Understanding NGO Workers’ Practices: Beyond the “Representatives of Civil Society” vs. “Agents of Transnational Leaders” Debate

Roger Magazine
Universidad Iberoamericana

Generally speaking, researchers have portrayed non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in one of two manners. According to some, NGOs are heroic representatives of the interests of civil society in an ongoing battle against evil, corrupt, and powerful national states. According to others, NGOs are in cahoots with the international leaders who are imposing neoliberal policies on the weak states of underdeveloped nations. The NGOs play the “good cop” role easing the suffering caused by the “bad cop’s” economic restructuring. While the categories “civil society” and “state” blind those who take the first approach to the common “governmentality” (Foucault 1991) of actors working for governments and non-governmental organizations, the second overlooks the variation in local responses to global projects (Mintz 1977).

In this paper, I describe the practices of an NGO providing services for street children in Mexico City that does not fit either of these portrayals. The organization, although not part of the government and supposedly a representative of the interests of a small segment of the population, attempts, as I will demonstrate, to put into practice a new narrative for the nation: an undoubtedly state-like practice. Meanwhile, even though it receives funding from international private donors and employs aspects of the liberal narrative in its practices, it adds these to aspects of nationalist narratives in such a way as to create an innovative scheme irreducible to the sum of its parts.

This latter characteristic of the NGO carries a pair of implications. First, logical contradictions between global and national leaders’ projects do not inevitably result in conflict or cultural schizophrenia among national leaders. On the contrary, the juxtaposition of contradictory ideologies is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for innovation. Second, this innovation can only succeed under particular organizational circumstances. That is, the NGO I discuss here, because it is locally-based, enjoys greater
success in its attempts at innovation than organizations that are local branches of international NGOs and thus find their attempts at innovation hindered by responsibilities to a central authority. After describing the NGO’s practices and situating them in the context of 20th century Mexican governmental strategies, I will further discuss these implications of its innovative capacity.

NGOs and Street Children in Mexico City

My interest in this and other NGOs emerged out of field research on gangs of so-called “street children” in Mexico City. Many of the street children I knew spoke of their past or ongoing experiences with governmental and non-governmental service providing organizations. I also came into direct contact with NGO workers in the places where the gangs live. The workers were usually providing a service such as giving out clothing and trying to coax the street children to enter a group home. I began to visit the organizations that the street children most frequently mentioned. On these visits, I usually had the opportunity to interview one or more of the workers about the organization. However, I realized that if I wanted to understand the interview data and more about their practices I would have to conduct extended participant observation, yet because of time constraints I would only be able to do so at one organization.

One NGO in particular, known as EDNICA (Educación de Niños Callejeros), caught my interest. When I asked workers at various organizations, including government agencies, for a recommendation of the organizations I should include in my research, without fail, they all put EDNICA at the top of their list and described it as doing the best and most innovative work in the city. Thus, although EDNICA is not typical of NGOs
working with street children in Mexico City, it does exemplify an ideal for many of the workers at other organizations. In fact, a group of young women and men with experience working at other organizations, but dissatisfied with their objectives and methods, founded the NGO in 1989 as an alternative. When I told EDNICA’s workers in September of 1996 of my wish to include the organization in my anthropological research, they asked if I would be willing to work there as a volunteer as well. For the following nine months, I spent one day a week at the NGO as volunteer and researcher.

The NGO workers’ ideal: EDNICA

Workers at other organizations mentioned two factors when praising EDNICA. First, they stated that the organization’s programs are set up to “help the street children help themselves” rather than provide for all their needs. Second, they said that EDNICA gives priority to the family, attempting to re-integrate street children back into their families and doing preventative work to stop other children from leaving their homes.

EDNICA workers themselves employed comparisons to government agencies to explain their objectives. They stated that most government agencies’ and some NGOs’ practices are “asistencialistas,” meaning that instead of assisting street children they overdo it and give them everything they need, which makes them complacent and dependent. EDNICA workers also described the resulting relation as paternalistic since the street children come to depend upon the agency like a child depends upon his parents. They considered these agencies to be inappropriate parents since they cannot provide the genuine love that family members can. In contrast, they explained, their objective is to demand (exigir) that the street children are active participants in changing their lives and leaving
behind “life in the street.” Furthermore, they stated that the government’s capitulation to neoliberalism has led to the end of economic regulation, leaving individuals already on the economic margins vulnerable. In response, their efforts to strengthen familial as well as communities bonds are aimed at providing support for individual victims and an organizational basis for making political demands.

EDNICA’s distinctive organizational structure reflects these two goals. Most of the NGO’s in the city and their activities are centered around a casa hogar (group home). The NGOs send workers (often called educadores de calle) out into all parts of the city where street children are found to attempt to convince them to come and live in the casa hogar. If they agree to come live there, the street children are subjected to a rigid schedule meant to re-socialize them. Once considered re-socialized, the NGO helps them to begin an independent existence or to rejoin their family. Compared to the typical NGO, EDNICA could be said to be decentralized. It consists of an administrative office, a small casa hogar\(^3\) in another part of the city and, most importantly, “los clubes de calle” (the street clubs), an organizational structure conceived of specifically to prevent the paternalism caused by asistencialismo (over-assistance) and the individual vulnerability caused by neoliberalism.

EDNICA’s main strategy in their work with street children is to approach community leaders in areas of the city where street children live and where there is a high population of impoverished families “at-risk” of having children leave home for the street, and propose the establishment of a street club as a joint venture between EDNICA and the community. The street club is a space where both the street children and neighborhood “at-risk” children can go to get an inexpensive healthy meal, basic medical treatment, family or individual psychological therapy, or help with homework. At the club, they can also
participate in recreational activities, learn work skills such as carpentry or hairstyling, learn
to solve community and other problems through group organization, or just hang out in a
safe drug-free environment. EDNICA provides training for community volunteers and
employees. The NGO—with funding from national and international private sources—and
the community share the costs of establishing the space and paying the staff for the first few
years, then the community takes over the club completely and EDNICA moves on to do the
same in another area. Thus, the overall organizational structure of the club is meant to
prevent over-assistance by involving community members and individual vulnerability by
bringing the community together in an integrated effort to run the club.

When I first learned of EDNICA in 1996, the NGO, after two years, was in the final
stages of establishing a street club near the Observatorio subway stop. At the time, a group
of street children were living in and around the stop and the out-of-town bus terminal
across the street from it. The subway stop and bus terminal are surrounded by a number of
colonias populares. The local parish had provided land to build the street club beside the
church and the parish priest was an active participant in the project. The club counted eight
employees, half paid by the NGO and half paid by the parish. EDNICA was waiting for the
community (the parish or otherwise) to provide enough funding or volunteers to take over
the work after which EDNICA would move its employees on to another project. According
to EDNICA, 25 street children and over 300 at-risk children were participating in the club’s
activities at the time.

An Ethnographic Description of EDNICA’s Club de Calle
The street club occupies the top two floors of a new three-story building beside the church. Parish activities generally occupy a meeting room on the first floor although the club sometimes holds workshops there. There are also showers on the first floor that the street children are permitted access to. The second floor consists of a large room used as a dining hall or a meeting place as well as a kitchen and bathrooms. The third floor is divided into two separate spaces. The bigger room is set up as a sort of lounge. One section, intended as a space where the neighborhood children can get help with and do their homework, is filled with tables and chairs. The rest of the lounge is meant to be a place where the street children could spend their days. An observer might find a couple of street children sleeping in the comfortable chairs while others play ping pong or watch T.V. A smaller space on the third floor houses the club’s office, consisting of a couple of desks and a telephone, and two small rooms dedicated to therapy. In one room the therapy sessions themselves take place and the team of four therapists plus volunteers (including myself) held weekly meetings while the adjoining room behind one-way glass is meant for observers. During group or family therapy sessions, but never in individual sessions and only with the consent of the participants, members of the therapy team can listen to and observe the sessions in order to provide their colleague conducting the session with suggests and comments afterwards. Finally, there is a small room on the building’s roof where a couple of the street children had asked and been permitted to sleep as part of their effort “to leave the street” (“dejar la calle”).

Based on my participant observation at the street club, I would say that the organization attempts to attain its general goals of simultaneously preventing or counteracting the effects of both asistencialismo and neoliberalism by working toward three main objectives. Translated into my own sociological terms, they are, in order of
priority: the creation or drawing out of relations among family members as family members and the encouragement of activities aimed at the well-being of the family as a unit; the creation or drawing out of relations among community or other group members as community or group members and the fomentation of activities aimed at the well-being of the group; and, finally, the creation or drawing out of the person’s awareness of his potential for action taken as an individual or independent person and the stimulation of activities aimed at the well-being of the individual person. EDNICA’s workers themselves employed the term “fortalecimiento,” the Spanish word for empowerment, or the phrase “ayudándolos a ayudarse” (“helping them to help themselves” when referring to their objectives. Now I will provide a more concrete picture of EDNICA’s efforts to work toward these three objectives through ethnographic portrayals of some of their practices.

Familial Empowerment

The fact that EDNICA’s first priority, either for street children or at-risk children, is familial “empowerment” can be explained in the context of their concept of what constitutes a street child. According to workers at EDNICA and at most of the other organizations in the city, street children are people who have left their parents’ or other relatives’ home and have cut off relations with their parents or other familial guardians. The term itself, street children, suggests this opposition to children who live in or are part of a home, understood as a family living in a house. The NGO workers consider the fact that these people are not part of a home a problem because, as they argue, the family is the only source of genuine emotional support for a person and also the most important source of economic support. The street child is imagined as vulnerable to the sufferings of
rejection, loneliness and poverty without the family. Whether or not they are legally
children (under 18) matters little to the boundaries of the category. EDNICA workers state
that legal adults should be considered street children because they find themselves in the
same predicament of vulnerability without familial support.

How EDNICA goes about solving this problem through familial integration must be
understood in the context of how they imagine the process of separation. EDNICA’s
therapists explained that the process of leaving home begins when neoliberal economic
policies bring about a lowering of wages. The wage earner, imagined as a man, has no
outlet for his frustrations so he takes them out on his family. Other family members, also
with no outlet, take their frustration of being treated badly by the father out on weaker
family members. EDNICA therapists posited that one child, with a particular personality
type, usually receives and takes on the brunt of the frustration and blame. This is the child
most likely to leave home both to escape abuse and to help the family since he feels he has
caused the family’s problems.

EDNICA workers claim that this misplaced blame and guilt is the biggest problem
to be overcome to achieve re-integration or to prevent separation in the case of at-risk
children. When working with street children, the therapists begin with individual therapy
with the goal of helping the person realize, first that he has feelings of guilt and anger, and
then that these feelings are based on misunderstandings: he is not the cause of the family’s
problems and his abusers cannot ultimately be blamed for their actions. At this point in the
reintegration process the therapists assume that the street child will have realized his true
desire to return to his family. If he does not profess this desire or professes it and then
demonstrates otherwise through actions, the therapists assume that they have moved along
too quickly and the street child still requires more of the first stage of therapy. They note
that these persons must face a doubly guilty conscious, first because they feel that they have caused the family’s problems and second because they left home and thus do not help their families. EDNICA workers state they are careful not to rush the process, forcing the street children to face too much psychological trauma to quickly, which would lead them to reject help, nor to go too slowly and not push the child, which is like asistencialismo and would lead to a stagnant relation of dependency.

If the street child does demonstrate a desire for reintegration, the therapists and the street child visit his “home” to see if his family members are willing to participate in family therapy with the hopes of helping them to realize their misunderstanding regarding blame and guilt and achieve the reintegration of the child. If the family is unwilling, EDNICA may try again later to convince them or may just settle for helping the street child through individual and group empowerment (see below). If the family is willing, they come to the street club for regular family therapy sessions until the therapists consider the misplaced blame and guilt to be gone and feel that the street child is ready to go live with the family. They conduct follow-up visits to check how the family is doing. Thus the NGO workers conceive of the problem in a way that puts the blame on neoliberal policy but that involves a response on the part of family members. Because they consider the immediate cause of the problem to be the family members’ response, even though the workers cannot change neoliberal policy, they can still do something to resolve the problem.

The EDNICA workers consciously made the point that the therapy and other practices are aimed at helping the family as a whole and not individual persons or groups of persons such as a street child, at-risk child, or an abused mother and her children. I observed therapy sessions in which although the father/husband never attended along with the mother/wife and their children, the therapists attempted to work toward the well being
of the family conceived of as including the father. In one case, a mother and her 6 children attended the sessions and she spent most of the time complaining of the husband’s abuse and her desire to leave him. The therapists’ response was to try to piece together the father’s perspective from the children’s (as opposed to the mother’s) more neutral statements in order to include the father and his silenced interests in a solution for the family as a whole. Therefore, by doing what the family, rather than, for example, what the individual, wants they hope to avoid the vulnerability caused by neoliberalism’s elimination of the government as an intermediary protector.

They are also careful to point out that, rather than imposing their own interests upon the family, they do “exactly what the family wants.” In doing so, they see themselves as avoiding the unequal exchanges of a paternalistic relation wherein street child or other receptor receives benefits in exchange for doing what the organization wants.

When working with the families at-risk, EDNICA provides a few basic serves with the intention of easing the economic burdens that neoliberalism supposedly places on male wage earners and consequently on families. They provide a low cost afternoon meal⁶; basic medical services for a low cost; free help with homework; and free family therapy. EDNICA therapists make visits to the homes in the neighborhood to evaluate the family’s economic and emotional status and to decide whether the children were at-risk and thus in need of these services. The therapists allowed different families access to different services depending on their perceived needs. A family without serious emotional problems but going through a difficult moment economically would be offered the meal service but would be refused therapy even if they requested it, while another with emotional conflicts but without economic problems would be offered the therapy but not the meal service. In all cases, the therapy team continues to periodically evaluate the families receiving a
service to judge whether the need is still present. According to EDNICA workers, maintaining the provision of services contingent upon need is necessary to avoid *asistencialismo*, paternalism, and dependence and to encourage families to resolve their own problems. Once again, EDNICA’s workers attempt to counteract the vulnerability caused by neoliberalism by evaluating and providing services for the benefit of the family as a whole and not just for the at-risk children themselves.

Empowering Community

As already stated, EDNICA hopes to achieve the empowerment of the community of residents in the area around the street club through community member’s participation in the club itself. In addition, the NGO attempts to foment group “consciousness” among the street children and the at-risk children with the intention of encouraging them to come up with their own solutions to problems—an alternative to the dependency caused by *asistencialismo*—and to make collective demands—a response to the increased individual vulnerability brought about by neoliberalism. EDNICA workers expressed puzzlement as to why the street children in particular, despite their apparently obvious common plight, did not respond collectively when faced with problems such as police abuse. They concluded that the problem was not simply a lack of organization, but rather a lack of awareness of their situation that in turn led to a lack of “group consciousness.” As a solution, they proposed to encourage the street children “to reflect” upon their situation and help them to realize that instead of being “passive subjects” they could participate in “the creation of their own history.”
Although the EDNICA workers assume that once aware of their situation street children would naturally organize into groups in order to make demands of the police and other segments of the government, they attempt to aid the development of this group consciousness through a set of activities called “fortalecimiento grupal” (group empowerment). EDNICA organized the street and neighborhood children into seven different groups. The street children constitute one group while the neighborhood children are divided up into six different groups depending on age and income levels. One of the staff members explained to me that these divisions were necessary because children at different ages and with different income levels experience different problems. For example, she continued, the poorest children don’t get any attention from their parents and can’t talk to them about anything while children from families with a bit more money can talk to their parents, but not about their problems. She stressed that each group elects a leader through a democratic process and that the leaders of the groups meet regularly to discuss common problems. She added that parents of the neighborhood children meet every month to try resolve problems as a group. I never had the opportunity to attend a group meeting, but I did observe Raul, the coordinator of the group empowerment activities, address a few street children by their group name, “águila”7 (“eagle”; he used the singular) when, for example, he was trying to get them to put away the tables after a meal.

Individual Labor Skills Acquisition and Empowerment

EDNICA reserves the practices aimed at the third objective, individual labor skills acquisition and empowerment, for the street children without possibility of familial reintegration either because they claim to have no family, integration presents dangers of
abuse for the street child, or integration was attempted and irrevocably failed. According to EDNICA’s therapists, after they help these street children to get beyond their guilt over leaving home and thus help them to realize that they can stop punishing themselves by living in the street, they are willing and ready to enter a group home if under 18 or live independently if 18 or over. To help the street children confront this supposedly novel situation, EDNICA sponsors courses to teach job skills such as carpentry and hairstyling and to teach money-management and other skills deemed necessary for living alone. They also organized a carpentry cooperative at the club that some of the older street children work for and help to run while living on their own in rented quarters.

These practices aimed at the third objective are the most problematic for the EDNICA workers since individual skill acquisition and empowerment, although formidable barriers to asistencialismo, do nothing to counter the effects of neoliberalism. A workshop I attended aimed at providing EDNICA’s workers and volunteers with alternatives to street children’s labor practices provides an example of the contradictions presented by this third objective. One of the founders of EDNICA and an expert on the street children problem according to workers at various organizations, ran the workshop. He started by listing the three common postures on child labor: the protectionist or abolitionist, the pragmatist, and the “promotionist.” The first, he explained, argues for the benefits of highly trained labor force and against the health hazards of child labor. The second, he continued, accepts as inevitable that children will work and argues for the improvement of conditions through regulation. He recommended the benefits of the third position and described it as a stance that takes a broader view of work as the means through which man fulfills all and not just his material needs. Therefore work, even for children, is something positive as long as the work relations allow for fulfillment. He went on to explain some of the conditions that
would allow for work to be fulfilling. He said that work relations should be democratic and that the worker should be taught and given access to all parts of the productive process. As he began to list some of the parts of the productive process—accounting, marketing, etc.—an embarrassed smile appeared upon his face as he jokingly concluded: “... and then we have... a businessman.” I believe that he grew embarrassed by his own presentation when he realized that he sounded like a neoliberal ideologue pretending to be a Marxist. His proposal did not successfully integrate a response to asistencialismo with an answer to neoliberalism.

Although they occasionally perceive their own failure to achieve their goal of simultaneously impeding the effects of both asistencialismo and neoliberalism, in general, EDNICA’s workers—as well as workers at other organizations—are confident that their primary strategy of empowering families and communities would prevent the formation of relations of dependency and counteract the vulnerability of individuals without state protection. In the next section, I present a brief history of governmental strategies and narratives for national betterment in twentieth century Mexico in an attempt to explain why EDNICA’s workers and those at other organizations working with street children in Mexico City share the same concerns and favor the same solutions.

Governmental Strategies and Narratives for the Nation in Twentieth Century Mexico

The problem of asistencialismo must be understood in the context of what political scientists refer to as state corporatism and historians know as the narrative of revolutionary nationalism. The origins of this governmental form are generally linked to the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930’s. The Cárdenas administration, in the name of the
Mexican Revolution, expropriated land from large estates and redistributed it to peasants in the form of plots known as ejidos. Dressed in the style of traditional communalism, the ejidos could not be bought or sold, but the national government retained control of this communalism through the direct administration of the ejidos. In addition, Cárdenas expropriated foreign interests in certain sectors such as the oil industry and established a number of state-owned enterprises in which not only the management but also the workers’ unions were administered by the government. These actions paved the way for the implementation of broader import substitution policies in the years following his administration. While Cárdenas’ “great political achievement was to bring popular movements under state control by incorporating local peasant and worker organizations into national confederations” (Gledhill 1994:106), his great historical achievement was to establish as a narrative for national prosperity the struggle to prioritize national interests over those of global capitalism.

This political strategy of incorporation supposedly led to the formation of what participants and analysts alike have conceived of as a combined political and social structure in the form of a pyramid, with the president at the apex, peasants and industrial workers constituting the base, and administrators and regional and local political leaders in between (Lomnitz 1982). A series of exchanges between patrons and clients hold the pyramid together. Services, jobs, and, in general, protection from the ravages of international capitalism are exchanged downward in return for loyalty, which is passed from the bottom up. While state corporatism includes elections and electoral campaigns, rather than fulfilling a typical democratic role, in this one-party system they take on the form of a ritual through which the re-negotiated alignment of persons’ and groups’
positioning in the pyramid are confirmed and displayed (Lomnitz, Lomnitz-Adler, and Adler 1993).

The problem of *asistencialismo* arises out of this context. When EDNICA workers complain about government agencies giving street children everything they need in exchange for their obedience, they are describing what, in the model, would be the relations and exchanges at the very base of the pyramid. According to EDNICA’s workers, this form of social welfare is injurious because even though it protects street children from starvation and exposure, for its continued functioning it depends upon their remaining street children, that is, people who believe they deserve the emotional suffering of a life without family.

EDNICA’s concerns with neoliberalism must be understood in the context of the national government’s adoption in the 1980’s of a narrative for national prosperity diametrically opposed to Cárdenas’. In response to the debt crisis of 1982, international and national leaders blamed the country’s economic problems on state control over the economy and argued that only global capitalism could bring prosperity. Since the ideological, economic and political aspects of this shift have been described from global (Harvey 1990) and national (Cornelius 1996; Cornelius, Craig, and Fox 1994; González de la Rocha and Escobar Latapí 1991; Otero 1996) perspectives elsewhere, I will only mention certain aspects directly related EDNICA’s workers concern over increased economic vulnerability for individuals. EDNICA’s workers and other critics claim that the privatization of national industries and the end of important substitution policies, rather than bringing prosperity to Mexicans, have made them the victims of global capitalism’s need for cheap and flexible labor. EDNICA’s workers see this change in the labor market as the primary cause of the breakdown of Mexicans’ most important social institution: the
family. They are also aware that neoliberal policy shifts include a reduction of government spending on social welfare, but they are less critical of this change. They realize that this situation forces the government to accept and even to require their services. Plus, they see that it has lessened and weakened, although not eliminated, government agencies’ *asistencialista* practices, freeing more street children from the grips of paternalism and giving them an opportunity to change their lives.

But while EDNICA bases its work on a critique of these two prosperity narratives, revolutionary nationalism and neoliberalism, it draws on these same two narratives or at least on the broader symbolic orders or metanarratives from which they emerge for its solutions. EDNICA’s policy of prioritizing and empowering the family and the community and Cárdenas’ attempt to create a corporate unit at the national level to shield individual citizens from global capitalism both resonate with intellectuals’ representations of indigenous social institutions. In an attempt to suggest or legitimate a model for a national state, between the 1930’s and 1980’s various intellectuals described an indigenous community protecting its members and their language and culture from Spanish and Mestizo-national domination (Lomnitz 1992:279). While the indigenous family has received less attention from intellectuals formulating nationalist narratives, its potential as a model has not gone unnoticed. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, for example, depicts the “Indian” family as a group that functions as a collective economic unit under the authority of a male family head, who treats his children with respect and benevolence and rarely uses physical violence to educate them (1987:58-59). While my research on EDNICA’s practices provides no direct evidence for link between these practices and revolutionary nationalism or intellectuals’ portrayals of indigenous social institutions, the similarities are sufficient to suggest that EDNICA’s workers draw on these or related narratives.8
Meanwhile, EDNICA’s policy of helping the family, community or individual to help it or himself in an effort to prevent the formation of a harmful relation of dependence between the welfare agency and the beneficiary appears to draw on aspects of liberalism. More specifically, it seems to draw on the liberal notion that there are cases in which problems of governance should be solved not by improving or augmenting government action but by reducing it since governmental action itself may constitute a chief cause of the problem. While EDNICA opposes the application of liberal strategies to certain aspects of governance such as the regulation of the national economy, it supports their application in the context of the prevision of social welfare services by the government or non-governmental organizations.

Political scientists note that the “popular social movements” of the late 1980’s, in particular *neocardenismo* (the movement surrounding the 1988 presidential campaign of Lázaro Cárdenas’ son Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas), combine, in a similar manner, aspects of the narratives of revolutionary nationalism and neoliberalism in representations of both what they are struggling against and want they are demanding. Jaime Tamayo, for example, posits that,

*Neocardenismo* reversed the tendency of social movements to sectoralize their demands by permitting their insertion into a national project that aggregated all criticisms of the economic and social policy of the regime and arguments for the defense of national sovereignty and the rejection of the state party and corporatism (1990:131).

Joe Foweraker notes that this combination, at first sight, appears contradictory:
But is there not some contradiction in talking of popular movements that
defend the corporatist state, with its institutional charisma and discrentional
use of law, while struggling simultaneously for an *estado de derecho*?
(1990:16).

He suggests that within the strategic trajectory of the popular movements there is not: “The
popular movements clearly defend corporatism for the social pact it enshrines, and not for
the clientelistic lines of control it contains and organizes” (1990:16).

Thus, participants in social movements as well as, I would add, NGO workers, can
and do integrate certain aspects of metanarratives into their practices while rejecting others.
In fact, one could argue that the formation of a novel governmental strategy—on the part of
a social movement, an NGO or a government—consists of the combination of elements of
two or more previously existent and contradictory strategies. If the strategies were not
contradictory, nothing new would be produced through their combination. In a recent
article, Claudio Lomnitz (1996) states otherwise. He posits that contradictions between
national and global narratives in contemporary Mexico obviate the possibility of
innovation.

**Fissures in Mexican Nationalism?**

Lomnitz (1996) argues that the recent shift in favored modernizing formulas at the
global level from one based on national protectionism to one based on integration into the
flows of global capitalism has thwarted attempts to come up with a new narrative for the
Mexican nation. He suggests that in the age of revolutionary nationalism, what was good for the nation was good for achieving global standards of modernity and vice versa. But that in the age of neoliberalism, a fissure has opened between the two projects: some view the open economy of neoliberalism as a threat to things Mexican, including the nation, while others view things Mexican as impediments to achieving global standards of modernity. Because of the separation of the two projects, attempts to gain ground in either direction are doomed to imperfection and only partial success since modernizers can never shed their “dismodern” Mexicanness, and nationalists, with their hopes for national betterment measured on an international scale, are closet modernizers. Lomnitz states that Mexicans, or at least Mexico City residents, consider the impure results of these incomplete efforts a vulgar kind of kitsch and use the derogatory term “naco” to describe their agents. For example, someone who names their son Cuauhtémoc, in reference to Mexico’s great Aztec past, considers someone who names their son Brandon, after the Beverly Hills 90210 character, a naco because the name clashes with the un-90210-like life of the son. Although he may not apply the term “naco”, Brandon’s parent points out that Cuauhtémoc’s parent’s struggle for upward mobility in a U.S. corporation and even his secret (although heard through the building’s walls) viewing of 90210 clashes with his pre-hispanic aspirations for his son.

According to Lomnitz’s formulation, EDNICA’s workers are nacos and doubly so since they aspire to both international and national standards of governmentality. Yet, in my interviews, workers at government agencies and at other NGO’s never criticized EDNICA for having incomplete modernization or nationalist aspirations. On the contrary, I heard nothing but praise for its work. I propose that Lomnitz’s understanding of naquismo and of the production of narratives for the nation in contemporary Mexico cannot account
for the case of EDNICA and that a slight reformulation of Lomnitz’s conceptual framework is needed. More specifically, we need a conceptual framework that can account not only for practices of cultural borrowing that actors view as imitation, but for practices of cultural borrowing that actors do not recognize as such since the borrower appropriates what he has borrowed.

Impersonation: A Framework that Accounts for EDNICA and *Naquismo*

Roy Wagner’s notion of impersonation provides such a conceptual framework. According to Wagner: “Impersonation is simply another form of metaphorization, representing people or objects in the form of other known cultural elements to extend the given, literal forms of culture into meaningful relations” (1972:9). Thus, “one ‘becomes’ a father, friend, or a good host by ‘acting like’ one, hence by impersonating the role” (1972:170). Among the Daribi of New Guinea, possession by a ghost is another example of impersonation. The act of impersonation extends the abilities and characteristics of the medium into the realm of the dead—the medium can communicate with the spirits of other dead people, for example—and extends the abilities and characteristics of the dead into the realm of the living—the ghost gains physical form making him imaginable and accessible to the living. The medium “becomes the embodiment of an innovative relation, a sort of human metaphor, for he is animated simultaneously by two identities and wills” (1972:132). He breaks the rules that apply to either the living or the dead, being an extension of both. Not reducible to either a dead or live being, he is something innovative and new.
I suggest that it is helpful to think of what EDNICA’s workers do as impersonation. When they give priority to the family and community, they are impersonating Mexico’s great indigenous and nation leaders. When they “help street children to help themselves” they are impersonating the protagonists of neoliberal modernizing narratives. By empowering families and communities, they perform a double impersonation, extending their abilities to include those of both national and global leaders.

But what of the apparent contradiction of a neoliberal nationalist or of a medium simultaneously embodying mortal, limited life and life after death? Wagner responds:

But these contradictions only assume the form of paradoxes when we think of them as simultaneously ‘valid’ corollaries of a consistent ‘belief-system,’ and thus ignore their dialectical relationship. And this, in turn, suggests that the conceptual basis of a culture can never be adequately summed up as a logical ordering or a closed system of internally consistent propositions (1972:10).

Just as ghost possession is perfectly acceptable to the Daribi, EDNICA’s workers’ double impersonation is perfectly acceptable to some Mexicans, including the workers I interviewed from other organizations.

Yet this acceptance does not preclude the possibility of naquismo. Not all impersonations are successful. Among the Daribi:

The efficacy of such undertakings is directly dependent on the degree to which the participants are able to assume their roles, and create the metaphor
by ‘becoming’ the spirits that they represent. If the roles are maintained, the
dual and mediating significance of the performance is realized; if not, the
performance becomes a parody, a betrayal of man and spirits alike (Wagner

Thus an impersonation appears vulgar not, as Lomnitz suggests, when it is incomplete in
the sense of remaining partially what it was originally: the NGO worker doesn’t have to
stop being a contemporary Mexican just as the medium does not have to die. Rather, it
appears vulgar and attracts the label “naco” when it is incomplete in the sense of not
producing something new that is neither contemporary Mexican, historically Mexican nor
globally modern but an innovation combination. A naco is a contemporary Mexican who
attempts to impersonate a modern American or an ancient Aztec and ends up appearing to
others as a contemporary Mexican attempting to impersonate a modern American or
ancient Aztec. The difference between innovation and naquismo lies not in the content of
the elements involved, but in the performance of the act of appropriation.

Lomnitz laments the days of revolutionary nationalism, before the emergence of
naquismo, when it was possible for the nation to have a fissure-less narrative. Yet,
revolutionary nationalism is itself a successful fusion of or innovation upon apparently
contradictory ideas: internationally oriented revolutionary socialism with its opposition to
the national state on the one hand and, on the other, a nationalism based on state
protectionism. I don’t know if Lázaro Cárdenas came up with the idea, but he did pull off
the impersonation that makes it possible for the writers of history to omit this contradiction
or fissure. Even if, as Lomnitz suggests, the current meaning of the term naco may have
come into use in the 1980’s along with a specific failed impersonation, surely there were
failed impersonations as well as successful ones during the era of revolutionary nationalism. I imagine, for example, that Lázaro Cárdenas’ actions appeared vulgar to some and that not all leaders of the era enjoyed the same level of success.

EDNICA’s Success as Impersonator

To understand what makes EDNICA a success in the eyes of workers at other organizations, we must take into account two factors: first, the homogeneity of local workers at all of the organizations and second, EDNICA’s unique history and structure. Almost all of the workers at these organizations are women from Mexico City, between 20 and 35 years old, trained in social work, psychology, pedagogy, or sociology at the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). The UNAM is the traditional training ground for government workers and politicians at the national level. And if the UNAM imparts governmentality, this includes the inculcation of the skills and knowledge necessary to integrate national traditions and global trends into projects of national betterment. The fact that almost all of them placed EDNICA at the top of their lists can be explained by the fact that NGO workers from Mexico City conceived of, founded and continue to run EDNICA, while most of the other NGOs are local branches of international organizations. In other words, local workers enjoy greater autonomy at EDNICA than they do at other organizations where local workers must content with political objectives in the case of government agencies, or, in the case of NGOs, with objectives shaped outside the country or by foreign and/or older directors.

For example, while government agencies at the national and city levels have hired these young workers to implement innovative projects for street children, workers at NGOs
and sometimes even the same government employees are critical. One such project is the national government’s SOLIDARIDAD program, which attempts to pull off an impersonation similar to EDNICA’s. At least in theory, the program only targets communities in need of social welfare and then allows the community itself to administer the support in an attempt to counter the economic ravages of neoliberalism and the asistencialismo of government administration. However, NGO workers told me that the program is an attempt by the government to appear as if they are attempting to resolve these problems to appease criticism from opposition parties and social movements but without actually doing much to resolve them. Thus, according to my informants, SOLIDARIDAD is not an innovation, extending the abilities of a part-neoliberal, part-corporatist government to social welfare provision, but rather a politically-minded government attempting to impersonate a welfare-providing organization.

Local workers at international NGOs face a somewhat different problem. In general, these organizations revolve around large group homes. While local workers have been able to implement projects aimed at reuniting street children with their families, the group homes, with their asistencialista implications, dominate the efforts of these organizations. With large group homes overshadowing the locally-implemented projects of familial integration, these organizations come across as foreign actors imitating local trends. Thus, while not simply handmaidens to a central authority, workers at these organizations are unable to pull off a convincing innovation.
Conclusions

Workers at NGOs providing services for street children in Mexico City agree with certain aspects of the modernization narratives emanating from global leaders: in most cases, costly welfare services provided by the government have done more harm than good to street children. Yet at the same time, they oppose these modernization narratives’ claim that individuals’ direct participation in the global capitalist market, without government or any other sort of intervention, will result in their well being. An analysis that focuses on the conflict between the logical premises of liberalism versus state nationalism will unfailingly conclude that the NGO workers and others with governmental concerns are facing a paradox or a choice between the better of two evils. Perhaps, our interest as researchers in the cultural or historical context of a practice, requiring that we separate elements that our informants have combined in successful impersonations, helps set the stage for this kind of analysis. That is, an analysis that examines ideologies, narratives, or discourses without taking into account the practices that constantly place them in dialectical relationships. The case of EDNICA demonstrates that although the terms global and national or global and local may be useful for describing contradictory narratives, we must be prepared to follow our informants when they move beyond these categories in favor of innovative combinations irreducible to the sum of their component parts.
Foucault uses this term to describe a culturally and historically particular preoccupation with the welfare or prosperity of a population. It includes a preoccupation over the extent of state responsibility. Thus, governmentality encompasses the state rather than the other way around.

They always referred to the organizations by their names and rarely distinguished between governmental versus non-governmental status. I never heard them use terms such as “NGO” or “government organization.”

EDNICA’s casa hogar has fewer than twenty residents. Some of the group homes in Mexico City have over twenty-five and a couple over one hundred.

For this point on I will describe EDNICA in the ethnographic present in an effort to take my readers back to 1996 and 1997 with me. I wish neither to imply that things have remained the same since that time nor that they have changed.

NGO workers seem to conceive of these terms, family and house, loosely and in the abstract thereby avoiding a confrontation with the empirical cases that are not easily fit into the categories home or street. Their loose conception of family is basically the nuclear family and other blood relations while their loose conception of house is of a structure giving shelter to a family that does not share a space with people they clearly consider street children for their lack of family relations.

In 1996 the cost of the meal was five pesos and there were about 7 pesos to a dollar. The street children had access to the same meal for 10 pesos. EDNICA justified the higher cost with the fact that street children work and earn money while many at-risk children do not. Because the street children had access to more money, more had to be asked of them to prevent them from living an easy life in the street and developing a dependency on EDNICA.

I’m not sure whether the group members chose their own names or if the EDNICA workers named the groups. If the former were the case, I would guess that the street children named their group after the popular Mexico City professional soccer team “Las Águilas del América.” In the latter case, I would imagine that the EDNICA workers chose the name in reference to the important role of an eagle in Aztec mythology, which in turn has been incorporated into Mexican national mythology (there is an eagle on the Mexican flag). I am ignorant of an historical connection between the name of the soccer team and the Aztec myth, but I would venture to say that most of the team’s contemporary fans, considering their usual reasons for supporting the team, have little interest in any such connection (see Magazine 2001a).

Although unrelated to the objectives of this paper, it is interesting to note that the people the NGO workers know as street children come to the city from the same sort of places that have provided anthropologists with data on the Mesoamerican community and kinship system. As I argue elsewhere (see Magazine 2001b), the so-called street children reproduce aspects of these Mesoamerican institutions in the gangs and families they form in the city, a fact that NGO workers, ironically, fail to note.
References

Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo

Cornelius, Wayne A.

Cornelius, Wayne A., Ann L. Craig, and Jonathan Fox

Foucault, Michel

Foweraker, Joe

Gledhill, John

González de la Rocha, Mercedes, and Agustín Escobar Latapí

Harvey, David

Lomnitz, Claudio

Lomnitz, Larissa Adler

Lomnitz, Larissa Adler, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, and Ilya Adler

Magazine, Roger

Mintz, Sidney W.
2001b La migración campo-ciudad y las instituciones sociales emergentes: el caso de los llamados 'niños de la calle' en la ciudad de México. XXVI Mesa Redonda de la Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, Zacatecas, Mexico, 2001b.

Otero, Gerardo


Tamayo, Jaime


Wagner, Roy