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THEODORA VETTA, *DEMOCRACY STRUGGLES: NGOS AND THE POLITICS OF AID IN SERBIA*, BERGHAHN, NEW YORK, 2018.

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Even though the issue of the non-governmental (third, voluntary, non-profit) sector is a very current and an intriguing one, its role in contemporary society and its transformations has mostly remained unexplained and only very superficially tackled. A global rise of non-profit institutions which occupy the space between the state, the market and the household and which appear to be an unstable type of an organization of flexible governance is one of the main traits of the period of post-capitalism that followed the fall of Berlin Wall. This type of an organization has been previously heavily promoted by international developmental agencies and their ascend has marked the redefinition of the geopolitical power structures shaped during the Cold War period; until recently, this phenomenon somehow has remained self-explanatory and has been taken for granted. Initial research projects about Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been done within developmental studies, but since there is an obvious similarity between the activities of NGOs and anthropologists, it is somewhat expected that among the first analyses of the role of NGOs will be likewise accomplished by anthropologists. Theodora Vetta, a social

anthropologist, does precisely this: she analyses the non-profit sector in post-2000 Serbia. One may wonder, however, why Serbia is an attractive case study for doing this kind of research on the non-profit sector.

Judging from the framing of the chapters and from their content, it seems that NGOs themselves are not the real focus of this book; rather, the focus of the book appears to be a general discussion of the transformations of the political space of post-socialist Serbia and the global modernization conjuncture followed by notion of civil society shaped within liberal democracy. Some of the chapters are too specific and lack some pieces of information about the structure and the concrete actors of the non-profit sector in post-2000 Serbia. The book itself consists of three main chapters and from time to time it looks like most of the popular notions of contemporary politics and transition are more or less taken for granted, such as the formation of civil society, political aspects of culture and good governance. Only occasionally and sporadically some critical and reflective remarks on these notions are given. Therefore, the book leaves you with a general impression that it does not even attempt to re-examine

in any serious way the contemporary global development.

The introductory chapter explicates the leading concept of the book. This is the changing relationship between the state and citizens which was previously understood as the “third wave of democratization” by Samuel P. Huntington and labelled as “associational revolution” by Lester M. Salamon (p. 2). The causes of these processes are thought of as a response to the different needs of citizens on the one hand (since hitherto existing structures were not capable of covering citizens’ needs anymore) and as ideological on the other hand – the promotion of the global consolidation of capitalism and liberal democracy. There are two main objectives of the book: 1) to contribute to the more dynamic understanding of post-socialist transformation and 2) to complement ethnographic insights with political economy analysis.

The notion of civil society is a crucial term for post-socialist transformation and the topic of the rising third sector. This term is described in the introductory section of the book as “a conceptual umbrella,” a kind of “new political culture” and a sort of “global axiom” which applies to the transforming political, social and economic structures of former socialist countries. This umbrella term is generally understood as emancipatory and progressive (p. 22). Around sixty NGOs from Serbia were included in this fieldwork (though the full list is not disclosed), but a more close or intensive connection is not made with any of them since it could prevent the author to establish a good and neutral connection with the others. From the content of the chapters it is more than obvious that the entire project simply lacks a concrete focus and includes too much raw fieldwork material, while of the promised more serious analysis we can find only fragments from time to time.

The book consists of three parts, each with two interconnected chapters.

The first part of the book, “Civil Society in the Making”, consists of a very dense, or “thick,” description of a training that happened in Serbia and that was supported by the Robert Bosch Foundation. It was actually a one-week seminar organized in an unnamed small town in Serbia in 2010. The main question of this chapter is what constitutes a civic society building program which should, ideally, expose “Balkan apathetic personalities” to “democratic civic awareness” and result in them being more active and engaged as political subjects. The description of this training involves a very rough dichotomy between the assumed inadequacy of Balkan culture and the advanced EU civility and the main problem of Balkan countries is thought to be poverty only. This neglects, however, the lack of global importance of Balkan countries and their marginalization. The argument that people were forcefully during the socialist period while now even the entire machinery of “associational revolution” is not capable to motivate them simply is contradictory and does not make much sense. In the end of this part, the author claims that trainers on this seminar were successful in avoiding the “cultural imperialism of the West” but we simply cannot see anything but an attempt to make them to unconditionally accept the most superficial version of it.

The first part of the book also explains the relationship of the non-profit sector with donors, their legitimacy and the “authenticity” of these initiatives which are often motivated by profit. Thought Vetta concludes that associational revolution is a struggle for liberal democracy and capitalism, she does not devote much attention to the question how this could bring any kind of development into the periphery (p. 76).

The second part of the book, “The Politics of Culture”, offers an analysis of how the “NGO-ization” of the governing infrastructures of periphery countries,

such as South-Eastern European (SEE) countries, also de-radicalizes their social struggles which go against the doxa of Europe: cosmopolitanism and overcoming local determinism. However, it remains quite unclear how the transformations of a certain type of cultural identity, no matter how composed, might bring any kind of development. What is the actual point of making citizens of SEE loyal global personalities framed by cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism? The main obstacle for this is the lack of civility, the author claims, caused by cultural determinism that is geopolitically grounded. The other issues that are raised in this chapter are the class aspect of NGO culture and the changing conditions of work happening simultaneously with the associational revolution, especially within the non-profit sector. This part of the book also considers if the people working in the non-profit sector are forming a separate class – a group with similar habitus or *projectariat*. Finally, this part offers a short summary of nationalism where the author argues that radical nationalists in Serbia (especially the Serbian Radical Party) offered the most serious critique of capitalism while democrats in fact promoted neoliberal capitalism. This interpretation is, however, quite simplified since the radical nationalist arguments against EU are assumed to be dominantly culturally and not economically grounded.

The third and last part of the book is concerned with “good governance.” Its main focus are the developmental programs initiated by US NGOs, especially USAID which are applying the “community-based approach” since the Community Revitalization through Democratic Action (CRDA) project that started in 2001. This kind of projects aim to reconfigure the governing structures and the public sector institutions. The scheme of interventions initiated by the US-funded organizations is characterized as the

“revolt-revolution-standardization” (p. 141). What is quite surprising is that this kind of intervention is counterpoised to socialist mobilization as independent because it does not seem the author of the book is exposing this quite contradictory fact about the way democratization works under the conditions of associational revolution. Furthermore, the results of these projects in terms of real potential for mobilizing the people are much weaker than the results of socialist mobilization and observed as “abstract for people’s concerns” (p. 154). This approach of liberal capitalist democracy, however, does not combat dependency in any sense at all; on the contrary, it is a conditioned and a forced way of engineering and manufacturing citizens to be actively engaged in their quite harsh economic and technological subjugation. The final chapter questions the role of the state in the developments related to the non-profit sector and the assumed dichotomy between the two. The public sector is actively transferring its duties on the third sector which happens via the globally omnipresent policy discourse. Even if the non-profit sector is assumed to be very critical towards state institutions themselves, collected fieldwork material demonstrates that the non-profit sector quite often works as a substitute for public service and is actually an active part of a new neo-liberal governmentality.

The conclusion of this ethnographic project, which is composed of a few separate smaller projects, is that the growth of local NGOs in Serbia did not consolidate a vibrant civic society nor did it create some kind of new liberal subjectivity that can produce active citizens for the future of global capitalism. Despite being a ground-breaking attempt in this field, the book is obviously lacking a conceptual consistency and a clear focus on non-profit institutions as an institutional sub-system. The ethnographic material is used more

to illustrate some of the claims, rather than to provide any kind of proof for some of the tendencies within the non-profit sector in Serbia. Since the author is a social anthropologist it really comes as surprise that the argument which bounds together colonialism, aid and development is not much more explored within the study. This direction of research on the third sector has been especially developed by Laëticia Atlani-Duault and it also comes as a

surprise that she is not even referred to in this book. Although the author is often critical towards (neo)liberal democratic developmental capitalism, many of the concepts and notions are used without much critical reflexion. However, because of the courage to initiate this type of research and open the debate on the nature of change that the non-profit sector brings to peripheral countries, this book should certainly be welcomed as a ground-breaking piece.