

Kate Hartford's Comments on Qin Hui's article on NGOs in China

She discussed three basic issues:

1. ideal-type role of "third sector" (voluntary public interest)
2. position of "third sector" in developmental process; contrast
  - developed and developing countries
  - developed: to compensate for "government failure" and/or "market failure"
  - developing: (along with market sector) to accelerate elimination of "fourth sector"
3. Position of "third sector" in globalization

General observation: intriguing effect of starting points: cf. *Federalist Papers*, which starts from premise of individualism, inevitable pursuit of particular interests ("faction") and impossibility of ideal pursuit of public interest

Re point 1:

1. How important is the "public interest" function? (as definitional criterion).
  - Fed.Papers: fact of representative government gives rise to "faction" (self-interest)
  - Tocqueville: associative (public-interested) tendencies of Americans
2. Contextual factors (highlighted in remarks on labor movement later in paper) -- affect private/public divide

Question: maybe real distinction (in interest terms) between government and public interest groups is that government has to make the comprehensive decisions/policies, balancing different private interests, but also different public interests (environment v. employment, for example?)

In this respect also: question of where the NGOs direct their energies, towards do-it-yourself, or in attempting to influence government policies?

Re point 2:

1. In developmental process: NGOs even according to Qin Hui's public-interest criterion are not such a recent phenomenon, at least in the US

- e.g., abolitionist movement in the US from early 1800s
  - women's rights movement
  - "progressive" movement of late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century
- all aimed, ultimately, at government policy  
and, interestingly, at enhancing elements conducive to democratization or elimination of "fourth sector"

2. So, parallels between "developed" and "developing" country experiences may be stronger than depicted in the paper.

3. However, the contrast between the developmental process in Western Europe as compared to either US or China might be more fruitful; Qin Hui's points on legacy of state role in northern and western Europe meaning smaller sphere for NGOs are important: if the culture gives the state responsibility for all public interests, this constraint on NGO sphere might be likely. (Another possible difference to look at: strength of political parties in Europe compared to the US, which might account for NGOs in the US playing, by default, some of the roles played by parties in Europe.)

Re point 3 (Globalization and NGOs):

In international arena: absence of state surrogate.

UN lacks many aspects of state, most especially, any capacity to coerce or command; to the extent that it democratizes internally, it may actually become weaker (cf. US informal semi-withdrawal which nearly crippled the institution)

The "first sector" in the global arena is weak, even with the construction of global trade regimes, etc.

The "second sector": dominant?

role of NGOs in international setting: international civil society?

- evidence of real "state failures" (inability to serve the public interest)?
- or, attempts to circumvent state choices as made in and exercised through international organizations?

Finally, a fourth point: whom do NGOs represent?

- the "public interest" of neglected groups?
- or elites' interests, or elites' definition of what the powerless need (cf. the evolution of US organizations from integrated civil rights organizations in which whites tended to become dominant, to black-power oriented organizations)

Ultimate issue we all need to grapple with: the meaning of "public interest" in societies with highly stratified social structures and some deep incompatibilities of groups' interests.

## Questions And Discussions

**Liz Perry** raised a question about how "civil society" should be translated into Chinese, *shimin* or *gongmin*?

The subtext of her question was the question of what should be the foundation of membership in a civil society, to which NGOs are presumably contributing public (or nation -- since *gongmin* implies citizenship in the PRC), urban (bourgeois), community (*shimin shehui*), popular/folk community (*minjian shehui*) or civilized culture (*wenming shehui*). Qin Hui said he was trying to capture the idea of what we call "citizen" in English but that kind of begs the question since both *gongmin* and *shimin* are translated into English as citizen and since the term "citizen" can have so many meanings in English -- from membership in a nation-state to membership in a local community (whether urban or rural) to civilized comportment and attitudes, public service, etc.

**Rob Weller** comments as follows:

Qin is setting up an opposition between democratic state (1st sector), economy (2nd sector), and society (3rd sector). My first point was that his claim that the first two sectors developed first in the U.S. and then the third came in to deal with the failures is probably historically wrong. Kate made a similar point. My second was that the implied opposition between state and society resonated with a particularly American vision of the nature of the state and the need to limit its power, but that there were other democratic visions with less of an oppositional relationship between state and society. Many European countries come to mind--France especially, or the role of political parties (as Kate said), or the current "neocorporatist" attempt for the government to reduce its welfare

burden by giving strong support to an NGO sector. Even in the US, the Reagan era boom in NGOs accompanied an increase in the state, not a decrease. Related to this, I mentioned that most Chinese NGOs had very little interest in autonomy from the state. Finally, I pointed out that you could also get an NGO sector in nondemocratic regimes, like an earlier Hong Kong or Taiwan.

**Jing** made a comment to Qin Hui:

I am interested in a contradiction in your theory and practice. Your interview by The Left Review emphasizes the importance of prioritizing *wenti* over *lilun*, and that there are universal values but we should not confuse them with universal questions. But in this NGO piece, your perception of the “western” model of the development of the NGOs serves as the point of reference (*zuobiao*) for your assessment of the Chinese NGOs, even though you said that the route taken by the Chinese NGOs drastically departed from the Western route. Nonetheless, conceptually, the “West” as a model seems to be evident in your conceptual framework and impacts your assessment about what should be the “correct” or “normal” way of NGOs’ development.