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**One Sector or Many: Nonprofits in Brazil**

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The idea of private, independent, voluntary nonprofit organizations as components of a “sector” and as a field of academic interest in its own right has become plainly accepted in the United States by the 1990s. The nonprofit sector is composed of organizations that vary greatly in size, sources of funding, reliance on paid or voluntary staff, and field of activity, such as nationally organized civil rights organizations, small locally-organized membership associations to hospitals and universities, but there is a consensus among practitioners and scholars that these organizations share a set of common features of a distinct sector<sup>2</sup>. The construction of a sector identity borrows from the all-American values of self-reliance, philanthropy and a pragmatic community approach to problem solving as an alternative to government, which is usually viewed among citizens with a degree of distrust unequaled in rule-of-law democracies.

In other countries, the newly created academic discipline of nonprofit sector studies has faced greater challenges to establish itself: while most of the components of the nonprofit sector, as defined in the US, are present in all developed countries, as well as in most developing nations, the values and ideas that bond these components in a distinct sector are not found or combined to lend themselves for the legitimization of a not-for-profit sector in

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<sup>2</sup> The “structural/operational” definition proposed by Salamon and Anheier states that nonprofit organizations share the characteristics of being (1) private, (2) formal, (3) autonomous, (4) non profit distributing, and (5) of public benefit (Salamon, 1992) or voluntary (Salamon & Anheier 1992).

the US. Europeans, as well as Latin Americans, “shun nonprofit concepts, even as they develop nonprofit realities” (Levy, 1996).

The case of Brazil is illustrative of a developing nation whose attention has recently been brought to its own emerging sector: from environmental and political activists to the corporate sector, government officials, and the press, since 1992, the year of the Rio United Nations Earth Summit, everyone talks about increasing the role of private nonprofit organizations in nearly all fields of public interest, from ethics in business to witness protection programs. What these “private nonprofits” are named and labeled greatly varies: NGOs, or nongovernmental organizations, the third sector, civil society organizations, philanthropic organizations, social organizations. Nevertheless, Brazil is a country which has been facing difficulties in coping with this sector, both as a field of scholarly investigation as well as in practice. None of these labels seem to fit existing reality or the accepted ways to view it; both scholars and practitioners diverge on the definition and the limits and hardly accept a comprehensive label which includes all components of the American nonprofit sector.

This paper explores the reasons for the lack of identity, in Brazil, between organizations which, in the United States, are considered to part of a sector. Whether the components of the “sector” are drifting apart or being brought together, is an issue of interest for scholar in the consolidating the field of nonprofit studies as well as practitioners in advocacy and service providing organizations, government officials and society at large.

The American nonprofit sector cannot be understood simply as an array of organizations that usually deliver some type of charitable or public service or activity, incorporated under laws that provide tax-exempt status. These organizations are well embedded in a set of historically rooted values, traditions and norms that shaped its position in society as distinct from the market and the state. The late nineteenth century witnessed the creation of the ideology of voluntarism, a set of ideas and moral values which placed private charity as a superior alternative to state in coping with poverty and social afflictions (Hall,

1994, Salamon, 1996). This mythology blended the social darwinism best described by Andrew Carnegie's *Gospel of Wealth*<sup>3</sup> and the community approach to problem solving - through associations - so well described by an impressed Tocqueville. The resulting unique blend of individualism and sense of community, linking accumulation to charitable giving and voluntarism became the moral base for the emerging nonprofit sector. This highly successful conservative ideology, Salamon notes, was a powerful device in holding back the state and curb the development of a workers' movement in the United States.

In its present state, the American nonprofit sector is an extremely diverse set of organizations with a significantly different role than that of one hundred years ago, particularly in the relationship between these organizations and the state, but the mythology of voluntarism and philanthropy is still very present, as a clear evidence of its strength.

While the freedom of association and the charitable approach to social policy is not an American invention, in no other country have these values been elevated to such a central position as national "core values". A feeling of estrangement toward the American concept of a nonprofit sector is a common among foreign researchers and even practitioners within the field of non-governmental, nonprofit organizations. However, whatever the differences in historical development, cultural values and institutional outcomes, there is growing acceptance of the common set of concepts that are turning the nonprofit sector studies into a truly flourishing field internationally. While pointing that the concepts of philanthropy and a nonprofit sector are foreign to their traditions, researchers and practitioners from other nations appear to have settled for the basic idea and definition of what is becoming internationally known as the "third sector": neither market nor state, or private means and public ends. Parallel developments in the field of law, public administration, political science are resulting in a greater cross-national sector identity than before, reaching practitioners as well as researchers.

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<sup>3</sup> Carnegie writes: "*the best means of benefiting the community is to place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise*".

This is cannot be said not to be entirely true in Brazil, a country which boasts one of the largest number of associations and foundations among developing nations, the two most common legal categories of tax-exempt, non-for-profit, private corporations. Here, nevertheless, the struggle with definitions, the “terminological tangle” appears to be more intense than elsewhere. The debate on who to include within and what to call a sector that in the US is neatly labeled “nonprofit” hides a deeper questioning of this rising field of scholarly investigation. Does the theory not hold in Brazil? What is unique about this country, and how does it affect theory?

One look at the components of Brazil’s non-profit, non-government sector reveals a familiar picture: one sees a considerable number of traditional, large and powerful church originated organizations which provide charitable services of many kind; membership organizations, such as trade unions, business associations; cultural, sports and recreation clubs; large service providing organizations who usually charge fees for services, such as universities and hospitals; affluent family and corporate foundations; numerous grass-roots associations serving various purposes and groups; and a very visible and loud group of activist NGOs, or non-governmental organizations. The most recent estimate of the size of the formal nonprofit sector - the one on which data exist - is of approximately 200.000 organizations (Landim, 1993). Perhaps an equivalent number of unincorporated organizations may exist, for which data is not available. Although small, compared to the American nonprofit sector, Brazilian nonprofits account for 2% of total employment - at least 1 million employees. Brazil certainly has one of the most vibrant nonprofit sectors among the developing countries, organized in a pattern that does not appear altogether dissimilar from the American counterpart.

So how can the difficulties in adapting the theoretical framework of nonprofits be accounted for? The foreign origin of the terminology is a common argument for its rejection, but what is foreign about it? What aspect of it does not pertain to Brazil, and why?

The sort of organizations that would be classified as private nonprofits in the US greatly vary in legal and institutional status from country to country. Salamon and Anheier

(1992) show that what is a familiar nonprofit activity in the US is frequently part of the state or even the for-profit sector elsewhere, and the opposite may sometimes be true. Common examples are health and human services, education, insurance and farming. Furthermore, traditional citizen institutions, such as labor and business unions are often controlled or limited by governments a way to neutralize opposition or tap their support.

The label *nonprofit sector* which fairly suits the American reality, does not accurately define a distinct set of organizations cross-nationally. The American legal system clearly distinguishes what scholars identify as the nonprofit sector: these are tax-exempt entities who are organized for “public benefit”, as opposed to serving the interests of its own members<sup>4</sup>.

“Third sector”, a more vague and encompassing attempt to create a common label, faces a different challenge: in Brazil, an emerging capitalist economy, sociological traditions resist a description of society as being fundamentally divided in two sectors: the state and the market, therefore a new third sector stemming from the intersection of these is not the favorite representation. In fact, Brazilians, even within the “nonprofit community”, frequently do not know who are the first two sectors implicit in the three-sector model.

Suggesting that the institutional components of the “nonprofit sector” have matching elements within civil society is a statement in accordance to the view that nonprofits represent or are expressions of groups within society or “manifestations of community” (Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Understanding the tensions and cleavages within civil society in Brazil is central for explaining lack of common third-sector identity, for it can be expected a fragmented society would tend produce institutions sharing little common ground, ranging

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<sup>4</sup> Under the Internal Revenue Service, the American tax authority, these organizations are defined under Sections 501(c)3: “Corporations, community chests, funds, or foundations, organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, or educational purposes, or to foster national or international amateur sports competition, or for the prevention of cruelty to children or animals” and 501(c)4: “Civic leagues or organizations not organized for profit but operated exclusively for the promotion of social welfare, (...) educational or recreational purposes”.

from anti-system paramilitary groups in nations where governments face crises of legitimacy to groups organized on the basis of regional, ethnic, religious, professional, social class or gender differences with varying degree of tolerance to other groups and government.

The image of a “melting pot” of cultures has long been used by specialists on Brazil to describe the diversity of the country and the unique resulting blend. A myth of “racial democracy”, combining the three peoples that built the nation - European, African and Indian -, and the cordial nature of the Brazilian have been widely ventilated. Nevertheless, Brazil has had to face internal tensions reflecting latent conflicts between segments of what is, in fact, a polarized society.

Despite the celebrated “pacif nature” of the Brazilian citizen, one of the other common portrayals of the country is of a land of contrasts: in this continental country, by no means a poor one, levels of accumulation of wealth and disparity between the richest and the poorest are unequaled anywhere on the globe; a likewise situation is seen in the distribution of land property. Instead of a land of harmonious, integrated diversity, the country is fragmented between a wealthy Southeast and South and poor Northeast and North regions; wealthy a wealthy predominantly white elite and impoverished majority of black mixed background. The Indians people were left behind in the myth, for they have been all but eliminated since colonial times. While social mobility appears not to be as clearly related to ethnic or racial issues as is in other societies, access of the poor to economic prosperity, public services and political representation is severely limited.

Not only the terminology utilized to name nonprofits carries problems, but it can be pointed that the organizations which would fall into this sector are frequently divided among lines that reflect different origins and social cleavages. Representing different and competing segments of society, there is little interest in creating a common sector identity. A look at the Brazilian third sector can reveal how this is so.

The term non-governmental organization is most frequently used, in Brazil, as a synonym of nonprofit. It seems more than coincidental that, while the American third sector

has defined itself in relation to the market - as the label nonprofit suggests - this emerging sector in Brazil, whether in collaboration with or in opposition to government, has defined itself in relation to the state - non-governmental - claiming a public interest dimension. As this is the most frequently used term by multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and United Nations development and relief programs, who channel fund to these organizations, an increasing number of private nonprofits are adopting this name. However, Salamon & Anheier (1997) argue that the term NGO is used in an elastic and selective way to identify who is and who is not morally or ideologically “eligible” to this category, and normally exclude traditional organizations which share the defined characteristics of the third sector. The non-governmental organizations or NGOs are what is usually thought of as the main component of the nonprofit sector in developing countries, but can be more closely characterized as typically issue-oriented advocacy associations who focus primarily on environmental and social development, and are likely to be funded by international government agencies and foundations. A large portion of the most visible NGOs had its origin in the 1970s. In the midst of a 20-year period of authoritarian military rule (1964-1984) this was one of the only tolerated forms of opposition, when thousands of progressive, socialist or simply oppositionist leaders were silenced by exile, torture and murder. With the reestablishment of democracy, these organizations intensified their presence; they are very successful in mobilizing public opinion and influencing the policy process on the sidelines of the mainstream political institutions. The ties to the political left and close cooperation with workers and peasants movements are maintained by the many of the organizations which adopt the NGO label.

As a dominantly Roman Catholic nation, this church has played an important role in establishing a network of private nonprofit organizations: the churches, parishes and dioceses themselves, but also incredible mosaic of organizations that flourish within what is commonly thought as a monolithic structure: religious orders, the bishops conference and a very large number of community centers and charitable institutions providing care for material needs as well as the soul. Along with the large charities, thousands of small, grass-roots “pastorals”

and “base” associations have risen (Landim, 1993). Two groups with opposing views have contended within the Catholic Church: conservatives, supported by the Vatican hierarchy, and a large number of progressive priests and bishops who have over the last 30 years established the vast network of local popular associations which are the matrix out of which even the secular grass-roots movement has shaped. The relationship between churches: Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, traditional African religions and others is, nevertheless, frequently overlooked by academic research or disregarded as a relevant element in the shaping of the nonprofit sector, a common bias also pointed in the American research community by scholars such as Peter Dobkin Hall.

Labor unions and business associations are organized nationwide in a system inspired in the Italian corporatist model, in which organized interests are represented as established by government. These powerful organizations are major players in the political and economic scene; they are assigned territorial jurisdictions and frequently have compulsory membership for professionals within an industry or trade. This model remains from a flirt with fascism in the 1930s, as an attempt of government to coopt and control social forces. Now, fairly free from government strings, this sector can still be described as “quasi-governmental”, for among other things it is predominantly funded by federal taxes. Over the years, new labor movements have attempted to reestablish independent unions, as this institutional arrangement is still seen as a means of breaking and taming working-class organization.

Private nonprofit organizations are flourishing in several new fields of public services. Higher education is a typical example. As a response to a rapidly increasing demand for college education and an inability of the state to provide it - in a country where free education is a constitutional right - a number of private organizations are being created. These are nonprofit, by law, although they operate as much in the same way as a businesses. Their profits provide their directors enviable standards of wealth and they are subject to little government control. The alleged distortion of the nonprofit status, with the commercialization and “for-profitization” of this field is currently under investigation and public debate and, as a result, Brazil is likely to create a unique legal category of for-profit, not tax-exempt higher

education institutions in the near future, coexisting with public and private nonprofit universities.

In the field of research, a number of private independent organizations has been created as an alternative to a failing public university system, originally due to the unsupportive and hostile environment for social science research during military governments. Upon the reestablishment of civilian rule, these research centers have not declined but rather taken a more preeminent role due to their ability to draw together the best talents, obtain resources and operate more flexibly than public universities (Levy, 1996).

Last but not least, as a result of a growing economy, the corporate sector is more recently taking a significant role. Philanthropic giving and corporate foundations are becoming increasingly common, especially in the major cities of the Southeast. Although minute compared to the US foundations, corporate grant-making foundations are growing as substitutes to the decreasing amount of foreign aid available. Operating foundations of Brazilian-owned and multinational corporations run significant social projects that propose to be demonstrations of how programs can be well run with a leaner state and a more responsive business sector.

As can be reasoned out from above, the components of the Brazilian third sector have differences far greater than the size of their budgets or legal status. They vary in degree of independence from government, source of income and membership, but even most importantly, on the values and beliefs reflected in their mission. Organizations of national status vary greatly in their vision for the Brazilian society, their ideology. Although, currently, there are no significant “anti-system” groups in operation, such as militias or guerrillas, organizations vary in purpose from, for example, organizing peasants to occupy private land for agrarian reform purposes to those who arm landowners to resist attempts of the former. Many organizations have clear stands on political and ideological issues and the distinction which still explains best the sides organizations take is “left” and “right”. Collaboration among many of these components - uniting labor, business and government and others - does

not commonly pass the stage of rhetoric, while frequently the ideological debate does not emphasize collaboration at all.

While the business associations, corporate and family foundations have taken the “third sector” label to their hearts, the organizations most commonly on the political left - NGOs, unions, the progressive church, and social movements have not come to terms with the classical liberal tradition of associativism used to conceptualize this field, used frequently in opposition to the socialist and social-democrat alternative. The organized NGO sector vigorously opposes the third sector concept, dismissing it as an opportunity to limit the rights of citizens to be served by government. As the president of the National Association of NGOs has said: “*We do not recognize ourselves as part of the third sector. We do not believe this theoretical model contemplates who we are and what we do*”<sup>5</sup>

The search for an identity between these diverse organizations in Brazil is not new. The adoption of the NGO “label” is an attempt which dates from the late 80s and early 90s among organizations that did not previously consider themselves similar or part of any “sector” (Landim, 1988). The Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, in 1992 solidified this identity while bringing to the general public for the first time the existence of a set of organizations which had already established themselves as major political players. Nevertheless, the search for a definition for NGO reaches an “I know it when I see it” tautology, including or excludes private nonprofit organizations by criteria that cannot be precisely defined. Thus, an NGO is anything that calls itself and is accepted as such. NGOs and the progressist, left-wing sector of the labor organizations and the Church identified themselves as part of the “social movements”: organized civil society aimed at fighting for an oppressed working class. Empowering citizens, developing consciousness were activities pursued not as goals in themselves but to create the conditions for social change. Involvement with foreign aid organizations and international agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations

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<sup>5</sup> “Entrevista com Silvio Caccia Bava - Presidente da ABONG - Associação Brasileira de Organizações Não Governamentais”, obtained 4/12/98 at <http://cogea.pucsp.br/~sircr/utlid/trabalha/polsoc/abong.html>.

programs gradually made this set of organizations converge toward the generic label used to describe non-governmental counterparts of these agencies, which have primarily worked with national governments.

The term “NGO” is clearly a conceptual compromise. In Brazil and elsewhere NGO is frequently used as synonym of “nonprofit”, but it excludes the more traditional civil society service providing organizations and charities, and official instruments of representation, like unions. Some more radical and politically active organizations refuse the NGO identity on the grounds that the name stands for an urban bourgeois phenomenon lacking popular penetration and legitimacy. Despite the more recent shift of NGOs to a more flexible and collaborative orientation, their recent history reminds them to view government with suspicion, distrust the corporate sector and traditional philanthropic institutions. In fact, philanthropy and charity are bad words among NGOs.

This story of diversity runs on very strong political and ideological divergence: representing different segments of society, there is little interest in creating a common sector identity with other nonprofits, particularly in the opposite political spectrum. Attempting to do so is commonly despised by the politically active labor and NGOs movement.

With this backdrop, it is easier to understand the difficulty to handle and translate into Brazilian reality concepts that are even more encompassing than NGO, such as “nonprofit” or “third sector, uniting antagonistic players, such as the corporate world, government-controlled organizations and workers movements, church-based organizations, trade unions, NGOs and sports clubs. Almost everyone feels that they may be losing something by letting the others in, mainly the politically active NGOs that fear diluting their identity in a politically neutral category.

“Civil society organization” is an increasingly popular designation for the whole set of nonprofit organizations. Interestingly, it is frequently defined in the same terms as third, voluntary or nonprofit sector, but does not raise immediate opposition, as those terms do. The expression civil society borrows from the highly positive idea of citizenship, the diversity

of “society” instead of a unifying “sector”. Civil society obtains cross-ideological legitimacy acceptance, for its roots in Smith, Hegel and Gramsci. While third sector results from the metamorphosis of a state and market society, civil society is society itself, and the source of the state and all institutions. Again the term is also imprecise, since everything outside the state, whether for or nonprofit is part of “civil society”. Regardless of this the term civil society organizations is being increasingly accepted and used for to signify organizations that are not part of the state and are not commercial, for profit, enterprise.

It is early to see if the idea of a new sector will be fully consolidated in Brazil and what will be the term used to describe it.

Robert Putnam’s frequently cited *Making Democracy Work* spells out the principles of what is known as the “social capital theory”. According to this, the quality of the political institutions of a region are heavily influenced by the long-term historical patterns of citizen participation and decision-making. Particularly, democratic vocation can be accounted for by the “social capital” a society builds. When citizens rely on each other and on horizontal networks and patterns of cooperation rather than hierarchical coercion by leaders such as monarchs or a landed aristocracy, the odds of democracy are better.

Brazil, as a New World nation, shares a mixed heritage of cultural and political traditions in which, the autocratic and elitist character seem to have prevailed. The social capital theory is useful to explain the fragility of the attempts of consolidating democracy in this country, but the usefulness of this explanation it is yet to be fully seen. Is the social capital theory two-way model? That is, if a democratic society can be explained by its history of associative and cooperative traditions, will the creation of new associative-type organizations necessarily build social capital? Could this increase in citizen participation lead to other outcomes besides consolidating democracy, such as unleashing tensions and pulling society and already fragmented society apart? At any rate, will pulling out government from different fields in hope that society will fill in build social capital in the same way that associations of

individual to provide previously nonexistent goods has in the past? These contemplations are highly relevant in a time where it sometimes appears that the major champions of the nonprofit sector are government, corporations and international agencies, with disappointing grass-root support.

The expected mixed results of increased nonprofit organization involvement in the policy process are observed: NGO-led national campaigns against poverty and hunger, successful and popular city-improvement civic campaigns, corporations banning child labor and sponsoring education projects are positive examples of the new vitality of the sector. Local government creation and control of nonprofit organizations to obtain resources, unresponsiveness and lack of transparency of public-funded NGOs, inequitable distribution of public services, corruption, an usage of the NGO format to reinforce traditional political patronage and spoils are the dark side.

The estrangement caused by the adoption of concepts developed in different historical settings, such as the US's nonprofit sector can be, therefore, traced to different patterns of development of civil society and its institutions: although there is clearly a nonprofit sector in the way it is defined in the U.S., one sees many sectors in Brazil instead of one. At any rate, the renewed role of these organizations and the attempt to place them in a common sector is likely to have important, yet unpredictable, consequences: whether the strengthening of civil society and the creation of social capital, the intensification of social tensions and antagonisms or even the political stalemate and legitimization of long-standing political elites. In the most optimistic scenario, nonprofit organizations may be playing an important role in the reconciliation of Brazilian society with itself, and the healing of wounds which have long fragmented this society may strengthen and consolidate a genuine "third sector".

Researchers and scholars of fields related to the third sector find themselves in the midst of a battle to name and place the limits of the sector, framing this new field of study. This includes social movement, nonprofit sector and “civil society” scholars, coming from fields such as political science, sociology, social work, public policy and management. This apparently sterile debate over names of things is still likely to consume endless time and ink. The divisiveness among components of the sector itself has necessary implications for the field of research, for the high permeability between research and practice: it is not infrequent for research to be conducted and funded by nonprofit organizations themselves and for researcher to have a background in social activism. Where the research community will choose to stand is also likely to influence strongly the organizations themselves, including the availability of information, funding and services such as training programs. The general public’s perception, as well as that of government officials is likely to be influenced by the direction theory and empirical research leads.

The American nonprofit sector, despite the centuries-old tradition of several organizations, is a fairly recent construct, which has derived much of its legitimacy by the ability of scholars to show large aggregate figures, such as the total expenditures, employment and services performed. An impressive, multi-billion dollar sector has been presented, but frequently at the expense of the important internal differences. The values of community, charity and philanthropy have been attached to the sector in a somewhat naïve or self-interested fashion. For the ultimate recognition of the existence of a three-sector society, research has yet to address the internal differences. In Brazil, as well as other developing countries where the field of nonprofit or third sector studies is in its infancy, and political differences more acute, these issues have yet to be addressed.

Thus, the role of the third sector research community is not a lesser one in shaping the role of organized civil society in relationship to the market and the state. While the concept of third sector is likely to gain acceptance in Brazil, as it has internationally, researchers must recognize, and not underestimate - as is frequently done -, the internal diversity, divisiveness and even antagonism between its components.



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