NGOs, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere

Nongovernmental organizations act on behalf of citizens in politics and society. Yet many question their legitimacy and ask for whom they speak. This book investigates how NGOs can become stronger advocates for citizens and better representatives of their interests. Sabine Lang analyzes the choices that NGOs face in their work for policy change between working in institutional settings and practicing public advocacy that incorporates constituents' voices. Whereas most books on NGOs focus on policy effectiveness, using approaches that treat accountability largely as a matter of internal performance measurements, Lang instead argues that it is ultimately *public* accountability that informs NGO legitimacy. The case studies in this book use empirical research from the European Union, the United States, and Germany to point to governments' role in redefining the conditions for NGOs' public advocacy.

Sabine Lang is Associate Professor of International Studies in the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington.

NGOs, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere

SABINE LANG
University of Washington

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107024991

First published 2013

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lang, Sabine, 1959–
NGOs, civil society, and the public sphere / Sabine Lang.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-02499-1
1. Non-governmental organizations. 2. Civil society. I. Title.
JZ4841.L36 2013
300–dc23 2012019845

ISBN 978-1-107-02499-1 Hardback

Contents

Tables

Figures

Preface

The idea for this book started fermenting during some of the lengthy Thursday afternoons in the 1990s when the State Parliament in Berlin, Germany, was in session. My job as Chief of Staff of the State Secretary of Labor and Women's Affairs included organizing and participating in meetings between NGOs and the Secretary. The parliamentary Thursdays presented opportunities to do just that, with NGO representatives lingering in the halls and politicians floating in and out of the plenary. What I observed was a strangely patterned dance between politicians and NGO representatives. At its center seemed to be unacknowledged power dynamics, and in particular a tacit co-dependency among unequals.

The core task at the time was to prevent the complete collapse of the Eastern labor market. In 1991 in Berlin alone, 300,000 jobs had vanished. Former East German industrial plants closed, cultural institutions disappeared, kindergartens shut down, and poverty grew. Neither state nor market offered solutions up front. Instead, state–civil society cooperation became the economic lifeline. In 1991, the Berlin Senate introduced what came to be the largest postwar NGO sector creation program. Already-operating civic groups were called upon to apply for project funds that would generate jobs. New NGOs were founded with encouragement, logistical help, and funding from government agencies. Government nudged civic activists whose loose network coalitions had advanced the revolutionary processes in Eastern Germany into forming NGOs. Formerly state-employed East Germans became civic entrepreneurs. At the same time, movement actors from the West contemplated strategies on how to transform their commitments to civic causes into paying jobs with benefits while keeping radical agendas alive. NGO–state agency

cooperation became a daily routine. Seemingly out of nowhere, hundreds of new NGOs were established in Berlin alone that got federal and state funding for their project tasks, infrastructure, and labor costs. They restored decrepit churches and in the process trained unemployed youths in crafts and construction. They founded satirical comedy nonprofits that provided a haven for unemployed musicians and actors. They created women's shelters, alternative media cooperatives, and East-West cultural centers. NGO expertise fueled innovative projects while offering an exciting laboratory for civic engagement.

Yet while I was partaking in a government-centered revitalization of civil society, I also started to wonder about some broader implications. Most notably, the Berlin government had turned into a huge donor agency that set the terms of engagement of civil society with the state. These terms of engagement were more often based on ad hoc decisions and utilitarian reasoning than on long-term strategizing and institutional deliberation. NGO expertise was valued as spearheading a combined job, civic, and East-West integration drive, but it was much less valued in the policy-making arena. Neither the executive and its bureaucracy nor parliament sought regular NGO input on what kinds of programs and projects should be funded. Those closest to the actual dynamics of economic and social transformations were routinely sidelined in the formal institutional contexts in which their voice might have added substance to the policy-making process.

A second pattern that emerged involved NGOs that organized to advocate *publicly* on behalf of a particular policy: They were typically perceived as unruly and were tacitly sanctioned. Most NGOs learned quickly that publicly mobilizing and organizing citizens was not as successful an advocacy strategy as institutional lobbying. In order to secure government access and resources, NGOs were restricted in their public voice by the very terms of engagement that had brought many of them into existence or made them flourish.

A third observation I made was that despite this fairly restrictive contact pattern between government and NGOs, when an official claimed he or she was speaking for large segments of the population, input from the NGO sector was often cited as evidence for having consulted the public. The nongovernmental sector was constructed by officials to represent the public. The irony here of course was that the NGOs most likely to be cast in the role of publics were precisely those that had been conditioned politically away from engaging or mobilizing citizens in their advocacy work.

That time in the Berlin government jumpstarted my interest in the ties that bind the civic sector and the state. When I left, the experience of the tensions built into civic engagement and advocacy in late modern societies guided my research. I was interested in whether what I had witnessed during exceptional postunification times also was at work in other places and at other times. This book tries to uncover, articulate, and explain some of these tensions. It investigates structural and institutional impediments to NGOs' role as public advocates in late modern public spheres, and it explores conditions under which NGOs can help activate public voice.

Many colleagues and friends over the years helped me think and rethink the argument. Joan W. Scott was the first to encourage me to continue the work on NGOization. Michael Edwards, Myra Marx Ferree, and Alex Warleigh provided helpful comments at the early stages of the research. Inderpal Grewal and Victoria Bernal brought together an inspiring group of scholars in Bellagio's Rockefeller Center for a week of intense discussions that helped center the argument. I am grateful to Margit Mayer for sharing her knowledge of urban politics and movements, to Wolf-Dieter Narr for insisting that social science writing can be simple and graceful, and to Aaron Cicourel for reminding me to cut out the "white noise" from my interviews. Many more friends and scholars over the years have given me feedback on parts of the argument and have provided support whenever needed, in particular Birgit Sauer, Petra Ahrens, Troy Duster, Petra Meier, Celeste Montoya, Joyce Mushaben, Elisabeth Pruegl, and Alison Woodward.

Qualitative work means being on the road, and I am grateful for the many people who opened their homes, offices, or meetings to me over the years for interviews, participant observation, background talks, follow-up conversations, or simply for a bed, breakfast, and nightly "debriefing sessions." They are far too many to name, but some have accompanied me and this research for a long time: Jochen (Barlo) Barloschky, who some call the pope of German urban development mobilization, Sabine Offe, and Ursula Staudinger in Bremen; the late Christian Fenner in Leipzig; Bev Crawford, James MacBean, and Troy Duster in Berkeley, where in particular Troy's knowledge of and connections in Oakland helped open more doors than I could have found myself; Conny Reuter in Brussels; Norma Damashek, Michael Schudson, and Nico Calavita in San Diego; and John Fox, Brent Crook, and Charlie McAteer in Seattle. Financial support for the fieldwork was provided by the German Fulbright Commission and the German Academic Exchange Office, as well as the Center for West

European Studies, the European Union Center, and the Nancy M. Bell Center at the University of Washington.

Various colleagues heard parts of the argument at conferences of the International Studies Association, the ECPR yearly meetings and Joint Sessions, the European Sociological Association, and the American Political Science Association. I cannot do justice to all the ideas I got from these audiences. I am also indebted to my fellow colleagues at the University of Washington's Jackson School Faculty Research Group for providing feedback on parts of the book, in particular Joel Migdal, Gad Barzilai, Matt Sparke, Robert Pekkanen, Sunila Kale, and Scott Radnitz, and to the many students who allowed me to debate ideas in my readings course on "Civil Society and the Public Sphere" and in other contexts, in particular Garrett Strain, Gillian Frackelton, Elizabeth Lyons, and Matt Reed. Tim Hannon was always one phone call away when my technology skills proved insufficient. Elizabeth Zherka deserves special praise for not only sticking with me as my research assistant throughout this project, but also for her close reading and copyediting of the manuscript.

Thanks finally to my editor, Eric Crahan, whose belief in the manuscript carried me over many hurdles; to the anonymous reviewers of Cambridge University Press, whose ideas have shaped this book in more than one way; and to the production crew, first and foremost Rebecca McCary, Chris Miller, and Gail Chalew, who improved not only my Germanic writing style but also the imagery on the pages. Fred Goykhman took the clues from our conversations to distill the ideas into an amazing cover.

Without friends and family on both sides of the Atlantic, the many travels to Europe and back would have been much less pleasurable. My father, Wolfgang Lang, from whom I caught the bug for politics, and all the other Langs, Bucks, Rohweders, and Obermaiers helped to keep my life in perspective whenever work threatened to take over. In Berlin, Roscha and Angelika fed me more often than I ever can repay; Helga, Peter, Bettina, and Terry shared their Berlin stories; and Astrid offered escape routes into the arts. Gertrud and Eckhart helped me feel at home in Berlin. In Seattle, Alice, Annie, Axel, Daphne, Eric, Peter, and Heidi were there to listen and to relax with during Sunday soccer. Irene, Stephen, and John helped me dance.

I am indebted in more than one way to my husband, colleague, and friend Lance Bennett. He not only carried the brunt of long hours, anxieties, and debates at home with his usual grace but also read and commented on many chapters at several stages. Finally, I want to thank Oliver

for helping me balance life and work and for making me smile so often. Sometimes, while looking over my shoulder onto the computer screen at age eleven or twelve, he started a little rap song and dance that went something like "formalistic, isomorphic, public NGOization." I truly hope that the book does not have as many "big words" as Oliver professed to see on any given page, and I dedicate this book to him.