



Patrice C. McMahon. *The NGO Game: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in the Balkans and Beyond.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. 238 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5017-0924-1.

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Patrice C. McMahon's *The NGO Game* articulates a very clear and consistent thesis that in postconflict environments and beyond, although nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been seen as a kind of magic bullet fostering sustainable peace and development, their impact has been much exaggerated. At times, McMahon goes further to suggest that the unintended consequences of their activities result in them actually doing more harm than good on the ground. She is particularly concerned with the distorting influence which international NGOs have on local organizations whose growing numbers are a product more of instrumentalized relations than of burgeoning civil society. A general conclusion is, therefore, that the international community's faith in NGOs as a kind of peacebuilding panacea, primarily by Western donors, is essentially misplaced and even akin to a form of colonialism.

Most of the empirical evidence for this is drawn from the author's own extended, if intermittent, fieldwork, over a long period of time, roughly 2000 to 2011, in Bosnia-Herzegovina (which throughout the author calls Bosnia) and Kosovo, presented in chapters 3 and 4 of the book, respectively. In addition, reference is made in the introductory chapter to the author's fieldwork in Vietnam and Cambodia. Throughout the book, and particularly in the concluding chapter, the

author uses work by others on, *inter alia*, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq, East Timor, Libya, Haiti, and postcommunist Russia.

McMahon in some ways is faced with a dilemma, in that when she began her work on NGOs in peacebuilding, the literature was generally positive about their impact, although lacking detailed empirical validation. However, by the time she wrote the book, an opposite orthodoxy, a kind of complete *volte face* as it were, was in place, substituting for a more nuanced and complex understanding of the diverse impacts of diverse NGOs in different places at different times. In a moment of reflexivity, the author notes that her own initial discussion of NGOs in Mostar was "incomplete and somewhat misleading" (p. 89), although no direct reference is provided to the text or texts in which this supposed error is manifest. This does not lead McMahon to embrace the open and contradictory roles of NGOs, individually and collectively, over time, within postconflict environments. Instead, she repeats frequently what I want to term the new common sense about their negative impacts, sometimes giving the book an air of superficiality.

Although there is a general agreement that research on peacebuilding and postconflict reconstruction needs to be multidisciplinary,[1] the book appears to be focused primarily within the

discipline of international relations (IR). In fairness, an early criticism in the book regarding the statist bias of IR and the concomitant failure to address the role of NGOs and other nonstate actors in international politics leads to McMahon, rightly in my view, suggesting that “IR scholars have a long way to go to catch up with their peers in sociology, anthropology, and even comparative politics, who have all interrogated NGOs more thoroughly” (p. 19). Unfortunately, subsequent reference to, in particular, anthropological work which is extremely well placed to provide a more nuanced account and to address the gap between what NGOs say they do and what they actually do on the ground, is rather haphazard, however. A great deal of important anthropological work on realities in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina by Čarna Brković, Andrew Gilbert, Elisa Helms, Azra Hromadžić, Stef Jansen, and Larisa Kurtović, to name a few, for example, is entirely absent.[2]

The author’s invoking, throughout the book, of “institutionalism” as a key conceptual lens through which to address the roles of NGOs in peacebuilding is problematic. McMahon does not explain which type of institutional theory is being preferred (at different moments, rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and discursive institutionalism seem to be influential). She also does not explain how to conceptualize the relationship between individual agency, organizational form, and macro-level power structures in “determining” NGO practices.

At times, it is not clear whether it is the faith in NGOs as a quick, effective and, above all, cheap substitute for direct, long-term engagement in postconflict reconstruction by international (read Western) intergovernmental and bilateral actors which is the main target of McMahon’s criticism or, rather, any attempt to intervene from outside, through the establishment of protectorates or semi-protectorates. The best parts of the book, in my view, are those which address the complex, and ever lengthening, chains of relations between

different agencies and the complex, and often competing, roles of the United Nations and its agencies, the European Union, the World Bank, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and other key actors in aid and development. I would argue that what Mark Duffield termed a new security and development agenda, linking humanitarianism, peacebuilding, biopolitical interventions, and forms of social and political engineering “from above” within a developing “Duty to Protect” (D2P) frame is more of an issue than the role of NGOs per se.[3] At the same time, linking the faith in NGOs not only to “liberal peace,” which is discussed in the book, but also to “neoliberal restructurings” and “new public management” approaches, which are not, could also have taken the book in an interesting direction. What if the projectization, NGOization, and, even marketization and subcontracting (for-profit actors, including consultancy companies, are not given enough attention in the book), traced here are part of more general global restructurings?[4]

Regarding McMahon’s sources, I am concerned with the rather uncritical use, at times, of Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts* (1993) and Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). Both works tend to reinforce a kind of “West is best” ideology which, in other places, the author is keen to reject. At the same time, Kaplan’s invocation of “ancient ethnic hatreds” in the Balkans is a prime example of what Milica Bakić-Hayden has termed “nested Orientalism.”[5] Thus, McMahon’s work is in danger of negatively comparing supposed “exotic” elsewhere with a mythical “civilized” West, as well as buying into a thesis that Kosovo is at risk in terms of the spread of “radical Islamic ideas” (p. 162). Favorably quoting Huntington for his “cogent” analysis in which “future violence” is caused by “issues of identity and culture” (p. 31) is far from an understanding of the causes of the wars of the Yugoslav succession through categories which are not essentialist but which relate to the contested claims of political elites in com-

plex political economies. Following the work of Michael Pugh and, more recently, Karla Koutkova, any simplistic and binary division between “local” and “international” actors and organizations is difficult to accept.[6] While McMahon does recognize the thriving civil society in Kosovo, explored in Howard Clarke’s *Civil Resistance in Kosovo* (2000), she fails to pay similar attention to a nascent civil society of women’s, student, and artist groups in parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1980s.

The NGO Game appears to be aimed at US readers (the book is marked by a noticeable US-centrism) who still believe in the panacea of NGOs in international assistance, if such straw persons exist. Unfortunately, as someone deeply involved in activist-oriented research on peacebuilding and on the role of NGOs in the post-Yugoslav space, I may be far from the book’s ideal reader. At the same time, the empirical work charting the rise of NGOs in chapter 2 is very much worth reading and shows the author’s grasp of the shifts which occurred in both the framing and practice of partnerships with nonstate actors by a large number of diverse supranational organizations. The argument in the conclusion of four “gaps” undermining NGO work in conflict environments—the “funding gap,” or the failure of most development assistance to actually reach local actors; the “empowerment gap,” in terms of the false rhetoric of “partnership” with local actors; the “accountability gap,” in terms of the failure to involve end beneficiaries; and the “motivation gap,” in terms of the reluctance of powerful actors to change the status quo—is extremely interesting and could, and perhaps, should have been more central to the book.

Notes

[1]. See Francisco Ferrandiz and Antonius Robben, eds., *Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Peace and Conflict Research: A View from Europe*, (Bilbao: University of Deusto, 2007).

[2]. See, for example, Čarna Brković, “Scaling Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Actions in a Bosnian Town,” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 81, no. 1 (2016): 99-124; Andrew Gilbert, “Legitimacy Matters: Managing the Democratization Paradox of Foreign State-building in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *Sudosteuroopa* 60, no. 4 (2012): 483-96; Elisa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013); Azra Hromadžić, *Citizens of an Empty Nation: Youth and State-Making in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Stef Jansen, *Yearnings in the Meantime: 'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex* (New York: Berghan Books, 2015); Larisa Kurtović, “The Strange Life and Death of Democracy Promotion in Post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina,” in *Unbribeable Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Fight for the Commons*, ed. Damir Arsenijević (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014), 97-102.

[3]. Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

[4]. Paul Stubbs, “International Non-State Actors and Social Development Policy,” *Global Social Policy* 3, no. 4 (2003): 319-48.

[5]. Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917-31.

[6]. Michael Pugh, “Protectorates and Spoils of Peace: intermestic manipulations of political economy in South-East Europe,” *Copenhagen Peace Research Institute* (2000); Karla Koutkova, “‘The King is Naked’: Internationality, informality and *ko ful* statebuilding in Bosnia,” in *Negotiating Social Relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Semiperipheral Entanglements*, ed. Stef Jansen, Čarna Brković, and Vanja Čelebičić (New York: Routledge, 2016), 109-21.

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