Symposium Article

Project-Think and the Fragmentation and Defragmentation of Civil Society in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey

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Abstract

By drawing from authors' fieldwork in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey, this article critically examines perceptions of project-think among civic organizations in the Middle East. As a managerial rationality, project-think has four key components: (a) a prioritization of discrete needs and discrete groups, (b) an orientation toward funding, (c) a focus on short-term and measurable results, and (d) the positioning of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as career ladders. Through unpacking these four components, we find that project-think is perceived to contribute to the fragmentation of civil society by fracturing social issues, dividing the NGO sector, isolating organizational energy, and complicating relations between groups. Simultaneously, we demonstrate that, civic actors use various strategies to circumvent the perceived impacts of fragmentation. By mapping these intertwined meanings and experiences of fragmentation and defragmentation, this study contributes to debates concerning the political effects of managerialism among civil society in the Global South.

Keywords

civil society, critical nonprofit studies, managerialism, Middle East, NGOization

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Introduction

> I will be crude. Much money goes to waste. It is an "industry" in the pejorative sense. There is much money to be made. People don't believe in what they do. There is a lot on paper but little trickles down and has an impact on the target group. The projects supported focus on short term benefits. The amount of aid and the results do not add up. (Interview with the director of a local grantmaking foundation, Cairo, February 4, 2010)

> We [need] community organizing. We need a base. We need to get out of the donor-controlled box of typical projects. (Interview with the director of a community philanthropy group, West Bank, June 5, 2016)

> We are of the opinion that civil society should not be in the business of project-making. We seek to develop relationships from the heart, we want to connect people to people, our mission is to be a collective force against those who abuse their power. (Interview with the manager of a left-wing grassroots organization, Ankara, March 3, 2010)

In these accounts, civic actors from Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey expressed a common perception about the impact of project-making. They argued that instead of increasing efficiency, project-making fragmented their activities, energy, and time, thereby obstructing them from advancing their mission-related goals. This perceived fragmentation of civil society as a result of project-based ways of thinking and acting—what we refer to as "project-think"—is the focus of this article. We explore several questions:

> **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** How do actors on the ground understand the impact of project-making?
> **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How do they relate project-making to organizational change?
> **Research Question 3 (RQ3):** How do they perceive project-making as constraining and expanding the scope of civic life, repertoires of political engagement, and practices of philanthropy?

We address these questions through a study of civil society in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey. We define "project-think" as a managerial rationality that has four components: (a) a prioritization of discrete needs and specific beneficiary groups, (b) an orientation toward funding, (c) a focus on short-term and measurable results, and (d) the positioning of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as career ladders. Our findings suggest that project-think was understood to change the ways in which civic organizations conceptualized their goals, approached social problems, and conceptualized their relations with other organizations and society at large.[1]

Our theorizing of project-think is drawn from our ethnographic fieldworks in the Middle East. By using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), we have developed the concept of project-think to capture the similar ways in which our interlocutors understood the ongoing configuration of civil society in their respective countries.

Elements of this concept, however, have been identified by scholars working on civil society in the Global South (Alvarez, 1998; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Kamat, 2004; Kuzmanovic, 2012; Shivji, 2007). For example, in her study of transnational humanitarianism, Krause argues that the "pursuit of the good project" has led to the "fragmentation of humanitarian reason," a multifaceted process that transforms beneficiaries into commodities that must compete for funding and attention (Krause, 2014, p. 4). In the eyes of civil society actors in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey, a similar process of fragmentation accompanied the adoption of project-think, but this time fracturing not only the rationale but also the field, energy, and networks of civic engagement and political activism.

While we do not posit a direct causal relationship between project-think and fragmentation of civil society, we build our inquiry around the fact that that many of our interlocutors perceived it as such. They overwhelmingly, and often nostalgically, narrated a civic sphere that traditionally comprised self-help groups, charitable associations, popular committees, and loosely networked social movements which brought everyday people together around shared interests and objectives. While longing for this imagined alternative, they also developed several strategies to circumvent project-think. This article tells the story of this intertwined process of fragmentation and defragmentation as told by actors on the ground.

As a managerial rationality, project-think has multiple origins, flows through diverse circuits, takes divergent forms, and brings unexpected consequences. Today, civil society organizations in these three countries increasingly structure their work around developmental, humanitarian, and advocacy projects (Abdo, 2010; Ibrahim & Sherif, 2008; Jad, 2007; Keyman & Icduygu, 2003; Kuzmanovic, 2012). The proliferation of NGOs coincided with the embrace of neoliberalism: government agencies transferred their responsibility for welfare provision to nongovernmental actors just as economic conditions worsened (Atia, 2013; Dana, 2015; Eder, 2010). At the same time, governments used symbolic discourses and legal regulations to constrain the types of activities organizations could pursue, thereby moving them away from mass mobilization (Herrold, 2016; Zencirci, 2014). International donors further molded NGOs' activities by providing grants for specific issue areas and diverting energy away from other, equally urgent, problems (Hanafi & Tabar, 2003; Ottaway & Carothers, 2000). As NGOs structured their work around projects, organizations that adopted this managerial rationality were seen by the general population as more legitimate. Thus, a confluence of factors—instead of a single cause—created an environment conducive to the expansion of project-think.

Our concept of project-think brings into conversation a growing body of critical nonprofit studies with that of managerialism, global civil society, and international development. We also build upon an interdisciplinary literature that examines the rise of managerialism among NGOs (Eagleton-Pierce, 2019; Hvenmark, 2016; Roberts et al., 2005; Willner, 2019). Although some scholars examine the networked flow of managerial practices among transnational civil society networks (Appe, 2016; Fouksman, 2017; Jones III et al., 2011; Marshall & Suarez, 2014), others investigate the ways in which managerialism transforms an organization's internal procedures,

external relations, and modes of legitimacy. In this view, NGOs' adoption of seemingly neutral administrative practices such as auditing, evaluation, reporting, tracking, monitoring, and planning leads to depoliticization, mission drift, and complicity with oppressive politico-economic structures (Girei, 2016; Sanders, 2015).

These concerns about the impact of managerialism on civil society speak to larger debates about "NGOization" in the Global South (Alvarez, 1998, 1999; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013). Although celebratory accounts, which see NGOs as harbingers of democracy and development, often welcome the adoption of managerial practices (Salamon, 1993), rejectionist accounts argue that bureaucratized and professionalized organizations have limited capacity to resist Western imperialism, neoliberal capitalism, or repressive state practices (Kamat, 2004; Petras, 1997; Shivji, 2007). In between these two poles, there exists a third, more nuanced, analytical framework that understands processes of NGOization—and de-NGOization—as capable of providing emancipatory possibilities while limiting political activism, grassroots mobilization, and democratic participation (AbouAssi, 2013; Elyachar, 2005; Ismail & Kamat, 2018; Shrestha & Adhikari, 2011).

In a similar vein, in this article, we trace perceptions of project-think by paying attention to both constraints and possibilities. As we discuss below, project-think is believed to encompass a diverse web of discourses, technologies, and practices that portray social problems as matters of effective management. Although project-think is understood to have a transformative impact, the result is not a zero-sum game but rather a fluid, dynamic, and contested field of practice that is marked by dynamics of fragmentation and defragmentation. This theoretical framework fits squarely within critical nonprofit scholarship, which analyzes trends in civil society in relation to dynamics of capitalism, difference, equality, governance, power, and knowledge while acknowledging local agency (Coule & Bennett, 2018; Eikenberry et al., 2018; Mirabella, 2013; Shachar et al., 2019; Srinivas, 2009).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we describe the managerial rationality of project-think by explaining its four main components. Next, we lay out our research methods and provide background information about our cases: Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey. We then explore the ways in which project-think contributed to the fragmentation of civil society in these national contexts, and in the following section, we discuss how civic actors avoided, negotiated, and maneuvered project-think instead of blindly adopting or refusing it. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for critical nonprofit studies and for the study of civil society in the Global South.

Project-Think as a Managerial Rationality

As a distinctive managerial rationality that is understood to configure how NGOs make sense of social problems and act upon them, project-think has four key components: (a) a focus on discrete needs and specific beneficiary groups; (b) an orientation toward funding; (c) the prioritization of short-term, measurable results; and (d) the positioning of NGOs as career ladders (Table 1). Understanding these interwoven dimensions of project-think is necessary before we move on to a discussion of actors'

Table 1. Components of Project-Think.

Components of project-think	Manifestation
• Discrete needs and discrete groups	• Projects privilege specific subthemes within a wider mission, and then identify target communities, problems, and geographies.
• Funding orientedness	• NGOs produce discrete projects to attract funding as donors rarely fund core operations.
• Short-term and measurable results	• NGOs understand goal attainment in terms of the delivery of concrete products over a short time period.
• NGOs as career ladders	• Project-based NGOs serve as career ladders for highly educated professionals.

Note. NGO = nongovernmental organization.

experiences with, and perceptions of, fragmentation, as well as the complex strategies that they developed in response.

Discrete Needs and Specific Beneficiary Groups

As a managerial rationality, project-making requires a focus on the discrete needs of specific beneficiary groups.[2] Civil societies in which project-think is pronounced are marked by professional NGO sectors in which organizations focus on niche issue areas and distinct populations (Jad, 2007). While most organizations that structure their work in a project-based model maintain their broad missions—for example, reduce poverty, address unemployment, resist state violence, and end occupation—they also target their interventions by specializing within their broader mission (Elbers & Arts, 2011; Krause, 2014; Thayer, 2017). Education projects, for example, might prioritize math skills or artistic expression among target groups such as primary school children, disadvantaged university students, or young women. While specialization provides a clearly defined sphere of operation, it also contributes to the idea that the needs of certain groups can be addressed in a vacuum, that is, without paying attention to structural constraints or contributing factors.

An Orientation Toward Funding

As projects need money, organizations that implement social projects must engage in different kinds of fundraising. To access funds, NGOs might align their work with the priorities of external donors, such as grantmaking foundations, international organizations (IOs), national governments, and corporations (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Eikenberry, 2006; Kuzmanovic, 2010; Sundstrom, 2006). Alternatively, they might collect project-specific donations from the public by organizing charitable campaigns. Both forms of fundraising have been argued to create an "accountability

myopia" (Ebrahim, 2005), a situation in which accountability toward donors is privileged over accountability toward benefactors. Moreover, project-specific donations or grants rarely support organizations' core operations or long-term activities aimed at fulfilling a broad mission. Instead, funding is provided for discrete projects that last 1 to 3 years. At the end of that time period, organizations are expected to produce a report that includes detailed information about their expenses, operations, and outcomes. Thus, the orientation toward funding not only limits the kind of projects an NGO might undertake, but also governs through establishing norms of organizational legitimacy.

Short-Term, Measurable Results

Organizations that conduct projects must document measurable results achieved over short time frames (Elbers & Arts, 2011; Henderson, 2002; Thayer, 2017). Under the influence of "audit culture" (Strathern, 2000), NGOs regularly conduct evaluations to demonstrate progress toward their goals (Bornstein, 2003; Townsend & Townsend, 2004; Vannier, 2010). Measurable outcomes relate to broader missions but are distinguished with an effort toward providing tangible outputs that can be observed, assessed, calculated, and documented—often in quantitative form. Thus, NGOs operating with a project-think rationality are more likely to understand goal attainment in terms of the delivery of concrete products, rather than through "more ambiguous and less tangible change in social and political processes" (Ebrahim, 2005, p. 64). For example, an organization whose mission relates to education might design a project around the goal of ensuring that adolescent girls complete high school. In this case, measurable outcomes might include the number of schools built or student achievement on examinations. Although the results of this project might be considered positive, the impact might not extend beyond these narrow goals.

NGOs as Career Ladders

Project-think also corresponds with what Dean calls "instrumentally-motivated volunteering," that is, "the trend toward volunteering to improve one's own skills, to better compete in the jobs market, rather than to fulfill a social need" (Dean, 2015, p. 140). NGOs that focus on projects serve as career ladders for highly educated professionals (Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 2014; Clark & Michuki, 2009; Henderson, 2002; Holmén & Jirström, 2009; Toraldo et al., 2016). With their hierarchical structures that employ executives, managers, and paid staff, these organizations offer lucrative salaries and opportunities for professional development and advancement. NGO staff develop managerial skills as they learn and conduct the administrative tasks required to carry out projects. These skills not only allow employees to advance within the NGO sector but also make employees marketable in the corporate and government sectors. For some young people, jobs in project-based NGOs may also provide connections to international donors and result in opportunities for international travel (Hanafi & Tabar, 2003). Thus, it is often the desire to earn money, hone transferrable skills, and

network with leaders in NGO, government, and business sectors that attract people to project-based NGOs, not just the desire to contribute to a social cause.

Methods and Cases

Our methodological approach follows in the footsteps of nonprofit scholars who use immersive ethnographic methods (Baines, 2010; Flinn, 2011; Harris, 2001; Rhodes, 2014). As interpretive social scientists have noted, ethnographic methods are essential for understanding on-the-ground practices of meaning-making (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Wedeen, 2002; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). Within the scope of our study, ethnographic methods have allowed us to unpack the ways in which our interlocutors perceived the origins of project-think, understood its varied manifestations, and experienced its impact on their organizations and the wider civil society space.

The empirical evidence that substantiates our argument is drawn from our separate ethnographic fieldworks in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey. Conducted over the course of the past decade, each one of these field trips had different durations—sometimes lasting over a year, whereas other trips were shorter. Whereas Zencirci conducted the majority of their fieldwork in Turkey between 2009 and 2010, followed by shorter trips in 2013, 2015, and 2019, Herrold conducted fieldwork in Egypt between 2010 and 2012, followed by shorter visits in 2014 and 2017, and in Palestine during the summers of 2016, 2018, and 2019. Although our research design varied, we both conducted field visits, observed meetings, attended workshops and conferences, and interviewed activists, donors, managers, and volunteers associated with numerous civil society organizations in these three countries.

Interviews were semi-structured, often taking place in 1- to 2-hr meetings, other times occurring whenever we were able to hold a conversation with our interlocutors—during a tea break at a workshop, while riding a bus to a nearby village to "expand the horizons" of poor children, or as we hiked through mountains. It was during these intimate conversations that we developed an understanding of the perceived manifestations of project-think and observed the ways in which our interlocutors understood, experienced, and negotiated this managerial rationality. In total, we interviewed more than 200 staff members, volunteers, and beneficiaries of formal NGOs and members and volunteers of grassroots community groups.[3] The formal NGOs included international NGOs, local development NGOs, local human rights NGOs, and local charities. These organizations worked across fields of democracy promotion, economic development, and social welfare provision. Some were officially registered and typically employed paid staff who worked out of dedicated office space. By contrast, grassroots community groups were volunteer led and had wide member bases. They engaged in a wide range of activities based on their own priorities. These groups often had no dedicated office space, instead borrowing space on short-term bases or meeting in public venues. We also spoke with staff members of international donor agencies, as well as local philanthropic foundations and crowdfunding platforms.

Several economic, historical, and political trajectories have played a role in the development of civil society in these three countries. Prominent factors include legacies of colonialism, dynamics of state oppression, rise of political Islam, and the impact of neoliberalism. In Egypt, neoliberal economic policies that former President Hosni Mubarak implemented in response to pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank contributed to the rapid expansion of the country's NGO sector (Elyachar, 2005). As the state withdrew from social service provision, the Mubarak regime encouraged NGOs to proliferate and fill in those gaps (Herrold, 2020).

In Palestine, both neoliberalism and colonialism shaped the rise of the NGO sector within civil society (Dana, 2015; Turner, 2014). Prior to the signing of the Oslo Accords, civil society in Palestine was marked primarily by social movements, self-help groups, and popular committees that maintained broad-based, anti-colonial, and nationalist agendas. Post-Oslo, the aid that flowed to Palestine reflected Western donor states' neoliberal preferences and priorities that stressed efficiency in service provision and viewed NGOs as the most efficient and effective service-providing organizations (Dana, 2015).

While Turkey was never directly colonized, the founding ideology of Kemalism considered Europe as an exemplar of civilizational progress. During the early Republican period, modernist reforms were introduced to replace religious civic formations with their secular counterparts (Singer, 2011; Zencirci, 2015). Similar efforts toward modernizing, democratizing, and secularizing Islamic associational life have been part of the Egyptian and Palestinian civic spheres. As a result, dichotomies such as secular versus religious, Western versus authentic, and democratic versus authoritarian remain a significant characteristic of debates concerning civil society in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey as well as the larger Middle East (Clark, 2004; Jamal, 2007).

State oppression also limits associational and philanthropic activity in the Middle East (Kienle, 2011). Egypt and Turkey are currently categorized as authoritarian political regimes with varying degrees of freedom afforded to NGOs. Palestine is under military occupation and, as a result, both Israel and the Palestinian Authority oversee Palestinian NGOs. In all cases, formal laws and informal harassment constrain the types of activities organizations can undertake (Brown, 2003; Doyle, 2017; Herrold, 2016).

Despite the unique historical trajectories of civil society in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey, in each case, we observed remarkably similar manifestations of project-think and common strategies among civic actors for sidestepping the perceived fragmentation of their time, energy, and missions. While precise dynamics varied, we noted (a) that civic actors perceived project-think as leading to fragmentation as activist forms of political mobilization were supplanted by formal, professional, and structured modes of civic engagement that were less involved with political confrontation, and (b) that civic actors undertook efforts to combat fragmentation through a revival of community-based activism that rejects project-think on ideological grounds. We unpack these intertwined processes in the following two sections.

Table 2. Project-Think Relates to Different Kinds of Fragmentation.

Components of project-think	Types of fragmentation
• Discrete needs and discrete groups	• Issue fragmentation
• An orientation toward funding	• Sector fragmentation
• Short-term and measurable results	• Organizational energy fragmentation
• NGOs as career ladders	• Civic actor fragmentation

Note. NGO = nongovernmental organization.

Fragmentation of Civil Society

Throughout our ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey, we witnessed indications of project-think in the domain of civil society. Across all contexts, we observed how formal NGOs cyclically raised funds for their short-term and issue-specific projects. As former activists gravitated toward project-based NGOs for the high salaries and career opportunities they provided, the managerial rationality of project-think came to dominate civil society spheres. In this section, we demonstrate how our interlocutors perceived the impact of project-think on the shifting terrain of civil society at four levels: (a) fragmentation of social issues, (b) fragmentation of the NGO sector, (c) fragmentation of distinct organizations within the NGO sector, and (d) fragmentation of social change actors (Table 2).

Issue Fragmentation

By turning structural issues into a compact package of solvable problems, the managerial rationality of project-think was understood to orient civil society toward the accomplishment of specific tasks. As NGOs built identities and capacities around the narrow focus of their projects, their understanding of how to instigate social change and assist beneficiary groups shifted. In some cases, issue specificity isolated social problems from their political, economic, and historical context. For instance, in Egypt, activists pointed out that formal NGOs did not instigate or participate in the 2011 uprisings that overthrew former President Hosni Mubarak. Project-based NGOs "certainly weren't related to the uprisings, instigating social revolt or revolution. And they never acquired a prominent role in society since then," argued one Egyptian activist (Interview, Cairo, September 26, 2011). Similarly, during the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey, formal NGOs were hesitant and slow to respond, whereas new civic activists were able to participate quickly due to their flexible networks and the fact that they received strong grassroots support (Zihnioglu, 2019). This absence was attributed largely to the impression that NGOs were not skilled in, or even oriented toward, confronting repressive politico-economic structures.

Frustration with issue fragmentation was particularly acute in Palestine, where the Israeli occupation pervades and distorts all aspects of social, economic, and political life. Some interviewees claimed that NGOs distracted activists from mobilizing

against the occupation and believed that any success would be fleeting until the occupation ended. One activist described a conference that convened NGOs around the topic of environmental sustainability, and specifically the issue of collective water rights. "How can we create sustainability when we [as Palestinians] do no control [our own] water?" (Interview, West Bank, July 11, 2018). The futility of narrow projects was compounded by the way in which they distracted from the occupation. "At the micro level every . . . NGO says they have a successful project," said another Palestinian activist, but added that project-based work "skips the important stage of ending the occupation" (Interview, West Bank, June 26, 2016).

In a similar vein, project-making led to the fragmentation of sociopolitical issues in Turkey. Many civic actors in Turkey distinguish project-based social interventions (*projecicilik*) from a genuine form of political activism that uses NGOs as a medium of collective mobilization (Kuzmanovic, 2010). As one feminist activist put it, instead of "doing things the old-fashioned way by engaging with the needs of our people," many civic organizations in Turkey today were occupied with "coming up with projects that use fancy words such as economic empowerment, human rights, women's health etc." She continued, "These are important issues no doubt. But feminism cannot be divided up into slices like that" (Interview, Istanbul, October 5, 2015). For her—an opinion shared by many other interlocutors from Turkey—social problems had to be addressed in a holistic manner.

Sector Fragmentation

Project-oriented NGOs sustain themselves primarily by attracting project-specific grants from external funders and donations from individual benefactors. The practice of fundraising itself is not unique to organizations that engage in project-think; civic groups throughout the Middle East have long relied on charitable donations to support their mission-related activities (Bonner et al., 2003; Ibrahim & Sherif, 2008; Singer, 2008). The difference is that project-oriented NGOs specifically prioritized fundraising and developed projects that were likely to appeal to donors.

Funding-orientedness was understood to fragment civil society in one of two ways. First, competition for funds distorted civil society organizations' relations with one another. Rather than working collaboratively, NGOs jockeyed among themselves for funding and prestige. To win grants, NGOs competed against each other to create the most compelling projects. They wanted to be perceived as the most effective provider of a service. As one Palestinian NGO leader described, "Coalitions fail because of competition among the NGOs. Within networks, organizations fight. They fight for concepts that lead to funding" (Interview, West Bank, July 21, 2016). Other activists concurred, "International donor funding does not promote collaboration, instead it promotes competition. It is a competitive field in which if others gain you lose. It is sad to see this in a field of human good" (Interview, Cairo, February 7, 2012).

Second, competition for funds forced NGOs to build projects around the specific issues and beneficiaries for which grants were offered. In this way, issue and sector fragmentation operated hand in hand. "Aid is project-based," explained one Palestinian NGO leader. "There is a supermarket of projects, thus organizations must see which

fits best with their work" (Interview, East Jerusalem, July 19, 2016). Coalitions and collaborations suffered when organizations competed in funders' "supermarkets" of projects. One of the key outcomes of funding orientation is what scholars of civil society often refer to as "mission drift": the subtle changes in organizational behavior through which an NGO moves away from its original social purpose (Chahim & Prakash, 2012). As one staff member of an Egyptian NGO put it, "Most of civil society is not value oriented. It is fund oriented" (Participant observation, Beirut, May 6, 2011). In Turkey, mission drift was sometimes caused by international organizations (IOs) that encouraged the formation of domestic NGOs to implement the kinds of projects that external funders were willing to support. For example, in the past decade, IOs have begun to seek local organizations who can conduct refugee- and immigration-related projects for Syrians residing in Turkey. Although some domestic organizations were willing to take on such projects, others found it problematic that projects were, as one activist put it, "prepackaged":

> They just want to learn from us, understand what the local situation is. Then, it is as if they assign each one of us a project. Our opinions are not considered, we cannot even question their criteria or debate priorities. (Interview, Ankara, July 20, 2019).

Organizational Energy Fragmentation

Project cycles were relatively short in duration and required NGOs to prepare administrative reports. To maintain funding, NGOs had to employ staff members who possessed certain technical skills. Time and energy spent on project planning, proposal writing, fundraising, budgeting, marketing, evaluation, and reporting prevented staff members to perform mission-related activities.

In Palestine, NGO leaders frequently drew attention to logic models that required organizations to lay out a project's "theory of change" by identifying causal relationships between an organization's inputs, activities, outputs, and broader impacts. NGO leaders routinely rolled their eyes when discussing logic models (or "log frames"). As one Palestinian NGO leader said,

> There is a really annoying part of an aid application called a "log frame." Applicants must list activities, indicators of success, measurement, results, and offer to provide photos and press releases. This is a total waste of time, money, and effort. It makes us more dependent just to learn the whole process. (Interview, East Jerusalem, July 19, 2016)

NGO staff were not opposed to measuring progress, per se. However, they felt that prevailing practices of measurement and reporting were a waste of time because they failed to capture long-term changes that more accurately conveyed progress toward a mission. "So much time is spent reporting for a three-month project," one NGO leader said regretfully. "It is micromanagement. We had ten trainings in three months. At each one we had to have people sign in and we had to take photos to prove attendance." Regarding actual impact, not just outputs, this NGO leader explained, "I can

give you beautiful examples but not numbers" (Interview, East Jerusalem, July 19, 2016). The NGO leader went on to describe a process of village-led mobilizing to create and maintain a community farm. The process of community-based organizing over a long-term period was how this NGO leader understood its impact, not one that could be documented through numbers within a set period.

Similarly, NGOs in Turkey experienced organizational change as they adopted aspects of project-think. The NGOization of Islamic charity, for instance, entailed that Islamic NGOs were now expected to collect extensive information about their beneficiaries to ascertain whether an applicant was worthy of receiving social aid. Although most personnel of Islamic NGOs were proud of these new administrative procedures, others were apprehensive. One mid-level manager, who was involved in the Islamist movement of the 1990s, said, "Sometimes, I feel that we only listen to the poor so that we can write down what they say in a form. We spend more time organizing documents and calculating percentages instead of actually listening to their needs." For him, the managerial, data-driven approach was antithetical to the moral philosophy of Islamic almsgiving: Whereas the former saw the poor as an "assortment of numbers," the latter perceived the poor to be a spiritually enhanced being who must not be "disturbed but rather respected" (Interview, Istanbul, March 13, 2010).

Civic Agency Fragmentation

Project-based NGOs offered some of the most lucrative jobs in the countries we studied. These organizations—which were generally housed in high-tech offices—allowed their personnel to develop technical skills and expand their professional networks. NGO professionals earned salaries commensurate with their project-related skills and built career ladders by advancing to higher level jobs and more prestigious NGOs. As one Palestinian activist put it bluntly, "People want to be in the NGO system because they want better jobs" (Interview, West Bank, May 31, 2016).

NGO employees' and volunteers' career opportunities expanded outside of the NGO sector, too. In some cases, government-friendly NGOs served as stepping-stones for personnel to find public employment positions, while staff who worked in NGOs that promoted social entrepreneurship often secured subsequent jobs in the private sector. For example, in Turkey, volunteers and personnel of government-friendly Islamic NGOs frequently found employment in business firms that are supportive of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) or in various government agencies. One young female volunteer explained how their NGO experience made them stand out among other candidates, saying,

> We may not get paid, but otherwise, this is just like a job. We have to come on time, we have to take responsibility, we have to report to our supervisors. When employers see that we have volunteer experience on our CV, they understand that we have the necessary skills to hold down a job. (Interview, Istanbul, March 20, 2010).

Table 3. Civic Actors Used a Variety of Strategies to Combat Fragmentation.

Type of fragmentation	Strategies to combat fragmentation
• Issue fragmentation	• Holistic, long-term mobilization
• Sector fragmentation	• Voluntary organizations, collaboration, and alternative funds
• Organizational energy fragmentation	• Informal organizations and creative measurement
• Civic actor fragmentation	• Egalitarian, solidaristic relationships among civic actors

The career-building and enhancing properties of NGO work has been acknowledged by many—public and private—universities in Turkey, who have implemented corporate social responsibility projects, often making it compulsory for students to volunteer at NGOs before they can graduate with a degree. As one manager of social responsibility projects at a private university put it,

> Each student has to complete a project plan. This includes identifying a problem, proposing a solution, and figuring out how to raise money for any necessary materials and resources. Although our primary goal is to teach them how to be responsible citizens, these students also gain valuable experiences and that serves them well when they apply for jobs. (Interview, Istanbul, October 22, 2009)

Strategies for Combating Fragmentation

Although actors working inside and outside of the NGO sector experienced project-think to be restrictive, they also avoided, negotiated, and maneuvered project-think instead of blindly adopting or refusing it. They found alternate ways to implement their missions, assess their progress, evaluate their success, and organize their members. In doing so, they emphasized values, such as compassion, egalitarianism, solidarity, and gentle responsiveness, which, in their minds, stood in opposition to the cold and calculative logics of project-think, such as objective assessment of issues, detached engagement with communities, and quantitative measurement of results. In this section, we map these various strategies that were used to combat the perceived fragmentation of civil society (Table 3).

Addressing Issue Fragmentation

In each of these national contexts, project-think was perceived to undermine the potential for grassroots mobilization. Refusing the fragmentation of structural problems into separate issue areas, civic actors instead wanted to mobilize their communities in a holistic and long-term fashion. Often, they created community-based groups that convened local residents. Together, they identified and worked toward ameliorating

collective problems. The types of initiatives undertaken by these groups varied widely from constructing local amenities (e.g., a park or a well) to creating youth clubs and camps, from organizing public forums in neighborhoods to holding regular reading groups, and from hosting communal feasts to organizing protests and sit-ins. Many of these initiatives—no matter what their particular focus—brought people together and emphasized the need for collective solidarity as the organizing principle of civil society (Herrold, 2020).

For example, a community-based organization in Egypt's South Sinai served as a hub for members of the local Bedouin community to envision shared solutions to local challenges. The group helped community members to build an olive press to make and sell olive oil—a simple but effective way to generate income for residents. Around the time of Egypt's 2011 uprisings, the organization hosted informational sessions in which the Bedouin community could discuss what the revolution meant for their lives. As a result of these discussions, Bedouins who had never before voted not only registered and voted in the elections but also ran for government offices. While the organization did facilitate the production of certain projects (e.g., constructing an olive press), all of its programming was structured around long-term goals of community building and civic engagement.

Activists also participated in protest movements against authoritarianism, police brutality, and settler colonialism. The 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey, the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt, and the Great March of Return in Palestine (2018–2019) purposefully created political coalitions that transcended ethnic, class-based, and religious differences and managed to continue their mobilization work, even after the most contentious periods of movement activity subsided. A striking example of this kind of post-movement civic activity are the "park forums" in Turkey, which brought together like-minded citizens to discuss political and economic issues in neighborhood-level meetings with the hopes of creating radical change (Akcali, 2018).

Combating Sector Fragmentation

Activists found a number of ways to reunify fractured civic sectors. Often, they created groups that were entirely voluntary. Instead of raising funds and hiring paid staff, these groups relied on unpaid volunteers. As one voluntary group member in Palestine explained,

> We need to work without funds so that we are not under pressure to do what we do not want to do. We are free to do what we want. There are many organizations like us, doing things just because they want to. From 2011 to today we have no funding. We use volunteers, people who want to help. (Interview, West Bank, June 5, 2018)

When they needed space or equipment, these activists relied on free donations from group members and residents. Because they did not have to compete for grants from institutionalized donors, these groups could work alongside and collaborate with each other as they pursued their missions.

In several situations, groups found it impossible to survive without some fundraising. But rather than casually pursue aid that came with strings attached and that produced competition, organizations either turned to alternative funding sources or placed conditions on the foreign aid they were willing to accept (i.e., only grants for core operating support). Alternative funding techniques were revered by many of our interlocutors as the only medium for reviving a vibrant civil society or, as one activist from Turkey put it: "creating a civil society that was not beholden to the business of project-making" (Interview, Ankara, September 12, 2015). Access to forms of funding that were not tied to specific projects allowed civic groups to utilize local resources, strengthen solidarity, and focus their energy on their broader missions.

Contesting Organizational Energy Fragmentation

The administrative responsibilities tied to project-based work had become a farce among most activists. Some individuals even refused to register the groups they created as formal NGOs. Their goal was to remain grounded in local communities and focus on mission-related work. These group leaders believed that the bureaucratic requirements associated with creating a formal NGO—which they equated to project-based organizations—would fundamentally divert them from their broader goals. For example, a member of a Palestinian group attributed their choice to remain unregistered to a value-based mission. "We just believed in the framework of equality, freedom and justice," she explained. "All activities were centered around mobilizing wide and diverse citizens around these values even if that meant that measurable outcomes were absent" (Interview, West Bank, July 11, 2018).

Groups that rejected designing, administering, and overseeing projects often had little need for office space, so they worked out of group members' homes, cafés, or wherever else they could find space. Many group members took pride in not having an office, both because it symbolized their rejection of project-based bureaucracy and as it allowed them easy access to the community. "We are trying to work in the *public* space," emphasized a member of a Palestinian group (Interview, West Bank, July 11, 2018).

Instead of using numerical metrics, actors used other strategies to recognize and demonstrate impact. As a hiking group in Palestine said about their Facebook page, "The website, it should be for stories, not metrics. We are not keeping track of numbers; we just live the experience. After every hike we post reflections about the hike" (Interview, West Bank, June 5, 2018). They reflected upon participants' collective experience, instead of measuring numerical outputs. As the leader of one Egyptian organization explained, these alternative evaluations focused on "people's thoughts, ideas, and expression" of their experience with poverty (Interview, Cairo, February 2, 2010).

Addressing Civic Actor Fragmentation

Cognizant of the ways in which project-think contributed to fragmentation, some activists built nonhierarchical groups with wide membership bases and few—if any—paid staff. Some avoided competing for jobs altogether and instead strove to build a

culture of teamwork around the group's mission. As one Palestinian participant said, "There is only one rule in [the group]: If you work hard, you can lead" (Interview, West Bank, July 11, 2018). Group cohesion was often so tight that interviewees described their groups as families (Interviews, West Bank, July 5, July 9, and July 11, 2018).

Some organizations rejected project-think due to the potential enforcement of a hierarchical relationship between managers, volunteers, and beneficiaries. A manager from a Turkish leftist organization explained,

> We are not just doing a project, we do not treat people as numbers, our goal is not to make input-output tables but to generate a sense of togetherness. We want these children to know that they can come to us regardless of what they need, regardless of what happens to them. (Interview, Ankara, February 10, 2010)

In her view, project-think was antithetical to solidarity politics because, whereas the former privileged vertical power dynamics, the latter required fostering egalitarian relationships.

Conclusion

Examining the perceived manifestations of project-think—at a range of scales—expands the focus of critical nonprofit studies to the analysis of civil society in the Global South in general and the Middle East in particular. Instead of treating project-based managerial practices as universal models of good governance, we have suggested that actors on the ground perceive project-think as a type of managerial rationality that both limits and expands civic spaces. Although NGOization in the Global South has detrimental effects, our findings illustrate that civic actors neither unquestionably adopt nor rebel against project-think, but instead reimagine associational and philanthropic practices in creative ways.

Although the organizations we studied in the Egyptian, Palestinian, and Turkish contexts had a wide range of missions and goals, they had something in common: They held that their mode of operations were reconfigured by elements of project-think that we have identified, namely, (a) addressing discrete needs and targeting discrete groups, (b) funding orientation, (c) short-term and measurable results, and (d) NGOs as career ladders. These elements, our interlocutors believed, brought fragmentation at multiple levels, including (a) issue fragmentation, (b) sector fragmentation, (c) intra-organization fragmentation, and the (d) fragmentation of social change actors. Although most civic organizations experienced fragmentation, many also resisted, negotiated, and found ways to combat fragmentation by mobilizing citizens through social movements, seeking alternative sources of funding, demanding that the organization decides its own priorities, focusing on broad and long-term missions, as well as refusing to measure their social impact or demonstrate the effectiveness of their overall performance.

Our findings suggest that the question of whether a civic organization has the potential to mobilize citizens for change can only be assessed by paying attention to the ways in which their associational and philanthropic practices acquire meaning within their immediate local context, which is why we believe that ethnographic methods have a lot to contribute to critical nonprofit studies. In a recent article, Appe (2019) suggests that critical nonprofit studies need to account for the "vocabularies of practice" that characterize the work of NGOs while simultaneously acknowledging that such vocabularies can be reclaimed and repurposed. Similarly, our analysis of the ways in which the managerial logic of project-making is understood, negotiated, and refracted by civic actors on the ground reveals that one of the ways in which critical nonprofit scholars can enhance the study of civil society in the Global South is by giving voice to the actors themselves.

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Notes

1. For a similar analysis of the relationship between project-making and civil society, see Kuzmanovic (2010).
2. Although historically charities have catered to the specific needs of target populations—for example, by establishing orphanages to house children or soup kitchens to feed the hungry—the rise of projects has separated broad-based social movements into distinct issue areas, thereby fragmenting political agendas.
3. Because of the politically sensitive nature of sociopolitical activism in all three countries and because of government crackdowns on civil society organizations, we guaranteed anonymity to all of our interlocutors, promising not to reveal their or their organizations' names. Our interlocutors were often reticent to sign documents or be recorded, so we often gained oral rather than written consent and took notes by hand rather than through a recording device.

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