



Gramsci's activists: How local civil society is shaped by the anti-corruption industry, political society and translocal encounters



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ABSTRACT

The rise of the international anti-corruption industry over the past two decades has led to questions about how this industry impacts local civil society organizations in developing countries. For some academics the rise of the anti-corruption industry has led to more meaningful local responses, for others it has helped reinforce apolitical and neoliberal-inspired solutions. This article suggests that these debates would benefit from more nuanced and multi-scalar analysis. Drawing on in depth interviews, media analysis, grey materials and academic and practitioner literature, this article focuses on a group of anti-corruption activists in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The article compares a group of activists called the Coalition to its more radical predecessors, a local non-governmental organization by the name of Melanesian Solidarity. It uses a Gramscian framework to argue that responses to corruption in PNG have not simply been shaped by the anti-corruption industry. Rather they have been shaped by: the incentives and capacity of political society, international discourse on corruption and the nature of 'translocal encounters'. These findings show that much of the academic literature on the anti-corruption industry has fallen into a 'transnational trap', by overemphasizing transnational linkages between organizations working to address corruption. Approaching the study of local anti-corruption movements with a focus on the complexity of scale, as this paper does, has important implications for theorizing responses to corruption in developing countries.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades concern about corruption has risen from the margins of academic enquiry to become one of the most researched topics across a number of disciplines. Debate ensues about what the concomitant rise of the anti-corruption industry means for local civil society responses to corruption. Some suggest that international support for local civil society organizations helps to address corruption more meaningfully (Bukovansky, 2006; Pearson, 2003; Pope, 2000; Richards, 2006). Others suggest that the rise of the anti-corruption industry has undermined meaningful local responses to corruption, and has drawn local actors into a global industry that favours apolitical and neoliberal policy responses (Brown & Cloke, 2011; de Sousa, Larmour, & Hindess, 2009; Hindess, 2005; Murphy, 2011). These academic examinations of the impacts of the anti-corruption industry are insightful. However, the industry has received scant attention from geographers (with some exceptions, see Brown & Cloke, 2004, 2005, 2011) despite, as this article will demonstrate, the debate on many issues that political geographers are usually concerned with, such as translocal encoun-

ters of civil society, manifestations of neoliberalism, state–society relations and (of course) corruption (Brown & Cloke, 2004, 2005; Jeffrey, 2000; Perera-Mubarak, 2012; Simon, 2009). It argues that much of the anti-corruption literature avoids a 'territorial trap' (a focus on relations at the national scale) but falls into a 'transnational trap', by overemphasizing transnational linkages between anti-corruption organizations and groups. Drawing on Gramscian theory, it shows how anti-corruption social movements can be shaped by complex and multi-scalar forces and relationships that are seldom recognized in this literature. In particular, it suggests that the way in which corruption is addressed by local civil society is shaped by the incentives provided by and capacity of political society; international discourse on corruption; and the nature of translocal encounters.

The article focuses on a group of anti-corruption activists in Papua New Guinea (PNG) referred to as the 'Coalition', who have been operating since 2007 and who grew out of a precursor radical civil society group, Melanesian Solidarity (MeSol). The author draws upon in-depth fieldwork carried out in Port Moresby (PNG's capital) during 2008 and 2009, as well as media reports and grey materials to examine the way the Coalition and MeSol responded to concerns about corruption.

The first section of the paper reflects upon the nature and importance of Gramscian approaches for understanding civil society's

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potential to resist or acquiesce to hegemony. This theory frames the second section which highlights how the rise of the anti-corruption industry has shaped civil and political societies across the globe. The third section examines the context of the study, focusing on corruption and civil society in PNG. The fourth section introduces MeSol and examines the way it responded to corruption in PNG. The fifth and sixth sections examine the Coalition's campaign against corruption in PNG and show how their approach differed from MeSol's. The article concludes by highlighting what the findings mean for academic analysis of responses to corruption in developing countries.

Gramscian civil society

Civil society is often depicted as a separate counterweight to the state, which functions as a check on state power (e.g. Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994). This framing has developed from Alex de Tocqueville's view of civil society as 'a predominantly autonomous arena of liberty incorporating an organizational culture that builds both political and economic democracy' (McIlwaine, 2007, p. 1256). This Tocquevillian perspective – sometimes called the 'associational school' (Mohan, 2002) – views civil society as a force that beneficially links the state and the individual, and generally categorizes civil society as separate from both the state and the market.

Challenging this perspective, geographers and others have turned to the writings of the 20th century Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, to better understand the nature of civil society. In Gramsci's view, the state is made up of political society (what many refer to as the 'state', including the army, police, legal system) and civil society (including media, church and trade unions). Gramsci's broad interpretation of the state is described in terms of class where the ruling class maintains its control of society through hegemony, persuading the population to accept capitalist values (Gramsci, 1999, p. 504). Gramsci considered civil society as a 'third sphere' consisting of a wide variety of organizations, operating between the state and the market (Gramsci, 1999), yet as Chandhoke (2001) notes this does not mean that civil society is autonomous from political society, rather political society plays a key role in shaping civil society. This article focuses on 'voluntary' civil society organizations that include groups and associations not a part of political society.

Gramsci argued that hegemony is always contested due to divisions between ruling and subject classes, and that compromise in the form of alliances between different groups is needed to ensure hegemonic rule. Concessions – rather than brute force – that account for the interests of those over which hegemony is exercised are crucial to maintaining rule (Gramsci, 1999, p. 373). Yet concessions mean that maintaining this rule is fraught. Hegemony is partial because citizens are shaped by the ruling class' control over civil society through using institutions to convince people that capitalism is natural. Gramsci also argued that ideology expands by transforming itself into 'common sense', an artificial construct that ultimately serves the purposes of the ruling class. However, citizens are also shaped by their lived experiences, which they can draw upon to reject these values. Gramsci argued that for resistance and revolution to be possible, intellectuals had to emerge within the subject classes to form a new 'historic bloc' – alliances between different groups to resist hegemonic capitalist rule.

Hegemony, albeit partial, has material consequences because it is crucial for developing the conditions for capital accumulation. Robinson (2005) highlights the historical impact of hegemonic arrangements (or 'historic blocs') between civil and political societies. He argues that the internalization of a neoliberal worldview enabled an acute global expansion of capital in the 1980s and 1990s.

Those drawing on Gramscian understandings of the state stress the fluidity of relations between political and civil societies, arguing that one cannot be understood without the other. In particular, they focus on the ways the political–civil society nexus shapes dis-

course and action. For example, Perera-Mubarak (2012) shows how politicians in post-tsunami Sri Lanka engaged with intermediaries from non-governmental organizations to corruptly redistribute aid funding. Similarly, Jeffrey (2000) highlights how rich farmers of the *Jat* caste in India perpetuated their economic and social advantages through placing relatives in the Indian police force. Simon (2009) has highlighted the way development actors have presented opportunities for political intermediaries to move fluidly between the market and civil and political societies. Focusing on the fluidity of relations between political and civil societies opens up important insights for understanding the way power is exercised across and between these spheres.

Gramsci's insights are reflected in academic analysis of the potential for civil society groups within developing countries to resist (hegemonic) neoliberal¹ capitalism. Much of the critical scholarship suggests that civil society responses to neoliberal hegemony, which is partial and spatially differentiated (Kingfisher & Maskovsky, 2008; Lewis, 2009), encompass acquiescence, resistance and compromise (Banks & Hulme, 2012; Escobar, 1984; Mitlin, Hickey, & Bebbington, 2007). Thus, 'civil society can act as a site of resistance, counter-hegemony and revolutionary praxis depending on the context' (McIlwaine, 2007, p. 1257) often at the same time and place.

While much of Gramsci's theorizing was bounded by the nation-state, Jessop's (2005) insightful analysis shows that Gramsci was also concerned with international forces. Gramsci believed that 'national states are not self-closed "power containers" but should be studied in terms of their complex interconnections with states and political forces on other scales' (Jessop, 2005, p. 425). Indeed, Gramsci noted that it is:

necessary to take into account the fact that international relations intertwine with these internal relations of nation-states, creating new, unique and historically concrete combinations. A particular ideology, for instance, born in a highly developed country, is disseminated in less developed countries, impinging on the local interplay of combinations. (Gramsci, 1999, pp. 406–407)

Gramsci had in mind transnational organizations of his time, such as the Catholic Church. However, more recent applications have focused on the relationships between local and transnational development actors. These transnational actors have become more powerful because as the state has been rolled back through neoliberal policy prescriptions, transnational actors have been called in to fill in the gaps (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; McIlwaine, 2007).

The rise of transnational civil society organizations – particularly NGOs – means that local civil society now includes international organizations that challenge the territorial power of nation-states. As Ferguson and Gupta (2002) note, civil society within developing countries comprises and is significantly shaped by local and international organizations. As a result, local grassroots organizations can now bypass political society and appeal directly to the transnational organizations for resources and solidarity. This trend has resulted in a call for greater analyses of the ways in which transnational organizations and coalitions shape territories of state power (Agnew, 2010; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002); this avoids what Agnew (2010) calls the 'territorial trap' – placing too much focus on the activity bounded within the nation-state.

Moving away from local-transnational binaries, geographers have highlighted the multi-scalar processes that frame conceptions of political (Akhter, 2015) and civil (e.g. Karriem, 2009; Staeheli, 1994; Steinberg, 1994) societies. Drawing on a Gramscian approaches, Karriem (2009) shows how the Brazilian Landless Movement successfully matured by territorializing into a national movement, while Akhter (2015) shows how Cold War hydropolitics of political society in Pakistan are embedded in multi-scalar flows of global political

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