



# ICOR-LEM-IOS Research Seminar

“NGOs & Civil Society as change makers in management literature: A critical perspective”

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Thursday, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016 / 12.30 p.m. – 2 p.m.

## Abstract:

This article propose a critical examination of the underlying theoretical foundations of recent approaches in management literature praising the positive influence that nongovernmental organizations (NGO) can have on reforming multinational corporations' (MNC) practices in social and environmental domains relative to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) issues. We identify within this literature three different perspectives: an apologetic perspective for which NGO-Firm collaboration naturally leads to mutual benefits, critical reformist that recognize weaknesses in NGOs capacities but try to overcome them and radical critic emphasizing the perverse effects of NGOs activism. At the exception of radical critics, from far the least developed approach, we argue that the bulk of this literature is based on a neotocquevillian perspective of civil society, which links the strength and stability of a democracy to the vitality of its civil society. Reduced to NGOs, its most prominent actors, civil society has become the modern locus of utopianism in this literature where the modern faith in the superiority of market mechanisms used by NGOs has replaced the faith in human natural benevolence for Adam Smith or a Christian theological order for John Locke, both thinkers at the origin of the modern concept of civil society (CS). A notion of CS developed at that time as a solution to preserve the social order and counterbalance the rise of private interests in nascent capitalism and the weakening of old feudalism. After a clarification of the different conceptions of civil society on which these different approaches rest, we present radical critics of CS in order to explain how on the contrary civil society can be considered as the neoliberal locus of dystopia, a trap that is neutralizing attempts to reform MNC practices keeping CSR issues in a corporate framework rather than transforming into a political agenda and at the same time occulting other solutions we try to identify in the conclusion.

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