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## Commentary

# Politics is Ordinary: Non-governmental Organizations and Political Participation in Contemporary Britain

‘Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact’.<sup>1</sup> This is the famous proclamation of Raymond Williams, set out in an article published in 1958 and developed at greater length in *Culture and Society*, published in the same year, and *The Long Revolution*, three years later.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to see whether the term ‘ordinary’ might be applied to a different, if related, sphere: politics. More specifically, it asks whether the term might capture something of the distinctiveness, diversity, and dynamism of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Britain since 1945.

Culture was ordinary for Williams because it consisted of the ‘common meanings and directions’ of a society.<sup>3</sup> It was not the preserve of any social or economic group, nor could it be found only in certain institutions. It was an everyday phenomenon, something held in every individual’s mind and something which could be constantly reworked and reformed in the light of observation and experience. Could we say

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<sup>1</sup> R. Williams, ‘Culture is Ordinary’, in Norman Mackenzie, ed., *Conviction* (London, 1958), 74–92 (74).

<sup>2</sup> R. Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (1958; London, 1987). Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Williams, ‘Culture is Ordinary’, 75.

the same of politics, once we take it away from party, ideology, and the central state, and locate it instead in the everyday interactions of ordinary people with the world around them?

Just as Raymond Williams, newly arrived in Cambridge, recoiled at the deliberately cultivated airs of the 'special kind of people' in the tea shop, might we not also claim that politics takes place not only in Westminster but in a whole variety of ordinary, institutional settings? I do not want to go so far as to conflate culture with politics, or render the ordinary so trivial that we see in everyday forms of cultural life aspects of the political everywhere. This was, in a sense, the cultural studies project. Rather the purpose here is to explore the ordinariness of politics as manifested in a whole range of institutions captured, in this article at least, by the term NGO.

Building upon a literature that has been loosely referred to in British scholarship as the 'new political history', I will follow others in taking politics away from the 'man in the grey suit' at Westminster and seek to explore how we might think of the political more generally in the post-1945 UK.<sup>4</sup> It will involve an analysis which acknowledges the political nature of Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association just as much as it does the peace movement or second-wave feminism.

Raymond Williams's notion of the ordinary was crucial to a reconceptualization of the political undertaken by the New Left after 1956. Inspired by such social movements as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), those figures associated with the first editorial board of the *New Left Review* in 1960 sought to open up the possibilities for political action 'beyond the party system and the binary logic of the Cold War'.<sup>5</sup> For Stuart Hall, 'the New Left launched an assault on the narrow definition of "politics" and tried to project in its place an "expanded conception of the political"'.<sup>6</sup> The aim was to transform the 'project of the Left' through a 'movement of ordinary people into politics' via a whole number of progressive social movements such as CND.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For others who have sought to develop a new political history see: J. Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford, 2003); J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993); J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, eds, *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1920* (Aldershot, 1997); J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998); S. Brooke, 'Evan Durbin: Reassessing a Labour "Revisionist"', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7 (1996), 27–52; L. Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954–1970* (London, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> M. Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London, 1995), 193.

<sup>6</sup> S. Hall, 'Life and Times of the First New Left', *New Left Review*, 61 (2010), 177–97 (quote from 187).

<sup>7</sup> Hall, 'Life and times of the First New Left', 190–1; E. P. Thompson, 'The New Left', *New Reasoner*, 9 (1959), 1–17.

The New Left might well have failed in this regard, though the questions it raised about the meaning of the political are ones we might return to as historians. Indeed, it is the contention of this article that NGOs have been at the heart of a transformation in politics over the last half century, if not in quite the manner that the New Left hoped. In capturing this transformation, it will become apparent that many of the common assumptions about contemporary political life must be set aside. The history of NGOs demonstrates that the public has not become more passive. There has not been a decline in political engagement. Citizens have not been replaced by shoppers. Democracy has continued to be practised in its myriad forms. Of course, if one were to take static measures of socio-political action—be it voting patterns, levels of social capital, volunteering rates—then one might tend towards a narrative of decline (or perhaps even of progress, depending on the indices selected). But the more difficult trend to capture is one of transformation, of how the nature of political engagement, and hence the meaning of the political, has changed.

This has been a transformation that has mobilized sympathizers of both the Right and the Left, as well as all the points in between, from reformists to radicals to reactionaries. They have included moralists and do-gooders, internationalists and nimbysists, socialists and conservatives, and, most strikingly, party political neutrals: those single-issue activists committed to non-ideological forms of political engagement. To understand their forms of political engagement rests upon three key factors. First, the growth of NGOs has taken place alongside a decline in trust in elected officials, party politics, and the central institutions of political power. The contrasting fortunes of the two types of institution are intimately related. Secondly, contemporary Britain has experienced in many ways the historical manifestation of what Pierre Rosanvallon has termed, *l'impolitique*: that is, the 'failure to develop a comprehensive understanding of problems associated with the organisation of a shared world'.<sup>8</sup> This has been a phenomenon which might well explain the failure of the New Left but which, more broadly, and as will be shown, has produced its own peculiar strengths and weaknesses. Thirdly, the growth of NGOs has taken place against a backdrop of the growing authority of professional expertise in society. The modern technocratic state has produced new forms of governance to which many NGOs have attached themselves thereby altering the relationships citizens have developed with the state.

To set out such an argument in a relatively short essay requires some serious omissions. The discussion that follows is oriented towards those

<sup>8</sup> P. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (Cambridge, 2008), 22.

NGOs that have sought a national political role. This is not to deny the importance of local and regional initiatives, but a fuller explanation of new forms of NGOs and their interactions with more traditional forms of social movement, party organizations, and socio-political networks at the local level warrants separate treatment. Likewise, those expecting insights into the internal workings of NGOs, the full nature of their advocacy and lobbying roles, their relationships with their members and supporters, or even the details behind the history of any one NGO, will be disappointed. Instead, this article is pitched more at the conceptual level, though it draws on two case studies—environmentalism and international aid and development—as well as the author's wider project on the history of NGOs (including detailed analysis of some sixty-five NGOs).<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand the meaning of both the ordinary and the political—and the interactions between the two—the essay is divided into several sections. The first sets out some basic empirical evidence that attests to the growth and diversity of the NGO sector. Here it will be apparent that politics, as with socialism, is not only what academics or Labour cabinet ministers say it is. It is so many things and this section tries to convey the whole variety of political causes associated with charities, new social movements, civil society groups, and NGOs. On one level, it might appear too ambitious to analytically lump together many thousands of different organizations. But as a starting point this article makes the case that some attempt ought to be made to understand the collective presence of NGOs on the British social and political landscape.

This leads on to a second section that highlights the inadequacy of existing models in capturing this diverse sector. Here I make a case for the use of the term 'NGO' as both a descriptive and an analytical category and how linking it with a notion of the ordinary helps explain the nature of the political in contemporary history. The description of politics as ordinary better encapsulates the full range of motivations behind people's actions. To be sure, many NGOs are extraordinary, overtly ideological, and engage in spectacular moments of political

<sup>9</sup> This is a Leverhulme Trust-funded project on the history of NGOs in Britain since 1945. This will map the size, growth, shape, and key features of the NGO sector, as well as tracing its role both as a form of political campaigning and as fulcrum for social activism. It also examines the ways in which NGOs have mobilized the public and how they have had an influence on politics, both in terms of impacting upon the formal sphere at Westminster and Whitehall (for instance, on specific acts of legislation) and in setting the terms of the debate. Three case studies are explored: the environmental movement; the international aid and development charities; and the homelessness sector. For further information about the project see [www.ngo.bham.ac.uk](http://www.ngo.bham.ac.uk). See also, N. Crowson *et al.*, eds, *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (London, 2009).

intervention. Others do choose to have formal links with established political parties and other established socio-political actors (e.g. the trade unions) which themselves can also engage with ordinary, everyday issues. The point is not to see NGOs solely as an alternative to mainstream or well-recognized political channels, but as a significant new presence which, collectively, is sufficiently distinct to challenge us to produce new accounts and analytical categories for understanding modern society and politics.

The next two sections seek to account for the rise of NGOs and their impact and effectiveness. The third section shows how the emergence of NGOs is a product of a more technocratic world. Non-party-based forms of politics have been the realm of the expert and the professional. In this sense, NGOs are part of a much broader phenomenon associated with the rise of the technocratic state. Crucially, too, the presence and, at times, success of NGOs have meant they have in turn become a driver of the growing authority of professional expertise. In this case, NGOs have become implicated within wider processes of the professionalization that lies at the heart of the modern state and which calls into question the claim to being 'non-governmental', especially if a broader concept of governmentality is invoked. Here, NGOs have increasingly become as much a part of the system of governance as critics of it, and not only because in more recent decades they have entered into formal partnerships with the state.

Yet, herein also lies an explanation for their support and popularity, an issue developed in the fourth and final section. The growth of NGOs does not rest upon a notion of the passivity of individual citizens. Indeed, NGOs have come about as the outcome of a certain type of rational action instigated by ordinary citizens. If issues about the environment, international trade justice, human rights, and so on have become too technical, too complex, or too legalistic to be either understood in their entirety by the ordinary citizen or easily absorbed into the traditional ideologies associated with the mainstream political parties, then it has made sense to trust and support NGOs. Over a hundred years ago, in an era of franchise extensions, there was a logic behind the creation of the mass political party. Over the last half century, in an era of depoliticization, specialization, and technical complexity, it has likewise made sense for ordinary people to lend their support to NGOs. These organizations, supported in varying ways through their memberships, can bring their own forms of expertise to the sites of political power. Expert forms of knowledge have increasingly come to shape ordinary life. It is therefore to be expected that ordinary citizens, engaged in ordinary forms of politics, harness that expertise and channel it through new and diverse institutional settings.

What emerges is an ordinary form of politics that is by no means an idealized pluralism, as shall be explained in a final, concluding section. NGOs have been the product and the catalyst of professionalization and citizens have actively chosen to support them. But ordinary politics are bounded, both socially in terms of who participates (and here the participation rates of the middle classes remains strong) and politically in terms of the issues that can be addressed (sometimes, radical and spectacular, rather than ordinary, solutions might be what is required). Social movements have excluded as well as mobilized; single-issue politics have limitations as well as potential; NGOs have been as much a complement as they have been an alternative to the mass party political system. Importantly, it will be argued, NGOs cannot be taken as exemplars of wishful or pessimistic thinking about either the decline of social capital or the revival of democratic politics.

They have transformed and extended the scope of the political process. The channels of political action have expanded. At times NGOs have acted as alternatives to party politics, at others they have worked in concert with established political institutions. But NGOs have had their limitations too. Most importantly, unlike parties or even established social movements such as the trade unions, access to the centre—to the sites of political power—has by no means been guaranteed. There has been an incredible dynamism associated with NGOs, but it ought not to fool us into thinking that greater diversity translates into greater effectiveness.

However, what binds together this admittedly heterogeneous group is the ordinariness of the issues they address and the ordinariness of the solutions sought. For all their differences, they constitute a form of politics in which largely non-materialist, yet still everyday, concerns have been expressed in the formal political arena. As Williams's unwitting successor in the exploration of the ordinary, Pierre Bourdieu, has put it, ordinariness represents 'a distance, in politics and culture, from both elitism and populism'.<sup>10</sup> Analytically, it captures something of the changing meaning of the political over the last half century, yet it is a politics that, as will be seen, inevitably remains fraught with tension and contradiction.

## 1. The Growth of NGOs

Any cursory survey of post-war institutions in Britain will immediately make one reflect on the sheer diversity of potential political actors. Notwithstanding those economic interests groups—trade associations, chambers of commerce, trade unions—which have an obvious stake in

<sup>10</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (Cambridge, 2007), 107.

Westminster politics—and those pressure and lobby groups formed to defend such interests, the sheer scale of NGOs in Britain is astounding. In 2006, there were 170,000 registered charities in Britain.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, the vast majority of these were small-scale affairs, many concerned with the local provision of services and which, rightly, would in no way regard themselves as political. Yet, there are still 5,500 organizations registered with the National Council of Voluntary Organizations, most of which did seek to have some impact on policy making in Britain.<sup>12</sup>

A recent attempt to locate the archives of those NGOs which can be regarded as having a national socio-political influence identified just under 2,000 such organizations.<sup>13</sup> They range from those NGOs spearheading new social movements such as CND and Women's Liberation, to those international activist groups usually associated with the phrase, NGO, such as Amnesty and Oxfam. Yet included too are those groups and organizations not usually regarded as political but which have sought to change, reform, or react against policy developed at the national level.<sup>14</sup> In this broader definition of political actor, therefore, we need a more inclusive approach. In the field of animal rights, we have to be as responsive to the actions of the Zoological Society, the Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Animal Aid, Flora and Fauna International, the Wildlife Trust, and even the Kennel Club as we are to the Animal Liberation Front, the National Anti-Vivisection Society, and the World Wildlife Fund.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in the sphere of those dealing with disadvantaged youth, we must include not just the Child Poverty Action Group, but also Barnado's, the Charity Organisation Society/Family Welfare Association, and the National Children's Home.<sup>16</sup> In the

<sup>11</sup> NCVO, *The UK Voluntary Sector Almanac 2006: The State of the Sector* (London, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> <[www.ncvo.org.uk](http://www.ncvo.org.uk)> accessed 1 April 2011; the comparable bodies for the rest of the UK are: NICVA (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action); SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organizations); and WCVA (Welsh Council for Voluntary Action).

<sup>13</sup> Database of Archives on NGOs. Available at <[www.dango.bham.ac.uk](http://www.dango.bham.ac.uk)> accessed 1 April 2011.

<sup>14</sup> For a good sense of the diversity of the sector, see H. Curtis and M. Sanderson, *The Unsung Sixties: Memoirs of Social Innovation* (London, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> H. Kean, *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain since 1800* (London, 2000); I. Newkirk, *Free the Animals: The Story of the Animal Liberation Front* (London, 2000); R. Garner, *Political Animals: Animal Protection Policies in Britain and the United States* (London, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> M. McCarthy, *Campaigning for the Poor: CPAG and the Politics of Welfare* (London, 1986); J. Lewis, *The Voluntary Sector, the State and Social Work in Britain: The Charity Organisation Society/Family Welfare Association since 1869* (Aldershot, 1995); P. Whiteley and S. Winyard, *Pressure for the Poor: The Poverty Lobby and Policy Making* (London, 1987); T. Evans, 'Stopping the Poor Getting Poorer: The Establishment of Professionalization of Poverty NGOs, 1945–1995', in Crowson *et al.*, eds, *NGOs in Britain, 147–63*; F. Field, *Poverty and Politics: The Inside Story of the Child Poverty Action Group Campaign in the 1970s* (London, 1982).

arena of homelessness, politics is not solely the preserve of Shelter or the Advisory Service for Squatters, that is, those more radical groups associated with the campaigning initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s, but also established charities such as Centrepoin, faith-based initiatives such as the Church Army, Emmaus, the Salvation Army, and Quaker Homeless Action, and more recent self-help ventures such as the Big Issue Foundation.<sup>17</sup>

The cumulative growth of these organizations has been impressive. Fig. 1 shows the number of registered charities in Britain in the post Second World War period. Although not all NGOs are registered as charities, and not all charities have a socio-political function, even broadly defined, as a proxy the general trend is impressive, rising from a figure of 56,000 in 1950 to 180,000 in 2010. Contrast this trend with that of more established forms of political participation and engagement. Over the last half century, membership of the two main political parties has fallen from over 3 million to less than 500,000. While voter turnout was well over 80 per cent in the general elections of 1950 and 1951, in 2001 it was less than 60 per cent (though it has risen slightly in the two elections since). Trade union membership collapsed from a peak of 13 million in the late 1970s to less than 8 million just twenty years later.<sup>18</sup>

The fortunes of specific NGO sectors confirm the overall trend. Fig. 2, for instance, shows the number of new environmental organizations that have appeared in each year since 1945. It has meant that environmentalism, as in other sectors, has been able to draw upon ever more resources, particularly in terms of membership and income. By the turn of the millennium, the combined membership (accepting some double counting) of all the main environmental NGOs was 6 million (see Fig. 3).

NGOs have become increasingly prominent in public life. Notwithstanding the long-standing traditions of voluntary and philanthropic endeavour prior to the Second World War, it is clear that NGOs have had an increasing impact on both policy formation and the economic and social life of the country as a whole since 1945.<sup>19</sup> There are many ways to measure their standing. One statistic is that of the

<sup>17</sup> R. Humphreys, *No Fixed Abode: A History of Responses to the Roofless and Rootless in Britain* (Basingstoke, 1999); T. Swithinbank, *Coming Up from the Streets: The Story of the Big Issue* (London, 2001); S. Hutson and D. Clapham, *Homelessness: Public Policies and Private Troubles* (London, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> J. Achur, *Trade Union Membership 2009* (London, 2010), 10 <[www.bis.gov.uk/policies/employment-matters/research/trade-union-stats](http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/employment-matters/research/trade-union-stats)>. Sources originally from Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics; Department for Employment (1892–1974); Certification Office (1974–2007/08).

<sup>19</sup> J. Harris, ed., *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford, 2003); F. Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse: Philanthropy in Modern Britain* (London, 1988).



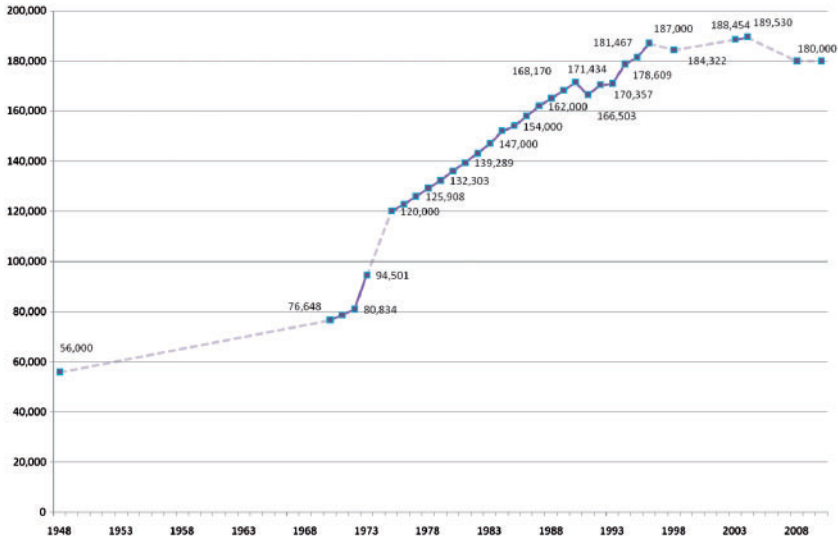


Figure 1.

Number of registered charities in the UK. Sources: W. H. Beveridge, *Voluntary Action: A Report on Methods of Social Advance* (London, 1948), 212; Committee on Voluntary Organisations, *The Future of Voluntary Organisations: Report of the Wolfenden Committee* (London, 1978), 34; Kendall and Knapp, *The Voluntary Sector in the UK*, (Manchester, 1996), 5; Charity Commission ([http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/About\\_us/About\\_charities/factfigures.aspx](http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/About_us/About_charities/factfigures.aspx)); Charity Commission Annual Report 2009-10: 22 ([http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Library/about\\_us/Charity\\_Commission\\_Annual\\_Report\\_09\\_10.pdf](http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Library/about_us/Charity_Commission_Annual_Report_09_10.pdf)); Charity Trends/Charity Statistics (various years); NCVO Almanac (various years).

number of references to NGOs made in the press. If it appears an admittedly crude measure it is at least appropriate, not least because NGOs have sought effectiveness by sidestepping traditional channels of political power through direct interventions in the media. Taking as a sample sixty-five of Britain's leading NGOs, there has been a steady growth in the references made to them in the press, such that by the end of the 1990s, there were around 4,500 mentions per year in the *The Times* and the *Guardian/Observer* alone (see Fig. 4).

The socio-political presence of NGOs in the post-Second World War period is not just a British phenomenon. Comparative data might easily be produced, but the more interesting point is that this is a global trend as well. The number of NGOs granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations has increased from 41 in 1948, to 377 in 1968 to 1,350 in 1998, and over 2,500 in 2010. Moreover, the number of international NGOs has expanded from

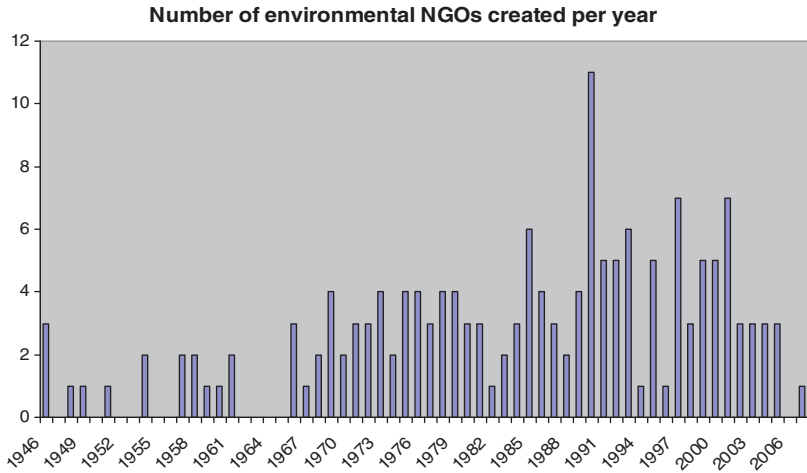


Figure 2. Number of environmental NGOs created per year. Source: [www.dango.bham.ac.uk](http://www.dango.bham.ac.uk)

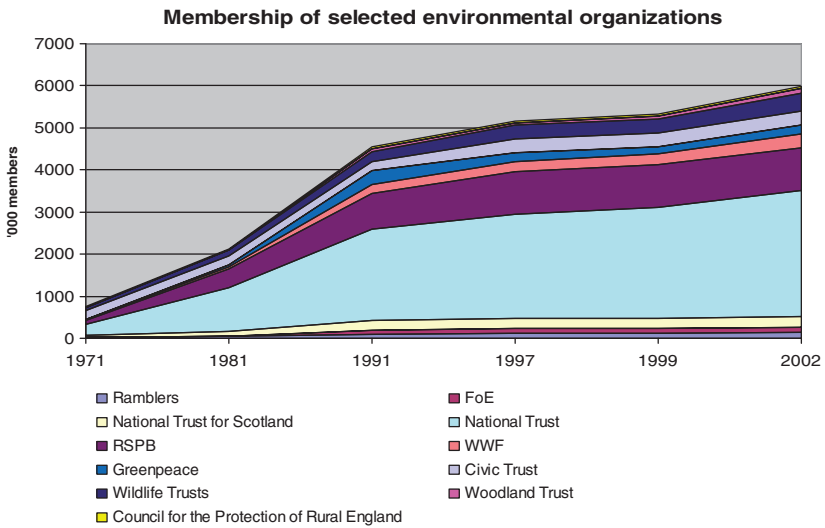


Figure 3. Membership of environmental NGOs. Source: *Charity Trends*.

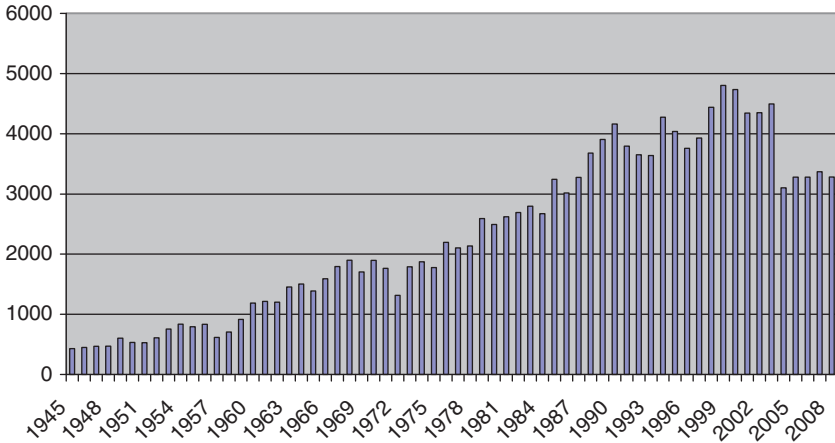


Figure 4.

Mentions of NGOs in newspapers. Source: *The Times*, *Observer*, *Guardian*<sup>20</sup>.

around 2,000 at the times of the UN's formation to around 13,000 in 2010.<sup>21</sup>

Most work on NGOs and global civil society has tended to focus on the more dramatic forms of campaigning and protest which emerged out of the new social movements associated with the 1960s: women's rights, environmentalism, human rights, peace movements, anti-nuclear campaigns, and the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>22</sup> Yet when studies have

<sup>20</sup> The sharp drop in the number of NGOs cited in 2004, from 4,500 in 2003 to 3,100 in 2004 (a fall of nearly 30 per cent) is due to the change in databases used, from ProQuest to Lexis.

<sup>21</sup> H. Anheier *et al.*, 'Introducing Global Civil Society', in H. Anheier *et al.*, eds, *Global Civil Society 2001* (Oxford, 2001), 4; H. K. Jacobson, *Networks of Interdependence: International Organisations and the Global Political System* (2nd edn, New York, 1984); J. Boli and G. M. Thomas, 'INGOs and the Organisation of World Culture', in J. Boli and G. M. Thomas, *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organisations since 1875* (Stanford, 1999), 13–49; K. Skjelsbaek, 'The Growth of International Nongovernmental Organization in the Twentieth Century', *International Organization*, 25 (1971), 420–42; K. Martens, *NGOs and the United Nations: Institutionalization, Professionalization and Adaptation* (Basingstoke, 2005); P. Willetts, ed., 'Consultative States for NGOs at the United Nations', in *The Conscience of the World: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organisations in the UN System* (London, 1996), 31–62.

<sup>22</sup> A. M. Clark *et al.*, 'The Sovereign Limits of Global Civil Society: A Comparison of NGO Participation in UN World Conferences on the Environment, Human Rights and Women', *World Politics*, 51 (1998), 1–35; D. A. Snow *et al.*, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford, 2004); J. Clark, ed., *Globalizing Civic Engagement: Civil Society and Transnational Action* (London, 2003); Global Policy Forum, *NGOs and the United Nations: Comments for the Report of the Secretary General* (New York, 1999); J. Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge, 2003); A. C. Hudock, *NGOs and Civil Society: Democracy by Proxy?* (Cambridge, 1999); J. Clark, *Worlds Apart: Civil Society and the Battle for Ethical Globalization* (London, 2003); H. Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Basingstoke, 2006).

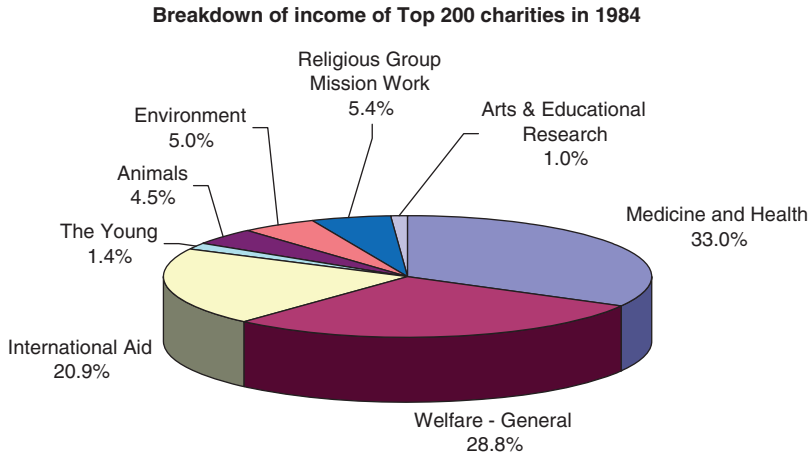


Figure 5.  
Income of top 200 charities. Source: *Charity Trends*.

been conducted into NGO influence it has often been found that far less glamorous bodies such as the International Council of Voluntary Agencies and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources have a greater role to play in the institutions of civil society than those which have more effectively captured the public imagination, such as Friends of the Earth and Amnesty International.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, in Britain, if a snapshot of the NGO sector is taken at any one point then the higher profile of NGOs such as Oxfam is not always matched by the funds going to the sector. Fig. 5 shows that the charitable sector in 1984 was dominated by social welfare organizations and by the groups focused on medicine and health. The British Heart Foundation and Cancer Research are unlikely to be categorized as new social movements, but they are nevertheless political entities through the demands they make of the state and other institutions. In any case, for all the problems we might raise about the validity of charitable income data (especially that not all NGOs, e.g. Amnesty, are charities), Fig. 5 alerts us to the relatively weak position of the environmental sector when compared with all charities.

## 2. NGOs as Ordinary Politics

The approaches so far adopted to analyse all these groups have inadequately captured their diversity and complexity. Two contrasting approaches come from a political science and social historical

<sup>23</sup> Jacobson, *Networks of Interdependence*, 411–13.

tradition: pressure group lobbying and voluntarism. The problem with the former is that it treats pressure groups as the organized articulation of a particular interest. The literature is therefore more conducive to understanding the work of trade unions and associations of manufacturers, retailers, and professionals, rather than NGOs whose campaigns are often wholly unrelated to the material interests of their membership.<sup>24</sup> In the USA, this literature is perhaps more developed, not least because a wider, citizen-based, interest has been mobilized—that of the public interest movement spearheaded by Ralph Nader—which has engaged in the forms of political intervention associated with pressure group politics. But it is arguable that public interest lobbying had its heyday in the late 1960s and 1970s, that it perhaps is specific to the tactics adopted by the ‘Nader Network’ and those sympathetic to it, and that therefore it is difficult to find such activity in the more centrist and corporatist political regimes of Europe, which lack the supposed pluralism of American politics with the many arenas for lobbying to take place (especially in the back corridors of Congress).<sup>25</sup>

For very different reasons the focus on voluntarism is also inadequate to capture the full diversity of the NGO sector. While voluntarism continues to attract significant academic interest, not least in the Office of the Third Sector’s (renamed Officer for Civil Society in 2010) support for coordinated research, for social historians the debates have been rooted very much in nineteenth-century philanthropy, local government, and welfare provision, particularly in areas such as public health, education, moral reform, and social deprivation experienced by marginal groups such as women and children. For these works the focus is on charity, the religious inspiration for much voluntary activity, and the subsequent decline of the philanthropic spirit when the government has stepped in, particularly after 1945 and the full flourishing of the British welfare state.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the ominous shadow of Leviathan lurks over both the secondary literature as well as the numerous soul searching investigations that have been made into the

<sup>24</sup> W. Grant, *Pressure Groups and British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2000). For a broader reflection on interests, see S. Berger, ed., *Organizing Interests in Western Europe: Pluralism, Corporatism, and the Transformation of Politics* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>25</sup> D. Vogel, ‘The Public-interest Movement and the American Reform Tradition’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 95 (1980–81), 607–27, reprinted in D. Vogel, *Kindred Strangers: The Uneasy Relationship Between Politics and Business in America* (Princeton, 1996); D. I. Warren, ‘The Middle American Radicals’, *The Nation*, 17 August 1974, 107–10; S. Gross, ‘The Nader Network’, *Business and Society Review*, 13 (1975), 5–15; B. Burlingham, ‘Popular Politics: The Arrival of Ralph Nader’, *Working Papers for a New Society*, 2 (1974), 5–14; R. J. Hrebenar, *Interest Group Politics in America* (Armonk, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> From very different perspectives, but with similar conclusions, see F. Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford, 2006); S. Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organizations in Crisis* (London, 1976).

voluntary sector from Beveridge's *Voluntary Action* (1948) onwards.<sup>27</sup> More recently, the narrative has shifted, not least because the Labour governments of 1997–2010 sought a new relationship between the public and the voluntary sector or, for critics, a form of co-option since campaigning activities become restricted for groups which increasingly rely on state funds to finance their work in service provision.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, voluntarism still captures much of the work undertaken by NGOs, but as a conceptual framework it fails to account for the greater professionalization of many NGOs, the eschewal of mass memberships by others or their reliance on mass contributions which support a non-voluntary yet highly skilled expert staff.

In order to try and capture the distinctive nature of the post-Second World War period of political activism, historians and social scientists have instead turned to 'new social movements'. This has constituted an immensely helpful examination of high profile movements associated with feminism, environmentalism, peace, and civil or human rights.<sup>29</sup> It has examined these as movements, rather than as institutions and has accordingly focused not only on the politics being articulated, but the social networks that gave rise to such movements in the first place. The problems, though, are not dissimilar to those found in the literature on political lobbying and voluntarism. It undoubtedly helps get to grips with new forms of organization that owe little to interest group politics

<sup>27</sup> W. H. Beveridge, *Voluntary Action: A Report on Methods of Social Advance* (London, 1948). See also Committee on Voluntary Organisations, *The Future of Voluntary Organisations: Report of the Wolfenden Committee* (London, 1978); Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector, *Meeting the Challenge of Change: Voluntary Action into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Report of the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector* (London, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> G. Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830–1990* (Oxford, 1994); D. Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy since the Industrial Revolution* (3rd edn, Basingstoke, 2003); N. Deakin, *In Search of Civil Society* (Basingstoke, 2001); J. Kendall and M. R. J. Knapp, *The Voluntary Sector in the UK* (Manchester, 1996); J. Kendall, *The Voluntary Sector: Comparative Perspectives in the UK* (London, 2003); N. Deakin, 'The Perils of Partnership: The Voluntary Sector and the State, 1945–1992', in J. Davis Smith *et al.*, eds, *An Introduction to the Voluntary Sector* (London, 1995), 40–65; G. Finlayson, 'A Moving Frontier: Voluntarism and the State in British Social Welfare', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 (1990), 183–206.

<sup>29</sup> S. M. Buechler, *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism: The Political Economy and Cultural Construction of Social Activism* (Oxford, 2000); H. Kriesi *et al.*, *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Minneapolis, 1995); E. Laraña *et al.*, eds, *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia, 1994); Snow *et al.*, eds, *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*; D. della Porta and M. Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1999); D. S. Meyer and S. Tarrow, eds, *The Social Movement Society: Contentious Politics for a New Century* (Lanham, 1998); D. McAdam *et al.*, eds, *Comparative Perspective on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge, 1996); S. Tarrow, ed., *Power in Movement: Social Movement and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, 1998); N. Thomas, *Protest Movements in 1960s West Germany: A Social History of Dissent and Democracy* (Oxford, 2003); P. Byrne, *Social Movements in Britain* (London, 1997).

or to well-established philanthropically minded volunteering, but it likewise only captures one part of those bodies which we can broadly identify as non-governmental. Indeed, there is a strong normative tendency to select for analysis only those organizations associated with liberal-left progressive causes. They do not capture the full range of NGOs working in other areas such as disability rights, education, consumerism, international aid and development, public safety, social care, old age, poverty, and social exclusion. Nor do they admit to the more fluid networks that operate within and across movements.

Such a point is illustrated if we examine the environmental sector. Friends of the Earth, founded in England and Wales in 1971, and Greenpeace, 1977, enjoy the greatest name recognition, yet environmental politics owes as much to the larger conservation groups, especially the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (1889), the National Trust (1895), and the Royal Society for Wildlife Trusts (1912).<sup>30</sup> Some seemingly modern environmental groups have also eschewed the mass membership model and have operated along an older elite policy-influencing model. The Conservation Society, founded in 1966 and the first product of 'radical ecology' in Britain, originally sought a large grassroots membership, but actually ended up following a political lobbying model that was unlikely to sustain a mass movement. Likewise, the elite, expert-based Green Alliance, founded in 1979, explicitly aimed not to be a mass organization and sought instead 'to act on opinion-formers, particularly politicians'.<sup>31</sup> That said, it still drew on the range of environmental NGOs, including the social movements and the fledgling Green Party, but also the professional magazine, the *Ecologist*, and older groups such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Town and Country Planning Association.

On the whole, the literature on new social movements remains indebted to the 1960s counter-culture and the political radicalism of the 1970s. It is of little surprise that the literature has been generated by those who often participated in these movements at the time and who have subsequently sought to redefine the meaning of left-wing politics or else sought a new confrontational politics of activism that no longer relied on the experience and expression of class-based solidarities.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> P. Lowe and J. Goyder, *Environmental Groups in British Politics* (London, 1983); C. Rootes, 'Nature Protection Organizations in England', in C. S. A. van Koppen and W. Markham, eds, *Protecting Nature: Organizations and Networks in Europe and the United States* (Cheltenham, 2007), 34–62; C. Rootes, 'Environmental NGOs and the Environmental Movement in England', in Crowson *et al.*, eds, *NGOs in Contemporary Britain*, 201–21.

<sup>31</sup> Green Alliance Archive: Box: 1978–82: Executive Committee, 20 November 1978.

<sup>32</sup> G. Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford, 2002); A. Touraine, 'The Importance of Social Movements', *Social Movement Studies*, 1 (2002), 89–95.

Perhaps of greatest use has been the explorations of the socio-economic bases of those who Frank Parkin termed, in his 1968 analysis of CND membership, 'middle-class radicals'.<sup>33</sup> In particular, a body of literature has emerged that has explored 'post-materialism' and the nature of social and political identities in an era of late or post-modern capitalism when who we are owes more to our relationship with consumption than production. This would certainly seem to explain why certain people turned away from a politics based on their now-gratified material needs such as work, diet, and housing, to look instead towards explorations of personal belief and identity as a path to fulfilment.<sup>34</sup> Yet again, though, and notwithstanding the contradictory societal trend towards ever greater materialist urges and satisfactions, such a motivation can only capture one part of the array of reasons why people have lent their support to NGOs. The post-materialist pursuer of identity-based politics and alternative value frameworks must be placed alongside the traditional volunteer and the socially conservative campaigner who might share a concern over one particular issue but differ massively on a whole range of others.

This is even more the case when we note that these diverse groups have networked with one another. Jubilee 2000, for instance, originated as the Debt Crisis Network in 1988 when NGOs such as Christian Aid, Tear Fund, Friends of the Earth, Oxfam, and the World Development Movement came together. By the end of the century it had become a global phenomenon, its petition collecting 24 million signatures from over sixty different countries. In Britain alone, there were 110 NGOs that became members of the coalition.<sup>35</sup>

Such collaboration between secularists and Christians, radicals and philanthropists, protestors and volunteers, goes back a long way. The international aid and development community is testament to this diversity. Building on longer established aid agencies such as the Red Cross and Save the Children, faith-based initiatives came into being during the Second World War. Most famously, Oxfam began as the Quaker-inspired Oxford Committee for Famine Relief in 1942 and Christian Aid began life in 1945 as Christian Reconstruction in Europe

<sup>33</sup> F. Parkin *Middle-Class Radicalism: The Social Bases of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* (Manchester, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton, 1977); A. Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye* (Cambridge, 1981); A. Melucci *Nomads of the Present* (London, 1988); A. Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> P. Grenier, 'Jubilee 2000: Laying the Foundations for a Social Movement', in J. Clark, ed., *Globalizing Civic Engagement*, 86–108; M. Mayo, *Global Citizens: Social Movements and the Challenge of Globalization* (London, 2005), 172–92; A. Pettifor, 'The Economic Bondage of Debt – and the Birth of a New Movement', *New Left Review*, 230 (1998), 115–22.



(and later the Inter-Church Aid and Refugee Service). However, they were all part of a broader internationalist spirit that often revolved around the energy of the socialist publisher, Victor Gollancz. In 1945, he established Save Europe Now which became very active in providing relief to central Europe. Later, though, his ambitions grew. In 1951, he established the Association for World Peace to campaign for peace and development. With the support of many prominent Labour MPs, especially Harold Wilson, this became War on Want in 1952.<sup>36</sup>

With one wing rooted in the Anglican church (though CAFOD, the Catholic Overseas Development Agency, supplemented the work of Christian Aid from 1962) and the other in the labour movement, international aid and development NGOs have made for uneasy comrades. Yet they have persistently worked together and campaigned for similar, pragmatic-based solutions to world problems such as the Freedom from Hunger Campaign in 1960, the formation of the Disasters Emergency Committee in 1963,<sup>37</sup> and the Voluntary Committee on Overseas Aid and Development in 1965, a body set up to enable Barbara Castle's new Ministry for Overseas Development to have access to the views of the NGO sector.<sup>38</sup>

By adopting the term NGO as a measure of socio-political activism, the intention is to follow other historians of contemporary Britain in opening up the political field far wider than that of others who have examined just one part of what has been extremely loosely referred to as the third sector.<sup>39</sup> The term NGO, as used here, refers to the 'players' of civil society, those organizations which have sought voice and influence, as well as protest and provision.<sup>40</sup> And in expanding the range of political actors the notion of the 'ordinary' becomes useful as a means of identifying extra-parliamentary politics in the period since the mid-twentieth century. There has been an ordinariness to political

<sup>36</sup> M. Black, *A Cause for our Times: Oxfam, the First Fifty Years* (Oxford, 1992); M. Luetchford and P. Burns, *Waging the War on Want: 50 Years of Campaign Against World Poverty* (London, 2003); C. Saunders, 'British Humanitarian Aid and Development NGOs, 1949–Present', in Crowson *et al.*, *NGOs in Contemporary Britain*, 38–58.

<sup>37</sup> The original founders were the British Red Cross, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children Fund, and War on Want and have been subsequently joined by ActionAid, CAFOD, Care International UK, Concern Worldwide, Help the Aged, Islamic Relief, Merlin, Tearfund, and World Vision: <[http://www.dec.org.uk/who\\_we\\_are/dec\\_members.html](http://www.dec.org.uk/who_we_are/dec_members.html)> accessed 6 August 2009.

<sup>38</sup> P. Burnell, 'Introduction to Britain's Overseas Aid: Between Idealism and Self-interest', in A. Bose and P. Burnell, eds, *Britain's Overseas Aid since 1979: Between Idealism and Self-Interest* (Manchester, 1991), 1–31; I. Smillie, *The Alms Bazaar: Altruism Under Fire – Non-Profit Organizations and International Development* (London, 1995); P. J. Burnell, *Charity, Politics and the Third World* (London, 1991); P. Burnell, *Foreign Aid in a Changing World* (Buckingham, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> For the most recent see Black, *Redefining British Politics*.

<sup>40</sup> J. McKay and M. Hilton, 'Introduction', in Crowson *et al.*, eds, *NGOs in Contemporary Britain*.

expression which encapsulates not only the day-to-day concerns of so many activists, volunteers, protestors, subscribers, and members, but an ordinariness to the demands which have so often eschewed ideology, interest, and the invidiousness of party politics.

Undoubtedly such a turn to the 'ordinary' differs from its usual connotations. From Williams onwards, scholars have long explored the ordinary and the everyday, though usually to find more spectacular moments of resistance, confrontation, and appropriation. Thus, for example, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies saw in subcultures 'resistance through rituals'.<sup>41</sup> The critical theorist, Michel de Certeau, found everywhere in everyday life active moments of production or *poiesis*.<sup>42</sup> More politically, in the footdragging of Malay padi farmers, the anthropologist James C. Scott saw 'everyday forms of peasant resistance'.<sup>43</sup> Historians have long extended their field of vision in their desire to explain away the absence of revolutionary worker action through the supposed 'cultures of consolation' offered by the mass market.<sup>44</sup>

The *alltagsgeschichte* project, led by Alf Lüdtke, has examined 'everyday, ordinary people' to explore, in Engel's phrase, 'the production and reproduction of real life'.<sup>45</sup> Here, the everyday does not have to stand in for something ideological or for confrontation by other means. For much of the time, the ordinary remains just that: ordinary. There is an essential mundanity to the routine coping mechanisms people employ just to get by. They engage in 'unconscious, non-reflexively applied routines' or acts which often take place without any explicit reference to a source of authority and without any obvious political intent.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, for Pierre Bourdieu, much of everyday life is indeed ordinary and banal, though those with a better 'feel for the

<sup>41</sup> S. Hall and T. Jefferson, eds, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London, 1976); D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979).

<sup>42</sup> M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London, 1984); M. Poster, 'The Question of Agency: Michel de Certeau and the History of Consumerism', *Diacritics*, 22 (1992), 94–107.

<sup>43</sup> J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

<sup>44</sup> G. S. Jones, 'Working-class Culture and Working-class Politics in London, 1870–1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class', *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 460–508.

<sup>45</sup> A. Lüdtke, ed., 'Introduction: What is the History of Everyday Life and Who are its Practitioners?', in *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, 1995), 3–40; G. Eley, 'Labour History, Social History, *Alltagsgeschichte*: Experience, Culture and the Politics of the Everyday – A New Direction for German Social History?', *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (1989), 297–343; S. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (1999; Oxford, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> J. Gronow and A. Warde, eds, 'Epilogue: Conventional Consumption', in *Ordinary Consumption* (London, 2001); A. Warde, 'Consumption and Theories of Practice', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5 (2005), 131–53.

game' can obtain greater social and cultural capital within the 'habitus'.<sup>47</sup>

If we apply such ordinariness to politics, we might see in the everyday a whole host of interactions which are not indicative of ideological confrontation yet, from which, politics still emerges. This manifests itself in the everyday forms of volunteering that British citizens continue to engage in. It is often claimed that the public has become less likely to 'join in', but the evidence on volunteering demonstrates that participation in routine forms of social and political action remains quite ordinary. Indeed, there has been remarkable consistency in overall rates of associational membership. Compiling data from various social and political surveys conducted from the late 1950s to 2006 shows some fluctuation but neither an upward nor a downward trend in the rates of associational memberships reported by the population as a whole. The overall average number of memberships reported by everybody was 0.73 organizations in 1959. This fluctuated upwards to 1.15 in 1973 and as low as 0.61 in 1999, though in 2006 it was as high as 2.16.<sup>48</sup> Of course, many of these changes are to do with the ways in which social surveys ask their questions: rare indeed is it for the exact same question to be asked. The data may well not be sufficiently robust for measuring historical trends. But when more consistent data are examined over a much shorter period, neither a decline nor a rise in participation rates is apparent. Fig. 6 shows the average number of associations one person has belonged to since the beginning of the 1990s, as claimed by respondents to the British Household Panel Survey. While there are certain degrees of variation, on the whole there have been persistently high levels of membership.

The important point for us is when such forms of social capital become the basis for institutional expression, manifested most clearly in single-issue NGOs. And what is also significant is that once this politics has emerged it is expressed in ordinary terms. That is, politics is articulated in response to the immediacy of the thing confronted: it is not channelled through either a pre-existing ideological framework or through a rigid institutional structure emanating from central or local governmental party politics. In this sense, there is both an ordinariness to the factors that give rise to socio-political action, and an ordinariness to many of the solutions sought and advocated. UK supporters of the Fairtrade Foundation provide assistance to the Latin American farmer

<sup>47</sup> P. Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge, 1994), 9; P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1986); P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> Sources for these figures: for 1959–90: P. A. Hall, 'Social Capital in Britain', *British Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1999), 423; for 1999 and 2006: *World Values Survey* <[www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)> accessed 1 April 2011.

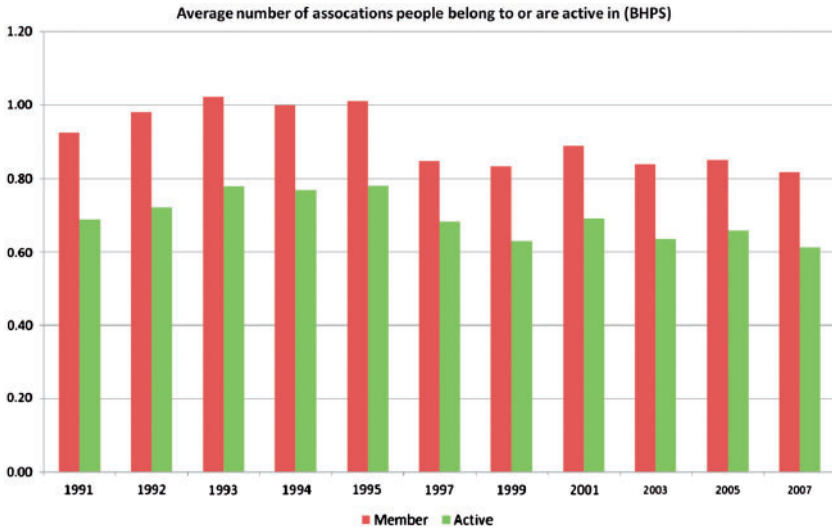


Figure 6.

*Average number of organizations people belong to or are active in. Source: British Household Panel Survey, 1991–2007.*

not because there is a desire to tie in an ethical purchase with some liberationist theology or some anti-capitalist critique of world trade. There is a concern, but a more general and diffuse one which manifests itself in the broad alliance of the Fair Trade Movement.<sup>49</sup>

This is not to say that certain NGOs are not alternative, radical, reactionary, or revolutionary in their aims and actions. For supporters of, for instance, second-wave feminism or CND, politics was always ideological and open to spectacular moments of protest. But for the vast majority of NGOs—and their members or supporters too—politics has been ordinary: ordinary in the sense that the support for an organization has not necessarily been conceived as political; and ordinary in the sense that the solutions sought for the issues covered by the NGO have also not been regarded as political in any ideological or party political sense. The consumer movement, for instance, built on ordinary consumers' dislike of being ripped off. It has sought ordinary solutions through market redress mechanisms and specific acts of legislation dealing with specific problems. At no point has it proposed a fundamental rethinking of the structures of the economy such that all

<sup>49</sup> M. Anderson, 'The Fair Trade Movement in Britain', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK 2009.

forms of market abuse were made illegal or prevented from arising in the first place.<sup>50</sup>

There is a history to such ordinary politics, one which takes us beyond the study of government, party, and trade union. James Vernon's history of hunger uncovers the roles of experts and professionals of nutritional science who did not necessarily adhere to any formal political platform, yet who contributed significantly to the politics of welfare provision by fostering an ongoing debate about minimum standards of living, below which citizens ought not to be allowed to fall.<sup>51</sup> Women's historians have long recognized the contributions made by politically and socially diverse organizations that have united behind issues such as maternity benefits and child health. Party and ideology do not have to be the prisms through which we interpret NGOs. The British Legion, Rotary International, and the League of Nations Union do not have to be seen as the bedrock of Conservative Party politics. Rather, they were independent entities that politicized the issues of importance to many unattached voters.<sup>52</sup> The National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty) does not have to be seen as a Communist Party stooge (as many accused it of being in the 1930s and 1940s), but was instead supported by 'progressive professionals' concerned with a specific socio-political issue.<sup>53</sup> In many ways, such an approach takes us back to the term, 'middle opinion' first employed by Arthur Marwick in 1964 to describe bodies such as the Workers' Educational Association, the Sunlight League, and Political and Economic Planning.<sup>54</sup>

These trends developed most clearly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Table 1 lists many NGOs prominent in the post-Second World War period, along with their foundation dates, attesting not only to the diversity of this middle way of politics, but to the ongoing development of it. Some are indeed radical and appear as

<sup>50</sup> M. Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge, 2003); Hilton, *Prosperity for All: Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalisation* (Ithaca, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> J. Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> H. McCarthy, 'Parties, Voluntary Associations, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain', *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), 891–912; R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> C. Moores, 'The Progressive Professionals: The National Council for Civil Liberties and the Politics of Activism in the 1960s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20 (2009), 538–60.

<sup>54</sup> A. Marwick, 'Middle Opinion in the Thirties: Planning, Progress and Political "Agreement"', *English Historical Review*, 79 (1964), 285–98; J. Pinder, ed., *Fifty Years of Political and Economic Planning: Looking Forward, 1931–1981* (London, 1981); D. Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning: The Debate on Economic Planning in Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1997); K. Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System since 1911* (London, 1979); J. Stevenson, *British Society, 1914–1945* (London, 1984), 325–9.

*Table 1.*  
*Prominent NGOs, with year of formation*

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MIND	1946
MENCAP	1946
Soil Association	1946
Alcoholics Anonymous	1947
European Movement	1948
Cruse Bereavement Care	1950
Samaritans	1953
Spastics Society	1953
Indian Workers' Association	1954
Institute of Economic Affairs	1955
Consumers' Association	1957
Homosexual Law Reform Society	1958
CND	1958
Institute of Race Relations	1958
Amnesty International	1961
British Heart Foundation	1961
World Wildlife Fund	1961
Help the Aged	1961
National Viewers' and Listeners' Association	1964
Child Poverty Action Group	1965
Shelter	1966
Society for the Protection of Unborn Children	1966
Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants	1967
Campaign for Homosexual Equality	1969
Festival of Light	1971
Friends of the Earth	1971
Campaign for Better Transport (Transport 2000)	1973
Life Style Movement	1974
Low Pay Unit	1974
Centre for Policy Studies	1974
Campaign Against the Arms Trade	1974
Advisory Service for Squatters	1975
International Fund for Animal Welfare	1976
Peace People	1976
Greenpeace	1977
Sustrans	1977
Adam Smith Institute	1977
Muslim Aid	1981
Neighbourhood Watch	1982
Terrence Higgins Trust	1982
Afghan Aid	1983
Re-Solv, Society for the Prevention of Solvent Abuse	1984
Islamic Relief	1984
Pesticides Action Network	1986
Rainforest Foundation	1989
Earth First!	1991
Fairtrade Foundation	1992
Big Issue	1995
Reclaim the Streets	1995
Countryside Alliance	1997
Muslim Council of Britain	1997

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new social movements. Others, however, are not. The majority of NGOs have sought a different route. At the local level, the interactions between activists and party workers have been incredibly dynamic, especially in the 1970s and 1980s when local authorities encouraged dialogue with self-appointed representative bodies. But at the national level, NGO legitimacy often rests upon both political neutrality and the professionalism with which they can tackle specific issues. The analysis moves away, then, from an emphasis on new social movements and the significance of the 1960s and embraces a tremendous diversity of ordinary voices and ordinary publics. We might not like all that we find in this enlarged political sphere, but we have to accept the incredible array of socio-political actors and the varied support they have obtained.

### 3. Ordinary Experts

For all its pluralism, however, the notion of ordinary politics has been bounded by both the dynamics of its membership and the values which have predominated within it. It must not be assumed that some new idealized, democratic relationship has emerged between state and society, with NGOs filling some sort of Habermasian space of rational communicative action between the two.<sup>55</sup> Rather, just as with the classic male, bourgeois public sphere, ordinary politics has been very much the product of dominant forms of knowledge and privileged socio-economic groups.<sup>56</sup> It cannot be claimed that NGOs are a class-based form of politics, but nevertheless class remains crucial in understanding their work.

For the post-Second World War period what became increasingly ordinary about politics was its technocratic nature. Expertise outside of the formal political realm has been on the rise for some time. In the 1930s, the authority that organizations such as Political and Economic Planning sought for themselves came not from their ideological affinities, nor from any mass, grassroots support. Instead, their authority was to come from their expertise. 'Planning' itself was the new technocratic ethos, the realm of the physical and social scientist, as well as the technician, the economist, the civil servant, and a whole host of professions that sought to position their expertise as independent of both the political and the social, of both state and society. They had assumed a new status as the experts and technicians of 'the social'.

<sup>55</sup> J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans. T. Burger; Oxford, 1992).

<sup>56</sup> N. Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1989); C. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (London, 1992).

As one recent study puts it, 'faith in the beneficent, public-minded expert underlay the creation of the modern welfare state.'<sup>57</sup>

In the post-Second World period, experts came into their own amidst the planning initiatives of the modern technocratic state. They found themselves at the vanguard of capitalist reconstruction, giving rise to new class-based professional identities. Socio-economically, they were the sons and daughters who had often been the first within their family to receive a university education and they were now the recipients of a secure and relatively sizeable salary. For Harold Perkin, such experts formed the basis of his 'professional society', a group that, collectively, would play a quantitatively more significant role in post-war reconstruction than they had in any other period.<sup>58</sup> They were the 'younger sons of the bourgeoisie' whom Orwell had predicted would bring about a mild-mannered English revolution.<sup>59</sup> These experts were central to not only 'economic management and social policy, but also to areas of cultural taste, the urban and rural environments, consumer behaviour and the psychological well-being of communities'.<sup>60</sup> They had a feel for the game of the modern technocracy, or, as Williams would put it, were well placed to embody the 'structure of feeling' that emphasized professionalism and expertise. Moreover, they were aware of their role.<sup>61</sup> When interviewed, middle-class Mass-Observers of the 1940s and 1950s broke with old class identities of 'status' and 'gentility' and emphasized instead their 'technocratic and scientific capacities' that they saw as 'key parts of an efficient and modernizing nation'.<sup>62</sup> Here was a transformation of middle-class identities to suit a new professional era, a trend most recently set out by Mike Savage in his study of British identities and social change.<sup>63</sup>

Just as they flocked to local government, to engineering, to the financial sector, to architecture, to law, and to medicine, so too would

<sup>57</sup> D. Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945–51* (London, 2007), 24; G. Savage, *The Social Construction of Expertise: The English Civil Service and its Influence, 1919–1939* (Pittsburgh, 1996); D. Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London, 1990).

<sup>59</sup> G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941; Harmondsworth, 1982), 113.

<sup>60</sup> B. Conekin *et al.*, 'Introduction', in B. Conekin *et al.*, eds, *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964* (London, 1999), 15.

<sup>61</sup> R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 128–35.

<sup>62</sup> M. Savage, 'Affluence and Social Change in the Making of Technocratic Middle Class Identities: Britain, 1939–1955', *Contemporary British History*, 22 (2008), 457–76 [quote from 458].

<sup>63</sup> M. Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010).



they become the bulwarks of an expanding NGO sector. They were the lawyers such as Tom Sargent and Peter Benenson who would form human rights organizations such as JUSTICE and Amnesty.<sup>64</sup> They were the higher degree-educated ecologists and environmental scientists who would flock to the environmental organizations, which would culminate in the Green Alliance eschewing mass politics, seeking power instead through an organization made up of '200 persons in positions of influence, 150 ecologists and 50 "names"'.<sup>65</sup> For those attracted to Greenpeace, they were a 'new-fangled hybrid between a professional scientist and a movement activist' (p. 114).<sup>66</sup> They were, after the first generation of Quakers and committed Christians, the engineers, scientists, and development economists who would staff Oxfam and Christian Aid and who would pass through the revolving doors of international institutions to spearhead the technocratic solutions to third world development.<sup>67</sup> They were what would be later termed 'expert citizens' rather than grassroots activists.<sup>68</sup> They were 'experts with their mouths close to telephones and their heads full of reasoned papers' rather than 'crowds with their feet close to main squares and their heads full of movement material'.<sup>69</sup>

Yet the key to understanding these post-war professionals is not purely as a socio-economic category. Their role within the liberal state was far more pervasive than that. Indeed, their growing authority was much commented on throughout the post-war period. Harvey Brooks worried in 1965 that the overall trend had become one that relegated 'questions which used to be matters of political debate to professional

<sup>64</sup> S. Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca, 2006); Tom Buchanan, "'The Truth will Set You Free": The Making of Amnesty International', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37 (2002), 575–97; T. Buchanan, 'Human Rights Campaigns in Modern Britain', in Crowson *et al.*, eds, *NGOs in Contemporary Britain*, 113–28.

<sup>65</sup> Green Alliance Archive, London: Executive Committee Minutes, 4 December 1978.

<sup>66</sup> R. Eyerman and A. Jamison, 'Environmental Knowledge as an Organisational Weapon: The Case of Greenpeace', *Social Science Information*, 28 (1989), 99–119.

<sup>67</sup> W. Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'A Curious Grapevine'* (Basingstoke, 1998), 29–50; C. Alger, 'The Emerging Roles of NGOs in the UN System: From Article 71 to a People's Millennium Assembly', *Global Governance*, 8 (2002), 93–117; A. Archer, 'Methods of Multilateral Management: The Interrelationship of International Organisations and NGOs', in T.T. Gati, ed., *The US, the UN, and the Management of Global Change* (New York, 1983), 303–25; A. Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organisations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, 2002), 42–3; P. Willetts, ed., *The Conscience of the World*.

<sup>68</sup> H. P. Bang, 'Everyday Makers and Expert Citizens: Building Political Not Social Capital', Draft Paper, Australia National University School of Social Science, 2004 <<http://dspace.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/42117/1/Henrik.pdf>> accessed February 2010; Y. Li and D. Marsh, 'New Forms of Political Participation: Searching for Expert Citizens and Everyday Makers', *British Journal of Political Science*, 38 (2008), 247–72.

<sup>69</sup> Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organizations*, 26.

cadres of technicians and experts which function almost independently of the democratic political process'.<sup>70</sup> Others too from across the ideological spectrum commented on a tendency to transfer issues from elected politicians to supposedly apolitical experts, though a more left-leaning critique such as that of Marcuse believed this was a deliberate effort to co-opt seemingly disinterested professionals to established political power blocs.<sup>71</sup> The concern of these writers was clearly one about the apparent centralization of power and 'the transfer of wider and wider areas of public policy from politics to expertise'.<sup>72</sup>

In Britain, the sociologist and founder of several organizations including the Consumers' Association, Michael Young, parodied the supposed 'meritocracy' born of professionalism and suggested the ways in which experts would perpetuate their class.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, the chronicler of the welfare state, Richard Titmuss believed expertise was being directed by an 'interlocking economic, managerial and self-regarding professional power' that was creating a 'pressure group state', the mark of an 'irresponsible society'.<sup>74</sup>

The argument is a persistent one. In a sense it has been revived by a new generation of political scientists who have used this depoliticization of the political (that is, the transfer of formerly political subjects to the realm of experts) to explain growing voter apathy.<sup>75</sup> Yet a rather different approach might be adopted, one which identifies expertise as a much more diffuse entity and one which cannot be tied so closely to the interests of those with a stake in the maintenance of the power of the state.<sup>76</sup> Power and knowledge are found not only in the disciplinary institutions formerly connected to the state, but across all those sites of expertise that have offered their own technical authority.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, such

<sup>70</sup> H. Brooks, 'Scientific Concepts and Cultural Change', *Daedalus*, 94 (1965), 66–83 [quote on 71].

<sup>71</sup> A. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of a New Class* (New York, 1979); J. Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York, 1964); H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, 1964); D. Nelkin, 'Science, Technology and Public Policy', *History of Science Society Newsletter*, 16 (1987) <<http://depts.washington.edu/hsexec/newsletter/1997/nelkin.html>> accessed 1 April 2011

<sup>72</sup> Brooks, 'Scientific Concepts', 71.

<sup>73</sup> M. Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958; Harmondsworth, 1961).

<sup>74</sup> R.M. Titmuss, *The Irresponsible Society* (London, 1960), 20.

<sup>75</sup> C. Hay, *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge, 2007); D. Marquand, *Decline of the Public: The Hollowing Out of Citizenship* (Cambridge, 2004); K. Jefferys, *Politics and the People: A History of British Democracy since 1918* (London, 2007).

<sup>76</sup> M. Foucault, 'On Governmentality', *Ideology and Consciousness*, 6 (1979), 5–22; T. Johnson, 'Expertise and the State', in M. Gane and T. Johnson, eds, *Foucault's New Domains* (London, 1993); M. Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology* (London, 1994), especially chapter 9, 'Governmentality...'; M. Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London, 1999).

<sup>77</sup> M. Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830–1864*. (Chicago, 1995); Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London, 2003).

a broader notion of governance is almost a truism. Notwithstanding the barbarity of twentieth-century totalitarian states, states fail when they impose a form of government that is divorced from other sites of knowledge.<sup>78</sup> Liberal regimes operate instead through a more diverse base of knowledge creation. To the list of expert professionals (e.g. the modern 'psy' professions<sup>79</sup>) operating within modern 'governmentality' we can add too those NGOs that operate in so many arenas of social, economic, cultural, and political life. Their work not only represents the interests of those existing within society. They have also constructed and contributed to our knowledge about society.

At times, such freedom to operate as experts has been seemingly curtailed. Certain interest groups have often worked to restrict the authority of NGOs and to limit the areas in which they can speak. International aid and development NGOs, for instance, have persistently fallen foul of the Charity Commissioners in England. During the 1960s, following constant trouble with the charity regulations, Christian Aid and Oxfam combined with other agencies to launch Action for World Development in 1969, as well as the non-charitable World Development Movement in order to avoid such scrutiny and control.<sup>80</sup> In the 1980s, organized interests sought to use UK charity law to restrict NGOs. Western Goals, an aggressively anti-communist and neoconservative think tank, lodged a complaint with the Charities Commission against War on Want, Christian Aid, and Oxfam claiming they were involved with political campaigning work through their links with left wing organizations in South Africa.<sup>81</sup> It was backed up by another right-wing group, the International Freedom Foundation which claimed in 1989 that the principal development NGOs had 'been "captured" at their centres by small cliques of ideologically motivated individuals'.<sup>82</sup>

Regardless of these restrictions that have been particularly acute for the development charities, NGOs have nevertheless participated in the construction of the subject for whom and for which they speak. The consumer movement, for instance, has not sought simply to provide the

<sup>78</sup> J. C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven, 1999).

<sup>79</sup> N. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (1999); Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (Cambridge, 1999); Rose, 'Governing "Advanced" Liberal Democracies', in A. Barry *et al.*, eds, *Foucault and Political Reason* (London, 1996), 37–64 [quotation at 52].

<sup>80</sup> World Development Movement, *A Brief History of WDM* (London, 1987); D. Walker, *Power to End Poverty* (London, 1969).

<sup>81</sup> Luetchford and Burns, *Waging the War on Want*, 143.

<sup>82</sup> International Freedom Foundation, 'A Multitude of Sins, Plus Accompanying Letter', 22 March 1989, cited in C. Dolan, 'British Development NGOs and Advocacy in the 1990s', in M. Edwards and D. Hulme, eds, *Making a Difference: NGOs and Development in a Changing World* (London, 1992), 203–10 [quote from 207].

consumer with information about the 'best buy'. It has also worked to create an idealized citizen-consumer who behaves in accordance with the scientific, professional, and technocratic ethos that has pervaded the pages of *Which?* since 1957.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, the environmental NGO does not just reflect the interests of citizens; it helps constitute what makes the good environmental citizen. Indeed, it appears as though the environmental movement has wanted to draw upon a well-trained, loyal, and obedient army of good green lifestylers who can be called out to back up the expert pronouncements of the professional staffers. In a Greenpeace campaign guide written at the end of the twentieth century, the strategy developed by the NGO leaders was to simplify issues such that the 'grey-shades' of solutions to environmental problems were polarized into black and white. The purpose of the Greenpeace supporter was not so much to reflect on the nature of the problem, but to take action in promoting a solution which had already been set out by the NGO itself.<sup>84</sup>

To be sure, NGOs have acted as traditional political entities. They have lobbied Parliament, sought connections with MPs, pressed for early day motions, presented evidence to select committees, and written submissions to Royal Commissions. Their influence in getting landmark pieces of legislation passed—be it laws relating to abortion, immigration, the environment, market regulation, minority civil rights, and so on—has been well documented and in many ways accounts for the ongoing support given to such successful NGOs. But the political role of NGOs is much broader than that. NGOs, along with other professionals, have been engaged in a process of knowledge creation about the social realm. They are like the experts of the modern technocratic state that help constitute a subject and which, in turn, becomes 'a set of practices that puts in place a new politics of calculation'.<sup>85</sup>

NGOs might be non-governmental but they are not non-governmentality. They cannot be placed alongside one line which clearly demarcates state from society. Indeed, such a line is difficult to draw. Timothy Mitchell dismisses any attempt to regard the state as a discrete entity, since there are so many examples that break down any meaningful distinction from society, be it bankers setting financial policy, academic scientists informing public health policies, or

<sup>83</sup> L. Black, 'Which?craft in post-war Britain: The Consumers' Association and the politics of affluence', *Albion* 36 (2004), 52–82; M. Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge, 2003).

<sup>84</sup> Greenpeace International Archives, International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam): MS 2143: Greenpeace UK Campaign Guide, 1998.

<sup>85</sup> T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002), 8. See also J. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (1990; Minneapolis, 1994).

employers influencing trade relations. Instead, he sees any such state–society division as an internal arrangement which allows actors to create boundaries around which they can claim to exist. Building on Foucault, he argues that this boundary is drawn in the minute practices of disciplining. Discipline is the product not of a pre-existing state acting upon us but the effect of a series of detailed practices and technologies of power in regard to so many other institutionalized arrangements. Here, the state too becomes the effect, as experts create a distinction between state and society in order to locate their own operations.<sup>86</sup>

Given that discipline exists in the detail rather than in co-ordinated state action, it gives rise to many contradictions such that there is incoherence and therefore possibilities for resistance in the political subjects that are created. NGOs are a part of this process. Indeed, their very name, ‘non-governmental’ is precisely such an effort to create the effect of a state–society distinction. The NGO does not actually stand apart from government—or, rather, governmentality—since its own expertise makes it a part of the disciplinary procedures usually associated with the state. Yet it creates an internal division between state and society in order to define its own sphere of operation and practice. It is in its everyday work, therefore, that the NGO is both a part of the disciplinary process and a seeming resistor of it. In modern liberal states, the NGO is at one and the same time an agent acting against the state, but also a wing of it as it forms part of the nexus of governmentality.

It is in these senses—that NGOs cannot be reduced only to being the carriers of authentic interests and values of citizens; that they cannot, in other cases, likewise be reduced to being ideological stooges of existing political parties; that they cannot be regarded as either co-opted partners or entirely independent entities of the state—that enables us to classify the work and politics of NGOs as ordinary. They might well, at times, be one or more of any of these phenomena, but their role is much wider and far more pervasive. Indeed, it is precisely their location within the modern technocracy and the professional institutions which make up its wider system of governance that has become so ordinary in the post-Second World War period.

#### 4. Trusting the Ordinary

There is in this analysis a basis for explaining the popularity and pervasiveness of NGOs. Precisely because they do not offer a coherent,

<sup>86</sup> T. Mitchell, ‘The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and their Critics’, *American Political Science Review*, 85 (1991), 77–96.

rigorous, or ideologically driven world view, and precisely because they are as much a part of the 'system' as a challenge to it, then here is the explanation for their growth. If what is ordinary about politics is its expert and technocratic nature, then it makes sense for the public to support organizations which can bring expertise to expertise. There is a logic and a rationality in the decision to place one's trust in certain institutions over others.

Unfortunately, existing accounts do not see NGOs in this light. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, for instance, sees a decline in participation in US voluntary associations, resulting in a decline in social capital and ultimately democratic citizenship.<sup>87</sup> Frank Prochaska argues similarly for Britain, particularly because, as he sees it, the older philanthropic bodies which enjoyed a golden age in the late Victorian era have suffered a long and terminal decline.<sup>88</sup> For all that other studies have instead pointed to continued high levels of voluntary membership throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the pessimists have tended to be dismissive of the supposedly more passive support for NGOs.<sup>89</sup>

Of course, the nature of membership has changed and this is the key to interpretation. The social capital thesis would hold that the non-participatory nature of much NGO membership does not forge the types of social bonds that ultimately give rise to trust, both at the social level and in our political institutions. But the problem is that trust does not have to be seen as the consequence of membership; it might just as easily be the cause of our membership. Declining levels of social trust may well be due to general social changes wrought by the transition to affluence, but declining levels of political trust might be the product of conscious decisions taken by ordinary citizens. The moral philosopher, Onora O'Neill, has bemoaned the increasing culture of accountability in recent years. This has created a culture of suspicion about our public and professional institutions such that we now place less trust in the media, business, and politicians. Yet she also notes that trust is not simply a sociological category. It is also something we decide to do. Thus, she notes that although we might not trust journalists to any great general degree, we do decide to place a tremendous amount of trust in them to provide us with the correct

<sup>87</sup> R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000).

<sup>88</sup> Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service*.

<sup>89</sup> Hall, 'Social Capital' 417–62; G. A. Almond and S. Verba, eds, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, 1963); S. H. Barnes and M. Kasse, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (London, 1979) and *World Values Surveys* conducted in 1981, 1990, 1999, and 2006.

Table 2.  
Interest in politics (*Showcard: How interested are you in politics?*)

Poll	Very interested, %	Fairly interested, %	Not very interested, %	Not at all interested, %
MORI 1973	14	46	27	13
State of the Nation 1991	13	47	26	13
State of the Nation 1995	13	40	30	17
Audit of Political Engagement 2003	11	39	32	18
Audit of Political Engagement 2010	14	39	29	18

Source: Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 7: The 2010 Report* (London, 2010), 119.

football results every weekend. It is this active and discriminating type of trust which she seeks to cultivate as a moral force.<sup>90</sup>

Arguably, this is what the public has done over the last five or six decades. Indeed, evidence suggests that 'people in Britain have a remarkable understanding of different kinds of political trust'.<sup>91</sup> Certainly, they have not lost their interest in political issues. Survey data from the 1970s onwards conducted by the Audit of Political Engagement and others has measured attitudes to politics and the figures show remarkable consistency (see Table 2), if a slight tendency for the obstinately uninterested to increase. The public has demonstrated persistently low levels of trust in journalists and politicians, for instance, yet much higher trust in the professions and the charitable sector. Taking just one example, conducted at the end of the 1990s by the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), it was found that nearly everybody (91 per cent) respect what charities are doing.<sup>92</sup> A study commissioned by Action Aid in 1988 found that 70 per cent of respondents believed that politicians were not doing all that they could on international aid and development issues. Trust in charities, in contrast, was much higher. Of course, this sector is particularly prone to certain imbalances: while the public constantly shows its supports for charities through extraordinarily impressive donations, these figures

<sup>90</sup> O. O'Neill, *A Question of Trust: The BBC Reith Lectures 2002* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>91</sup> Li and Marsh, 'New Forms of Political Participation', 264.

<sup>92</sup> F. Tonkiss and A. Passey, 'Trust, Confidence and Voluntary Organisations: Between Values and Institutions', *Sociology*, 33 (1999), 257–74.

rise especially during emergencies, arguably trapping the NGO into relief work rather than long-term development. The point applies more generally. The same NCVO survey also found that most people think charities are engaged in relatively innocuous caring roles that we associate with traditional forms of philanthropy. The reading we can take from such evidence, as the British voluntary sector has itself worried, is that trust is maintained in charities precisely because they are not seen as political actors.<sup>93</sup>

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the public trusts the expertise of NGOs more than that of other bodies. The IPSOS MORI 'Trust in the Professions: Veracity Index', commissioned by the Royal College of Physicians, shows persistently higher rates of trust in the professions than for business, governments, or journalists.<sup>94</sup> When we break down these figures still further, it becomes even more apparent. A poll conducted in August 1993 found that 38 per cent of the public trusted government scientists. The figure for trust in industry scientists was around the same at 41 per cent. Yet for scientists working for environmental organizations that figure was 73 per cent.<sup>95</sup> This suggests that among supporters of NGOs there is an emotional attachment as they trust the organization to act on their behalf when dealing with other experts. The public itself lacks the expertise about a particular issue, but has made a calculated decision on who to trust to act as an expert. Greenpeace, for instance, has seen itself as a scientific body, yet in precisely such a way it has recognized the 'emotional contract' it has had with its supporters.<sup>96</sup>

This trust has emerged out of a sense of frustration. Greenpeace believed its support came from a growing public awareness about environmental issues, yet 'conventional politics said little about how to deal with new environmental risks'.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the public felt disenfranchised from environmental debate, feeling it was an issue confined to the media and one in which 'science is increasingly used by government and business to dismiss or conceal environmental concerns. The rising public environmental concern was accompanied by a sense of anxiety, frustration, and eventually, helplessness'.<sup>98</sup> At such moments of concern, the NGO can step in.

<sup>93</sup> 'Blurred Vision: Public Trust in Charities', *NCVO Research Quarterly*, 1 (1998).

<sup>94</sup> Royal College of Physicians, *Trust in the Professions: IPSOS MORI Veracity Index* (2008) <[http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/Ipsos\\_MORI\\_Veracity\\_Index\\_2008.pdf](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/Ipsos_MORI_Veracity_Index_2008.pdf)> accessed 1 April 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Greenpeace International (Amsterdam): Greenpeace MS 2124: Jonathon Porritt, 'Scientists Plagued by the Credibility Gulf', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 December 1994.

<sup>96</sup> Greenpeace International (Amsterdam): Greenpeace MS 2135: 'Programme - Discussion Paper', September 1992.

<sup>97</sup> Greenpeace International (Amsterdam): Greenpeace MS 2141: 'Changes at Greenpeace UK: An explanation', 1994.

<sup>98</sup> Greenpeace International (Amsterdam): Greenpeace MS 2141.



Yet it must do so in a manner that avoids being tainted with the same suspicious brush as the politician. As membership of and trust in mass political parties has steadily declined since the 1950s support for NGOs has increased in part because they position themselves as non-party political and thus avoid the culture of suspicion increasingly targeted at politicians. The ordinariness of NGOs is tied in with their perceived autonomy. Indeed, NGOs suffer when they are too readily associated with a political party. When George Galloway took over as General Secretary of War on Want in the 1980s a whole host of problems contributed to its demise, but his too close associations with the Labour Party and the trade unions overstepped the delicate balance maintained previously with such figures as Harold Wilson.<sup>99</sup> A typical claim therefore made by NGOs has been that they aim to bring people together 'regardless of their political affiliations'.<sup>100</sup>

If trust is demonstrated negatively through independence from party it must also be shown positively by a willingness to work with and engage with partners who on so many other issues wider ideological differences might impact. Michael Taylor, director of Christian Aid in the 1980s, reflected on how secularists and Christians have worked together on a basis of mutual respect in order to tackle global poverty. Doing good, in a Christian sense, for Taylor meant signing up to specific initiatives—technological, economic, and social—that others could support too. The importance was the single issue arrived at rather than the wider world view that each organization might draw upon to reach the same practical solution.<sup>101</sup>

In the development sector, theology has taken a back seat for Christian Aid, just as ideology has for the leftist War on Want. More generally, this is an approach that is now commonplace in much of the commentary on 'anti-globalization' protest, but it has lain behind the operating rationale of NGOs for decades. And it again brings us to the question of membership and support. Clearly, single-issue politics is open to the charge that it reduces politics to shopping. Voters, or supporters of NGOs, have low costs of exit and can switch their affinities readily and often: this is 'cheap participation' as one study puts it.<sup>102</sup> Yet for all that the counter-cultural generation critiques the 'priesthood' of technocratic experts, supporters of NGOs have actually recognized that such experts are better placed to make one's case (albeit with 'our' experts rather than 'their' experts).<sup>103</sup> Citizens might no

<sup>99</sup> Luetchford and Burns, *Waging the War on Want*.

<sup>100</sup> Green Alliance Archive: 'The Green Alliance', *Vole*, March 1979.

<sup>101</sup> M. Taylor, *Good for the Poor: Christian Ethics and World Development* (London, 1990), 4.

<sup>102</sup> G. Jordan and W. Maloney, *The Protest Business: Mobilizing Campaign Groups* (Manchester, 1997).

<sup>103</sup> W. Ophuls, *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity* (London, 1977).

longer share in the optimism of the scientific revolution, and they might now be more anxious about the risks of the technocratic society, but they still rationally place their faith in expertise to deal with modern complexity.<sup>104</sup> Agency, not passivity, thus marks the 'surveillance of power by society'.<sup>105</sup>

On the one hand, then, NGOs are indeed money-making machines which seek a mass membership solely to raise funds. Yet, on the other hand, this membership can be mobilized at key times—to write letters, to attend protests, to be seen to support a campaign initiated from the top. For instance, the Brandt Commission report, *North-South: A Programme for Survival*, published in 1980, proved very popular in Britain: 150,000 copies were bought by the public. When the second report of the Brandt Commission, *Common Crisis*, was published in 1983, World Development Movement organized a letter-writing campaign. It sold 100,000 copies of its letter-writing guide creating such pressure that 400 MPs wrote to either the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary for clarification on the government's position.<sup>106</sup> This was a strategic mobilization of a perhaps usually dormant support which had, nevertheless, signed an unwritten contract whereby the NGO would be trusted to act as the expert body while the public donors would not be called upon to do very much except at key moments.

NGOs, therefore, are neither the saviours nor the symptoms of any perceived decline in political life. They have grown because they have responded to a changing political landscape and the public as a whole, knowing the limits of its own participation and the nature of the solutions sought, has recognized the need for their existence. It is this that is ordinary about politics in the post-Second World War period. Politics is ordinary because of the sheer diversity of the NGO sector. It is ordinary too in the processes of politics, which owes more to a politics of pragmatism than it does to the dramatic interventions of a social movement based upon interest or ideology. And it is an ordinariness that is bounded by the wider value frameworks of the modern technocratic state. NGOs have proved so pervasive because they have been able to participate in expert knowledge systems from which their supporters, as a public, have felt excluded and disillusioned. In this sense, 'the man in the grey suit' has not been the intermediary between the social and the political in the past half century. Instead, it has been 'the man in the white suit'—that is, the technocrat, the scientist, the engineer, the academic, and the professional: in short, the expert—that has reformulated politics for a more

<sup>104</sup> U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1986; London, 1992).

<sup>105</sup> Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*, 32.

<sup>106</sup> J. Mitchell, 'Public Campaigning on Overseas Aid in the 1980s', in Bose and Burnell, *Overseas Aid*, 146–57 [quote from 148].

complex era. If greater trust is now placed in NGOs and charities rather than in political parties it is precisely because the professional experts associated with NGOs have a better feel for the game of politics in the modern technocratic state.

## 5. Conclusion

It is unlikely that the phenomenon described in this account is purely a British one. Useful comparisons might be made with other countries, though the research elsewhere into NGOs, as in Britain, is fledgling. What is clear, though, is that a similar story might be traced at the global level. Forced to work at all levels of socio-political action, from direct action to media campaigning to lobbying of governments to working alongside the bureaucrats of intergovernmental agencies, international NGOs have drawn on comparatively limited resources and have thus sought alliances and support networks which have enabled them to better target single issues while forgoing the ideological affinities of broad-ranging political federations. They have sought to influence the terms of the debate within an 'epistemic community' of experts and professionals that includes not only the NGOs but the international bureaucrats and politicians who work within and alongside intergovernmental agencies.<sup>107</sup> Just as in Britain, international NGOs have worked with very different types of organizations to focus on single issues. They have formed 'transnational advocacy networks' to make themselves into more effective lobbyists.<sup>108</sup>

Yet rather than seek to expand this coverage of the ordinary to other locations, I want, by way of conclusion, to point to some of the problems associated with this form of politics. Rather than ending on an optimistic note, which can so often be found in much writing about NGOs today,<sup>109</sup> I wish to draw out some of the limitations which demonstrate that NGOs represent neither a worsening nor a heightening of political engagement. What they have done, instead, is transform the nature of political engagement.

<sup>107</sup> P. M. Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination', *International Organization*, 46 (1992), 1–35.

<sup>108</sup> M. E. Keck and K. Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, 1998); J. Clark, 'Introduction: Civil Society and Transnational Action', in J. Clark, ed, *Globalizing Civic Engagement*, 1–28; M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture: Vol. I. The Rise of the Network Society* (1996; Oxford, 2000); M. Hilton, *Prosperity for All: Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization* (Ithaca, 2009); M. Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, 2008).

<sup>109</sup> In addition to much journalistic commentary see, more seriously, P. Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (Cambridge, 2003).

First, as Geoff Eley has recently commented, for all that radical, leftist political groups may have splintered and fragmented in the experimentalism of the 1960s and 1970s, they have still operated within a system that provided them with access to the political centre.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, the purging of Militant in the 1980s was so important to the Labour leadership precisely because a left-wing group had found it relatively easy to penetrate the mainstream political process. NGOs, though, have no centre and can never rely on established political structures to ensure their voice is heard. It is a condition highlighted most clearly in the tremendous vitality of the World Social Forum but also, ultimately, this body's almost complete absence of sustained political effectiveness.

Within the UK, the power and effectiveness of NGOs must be seriously questioned. For all their expansion, dynamism, and presence, as well as the trust placed in them, the ability of NGOs to influence the established structures of power in British politics is circumscribed. Certainly, there have been many significant pieces of legislation passed that owe their origins to NGO lobbying, and NGOs' willingness to take politics away from Westminster and into other public forums means they have often set or recast the terms of the debate. But there is nothing programmatic about their channels of influence. For all that one NGO might successfully publicize an issue and successfully lobby for a parliamentary remedy, there is nothing institutional that ensures that the lessons learned will be replicated by another NGO seeking similar goals. NGOs can sometimes barge their way through the door to political power but they cannot guarantee such access. Formal and informal links can be established with the political centre but there is nothing like the mechanisms available to party fringe groups that can ensure their voices are heard at conferences and which can then travel through to party policy, parliamentary action, or government initiative. Ultimately, the politician can simply choose to ignore the NGO. And this stonewalling can take place no matter how persuasive the NGO's expert advice might be, how many newspapers columns it can encourage to be devoted to the issue at hand, or how many supporters the NGO might be able to galvanize in whatever manner it sees fit.

This raises more general questions about the relationship between the ordinary politics of NGOs and the more mainstream politics associated with the established parties. Certainly, there has been much crossover, and many of the more progressive groups have indeed revitalized leftist politics more generally in a manner the New Left had

<sup>110</sup> G. Eley, 'Historicizing the Global, Politicizing Capital: Giving the Present a Name', *History Workshop Journal*, 63 (2007), 154–88.

hoped. But at the same time the class-based political system has not solely adapted to NGOs and the two have worked in very different ways. Further research is required here, but the 1970s—as opposed to the 1960s—might well prove to be the crucial turning point. As Rosanvallon has suggested more generally, until that decade, ‘a vertical, hierarchical vision of politics prevailed’. Subsequently ‘the authority of the political parties’ has diminished, though it is unclear whether NGOs, and the ordinary politics associated with them, can ever fill the gap.<sup>111</sup>

This is increasingly relevant because of a second issue, the eschewal of ideology, and more radical solutions by these pragmatically minded groups. In pursuing an ordinary, pragmatic politics that enables NGO experts to have a seat at the technocratic table, more radical political solutions have been generally eschewed, though in the longer term it is perhaps more radical solutions that are required. Greenpeace, for instance, has often worried that the real answer to environmental problems require modes of living that run counter to the dominant economic and social system. Any gains sought on a pragmatic basis must inevitably involve compromises, but ones which can only delay, rather than remove, what they see as an impending crisis.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, the specific gains of the women’s movement might be impressive, but they fall far short of the structural reforms required to achieve the true equality and liberation believed to be necessary by more ideologically driven feminists. From another perspective, by operating within governing systems of expertise, NGOs are often part of the democratic liberal paradigm that ultimately supports market economies. This is a charge that has been made against human rights NGOs, particularly from those advocating an ‘Asian values’ perspective, though there exists a more general critique that NGOs are ultimately as much the agents of westernization as western governments themselves.<sup>113</sup>

Finally, there have been limits to the range of participants in ordinary politics just as there always was with traditional voluntary associations and political parties. In much of the work on social capital and civic

<sup>111</sup> Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*, 66.

<sup>112</sup> Greenpeace International (Amsterdam): Greenpeace MS 2135: ‘Programme - Discussion Paper’, September 1992.

<sup>113</sup> A. Sen, *Human Rights and Asian Values* (New York, 1997); M. Jacobsen and O. Bruun, eds, *Human Rights and Asian Values: Contesting National Identities and Cultural Representations in Asia* (London, 2006); Sheldon Garon, ‘The Transnational Promotion of Saving in Asia: “Asian values” or the “Japanese model”’, in S. Garon and P. L. MacLachlan, eds, *The Ambivalent Consumer: Questioning Consumption in East Asia and the West* (Ithaca, 2006), 163–87; W. Theodore de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective* (Cambridge, 1998); H. Widdows, ‘Is Global Ethics Moral Neo-colonialism? An Investigation of the Issue in the Context of Bioethics’, *Bioethics*, 21 (2007), 305–15.

participation, it has been found that even in the years when parliamentary democracy could be said to have been most flourishing, large cohorts of the population have still not joined in. Largely, this has been based on class, and strong evidence exists that feelings of exclusion have risen over the years for the very poorest members of society.<sup>114</sup> The alternative growth of new forms of political institution has largely done little to change this trend. Indeed, it has been much commented upon that those who flocked to new social movements were largely from the educated, if expanding, middle classes. An early examination of CND's supporter base found that it drew heavily from this social group.<sup>115</sup> If the analysis moves beyond new social movements to, say, faith-based organizations, tenants groups, and even some of the grassroots environmental organizations with strong local affiliations, a wider spectrum of the social classes can be found. Yet the point still stands that the primary context to explain the popularity of new socio-political actors has been an expanding, affluent, and educated middle class.

Indeed, the idealized supporter of the NGO looks something like Ernest Gellner's 'modular man': that is someone who is active in civil society while also experiencing individualization and atomization.<sup>116</sup> For Gellner, the price of modularity is the alienation and isolation that comes from having 'each activity unsustained by the other', in a manner that mirrors the political problems of a non-ideological approach.<sup>117</sup> Yet, what is also apparent is that such modularity remains out of reach for lower social classes. Class remains relevant to people's identities, especially those whose limited education makes them less likely to join NGOs and to trust professionals as well as politicians. Accordingly, ordinary politics might ultimately be unsatisfactory for both its participants and for those who feel excluded.

To reflect on these boundaries of the ordinary is to understand better both the contributions and the limitations of a politics spearheaded by NGOs. It means we should be no more optimistic about the future of democratic politics than we are pessimistic about a supposed descent from a previous golden age. We can, however, be certain that politics has changed and that it has done so largely because of the tremendous energy unleashed over the last sixty years by what have often become immensely powerful NGOs. Unlike Williams in his analysis of ordinary culture, then, we are unlikely to find any authentic realm of the political in these institutional settings. NGOs are too implicated in the wider

<sup>114</sup> Hall, 'Social Capital', 456.

<sup>115</sup> Parkin *Middle-Class Radicalism*.

<sup>116</sup> E. Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (London, 1994), 99.

<sup>117</sup> Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 104. See also Z. Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Palo Alto, 1999), 157–60.

processes of governance for that. But that is to miss the point. What we have in the ordinariness of politics is a clue to the changing dynamics the wider public has had with the political process.

That is, since 1945, by lending its seemingly passive support to NGOs by solely making a financial contribution, the public has appeared to be become less politically engaged. Yet members of this public have also personalized politics and acknowledged too that their ordinary concerns are better articulated by those with the resources to understand them comprehensively. This is neither de-politicization nor re-politicization. It is, instead, the transformation of politics and the reorientation of state–society relations in an era of technocratic expertise.