

Individuals involved in activism, meanwhile, also sometimes work for NGO's, often relying on them for their expertise. Those who do work for NGO's often experience them as constraining, supporting protest and direct action networks. Junior NGO staff and occasionally senior staff do participate in these networks to escape the constraints imposed, implicitly or explicitly, by their NGO employers. We found that although some activists roundly rejected and criticized the 'managerialism' of NGO's, other activists recognised that their activities took a more institutional shape, but were creating alternative spaces as well as new practices and forms of organizing which preserved the ideational and emancipatory logic of activism.

Activists continue to denounce and in some cases, openly oppose, NGO's that have embraced the material and coercive logics of the market and state respectively. Yet alongside the critiques and denunciations, there are also mutually-beneficial, albeit 'below the radar', interactions between NGO's and activists.

Thanks precisely to this phenomenon of surreptitious symbiosis, we found that it is possible to do sustained activism to bring about social change without becoming part of a 'civil society industry'. But can this be sustained in the longer term? The current relationship between activists and NGO's, based on individual ties, is one which both sides are typically keen to keep under the radar. It allows NGO staff to engage with and support movements and activists and to feel as though they are making a difference without having to make that relationship public. For NGO's, given the growing competition for funding and pressure from both governments and donors in which NGO's are required to demonstrate their professionalism and efficiency, being too close to movements that are radically critical of governments could be seen as endangering NGO contracting relationships or grant-based support. But this approach was also convenient for activists as it allowed them to present themselves as entirely distinct from NGO's, remaining 'clean' and autonomous in their own eyes and those of others.

Is 'surreptitious symbiosis' a temporary or a lasting phenomenon? Below we sketch three, not mutually exclusive, scenarios.

NGO's and movements: three possible scenarios

In the first scenario, our cyclical logic would predict that those activists who have continued to be active, a few years on from the peak of the movement, will increasingly seek new ways to fund or be funded, and to (re-)engage with the state and its policies. Both of these processes are occurring as some movements attempt to institutionalize and scale up. Still, these forms of institutionalization are perceived by the activists as different from NGO's, just as NGO's are different from the trade unions or political parties who used to be much more prominent actors in civil society.

Our second scenario focuses on the emancipatory potential of the NGO staff that have immersed themselves in recent activism. This tendency, combined with pressure from outside on NGO's to prove their continued relevance, may rejuvenate and re-radicalize NGOs from within, challenging the cosy relations some NGO's have with donors and the state and instead emphasizing reconnection with grassroots activism. This optimistic scenario would require not only the participation of individual (junior) staff, but also shifts in NGO leadership and organizational culture which may be difficult to achieve. In this scenario the symbiosis would become more sustained and lose its surreptitious character.

Finally, in a third scenario, if ngo's cannot be rejuvenated and re-radicalized from within, then the opposition between activist groups and NGO's may grow. It is clear that the future of NGO's is under threat: after a decade of virulent criticism, distrusted by governments and the general public alike, in a hostile financial climate, they may have outlived their purpose, and may wither, die or become hybrid organisations such as social businesses.

While for some activists this would be a vindication, the demise of NGO's could also have an unexpected indirect impact on the more radical activism that has sought to distance itself from the lure of money and jobs, but has surreptitiously also relied on it. In other words, despite activists' criticism and their uneasy relationship with NGO's, the demise of the latter would be the loss of a valuable kind of ally.

It remains to be seen whether the move towards institutionalization which we are beginning to witness can – as the activists themselves insist - be distinct from older patterns of NGO institutionalization.

For the full version, see "[Surreptitious Symbiosis: Engagement between activists and NGOs](#)" by [Marlies Glasius](#) and [Armine Ishkanian](#), published in *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*.



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