

# Challenges to the Thai N.G.O. movement from the dawn of a new opposition to global capital

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## Abstract

Nearly twenty years have elapsed since the massive proliferation of N.G.O.s in Thailand and other developing countries. This proliferation occurred alongside the rise in theories concerning "New", non-class based Social Movements and the revival of the belief in the need to build "Civil Society", as a process of democratising the state. They are all products of the "collapse in confidence" in Marxism, which took place in the 1980s. However, the revival of a generalised anti-capitalist mood among young people who have "lost confidence" in neo-liberalism, together with a revival of international working class struggle and Left-wing organisations, challenges many post-Cold War assumptions. It is necessary to re-evaluate N.G.O. practices, developed during the 1980s, in the light of this global upturn in struggle. Firstly, it is necessary to analyse the political ideology of the "New" Social Movements and Civil Society, much used by the N.G.O. movement, in order to determine its claimed success in reducing state domination over citizens. Secondly, it is important to address the important contradiction between the N.G.O.s' role as a political catalyst for change on behalf of the poor, and their role as an alternative service provider to the state, under a neo-liberal model. Thirdly, it is necessary to analyse the contradictory ideology of the N.G.O. movement, which on the one hand claims to be apolitical but on the other hand cannot escape having a profoundly political character. Finally we must examine the problem of democratic representation and accountability in the Peoples' movement, in the light of N.G.O. claims to further the aims of democratisation and participation.

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Nearly twenty years have elapsed since the dramatic rise of Non-Government Organisations (N.G.O.s) throughout the world, and especially in developing nations such as Thailand. Although N.G.O.s existed well before the mid-1980s, it was the —collapse of confidence“ in a Marxist alternative to capitalism, together with a generalised ruling class offensive against struggles from below from the mid-70s, which gave the N.G.O. movement its real growth spurt. The pre-1980s N.G.O.s were mainly charitable foundations, such as the Y.M.C.A., the Red Cross, Japanese Societies of Gratitude, Budi Oetomo in Indonesia (Clarke 1998: 7, 28) or the various Chinese mutual-help foundations which were set up in Thailand. However, it was the collapse of the Left on a world-wide scale that coincided with the rise of modern N.G.O.s. Some authors even go as far as to state that N.G.O.s displaced, destroyed or co-opted movements of the Left rather than rising out of the ashes of a weakened socialist movement (Petras 1999: 429). Whatever the case, what is clear is that there was an inverse relationship between the strength of socialist movements and the N.G.O. movement (Clarke 1998: 7, 198).

In his important book on the N.G.O. movement, Gerald Clarke outlines five main reasons for the proliferation of the N.G.O.s in the 1980s (Clarke 1998: 7). These are:

1. The expansion of N.G.O.s in the West into developing countries, either directly or as funders for local N.G.O.s
2. The increasing use by governments in developed countries of N.G.O.s in a neo-liberal climate where the role of the state in providing services came under attack.
3. The fact that governments in developing countries increasingly recognised the beneficial role of N.G.O.s.
4. The fragmentation and collapse of Left-wing, class-based movements.
5. The failure in developing countries of political parties and trade unions to articulate a wide range of problems facing society.

Between 1975 and 1985 the amount of aid transferred from developed nations to developing nation via N.G.O.s increased 1400% and the number N.G.O.s proliferated in countries as far apart as Brazil, Kenya, Philippines and Thailand (Jaturong 1999: 74, Sanguan & Surapon 2001: 13). Today there are 18,000 officially registered N.G.O.s in Thailand, but only a small proportion remained active for any length of time (Ranee 1999: 180). Never the less the role of N.G.O.s became increasingly important after the

collapse of the Communist Party of Thailand (C.P.T.) in the mid-1980s.

Local N.G.O.s operate in all regions of Thailand, although there is a strong bias towards work in rural

areas, since these areas are perceived to be where —the majority— of the poor are located. In fact, this bias

is to a large extent, a result of the persistence of certain aspects of Maoism, which dominated the Thai

Left in the 1970s. Today most N.G.O. activists mistakenly believe that most Thais work in rural agriculture and that rural areas are the only areas which are associated with poverty (Rigg 2001: 95, 164).

N.G.O. work covers such diverse issues as human rights, the rights of indigenous minorities, promotion

of democracy, advocacy for small farmers and fisher-people, advocacy of non-violence and peace, support for children, labour rights, environmental issues, health issues, religious matters, gender rights,

alternative technology, cultural issues etc... Thai N.G.O.s are also linked together by networks based upon the type of work that they do and/or the regions in which they operate. Although originally set up

and run by people of the —October Generation—, who were radicalised during the 1970s, some of whom

were members of the C.P.T., N.G.O.s now recruit new generations of young people to work for them.

Many are graduates who were involved in social activist groups while at university. Labour N.G.O.s also

recruit sacked and victimised union organisers. Local N.G.O. funding mainly comes from foreign governments, either directly, or through international N.G.O.s and multinational organisations, such as

the World Bank. In addition to this, some international N.G.O.s operate directly along side local N.G.O.s.

These latter bodies are more likely to have foreign personnel.

## **1. The “New” Social Movements and “Civil Society”**

Following on from the —collapse of confidence— in a Marxist alternative to capitalism in the 1980s, the

ideas of the “New” Social Movements and “Civil Society” became dominant among ex-Left-wing activists and academics and those involved in the N.G.O. movement who sought to bring about democracy and social justice.

The “New” Social Movements were considered to be different from the “Old” movements because they

were “self-limiting radicalism” which abandoned “old” revolutionary objective of seizing state power. Instead, the primary aim of the “New” Social Movements was reforms within the existing political system

which were not just about changing the nature of state power, but also about self-activity within society,

outside the realms of the state (Cohen & Arato 1997: 493). Rather than using “traditional” weapons, such

as strikes or mass demonstrations, these “New” Social Movements were said to use the new electronic technologies of global communication, such as e-mail, the internet or fax machines. Many argued that what was also “new” and important about such movements, which included the ecological movements, movements for the rights of indigenous peoples and women’s movements, was that they were concerned with individual and cultural rights rather than collective and economic rights (Touraine 2001: 47,82).

Such ideas were associated with the belief that the “Old” Social Movements, based upon the working class and socialist ideology, were a thing of the past, following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Left-wing organisations (Keane 1998: 16, Leonard 1997: 154, Touraine 2001: 47).

The idea of classless “New” Social Movements, pushing for reforms within the present system and strengthening Civil Society, is more or less a revival of mainstream pluralist ideas (Dahl 1963). Thus Civil Society is where separate and self-organised interest groups (including “New” Social Movements), which are independent from the state, remain in constant tension with each other and the state, helping to ensure a peaceful democratic society without a dominating state controlled by any one group (Cohen & Arato 1997, Keane 1998: 6 , 75, Touraine 2001: 99).

## **2. Cycles of struggle and the rise of the Anti-Capitalist Movement**

The idea of “New” Social Movements and the revival of pluralist “Civil Society” ideas rest upon the assumption that class struggle and Marxism are finished historically. However, rather than seeing the collapse of the Left throughout the world in the mid- to late 1980s as a —final defeat of Marxism” and class struggle, as most mainstream commentators do, it is more useful to consider the downturn in class struggle in cyclic terms. Sidney Tarrow, in his study of Social Movements, shows why contentious politics and Social Movements rise and fall in cycles and that the so-called “New” Social Movements, while reflecting an ever changing world, retain many of the “old” features of those Social Movements which existed before the end of the 1970s (Tarrow 1999: 24, 142). While not specifically using a class analysis, Tarrow accepts that the working class is still a significant actor in modern and global Social Movements (Tarrow 1999: 177). He further points out that the fashion for e-mail or fax activism among the followers of the “New” Social Movement theory, which he describes as “virtual activism”, may merely serve as a substitute and not a spur to activism in the real world (Tarrow 1999: 134 , 193).

The Marxist theory of Social Movements has always recognised that class struggle is cyclic,

sometimes

open and sometimes hidden, with victories as well as defeats. What is more, Marxists have always been

aware that class struggle comes in many shapes and forms, in such a way that diverse political or cultural

issues can never be separated from economic and class issues (Marx 1847/1995: 190, Rosa Luxemburg

1906/1986, Trotsky 1921/1983, Ferguson et al. 2002: 72). Finally, it is quite wrong to assert, as many

people do, that class struggle merely disappeared after the mid- to late 1980s. For example, there were

general strikes organised in nearly all major continents of the globe throughout the mid 1990s (Moody

1997: 21).

The defeats of the late 1970s and mid 1980s should be regarded in cyclic terms as a —temporary set-back—

for the Left. It is important to be aware of the dramatic wave of international class struggle which peaked

in Western Europe with the May Events in Paris in 1968. This wave of class struggle arose as the result of

the end of the long post-war boom in the West coming together with struggles of oppressed peoples throughout the world (Harman 1988). It included such diverse struggles such as those waged by black

people in the United States, Irish nationalists in the north of Ireland, workers in Poland, women and gays

in various countries and the struggle against colonialism or dictatorships in Africa and South-East Asia.

This diverse spectrum of struggle shows why the Marxist view of a concrete link between economic demands and political demands fits with the real world. In Thailand the international wave of class struggle took the form of an explosive radicalisation of students and workers which led to the overthrow of

the military dictatorship in October 1973.

Such global struggles tested the abilities of existing socialist organisations to lead these struggles for

liberation. In many countries, the true reactionary nature of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and

the Stalinist Communist Parties in the West, resulted in the growth of previously existing or new non-

Stalinist Left organisations in this period (Birchall 1974). Some of the non-Stalinist Left from this era, for

example the Fourth International in France, or the International Socialist Tendency in Britain and Greece,

have survived to be important actors in the new global anti-capitalist movement today.

It is important to understand that the massive international wave of class struggle in the late 1960s and

early 1970s was followed by a generalised offensive in the mid-1970s, conducted by all ruling classes,

which resulted in the defeat of the Left, the working class and the peasantry throughout the world.

In many cases, especially in Western democracies, this defeat of the movement was brought about by the actions of Stalinist Communist Parties or reformist Social-Democratic parties which sought to demobilise the revolutionary situation in order to make the world safe for capitalism. France, Italy and Britain are very good examples of where such parties used their influence among the organised working class to demobilise the struggle. That this was carried out by Communist Parties, should surprise no one, since the declared aims of Stalinist Communist Parties were always to establish or strengthen the —Democratic Stage“ of capitalism. Similarly modern Social Democratic parties never ever claimed to be in favour of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

Where mass Social Democratic or Stalinist Communist Parties did not exist, such as in the United States, radicalism was destroyed through a mixture of buying-off middle class sections of oppressed groups, such as women and blacks, coupled with direct repression of working class blacks (Harman 1998, Neal 2000:191). In many less developed countries, where the political system was less open to the non-violent manipulation of Civil Society by the state (see Gramsci in Forgacs 1999: 227), the ruling classes resorted to naked oppression. This can be seen, for example in the bloody crack-downs of the 1970s in Chile, Mexico, Argentina and Thailand. The 6th October 1976 massacre in Bangkok resulted in the destruction of the Left in open Thai society (Ji et al. 2001), pushing radical students and workers into the arms of the C.P.T. in the countryside. The subsequent failure of the C.P.T., in its Maoist strategy to stage the —Thai National Democratic Revolution“, by using a peasant army, together with the C.P.T.’s total inability to adapt itself to the wave of urban class struggle from 1973, resulted in the destruction of the Thai Left. (Ungpakorn 1997: 94, Ungpakorn 2001: 160, Ji et al. 2001).

As disillusioned students left the jungle strongholds of the C.P.T. to return to the Bangkok and open society, many of those who were not totally demoralised became active in setting up N.G.O.s. The same situation occurred in the Philippines (Clarke 1998: 7,195). The collapse of Stalinist regimes throughout Eastern Europe, which should really be regarded as “State Capitalist” rather than “Socialist” (see Cliff 1974), served to reinforce the total crisis of the Left. It is interesting to note that most of the Left-Wing organisations which have been able to survive this period up to this day, have been those which did not have illusions in the “benefits” of Stalinism.

From the above analysis of the international cycle of class struggle, two important conclusions about the present day international situation can be reached. Firstly, although the destruction of the Left was really the destruction of the Stalinism (and Maoism), which proved the bankruptcy of Stalinism and not that of Marxism (Callinicos 1991), this destruction did have very serious consequences. It resulted in the total acceptance of neo-liberal and free-market dogma by all sorts of groups and organisations, ranging from reformist "Third Way" Social-Democratic Parties, through the various reformed Communist Parties, to N.G.O. activists who now advocate "Civil Society Theory". Secondly, the rise of a new international wave of class struggle, starting with the social forum movement in Porto Alegre and the anti-capitalist demonstrations in Seattle and Genoa in 1999-2001, and leading to a generalised level of opposition to capitalism in the form of 13 million workers on general strike in Italy in April 2002, the massive unrest in Argentina and the huge international anti-war movement, creates a massive opportunity for the revival of the non-Stalinist Left. This new wave international class struggle represents a "collapse of confidence" in neo-liberal policies of free-market capitalism. The main actors in this revolt are young people who are disillusioned with mainstream free-market politics and a revived working class movement tired of making sacrifices in order to increase profitability (Bircham & Charlton 2001). Coupled with this new global anti-capitalism is the disillusionment with main stream political parties of both the traditional Right and the reformist Left (Klein 1999: 341). A symptom of this is the rise of Populism, the Revolutionary Left and Fascism. The landslide victory of the capitalist but populist Thai Rak Thai party in Thailand is also part of this process, since Thai Rak Thai is the first political party in Thailand to offer Populist policies for the poor in twenty-five years.

Many young people and ordinary workers today see the existing system as being unable to solve the problems of economic injustice, crisis and war. Naomi Klein reported in 2002 from crisis torn Argentina, that in the last federal election more people spoiled their ballots than voted for a single politician and the most popular write-in candidate was "Clemente", a cartoon character with no hands who couldn't therefore steal (Klein 2002). In the January 2001 elections in Thailand, an historic number of spoiled ballots and abstentions were also recorded, but this was partly because voting had just become compulsory under the new constitution. Never the less, there is growing disillusionment with established parties and the system even in Thailand.

Event before the rise of the anti-capitalist mood, the nature of contentious politics in countries such as France was disproving “New” Social Movement theory. Since 1995, the level of trade union struggle has been high in France. What is interesting about this trade union activity is that there has been significant self-organisation among the rank and file, independent of the bureaucracy. This is best illustrated by the formation of a new union federation called S.U.D., which stands for “Solidarity-Unity-Democracy”.

S.U.D. was formed in 1989 as a rank and file-led union federation. Key activists involved in S.U.D. are members of the Trotskyist Fourth International (Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire, L.C.R.) and other Marxist activists. The important point, as far as “New” Social Movement theory is concerned, is that not only were Marxist organisations central to the formation of S.U.D., but that both S.U.D. and the L.C.R. played important roles in the anti-capitalist A.T.T.A.C. and the anti-racist “New” Social Movements which arose in France after 1995 (Blakey 2001). In the May 2002 French presidential election, L.C.R. stood a 27 year old postal worker from S.U.D. who polled a significant proportion of votes from those under the age of 25.

The recent qualitative change in the level of class struggle, both in ideological terms and in real practical struggle, are a challenge to the established methods of operation, inherited from a post-Cold War era, within the N.G.O. movement. The —collapse of confidence” in the free-market means that long-held assumptions that there is no real alternative to the market and capitalist parliamentary democracy, are being openly questioned. The increased combativeness of the international working class and the clear message of internationalism among anti-capitalist protesters also raise questions about the so-called —irrelevance” of class in a global era, which is the foundation of N.G.O. —Civil Society theory” or ideas about so-called —New Social Movements”. Assumptions that the poor in under-developed countries must ally themselves with their own local ruling classes in a battle between the rich —north” and the poor —south” are also thrown into question. Finally, the revival of the non-Stalinist revolutionary socialist Left throughout the world challenges the idea that Marxism has no future.

### **3. Challenges to Thai N.G.O. theory and practice**

In the present climate of increasing international class struggle there are four main challenges to N.G.O theory and practice which social activists ought to consider. (1) Do N.G.O.s reduce elite state power or are they part of the process of stabilising the state and the existing political structures? (2) Are N.G.O.s



political catalysts for change, on behalf of the poor, or have they become service providers under a neo-liberal model? (3) How useful is the N.G.O. position in rejecting formal politics and rejecting the need to build political parties from below? (4) How can N.G.O.s advocate greater democracy in society while rejecting internal democratic structures within N.G.O.s and rejecting —representative democracy“? In order to analyse these issues, it is helpful first to look at the dominant ideology within the N.G.O. movement.

### **3.1 The dominant ideology of Thai N.G.O.s**

Most Thai N.G.O. activists unwittingly reflect Post-Modernist ideas when they claim that theirs is a movement without fixed ideology, unlike the dogmatic Left-wing organisations of the past. Post-Modernism became very fashionable in response to the authoritarian nature of Stalinism and its subsequent collapse and the logic of this school of thought fits nicely with those who believed that after the end of the cold war there was no other alternative to capitalism (Callinicos 1992). Starting out as a reaction against having “the correct line” rammed down your throat, Post-Modernism, however, soon became an excuse for N.G.O. activists to “reject political theory” and any unified global analysis of our present social system, since that would be succumbing to some “Grand Narrative”. Yet, in practice, most N.G.O. activists operate around four sets of dogmatic theoretical ideas, all of which reject class analysis and the need to overthrow the state. These are the ideas of —Civil Society“, —the ‘New’ Social Movements“, —top-down advocacy for the dis-empowered poor“ and a blend of autonomism or Anarchism, which pays lip-service to the rejection of political parties, representative democracy and the state.

Today the most popular theoretical frame work for strengthening popular democratic participation used by N.G.O. activists in Thailand, is that put forward by the Civil Society and the —New“ Social Movement schools. As already mentioned, their starting point involves two assumptions which arise out of the —collapse of confidence“ in what most activists regard as —Marxism“ (Ranee 1999: 42,181). First there is an assumption that there is no more progressive alternative to capitalist parliamentary democracy and the second assumption is that class is not a useful tool for analysis when looking at the issues of state power and the forces which can challenge state power.

The Civil Society view has many similarities with the old Modernisation Theory of Samuel Huntington, which was applied by main stream academics to the development of democracy in Thailand (Huntington 1968). Huntington suggested, in the 1960’s, that developing countries were not yet ready for U.S.-style

democracy, due to the undeveloped nature of their economies and a lack of an influential middle class. In that era, this was a Right-wing Cold War-type theory used partly to justify why democratic U.S.A. should ally itself with authoritarian military dictatorships such as Thailand, in the name of the —Free World“.

Sooner or later, this theory stated, Thailand would become democratic, when Thai society was ready.

Looking at Thailand today, it might be tempting to think that Huntington was right. As the economy has

developed, the power of the army has declined and bourgeois democracy has become the established

norm. However, the situation is not that simple. Firstly, there is no cast-iron guarantee that Thailand will

not revert to dictatorship in the event of a political crisis. Secondly, Singapore has a more advanced economy than Thailand with a large middle class, yet it has a more dictatorial regime. Middle class organisations, even when independent of the state, are not automatically in favour of more democracy

(Rodan 1997). This is a general problem for the elite version of Civil Society theory, since this version

believes that the middle class is the key force in —Civil society“ which checks the power of and struggles

against the authoritarian state (Pye 1990, Robison & Goodman 1996, Hewison 1996, Anek 1993, Seksan

1994). Thirdly, democratic rights in countries like Thailand and the Philippines were won through violent

mass popular struggles, involving alliances between students, workers, urban poor and the middle classes.

This is not the model that Huntington had in mind.

Most Thai N.G.O. activists prefer to see the agent for building Civil Society as the —New“ Social Movements, especially of the poorer sections of society, rather than the middle class. Despite, rejecting

the importance of class as a frame work for analysis, a number of N.G.O.s work with —Old“ Social Movements, such as trade unions or peasant movements, and even when they do not do so, N.G.O.s are

usually on the side of the —poor“ in society. The theory of —New Social Movements“ is very much related

to the ideas of Civil Society, but with an emphasis on identity politics or single-issue campaigns as being

important to pressurising the state. As mentioned already, the starting point for this theory is a —crisis of

confidence“ in class theories, especially Marxism. The Thai and international working class is seen as an

irrelevant force for change within society (Chairat 1997: 3). E-mail and fax activism are proposed instead

of strikes or violent struggles. Parallel to this view is the Post-Modernist idea that general theories which

explain state power or economic systems are no longer of any use and that social movements of the new

era are and should be loosely organised networks, rather than campaigns influenced by Left-wing political organisations or centralised parties.

One of the worst aspects of Civil Society and “New” Social Movement theory, as used by the Thai N.G.O.s is the intentional or unintentional capitulation of the N.G.O.s to neo-liberalism. This is hardly surprising since Civil Society theory is often advocated by those in the West who believe that the Welfare State has collapsed in Western Europe along with the collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe (Keane 1998: 5). Alan Touraine explains that the success and advantage of the “New” Social Movements is because they do not directly oppose the logic of neo-liberalism (Touraine 2001: 69). The Thai Working Group on the People’s Agenda for Sustainable Development “Alternative” Report states that “the principle of free trade might still be appropriate” so long as there is justice within this system (NGO-COD 2002a: 25). This capitulation, by the N.G.O.s to neo-liberalism can also be seen most clearly in the way that demands by N.G.O.s to reduce the role of the state, dovetails nicely with the neo-liberal demand to reduce state taxation and spending on welfare. Few N.G.O.s in Thailand call for higher progressive taxation on the rich in order to fund a welfare state or increased provision for the poor (NGO-COD 2002a: 153). Instead they demand that the state reduce its welfare provision in favour of a decentralised self-help system based on —the peoples sector” without proper regard to funding (NGO-COD 2002a: 25).

### **3.2 N.G.O. conceptualisation of state power**

It is in dealing with the issue of inequality of power within society, and the way to deal with this problem, that we find the most important weakness with Civil Society and —New” Social Movement theory, since both theories rest upon an assumption that the state can somehow be neutralised by various independent forces in society, regardless of class. Furthermore, this model of state and society assumes that there is no alternative to free-market capitalism and parliamentary democracy where voters are free to choose their political leaders, but powerless to choose or mandate those who control the big corporations that dominate the means of producing wealth in society. As the Italian Marxist revolutionary, Gramsci, put it, the whole idea of Civil Society and the so-called independent institutions in society which are claimed to reduce the power of the state, are under the hegemonic idea that there is no alternative to the current set-up. In other words, Civil Society strengthens the stability of the democratic capitalist state (Forgacs 1999: 227). In the light of this it is ironic that many Thai N.G.O. theorists copy their Western counterparts by dishonestly attempt to mis-quote Gramsci in order to justify their views that civil society institutions can

reduce the power of the state (see Ranee 1999: 187, Keane 1998: 15).

N.G.O. theory, especially Civil Society theory, suggests that the activities of N.G.O.s in strengthening organisations independent from the state, can reduce the power of the state and redistribute such power to the —Peoples Sector“. In opposition to this view, as we have seen above, Marxist such as Gramsci, argued that a strengthened Civil Society merely stabilises the state. Given that N.G.O.s claim that their strategy is more realistic than the Marxist strategy of attempting to seize state power, what has been the impact of N.G.O. activity in reducing the power of the Thai state? Certainly over the past twenty years the democratic space in Thai society has expanded and an important part of this is due to the activities of N.G.O.s and social movements. This increased democratic space is not insignificant. It means the increased ability of the oppressed to struggle openly for a more just society. It means free trade unions, free peasant movements and a free press. It has meant that governments have had to realise that dams, power stations and gas pipe-lines cannot just be built with total disregard for the feelings of local people. But all this does not mean reducing the power of the state to act in protecting the interests of the Thai capitalist class. In fact all modern and developed capitalist states involve open and democratic political structures which stabilise the power of the state without challenging the right of a small minority to control the levers of wealth production.

Viewed from this angle, the N.G.O.s support for a modern and democratic —Peoples“ Constitution in 1997 (NGO-COD 2002b: 28) can be seen as acting within the boundaries capitalist hegemony in order to protect and develop Thai capitalist democracy, rather than reducing the power of the state (Connors 1999, Ungpakorn: 2002). In practice, as with all Constitutions under capitalism, the paper clauses on people's rights are hugely outweighed by the reality of power and privilege of the capitalist class in Thai society. In addition to this, there is no indication what so ever that the power of the state in terms of its armed forces, its police, its courts or its prisons, has in any way been reduced. The experience of government repression against land occupations, against the Assembly of the Poor and against the movement to oppose the Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline, are good examples. In terms of —convincing“ the state to take issues of human rights and equality more seriously, the bloodbath resulting from the Taksin government's anti-drugs campaign in 2003 shows that the state is as brutal and powerful as ever. The unequal power relationship in the dream coalition of N.G.O.s, Civil Society groups with the business sector and the state

is obvious.

In fact, many N.G.O. theorists do not even attempt to reduce the power of the state. Sanguan & Surapon (2001) argue that Civil Society should join forces with the state, echoing something which conservative academics such as Prawes Wasi (1998) and Chai-anan Samutwanit (1998) have often argued. In the West, those arguing for Civil Society stress the need to maintain the state and see the importance of state legal protection for the status of non-government institutions (Keane 1998: 6). Clarke (1998: 14, 93, 198, 201) has shown that despite N.G.O.s' considerable contribution to democratisation and the reduction of patronage in many less developed countries, they have not reduced the power of the state, since N.G.O.s have been co-opted into state networks which support political and economic stability of the state (Clarke 1998: 211). In a similar manner, Bryant argues that N.G.O. empowerment of the downtrodden can often have the unintended effect of extending the political control of the state to marginal people, by linking them into formal political structures (Bryant 2002: 286). Rather than seeing the Thai state's increased interest in N.G.O.s or Civil Society, as an indication of the weakening power of the state, as many N.G.O. activists tend to do (Jaturong 1999: 76), we should view this as a successful attempt to co-opt N.G.O.s into the modern political system. In the case of Singapore, the government has taken one step further and actually created voluntary and welfare organisations in the public sphere in order to directly control such bodies (Tan 2001: 112). Main-stream N.G.O. ideology regarding the modern capitalist state can only be regarded as "reformist".

N.G.O.s work within the system, encouraging more "people's" participation and seeking to make minor changes to the existing system, rather than seizing state power and rebuilding a new political system. In the developed West, such reformism is in deep crisis with the British Labour Party and the French, German and Japanese Socialist Parties accepting the old ideas of free-market liberalism under the cloak of a "New Third Way". The "Third Sector" which Thai and many other N.G.O.s talk about has many similarities to this way of thinking. Yet it is interesting to note that the revival of global anti-capitalism coincides with disillusionment in political parties which openly support either the free-market or the so-called the Third Way.

Even among those N.G.O. activists who reject the state, their anarchistic analysis merely leads them to ignore the state, not change it or overthrow it. Such views provide no real solutions to villagers who face state repression as a result of land seizures or protest campaigns. Rather than trying to locate the

source of  
class power within society which can deal with the capitalist state, these activists are ultimately forced to  
turn to clauses in the Constitution, so-called “independent bodies” or negotiations with state officials via  
sympathetic politicians in order to solve villagers’ problems.

### **3.3 N.G.O. acceptance of the free-market**

The rejection of class and the potential power of the modern working class to challenge the interests of  
the capitalist class by “New” Social Movement and Civil Society theorists, means that it is not possible  
for them to theorise about the free-market in terms of opposing class interests. This means that most N.G.O.s accept the idea that the free-market leads to more efficiency (see the views of Sanguan & Surapon 2001: 12). N.G.O.s operating among villagers spend much of their time promoting  
community  
businesses which are aimed at finding unique niches within the world market, without any analysis of the  
pitfalls of market capitalism.

When advocating a reduction in the power of the state, N.G.O. activists often only mean reducing the power of the civil service and the military and increasing the influence of private organisations.

Ranee

(1999: 181) states that N.G.O.-backed political reform has resulted in a change from the old “steel triangle of power” which involved civil servants, politicians and the business sector. The new  
“partnership” that has arisen involves the state, business and “the Third Sector” (Civil Society).

There is

no question of asking why the Thai capitalist class, which makes up less than 1% of the population, should have at least a 33% stake in power and if one were to regard the state as being under the influence

of this class, its power share rises to 66%! Rather than attack the power of private business and its representative state, or even the article in the new Constitution which guarantees the free-market, Ranee

(1999: 185) bemoans the clauses in the constitution which pose an obstacle to broad cooperation between

the state, private business and Civil Society.

Similarly, when N.G.O.s attack the policies of the World Bank, the A.D.B., the I.M.F. and the W.T.O. they often do so from a nationalist stand point. These neo-liberal policies should be opposed only when

they open the door to foreign capitalists (NGO-COD 2002a: 172). The logic is that structural adjustment

programmes are not a problem if they favour local Thai capitalists at the expense of the poor.

Thus, the defeats of the mid 1970s allow N.G.O. activists to adopt neo-liberal ideas wrapped up in a fig-

leaf of progressiveness. Petras (1999: 431) rightly concludes that Civil Society theory facilitates N.G.O.

collaboration with bankers and businessmen. Yet the present “crisis of confidence” in the free-market

results from the negative impact of such neo-liberalism upon workers and peasants throughout the world.

### 3.4 Political catalyst or neo-liberal service provider?

The contradiction between N.G.O.s acting as political advocates for change on behalf of the poor, and N.G.O.s acting as subcontracted service providers, instead of the state (Clarke 1998: 14, Jon 1999: 92) is hardly seen as a contradiction or even a problem among many N.G.O.s in Thailand. The tendency towards more professional N.G.O. workers, while improving efficiency, especially in the delivery of services, goes hand in hand with the loss of political motivation (Jon 1999: 91) and the seeking of professional well-paid and secure jobs in N.G.O.s. This can result in internal bureaucratisation of N.G.O.s (Petrus 1999: 430).

The fundamental reason why most N.G.O. activists do not even recognise the contradiction between political activism and providing services, is a lack of an analysis of the free market. This is not surprising given that most N.G.O.s accept the free-market in some form and that their Communist Party of Thailand predecessors also saw the real issue facing Thailand as national capitalist sovereignty rather than class. There is a general acceptance of privatisation. Yet, the lessons from the West, especially from Britain and the United States, of N.G.O.s, with their low paid and unprofessional volunteer staff, being used to take on the role of service providers as a means to cut government expenditure and reduce the bargaining power of trade unions under extreme neo-liberal agendas, has not been learnt (Deakin 1987, Ferguson et al. 2002: 161, Lowe 1999: 57 , 305, Webster 1998: 145 , 189). Even in Asia, Singapore has a history of hiving off social services to N.G.O.s in order to reduce state spending (Tan 2001: 113). In Cambodia international, externally funded N.G.O.s effectively function as the social services arm of a corrupt and repressive government which is not prepared to tax the elite or provide services for the poor (Clarke 1998: 26).

In fact many N.G.O. theorists accept the neo-liberal assumptions that the state “is unable” to provide welfare services to the poor in the modern world (Jaturong 1999: 81, Sanguan & Surapon 2001: 15, 21).

They accept the “fact” that the welfare state in the West “has failed” (Keane 1998: 5 , 35) without looking at the reduced government spending, linked to neo-liberal policies, which has brought about the problems of a shrinking welfare state. Instead of allying themselves with the many people in the West who want to defend state welfare or health services, they stand firmly with the conservatives, industrialists, bankers, the I.M.F., the W.T.O. and the World Bank. They therefore welcome the role of N.G.O.s in providing cheap welfare, which will not be too much of a tax burden on the fabulously rich in Thai society.

### 3.5 Top-down advocacy for the dis-empowered poor

Despite the fact that most N.G.O. activists genuinely believe that they are merely facilitating the empowerment of the poor, in practice N.G.O.s fail to do this because they reject organised political agitation. This can be demonstrated by two examples. The first comes from the activities of N.G.O.s in the Thai urban labour movement. Such N.G.O. activists openly regard themselves as —Pi-Liang” (nannies) to trade unions. Therefore the N.G.O. activists will lead struggles instead of agitating for self-activity by workers themselves. They can be seen directing demonstrations and sleeping along side workers in their protest tents because workers are deemed not to be able to lead themselves. In opposition to this way of operating, Marxist agitators, when operating from outside a workplace would attempt to recruit workers to a party in order that workers can lead their own struggles. During that process of agitation and recruitment they would state very plainly to workers that they are not —knights in shining armour” that can solve workers problems from on high. The emancipation of workers must be the act of rank and file workers themselves. Unlike N.G.O.s, Marxists have no funds, donated by foreign aid agencies, with which to —help” workers. All they can do is advocate that workers carry out collections in each other’s factories and workplaces as acts of solidarity. Only then can the working class movement be strengthened. Outside funding by foreign N.G.O.s to labour movement bodies rather than strengthening workers organisations in Thailand, leads to dependency and bureaucratisation, as workers are not called upon to find their own resources for struggle and union meetings and seminars are held in the comfort of expensive hotels. In fact N.G.O. activists have absolutely no faith in workers solidarity within the Thai trade union movement. Instead they look to foreign net-works and the Internet for help. This can be seen by the way they teach striking workers to chant slogans and write placards in English, a language which most Thai trade unionists do not understand.

Whether or not their aim is to consciously block effective self-organisation of struggle, as James Petras suggests (Petras 1999: 435), N.G.O.s operating among Thai labour concentrate on providing welfare to the disorganised and advice to trade unions about how to operate within the law. This means that they are unwilling or unable to politically agitate among stronger sections of the trade union movement in order to increase the level of legal or illegal workers’ struggles. Under these circumstances they have been known to ignore calls for an end to mass job-losses and demands for a welfare state funded by taxation of the



rich. Instead they favour telling sacked workers which government loan they can apply for in order to set up their own businesses.

The second example comes from the Assembly of the Poor, which is a mass Social Movement of the peasantry in Thailand. Many of the N.G.O. activists who have dedicated themselves to this Social Movement were students who joined the C.P.T. in the jungle after 1976. Their dedication cannot be questioned. But the problem is that when it comes to political leadership of the Assembly of the Poor, it does not come from rank and file peasants. It is always the N.G.O. activists who act as spokespeople and carry out the real negotiations with government officials. Such negotiations take place after lengthy periods when the protesting peasants stay in tented encampments outside government offices. The image of these encampments is more like the lower classes passively waiting for an audience with their rulers rather than militant struggle. In sum, the Thai N.G.O.s have failed to build self-leadership either among peasants or workers.

N.G.O. political ideology helps to act as a barrier to self-leadership and the strengthening of struggle from below. N.G.O.s concentrate on the most dispossessed in society, for they rightly see such people as in need of receiving most help (Dej 1999: 116). Foreign aid funders are also much more likely to provide funds for such works. But work among those on the fringes of society or —under-classes“, however important, can only be welfare work. It cannot lead to the strengthening of struggles from below by workers and agricultural workers who potentially have more economic power. Of course, foreign funders are highly unlikely to support projects, which encourage militant strikes or demonstrations. Among those N.G.O.s working with Labour, there has often been a tendency to turn away from building in the trade unions in order to advance class struggle in the workplace. Instead it is suggested that strengthening —communities“ is the answer. Yet there are indications that such community-based activity was useless in stemming the tide of job-losses and wage cuts in the recent economic crisis in Indonesia (Ford 2000). Worse than this, many N.G.O. theorists are highly elitist in outlook. They bemoan the fact that poor people have been brain-washed into taking part in the —consumer society“ (Ranee 1999: 189). This looks upon the poor as stupidly wanting such luxuries as motorcycles, refrigerators or televisions. They also reject —representative democracy“ (Ranee 1999: 177) since this leads to vote buying by capitalist parties. The logic of this is that the poor cannot be trusted to vote since they will just sell their votes to the rich and powerful.

### 3.6 The issue of politics: rejection of politics, but unable to avoid it

Since the early establishment of modern N.G.O.s in the mid-1980s, at the heart of N.G.O. theory has been the claim that they avoid or reject politics. In the early days of authoritarian regimes, this was an understandable method of operating in open society, but the idea rests on more than this. Civil Society and —New" Social Movement theories reject a class analysis and the need for the seizure of state power in favour of building single-issue pressure groups and community activity. Added to this is the negative experience of many N.G.O. activists who were members of the dictatorial Communist Party of Thailand.

This negative experience means that most N.G.O. activists today shy away from the idea of building a new workers or peasants political party. Not only do people fear the rise of another authoritarian, top-down, Stalinist party, but they are unable to picture how any political party in modern Thailand can be different from the money-politics parties that already exist. They have forgotten their own history, for the C.P.T. was not the only Left-wing party that ever existed in Thailand. In the 1970s a couple of legal socialist parties operated in the parliamentary system, winning votes on the issue of policies for the poor, rather than by handing out cash.

James Petras (1999: 431) explains that N.G.O.s "apolitical posturing" reinforces the neo-liberal agenda because the N.G.O.s do not take on the political arguments against neo-liberalism. He goes on to accuse many N.G.O.s of acting as "grass-roots reactionaries", channeling neo-liberalism down from the World Bank or the I.M.F. to the Peoples' sector for the benefit of Imperialism. N.G.O.s are, according to Petras, the local fire-brigades that reduce class struggle so that capital accumulation can continue smoothly. This view is echoed by Narong Petprasert (Narong 1999: 8 , 23), although Narong places much more emphasis on nationalist domination from the West than on the issue of class or the free-market. Narong further suggests in an unprincipled way, that despite the fact that international funding bodies such as the World Bank use N.G.O.s in this manner, Thai N.G.O.s should still accept funds from the World Bank, so long as they are prepared to act independently. This they have done with a vengeance. The number of World Bank projects involving Thai N.G.O. participation has risen from 12% in 1990 to 47% in 1997 (Ranee 1999: 180).

The acceptance of a liberal capitalist agenda for the new Constitution was a result of N.G.O.s lacking a clear political analysis about political reform, especially a class analysis (Connors 1999, Ungpakorn 2002). This weakness in political analysis is acknowledged by some. Jaturong (1999: 84) says that

weak

political analysis leads to repeating old mistakes, although he does not explain what those mistakes are.

Jon (1999: 91) states that the concentration on single issues at the expense of a broader political analysis

of society is a weakness. But others, such as Ranee (1999: 42, 199) celebrate lack of clarity among N.G.O.s, claiming in Post-Modernist fashion, that nothing is black and white and that there is a "multiplicity of power" within society. Similarly, in Indonesia, N.G.O.s have also shown their acceptance

of political liberalism by calling for non-party "independent bodies" (Tan 2002).

Anek Nakaboot (1997: 14) elaborates that the three sources of —power" which the Peoples' Sector can use

are culture, community networks and alliances with business and the media. Many N.G.O.s also talk about the —power" of Local Wisdom, thus confusing the need to seriously study local knowledge, with the

issue of power in society. Such abstract, wishful thinking on the part of the powerless, when faced with

the full might of the state and capital was common in the period of defeats of the 1980s. In that period in

the West, we were expected to believe that tying ribbons on airfield fences and holding up mirrors "to

deflect evil" would get rid of mass weapons of destruction. However, with the growing anti-capitalist current and the international working class flexing its muscles once again, it is clearly non-sense.

The

power of the capitalist state, and of international capital, is not something mysterious, which we cannot

see or feel, and it requires concrete power on the part of those opposing the state and capital to counter it.

The concentration by N.G.O.s on work with those who have least power in society (the unemployed, the

marginal etc.) is very understandable, but it does not address the issue of locating power to build a more

just society.

On the issue of building alternative political parties, although Thai N.G.O.s have not yet copied their counterparts in the Philippines who have such parties, Thai N.G.O.s are constantly involved in politics. A

number of N.G.O.-supported candidates stood and won seats in the Senate. But this was an individualistic

activity, since the electoral rules forbid senators from being members of political parties, a measure not

countered by N.G.O.s when drawing up the new Constitution. The problem is that however noble their

efforts, the N.G.O. senators have little power and are immune from democratic control by a disunified

N.G.O. "movement". There is no systematic plan to stand as many N.G.O. candidates as possible by selecting and targetting constituencies and raising and sharing funds for electioneering. Added to this is

the fact that in reality, in the opposite camp, capitalist parties influence and control the bulk of present

day senators, despite the constitution.

The N.G.O. policy of refusing to set up a political party to campaign inside and outside the structures of parliament, means that N.G.O.s constantly seek alliances with existing capitalist parties. The best example of this is the Thai Rak Thai party of telecom billionaire Taksin Shinawat. This party is a Right-wing populist party which seeks to co-opt people from various Social Movements. It is not unlike the Peronist party in Argentina, but has not yet managed to systematically co-opt Social Movements or trade unions. However the true carrot-and-stick nature of Thai Rak Thai populism was revealed to some shocked N.G.O. activists early in 2002, when leading N.G.O. organisers found themselves under investigation by the Anti-Money Laundering Office. Some N.G.O. leaders complained that they had previously worked hard to dissolve demonstrations by farmers groups at the request of the government and now they were being attacked! (Bangkok Post 10/3/02) The fact of the matter is that Thai Rak Thai has skillfully used ex-Leftists and N.G.O. activists to both give it a populist colouring and to police Social Movements. This is what comes of refusing to build political parties of the working class and peasantry.

Despite claiming to avoid politics, the N.G.O. movement is deeply involved in it, but the refusal to see the central role of politics in building a better society merely means that the N.G.O.s have no analysis or political organisation independent of the state and the capitalist class. Another problem with refusing to build a political party is that placing the emphasis of work on single-issue campaigns, rather than having a unified political analysis seldom results in national policy proposals. For example, demands for compensation for land flooded by dams or campaigns opposing coal-fired power stations by local communities, do not result in a campaign for a unified energy producing policy on a national level. They cannot be easily linked to issues of poverty and other social problems either and the government can sometimes solve one group's problems while other groups are left isolated.

### **3.7 N.G.O. lack of accountability and internal democracy**

The N.G.O. movement grew up in the mid 1980s in response to social injustice, inequality and the authoritarianism of the state. N.G.O.s were also a reflection of disillusionment with the lack of democracy in Stalinist political parties, such as the C.P.T. and the authoritarian nature of Stalinist dictatorships throughout the world. N.G.O. activists were originally motivated by ideas of local empowerment, participation and democratisation. Yet, the use of anarchistic, non-political party ideology, together with talk about "Communities", "Peoples' Sectors" or atomised "Social Movements", while at the same time rejecting "Representative Democracy" (Umporn 1999: 137, Rane 1999: 177), means that N.G.O.s cannot escape building yet another undemocratic model of society.

Firstly, N.G.O.s claim to be “Representatives of the Peoples’ Sector” (Umporn 1999: 137), yet they are never accountable or elected by anyone in the “Peoples’ Sector” (Chaiyot 1999: 228). They reject the whole idea of representative democracy as seen in local council elections, since these elections are tainted with vote-buying and money politics. Instead they opt for a non-elected version of representing the “Peoples’ Will”. This is very elitist and has previously been used as an excuse by Stalinist and Right-wing dictatorships throughout the world. Unlike N.G.O.s, political parties of the non-Stalinist Left are tested from time to time in elections. Even those not contesting state elections must face the test of elections to leadership positions in trade unions or other bodies. However, the N.G.O.s shun elections as if they were a disease. Not only are they against facing elections in outside society, they also have very undemocratic internal structures. Most N.G.O. internal structures resemble that of a small private business, and that is exactly what some of the service providers actually are. Many people who set up N.G.O.s appoint themselves to be directors and never face election. Never the less, most N.G.O. leaders are not power-hungry dictators. Their libertarian or anarchistic views of organising mean that they reject most formal internal democratic structures. Yet, while they claim not to have “leaders”, in practice they do and they are unelected. Similarly they claim not to need formal rules for governing meetings (such as are found in trade union bodies), yet this is a recipe for the domination of informal meetings by loud-mouths.

Compounding this is the N.G.O. policy of avoiding political arguments and theoretical debates within their meetings, which results in a “silent dictatorship” of Civil-Society and localist values. Younger activists are not encouraged to form views of their own and debate issues with the older generation because political debate in general is frowned upon. Libertarian ideas sound non-bureaucratic and liberating, but they are useless for ensuring equality and democracy in collective bodies.

## Conclusion

Given the “Collapse of Confidence” in neo-liberalism and the re-emergence of an international anti-capitalist current which brings together a new generation of young activists and a revived working class movement, it is time to re-evaluate long-held views regarding the acceptance of the market, “Civil Society” and non-class Social Movements. The N.G.O. movement has a serious contradiction at its heart. On the one hand, most activists stand firmly alongside the poor and oppressed, but on the other hand, they operate within an ideological framework borrowed from the representatives of the ruling capitalist class.

This is a common problem for all reformist movements and political parties which attempt to side with

the oppressed (see Gramsci in Forgacs 1999: 86, Rees 1998: 156)  
 Due to the weakness of N.G.O. ideology regarding the power of the state, the disadvantages of the free market and the need to locate and organise the power that can challenge the elite, there is a pressing need for social activists to re-discover Marxism. Marxism is a broad political theory of the modern working class, which can both explain the failure of the free-market and the failure of Stalinism. This does not mean returning to the old repressive and mechanical ways of operating, which most people associate with the communist parties of the past. Activists must have the courage to move beyond the boundaries defined by capitalism, neo-liberalism and Stalinism. They must seriously reconsider the class power relations concerning the state and the location of real power in society which can lead to the self-emancipation of working people. In addition, social activists must reconsider and evaluate their libertarian rejection of formal democratic structures and political organisations. The proposal for the building of a political party, which can put forward unified demands on behalf of the majority of ordinary working people, is not a call for all N.G.O. activists to cease operating as N.G.O.s. Such a party can be built in the present while people continue to earn a living in N.G.O.s, by maintaining a certain separation between day to day N.G.O. work and party political work. Rather than it being the "end of history" or an end to ideological or class conflict, the present era holds out the prospect for a renewed international struggle for socialism and the self-emancipation of the majority of human kind. The participation by Thai activists in the global anti-war movement and the Asian Social Forum are signs that Thailand will not be immune to the new international upturn in struggle.

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