

# Surreptitious Symbiosis: Engagement Between Activists and NGOs

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**Abstract** Based on research conducted in Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan, the article analyzes the relationship between activists engaged in street protests or direct action since 2011 and NGOs. It examines how activists relate to NGOs and whether it is possible to do sustained activism to bring about social change without becoming part of a ‘civil society industry.’ The article argues that while at first glance NGOs seem disconnected from recent street activism, and activists distance themselves from NGOs, the situation is more complicated than meets the eye. It contends that the boundaries between the formal NGOs and informal groups of activists are blurred and there is much cross-over and collaboration. The article demonstrates and seeks to explain this phenomenon, which we call surreptitious symbiosis, from the micro- perspective of individual activists and NGO staff. Finally, we discuss whether this surreptitious symbiosis can be sustained and sketch three scenarios for the future.

**Résumé** Se fondant sur des recherches menées à Athènes, Le Caire, Londres et Erevan, cet article analyse la relation entre des activistes, engagés dans des manifestations de rue ou l’action directe depuis 2011, et les ONG. Il étudie les liens entre ces activistes et les ONG et interroge la possibilité de militer de manière pérenne sans pour autant faire partie d’une « industrie de la société civile ». Si de prime abord les ONG semblent déconnectées de l’activisme de rue et que les activistes prennent soin de se distancier des

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ONG, l'article fait valoir que la situation est plus compliquée qu'il n'y paraît. Les limites entre les ONG officielles et les groupes informels d'activistes sont floues et les liens comme les collaborations nombreux. L'article détaille ce phénomène, que nous appelons symbiose clandestine, et cherche à l'expliquer au moyen d'une microsociologie centrée sur les individus impliqués dans ce type d'activisme. Nous discutons en dernier lieu de la possibilité que cette symbiose clandestine se pérennise, et esquissons trois scénarios pour l'avenir.

**Zusammenfassung** Beruhend auf Forschungen in Athen, Kairo, London und Eriwan analysiert der Beitrag die Beziehung zwischen Aktivisten, die seit 2011 an Straßenprotesten oder direkten Aktionen beteiligt sind, und nicht-staatlichen Organisationen. Es wird untersucht, in welcher Beziehung Aktivisten zu nicht-staatlichen Organisationen stehen und ob es möglich ist, einen nachhaltigen Aktivismus zur Bewirkung eines sozialen Wandels zu verfolgen, ohne Teil einer „Bürgergesellschaftsindustrie“ zu werden. In dem Beitrag wird dargestellt, dass nicht-staatliche Organisationen auf dem ersten Blick zwar nicht mit dem jüngsten Straßenaktivismus in Verbindung zu stehen scheinen und auch Aktivisten sich von nicht-staatlichen Organisationen distanzieren, die Situation jedoch komplizierter ist als zunächst angenommen. Es wird behauptet, dass die Grenzen zwischen den formellen nicht-staatlichen Organisationen und informellen Aktivistengruppen verschwommen sind und häufig überquert werden und beide Seiten zusammenarbeiten. Der Beitrag legt dieses Phänomen, das wir als schleichende Symbiose bezeichnen, dar und versucht, es aus der Mikroperspektive individueller Aktivisten und Mitarbeiter nicht-staatlicher Organisationen zu erklären. Abschließend diskutieren wir, ob diese schleichende Symbiose erhaltbar ist und entwerfen drei Zukunftsszenarien.

**Resumen** Basándose en investigaciones realizadas en Atenas, Cairo, Londres y Ereván, el artículo analiza la relación entre los activistas implicados en protestas callejeras o acción directa desde 2011 y las ONG. Examina cómo los activistas se relacionan con las ONG y si es posible realizar activismo prolongado para lograr el cambio social sin llegar a ser parte de una “industria de la sociedad civil”. El artículo argumenta que aunque, a primera vista, las ONG parecen desconectadas del activismo callejero reciente, y los activistas se distancian de las ONG, la situación es más complicada que lo que se ve a simple vista. Sostiene que los límites entre las ONG formales y los grupos informales de activistas son borrosos y que existe mucho intercambio y colaboración. El artículo demuestra y trata de explicar este fenómeno, que llamamos simbiosis subrepticia, desde la micro-perspectiva de los activistas individuales y el personal de las ONG. Finalmente, analizamos si esta simbiosis subrepticia puede ser prolongada y esbozamos tres escenarios para el futuro.

**Keywords** NGOs · Activism · Global civil society · Street protests · Occupy

## Introduction

The emergence in 2011 of the pro-democracy movements of the Arab Spring and the anti-austerity and anti-capitalist movements captured the public's imagination the world over. Journalists and media commentators covering these movements began to ask 'who are these people?' What do they want and why are these movements suddenly "kicking off everywhere"?' (Mason 2012). Academics sought to examine the demands and aspirations of the protestors (Calhoun 2013; Glasius and Pleyers 2013; Graeber 2013, Kaldor and Selchow 2012), their links to and differences from previous movements (Biekart and Fowler 2013; Tejerina et al. 2013), and the ways in which they were using new forms of communication to organize and mobilize (Castells 2012).

We conducted research in Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan in April–August 2013. Our aim was to build on and expand the existing research on these new movements, by not only including new sites (e.g., London, Yerevan) that had thus far been overlooked by other scholars, but to also consider the relationship of the activists with more formal civil society actors including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions and political parties. In this article, we analyze the relationship between the new activists and the archetypical institutionalized actors of global civil society, the NGOs. We examine the following questions: how do today's activists relate to NGOs? And is it possible to do sustained activism to bring about social change without becoming part of a 'civil society industry,' with fundraising structures and engagement with government?

We will show that, while at first glance NGOs seem disconnected from recent street activism, this assessment is only partially correct and the situation is more complicated. While NGOs did not initiate the demonstrations or play an active role in square occupations, there was NGO involvement behind the scenes, through the provision of non-monetary resources and the participation of individual NGO employees in their personal capacity. Thus the boundaries between the formal NGOs and informal groups of activists are blurred and there is much more cross-over and collaboration than meets the eye. In this article, we demonstrate and seek to explain this phenomenon, which we call *surreptitious symbiosis*.

We locate our argument within the context of transformations within the sphere of global civil society, to which both NGOs and activists belong. Global civil society was defined by Anheier et al. as "the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organisations, networks and individuals located *between* the family, the state and the market and operating *beyond* the confines of national societies, politics and economies" (Anheier et al. 2001, p. 17). Here, we emphasize the *logic* of that sphere, and the tensions to which its interaction with other logics give rise. Global civil society primarily relies on an ideational logic, it is animated by ideas about how the world should be ordered, and the notion that ideas can persuade, and bring about social change. As such, it sets itself against the material logic of the market and the coercive logic of the state. But, as Chandhoke has put it, while there is nothing wrong with subdividing areas of collective life into separate spheres and endowing these domains with their distinct logics, "[w]hat *is* problematic is the assumption that appears to underlie theorising in this mode, namely that these

domains of collective action do not *influence* each other, or that they do not *affect* each other, or that they do not *constitute* in the sense of shaping each other” (Chandhoke 2002, p. 35 italics in original). Just as the state and the market are not free of ideas, civil society is also permeated by material and coercive logics.

Within the sphere of global civil society, we discern (following Kaldor (2003), and others) a cyclical movement. At certain points in time, citizen dissatisfaction with the ways in which state and market have organized social life gives rise to spontaneous outbursts of collective action. It has been argued, necessarily heavily stylizing and simplifying world history, that 1848, 1968 or 1989 have constituted such moments. We ourselves and others have argued that 2011 is another such moment (Glasius and Pleyers 2013; Reifer 2014; Weyland 2012). One common characteristic of the activists at the heart of such moments is that they agitate virulently against the logics of coercion and materialism, and distance themselves from these logics, relating the legitimacy of their cause to the purity of the ideational logic.

But when the nature of activism becomes more sustained, its engagement with the other logics evolves. Over time, activists often come to the view that for ideas to do their persuasive work, they require a more secure institutional footing, which involves (a) material resources and (b) recognition by and a relationship with the state or international governance institutions. The NGO-ization of civil society in the 1980s and 1990s has been well documented (Bebbington et al. 2008; Howell and Pearce 2001; Lewis 2010). The emergence of the various square movements in 2011 drew particular attention to the growing disconnect of NGOs from informal movements and even from the communities they claim to support. As we will discuss below, there is a consensus between the literature on NGOs and the activists we interviewed that NGOs have gone too far in the accommodation with states and funders. Even CIVICUS, which is an alliance of organizations dedicated to strengthening “citizen action and civil society throughout the world” has expressed concern about the “noticeable disconnect” between the new informal movements and established NGOs, going so far as to recommend that NGOs “must embrace such movements to connect better with the public and renew themselves in order to survive” (CIVICUS 2011).

The current moment, we argue, marks the starting point of a new cycle from spontaneous activism to institutionalization, albeit one which activists insist is distinct from the NGO model of institutionalization. As one might expect based on the cyclical logic, we found that activists reviled NGOs for their relationship to power and money, and what many described as their loss of values and mission. But on closer consideration, the relationship between activists and NGOs turned out to be a more complex one of what we term *surreptitious symbiosis*. Activists rely on NGOs for technical support for things like meeting space and printing to avoid direct reliance on the material logic of fundraising; and for legal aid and information about government plans to help protect against, and indirectly engage with, the coercive logic of the state. Individuals involved in activism, as we shall describe, sometimes work for NGOs and often rely on their expertise. Those who do work for NGOs often experience them as constraining, and support and participate in protest and direct action networks to escape these constraints. Finally, as we will show,

although some activists roundly reject and critique the ‘managerialism’ of NGOs, other activists are already beginning to give their activities a more institutional shape which—although they are in denial of this—begins to look like that of NGOs. The activists recognize that their activities are taking a more institutional shape, but argue that they are creating alternative spaces as well as new practices and forms of organizing which preserve the ideational logic.

Based on our research in four very different settings, we will argue that the cyclical nature of civil society’s engagement with state and market can now be considered as a global cycle within global civil society, transcending local differences and circumstances. We find some universal trends in the ways in which highly institutionalized and highly spontaneous actors interact in order to resolve some of the dilemma’s thrown up by the encounter with material and coercive logics. We demonstrate and seek to explain the phenomenon of surreptitious symbiosis between NGOs and activists that we found in all four contexts.

For the purposes of this article we use Edwards’ definition of what an NGO is, and how it differs from other actors in global civil society: “a subset of civic organisation, defined by the fact that they are formally registered with government, receive a significant proportion of their income from voluntary contributions (usually alongside grants from government), and are governed by a board of trustees rather than the elected representatives of a constituency” (Edwards 2000, pp. 7–8). We recognize the great diversity of NGOs, ranging from global organizations with hundreds of staff and millions of supporters to local organizations, and encompassing advocacy, service-provision, professional, cultural and other organizations. Nonetheless, as Edwards’ definition makes clear, NGOs have in common that relative to other, more informal actors in civil society, they have to a greater extent embraced the coercive logic (by registering with the state) and the material logic (by structurally soliciting funding for their activities).

‘Activist’ is an equally slippery term. Dictionary definitions define an activist as someone who “believes strongly in political or social change and takes part in activities such as public protests to try to make this happen” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online) or uses “vigorous campaigning” (Oxford Dictionaries) to bring about such change. In much of the social movement literature, being an activist is a collective identity linked to participation in a social movement or collective action (Bobel 2007, p. 148). For the purposes of this article, we operate with a much narrower definition, considering as activists those who have taken part in sustained street activism (often occupying a square) and/or direct action since 2011. As will be elaborated below, it is these people that we have focused on in our interviews in Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan; and their views on and engagement with NGOs are the main topic of this article.

In the next section, we briefly outline our case selection and methodology. Sections three to six form the empirical heart of the article: the third section will discuss the criticisms of NGOs in the academic literature, and the very similar points made by our respondents in the context of their activism. Section four will discuss how NGOs support activists; section five will explain why NGOs support activists and how individual respondents described their relationship to NGOs; and section six will discuss their relation to resources and institutionalization. Together,

they will uncover an intimate but uneasy relationship between activists and NGOs. The conclusion will address the sustainability of the ‘surreptitious symbiosis’ between activists and NGOs that we have described.

## Case Selection and Methodology

From April to August 2013, we conducted research in Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan. These four cities had one important commonality: they all witnessed extensive and sustained mobilization, including street demonstrations and an encampment, in 2011 or early 2012. Beyond that, we chose these cities for their differences, in terms of the financial and political context in which civil society operates in each city, and the circumstances that gave rise to recent street activism.

London can be considered as the site with the *most established* civil society of the four cities where we conducted research. It is the capital of an established liberal democracy and a global financial center. In terms of the number of NGOs (over 900,000 civil society organizations, of which 163,763 are registered charities, Clark et al. 2012, pp. 3–4), their longevity, and the regulatory framework that governs them, it can be considered as the context with the most developed NGO landscape, commonly referred to as ‘the voluntary sector’ (Alcock and Kendall, 2011). In the past 4–5 years, the sector has been suffering from the effects of the global financial crisis and the introduction of austerity policies, losing funds both from public spending cuts (Kane and Allen 2011) and from reduced individual giving (Clark et al. 2012). In comparison to our other sites, what stands out is that the funding NGOs in London rely on incomes from central or local government and/or private donations (Clark et al. 2012). The Conservative Party, the senior partner in the current coalition government, came to power in May 2010 promising to strengthen civil society through its Big Society agenda (Cameron, 2010). Yet there are concerns that the independence of the voluntary sector is under threat due to the growing focus on contracting and use of gagging clauses in contracts (Independence Panel 2013) and widespread criticism from government officials of campaigning by voluntary organizations (Ishkanian 2014). In January 2014, a controversial lobbying bill was narrowly passed, which charities and campaigning groups across the political spectrum have argued will have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and campaigning (Last 2013; 38 Degrees 2013). London has a long tradition of large-scale, peaceful demonstrations marching through the city center (including a 2 million march against the war in Iraq in 2003), but also of violent anti-police riots in different parts of the city, most recently and notably in the Summer of 2011. Occupy London was directly inspired by Occupy Wall Street and its main message was against global capitalism and inequality. But it also built on the earlier local repertoires of Reclaim the Streets (since the 1990s) and the grassroots Climate Camps (2006–2011). In terms of its concerns, it can be seen as part of a broader local, national and transnational anti-austerity movement.

Yerevan, until recently at least, has been typified by what we have elsewhere called a ‘*genetically engineered*’ (Ishkanian 2008) civil society. Since the fall of communism 25 years ago, foreign donors together have spent large sums of money

strengthening civil society, as a means of promoting democracy, good governance, human rights, and the rule of law. Within a few years, donors claimed success in having exponentially grown the number of NGOs from a few hundred to several thousand in nearly all of the former socialist countries (US Agency for International Development 1999). Despite the investment of human and financial resources, scholars and policy makers continue to lament the “weakness” of civil society in the former socialist countries (Celichowski 2004; Mandel 2012; Morjé Howard, 2003) and the lack of trust that NGOs have (Caucasus Research Resource Center 2010; EBRD 2011; Evans 2012). Such skepticism and lack of trust have made it relatively easy for the Armenian government to justify crackdowns on NGOs by accusing them of being agents in the pay of foreign governments or ‘grant-eaters’ shamelessly chasing donor funding (Ishkanian 2008). Beginning in 2010, despite the rising authoritarianism, and sometimes in direct response to it, Armenia has seen the emergence of new grassroots movements locally known as ‘civic initiatives.’ Civic initiatives are grassroots, volunteer based, non-partisan groups usually consisting of between twenty and (more rarely) a few hundred individuals, who come together to address a particular issue and disband once that issue has been resolved. Civic initiatives are structured horizontally and decision-making is consensus based with discussions taking place in person or in secret Facebook groups. Civic initiatives address a wide range of social issues spanning from mining, transport fee hikes, pensions’ privatization, to the defense of historical buildings and urban green spaces. The civic initiative Occupy Mashtots Park, which lasted from February to May 2012, succeeded in saving a public park from being destroyed for the construction of boutiques. The immediate aim was to save the park, but the larger objective was to challenge policies which consistently put the interests of oligarchs and corporations ahead of people and the environment.

Athens has the *most traditional* civil society: the church, and until recently party-affiliated structures, have had an important role in civil society, while formal NGOs are a relatively recent and weak phenomenon. Their “massive appearance” (Tsaliki 2010, p. 153) was very much dependent on decisions taken by the state itself (Afouxenidis et al. 2004, p. 3) and by international organizations such as the OECD and the EU to promote such forms of public participation. Even in the 2000s, “large institutionalized civil society organisations (CSOs) are few and are not influential in Greece. Most formal CSOs do not attract a significant number of members or a significant amount of funds” (Sotiropoulos and Karamagioli 2005, p. 8). In comparative perspective, we attribute this to Athens being neither a ‘western’ context with a tradition of formal associationalism (such as London), nor a ‘non-western’ context that has been the subject of NGO-ization within the framework of foreign aid (such as Cairo and Yerevan). In the context of the Greek debt crisis, the role of NGOs appears on the one hand to have increased, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups such as the unemployed and migrants, but on the other hand, the NGOs themselves are also financially affected by the crisis. Street protests are dated by activists as beginning before the financial crisis, with the shooting of an unarmed boy by the police in December 2008.

However, the main protests, seeing hundreds of thousands of people in the street, were a response to the financial and political crisis relating to public debt. These

began in May 2010, and culminated in the occupation of Syntagma Square from May to early August 2011.

Cairo has in recent years been the *most volatile* context for civil society. Similar to Yerevan, NGOs in Cairo have also been the recipients of vast amounts of foreign aid over the past two decades. The number of NGOs greatly expanded, with foreign funding, in the 1990s, when they were seen as a means of protecting disadvantaged groups from the worst effects of structural adjustment policies (Abdelrahman 2004, p. 59). The thriving NGO sector broadly consisted of Islamist, Coptic, and secular, especially human rights and women's rights groups, and became an attractive source of employment for middle class professionals, "both for the high salaries that these organisations offer and for the intellectual and ideological satisfaction that the work provides," despite offering insecure, temporary contracts and demanding long working hours (Abdelrahman, 2007). This funding increased even further after the fall of Mubarak. The Egyptian state frequently intervened, sometimes to repress, sometimes to manipulate rivalries and sometimes to access funding. In the 2000s, Egypt and Cairo in particular were characterized by increasingly open and frequent opposition to the government, beginning with demonstrations in support of the second intifada in Palestine in late 2000, followed by the election-monitoring movement Kefaya as well as increasing labor protests. In January 2011, this culminated in the 18-day protests in Tahrir Square which caused President Mubarak to step down. The period from the army's announcement that power would be handed over to a democratically elected government in January 2012, until the renewed army take-over in July 2013, were characterized by an unprecedented flourishing of all manner of activism. It was in this period, in May 2013, that we undertook interviews.

Since the military take-over in July 2013, there has been an increasing crackdown, first on Islamist, but now also on secular activists.

Hence in many ways, the circumstances in the four cities could not be more different: London's established civil society, where both charities and street activism have a long pedigree; Yerevan's purpose-built but artificial civil society recently joined and challenged by grassroots activism; Athens' traditional civil society, where NGOs have made fewer inroads, but street activism has become a mass phenomenon since the crisis; and Cairo's well-funded but volatile civil society, coming together in Tahrir Square in January 2011 to overthrow a dictator but suffering from dissension and renewed repression since. Yet, as we will show, there were important commonalities in the relations between activists and NGOs in all four cities. This suggests, first, that there is something universal about the dilemmas activists face in their encounter with material and coercive logics, and the ways they resolve them; and second, that the cyclical nature of civil society's engagement with state and market is increasingly globalized, transcending local differences and circumstances.

We conducted field research in Athens together, developing a definitive interview guide that we used in the other three other cities.<sup>1</sup> In each city, we conducted semi-

<sup>1</sup> We owe a great debt to Christina Psarra and MK (anonymized) for research assistance and translation in Athens and Cairo, respectively; to Irum S. Ali and Evelina Gyulkhandanyan for conducting some of the interviews in London and Yerevan respectively, and to Donna Middelkoop and Meta de Lange for transcription and anonymization of the interviews.



structured interviews with 12–20 respondents, most of whom were activists in the sense described above (square occupations or direct action), while some were journalists, representatives of NGOs, trade unions or political parties. In this article, we focus solely on the ‘activists,’ although as we will make clear in the analysis, these categories also sometimes overlapped. We selected the people we interviewed via a snowball sample, but selecting for the greatest possible variety in political views, age, gender and class to reflect the much-noted diversity in the street protests themselves. In Cairo for instance, we made sure to interview various shades of liberals, leftists and Islamists, young and old, male and female, English speakers and Arabic-only speakers. We did, however, focus on those deeply involved, for whom activism, however they defined it themselves, is an important time commitment and part of their identity, rather than on occasional demonstrators.

Our questions focused on the activists’ targets and aspirations; their tactics and repertoires of action; the discourses and slogans; transnational links and their relationship with more formal civil society organizations, the subject of this article. The interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English or the local language. All interviews were translated into English, transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software. Since many of our questions were politically and/or organizationally sensitive, we have anonymized the interviews and all respondents are referred to with pseudonyms or interview numbers.

While our analysis draws on our broader base of interviews, for the purposes of this article, in order to provide greater depth and illustrate the identity and diversity of the activists, we will focus on and take quotes from only four respondents in each city, each of which was deeply involved in street activism and direct action in 2011–2012, and many of whom continue to be so. Thus, we provide a window to the micro-level of their individual trajectories and self-reflections, rather than have them speak as disembodied voices. At the same time, we demonstrate that their views and considerations are also more broadly shared, by regularly referring our broader base of interviews. The full transcripts of all our interviews, in their anonymized form, are available online.<sup>2</sup>

In London, we will focus on Oscar, Charlie, Emily and Alice. Oscar, in his late twenties, has been involved in Climate Camps, was active in Occupy London and now works on the intersection between energy use and poverty; Charlie, in his early thirties, is an anti-austerity activist and works full-time for an NGO; Emily, in her early sixties, has worked in the voluntary sector for decades, but now sees herself as an independent activist, and was involved in Occupy London; and Alice, in her early thirties, is an architect who camped at St. Paul’s for 5 months and continues to engage in direct action.

In Yerevan, we will discuss the views and experiences of Davit, Narine, Milena and Gayane. Davit, 30, works for a human rights NGO but is also deeply involved in civic initiatives; Narine, late twenties, works for an international NGO but is also an environmental activist; Gayane and Milena are in their late thirties. Gayane,

<sup>2</sup> We provide the full transcripts as a resource for other scholars and as part of our commitment to increasing transparency in the social sciences without compromising obligations toward respondents. The transcripts are to be found at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60128/> and <http://www.uva.nl/contact/medewerkers/item/m.e.glasius.html?f=glasius>.

originally a journalist with a Master's degree from the US, now works for a human rights NGO and helped to create a civic initiative which focuses on violence in the army. Milena is an independent women's rights activist and is involved in a number of civic initiatives.

For Athens, we will draw on the interviews with Aiketerine, Eleni, Spiros, and Vasilis. Aiketerine, late twenties, is a humanitarian NGO worker who has been involved in many forms of street activism, in Syntagma Square, in the traditional anarchist Exarcheia neighborhood, and in various other locations. Eleni, early thirties, is a graphic designer who had no previous activist experience when she became involved in Syntagma and Spiros is a teacher in his late forties. Eleni and Spiros worked together in anti-pollution protests in the port suburb where they live, and are now engaged in direct action (reconnecting electricity supplies) and food collection in the same area. We interviewed them together. Vasilis, late thirties, has an anarchist background. He interrupted his academic career in the UK (teaching and writing a PhD) in order to immerse himself in the Athenian Syntagma occupation, and now runs an organization connecting and supporting solidarity initiatives, about which more below.

For Cairo, we will focus on Mahmoud, Rania, Salma, and Malak. Mahmoud, early twenties, is a law graduate who works for an NGO and comes from a 'political family,' which means he has been involved in street demonstrations since his early teens. Rania, of the same age, works for a human rights organization. Salma is an academic in her late forties who did not engage in street activism until she became part of the 'We are all Khaled Said' Facebook group in 2010. Malak, mid-forties, is a veteran activist with a Marxist and anti-globalization background and a known connector between leftist and Islamist activists. He has a corporate day job. All were in Tahrir Square throughout the '18 days' in 2011 that led to the overthrow of Mubarak, except Rania, who was studying in the UK at the time, but engaged in many forms of protest since returning in summer 2011 (Table 1).

### **The Critique of NGOS: “This is a kind of civil society business”**

Scholars studying NGOs in different parts of the world have examined how NGOs have come to embrace the material and coercive logics of the market and state, respectively. The criticisms of NGOs, although all inter-related, can roughly be classed into three categories: resource dependency; co-option by or constraints emanating from the state; and a general pattern of de-radicalization associated with institutionalization and a focus on service delivery.

The literature has argued that NGO dependence on foreign aid (Howell and Pearce 2001; Hemment 2012) as well as funding from national or local governments (Alcock and Kendall 2011; Lewis 2005) leads to loss of independence and voice. On the ground, some of our activist respondents held that many or most NGOs are just motivated by a desire to get funding, to live well. Milena, herself a women's rights activist, said,

Women's activism mainly started with grants. Mostly those grant-eaters ... the women, who were transferring some grants from *Komsomol* [Young

**Table 1** Our 16 main respondents (at time of interview, Spring 2013)

City	Pseudonym	Age, gender	Type of activism <sup>a</sup>	Day job
Athens	Aiketerina	F late twenties	Anti-police violence; pro-democracy; anti-racism; anti-austerity & solidarity	Humanitarian NGO worker
	Eleni	F early thirties	Anti-pollution; pro-democracy; anti-austerity & solidarity; direct action	Graphic designer
	Spiros	M late forties	Anti-pollution; pro-democracy; anti-austerity & solidarity; direct action	Teacher
	Vasilis	M late thirties	Anarchist; pro-democracy; anti-austerity & solidarity	Party-funded solidarity network
Cairo	Mahmoud	M early twenties	Palestine solidarity; anti-police violence; pro-democracy; human rights	NGO worker
	Malak	M late forties	Anti-globalization; social justice; pro-democracy	ICT, corporate sector
	Rania	F early twenties	Human rights; social justice	Human rights NGO
	Salma	F early forties	Anti-police violence; pro-democracy; anti-GM foods; feminist	Academic
London	Alice	F early thirties	Occupy; anti-austerity & solidarity	Architect (on and off)
	Charlie	M early thirties	Anti-war; climate change; anti-austerity; anti-banks; direct action	Peace building NGO
	Emily	F early sixties	Voluntary action; citizen's advice; anti-austerity	Own organization
	Oscar	M late twenties	Climate change; anti-austerity	Part-time job with activist network
Yerevan	Davit	M early thirties	Human rights; pro-democracy; environmentalist; Occupy	Human rights NGO
	Gayane	F late thirties	Anti-military; pro-democracy; Occupy	Human rights NGO
	Milena	F late thirties	Anti-death penalty; anti-military; feminist; LGBT; prison conditions	Musician
	Narine	F late twenties	Environmentalist; Occupy	Good governance NGO

<sup>a</sup> First entry is type of activism first engaged in, others are more recent and current activities

Communist League] to here [NGOs]. In reality they weren't raising all the issues that existed.

Mahmoud from Cairo similarly holds that

Civil society has been misused. With endless amounts of money... a lot of people just decided to stop working and stop doing anything positive for the society and they just launched their civil society organisations. You see millions of funds and you see basically nothing.

In Athens, local anti-austerity activists Eleni and Spiros explained that "...no NGOs or the Church were involved [in their actions], but we didn't ask for their help either. But this doesn't mean it can't happen in the future. But it will be with real NGOs." They were implying that most NGOs are somehow 'not real' in terms of activist commitment (see also interviews YN2, YN3, YN11, Yerevan; AN5, AN6, Athens on the pernicious effects of funding, more particularly foreign funding, on NGOs). On the other hand, respondents we interviewed, including sometimes the same ones who voiced these criticisms, like Mahmoud, also reported suffering from the public's general suspiciousness regarding NGOs being foreign-funded (see also CN5, Cairo).

Academics have also examined how the growing participation of NGOs in service delivery, and in particular through contracting arrangements, leads to a reorientation of NGOs away from their values toward a focus on efficiency and effectiveness (Batley and Rose 2011; Robinson 1997). This argument of a gradual drift of NGOs away from activist commitments was also echoed by our respondents. In Yerevan, Narine said, "It seems to me that the phase of NGOs has passed" indicating that NGOs, if indeed they ever did, no longer played a leading role in campaigning and awareness-raising (see also interview Davit, Yerevan; CN6, CN20, Cairo). But the constraining nature of institutionalization appears to be especially felt in London (see LN1, LN7, LN12, LN13, London).

Emily left her job in the voluntary sector and started her own initiative because,

...we found ourselves both at the national and local level, among people who were paid professionals...we noticed an increasing professionalization and managerialisation. There seemed to be a dulling of the fire and the motivation that we grew up with and we started to wonder was this just the way we saw it, our corner of the world, or was there a real problem going on here? Was this co-option of voluntary action?

Radical left critics have argued that NGOs, are "powerful pacific weapons of the new world order" (Hardt and Negri 2001, p. 36) and that as part of the neoliberal aid regimes, NGOs emphasize projects over movements thereby mobilizing people to protest at the margins but not to struggle against structural conditions that shape everyday lives (Petras 1997; Lipschutz and Rowe 2005). We found this scathing critique echoed by Vasilis, the Athens activist who also spent years living in the UK.

In Greece you don't have independent NGOs. It's another way to destroy the social solidarity systems, but including and importing the model of charities

and NGOs. This is a kind of civil society business ... For us, the main antagonist is the civil society – the NGOs.

The nature of the denunciations made differs from context to context: Milena and Mahmoud in Yerevan and Cairo refer to blatant greed in relation to funding, whereas Emily and Vasilis in London and Athens describe a process of managerialization and ‘business.’ But both strands fit within a broader and very widely shared perception that the engagement of NGOs with the material logic, i.e., taking money, becomes a purpose in itself, dulling or even destroying ideational motivations. Some, such as the activists quoted above as well as others (e.g., LN12), contend that this can and does lead to the loss of independence of voice and action. In London, we discovered more adversarial stances between activists and NGOs than in our other field sites. Some activists’ we interviewed (LN1 and LN7) are involved in groups that have gone beyond criticizing the actions of NGOs in private to publicly protesting NGO policies and programs. In one case, a group of activists even occupied the London headquarters of a large NGO to protest the latter’s participation in a government funded welfare-to-work program (Boycott Workfare 2013). However, as we demonstrate in the sections that follow, if we solely focus on these denunciations and the critical stances, we run the risk of ignoring the broader, more complex set of interactions and the below-the-radar alliances which exist alongside and which we characterize as surreptitious symbiosis.

### **How NGOs Support Activists: “They are like a resource center that always exists”**

But while the comments made by Milena, Mahmoud, Emily and Vasilis and others in Yerevan, Cairo, London and Athens are undoubtedly sincere, as well as being in alignment with the near-total consensus in the NGO literature, they do not tell the whole story about these activists’ relation to NGOs. As we will show in the next sections, the same activists turn out to appreciate good relations with NGOs, and indeed rely on them to provide resources of which the activists stand in need. What is more, quite a few actually work for NGOs, while others are setting up initiatives with NGO-like characteristics.

Milena, the feminist activist from Yerevan who was quoted above as saying that NGOs are grant-eaters who do not raise the really important issues, also describes them in a very different ways: “besides their everyday work, some NGOs also support with resources. They are like a resource center that always exist and are very useful in this means. They are very important as a resource for mobilization.” These resources range from very practical ones like printing facilities to resources flowing from a closer relationship with government. We will focus on two types of resources that were most often mentioned by activists: the provision of meeting space, and the provision of expertise, including substantive expertise, campaigning know-how and legal aid.

Public space is a very important issue for contemporary activists. It is a symbolic issue and an object of their struggles: the occupation of squares was in part intended

as a protest against the privatization of everything, reclaiming public space (e.g., Occupy Mashtots, Occupy Gezi, etc.). What has received much less attention is that, in part because of the same privatization processes, space is also very much a practical problem for activists. They need spaces to meet and plan activities, as well as to carry them out. Public institutions and even many NGOs nowadays no longer lend their spaces to public uses, but rent them out at market prices, making it much harder to find meeting rooms.

Alice, as an Occupy London activist, attests that after the break-up of the camp, “in terms of meeting space, it was a big problem when we lost the camp. So we mainly meet in cafes.” Both in Athens (Aiketerina, AN4, AN8, AN10) and in London (LN7, LN11), recent movements have followed a longer tradition of squatting public buildings. Squatting is done of course in order to make a political point, but it also provides a practical solution to the problem of where to meet. In Cairo, the uprising also fostered initiatives that required spaces, but rather than squatting, flats are converted to semi-public use either by a private benefactor (Salma) or by a group of people clubbing together to pay rent and try to make a space self sustainable (CN17, CN6 were part of the same initiative).

The other solution to the space problem is to turn to NGOs. Oscar from London, echoing Milena above, says “things like resources, like they can print for us, they book a room for us. So when you find a friendly NGO it is quite a big thing.” In Oscar’s case, a ‘friendly NGO’ has actually provided him with a desk at their office. In Cairo before the uprising, the ‘space’ provided by NGOs had both a practical and a more metaphorical meaning. At the practical level, Abdelrahman records that before the uprising, the Anti-Globalization Egypt Group (AGEG) “held informal, weekly meetings in a ‘borrowed’ space in the Hisham Mubarak human rights NGO” (Abdelrahman 2011, p. 412). But NGOs, more specifically human rights NGOs, were not just a space, but a relative ‘safe space’ for activists (see also CN7, CN8). Malak, who was himself also a member of AGEG, explains that

I joined in the Egyptian organisation of human rights ... because it was the only space that you could really criticise the government throughout 2000s ... it was a space that existed and the regime tolerated it in a sense, because it wasn’t so threatening and it was bad PR for the regime to really attack it ... So we had that space and this was the space we worked in up to the revolution. And actually it’s still the space that a large number of people are working through.

This is also the case in Yerevan where in the context of growing government repression, it is only the human rights NGOs that are providing support to activists (see YN9).

The second NGO resource that activists frequently referred to making use of was their experience, expertise and contacts. In relation to advocacy, Davit from Yerevan held that

NGOs brought new skills and abilities. And the existing activism nowadays is using the tools developed by NGOs. If you look at the activism, those people, who have been in NGO sector, work more professionally, than people who

were out and joined after. Maybe they are enthusiastic...but they do not have those skills.

Alice, from Occupy London, referred in particular to the research capacity that NGOs possess, more than independent activists. She said:

As for the NGOs, there are those that we work very closely with such as [NAMES DELETED]...they have specific structures, they have accumulated knowledge, they can support us with things that we don't have the time to dedicate to ... I think they have their own infrastructure so they are able to produce certain kind of material. We can't afford to have people doing research.

Oscar refers more to resources flowing from the relationship with government:

It's all very informal and there's obviously issues in terms of it's difficult to get [NAME DELETED] to sign off on supporting direct action because of the constraints of being a big NGO. But they will support us in other ways. For instance, they'll give us embargoed reports so that we are aware of the policy stuff.

Gayane's fellow activist in Yerevan, YN8, refers in very similar terms to the utility of NGOs for movement activists: "non-governmental organisations help a lot, which are carrying out more institutional activities, where office work is shaped, where they collect all the information and have legal services ... Civic activists do not have enough income to deal with those issues."

In Cairo too, it is research, and more specifically the legal expertise of human rights NGOs, that stands grassroots activists in good stead. Salma, herself a university-employed social scientist, says

I think the most important work is done by the human rights organisations ... [those] working on personal and civil liberties, political and civil rights, but also the groups working on economic and social rights are doing fantastic work. So it's the rights groups that stand out. Because also they do research, they do policy. They're heavyweight in terms of the content of what they produce. They do a lot of homework.

Rania, who works for such an organization, describes concretely how the relationship might work:

We get invited by local committees in urban slums, in Cairo, telling us 'we want you to be with us, because we going to hold a press conference'...And then they would ask you for information about what kind of rights do we really have, legally what can they do to us? (See also AN4, AN5 in Athens; and CN8, CN15, on human rights NGOs in Cairo).

Apart from the near-universal reliance on meeting spaces, the types of resources that flow from NGOs depend on the context. In Athens, where the sector is most weakly developed, we actually see the least reliance on NGOs, although some respondents did refer to the legal expertise of human rights NGOs, or material help

with individual people in need. Respondents in Cairo, London and Yerevan all refer to the research capacity and skills provided by NGO staff. In London, Oscar and Charlie, added to that the benefit of close relations with policy circles, whereas NGOs in the other three cities clearly do not have such intimate ties. In Cairo and Yerevan, the—relative—safety provided by the international prestige and expertise of human rights NGOs is particularly salient, whereas in London, it is not. However, all the concrete instances of resource transfers ultimately flow from NGO engagement either with the material logic (providing meeting space, learnt skills, research capacity) or with the coercive logic of the state (providing safety and information on imminent government policy). Thus, the reliance on NGOs allows activists to indirectly benefit from NGO embedment in material and coercive logics, without having to ‘pollute’ themselves by direct engagement with these spheres.

### **Why NGOs Support Activists: “They are free”**

It is relatively easy to understand why activists, notwithstanding criticisms they may have of NGOs, would be happy to rely on them for meeting space, printing services, research expertise and legal aid. But it is not so obvious why these useful services are being rendered to movement activists. From our interviews, we can discern three motivations for NGOs to support activists. The first two concern the engagement of NGOs as organizational entities with activists, whereas the third concerns individual NGO employees who support and engage with activism in their personal capacity. We will argue that the latter is much more common than the former, and that the relationship between NGO staff and activists goes much deeper than the former occasionally booking a room or giving legal advice or a policy document to activists.

The first motivation for supporting activism is a conception of NGO work that sees this kind of support as part of their core business, and makes little or no distinction between ‘activism’ and ‘NGO work.’ Salma’s discussion of human rights NGOs, quoted above, demonstrates that she sees these organizations as being at the heart of Cairo activism. Rania, who works for one of these organizations, initially shies away from the idea that she is an activist

I would be labeled by others as an activist. I get mixed up and confused by the word because of its generic use nowadays after the revolution. So everyone who walks along in a demonstration becomes an activist? And then you start asking if everyone is doing this professionally and this is really my career, do I call myself an activist? So it’s a very dazzling question but I don’t go around calling myself an activist at all. I say I work in human rights.

Later in the same interview, however, she recalls the term ‘activist’ in order to explain how different her commitment to her work is to that of a mere ‘employee’:

this is perhaps where the activist word comes, because many people in civil society or in the different organisations that are part of the movement in



Egypt, or the different movements in Egypt, one of the things that they call themselves is activists, to differentiate themselves from an employee who would be just taking orders and following them through. And I think this is one of the ways in which the movements themselves become more democratic from inside.

A second line of reasoning defines the relationship between NGOs and activists in terms of mutual benefits. Activists are seen as useful because of their ability to mobilize and get media attention for issues that are also of concern to NGOs. Often NGOs, given their relationships with states and donors and their reliance on those funding sources, are constrained in terms of how vocal they can be in their criticisms of government or donor policies. At the same time that closer relation to the state can also be useful to activists. Gayane explains, “When we have a problem [as activists], we apply to NGOs, because they can be in touch with state institutions. And when they have a need, we raise noise around the issue.” Oscar, an activist from London describes a similar symbiosis, additionally explaining why the relationship remains informal:

We also go to this big civil society coalition [NAME DELETED]. We’re not formally signed up... We don’t want to be signed up to that and they don’t want us to be signed up to that, but actually they probably quite like us to be there at meetings because we probably get the media attention more than they do.

However, our interviews suggest that in most cases, the support delivered by NGOs to activists is neither a matter of NGO ‘core business’ nor of rationally defined mutual benefit. Unlike Rania, many NGO staffers appear to feel that their work for the organization is not entirely coterminous with their identity as an activist. It turns out that many others activists who have day jobs in NGOs, described NGO work as constraining. While appreciating having this for a ‘day job,’ and the skills and contacts it has brought them, they argued that there was a limit to what they could say and do as an NGO employee. We will focus here on the reflections of Aiketerina in Athens, Mahmoud in Cairo, Narine and Gayane in Yerevan, and Charlie in London, all of whom work for well-established NGOs.

Aiketerina in Athens makes a strong distinction between institutional connections between NGOs and activist movements, and her own personal commitments. On the one hand she asserts that

There is no connection between these movements and NGOs. Only in instances where people from movements would refer people to NGOs or to a formal structure so that the NGO could give them more assistance.

On the other hand she states:

I have participated in most of the riots, demonstrations and occupations of the past few years. I wanted to see them from the inside, to see what they represent. But [in 2011] what was happening for the first time in Greece was

that the older generation, people like my mother went to protest and I also wanted to be a part of that.

Mahmoud has a longer history as a street activist. Like Aiketerina, he has been involved in multiple movements rather than identifying with any particular one:

I believe in protests and social movements ... I love to be a member of different kinds of movements raising particular awareness. I have been part of different movements from spreading political awareness in Egypt and Cairo etc. That was before and after the uprising. Also, I've been interested in politics since I was young because my family is all political. My dad has been arrested tens of times, my uncle, my mum ...

When he is asked whether he is an activist, his first reaction is to say yes *because* he engages in other work beyond his work with the NGO: “As an activist? I dislike the term itself. I would say yes. Because also next to my job I am also a member of an association [NAME WITHHELD].” He then redefines his current NGO work itself as a ‘different kind of activism’:

Now I'm an activist in a different sense, not protesting; I do protest but not really as I used to do. But I'm doing something that affects the public interest. ... I work on different laws with the government and the parliament, the opposition and political parties. This could be called activism.

Gayane in Yerevan who works for a human rights NGO also begins by insisting that there are ‘different kinds of activism,’ but she does not seem to believe that NGO work is one of the kinds:

There are so-called ‘screamers’...unlike the professional NGOs, they raise problems, and professional NGOs sit and work on projects. There are also [activists who are] ‘whistle blowers’, these are the ones who create communication and I probably belong to those creating communication. I prefer to not only raise noise about the issue, but also to link the issue's beneficiaries or victims to relevant public institutions.

Narine, who works for an international NGO, also identifies with multiple movements separate from her work:

I do not separate the movements from one another. In a deep sense they are similar to each other as all the raised issues of movements are the result of this system, everybody has confronted with this [political] system.

She initially appears to see her activism as connected to her NGO persona. Asked how she became politically active, she says:

Basically it was in an NGO, as [NAME WITHHELD] is very open for all active citizens. It's always helpful, supportive in various issues, and people here have the same attitudes, they share the same values. While being in this network, I also became that way.

Nonetheless, in relation to an environmental campaign in which she is involved, Narine says: “there are no NGOs involved in the issue of [NAME DELETED], there are representatives from NGOs, but that is because of their own initiative” (see also YN12 on environmentalism; YN9 on multiple movements identifying individual staff, but not NGOs, as organizations, as involved in activism). She goes on to express frustration with NGOs, and a belief that activists can actually be more effective than NGOs. She says,

[NGOs] are more in the role of supporter now, in the role of providing basic information, scientific counseling...providing resources. They kind of were not able to, did not seek to demonstrate activeness in the street. The fact showed that some things are changed by young active citizens, who are more persistent, more mobile. They are free from documentation, from writing grants, reports; they are free.

In London, Charlie is similarly familiar with the phenomenon of NGO staff who are also activists: “a lot of people involved in [anti-austerity network] themselves work in NGOs.” Just like Davit quoted in the previous section, he sees great advantages to this background:

They are all highly networked and knowledgeable about the political scene in the UK. We all bring to it experience of having worked in these organisations. So not just grassroots experience, but professional experience in NGOs as well. So we know both sides of the fence!

But for Charlie and his fellow activists, there clearly is a fence. In almost direct counterpoint to Rania’s experience of her job, Charlie explains how for many members, the activist network he is part of

...is a way to get away from the world of NGOs as they can also go so far ... it was about using more radical means and having a more radical message, being more autonomous than NGOs can be ... NGOs pay you to work, but you start at the bottom of the ladder and you do not have enough influence to make real change and make your politics felt in the way you want to (see also Oscar).

So, the reason NGOs support activists is because NGO staff are themselves activists. While some, like Rania, see a complete continuum between their office job and other forms of activism, most others engage in these other forms precisely because the NGO format does not allow them to be politically active in all the ways that they want to be. Activism eases their discomfort with the constraints of the material and the coercive logics, expressed in grant-writing and working on projects, by giving them an additional means of political self-expression, without giving up their jobs.

### **Institutionalization and Denial: “We are not an NGO”**

Above we discussed the boundary crossings by NGO employees. Despite the useful benefits and contacts, for many activists it was important to clearly distance

themselves and their activities from NGOs. Some of the respondents we spoke to who do not work for NGOs went out of their way to emphasize that their activism was not NGO work, presumably because they felt the term to have negative connotations. Yet, a few years on from the big street demonstrations, it is clear that some are thinking about, or in fact acting on, the need to consolidate their work, becoming more institutionalized in ways that resemble the trajectories of NGOs.

Gayane, whose civic initiative is still entirely voluntary, suggests that it should professionalize (see also YN2). The movement is now “in the stage to take it to the political agenda,” but she is frustrated with the movement’s lack of professionalism and particularly, their reluctance to embrace leadership. She said,

A new kind of leader emerged in civic initiatives who are in favor of a more horizontal management... they are collaborative and inclusive... almost everyone in activists groups are leaders. The only problem is that they have a phobia from leadership that it will make them similar to NGOs or political parties.

Oscar from London is now “a paid worker for the group...because we had a massive problem of capacity, because everyone had jobs. So we decided to get funding to pay someone to be there for 3 days a week.” Yet Oscar, quoted a few times above on the relationship between activists and NGOs, does not see himself as working for an NGO. Similarly, Emily claims that,

We are not an organization, though we have to have organizational arrangements for more formal things like dealing with money where we have some and for ensuring that we understand what is out there and we are not only speaking from opinion and prejudice and our personal politics.

Yet with four members of staff, albeit part-timers, there is little doubt that Emily’s is an organization. A final interesting case is Vasilis, in Athens, who now works for an organization funded by a left-wing political party, intended to support the blossoming of anti-austerity initiatives in Greece, but who is very careful in his wording about how the organization does this:

First, we are working to make these solidarity movements more visible and to support their informal networks and the networks between them. Because they face a concrete need, sometimes people can’t see the larger picture. So we help them to see where they fit into the whole process ... We are also facilitating, but NOT coordinating ... This is not a top-down process.

This work description sounds eerily familiar to anyone familiar with development NGOs and donors, who routinely deny having top-down relations with their ‘partners.’ Yet we have quoted Vasilis above as a virulent opponent of NGOs, donors and everything they stood for. More specifically, we found our respondents to be very uncomfortable with the financial side of institutionalization. Some go so far as to claim that money is unnecessary, others will take it, or indeed give it, but insist on the lack of strings attached.

In London, Emily has found “this fantastic funder,” who accepted her plea that “we don’t do performance indicators, we don’t do outcomes, we don’t know what’s

going to happen tomorrow let alone in a few months' time." Still she emphasizes that "money isn't the issue." She said,

Money cannot spark activism, though it can close it down or have a good try at closing it down ... I just had a conversation this morning with [NAME DELETED] a local umbrella group who said 'Oh we have no money, no core resources, where are we going to get money, it's such a problem' and I said to them that they were the first people in months who talked to me about money because I had been living in the activist world where money is not the point.

Mahmoud in Cairo, who does earn a salary working for an NGO, and does not seem to have a problem with that nonetheless claimed that "being active does not really necessitate money. But civil society in Egypt here is really spending a lot of money and paying a lot on the media. Money and media they corrupt." In Yerevan, Gayane sees an opposition between making money and being an activist: in university she made "a final decision that being poor is not scary to me, that you should not compromise yourself to adhere to the true values." Yet like in Cairo, in Yerevan, NGO day jobs seem to provide a practical answer to the question of how to be an activist and make a living too, for Davit, Gayane and Narine, while even Milena who stays outside them relies heavily on NGO support for the funding of activities.

Vasilis is reluctant to admit that his organization actually *funds* grassroots initiatives: "before the financial assistance, that we sometimes provide, we try to find in-kind donations, especially for instance with medicines." On the other side in Athens, Eleni and Spiros explained that "(w)e want to remain autonomous. We don't take funding from donors and we are against funding. Even if someone approach us and want to give us something, even if we take it we won't publicize them and their donations."

Again, there are some contextual, as well as individual differences here: while Gayane craves professionalization, others in Yerevan, such as Milena, prefer the informal and radical forms of activism. Emily's 'fantastic funder' in London, who disregards customary donor procedure, might be met with more suspicion in Cairo; and Vasilis' party-funded initiative would look unsavory from a UK perspective. But they are united in their unease with, indeed almost denial of, the fact that they are all taking or providing funding. The awkward ways in which they describe their current situation reflects the tension between a vision in which money pollutes activism, and a recognition that it may also be needed to sustain it.

### **Conclusion: Future Scenarios for Surreptitious Symbiosis**

Since 2011, there has been a global rise in street protests and occupations. We have focused on Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan, but there have since been similar outbursts in Delhi, Istanbul, Sao Paulo and Sofia. Media and academic coverage have suggested that the protestors were ordinary citizens who had little or no connection with formal civil society organizations. The activists themselves have emphasized their commitment to internal democracy and their revulsion with 'business as usual' and 'politics as usual.' Both in Western and non-Western

settings, NGOs appeared to be hopelessly disconnected from these upsurges of spontaneous citizen action. In answer to our first question, ‘how do today’s activists relate to NGOs,’ we have revealed an equally universal but more complex state of affairs: independent activists rely on NGO resources in many ways, and NGO staff, especially junior but occasionally also more senior staff, engage in street activism on the side. However, as we discussed, activists continue to denounce and in some cases, openly oppose, NGOs that have embraced the material and coercive logics of the market and state, respectively. Yet alongside the critiques and denunciations, there are also mutually beneficial, albeit ‘below the radar,’ interactions between NGOs and activists which we called surreptitious symbiosis.

In answer to our second question, whether it is possible to do sustained activism to bring about social change without becoming part of a ‘civil society industry,’ we have shown that currently, this is indeed possible, due to the phenomenon of surreptitious symbiosis, but the question is whether this can be sustained in the longer term. The current relationship between activists and NGOs, based on individual ties, is one which both sides are typically keen to keep under the radar. It allows NGO staff to engage with and support movements and activists and to feel as though they are making a difference without having to make that relationship public. Given the growing competition for funding and pressure from both governments and donors for NGOs to demonstrate their professionalism and efficiency, being too close to movements that are radically critical of governments could endanger NGOs’ contracting relationships or grant-based support. This situation was also convenient for activists as it allowed them to present themselves as entirely distinct from NGOs and to remain clean and autonomous in their own eyes and those of others. But it remains to be seen whether this surreptitious symbiosis is a temporary or a lasting phenomenon. We sketch three, not mutually exclusive, scenarios.

In the first, our cyclical logic would predict that those activists who have continued to be active, a few years on from the peak of the movement, will, like Vasilis, Emily or Gayane, increasingly seek new ways to fund or be funded, and to (re-)engage with the state and its policies. Both of these processes are occurring. For example, several activists (Oscar and LN1) in London have received funding from a newly established radical grant-making body, which supports grassroots groups without demanding the same type of accounting, monitoring and reporting required by traditional donors, thus allowing activists to obtain small amounts of money for their projects without having to dramatically alter the way they operate. This allows them to claim that they remain clear of the taint of professionalization and managerialism. As for (re-)engaging with the state and its policies, some activists have joined political parties (Gayane, YN2, YN11, and at the time of interviewing, CN7, CN8, CN10, CN12, CN13, CN15, CN16, CN20) or attended political party conferences (LN1), while others have been elected to serve in local government (Spiros). This growing engagement with the material and coercive logics is driven by the need to scale-up their efforts and to widen impact. They are evidence of a more sustained engagement with the material and the coercive logics, but these forms of institutionalization are perceived by the activists as different from NGOs,

just as NGOs are different from the trade unions or political parties who used to be much more prominent actors in civil society.

Our second scenario focuses on the emancipatory potential of the NGO staff that have immersed themselves in recent activism, personified in our article by Aiketerina, Davit, Narine, Charlie, or Rania. Combined with pressure from outside on NGOs to prove their continued relevance, they may come to rejuvenate and re-radicalize NGOs from within, challenging cosy relations with donors and the state and emphasizing reconnection with grassroots activism. This is an optimistic scenario which would require not only the participation of individual (junior) staff, but also shifts in NGO leadership and organizational culture which may be difficult to achieve. In this scenario, the symbiosis, re-asserting the primacy of the ideational logic in global civil society, would become more sustained and lose its surreptitious character.

Finally, in the third scenario, if NGOs cannot be rejuvenated and re-radicalized from within, then the opposition between activist groups and NGOs may grow. It is clear that the future of NGOs is under threat: after a decade of virulent criticism, distrusted by governments and the general public alike, in a hostile financial climate, they may have outlived their purpose, and wither and die or become hybrid organizations such as social businesses. While for some activists this would be a vindication, the demise of NGOs could also have an unexpected indirect impact on the more radical activism that has sought to distance itself from the lure of money and jobs, but has surreptitiously also relied on it. In other words, despite activists' criticism and their uneasy relationship with NGOs, the demise of the latter would be the loss of an ally nonetheless.

It remains to be seen how these processes will develop in each of the four contexts, and whether the move toward institutionalization we are beginning to witness, three years on from the movements in the squares, can—as the activists themselves insist—be distinct from patterns of NGO institutionalization, continuing to privilege and emphasize the ideational logic.

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