

Book Review

Paved With Good Intentions: Canada's Development NGOs From Idealism to Imperialism

by Nikolas Barry-Shaw and Dru Oja Jay. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2012. \$24.95 CAN, paper. ISBN: 978-1-55266-399-8. Pages: 1-303.

Reviewed by Madalena Santos¹

Paved With Good Intentions provides a critical perspective on the negative impacts of Canadian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) projects in relation to achieving the goals of equality and social justice in countries that are not considered to be part of the West (i.e.: Canada, the United States, or Western Europe), or what the authors refer to as the "Global South." Citing various studies from NGO specialists such as Sangeeta Kanat and Michael Edwards, James Petras, Eboe Hutchful, Mike Davis, Laura Macdonald, Tina Wallace, and Arundhati Roy, the authors situate their work within an anti/decolonial framework that seeks to achieve social justice from the bottom up. They examine the power of donors in controlling the direction and focus of development NGOs, which they contend reinforce colonial legacies of resource extraction and genocidal policies in the name of benevolence. The authors provide a nuanced yet perhaps contentious view of NGO work suggesting NGOs have become at best toothless critics which define the limits of dissent, and at worst proponents of Canadian imperial interventions. They distinguish between development NGOs and humanitarian NGOs, although they devote less space to the latter. In their view, humanitarian NGOs provide assistance for short periods of relief efforts such as during natural disasters, for example, while development NGOs try to alter the fundamental ways in which societies are organized. In their own words: "We consider development NGOs to be distinct from humanitarian agencies. Humanitarian action seeks to alleviate episodic instances of suffering, whereas development work seeks to address the root causes of poverty" (14).

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Going further, Barry-Shaw and Oja Jay define development NGOs as “professionalized, non-profit organizations that depend on CIDA [Canadian International Development Agency] for funding and whose primary aim is to permanently remedy poverty in the Third World” (13). Yet while the stated goal of these NGOs is to eliminate poverty, the authors show how development NGOs often present a paternalistic view of poverty that is unconcerned with power relations and structural or systemic change, but instead emphasizes the individualized goals of “empowerment” and “participation” through projects such as micro-credit financing that are closely tied to neoliberal market reforms. They explain how neoliberal ideology promotes greater economic liberalization, privatization, free trade, open markets, deregulation, and reductions in government spending in the public sector in order to increase the role of the private sector in the economy. They claim that the work of development NGOs not only fails to link development to state politics and ideology, but also disrupts local grassroots activism that attempts to effect transformational change through efforts such as wealth redistribution. In short, they argue that NGOs obscure their own role in implementing neoliberal reform through what they call the political project of “NGOization” or “privatization by NGO” (44).

Over the course of ten chapters, *Paved With Good Intentions* covers a number of areas in the study and analysis of NGOs offering a succinct history of NGOs in Canada that traces changes within the goals and aspirations of NGOs to foreign policy and the geopolitical climate of the day from the fear of Communism to the rise and continuance of neoliberal policies and the link to Western imperial military interventions. Using a structural analysis that examines the underlying systems and methods of development, the authors convincingly argue what they understand as the myth of the benevolent Canadian NGO, which they contend has never existed. The authors draw attention to the dependence of NGOs on government financial support, which now sees the typical development NGO relying on federal funding for over 50% of its annual budget (59). According to Barry-Shaw and Oja Jay, the increase in government money for development work limits and at times prevents NGOs from critiquing the Canadian state, in particular Canada’s foreign state policies. Tracing the origin of development NGOs in Canada to the Cold War era of the 1950s, Barry-Shaw and Oja Jay provide the historical context for the current growth of neoliberal policies and free trade agreements. The ongoing era of “globalization,” which the authors contend is really a euphemism for capitalistic expansion, has increased NGO

bureaucratization and collaboration with the state, as well as the simultaneous suppression of social justice and anticapitalist activists.

Barry-Shaw and Dru Ojay discuss the radicalization of NGOs during the 1960s and 1970s, which saw projects put into practice based on a Friarian pedagogical approach concerned with the “uprooting of unjust political and economic structures and systems” (144). They show how this period of radical development was stifled through government cuts to funding in the 1980s furthering the depoliticization of resistance and the relationship of dependency of the Global South on the Global North through clientalism and the cooptation of development projects. The professionalization of NGO projects, the authors go on to argue, helps to maintain or create an educated minority of middle and upper class elite who are not interested in change that would redistribute wealth and make structural and systemic transformations to relations of power that would actually eliminate poverty. Much of the money spent on NGO “development” for instance goes to training and the institutionalization of projects rather than going directly to beneficiaries. Moreover, they point out how NGO workers from the Global North who work in the Global South reinforce colonial relations where race, class, and gender play a significant role in establishing and maintaining relations of social and economic privilege (42).

The book offers concrete examples of the destructive outcomes of development NGOs in a number of countries, including Haiti, Palestine, Honduras, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. The authors discuss how development NGOs have not only been ineffective in making the substantial changes needed to create more equitable and just societies in the Global South, but have actually lead to greater violence and injustice in these countries through support and imposition of corrupt regimes. They present Haiti as an extreme yet significant example of the connection between development NGOs, the neoliberal goals of Canada, France, and the US, and the violent criminalization and marginalization of popular dissent. In this case, they detail how the Canadian government helped to overthrow the democratically elected and popularly supported President Aristide through the use of military force while providing NGOs with the funds necessary to undermine Aristide’s popular *Fanmi Lavalas* movement, which was overwhelmingly supported by the Haitian poor who form the majority of Haiti’s population. While more needs to be said about the neocolonial legacy of NGO development and the exacerbation of colonial legacies in the Global North, *Paved With Good Intentions* underscores the possibilities for transformational change that can come

about through solidarity work that centres the aims and strategies of people working for justice and recognizes the connections between the struggles of peoples across international borders.