Non-governmental Organizing in the People's Republic of China

– a Reading Inspired by Agential Realism

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ESSAY

In this essay we show how various theories, not least Karen Barad's (2003, 2007) theory of agential realism, have inspired us to a reading that opens up theorizing on non-governmental organizing in the People's Republic of China (PRC).[1] Drawing on Barad we define such organizing as a phenomenon that emerges through the ontologically inseparable intra-action between three entities that are conventionally viewed as separate.[2]

Major restructuring of Chinese economy and society have taken place since economic reforms were initiated in 1979. During the previous thirty years of planned economy the realization of gender equality was a major priority of the Communist Party and much was achieved in terms of legislation and changes of practice. At the same time the advent of economic reforms revealed long term unresolved gender injustices and inequalities and gave rise to new issues. Social entrepreneurs reacted to these problems and used newly available opportuni-

ties to organize from below to set up organizations to address gender and development issues which they felt that the party-state was not sufficiently aware of or was addressing inadequately.

Three entities are commonly identified as being involved in the creation and functioning of non-governmental organizing. They are, first, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) themselves, second, domestic party-state institutions at national and local levels, and, third, foreign (primarily European/North American) development aid organizations involved in providing funding and other forms of support and intervention to the NGOs. The central question we originally asked in the research project from which this essay derives was: How do the social entrepreneurs who are the initiators of and participants in NGOs create the knowledge and practices that are central to their activity in the course of their meeting up with the two other actors that are crucial to their work? Contrary to our initial understanding of interaction between the three separate entities of social entrepreneurs, party-state and donors we now view the three as inseparably entangled in Barad's sense of lacking an independent, self-contained existence in their direct material engagement in constituting NGOs.

In this essay we propose an alternative theoretical framework for understanding NGOs in the PRC. NGOs may be viewed as local and Chinese in the sense that they are territorially situated in the geopolitical entity of the PRC. We argue that the 'local' phenomenon is not closed or self-constituted. On the contrary, it is relational, and the relations involve the intra-active entanglement with not only domestic party-state, but also with foreign donors. In other words, what is usually understood as an external element in the form of European/North American donors is in our understanding internal to what is conventionally understood as a 'Chinese' phenomenon.

In the following we trace our search for a theoretical framework that would help us to understand the coming together of social entrepreneurs, domestic party-state and foreign donors in the joint enterprise of creating NGOs in the PRC. We draw on the work of sociologist Sasha Roseneil, geographer Doreen Massey, grounded theorist Adele Clarke, and, finally and importantly, physicist Karen Barad.

A Flow of Energy through Social Transformation

Our theory building is based on a study of three gender and development NGOs in the provinces of Hebei, Shaanxi and Yunnan carried out over a three year period from 2004 to 2006. Throughout our encounters with social entrepreneurs who had initiated and were working in the organizations we were studying we had an uncomfortable sense that what we were concentrating on in our analysis was not what was most significant in terms of understanding how the organizations had been established and how they were working in both form and content. The social entrepreneurs we spoke with were very focused on organizational structures and on forming 'real' NGOs, and we tended to adopt their focus on such activity as a somewhat static format that they could and should learn about from the West and subsequently emulate. We found ourselves struggling to understand other levels of organizing. Interviewees were telling us a lot about the way they in their daily practices were working *beyond* the organizational frameworks they were building. They were continuously telling us stories of how they were collaborating, interacting, negotiating and compromising with both donor organizations and party-state institutions. This was, of course, in response to our questions on their interaction with donors and party state. The important thing is that what they were doing was going beyond the analytical framework that implicitly underlay our

questions and our understanding. This framework implied the notion of separate NGOs working with separate party-state institutions and foreign donors organizations albeit with lines between the separate entities sometimes being blurred. However, the theory did not fit what we were hearing and we sought to find an alternative theoretical framework.

The story we tell – the analytical framework we propose – builds upon recent recognition that what were previously understood as rather rigid boundaries between NGOs, foreign donors and party-state institutions can better be understood as fluid boundaries. Scholars such as Yiyi Lu (2009), Louise Edwards (2009) and also Jude Howell (2004), who has written extensively on non-governmental organizing in China, have pointed to the need to recognize that the role of Western development aid donors must be made visible in understandings of bottom-up organizing, and they have emphasized the fluidity of boundaries between the new organizations and the party-state. In our understanding the boundaries are neither blurred nor fluid. They are not there at all.

At one point we looked towards what Sasha Roseneil (2004: 351) calls '..a social ontology which stresses not social structure but movement within the social.' in the sense of 'a flow of energy through social formation' and the 'broad-based transformative coalitions' that constitute this flow. We asked: Where does this flow of energy for social transformation come from? Does it come from the combined efforts of people within an entity called an NGO who then interact with or collaborate with people from other entities? Or does it come from a completely other type of entity that cuts across these formal structural entities? Formally and structurally NGOs, donors organizations and party-state institutions as we know them are not only three separate, but also three extremely disparate, entities. What we were hearing was that this did not necessarily mean that they *functioned* as three separate entities in their joint engagement of addressing gender and development issues. We realized that a key to understanding what we had previously viewed as relationships between three separate entities would be to look at a sphere or space or whatever we wanted to call it that existed across the three.

Relations in the Situation

We turned to Doreen Massey's (2005) imagination of space. Space in her understanding is constituted by relations that are defined by contemporaneous multiplicity and are always under construction, open-ended and unknown. The point in terms of the organizations in our study is that when social entrepreneurs, party-state and donors enter into relationships in the context of globalization then this leads to a process of becoming that cannot be presumed to have a predefined form or content. Each of the involved actors may have predefined notions of what form of organization they view as ideal and which they aim at establishing. However, once they come together in relations that involve their contemporaneous multiplicity then the outcome of the combined activity cannot be predefined. On the contrary, the outcome is always under continuous formation. The relations themselves constitute a space that is always being formed.

Massey's concept of space differs from the way the space occupied by NGOs in the PRC is often portrayed as an open surface which they have moved onto following the provision of this space by the party-state. Space in Massey's definition is not a container in which something takes place or an open surface on which something happens. Massey starts her conceptualization of space by troubling an understanding of space as it is used in what she calls 'voyages of discovery' in terms of crossing and conquering space. Space in that way of

telling things is an expanse people can travel across. Space is land and sea. It is a surface that is continuous and given. Massey emphasizes that an effect of that understanding of space is that space is convened into time and geography is turned into history. This is the case when different societies are viewed as situated at different points in one universal form of development that all should, according to a prescriptive ideal, be moving towards. Space as empty surface can also, according to Massey, be viewed as blank in the sense that space is imagined as "a continuous surface that the colonizer, as the only active agent, crosses to find the to-be-colonized simply "there"." (Massey 2005: 63) Without its own history that will enter into the relations and the way the involved parties form the joint endeavor. Viewed in this perspective China and Europe/North America are part of one universal developmental model, but are placed at different stages of this development. Spatial difference is convened into time in an imagination of globalization as a historical queue. In terms of NGOs the implication is that NGOs in the PRC are young and immature and need to learn to function according to a certain set of Western norms of separation and independence. Massey refuses to convene space into time in this manner. Instead of viewing space as surface and convening space into time she proposes an understanding of space as 'a meeting up of histories' and she speaks of 'open interactional space'. Following Massey China and Europe/North America are different types of societies facing each other at the same time. The implication is that they can also move in completely different directions. This means that in terms of the relations between social entrepreneurs in China and foreign donors the NGO format that develops in China may very well be different from such organizing in the countries in which donor institutions originate and/or are based and the models which they may be promoting. Something new and not already known, rather than a replication of the already known and existing, can potentially develop out of the encounter.

Moving on from Massey to grounded theorist Adele Clarke (2005) we argue that neither party-state nor donors merely influence NGOs from the outside. They do not constitute an outside context which supports and/or constrains NGOs. On the contrary, both party-state and foreign donors are situated within the phenomenon of non-governmental organizing. As conditions of the very existence of the situation party-state and donors are inside the NGOs. In Adele Clarke's words:

> *The conditions of the situation are **in** the situation*. There is no such thing as context. The conditional elements of the situation need to be specified in the analysis of the situation itself as *they are constitutive of it*, not merely surrounding it or framing it or contributing to it. They *are* it. Regardless of whether some might construe them as local or global, internal or external, close-in or far away or whatever, the fundamental question is *"How do these conditions appear – make themselves felt as consequential – inside the empirical situations under examination?"* (Clarke 2005: 71, emphasis – italics and bold – in original text).

Having thus travelled from Roseneil's ontology of movement within the social, to Massey's focus on contemporaneous meeting up of histories, and then to Clarke's understanding of what is usually viewed as an 'outside' context as being located *within* a given situation we found further inspiration in Karen Barad's work.

From Interaction to Intra-Action

Barad's theory of agential realism is absolutely mind-boggling as it challenges the commonly taken for granted separation between ontology (the nature of being) and

epistemology (the nature of knowing). Instead, she proposes an onto-epistemology in which there is no such separation. Transferred to the study of bottom-up organizing in China we propose that this can mean that donor organizations and party-state institutions are internal elements of NGOs. Donors and party-state do not constitute an outside context. On the contrary, they are inside the NGOs. Rather than being outside or separate we view foreign donor organizations and domestic party-state institutions as constitutive of the phenomenon of nongovernment initiated organizing. To use Barad's language in relation to our object of analysis – the distinct phenomenon of an NGO does not precede, but rather emerges through, the intra-action of social entrepreneurs, donors and party-state. Further – with Barad's notion of phenomena as 'entangled material practices of knowing and becoming' (2007: 56) and 'the *ontological* inseparability of agentially intra-acting components' (2007: 33) the phenomena of NGOs would then be constituted by the entangled material agencies of social entrepreneurs, party-state and donors.

Barad distinguishes between interaction and her neologism of intra-action. In the theory of agential realism *interaction* takes place between clearly demarcated entities. In contrast, *intra-action* consists of association, connections and relations of phenomena that are not clearly demarcated from each other and which mutually influence each other. We contend that the gender and development organizations we have studied are entangled with foreign development aid donor organizations and party-state institutions in the sense that the three lack independent, self-contained existence in their joint involvement in bringing the knowledge and practices of NGOs into being.

Space does not allow us to go into empirical detail here. In a forthcoming book chapter we show how a foreign donor was intra-actively involved in creating two 'Chinese' gender and development NGOs – the Yunnan Reproductive Health Research Association and the Qianxi Women's Legal Aid Centre (Milwertz and Wang forthcoming). Based on a detailed analysis of the Yunnan Reproductive Health Research Association we have argued that the formal structure of the organization conceals important relations that are fundamental to the way the organization functions, that is, the way it is continuously brought into being (Milwertz and Wang 2011). Pivotal relations that form the basis for the workings of the organization remain unrecognized by the formal tri-part structuring into levels of decision-making, management and implementation. None of these levels recognize the involvement of foreign donors or domestic party-state. Their involvement is concealed by a specific understanding of how an NGO ideally ought to function. The imagination of an ideal of an independent Chinese NGO is, if not an illusion or a fiction, at least a specific perspective that requires that the involvement of both donor and party-state is made invisible.

One might quite legitimately argue that this invisibility of financial sponsors and collaborators – be they Euro-American development aid donors or other forms of funding agencies such as private companies and research foundations or domestic institutions – is the case in many places in the world in relation to many types of institutions and organizations. This is the hegemonic way of perceiving the separateness of organizations and institutions. It is, however, nothing but a specific theoretical cut. Many organizations and institutions are dependent on their sponsoring bodies and the conventional way of understanding these relations separates the sponsoring body from the recipient of funds. The point in this context of endeavoring to understand bottom-up organizing in China is that by applying this particular understanding of separate structural systems pivotal intra-active relationships between social entrepre-

neurs, donors and party-state are left unexamined and are insufficiently understood.

We suggest that pivotal relations are made invisible because they do not fit into the imagination of a certain Western normative organizational structure in which the type of bottom-up organizing which is defined as nongovernmental should ideally be autonomous and independent of both party-state institutions and foreign donors. If we, instead of looking at the structure of the working format of NGOs as they are represented in organization structure diagrams, look at what is going on in practice, then several relations that are of crucial importance to the functioning of the organizations come to light. It becomes evident that donor organizations and party-state institutions are involved in all stages of activity – decision making, management and implementation – not from the outside but from within. In other words, what is usually viewed as context or background elements are in this perspective in the situation itself. Party-state and donors are constitutive of the phenomenon of NGOs. By drawing on Barad's theory of agential realism we move beyond a discussion of what we can know of the more or less blurred interactions between social entrepreneurs, donors and party-state. On the contrary, with regard to the phenomenon of NGOs we contend that there is no inside, no outside – only intra-acting.

Notes

1. I (Cecilia Milwertz) dedicate this essay to Alexandra Kent and Dino Raymond Hansen. I began to read Karen Barad's work in 2009 during a one-month writing retreat at the Monastère de Saorge in Southern France. Dino had recommended a stay at the monastery when I told him how I was suffering from an acute inability to write. Each afternoon I would emerge from the day's work in my cell to go for walks in the mountains with Alix. She listened to, commented on and warmly encouraged my initial thoughts on how Karen Barad's theory could be used to understand NGOs in China. Without the support of Dino and Alix, the magical atmosphere of the monastery, its warm hosts and the company of the peculiar and fascinating residents of the other cells, I might still be stuck and Fengxian and I would not jointly have ventured further into the world of agential realism.
2. Parts of this essay have previously been published in the journal *Gender, Technology and Development* (Milwertz and Wang 2011).

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