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Book Review

By Jack Quarter

Internal Affairs: How the Structure of NGOs Transform Human Rights. *By Wendy Wong.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. 272 pp. ISBN 9780801450792.

Why are some human rights organizations more successful in their international campaigns than others? Professor Wendy Wong of the Political Science department, University of Toronto, offers a simple but compelling analysis that runs counter to the prevailing logic. In brief, Wong argues that organizational structure, not the amount of resources, is the determining factor. Her research focuses upon the agenda setting structures of human rights organizations. She subdivides agenda setting into three mechanisms: proposal development, enforcement powers, and implementation, and she argues that the most successful NGOs in the international human rights field centralize the proposal development and enforcement mechanisms of their organization but decentralize the implementation mechanism. Centralization allows human rights NGOs to create a coherent message and the power to enforce that message through vetoing rights and the ability to disallow the organization's trademark if members deviate from the central agenda. Decentralization "enables NGOs to capitalize on local capabilities and knowledge" (p. 190). Wong argues that decentralization of implementation is very important for mounting effective campaigns because what works in one cultural context may not necessarily work in another. Also, decentralized implementation motivates members in differing local contexts by giving them decision-making power.

One of the challenges experienced by international NGOs is that they operate in diverse cultural contexts. Participants from different cultures may interpret issues differently, which poses a dilemma for the NGO: does it accept those differences in its agenda or does it opt for one message independent of location? Professor Wong argues that

[m]any NGOs simply do not navigate the transnational dilemma well: they run aground on intersectional squabbles over principles, policies, and political positions because their organizational structures do not allow for the creation of a coherent advocacy agenda and an implementation strategy that focuses on maximizing applicability of that agenda across a variety of contexts. (p. 192)

The takeaway from this analysis is that both centralization and decentralization are important for the appropriate functions: centralization is essential for agenda setting and enforcement so there is a common message, and decentralization is necessary for implementation so that the message is adapted in the appropriate manner for each cultural context.



Professor Wong develops her theory from a thoughtful review of the organizational research literature. For organizational theorists, her synthesis of that research may be self-evident; however, the primary purpose of this research is its application to the international development field, which is something that this book does forcefully and creatively.

Professor Wong's research focuses upon seven organizations: International Committee of the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, Médecins sans Frontières, Oxfam International, Anti-Slavery International, Amnesty International, and the International League of Human Rights. It is not completely clear why these particular organizations were selected, but presumably they offer sufficient variety to illustrate Dr. Wong's point. The presentation of these seven organizations is interesting for readers who are unfamiliar with the international development field. Much of the discussion focuses on Amnesty International, which relies on effective local implementation and neatly illustrates the central theory of this book. A more rigorous test of Dr. Wong's theory would require its application to a broader sample of NGOs.

A central idea in this book is political salience. Professor Wong differentiates between political salience as a social norm (as it is often used in political theory), and political salience as a reference point for a particular organization. Although the two may go together in some cases, in others they do not. She gives the example of anti-slavery as a strongly held social norm, but Anti-Slavery International (an NGO that advocates for that norm) lacks organizational salience and is relatively weak in terms of its organizational impact at this point. While issues that are addressed by Amnesty International may run counter to the norms in particular cultures, Amnesty's strong organizational structure makes it a politically salient organization.

Internal Affairs is a story worth reading. The theory it presents is elegant and unpretentious, and its simplicity opens up the theory to further empirical testing without any uncertainty about what the author intended. Like the international NGOs that are the focus of this book, Dr. Wong's theory of organizational political salience is an idea with legs, and I strongly recommend this very readable book.

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