

## Against NGOs

What would development look like if its practitioners and scholars were “against NGOs,” challenging common sense about them? This book presents a critical perspective on NGOs, describing how they emerged as key agents of development over time. Through an interpretative history based on Gramscian concepts it shows how civil society organizations were gradually enlisted in development as non-state technocratic actors.

The book argues that management studies and development studies emerged as commonsensical explanations for capitalist crises. Each offered complementary solutions to balance the needs of capital and society, in particular historical circumstances. These solutions also situated civil society as agents of development and vectors of management.

*Against NGOs* fills a gap within the literature of management and development studies through its original discussion of their historical interconnections and shared themes. The book raises provocative questions on what forms of knowledge-politics can respond productively to the crises of our contemporary moment.

**Nidhi Srinivas** studies global intersections of management studies, philosophy, and justice in terms of critique, efficacy, and empowerment. He has researched a variety of civil society organizations and their management settings, including in India, Brazil, Mexico, and China. He is Associate Professor of Management at The New School, New York.

# Against NGOs

A Critical Perspective on Civil Society, Management, and  
Development

**Nidhi Srinivas**



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-108-84038-5 — Against NGOs  
Nidhi Srinivas  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, vic 3207, Australia

314 to 321, 3rd Floor, Plot No.3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education,  
learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108840385](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108840385)

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First published 2022

Printed in India

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-1-108-84038-5 Hardback

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*For those who seek credible politics  
through ideas  
of a less unequal world*

The fact is that only gradually—layer upon layer—has mankind become aware of its worth...this conscience has been shaped not through the brutal sting of physiological necessities, but through intelligent reflection...every revolution has been preceded by ... intense critical activity.

—Antonio Gramsci c. 1916, *Cronache torinesi* (Turin Chronicles),  
cited in Santucci (2010 [2005]: 35)

Q.: ... Are you a revolutionary?

C.C.: *Revolution* does not mean torrents of blood, the taking of the Winter Palace, and so on. *Revolution* means a radical transformation of society's institutions. In this sense, I certainly am a revolutionary.

But for there to be revolution in this sense, profound changes must take place.... The idea that the sole goal of life is to produce and to consume more—an idea that is both absurd and degrading—must be abandoned.... That is something only men and women can do. A single individual, or one organization, can, at best, only prepare, criticize, incite, sketch out possible orientations.

—Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Revolutionary Force of Ecology,"  
*The Rising Tide of Insignificance*, 1993, original emphasis

Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figure</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Timeline and Key Events</i>	xiii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
1. Introduction: Development, Management, and Civil Society from a Critical Perspective	1
2. Colonial Development, Colonial Management	40
3. Modernization Theory, Development, Management	80
4. Dependency Theory and an Alternative Management	148
5. High Management, the Short Reign of Shared Common Sense	192
6. The Washington Consensus and Financialization of Management	230
7. Moving Past the Washington Consensus	257
8. Conclusion: Possibilities of Emancipation	289
<i>Glossary of Specialized Phrases and Terms</i>	301
<i>References</i>	303
<i>Index</i>	335

# Tables and Figure

## Tables

1.1	Regimes of accumulation	23
1.2	Development/management theories and regimes of accumulation	24
8.1	Tracking elements of common sense across development doctrines	292

## Figure

1.1	Capitalist crises and elements of common sense	28
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# Abbreviations

AACSB	Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business
ARA	American Relief Association
AMUL	Anand Milk Union Limited
ASQ	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>
BFS	Budgetary Finance System
BNDES	Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social (The Brazilian National Bank for Economic and Social Development)
BOP	Bottom of the Pyramid
CARE	Cooperative for American Relief in Europe
CEO	chief executive officer
CEPAL	Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIS	Center of International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
CMS	critical management studies
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program
CSR	corporate social responsibility
DSR	Department of Social Relations
ECLAC	Economic Commission on Latin America
ED	executive director
EDF	Environmental Defense Fund
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FFHC	Freedom from Hunger Campaign
GDP	gross domestic product
GSB	Graduate School of Business, University of Chicago
GSIA	Graduate School of Industrial Administration, Carnegie Mellon
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFIs	International Financial Institutions



IIM	Indian Institutes of Management
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MBA	Masters in Business Administration
MDF	multidivisional form
MKSS	Mazdoor Kisan Sanghat Samiti, India
MNC	multinational corporation
MOS	management and organization studies
MPS	Mont Pèlerin Society
MSF	Medecins Sans Frontières
NBA	Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada movement), India
NIEO	New International Economic Order
NGOs	non-governmental organizations
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Program
PWC	Post-Washington Consensus
RDA	Ruvuma Development Association, Tanzania
SAP	Structural Adjustment Program
SCF	Save the Children Fund
SDGs	sustainable development goals
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SSP	Sardar Sarovar Project
TVA	Tennessee Valley Authority
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
US	United States of America
WEF	World Economic Forum
WSF	World Social Forum
YMCA	Young Mens' Christian Association

## Timeline and Key Events

1857	YMCA branch founded in Calcutta, India
1863	International Committee of the Red Cross founded in Lausanne, Switzerland
1881	American Red Cross founded
1882	In September, De Lautour-Tucker arrives to found the Salvation Army's first chapter in India (and its first outside Europe and America)
1894	E. D. Morel founds the Congo Reform Association
1903	<i>Shop Management</i> by F. W. Taylor published
1910	Louis Brandeis declares Taylorism could save the US railroads a million dollars a day
1911	<i>Principles of Scientific Management</i> by F. W. Taylor published
1918	V. I. Lenin praises Taylorism and exhorts its use in the newly formed Soviet Union
1919	Article 22 League of Nations Covenant on development and mandate system is signed as part of the Treaty of Versailles
1919	Save the Children Fund founded
1922	<i>The Dual Mandate</i> by Lord Lugard published
1928	Elton Mayo makes first of many visits to the General Electric Hawthorne plant near Chicago
1929	Colonial Development Act enacted by the British Parliament
1932	Franklin D. Roosevelt accepts Democratic Party nomination, promising a 'new deal' for the American people
1936	First meeting of the Academy of Management held in Chicago
1939	The Bruce Report in the League of Nations argues that its political activities should be separated from its technical organizations, a model later followed by the UN
1940	Colonial Development and Welfare Act enacted by the British Parliament
1941	<i>The Managerial Society</i> by James Burnham published

xiv	Timeline and Key Events
1942	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief founded, precursor of Oxfam
1943	FAO envisaged in wartime meeting
1944	IBRD (World Bank) founded
1945	FAO established as the first specialized UN agency
1945	Article 55 of the UN Charter commits it to development goals, while Article 71 codifies consultation with non-governmental organizations
1945	CARE founded
1946	Fonds d'Investissement et de Développement Économique et Social (FIDES—Economic and Social Development Investment Funds) enacted in France
1946	Department of Social Relations (DSR) created at Harvard University, with Talcott Parsons as its Chair
1947	The Mont Pèlerin Society meets for the first time in Switzerland
1948	WHO founded
1948	Havana meeting of the International Trade Organization revises the initial charter, now emphasizing the linkage of economic development to international trade; most nations do not ratify it, awaiting US approval and the original draft is ratified as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)
1948	Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) is founded to administer Marshall Plan aid for reconstructing postwar Europe
1948	Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL) created as part of the United Nations
1949	Harry Truman's presidential address offers technical assistance to tackle global poverty, in its Point Four
1951	Arthur Lewis publishes <i>Measures for the Economic Development of Under-Developed countries</i> on behalf of the UN General Secretariat
1952	Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social (BNDES), the Brazilian Economic Development Bank, founded
1954	Cauca Valley Corporation founded in Colombia
1956	FAO directorship under Binay Sen (until 1967)
1956	The journal <i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> founded
1959	UN World Refugee year galvanizes civil society actions
1960	FAO Freedom from Hunger campaign (FFHC) initiated
1960	The first UN "Development Decade" announced
1960	US President Kennedy announces creation of the Peace Corps

## Timeline and Key Events

xv

- 1960 Ruvuma Development Association (RDA) started in Litowa, Tanzania
- 1961 The OEEC becomes the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and commits to promoting economic development in member and non-member countries
- 1961 Oxfam appoints its first field director, Jimmy Betts, and begins to decentralize operations
- 1963 FAO convenes World Food Congress in DC
- 1964 UNCTAD founded
- 1965 UNDP founded
- 1966 FAO founds Industry Cooperative Program for corporate partnerships, precursor of CSR; disbanded in 1978
- 1967–1970 The Biafran civil war and humanitarian crisis
- 1967 Arusha declaration in Tanzania emphasizes self-help and agriculture
- 1967 James Thompson publishes *Organizations in Action*
- 1968 McNamara becomes president of the World Bank
- 1968 Haslemere group in Britain makes a radical case for development, echoing arguments of dependency theorists
- 1968 Gustavo Guitiérrez delivers the talk “Toward a Theology of Liberation” to a newly formed group of progressive priests in Chimbote, Peru, arguing for equitable resource distribution
- 1969 The RDA is disbanded by government order
- 1969 Lester Pearson’s report “Partners in Development” delivered to the World Bank
- 1969 Consumer’s Association of Penang founded, Penang, Malaysia
- 1970 The second UN “Development Decade” announced
- 1971 Médecin Sans Frontières founded
- 1971 Oxfam launches Oxfam America as well as centers in Australia and parts of Europe
- 1972 The DSR at Harvard is dissolved
- 1973 E. F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful* published
- 1973 The *New Internationalist* begins publication, with Oxfam and Christian Aid backing, focused exclusively on development issues
- 1974 The G-77 countries declare the need for a new international economic order, and radical redistribution of wealth; the declaration is supported by UK NGOs
- 1979 At the Manila UNCTAD conference McNamara announces World Bank structural adjustment loans

xvi	Timeline and Key Events
1981	McNamara steps down as president of the World Bank
1981	The World Bank publishes the Berg Report (Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa) and identifies market-oriented policy reforms necessary for African development
1982	World Bank establishes an NGDO office within its External Relations department
1984	World Bank establishes an NGO-WB committee
1984	Band Aid single released in December to benefit Ethiopian famine victims
1985	Live Aid concerts held in two continents in July
1989	World Bank publishes report “Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustained Growth” that acknowledges limitations in SAP implementations, urging focus on governance in African states
2012	Kony 2012 video launched by Invisible Children

## Preface and Acknowledgments

One summer afternoon on a train from Athens to Thessaloniki, some years back, I met a young Pakistani man in the snack car. He was in a seat, hands over his eyes, and at times he slumped abruptly. He seemed tired. We noticed each other when boarding the train—it is not all that often two South Asian strangers travel the same six-hour route through Greece. We got talking. He helped me establish when I had to leave the train, at a stop I still find hard to pronounce, Palaeofarsalos, to change to another line for my final destination. I asked him what he did for a living and he described working in a farm hauling stacks of wheat, processing it in a mill. His wife and daughter lived outside Islamabad. Foolishly, I asked for good Pakistani restaurants in Thessaloniki. He shrugged. Few of his compatriots could afford to eat in restaurants. I recalled a vendor from Bangladesh a few weeks earlier, in Athens's Plaka, selling rubber balls. Each time you threw them they flattened into a disc, and then, after a moment, became balls again. On them was painted an image of a frog, squashed, regenerated, and squashed again. It seemed an apt image for these men, shaken, jostled by circumstance, trying to gather the semblance of a life in new settings, speaking another language.

It was as the train slowed, nearing my destination, that I asked this man a question for which I already sensed part of the answer: *How did you get to Greece?*

*I walked here.* From Islamabad he took a train to Karachi. There he joined a group of men to the Iran border, let through by guards who looked the other way. They walked at night, in small groups, by road verges. Or they paid truckers to drive them a day's length, huddling inside. In this manner, they reached the border of Iran with Turkey, Kurdistan. At this point, his voice slowed and dimmed, and all he could say was that Kurdistan was very difficult. *People died.* What was left of the group entered Turkey and traveled across to Edirne, the border. Twice, the Greeks caught him, returning him to the border where Turkish guards drove him a hundred miles away and left him. Each time he returned, waited, ran across. The third time he got through.

I was impressed by the calm, matter-of-fact manner in which this man narrated his story. Through the last hour he had been describing his family, their small farm, why he did not wish to raise his daughter in Greece (*there is no future here*), and how much he wished to return home. But he had also been asking me questions: *What do you do for a living? How did you get your job? How much do you earn? How long did it take you to learn English? What is your education?* Dimly I realized his questions were a way of reaching out to a stranger, of the sort in another setting you could ignore, defer to, assume you knew. Circumstance had brought us together. Where would I, an Indian based in the United States, have the occasion to meet a Pakistani who walked from the subcontinent to Thessaloniki? But it was not simply an effort of reaching out, but to appreciate up close the opportunities available to him and myself. Through an accident of birth, I had been exposed to the English language, studied in certain institutions, passed the exams, gone abroad, and, in this fashion, in part, made a life. His had been different from that, and while many reasons could explain it, he wished to learn from talking to me: What could he do about it? Could his life still be different from what it was?

One aspect was education, which in our conversation meant English and computers. He told me of a school he attended at times in Thessaloniki to learn basic computer skills. The train was now reaching Paleofarsalos and I asked him for an email and immediately saw my mistake—he did not speak English so how could he handle keyboards? But I was only partly correct. Of course we could stay in touch. Grabbing the envelope I had with me, he wrote on it carefully, painting the letters more than writing them out, his name ‘Qadeer’ and nothing else. Feeling foolish at the presumption somehow that words linked by an asperand, the @ sign, would allow us to establish a sensible connection of understanding and benefit, on equitable terms, I instead thanked him and parted.

Qadeer had traveled to Greece at great risk to simply find a life. Later, in recollection, what struck me of my conversation with him was whether our stark differences could be overcome. This expectation of changing the terms of a life, its opportunities, was also the historical project of international development. Often, its arm of reach was civil society, and in fact it was a local nonprofit that sponsored Qadeer’s refugee application, as he informed me. Repeatedly, he asked me: *What is management? Can I learn it?* It was hard to tell him. What was its special quality that enabled opportunities and jobs he could not himself acquire? A language? No, that was just English. A unique capacity, an insight? Well, then, why was it so hard for everyone to have it? I remain unsure. What could be a management that mattered in terms of him?

This book was written reflecting on those I have met in this fashion, human beings struggling in difficult material circumstances, seeking a better life for themselves

and those around them, working within terms of existence beyond my immediate understanding, living a life I do not properly comprehend, but which I wish to, in the hope somehow that an effort of understanding can allow a better world for all of us. This book was also written with the recognition that those whose existence is of importance to its ideas and arguments, often described in large words—the poor, *les damnés*, the illiterate, the underprivileged—will not read it. Its language, concepts, and exegesis are alien to their existence, written for reasons not immediately apparent to those seeking practical tractable responses. This is a common enough dilemma for those who work with ideas, and this book is a reflection on the trajectories of politics generated by ideas, including in fields presented by some as intensely practical (and thus claimed to be above ideas in that sense). Ultimately, I have written this book unable to turn away, wishing to understand why the project of development has moved over time toward an unlikely agent—civil society—while sharing its goals with an even more unlikely partner, management studies. This, *too*, deserves attention. As the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, thinking of the poor on Lahore's streets (and the necessity for the ghazal to address its true beloved, revolution), declared, "I can't help but look back/when I return from those alleys—what should one do?"<sup>1</sup> (Faiz, 1991 [1943]: 5). There are admirable civil society groups that do not turn away, and I have been inspired by some of them, and sought to learn from them. These include the Timbaktu Collective in Anantapur District, India; Cideci (Centro Indígena de Capacitación Integral; Indigenous Center for Integral learning) in the Chiapas region, Mexico; and the Galpão Aplauso in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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While writing this book I have worked at the New School, a university of myth, exigency, and contingency. These three realms have had an impact on this book, the historically leftish<sup>2</sup> aspirations of faculty, top-down administrative directives that can offer instruction in misguided managerialism, and especially a space of possibility that emerges from the muddled hopes and jagged aspirations of students and faculty.

I am particularly grateful to students who have, over many years, reacted to my views in classes and outside them. Their engagement and courage remain deeply inspiring. I would like to thank, in particular, Frank Addeo, Lenka Heller, Jenny Shapiro, Daniel Bustillo, Arturo Ramirez, Asmaa Donahue, Leonor Alfonso, Lee Davenport, Katarina Spasic, Ritu Yadav, Cesare Baccheschi, and outside the New School, Daniel Lacerda, Guilherme Saraiva Grava, Fábio Grigoletto, and Rene Fernandes. They asked hard questions that I am yet to answer to satisfaction. I also thank faculty colleagues who have offered intellectual engagement and empathy, encouraging me to pursue the ideas that inhabit this book, including Sanjay Reddy, Antonin Wagner, Aida Rodriguez, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, and Michael Cohen.



Also, colleagues elsewhere, for their warmth and camaraderie: Bill Cooke, Dennis Smith, Rohit Varman, Alexandre Faria, Rafael Alcadipani, Sadhvi Dar, Martin Parker, Christian de Cock, Fernando Nogueira, Mário Aquino Alves, Takeshi Endo, Mariana Prandini de Assis, Despina Lalaki, Vittorio Valli, Jonathan Lewis, Filippo Barbera, Takeshi Sato, Yoshiko Ashiwa, Takeshi Ito, Vincenzo Fucci, Yang Shuo, Farzad Rafi Khan, Henry Mintzberg, Jan Jorgensen, and Anne-Emanuelle Birn. I am indebted to four educational institutions that offered me another home while working on this manuscript, the Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo, Fundação Getúlio Vargas in São Paulo, Brazil; the Institute for the Study of Global Issues, Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, Japan; the Research Institute of Economics and Business in Kobe, Japan; and the Collegio Carlo Alberto in Turin, Italy. Finally, I thank my parents, A. V. Srinivasan and Bawani Srinivasan, my brother Shankar and his family, and Marina, for their love and support. Life is beautiful when it gives us its riches.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. This is a liberal translation by Agha Shahid Ali of the poem's original lines in Urdu: "*Laut-jati hai udhar ko bhi nazar, kya kije?*"
2. The New School of Myth is inhabited by contrarian striking figures, including John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, Claude Levi-Strauss, Robert Heilbroner, and, more recently, Richard Bernstein, Andrew Arato, Nancy Fraser, and Anwar Shaikh, each expressing a variant of left-wing progressive politics.
3. *Que bonita es la vida cuando nos da sus riquezas* is the title of a painting attributed to Frida Kahlo but this provenance is now considered apocryphal.