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Mediating Dilemmas: Local NGOs and Rural Development in Neoliberal Mexico

Analysis of the role of NGOs as mediators of change may yield important theoretical insights into the processes by which neoliberalizing projects become embedded in and consequently transformed by specific settings. In recent decades, NGOs have played an important role in mediating intertwined and often contradictory processes of political and economic liberalization in countries around the globe. However, changes to the political context in which NGOs work have altered the nature of the interventions these groups make. This article examines how members of a Mexican NGO community centered in the provincial city of Tulancingo, Hidalgo, rework cultural idioms of mediation to position themselves as legitimate intermediaries linking rural cooperatives, state officials, international donors, and global activist networks. Their strategies for confronting their own entrapment in processes of structural reform illuminate the constraints faced by Southern activists in negotiating possibilities for social change after the Washington Consensus. They also underline the importance of renewed attention to the role of intermediaries in enabling and enacting structural change. [Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); neoliberalism; intermediary; Mexico; development]

And thus it is necessary to begin again, and again, in the middle of things.
[Anna Tsing 2005: 2]

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have become key mediators of political, economic, and social change in the post-Washington Consensus era. While development experts have lauded NGOs as efficient conduits for aid, and pointed to the NGO “boom” as an indicator of democratizing civil societies, anthropologists have focused on the myriad ways NGOs help to remake forms of social organization and government. Analysis of the role of NGOs as mediators of change may yield important theoretical insights into the processes by which neoliberalizing projects become embedded in and consequently transformed by specific settings. Earlier anthropological theories of mediation assumed a nation-state frame, seeking to explain how local communities were incorporated into postcolonial nation-building projects via the work of cultural intermediaries. Although neoliberal ideologies have advocated the elimination of intermediaries in order to “free” individuals to interact in the marketplace, in practice neoliberalizing projects have relied upon the cultural knowledge and practices of a variety of actors to construct and consolidate new modes of regulation in specific settings (Harvey 2005; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Tsing 2005). In Latin America and elsewhere, NGOs have increasingly been called upon to fill in for the...
downsizing of social welfare and rural development programs, as well as to facilitate
decentralized forms of governance. This article examines how members of a Mexican
NGO community centered in the provincial city of Tulancingo, Hidalgo, rework cul-
tural idioms of mediation to position themselves as legitimate intermediaries linking
rural cooperatives, state officials, international donors, and global activist networks.

This account is based on a larger ethnographic project that investigated the role of
rural development NGOs in producing neoliberal democracy in Mexico. As the first
developing country to default on its external debt, in the 1980s Mexico became a
paragon of orthodox structural adjustment and a regional leader in free trade. During
this long “transition,” NGOs have played a crucial role as advocates for political
reform, “anchoring Mexican democracy in the international community” (Castañeda
2002) by forging transnational issues networks with civil society groups around the
globe. Both academics and development professionals have accorded an important
role to NGOs as “new” actors helping to remake the relationships between state and
society in ways that produce new forms of citizenship distinct from the corporatism
and clientelism characteristic of earlier eras. However, upon closer inspection, it
becomes clear that the ways in which rural development NGOs operate—indeed, the
role they attempt to create for themselves as existing somehow “in between” state,
society, and market—is in fact closely tied to earlier historical forms of mediation.
Examining this complex relationship to past cultural forms helps us to understand
NGO workers’ sense of being entrapped by changes they themselves helped to create.
Moreover, it helps us to ground our inquiry into the novel role played by NGOs in
processes of globalization more firmly within a discussion of older anthropological
insights into the cultural dynamics of large-scale structural change.

My research focused on how a group of provincial intellectuals from the Tulancingo
area of Hidalgo, Mexico, sought to cultivate political and economic change in partic-
ularly inhospitable terrain over the course of three decades by founding and working
in NGOs. The state of Hidalgo is widely acknowledged as one of the most historically
conservative, impoverished, and overlooked states in the republic (Gutierrez Mejia
1990). I first visited Tulancingo in 1996 and undertook preliminary research visits
to local development project sites in 1998 and 2000. The primary participant obser-
vation and interviews for the project were completed in Tulancingo and surrounding
rural areas from August 2002-August 2003, with brief follow-up visits in 2004, 2005,
and 2006. During my time in the field, I shared a house in Tulancingo with a group
of workers from one local NGO. I conducted intensive participant observation in the
organization’s main office and in three of its major rural project sites. I also conducted
site visits and interviews with members of five other Tulancingo-based NGOs; at-
tended NGO conferences and workshops in Tulancingo, Puebla, and Mexico City;
and interviewed Mexico City-based civil society advocates.

Tulancingo’s NGO community materialized from a series of civic improvement
projects undertaken in the late 1960s by the sons of several prominent area families.
This small group of professionals and businessmen was influenced both by stu-
dent movements in the capital and by a branch of the liberation theology movement
centered on Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo of Cuernavaca. The first major organization
to emerge from their efforts was Desarrollo Rural de Hidalgo (DERHGO), a rural development organization dedicated to organizing and capitalizing agricultural cooperatives in nearby peasant communities. By 2002, there were ten similar independent NGOs in the Tulancingo region. Since the late 1960s, this group has succeeded in producing important social changes in the Tulancingo region, as well as contributing to national democratization efforts. However, in the years following the historic 2000 elections, Tulancingo NGOs have come to face a crucial dilemma. The rural development gains they made in the 1980s have largely been reversed by two and a half decades in which land privatization, government funding cutbacks, and the dumping of US maize and powdered milk onto the Mexican market have devastated small-scale agriculture and local food processing industries. These circumstances pose new challenges for rural development NGOs.

In order to contextualize the mediating dilemmas NGOs face, I begin by discussing the classical anthropological literature on mediation. This earlier work attempted to theorize the modes and models of mediation that enabled large-scale structural change but was ultimately limited by a narrow focus on nation-state politics and a static spatial imaginary. Ironically, the very dynamics of globalization that revealed the limitations of these earlier models, such as transnational issues networks and economic integration policies, also depend on the cultural work of intermediaries. Over the last several decades, NGOs have emerged as important actors within these new global structures. The next section demonstrates how the emergence of the NGO sector in Mexico was both a response to and a catalyst for such changes. In particular, I examine how the role played by NGOs in the Mexican transition to multiparty democracy, and their proliferating links to government agencies and international donors after the 2000 elections, yielded unexpected changes. The contradictory outcome of the Mexican transition confronted these NGOs with a crucial dilemma. In order to survive in a new funding climate, they were pressured to act in ways that risked damaging their local legitimacy. Their strategies for confronting this dilemma were rooted in longstanding Mexican cultural modes of mediation, which I analyze in the following section. Finally, I conclude by discussing how the dilemmas faced by Tulancingo NGOs and their strategies for positioning themselves as legitimate mediators in processes of structural change reveal the importance of intermediaries to the instantiation of neoliberalizing projects.

**Anthropological Theories of Mediation**

During the post-World War II “community studies” boom, anthropologists studied culture brokers and other intermediaries as an entry point into the power-laden processes through which local communities became linked into postcolonial nation building projects (Press 1969; Wolf 2001; Geertz 1960). Eschewing prior models that represented the modern nation-state as an aggregate of hermetically sealed local communities, Wolf proposed a number of “supplementary sets” that enabled the functioning of formal institutions in complex societies by bridging gaps among social groups and between institutional levels (2001:182). Patron-client relations, for example, constituted a type of “instrumental friendship” encountered where “the formal institutional structure of society is weak and unable to deliver a sufficiently
steady supply of goods and services, especially to the terminal levels of the social order” (Wolf 2001:180). According to Wolf (2004), new groups of intermediaries tend to emerge during processes of recentralization of power following major upheavals. Studying them would yield insight into the configuration of particular power structures: “complex societies in the modern world differ less in the formal organization of their economic or legal or political systems than in the character of their supplementary interpersonal sets . . . [which] make possible the functioning of the great institutions ” (Wolf 2004:19). In post-Revolutionary Mexico, the pursuit of power by groups and individuals eventually came to be mediated through the state party, the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI). According to de la Peña, post-Revolutionary Mexican society was organized as

a pyramid of patron-client relationships which permit concentration of power at the top. The complexity of this fabric determined a dual phenomenon: individual maneuvering is quite possible because it is impossible to achieve structural change . . . A man can use his relationships of trust to obtain individual power as long as such relationships do not become horizontal alliances which lead to the emergence of an independent faction, and as long as his political network includes external patrons. [1981:246–247]

This hierarchical and holistic structure enabled collective demands to be manipulated or silenced in exchange for personal favors.

Fox (1994) notes that the number of studies on the role of intermediaries in national politics diminished significantly after the 1970s, and that such studies were largely absent from the later literature on regime change and democratization. Although the burgeoning NGO sector has received a great deal of attention from scholars in regard to its potential role in democratic transformations, comparatively little emphasis has been placed upon investigating how NGOs might be related to older organizational forms in the societies in which they have taken hold. Reina, Servin, and Tutino (2007) locate Mexico’s “democratic transition” within a repeating cycle of fin de siècle crises that began in the 17th century. Each of these crises seems to have erupted when an “economic boom combined with social dislocations and calls for political change” (Reina et al. 2007:1). In each case, programs of political and economic liberalization failed to keep pace with one another, leading to a breakdown in mediation between state and society. The authors assert that the basic structures of Mexican mediation originated during the colonial era, when New Spain separated Spanish and indigenous subjects and organized both into corporate institutions mediated by the formal institutions of the colonial regime. The first crisis of this model came with the Bourbon Reforms, which sought to recentralize administrative authority in order to extract greater resources from and exercise tighter control over the New World colonies (Reina et al. 2007:5). Following Napoleon’s victory in 1808, two competing movements emerged among Spaniards in both the Old and New Worlds. While one advocated a revival of earlier corporatist models, the other sought a newer liberal model of “state power sanctioned by popular representation grounded in individual rights” (Reina et al. 2007:6). The conflicts between these opposing movements (and
the versions of liberalism and corporatism that evolved from them) would shape the outcomes of future Mexican fin de siecle crises.

Mexico faced a new set of crises as the 20th century drew to a close, in which older forms of mediation between the state and society would break down and new intermediaries like NGOs would emerge. However, the precise nature of these new actors’ intervention was not immediately clear. Western theories of civil society tend to presume a system in which individual rights-based liberalism is well institutionalized. Those conditions were not evident in the Mexican case of the 1980s and 1990’s (Olvera 1999b). Like many civil society theorists, Fox framed the problem of political change in Mexico as a transition from a political system based on authoritarian clientelism to one based on citizenship, where negotiations or bargaining between state and citizens over material benefits is not predicated on forfeiture of their associational autonomy, or “the right to articulate their interests autonomously” (1994:153). Notably, the presence of NGOs was viewed as an indication of the strength and autonomy of civil society in overcoming corporatism and forging new forms of political collectivity (Olvera 1999a; Verduzco et al. 2002). However, the erosion of established patterns of political deference can lead as easily to the use of force as it may to democratic pluralism (Fox 1994). As Olvera (1999b) points out, Mexican NGOs and social movements have always coexisted alongside enduring patterns of clientelism and corporatism. Moreover, de la Peña (2007) argues that, despite neoliberal ideologies and their appeal to universal rights, social movements and NGOs that pushed for democratization in Mexico have not promoted a vision of individuated political rights. Although civil society is often thought of as based in 19th-century liberal notions of individual civil and political rights, this new age of Mexican politics does not simply return us to that earlier model. “This struggle to broaden human rights is tied to a new definition of citizenship—not a given, but a goal to achieve, a constructive process that demands the constant participation of dynamic and heterogeneous social sectors” (de la Peña 2007:307). The concept of citizenship as a participatory process implies both the emergence of new collectivities and a change in modes of mediation.

The complexity of the Mexican case highlights the need for ethnographic accounts of “actually existing neoliberalisms” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:349). Such ethnographies must address not only ideologies of reform or the reactions they provoke but also “the path-dependent, contextually specific interactions between inherited regulatory landscapes and emergent neoliberal, market-oriented restructuring projects” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:349). Analyzing the intermediary role NGOs play in these processes requires rethinking the two-dimensional topography that animated classic models of mediation (Gupta and Ferguson 2002; de Vries 2002). Indeed, the spatial imaginary deployed by Wolf and his contemporaries was predicated upon the state’s metaphorical “vertical encompassment” of society, which fails to attend to the social and imaginative processes through which state verticality is made effective and authoritative” (Gupta and Ferguson 2002:983). Further, Lomnitz (2001) points out that the centers and peripheries bridged by Mexican intermediaries are relative and mutually dependent rather than fixed. Ergo, the ethnographer’s task is to analyze how intermediaries arise to represent “authentic” local collectivities in the national
space via specific cultural idioms and in fulfillment of particular values. De la Peña (1981) calls attention to the situational nature of such collectivities and their constitution in relation to “external” forces. In his view, local “communities” represented by intermediaries (be they political bosses or NGOs) may be more akin to political domains than they are to durable, internally coherent groups. Acting as an intermediary, then, necessarily entails constructing (or reconstructing) a collectivity to represent.

In place of the classic schema that represented the state as composed of stacked levels (sometimes linked via the work of intermediaries), Gupta and Ferguson propose the concept of “transnational governmentality” (2002:990) to capture how new nonstate actors like NGOs are implicated in neoliberal modalities of government. NGOs are simultaneously local and transnational, and their forms of intervention into the lives of local populations allow other transnational actors to circumvent states to enact their own programs of change. NGOs themselves may appeal to transnational ideals and networks to challenge state strategies of rule (Fischer 1997). In the process, however, NGOs have become increasingly marketized through techniques of government that devolve both the risks and responsibilities of development onto the organizations, which are “empowered” to discipline themselves (Gupta and Ferguson 2002:989). In turn, NGOs must use these same logics in evaluating, creating, and administrating projects. This affects how they relate to project participants as well as to other members of the local NGO community (Elyachar 2002; Leve and Karim 2001; Fisher 1997).

During the waning years of the corporatist political system that informed Wolf’s classic theory of the culture broker, Mexican NGOs challenged the state-oriented system of mediation by appealing to ideals of universal human rights and leveraging connections to transnational issues networks. According to anthropologist Anna Tsing, universalist aspirations, like those embodied by appeals to universal human rights, “can only be charged and enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters” between disparate and unequal groups, encounters which may produce unanticipated “new arrangements of culture and power” (2005:1,5). The practical encounters through which Mexican NGOs succeeded in embedding these universalist ideals into the political discourse have, however, yielded some unexpected results. In recent years, NGOs have found themselves repositioned by political reforms aimed at institutionalizing multiparty democracy. No longer easily categorized as opposition activists, they are struggling to redefine their role as legitimate intermediaries. Moreover, traditional arenas of mediation, like state development agencies, have been transformed as neoliberal reforms—which were aimed at decentralizing government-diffused political power and development resources to multiple centers (Rodriguez 1997).

Whereas the role of the intermediary in classical theory was to act as a buffer, translating between social groups and administrative levels, this new multipolar configuration presents a novel set of challenges for NGOs. Unlike political intermediaries under the corporatist state, NGOs do not hold a monopoly on the flow of resources from elsewhere into their local project sites. Sources of material support are not at all secure. In fact, many Tulancingo NGOs compete with one another for access to
funding sources. In order to survive, they must aggressively market themselves to donors, seek out advantageous public-private partnerships, and strategically manage their investments in local project sites. While this entrepreneurial behavior is viewed favorably by foreign donors, it may be interpreted in an entirely different light in the rural villages where such development programs are carried out. Hence, NGOs do not fit in smoothly “between” state and society, but rather they must negotiate an uneasy set of connections and constraints. Some of these are brought about by the structures to which NGOs are articulated as supplementary sets, but others derive from the systems of public symbols through which their actions are constructed and interpreted.

Caught in the Middle: NGOs in the Mexican Transition

Most histories of the emergence and proliferation of NGOs in Mexico locate the beginnings of the movement in the aftermath of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, when government troops deliberately fired into a crowd of student protesters before the opening of the Olympic Games. While independent unions and student movements had been active for some time prior to this event, the 1968 massacre marked a very public loss of legitimacy on the part of the Mexican state. This was soon to be followed by a series of external blows to the PRI’s monopoly on power, including a debt crisis that reduced the capacity of the corporatist apparatus to contain discontent through patronage, population growth leading to land invasions throughout the countryside, and a growing liberation theology movement that encouraged Catholics to question authoritarian hierarchies. De la Pena describes the NGOs that emerged during this period as

non-profit organizations that pursue goals of social and community service and are not linked to unions or interest groups. . . . NGOs are voluntary associations made up of mostly young, university-educated men and women who dedicate anywhere from a few years to their whole lives to service work for reasons ranging from religious convictions, to humanitarian visions, to beliefs in nonparty politics. Usually these volunteers do not become leaders of popular organizations, but they help as advisors and are sometimes key players in the process of consolidation. [2007:323]

Many NGOs that emerged during the 1970s, like Tulancingo’s DERHGO, developed relationships with the Christian Base Communities, which had emerged from the liberation theology movement. These groups, modeled on earlier experimental communities in Brazil, were organized by priests and lay leaders in working-class and poor urban parishes of progressive dioceses, like the one headed by Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo of Queretaro. The groups emphasized horizontal organization and participation, using “the concept of conscientization—personal consciousness based on a reflection on one’s experience—taken from the work of the Brazilian Paolo Freire” (de la Pena 2007:325). The loss of legitimacy by authoritarian elites provided an opening in which social movements and NGOs began to assert rights to associational autonomy, beginning an iterative cycle of negotiations with authoritarian
power-holders and reformist or technocratic state managers (Fox 1994:156). In DERHGO’s case, the organization was initially allowed to carry out select development projects that were seen by officials in the national and state governments to be in their own interests, as such projects were aimed at ameliorating the rural poverty that had led to violent land invasions in other regions of Hidalgo. Hence, the political and social role Tulancingo development NGOs have constructed for themselves over the last three decades has been profoundly shaped by their ongoing negotiations with political elites and state agencies over the extent of their organizational autonomy and their status as agents of social change.

The Programa de Inversiones Para el Desarrollo Rural [Program of Investment for Rural Development] (PIDER), in which DERHGO was a participant, was typical of the sort of semiclientelism that characterized the relationships between state agencies and rural development organizations in the 1970s. PIDER, funded in part by World Bank, aimed to preserve the social peace in regions of growing tension by funding infrastructure and farm credit projects involving community participation (Fox 1994:162–163). Local organizations like DERHGO organized the cooperatives and administrated the projects, incorporating their own goals and methods along the way. DERHGO’s founders were greatly influenced by the liberation theology movement, but their ability to carry out their goals related to conscientización in rural project sites was limited both by their affiliation with the Mexican Foundation for Rural Development (FMDR), which was backed by a coalition of wealthy Catholic businessmen, and by pressure from political caciques (bosses) affiliated with the PRI.

The classical political bargain required official incorporation of social groups under state tutelage in exchange for access to social programs. Mass protest that was strictly “social” was sometimes tolerated, but if it was perceived as “political” (that is, challenging the hegemony of the ruling party) the usual mix of partial concessions with repression shifted toward the latter. Movements were more likely to be labeled as political is they expressed their autonomy by publicly rejecting official subordination. [Fox 1994:159–160]

The ability of NGOs to negotiate with the state on behalf of particular groups, like poor farmers, was not the result of a unified state strategy (as the earlier pyramid of brokers employed by the PRI had been) but came about as a result of the reduction of authoritarian capacity and disagreements within the political class between hardliners and reformists. The distinction the PRI made between “political” and “social” organizing and protest had a lasting effect on the strategy of NGOs from this point onward, shaping the environment in which Tulancingo NGOs operated, thereby influencing the way they configure their role as intermediaries.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, DERHGO and the FMDR partnered with the national government, Hidalgan state agencies, and international aid agencies to deliver development projects to impoverished rural areas in the Tulancingo River Valley. However, a rift emerged between FMDR’s national directorate and DERHGO during this era, as FMDR began to accuse DERHGO of drifting toward “political” rather than “social” aims. DERHGO’s personnel had begun to promote “integrated”
development projects in poor farming villages, combining infrastructural projects, like irrigation schemes, funded through state and international agencies with popular education efforts aimed at promoting economic self-reliance and democratic political participation. Participants in DERHGO development projects were encouraged to participate in regional assemblies of popular organizations, and some members of the DERHGO staff promoted the founding of a “sister organization” dedicated to protecting human rights. An anecdote recounted to me by DERHGO’s former bookkeeper illustrates the boundaries of “social” organizing as they were understood in the 1970s and early 1980s, as well as the ideological stakes of such distinctions. During a routine visit to Tulancingo during the 1987 Christmas season, an official from the national office of FMDR became enraged when he spotted a newspaper mural that was prominently displayed in the entryway to DERHGO’s main office. The newspaper mural was a form of collage commonly used by popular education organizations associated with the liberation theology movement to inform community members of current events. This particular mural had been constructed by the office staff with the intent of eliciting community reflections on the importance of the growing human rights movements by linking human rights abuses in Latin America to the Cold War. My informant recalled that the mural contained several striking photos of Nicaraguan and Guatemalan civilians brutalized by soldiers, clippings from stories about the recent Central American Peace Plan brokered by the United States, and construction-paper cutouts of white doves. It was boldly titled “La Paz de Reagan no es La Paz de Jesus” (“The peace Reagan brings is not the same as the peace Jesus brings”). This outright indictment of state-sponsored violence and the anti-capitalist and anti-US overtones the mural contained were too much for the FMDR representative, who left in a huff. The national organization then warned DERHGO repeatedly not to mix “politics” with “social development.” When admonishment and threats did not deter DERHGO’s founders from using such rhetoric, the FMDR dissolved its formal relationship with the organization, and by the 1990s it founded its own independent branch in Tulancingo, the Hidalgan Foundation for Rural Service (FHAR). The FHAR continued the FMDR’s long-standing focus on rural development projects aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and commercialization whilst DERHGO shifted its attention toward rural popular education, human rights, and fair trade initiatives.

The debt crisis of the 1980s and the series of structural reforms that it precipitated severely weakened the PRI’s capacity to maintain the corporatist model through patron–client relationships. While social and economic demands formed the primary agendas of Mexican social movements in the 1970s, by the 1980s the focus had begun to shift toward calls for human rights and democracy. This shift, which came in the wake of crises of state legitimacy and accountability, was characterized in part by demands from movements and organizations for recognition by state and society, and the beginning of long struggle to institutionalize their role. They also began to move from oppositional protest to a new mode of proposition, constructing and advocating for alternative state policies. NGOs came to serve as institutional links between grassroots movements and intellectuals, and “in the process, a new sense of citizenship . . . emerged, combining community-based self-organization for
socioeconomic development with a political push for accountable government” (Fox and Hernandez 1992:168). This new framework encouraged many more NGOs and movements to become involved in electoral politics, but often from the side of voter education and poll monitoring rather than direct engagement with political parties or candidates. Access to external patrons (international donors and powerful allies among the Mexican elite) initially allowed development NGOs to implement their projects, but it was horizontal alliances among civil society groups that later enabled the successful growth of the prodemocracy movement.

During the 1990s, umbrella groups like Alianza Cívica [Civic Alliance] cobbled together diverse networks of prodemocracy and human rights organizations from across the country. Mexican civil society groups skillfully leveraged international media attention and human rights discourse in order to pressure their government into a series of important reforms. Strong, flexible coalitions among Mexican NGOs, like Alianza Cívica, Movimiento Ciudadano Para la Democracia [Citizens’ Movement for Democracy], and Red “Todos Los Derechos Para Todos” [“All Rights for Everyone” Network] were crucial to building popular grassroots support for that change, which was marked by the election of first opposition candidate to the presidency, Vicente Fox, in 2000. Tulancingo NGO workers warmly recalled this period of activism as a time when local civil society groups shared a sense of purpose and hope for the future, worked together closely, and interacted regularly with colleagues from across the country. They envisioned a future where these tightly networked NGOs would continue to act as independent monitors of the state and advocates for citizen rights. Given the important role NGOs had played in the prodemocracy movement, they expected to wield greater influence in policy discussions at the local and national levels, and to receive public support for their development efforts.

However, in the years immediately following Fox’s victory, the Mexican NGO sector slid from its initial democratic fervor into a period of disenchantment with the pace and scale of changes taking place under the new administration. After championing free elections as the instrument of democratic change, many found themselves shut out of important political and economic decision-making processes that remained dominated by appointed technocrats. DERHGO, Tulancingo’s first independent NGO, had been accused of spreading communism in the 1970s and 1980s and celebrated locally as a champion of democracy in the 1990s, but by the date of its 25th anniversary in 2003 it was largely ignored by the state. DERHGO’s leader found this disappointing. “It is better to be thought dangerous,” he said, “than not to be thought of at all.” His comment reveals the depth of the political shift that has taken place, trapping Tulancingo NGOs in a delicate dilemma. In the past, when they had been seen as potential competitors against the PRI for the loyalties of poor farmers, or even when the possibility of co-opting NGOs had been attractive to PRI officials, the organizations had found themselves in a position in which skillful bargaining could gain them access to key resources. From the 1970s on, they had carefully managed their negotiations with state agencies and politicians in order to avoid publicly revealing loyalties to any party or candidate. Now, however, some began to reconsider this strategy.
Early on, NGOs in Mexico had been identified juridically as \textit{asociaciones civiles} (civic associations) by the Mexican government. In the 1980s the federal Finance Ministry began to treat NGOs and cooperatives as if they were large businesses or tax shelters, taxing them at high rates. NGOs interpreted this move as an attempt to broaden the federal tax base and impose greater control on their operations (Fox and Hernandez:185–186). It has served as a rallying point among NGOs over the last two decades, as they sought to institutionalize their social and political role \textit{vis-à-vis} both state and society. In 1994, a coalition of NGOs began to lobby the Mexican Congress in favor of the creation of a Law of Promotion for Civil Society Organizations. The purpose of the legislation was to publicly recognize their role in Mexican society, provide an official legal framework for partnerships with state agencies, and enable NGOs to participate in official policy making processes.\footnote{This public legal recognition became especially important after the 2000 elections, as the large coalitions that had become involved in the pro-democratic electoral push lost their common focus and began to disintegrate. The number of NGOs had exploded in the late 1990s, and during this period of disenchantment (following the 2000 elections), many began to look for new sources of support and ways of participating in public decision-making processes. While the leaders of some Tulancingo NGOs began to publicly support candidates from particular political parties, others quietly cultivated relationships with multiple groups of political elites simultaneously. Still other organizations, particularly newcomers associated with prominent NGOs, had not yet developed strong political reputations. To publicly ally with one particular political faction was to endanger the organization’s legitimacy as a “social” rather than “political” actor. This might signal that the collectivities an NGO organized in the course of its development work were political in nature and intended to create not only networks of clientelism but also possible bases of support for launching individual political careers of NGO leaders. These implicit “rules of the game” were not merely the legacy of earlier PRI practices but were also related to an emergent phenomenon in Tulancingo politics; a growing number of politicians, seeking to secure the nomination of their parties to candidacy for high office, but prevented by new electoral rules from engaging in some of the more blatant methods of vote-buying, had taken to founding charities or development NGOs whose sole purpose was to purchase goodwill and name recognition through “good works.”\footnote{Tulancingo NGOs, like their counterparts elsewhere, face a paradox of “participation” brought about by the interwoven processes of economic and political liberalization that have come to characterize modern “democratic transitions” in Latin America and beyond. In an insightful analysis of the cultural work involved in “marketing democracy” in Chile, Paley (2001) illuminates how understandings of citizenship rights and responsibilities are reworked through official state discourses and practices in order to produce consent for neoliberal restructuring. She argues that Chilean NGOs were asked to “participate” by giving of their labor, often to activities previously performed by the welfare state. While framed as a way of bolstering democracy by strengthening civil society, this kind of participation subsidized and fortified neoliberal economic reforms. [Paley 2001:6]}}
In Mexico, rural development NGOs were being interpolated to fill in not only for the downsizing of social services but also for the rollback of the political patronage system that had subsidized rural communities for decades. NGOs were being asked to take on more responsibility than ever, with far fewer resources at their disposal.

Dependency on donor funding was a key factor in shaping the dilemmas they faced. Although the number of institutions providing NGO funding in Mexico has expanded since the late 1990s, the vast majority of funds are generated by the NGOs themselves, via international partnerships or local charity events rather than through domestic philanthropy or public funding (Verduzco et al 2002). In fact, it was not until 2007 that the Mexican legislature approved a bill that exempted private donations to nonprofits from federal taxes. NGOs were eager to develop partnerships with international NGOs and funding agencies, but often found themselves at the mercy of trends and fads in international aid. NGO workers almost universally blamed former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari for this state of affairs. They claimed that his declaration in the early 1990s—that Mexico was now a member of the First World, intended to convince the US government of Mexico’s readiness to enter into NAFTA, had inadvertently encouraged international agencies to divert support elsewhere. Although some prodemocracy organizations like Alianza Cívica experienced an increase in international funding in the late 1990s, the amount spent by international agencies to fund civil society initiatives in Mexico was insignificant in comparison to that expended on similar efforts in Eastern Europe, Chile, and Spain.

Southern NGOs who cannot rely on domestic funding must network with donors abroad, but most of these “partnerships” are inherently imbalanced (Wallace 2003). The “audit culture” characteristic of international aid places small, provincial NGOs, like many from Tulancingo, at a distinct disadvantage. It is characterized by adherence to corporate-style accounting and management schemes, as well as an emphasis on corporate-style branding. It enforces a very specific set of organizational forms and norms that control NGOs by setting the priorities and parameters for funded projects. Often partnerships are entered into only on a per-project basis, requiring local groups to constantly search out new funding sources, and thus to suffer the constant indignities of what one Tulancingo NGO worker referred to as “institutionalized begging.”

The structure of upward accountability also allows donors to shape local development agendas by setting funding priorities and promoting competition for funds among formerly allied local groups. Many older Mexican organizations founded during the 1970s and 1980s favored deprofessionalization and popular education as a means of equalizing power relations between campesinos (small farmers) and development workers. However, the new paradigm promotes professionalization and advanced technical expertise among NGO personnel. The Mexican Center for Philanthropy (CEMEFI), which consults with local NGOs undergoing the professionalization process and conducts research into the Mexican NGO sector in partnership with Johns Hopkins University, has been at the forefront of promoting this model. However, one CEMEFI consultant I interviewed admitted that the new nonprofit model presents a series of political and institutional disadvantages for provincial NGOs. Research and preparation of formal grant proposals for presentation to national-level grant makers or international donors can be intimidating and time consuming for groups
that lack professional training. The exclusively upward accountability built into the model also contradicts their self-image as advocates for the poor and marginalized.

In the early 2000s, many of the coalitions of independent organizations that were the backbone of the prodemocracy and human rights movement fell apart, leaving their former members isolated from one another. A split between NGOs closely connected to social movements and increasingly professionalized nonprofits, already discernible in the late 1980s, become exaggerated by changes in NGO roles as mediators between global capital, states, and local populations. Many NGO workers I spoke with complained that they had lost the shared sense of purpose that formerly made their work seem worthwhile and meaningful. Since most NGOs in Tulancingo relied on one or two donors for the bulk of their funds, competition for funding became fierce. Local groups affiliated with large, national-level organizations fared much better than their independent counterparts. As a consequence of increasing competition for funds, the atmosphere of cooperation and camaraderie that had prevailed among NGOs during the prodemocracy movement had given way to rivalry and mutual disinterest. While neoliberal ideologues take for granted that competition leads to increased efficiency and accountability, in this instance it worked to hamper the very sort of grassroots coalition-building that had enabled the democratic transition.

The tensions brought about by this crisis set the tone for the Hidalgo State NGO Forum in Pachuca in December 2003. The forum was arranged by the Council of Civil Society (CSC), an umbrella group organized after Fox’s electoral victory in hopes of uniting the now-scattered ranks of Mexican NGOs. The organizers sought to address this simultaneous crisis of identity and function by enlisting participants in a coalition capable both of influencing government policy on issues of social development and of persuading government entities to help sustain the work of NGOs financially and juridically. They demanded to be taken into account12 by the politicians and government technocrats who had shifted so much responsibility onto their shoulders. In the library of the Arturo Herrera Cabañas Foundation, representatives of over a dozen NGOs from the region gathered to discuss the common problems they faced. The organizations ranged from indigenous media groups to development organizations, education and health care service groups, and artists’ collectives. What emerged from their discussions was a clear understanding of NGOs as legitimate representatives of civil society with a moral imperative to respond to social needs.

Participants agreed that the services they provided were by all rights owed by the state to its citizens, but NGOs had taken on the responsibility of delivering them, as the state was either unwilling or unable to do so. The NGOs thus positioned themselves as public advocates for the fulfillment of citizen rights who deserved government recognition and support. In order to be “taken into account,” however, they would have to cultivate their cabildeo (lobbying) skills. This entailed developing personal relationships with local politicians, particularly state and national senators, through which they could be identified as “field experts” on local issues of social development and consulted on policy decisions.13 But how could NGOs partner with the state in the development of Mexican society without becoming co-opted? In order to understand the ideological and material stakes of their dilemma, we must take into account the
cultural framework used to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of mediation.

**Mexican Cultural Modes of Mediation**

Two cultural modes of mediation, embodied in the ideal types of the local intellectual and the political boss, or cacique, are of special relevance to the present-day dilemmas of Tulancingo’s development NGOs. Both were historically subsidized by the post-Revolutionary state apparatus and became integral to the functioning of modern Mexican society. Because they are firmly anchored in local institutions, these ideal types operate as durable public symbols through which collective identities are constructed and reconstructed, and through which historical events acquire coherence and meaning. As ideal types, caciques insert themselves into structural “gaps” in an entrepreneurial fashion, seeking to gain personal power by monopolizing resource flows. Local intellectuals also bridge levels and groups, presumably in the service of integrating national society. Both caciques and intellectuals endure as cultural models for mediation, yet only the latter is perceived as acting legitimately. Tulancingo NGOs have traditionally emulated the model of the local intellectual; hence, the increasing pressure to adopt certain entrepreneurial practices places them at risk of losing both their legitimacy and their sense of themselves as agents of improvement.

According to classical anthropological theories of mediation, the ability of an individual or group to become an effective intermediary is contingent upon managing conflicting roles and expectations. Press argued that an intermediary’s “mandate to innovate” (1969:205) derived from the initial ambiguity of his or her role with respect to a local community. Once a role configuration became fixed, however, deviation from the new expectations attached to that role could quickly damage the intermediary’s reputation and imperil any innovations he or she attempted to bring about. Contradictions or conflicts eventually provoked by these changes might also damage the leadership capacity of an intermediary (de la Peña 1981:236). Furthermore, Geertz’s (1960) study of the Javanese kijaji (learned man) demonstrated how a shift in modes of mediation, even on the part of established brokers, might negate the very cultural foundations of the intermediary role. For example, DERHGO workers’ ability to introduce rapid changes in rural life during the 1970s and 1980s was predicated in part on their novel positioning as seemingly altruistic provincial intellectuals. When DERHGO and other NGOs, pressured by competition for funding and international donor protocols, began to behave in more entrepreneurial ways, their reputations were threatened and their motivations questioned. However, their dilemma can only be fully understood by revising the framework above to account for how the structures to which NGOs have become articulated as “supplementary sets” are being reconfigured by neoliberalizing projects.

When the Mexican Revolution of 1910 destroyed the hacienda along with the social forms that it mediated, new gaps were opened between local communities and nascent national institutions (Wolff 1956). These gaps were filled in part by caciques. Entering into patron-client relationships with powerful regional and national political figures, caciques gained power for themselves by channeling state resources to their
local communities (Gledhill 2000:113). In post-Revolutionary Mexico, the pursuit of power came to be mediated through the sectoral organs of the state party, the PRI. During the presidency of Lázaro Cardenas, the party launched an unprecedented effort to integrate remote rural and indigenous populations into the new political structure, creating more positions for caciques like those described by Friedrich (1986). The figure of the cacique symbolized both the pleasures and perils of virility and violence in the popular imagination (de Vries 2002). However, this new class of “political entrepreneurs” eventually posed a threat to centralized power. The organization of the party along sectoral lines, and its monopoly on key political and economic resources, helped to “check the transformation of power seekers from local communities into individual entrepreneurs” (Wolf 2001:135). As Mexico underwent successive modernization programs, caciquismo (political bossism) contracted and expanded in accordance with the availability of state resources and opportunities for mediation (Zarate Hernandez 1997:9). Although caciquismo became more ingrained in some regions than in others, the one-party corporatist system survived for over seventy years, at least in part by reworking this older cultural form of mediation to suit the purposes of Mexican state-building. The state of Hidalgo has earned a reputation as stronghold of caciquismo, where a small number of powerful families have managed to maintain political control for extended periods. The PRI has long dominated the political landscape, both by patronage and by force. The growth of alternative parties following the 2000 elections in many municipalities, far from signaling a fundamental shift in power, merely enabled lesser members of these powerful families to seize new opportunities for political advancement.

In the Tulancingo region, independent development NGOs challenged the power of the PRI and the caciques’ monopoly on resource distribution in the 1970s and 1980s by delivering development projects directly to local communities and by organizing them into producer and consumer cooperatives. This made NGOs a threat to the political status quo and placed them in competition with the more established intermediaries, so they were closely watched and some were frequently harassed. However, it was not until the 1980s that caciquismo was specifically targeted as corrupt and undemocratic by local NGOs connected to the Mexican prodemocracy movement. In particular, groups like El Barzón and DERHGO were active in voter education initiatives in rural villages, where their projects were located and where they trained volunteer teams from those locales to serve as poll monitors. Several of these volunteer teams were successful in preventing incidents of vote buying and denounced voter intimidation by local caciques. Currently, members of the Tulancingo NGO sector vocally oppose caciquismo as a major roadblock to rural development and democratic citizenship. They model their interventions into rural life on an alternative form of mediation, that of the local intellectual.

The role played by provincial intellectuals, like schoolteachers and priests, as “pious technicians” of social change predates Mexican Independence (Lomnitz 2001:203). Lomnitz traces a historical shift in styles of intellectual intermediation that is linked to changing modes of citizenship. He argues that the limited reach of the governmental state during the colonial era and the dependency of the majority of the population post-Independence prevented the ideal of liberal citizenship from becoming a reality
While all citizens were guaranteed basic constitutional rights, in practice many were so isolated from the state apparatus or so dependent upon patron-client ties that they could not claim them. In addition, many authorities deemed indigenous and rural citizens incapable of participating in national politics by virtue of their perceived “backwardness.”

The provincial intellectual mediated between the national state and local communities, both by integrating local people into the nation via modernizing projects and by discursively representing the essence of local authenticity back to the state (208–209). The role of such intellectuals was to produce and measure progress, which could then be used to legitimize the state as the guarantor of the public good. After Independence, a second task of interpreting and “somatizing” popular sentiment emerged. Since the poor were assumed to exist in coerced silence in times of peace, intellectuals developed discourses that served to represent the sentiments of local and regional populations in the national arena (208). In contrast to the violent image of the cacique, the figure of the provincial intellectual embodied pastoral benevolence.

This role continued in a modified form after the Revolution, when agrarian reform measures not only redefined the corporate relationships between peasants and the state but also inaugurated a new project aimed at creating a shared national consciousness. According to Zarate Hernandez,

the revolutionary state proposed the creation of a national consciousness among groups which, because they lived in situations of extreme backwardness or marginality, did not have a sense of nationality or Mexicanness. The reasoning was clear as there did not (yet) exist a national consciousness, and moreover there were “zones” of the country in which the rights of citizens were functionally subordinated to the interests of particular groups... The political reforms which were undertaken hence had this double purpose (or were directed toward the resolution of this double problematic) on the one hand, to resolve or mitigate some of the more notable inequalities and, on the other, to form or forge citizens with a clear national consciousness, thus strengthening the national State.[1997:259, author’s translation]

The creation of these ideal citizens, however, depended upon the strength of the state and the development of markets, conditions which were not yet favorable to the formation of a political culture based on autonomous individuals rather than hierarchically organized groups. Here again we see the historical interplay between evolving forms of corporatism and individualism that Reina, Servin and Tutino (2007) argue informs every major turning point in state-society relations in Mexico. Far from destroying earlier forms of mediation, the Revolution renovated them and reworked them as the basis for incorporating new collectivities into the national state. In fact, nationalism would soon provide a new symbolic resource that could be deployed by competing groups in order to claim legitimacy for projects of social change (Zarate Hernandez 1997:261–262). Whereas the cacique symbolized venality and lust for personal power, the intellectual mode of mediation was predicated upon the value of self-sacrifice in service to national progress. Provincial intellectuals in
post-Revolutionary Mexico figured as legitimate intermediaries laboring for the common good of the nation rather than for personal gain. The vocation of schoolteachers, development workers, and other “civic missionaries” was to extend the promises of the Revolution and the rights of citizenship to everyday Mexicans (Foweraker 1993; Vaughan 1997).

The nature of this historical moment helped to shape the future role and mode of mediation used by Tulancingo NGOs in their rural project sites. As was the case with the activist priests of Morelos described by de la Peña, the ability of these NGOs to organize and implement development projects in rural villages was closely tied to their leaders’ “access to, and manipulation of, a number of social and economic resources which were completely out of the reach of any local person” (1981:236). For example, DERHGO’s early irrigation infrastructure projects depended upon the organizations’ links to Mexican government agencies, like PIDER, and to foreign donors, like the Inter-American Foundation, procured through the organization’s affiliation with the FMDR. In addition, as members of two of Tulancingo’s most prominent merchant families, DERHGO’s cofounders enjoyed access to elite social networks through which large donations could be solicited and political support could be procured against the interference of local PRI bosses.

Although Tulancingo NGO workers modeled their work on this intellectual ideal, their development mission was originally rooted in an oppositional logic. Unlike the provincial intellectuals who attempted to integrate campesinos and indigenous people into the corporate state apparatus, they advocated a broader vision of “progress,” drawing on discourses of universal human rights that sought to liberate everyday Mexicans from that very corporatist system. Like their colleagues elsewhere in Mexico, they sought to expand the rights of individual citizens and educate them for participation in grassroots democracy. Their vision was one of “collective modernity” based in social rights, where inequality was understood to be as antithetical to democracy as authoritarianism (de la Peña 1981:337). During the 1970s and 1980s, many Mexican NGOs promoted an institutional culture of solidarity and fraternity, both within the organizations and in their relationships with project participants. Concretely, this vision of social change prompted a trend of deprofessionalization and an emphasis on consensus-based planning and decision-making processes (Aguilar Valenzuela 1997b:299–309). A moral commitment to solidarity, equality, and grassroots democracy became key qualifications for employment in Tulancingo NGOs, and their moral mission of national improvement lent legitimacy to their local projects.

In the neoliberal era, however, the problem of the intermediary in Mexican society has taken on renewed significance. The student and labor movements of the 1960s criticized the corporatist system’s reliance on political mediation, calling for a more open democracy and independent unions. They were joined by proponents of liberation theology, who accused the Catholic hierarchy of illegitimately profiting by acting as a power broker and spiritual gatekeeper. By the 1980s many activists in Mexico, including the development sector of Tulancingo, had seized upon the language of universal human rights as a means of asserting individual liberty against the authoritarianism of the state. However, deployment of this discourse of individual
freedom was not confined to advocates of democracy and social justice. Throughout the 1970s, large business interests had gained new power in Mexican politics and had fortified their ties with foreign capital (Harvey 2005). During the presidency of Carlos Salinas, who presided over wholesale privatization and the creation of NAFTA, government ministries came to be staffed almost entirely by technocrats, trained in the United States in neoliberal orthodoxy. They, too, attacked the corporatist state, not in rejection of its authoritarianism (which they relied upon to push through unpopular economic reforms) but rather on the grounds that its inefficiency and protectionism hampered economic growth. Salinas co-opted the discourse of individual freedom used by opposition activists but divorced it from the ideals of social justice and equality that had accompanied it (Harvey 2005). The outcome of this unlikely ideological convergence has been a crisis of legitimacy for NGOs, which must now defend their role in a political environment where intermediaries of all stripes have been rendered suspect. In contrast to the much maligned cacique, NGOs have sought to become the new “legitimate intermediaries” between rural communities and diffused centers of power. One of the most difficult dilemmas confronting NGO workers in Tulancingo is how to survive in an organizational climate that encourages self-interest and entrepreneurialism without imperiling the ethos of solidarity that they claim makes their work personally meaningful and socially important. Without it, rural development work becomes, in the words of one Tulancingo NGO worker, “business by other means, and a failed business at that.”

Vulnerable Intermediaries: Reworking Cultural Idioms of Mediation

The capacity of Tulancingo NGOs to pursue their programs of social change in the countryside depends in large part upon their perceived legitimacy as intermediaries. One major challenge they face is that international donors and project participants often have conflicting expectations of how these NGOs should go about their development work. NGO workers must also confront the gap between their earlier expectations of democratic transition and the contradictory path it has taken in practice. Together, these dynamics trap Tulancingo NGOs in a crucial dilemma: operating successfully within an increasingly marketized NGO paradigm threatens to undo the terms of their own local legitimacy as intermediaries.

Tulancingo NGO workers viewed themselves as democratic activists and advocates for the poor, but over the past several years they have experienced increasing pressure to convert themselves into freelance development consultants. In fact, many NGOs in the Tulancingo area have begun to charge campesinos for the services they provide in order to survive. Both the FHAR and the local branch of El Barzón have been reconfigured into despachos tecnicos (technical consulting offices), acting as liaisons to state bureaucracies and commercial creditors on behalf of campesino cooperatives. Despite the fact that many campesinos are entitled to apply for government grants or credits to start up small cooperative enterprises, many of them are unaware of these programs or cannot access them due to the large volume of highly technical paperwork involved. Most of these benefits have been monopolized by local caciques with connections in the state government, even when the program guidelines stipulate
that the supports must be shared by an entire community or cooperative association. Several local banks also offered project proposal services, but charged an average fee equal to about 30 percent of the solicited funds. In Tulancingo, an established NGO that had recently received official certification to apply for such funds on behalf of campesinos reported charging a 5 percent rate per project, enabling them to organize proposed cooperatives and to provide ongoing technical support. The NGO manager justified this new consultative role as an extension of the organization’s earlier prodemocracy work. He distinguished between two forms of mediating between campesinos and government agencies: aprovecharse (taking advantage) and facilitar (facilitating). From his point of view, both the banks and the caciques typically acted in an entrepreneurial fashion by “taking advantage” of the campesinos’ lack of information and political patronage. By channeling public funds to the poorest peasants rather than those with the strongest political connections, he reasoned, his NGO could instead “facilitate” citizen access to public resources. The fee they charged for this service, he argued, was intended only to cover the organization’s labor costs and not to line its coffers. However, other NGO workers in Tulancingo pointed out that charging for services often prevented NGOs from reaching the poorest of the poor. The manager of the FHAR complained that this model forced him to perform “development triage” by choosing to invest the organization’s limited resources in only those campesino cooperatives (usually those with prior business experience and higher cash incomes) deemed most likely to succeed. For many NGO workers in Tulancingo, the marketization of development work and the rise of the audit culture in international aid represented a drastic paradigm shift that contrasted sharply with their own visions and earlier strategies for producing social change.

Although neoliberal ideology insists that political and economic action must be both direct and individualized, Tulancingo NGO workers justified a continued need for mediation on the ground that their rural constituents lacked access to the rights of full citizenship and needed assistance in claiming them. In doing so, they reworked existing cultural models of mediation to constitute themselves and their organizations as legitimate intermediaries. This required cultivating particular forms of subjectivity that allowed them to balance conflicting expectations and values. They did so by continuing to make sense of their development work in terms of an ongoing struggle for democracy and human rights. For them, an NGO career was meaningful as a form of middle-class martyrdom whereby they sacrificed financial security and upward mobility in the name of their commitment to Mexico’s future.

Lomnitz (2001) argued that provincial intellectuals initially constituted themselves as intermediaries, operating in the governmental breach between isolated local communities and the capital, by claiming to represent marginal citizens who lacked the resources, preparation, or autonomy to represent themselves. Even after the prodemocracy movement culminated in the 2000 elections, Tulancingo NGOs continued to represent themselves as the voice of civil society using rhetoric very similar to that discussed by Lomnitz. They saw their intermediary role as twofold: to assist disadvantaged Mexicans (primarily campesinos and indigenous people) in claiming the rights and benefits to which they were entitled as citizens, and to capacitar (train)
these same groups to participate fully in Mexico’s new democracy. The former goal included helping citizens access government development and assistance programs, as well as advocating for the political, civil, and property rights of citizens who did not have the wherewithal to defend themselves legally. The second role, that of capacitación (training), figured as an extension of the voter education campaigns NGOs had carried out in the countryside around Tulancingo during the heyday of the prodemocracy movement. The technical consulting offices discussed above were also a key component of this approach, enabling NGOs not only to help campesinos access government development funds, but also to assist groups with “follow-up” training that would help them succeed in producing and marketing agricultural products and administrating small businesses.

In constituting themselves as legitimate mediators, Tulancingo NGOs sought to distinguish themselves in the public eye from intermediaries who “took advantage” of campesinos to amass wealth and power for themselves. They positioned themselves in explicit opposition to the new philanthropic culture exemplified by former First Lady Marta Sahagún de Fox. Her Fundación Vamos México [Let’s Go Mexico Foundation] fully embraced the marketized model favored by US nonprofits. Vamos México was founded in the fall of 2001 to combat poverty through targeted programs in education and basic healthcare. It inaugurated its mission with a $10,000 US per head charity concert featuring British pop star Elton John, and managed to raise $40 million in ten months. The press, however, criticized Sahagún’s aggressive promotion of Vamos México as shameless politicking, claiming she suffered from “the Evita Syndrome” (Cansino 2004). Tulancingo NGO workers publicly criticized “Martita’s” organization as a paternalistic anachronism out of step with Mexico’s new democracy. One Vamos México initiative in particular, a campaign seeking private donations of used bicycles for rural schoolchildren who traveled long distances to attend classes, earned their angry condemnation. Education, they maintained, was the constitutional right of every Mexican citizen. The proper solution to rural students’ problems was for the Fox government to deliver on its campaign promises to build and staff more and better schools in the countryside, rather than giving Marta a photo opportunity.

Worse still, congressional investigations into possible financial links between the Fox government and Vamos México fueled existing rumors that represented NGOs in general as parasitical middlemen in the political power game. For example, some local beneficiaries of NGO programs questioned how helpful these projects really were in their daily struggles. Many campesinos in the Tulancingo region complained that while NGO workers promoting new projects were full of interesting ideas, they seldom had sufficient resources at their disposal to carry them out successfully. It was also plain to them that the success of rural development projects ultimately depended on the vagaries of global market fluctuations and macroeconomic policies, factors neither the NGOs nor the campesinos could control. One woman, a member of a foundering dairy cooperative, alleged that the NGO organizing her group only went around raising false hopes, eager to enlist them in what she saw as a risky venture but less than forthcoming with the hard cash needed to found a real business. The NGO claimed to be helping out the campesinos, she said, but in the end she questioned...
whether the campesinos, through their work on the cooperative, might instead be helping to guarantee the survival of the NGO. Her viewpoint was shared by others who had come to see the proliferation of NGOs in the countryside not as a radical departure from the old patron-client politics but rather as an impoverished form of its spoils system.

The peril of being perceived as illegitimate intermediaries deeply influenced the way NGO workers framed their careers. They struggled to reconcile external pressures to act as self-interested entrepreneurs with closely held notions of the inherent value of solidarity and self-sacrifice for the common good. They responded to emerging forms of vulnerability by highlighting the altruist and humanist motivations behind their work, emphasizing the downward rather than upward accountability of their role. Prior to the Debt Crisis of the 1980s, professional development work—especially posts in government agencies—had meant a secure middle-class lifestyle. Those displaced by the crisis, who had found a niche during the NGO boom of the 1990s, while less secure, managed to keep their heads above water. Nevertheless, the new trends in NGO funding left many of these workers without the wherewithal to procure the most basic markers of middle-class status. In 2003, NGO workers in Tulancingo earned between $50 and $150 US per week, but because of the per-project basis of their jobs, some might only work for three months at a time and then be out of work for a month or so, or forced to find another source of employment in the interim.19

During this same period, food for a family of four cost around $40 per week. Tuition for one student at a private secondary school started at $70 per month. According to Mexican government statistics, the average family in an urban area spent around $60 per month on housing, and about $120 on transport and communications.20 This does not even begin to account for medical care, taxes, or rising utility prices. It is widely acknowledged that the middle class has been hard hit by economic reforms, especially following the peso crisis of the early 1990s that erased many Mexicans’ life savings (Moreno 2002; Thompson 2002; Gilbert 2007). Local newspapers routinely covered the plight of the rural and urban poor who fled north to find work, but it was big news in the fall of 2004 when La Ruta, Tulancingo’s independent biweekly, reported unprecedented levels of unemployment and immigration among educated professionals (La Ruta 2004).

Tulancingo NGO workers continually framed their precarious careers as a conscious sacrifice for the greater good. They insisted that although professionals with comparable expertise and job descriptions were well paid and highly respected in the private sector, they preferred to work in NGOs out of solidarity with the campesinos and a commitment to democracy and human rights.21 One young DERHGO staff member,22 recounting that organization’s abundance of past funding in light of its current austerity, declared that she was glad she had only begun working there in the past five years. Rather than lament her lot, she maintained that she had been privy to the “nicest era” of DERHGO’s history, in which staff were motivated by their moral convictions rather than by material gain. For her, NGO work was a meaningful, if underappreciated, pursuit. Among many of her compatriots, self-sacrifice had become grounds for claiming moral authority to speak for Mexico’s future on behalf of the marginalized.
Their struggle to maintain legitimacy as intermediaries also compelled Tulancingo NGOs to reconsider the value of professionalism as a prerequisite for being taken seriously by politicians, government technocrats, international funders, and their campesino clientele. In this context, professionalism meant attending to two often contradictory sets of values. On the one hand, surviving as an NGO was an exercise in self-entrepreneurship. This entailed establishing one’s self as a field expert, not only proficient in technical matters but also in touch with one’s campesino constituency and competent at “getting things done” bureaucratically. It required combining intimate familiarity with local agrarian conditions with technical knowledge of current trends in development “solutions.” On the other hand, professionalization could be reframed as a new form of solidarity with campesinos. By offering campesinos professional “consulting services,” NGO workers insisted, they could help them achieve better results with the limited resources available to them. By staying abreast of trends in development solutions, NGOs could reconcile local needs with external funding trends. Professionalism might endear NGO workers to their campesino clients if it rendered them better technical consultants and more effective intermediaries on the campesinos’ behalf.

In their relations with campesinos, NGO workers from Tulancingo were at pains to distinguish themselves from other outside intermediaries like caciques. They attempted to legitimate their interest in the survival of campesino villages by demonstrating that they “belonged” there and that their work was motivated both by ties of affection toward rural people and respect for the innate value of rural culture. They took pride in greeting villagers by name with a firm handshake, and took special pleasure in sharing meals in the homes of their project participants. Invitations to serve as godparents were prized by NGO workers as indications that they had, indeed, proven their worthiness as friends and usefulness as intermediaries. By comparison, organizations that failed to maintain these relationships or to deliver successful projects could develop reputations as quemados (burnt), which might damage their ability to launch future projects in the area.

The way one Tulancingo NGO negotiated requests by the community of El Ocote for assistance in the face of a long-standing drought provides a clear example of how NGOs have tried to strike this delicate balance. It was nearly impossible at the time to procure funding to expand the community’s irrigation system, as capital-intensive infrastructural projects had fallen out of favor with international agencies in the late 1980s. A nearby lake was proposed as an alternative water source, but competition for access among area communities was fierce and securing water rights would have been an expensive, lengthy process involving multiple government agencies (not to mention the possible involvement of local caciques). Nonetheless, the NGO staff knew that the state agricultural ministry had recently launched a pilot project that would partially fund a limited number of campesino cooperatives interested in building greenhouses to grow vegetables for export. The NGO’s manager used his expert reputation and connections in the state agricultural ministry to help several households in the community enroll in the program. While greenhouses did not benefit every family in El Ocote, they did provide a means to conserve limited water resources. Although this solution did not go very far toward addressing the root causes
of poverty in El Ocote, the NGO staff reasoned that without professional assistance and the right connections, campesinos might find survival impossible.

The dilemmas that Tulancingo NGOs face point to some of the profound ways in which the terrain of struggle over rural development and democracy has shifted in Mexico. If, as the classical literature holds, forms of mediation are reconfigured in response to structural change, then the mediating dilemmas faced by Tulancingo NGO may illuminate some of the dynamics of how “actually existing neoliberalisms” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:349) are forged from existing institutions and social forms. The problems NGO workers face, particularly in constructing legitimate modes of mediation through which to affect change, point to the contingency and path dependency of neoliberalizing projects. Their attempts to find solutions that simultaneously ensure the survival of their organizations (lending legitimacy to their work) and cultivate meaningful forms of social action serve to illustrate the often contradictory processes through which neoliberalizing projects become embedded in specific places.

Conclusion

Roger Bartra (2002) has called for a reimagining of Mexican identity and political culture in light of changes to the nation-state frame brought about by globalization. For nearly a century, national mythology—indeed a sense of “Mexican-ness” itself—was closely tied to an authoritarian corporatist political structure in which intermediaries (intellectuals and caciques alike) not only bridged social groups via cultural idioms of mediation but also helped to legitimize the authority of the state. According to Bartra, the end of the “perfect dictatorship,” which shaped the mediation practices described by anthropologists like Wolf, has led to a “post-Mexican condition” (2002:46). He contends that the most dramatic feature of this paradigm shift has been the state’s abdication of its previous role as mediator of social change. However, the problem of national identity and the role of the state in mediating change is not particular to Mexico. The policies of intertwined political and economic liberalization mandated by the Washington Consensus have forced the citizens of many countries to reconsider these questions.

In Mexico, as elsewhere, NGOs have taken on intermediary roles, building structural linkages for redistribution of resources and power, as well as facilitating translation of cultural forms between distinct social groups. The project of reconfiguring forms of citizenship in Mexico has been a complicated one. The historical interplay between evolving forms of individualism and corporatism noted by Reina, Servin, and Tutino (2007) continues to inform this process. In many ways, the great distance that persists between notions of universal rights and the insistence on collective forms of political participation both serves to legitimate the intermediary role of NGOs and complicates it further. Indeed, the notion of the “right to have rights” that animated the prodemocracy movement is a prime example of what Anna Tsing has called “engaged universals,” the form taken on by universalisms as they gain traction in particular times and places to become “practical projects accomplished in a heterogeneous world” (2005:8). In contrast to earlier theories of globalization, which
assumed the coherence and coordination of global interconnections, Tsing emphasizes the awkwardness and contingency of the material and ideological links through which global norms and forms are brought into being. She calls these moments of awkward engagement between traveling universalisms and the people they mobilize “friction,” insisting that the “cultural work of encounter” is central to the production of engaged universals (2005:12). For Tsing, to study such engagements is to examine how particular actors in particular times and places put universalisms to practical use. She warns, however, that the outcomes of the cultural work of encounter, like the labor of mediation performed by Tulancingo NGO workers, can be unpredictable and often contradictory. Indeed Mexican NGOs, which began as oppositional activists, have been called upon to help preserve social peace by ameliorating the poverty and inequality caused by neoliberal reforms. In order to fund these efforts, they must act in an increasingly entrepreneurial fashion, thereby risking the cultural grounds of their legitimacy as intermediaries.

If we take seriously Wolf’s (2004) theory that the processes of recentralization, which accompany major structural shifts, often entail changes to modes of mediation and the emergence of new groups of intermediaries, then examination of how such groups emerge and constitute themselves as intermediaries, and how they resolve dilemmas that arise in the process, affords anthropologists valuable insight into complex processes of structural change. As we work toward new understandings of how neoliberalizing projects coalesce and gain traction in specific locales, it is important to consider the role of intermediaries like NGOs in creating these changes. However, intermediaries like the ones presented here can no longer be imagined as operating within or working to knit together the “gaps” between static structural “levels.” The complexity of the structural changes brought about by neoliberal reforms defy earlier evolutionary frameworks and spatial imaginaries. The path dependency of neoliberalizing projects necessitates a thorough investigation of how the legacies of earlier efforts at producing social change influenced the emergence of new groups of intermediaries and the creative reworking of cultural modes of mediation. We should reexamine intermediaries as actors that emerge in response to such structural shifts, but whose work must gain traction on the ground by responding to durable cultural frameworks that shape the possibilities and limits of their projects. Refocusing attention on intermediaries like these is a good way to get at the cultural labor of connection through which contemporary political realignments—simultaneously global and local—are produced.

Notes

1. The original group responsible for founding DERHGO was also involved in the foundation of ten other NGOs in the 1970s and 1980s, all of them dedicated to various forms of civic improvement. While several of these fell idle and disappeared over the years due to declining interest and a shifting political climate, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a renewed surge in NGO organizing in Tulancingo, this time driven by a new generation of actors with a wider variety of interests.
2. Defined as “political subordination in exchange for material rewards” backed by the threat of coercion, or “the exchange of political rights for social benefits” (Fox 1994:153).

3. Comite Pro Derechos Humanos Sergio Mendez Arceo [Sergio Mendez Arceo Committee for Human Rights].

4. Interview, Tulancingo, Hidalgo, October 2002. With the exception of well-known public figures, the names of informants have been changed or withheld to protect their privacy.

5. Interview, Tulancingo, Mexico, January 2003.

6. After a decade of lobbying, a version of this legislation was finally passed by Congress in 2004. See *Ley Federal de Fomento* (2004).

7. See Rivera Flores (2004) for a detailed analysis of how the Fundacion Hidalguense [Hidalgan Foundation] was used as an instrument to promote the political career of infamous Hidalgan PRI politician, Gerardo Sosa Castelán.


10. Interview, Tulancingo, Mexico, May 2003.

11. Interview, Mexico City, December 2002.

12. *Ser tomados en cuenta.*

13. Cooperation between the Fox administration and the FMDR was paradigmatic of this sort of new relationship between NGOs and the state. FMDR’s “development through entrepreneurship” models were used by the Fox administration in the planning of agricultural policy.


15. This change was reflected in spatial arrangements, as some NGO offices large meeting rooms that once hosted campesino assemblies were carved up into individual office spaces and, in some cases, commercial spaces.

16. Most of these projects are aimed at enabling campesinos to purchase expensive equipment intended to increase agricultural productivity (such as feed grinders or in vitro fertilization of livestock) or introducing new cash crops (such as greenhouse vegetables for winter export). They do so by providing grants to cover a percentage of the total proposed investment, or by paying for material costs while campesino cooperatives commit to providing the necessary labor.

17. Interview, Tulancingo, Mexico, June 2003.

18. Interview, Tulancingo, Mexico, April 2003.

19. Some NGOs tried to stretch temporary project funding out, so that employees would receive at least a nominal salary at all times. Others, however, only hired employees on a temporary basis. Many NGO workers were involved in sidelines that helped them make ends meet. One man I knew sold agricultural inputs in the countryside. Another drove a taxi between periodic stints of employment by NGOs and government agencies. Some female NGO workers, like other women in Tulancingo, were actively engaged in the informal economy, selling everything from jewelry and household linens to makeup and nutritional supplements. Side-lines were common in Tulancingo during my fieldwork, but now professionals,
like NGO workers and schoolteachers, seem to be participating in unprecedented numbers.


21. Although I heard this assertion frequently, no NGO worker with whom I spoke could name such an open private sector position in the Tulancingo region. In fact, several of those with whom I spoke had long been seeking such a post in vain.

22. Interview, Tulancingo, Mexico, October 2002.

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