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2012

Introduction: Understanding the Activism–Policy Nexus

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mario_pianta/91/
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INTRODUCTION

On 15 October 2011, demonstrations in 950 cities of 80 countries of the world protested against the social effects of the economic crisis started with the financial collapse of 2008. The ‘indignados’ of Spain and Greece, the students of Chile, and the current numerous mobilizations inspired by the ‘Occupy’ movement all over the world, have opened up a new wave of protest against neoliberal policies of austerity and the injustice of the economic order. Periodic waves of activism spur increasing interest in the question of how civil society actors and social movements influence public policy. Such was the case in the 1970s with the emergence of so-called ‘new social movements’ and, more recently, with the rise of mobilizations centered on global justice issues (Giugni 2004). Such ‘global justice activism’ (della Porta 2007) connotes the increasing connectedness of civil society and activism across borders and at multiple scales (local, national, regional and international), involving ‘transnational activist networks’ (Sikkink 2005). Issues such as Third World debt, liberalization of trade and investment regimes, the need to regulate global finance and to make corporations accountable emerged in the mid-1990s as important areas of public concern, leading to waves of mobilizations broadly associated with the contestation of neoliberal globalization. Global justice activism came under the media and political spotlight, and gained considerable public support. Protests, campaigning and lobbying, plus the fact that activists increasingly participated in knowledge networks or ‘epistemic communities’ that informed public policy, challenged governments and politicians, as well as policy makers in international organizations and global business, to listen and respond to their demands for change.

What were the outcomes of such efforts? Several events—starting with the decision to abandon the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in October 1998 at the OECD, and ‘the Battle for Seattle’ at the WTO ministerial conference in 1999—showed that activists could prevent or slow down the introduction of ‘neoliberal’ policy reforms. But could activists also push through their ‘progressive’ agendas aiming at a more inclusive and sustainable pattern of development?

This volume addresses this question by focusing on four issue areas that are prominent within the justice movement: debt relief, trade justice, corporate accountability and international taxation. In relation to all these areas, activists have gone beyond the politics of rejection to demands for substantive policy reform. Such a transition inevitably intensifies the nature of the activist-policy

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1 For the purpose of this volume activism is defined as ‘organized efforts by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspect of society’ (Scott and Marshall 2009). Justice activism refers to mobilizations that centre on such societal aspects as equity, sustainability, rights and democracy.
nexus and formalizes the organization and coordination of advocacy organizations and networks (McCarthy and Zald 1987).

The chapters in this volume look at global justice activism at both the transnational and national levels, paying particular attention to civil society actions in three European countries—France, the United Kingdom and Italy. In these countries, social activism is not only vibrant on both the global and national stage, but multiple channels and institutional arrangements exist for potentially influencing policy processes. At the national level, various chapters examine the forms of mobilization and the nature of engagement with the policy process, as well as policy responses and outcomes. Strong variations emerge in the national experiences of activism in the three countries, and a wide range of outcomes are found, from success in changing national or business policies to failure to engage policy makers and public opinion. What factors explain such a diversity of activism trajectories? What national contexts and forms of mobilization are conducive to policy reform? And how do these factors influence each other and impact on outcomes? In short, how can activism make change happen?

CONCEPTS, APPROACHES AND ANALYTICAL GAPS
To understand the dynamics of what we call the ‘activist-policy nexus’, this volume draws on both theory and empirical evidence. The theoretical contributions, developed in Part 1, aim to identify conceptual elements that are key for understanding both ‘success’ and ‘failure’ as well as considerable variations in forms of mobilizations and outcomes that are identified in the case studies that make up Part 2. Chapters 1 and 2 draw on neo-Gramscian and path-dependence theory to understand how elites reproduce control and how limits to change derive from historically constructed institutions. Chapters 3 and 4 refer to social movements and organization theory to highlight the possibilities for change associated with some of the relatively recent features of collective action associated with networking and transnational activism.

By referring to these different perspectives the volume aims to address weaknesses that characterize various perspectives used to analyze global justice activism, including gaps in analysis and the fragmentation of approaches and disciplines.

So-called ‘realist’ political studies have traditionally been concerned with how institutional politics (national and supranational) works and how state actors (and multi-lateral institutions) shape policies and address controversies. Less attention has been paid to the roles of other—non-state—actors, in particular NGOs and NGO networks. The drawbacks of such a realist approach to the study of policy change have long been highlighted. First, by putting too much weight on traditionally powerful actors, i.e. states, the role of civil society and activism is often disregarded or narrowly confined to its influence on (global) public opinion and to specific efforts for lobbying policy makers. Second, traditionally state-centered analyses neglect the capacities of non-state elite actors, such as business interests and powerful lobbies to repress, capture, co-opt and exert power (Escobar 1995; Wainwright and Kim 2008). Third, and apart from the actors involved, a ‘realist’ approach tends to confine change and the potential impact of activism to alterations in institutional arrangements and policies. Yet, while non-
state actors and activists often do not hold the decision-making power and authority of states and supra-national institutions (Wendt 1999), their role in initiating, designing and increasingly also implementing and monitoring change, is undeniable (Arts 2000; Wolf 2006). Attempts at understanding change thus require nuanced analyses of the social and temporal dimensions of politics and transformation and an assessment of the impact of non-state actors at different stages and levels of these processes.

The burgeoning ‘governance’ literature, in contrast, has broadened attention to the roles of non-state actors, particularly in the context of globalization and economic liberalization. Utilizing policy-process and regime theories (see Okereke, Bulkeley and Schroeder 2009), scholars examine the multi-stakeholder governance systems that emerge at different levels, locally, nationally, regionally and trans-nationally, around certain issues, such as trade, development, finance, climate and human rights (see for example, Arts, Noortmann and Reinalda 2001). While activists and other non-state actors are recognized as ever more important initiators and drivers of change, critical perspectives on this development claim that their impact may be overrated (Yanacopulos 2005) because still, ‘[…] change ultimately happens through states’ (Wendt 1999:9). Furthermore, by emphasizing the primacy of consultation and social dialogue in processes of policy reform, aspects associated with unequal resources, conflicting interests and bargaining are often sidelined (Yanacopulos and Smith 2008).

Sociological literature, in particular social movement and organization theories, have focused on explaining the increasing involvement of all kinds of non-state actors, individual organizations, groups and networks in various policy areas and service-spheres (Smith 2007; Tarrow 2005). This approach, however, tended to focus on the behaviour of specific sets of actors (such as NGOs) and lacked the theoretical and historical contextualization for understanding the relationships between forms of mobilization and policy change. In the case of civil society coalitions, often insufficient attention is directed to power relations between networked organizations and other aspects of internal governance.

The social movement literature builds upon a long and rich tradition of comparative research on mobilization in and across national policy contexts (della Porta and Diani 2006; Kriesi and Duyvendak 1995). From this literature emerged key analytical concepts of political opportunity structures, resource mobilization and framing that help to understand the activist-policy nexus and devise typologies of contexts and activist mobilizations. A stream of this literature has addressed the question of the outcomes of mobilizations. The early study of Gamson (1990) distinguished between the achievement of particular aims (‘new advantages’) and success in being recognised as a legitimate claimant (‘acceptance’). Giugni, McAdam and Tilly (1999) distinguished between direct links from claims of mobilizations and effects, and outcomes resulting from a combination of claims and outside events. Schumaker (1975) focused on the phases of the policy making process when the effects of activism emerge, considering access, agenda setting, policy, implementation of legislation and impact, i.e. the specific consequences of a change in policy (for a broader discussion, see della Porta et al. 2010).
At the national level, the effects of mobilizations have generally been linked to political opportunities, the scale of resources available, forms of activism and access to policy makers. In a study of ecological, antinuclear and peace mobilizations in Europe, Giugni (2004) found that success was associated with the presence of favourable political opportunities, strong political alliances, and the viability of claims (higher in domestic, low profile issues; lower in foreign policy and high profile issues).

With the rise of transnational movements addressing global issues (della Porta 2007), the contexts and conditions of success of activism have broadened. A less structured system of governance of global issues can be open to new forms of cross-border contestation, with novel opportunities for policy change. della Porta et al. (2010) draw lessons from studies of 12 cases of transnational mobilizations at the European and global level, on economic, social and disarmament issues. They find that success in policy change is associated to the presence of multilevel political opportunities, strong protest networks, global framing of issues, and multiple forms of transnational activism.

The persistent role of national factors—such as domestic political opportunities and constraints—in shaping mobilizations and their possibilities of success has been emphasized in several studies. National factors are important even when the mobilizations address transnational issues (Giugni, Bandler and Eggert 2006; Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Smith 2004).

This volume aims to overcome the theoretical and analytical limitations related to the disciplinary divides highlighted above and to build a stronger conceptual framework. Such a framework includes the relevance of national contexts, institutional path dependence and ‘activist traditions’; hegemonic elite dominance by powerful business interests; and the dynamics within civil society, including power relations within networks and among different actors. To do so, it draws on diverse streams of literature, in particular, political economy, institutional and Neo-Gramscian perspectives, as well as social movement and organization theory. Furthermore, it takes a comparative empirical perspective and examines differences in the context and nature of mobilizations, across activist experiences and national and transnational policy settings.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Part I of the book, Actors, Institutions and Networks, draws on various literatures and theoretical perspectives to address the following questions:

- In a context where state-business-society relations and forms of governance are undergoing significant changes, what opportunities and constraints does this afford for counter-hegemonic struggles and reform initiatives?
- How do corporate élites attempt to retain the reins of control over processes of policy reform associated with justice activism?

2 This approach argues that ‘the forms and dynamics [of activism] we see in the transnational arena resemble their national and local predecessors, even as they are adapted to fit a transnational political context’ (Smith 2004: 320).
What role does history and institutional path dependence play in explaining opportunities and constraints for policy-oriented action, as well as variations in policy response by country?

Can civil society strategies centered on networking at the national level overcome the limitations of atomized civil society organizations pursuing their own agenda?

What is the nature of transnational mobilizations, and what role is played by cross-border networks in complementing national activism and in opening up contestation at the global level?

In the first chapter, *Elite Business Power and Activist Responses*, Peter Utting identifies the significant variations in traditional modes of domination, governance, regulation and policy making that have occurred in contexts of globalization and liberalization. Such changes are reflected in terms and concepts that have entered the lexicon of scholarly studies: the ‘competition’ state; ‘technocratic’, ‘multi-layered’ and ‘good’ governance; and knowledge networks, epistemic communities and ‘civic networks’, where the latter, in particular, are seen as sources of ‘counter-hegemony’ to the unleashing of global market forces and neo-liberal economic ideologies. The chapter examines how both elites and civil society actors are responding to these changes to gain influence and control. Particular attention is given to different forms of pressure and influence exerted by NGOs and trade unions that relate to the role of transnational corporations (TNCs) in development and issues of corporate social responsibility and accountability. The chapter also examines what powerful actors and institutions are doing to resist, accommodate, shape, or indeed, lead processes of policy and institutional reform, as well as how the strategies of activists and civil society organizations have evolved and adapted to changing patterns of governance and domination. The chapter ends with a reflection on the potential and limits of such strategies from the perspective of progressive policy reform.

Chapter 2, by Daniela Barrier, on *National Policy Regimes: Implications for the Activism-Policy Nexus*, is concerned with the effects of history and institutional path dependence on activism and policy reform. It draws from the case studies presented in Part II of this volume as well as historical institutionalism literature and other research conducted by the author to compare the development of the activism-policy nexus in the contexts of France and the UK. In particular, it examines how the nature of activism and state-civil society relations vary under differing policy regimes, social models and political narratives—differences which relate to notions of the UK ‘spectator’ state and the French ‘interventionist’ state. The chapter first briefly reviews the relevant variations in the nature of the French and UK state-business-society relations and colonial models. It then describes the evolution of social movements concerned with development issues since the beginning of the 20th century in both countries. Finally, it examines variations in terms of resource mobilization, action repertoires, framing and political opportunities, arguing that the development activism-policy nexus in France and the UK is highly path dependent and remains closely linked with each national context, despite the recent rise of cross-border and trans-national activism.

In Chapter 3, *The Potential and Practice of Civic Networks*, Jem Bendell and Anne Ellersiek examine the promises and practices of networks among activist
groups as a key mechanism for advocacy for global justice. Four networks based in the UK are analyzed in the light of the promises extracted from the literature with regard to the ‘network effect’ on mobilization. The authors show that network participants consciously seek to maximize the benefits of networks, and what this implies for the network participants’ awareness of, and autonomy from, social structures; the effectiveness and legitimacy of the impacts of networks; and the implications for their effective management with regard to policy impact. The authors reflect on problems of network legitimacy and effectiveness, and suggest the need for a shift from ‘noble to global’, whereby networks further align participant organizations’ practices and agendas with network-related activities and goals, involve more groups and movements from the South, and adopt an agenda more aligned with universal values and concerns than national issues and interests.

The emerging structures of global social movements and their impact on policy change are examined in Chapter 4, *Global Social Movement Networks and the Politics of Change*, by Raffaele Marchetti and Mario Pianta. The authors identify three key novelties of such networks. First, they organizationally constitute the backbone of a new political agency that it is openly global, thus different from traditional contentious agency at the national level; second, they show a degree of political maturation in the framing of issues from local and national protest to global proposals; and finally, they develop a specific strategic-political skill in both challenging and implementing institutional policy-making at the state and international level. Organizational structure, themes and strategy constitute the three elements characterizing the unique nature of transnational social networks as key elements for understanding global politics in general, and global contentious politics in particular. The chapter concludes with examples of how these global social movements have concretely affected transnational and national policies, illustrating the ‘global activism-policy nexus’ and its manifestations at different levels of governance.

Part II of the book, *The Activism-Policy Nexus in Practice*, examines concrete cases of mobilizations associated with debt relief or cancellation, trade justice, international taxation and corporate accountability at both global and national levels (see Table 0.1).

*Insert Table 0.1 Overview of cases*

Chapter 5, *Global Networks on Trade Policy: The Case of the WTO Conference in Cancun*, by Federico Silva, investigates the emergence of transnational mobilizations on trade justice, and the opportunities and challenges they faced in the run-up to, and during, WTO Ministerial Conferences, particularly Cancun. The focus of the chapter is the interaction between global networks and policy makers. Specific attention is devoted to the development of the policy decisions, to the networks’ activities aimed at influencing these decisions, and to the outcomes that emerged. The chapter identifies the relevant factors and causal mechanisms that have facilitated (Cancun) or impeded (Doha) policy impact. The analysis shows that in social movement strategies, success is determined both by internal factors pertaining to social movements and external factors, by the simultaneous presence of lobbying, protest and an epistemic-like community, and by key factors in the political opportunity structure such as trust and alliances. An
additional important finding concerns the complexity of the interactions between the national and the transnational level, the presence of both ‘boomerang effects’ and of a ‘return to the national’ where a decisive role can be played by a few national delegations acting in alliance with global networks.

The remaining chapters are devoted to case studies of national mobilizations in the UK, France and Italy. Chapter 6, *Advocacy for Corporate Accountability and Trade Justice: The Role of ‘Noble Networks’ in the United Kingdom*, by Jem Bendell and Anne Ellersiek, examines the policy impacts of the mobilizations of British coalitions over issues of trade justice and corporate accountability. The authors look at how different coalitions’ interacted with policy-making institutions, noting their relatively moderate agenda, both in terms of the preferred means of collective action (advocacy and lobbying rather than protest), and the nature of their goals. In the case of trade, the analysis finds that activists have been highly permeable to the British government’s views and proposals on trade policy. In the case of corporate accountability, the coalitions have adopted a legalistic approach to activism, targeting the legislation making process as well as British commitments to international agreements, and using legislation already in place to seek redress. Despite the significant degree of access to policy-makers enjoyed by the coalitions, achievements related to even conservative policy reforms have been quite limited. The chapter reflects on needed reforms in NGO advocacy and mobilizing strategies, with a particular focus on the organization of activism in networks and the challenges of arriving at and effectively communicating joint agendas.

*Reforming Agricultural and Trade Policy in France* is the topic of Chapter 7, by Benoit Daviron and Tancrede Voituriez. Investigating the demands and policy positions of key actors and organizations in relation to agricultural trade policy, they find a substantial convergence of ‘radical’ thinking among a diverse set of activist, professional and governmental actors and institutions. In order to understand this convergence and evaluate its impact on policy, the chapter analyzes the resources and framings of four main civil society organizations active on the issue. The convergence in agendas is due to the emergence of a cohesive epistemic community, made possible by three main factors: the strong influence among intellectuals of the ideas and principles stated in the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy in the 1960s; the weight of agricultural specialists in activist and professional organizations; and the high levels of permeability between civil society organizations and government personnel. The coalition failed, however, to mobilize key workers’ unions and larger movements such as ATTAC, as well as the wider public. The chapter proceeds to analyze the interactions of these organizations with policy-making circles, and in particular the ministries of agriculture and trade, finding that despite significant consensus among some key national level actors and a large epistemic community, this had little policy influence at the EU level, where trade policy is largely determined.

In Chapter 8, *Debt Relief and Trade Justice in Italy*, Paolo Gerbaudo and Mario Pianta, examine the different ways in which debt and trade issues have been framed in the political and social arenas in Italy, and the role of solidarity groups, development NGOs, environmental and peace groups, trade unions and Catholic organizations. Although Italian activism is strongly rooted in domestic political
cultures, it was able to link up from an early stage to transnational mobilizations—a key factor which shaped national actions. The chapter investigates mobilization capacities, forms of actions and interactions with policy makers. In the case of debt, a unified campaign, *Sdebitarsi*, reached an important policy success with the passing of legislation on debt relief. In the case of trade, several coalitions have been active with little success in affecting policies that were mainly decided at the European and WTO levels. Such campaigns, however, spurred the growth of fair trade experiences.

Chapter 9, *Dropping the Debt? British Anti-debt Campaigns and International Development Policy*, by Claire Saunders and Tasos Papadimitriou shows that the issue of debt relief became political and passionate in Britain during the late 1990s. This period marked a break from the previously moderate lobbying actions of British civil society organizations concerned with development issues and brought the debt issue for the first time to the wider public debate as well as government forums. The chapter first presents the structural and ideological reasons for this increased interest on debt relief. Based on data gathered via questionnaires and interviews, it analyses the composition and resources of the two coalitions that best represent the anti-Third World debt activism born in the UK in the mid-1990s: Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History. Despite the overall dominating presence of large development NGOs, it finds important variations with regards to resources, membership and framing between the two coalitions, with Jubilee 2000 enjoying larger membership of labour, environmental and missionary organizations but marked by internal dissent, and Make Poverty History being better resourced and closer, in agenda and actual relationships, to policy-making circuits. The study then analyses chronologically and in detail the effects of these variations on activists’ interactions with relevant government institutions, as well as the differences in their policy impacts between those two coalitions.

*The Struggle for Third World Debt Relief in France* is the topic of Chapter 10, by Rodrigo Contreras, who first analyses the resources and framing aspects of the two main anti-debt coalitions in France—*Ça suffit comme ça*—created to prepare the world-wide Jubilee 2000 campaign, and Plate-forme Dette & Développement, created to enlarge the existing coalition. It finds that overall, French anti-debt coalitions are poorly resourced and rely largely on the voluntary work of their members. There is however continuity of membership and framing. Demanding total debt cancellation, both coalitions were formed by Christian solidarity, anti-imperialist and development NGOs, as well as labor unions, and both linked debt to the French colonial heritage and to unequal power relations between North and South. The chapter analyses the coalitions’ interactions with the Ministry of Finance, their main interlocutor in government. It finds that the wide membership base and the continuity of activists’ agendas gained them credibility with the government and resulted in the institutionalization of periodic consultations. However, in a context of scarce resources and where the French government chose to promote its own pro-development initiative, the coalitions managed neither to make the issue of debt accessible to the wider public nor to obtain public government support for their demands.

Chapter 11 by James Brassett, *Global Justice and/as Global Democracy: The UK Campaign for a Tobin Tax*, focuses on the experience of War on Want, the main
British organization that promoted an international currency transaction tax (CTT). The chapter examines the nature of the demands that emerged, noting that the UK campaign for a CTT falls within the moderate range of proposals related to such a tax, and that the framing of demands evolved over the course of the campaign. The ambitious original demands for a version of the Tobin Tax, which contained important democratizing and transformative dimensions, shifted towards a more strategic and straightforward ‘tax for development’ aimed at raising revenues to contribute towards the British government commitments to the Millennium Development Goals. This evolution took place as large development NGOs joined the CTT cause to form the ‘Stamp Out Poverty’ coalition which brought the CTT issue to the Make Poverty History Campaign. The chapter goes on to examine the policy impact of the CTT movement, in particular through the movement’s interactions with the Treasury and the Department for International Development (DfID). Finding very limited impact, the analysis discusses the reasons for this in the light of a political and economic context in Britain with its strongly finance-oriented economy and a set of legal constraints on the political activities of charities. The coalition, however, had more impact at the EU level, forcing the European Central Bank to justify its position on taxing capital and contributing towards existing debates that place social redistribution on the agenda of European governance.

Chapter 12, Campaign or “movement of movements”? ATTAC France and the Currency Transaction Tax, by Edouard Morena, refers to political opportunity structures, resource mobilization and framing to study the trajectory and impacts of the French organization ATTAC and its interactions with policy-making circles. First, it analyses the political and economic contexts within which ATTAC was created, suggesting that its success and high profile presence on both the French and international political scenes can be seen as the direct result of a convergence between its objectives and those of mainstream politics and public opinion over one triggering issue: globalization. Regarding the question of resource mobilization, the analysis reveals that ATTAC was set up by a coalition of like-minded organizations (trade unions, civic associations, NGOs, newspapers, academics and individual militants) that had grown aware of the proximities between their analyses with regards to neoliberal globalization and the crisis of mainstream politics, and had campaigned together during large national social mobilizations. This coming together of like-minded organizations provided incentives to all: unions widened their support network and legitimacy; and civic associations gained access to tangible and intangible resources. With regards to framing, the demands of ATTAC France evolved progressively from the Tobin tax demand towards other forms of global taxation. This evolution in framing, it is argued, was partly related to changes in the political context: concerns at the level of public opinion and the legislature about unregulated financial markets had subsided, while the executive branch sought to regain international status and find innovative sources of funding for development in view of commitments for the Millennium Development Goals.

The concluding chapter, How Can Activism Make Change Happen?, by Mario Pianta, Anne Ellersiek and Peter Utting, distills the main findings in terms of variations in demands, proposals, and policy and discursive impacts by issue area, type of mobilization and country. It identifies key elements related to institutional
and historical context, power relations and political opportunities for understanding such variations, as well as ‘internal’ dimensions of activist organization and networks. Such dimensions relate to resource issues; representation and legitimacy; identity, cohesion and coherence; and the monitoring and sustainability of action. The chapter ends by reflecting on the implications of the findings for activism in the contemporary context of global crises.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


