Global Social Movement Networks and the Politics of Change

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1. Social Movements in a Global Context

Political mobilisations on global issues have often been interpreted by extending in various directions the model of national social movements to a context of transnational actions (della Porta et al. 1999; Tarrow 2001; Smith & Wiest 2005). While there is no shortage of empirical cases that fall into the pattern of a limited internationalisation of domestic activism, we argue that this approach is unable to capture the fundamental novelty of the global mobilisations on global issues of the last two decades. Such novelty can only be understood if studied from a truly transnational perspective rather than as an extension of domestic political logic (Coleman & Wayland 2006; Pianta et al. 2009).

In this regards, three directions of study of transnational mobilization can be identified. A first group of studies in this transnational direction investigated the evolution of specific nationally (or locally) based campaigns that involved some cross border dimensions, in terms of access to (or provision of) knowledge, resources, support, legitimation, or political alliances with activist organizations (and sometimes also institutions) of other countries (Smith et al. 1997; della Porta et al. 1999; Cohen & Rai 2000; Khagram et al. 2002; Smith & Johnston 2002; Bandy & Smith 2004; della Porta & Tarrow 2005). A second line of investigation has addressed mobilizations concerning international institutions as such. Here, social movements engage in conflict over the decisions, policies, and behaviour of international institutions, while the role of single national governments loses importance. Transnational activism is of major importance in these cases, usually with a crucial co-ordinating role played by large networks of movements or organizations in many countries (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Cohen & Rai 2000; O’Brien et al. 2000; Khagram et al. 2002; Glasius 2005; Joachim & Locher 2009). A third line of more specific investigations has addressed the rise of the Global Social Movement Networks and the Politics of Change

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1 The authors wish to thank Martin Koehler for extensive discussions on the themes of this chapter, and Donatella della Porta, Peter Utting and Daniela Barrier for their comments.
Justice Movement. The specificity of such mobilizations is their focus on global issues, although they include a wide spectrum of actions ranging from nationally (or locally) rooted ones to the campaigns on supranational institutions (Arrighi et al. 1989; Brecher et al. 2000; Pianta 2001a; Waterman 2001; Pianta & Silva 2003; della Porta et al. 2006; della Porta 2007). In order to grasp the transnational component of social movements and civil society at large, it is crucial to focus on those specific processes and social actors that best express this transnational or indeed global scale shift.

Within the broader spectrum of global social movements, transnational networks arguably offer the best instance of this new way of conceptualising and implementing political relationships at the transnational level. Transnational networks can be considered as a novel expression of transnational politics for at least three main reasons. First, they constitute the organizational 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 of political issues and themes from local and national protest to global proposal. Crucial for this is the envisaging of new identities, aware of global responsibilities, tolerant of diversity and capable of building large alliances. Finally, they develop a set of strategies aiming at policy change in complex multilevel systems of governance, with a capacity to address both national and international institutions and policy processes. Innovative strategies and repertoires of action make parallel use of both radical protest and more moderate lobbying of authorities (see Silva’s chapter in this volume); such strategies also tend to evolve rapidly, with immediate diffusion of successful models and shifts of the scale of activism. These three elements (organizational structure, themes, and strategy) characterise the unique nature of transnational social networks as key elements for understanding global politics in general, and global contentious politics in particular. Hence, this chapter outlines the concepts needed to understand transnational networks in global social movements and their impact, providing a comprehensive overview of the main characteristics of transnational networks.

From a transnational perspective, global activism of the last two decades has to be understood in the context of the evolving relationships between the spheres of politics, economy and society, resulting from the increasing international integration that has emerged since the 1980s (Florini 2000; Mittelman 2000; Pianta 2001b, 2001a). At the global level, the sphere of politics is structured by the inter-state system, where national states and international institutions exercise their power. While at the national level the political relationships between state and citizens have been defined by constitutions, law and democratic processes, at the global level no universally coercive power of law has yet emerged, and no democratic processes of participation and deliberation have developed for the world citizens. Disregarding the global democratic deficit, political powers have developed new rules for economic and social activities that

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2 The present analysis is based on our previous empirical research (Pianta 2001b; Pianta & Silva 2003; Pianta 2005; Pianta & Zola 2007) and on work for the DEMOS project (della Porta 2007; Pianta & Marchetti 2007; della Porta 2009a, 2009b; Pianta et al. 2009). While these works provide extensive empirical analyses, in this chapter we aim to offer a broader theoretical formulation of the key features of transnational networks in global social movements.
remain both inefficient and illegitimate within the new context of globalization (Held & McGrew 2002; Marchetti 2008). The sphere of the economy is structured, according to the neoliberal global strategy, by the operation of firms and markets, which are driven by the search for profits. This generates a tendency to turn into commodities an increasingly wide array of activities previously provided and regulated by states and society, from knowledge to education and health, from public services to global public goods such as water and environmental protection. The resulting privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation, that have characterised since the 1980s the model of neoliberal globalization, has asserted the power of markets and large industrial and financial firms over decisions made in the political sphere and over social behaviours. The recent financial crises have not structurally altered such long-term trend.

Distinct from the spheres of politics and economics, a global sphere of social activities has also emerged. Here we understand global civil society as the sphere of cross-border relationships and activities carried out by collective actors—social movements, networks and civil society organisations—operating independently from states and markets. Actors in the emerging global civil society have formulated a number of demands vis-à-vis the political and economic spheres, that include: a) demands for global democracy, human rights and peace to the political system; b) demands for global economic justice to the economic system; and c) demands for global social justice and environmental sustainability to both systems. Conversely, both the political and the economic systems have put pressure on global civil society to adhere to their own values and norms.

Since the 1980s, a growing activism has addressed global issues, defended fundamental rights, and advocated change in a transnational perspective (Pianta 2005; Pianta & Marchetti 2007). At the national level, modern definitions of civil society have emphasised its autonomy from both the state and the economy looking at it as the contested terrain where counter-hegemonic projects are developed. In the last decades, however, the demands and activities of civil society moved beyond the domestic interaction, challenging political and economic power across and above national borders. Civil society activism has come to increasingly define itself on the basis of values and identities that transcend national loyalties and to act on global issues across boundaries. A growing field of activism with a transnational organizational structure, identity, and scale of operation has thus emerged.

Within global civil society, however, highly heterogeneous actors operate. Among these, global social movements are key actors of protest at the global level. They can be identified as cross border, sustained, collective social mobilisations on global issues, based on permanent and/or occasional organisations, networks and campaigns with a transnational co-ordination, moving from shared values and identities, challenging and protesting economic or political power, and campaigning for change in global issues. They share a global frame of the problems, have a global scope of action and may target supranational or national objectives. The analysis in the rest of the chapter will focus on the transnational networks associated to global social movements that have challenged the dominant model of relationships between global politics, economy and society, developing counter-hegemonic ideas and actions against neoliberal globalization. The characteristics of transnational networks, in both their internal
and external dimensions, will be examined in order to identify their dynamics and policy impact. Internal aspects concern the organizational structure, the values and identities, and the themes of the networks. External aspects concern the strategic attitude of networks; global political opportunities, the politics of change and the actions of transnational networks will be examined, leading to an assessment of their role and relevance.

2. The rise of transnational networks

Within global social movements, transnational networks are crucial political actors. In this context, a transnational network can be defined as a permanent co-ordination among different civil society organisations (and sometimes individuals, such as experts), located in several countries, based on a shared frame for one specific global issue, developing both protest and proposal in the form of joint campaigns and social mobilisations against common targets at national or supranational level. Transnational networks play a major role in terms of aggregation of social forces and development of common identities. While embedded in global social movements, they provide political innovation in term of conceptualisation, organisational forms, communication, political skills, and concrete projects to the broad archipelago of activism. Despite being subject, as much as any other social and political organization, to internal social competition which generates at times negative outcomes (Silliman & King 1999; Bob 2005), transnational networks can nonetheless be interpreted as positive tools for opening up opportunities for effective social struggles. In this regard, networks are structures created through political agency that alter the political scene in which social movements play.

In the last two decades, cross border networks of civil society organisations have been the most typical actor promoting political and economic change on global issues. Typical examples of transnational networks active on global justice issues include Our World Is Not for Sale (OWINFS), that has a global reach on trade issues (Silva 2008, see chapter 5 in this volume); Via Campesina, with a global, South-based perspective on agricultural issues (Edelman 2003, McKeon 2009); Attac, as a global network of national associations addressing finance and economic policy (Kolb 2005, see chapters 11 and 12 in this volume); Jubilee 2000 and Jubilee South as global networks on debt issues (Donnelly 2002, see chapters 6, 7 and 8 in this volume); the various women networks active on human rights issues (Bunch 2001; Moghadam 2004), People’s Global Action (PGA), an informal network of grassroot activists (Juris 2008), but also the International Committee that organises the World Social Forum can be considered as a global network engaged in making the largest gathering of global social movements possible every year (Waterman 2004; de Sousa Santos 2006; Teivainen 2006).

3 In particular “in organisational studies networks are conceptualised as relationships based on forms of exchange and distinct from markets and hierarchies. Networks are regarded as an intermediary between markets and hierarchies as they have less uncertainty than the former and less complexity than the latter” (Henry et al. 2004, 842). However, social networks entail differing power and thus some degree of implicit hierarchy, as explained in a section later.
Similar transnational networks have emerged in the fields of human rights - such as the campaign for creating the International Criminal Court (Glasius 2005), in human security and disarmament - from land mines to small arms (Faulkner 2007, Alcalde, 2009), in environmental issues (Seyfang 2003), and many other global themes.

Transnational networks are usually characterised by their advocacy function toward the promotion of normative change in politics (Risse-Kappen 1995; Keck & Sikkink 1998) that they pursue through the use of transnational campaigns. Many of these campaigns have had some success in influencing policy on global issues. Major examples are the efforts for the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (1995), which led to the approval of the Rome statute (1998) (Glasius 2005); the Jubilee campaign on Third World debt (1996), which induced creditor governments and the International Monetary Fund to take some steps toward debt relief for highly indebted poor countries (Donnelly 2002); the international campaigns to ban landmines (1992), which led to the intergovernmental conference in Ottawa where the Mine Ban Treaty was signed (1997) (Faulkner 2007). Beyond campaigns, however, transnational networks may also carry out alternative practices—such as solidarity actions or fair trade—that are largely separated from the spheres of global politics and the global economy.

In global political contestation, transnational networks play a twofold critical role: inside and outside global civil society. On the one hand, they can be considered as the backbone of social movements engaged in the political struggle for global justice for they provide essential connecting spaces for the growth of activism at all levels (Smith 2002; Katz & Anheier 2006). On the other hand, they are significant actors in international politics and global governance for they promote transnational campaigns on specific issues and more generally global contentious politics that may lead to policy change on specific issues (Smith et al. 1997; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Gills 2000; O'Brien et al. 2000; Smith & Johnston 2002; Armstrong et al. 2003; Scholte 2004).

Building on the ample evidence provided by such cases of transnational networks, let us now turn to the context and characteristics of their activities that appear as common features of most transnational networks.

3. Networking

Transnational networking is a form of organisation characterised by voluntary and horizontal patterns of co-ordination, which are trust-centred, reciprocal and asymmetrical. Networks are in fact eminently non-static organisations: flexibility and fluidity are two major features of the network organisational form. A flexible

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4 In some cases transnational networks, rather than being the backbone of global mobilisations, may play a more peripheral role, with a “bridging function” between civil society and global politics, providing national groups with experts' competences, resources and access to international institutions. Examples include UN-related networks favouring civil society participation to UN activities or World Summits (Pianta 2005), or networks favouring consultation and dialogue with corporations on environmental sustainability or corporate social responsibility (see chapters 4 and 9 in this volume). Networks with a bridging function are peripheral to the dynamics of global social movements and may lose autonomy and legitimacy as they move closer to cooperation with centres of power, thus running the risk of cooptation.
organisational structure enhances the capacity to adapting effectively to changing social circumstances and political situations at the global level. Fluid organisational structure, conversely, allows for porous organisational boundaries that do not require enrolment ratified by formal membership but are able to cross national and cultural borders. Network structure also varies in that connections can be direct as well as indirect, and linkages can be centralised or decentralised with differing levels of segmentation (Diani 2003; Anheier & Katz 2005). Main activities of transnational networks include spreading information, influencing mass media, and raising awareness. In this vein, they constitute a sort of "global infrastructure" for global social movements. By sharing information, resources, and costs, transnational networks generate value-added for all their participants in terms of innovation, responsiveness, and mutual support, thus achieving greater legitimacy and power in a positive sum manner. At the same time, lobbying, protest, and supplying of services to constituency are also main functions and objectives of transnational networks.

A network among organisations from a large number of countries is formed when a set of preconditions exist, in terms of values, identities and political projects, and when a convergence develops on the importance of a specific global issue, on the agreement on a common issue frame and on the appropriate strategies to tackle it. Crucial in order to achieve convergence are the procedures according to which the consensus on values, identity and strategy is negotiated, affirmed and reproduced among independent members that decide to work together on global issues. The production of a statute, charter or programme is usually crucial in the network formation process, that is then approved following different procedures, both formal and informal, consensus being the most frequent method.5

The "internal" dynamics of a global network are determined by the strategic decisions of national social and political actors to enter, stay or leave a network. Underpinning these decisions are a number of reasons which can be interpreted according to a model of acquisition of shares of "ownership" in the network, where the investment of political capital and resources by each participant is negotiated with the network co-ordinator and other key members, in order to obtain political gains both at the international and national level, in ways that may differ substantially across member organisations. Networks are thus constantly evolving through processes of internal discussion, contestation and resistance, which produce either a new "constitutional" character or a new membership. Here the power dimension of transnational networks is clearly evident. In transnational networks, the key principled dimension (to be examined in the next session) is always pragmatically combined to a strategic or instrumental dimension, which can be roughly labelled do ut des conditionality. While the normative content is of paramount important in the structuring of transnational networks, it is equally significant to reveal the instrumental side of the network relationships in terms of political drive, leadership, and interest pursuit. The instrumental reading of the network organisational structure is

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5 The different procedures may include simple majority voting; qualified majority voting; consensus; unanimity; no objection base. Additional key elements in this process include internal debate, entitlement to speak, and entitlement to vote.
nowhere more evident than in the mechanism of participation and ‘ownership’ of the network. Members are not part of the network until they decide to what extent to take part, which is directly dependent on what the member receives back from its participation. This results in differing degrees of participation of each member, and thus in asymmetrical roles in the network.

This strategic aspect of the network organisational form, however, should not be overemphasised, for it is moderated by both the discursive process within the network which keeps changing members' interests, and by the original background in reference to common principles and values. In this regard, members should be simultaneously considered stake-holders and share-holders. They are stake-holders insofar as they have in common—a number of general principles and values that refer to concrete stakes in the struggle on global politics (the moral side of the network relationship). But they are also share-holders as they bargain the degree of their engagement according to the degree of the satisfaction of their specific interest (the strategic, power-related side of the network relationship). Both strategic and normative components are then balanced by an outcome-oriented attitude, according to which achieving concrete results and building credibility constitute important elements underpinning networks’ strength, growth, and legitimacy.

4. Values and identities

Transnational networks within global justice movements are characterised by a set of common beliefs and values which define their political identity. While other kinds of networks are constituted around different principles (economic, scientific, etc.), network activists are usually motivated by shared principled ideas and interpret their role as a fully political, non-profit attitude (Ness & Brechin 1988; Keck & Sikkink 1998). Transnational networks are dependent on shared values and, at the same time, are key organisational instruments for building such shared values, identities, mutual trust, common visions, and strategies among organisations of different countries (Risse-Kappen 1994; Schulz 1998; Smith et al. 1998; Smith 2002; Olesen 2005). Differently from the national case, the members of transnational networks do not originally share the same issue frames, political cultures, repertoires of action, nor most often a language. Within a national civil society, the common language, culture and experience makes the rise of collective action easier, involving both organisations and individuals, with a highly informal pattern and fuzzy edges of the movement. At the global level, such common ground cannot be taken for granted and has to be slowly built by deliberate, long term efforts of organisations with substantial resources. In the case of global justice movements, the complexity of global issues and the resources needed for acting on them are major barriers to entry in the field of global activism. Transnational networks have represented a major way for lowering such barriers and allowing a broader participation to global campaigns.

The normative aspect of transnational networks – and, more generally, of social movements - is crucial in defining their identity. In particular, the normative component of this kind of organisations illustrates a double and reciprocal dynamics, in which universal principles encounter values and norms
generated from below, resulting in an unpredictable and creative normative combination. Transnational networks foster a number of fundamental principles which, despite being originated in a specific cultural context, can be shared by culturally diverse actors. These principles typically include equality, justice, peace, human rights, autonomy, and environmental protection (Smith et al. 1998; Boli & Thomas 1999; Risse et al. 1999; de Sousa Santos & Rodríguez-Garavito 2005). Alongside these fundamental principles, value pluralism is expressed by the differing norms emerging from below, from grassroots movements, which serve as sources of credibility for the project of normative persuasion pushed by transnational networks. The interaction between the global and local perspectives on values can be highly effective for creating new spaces for political action (such as in the case of the World Social Forum).

However, the asymmetries among members’ political cultures, commitments and resources should not be underestimated and may lead to power positions and unbalanced decision making within networks, often in favour of Western countries (extreme cases may be the international “franchising” strategies of Friends of the Earth or Transparency International; the latter, however, could hardly be considered as part of global social movements). The important role that civil society organisations from the North have played in past decades in the establishment of major transnational networks has even led to charges of ‘cultural imperialism’ and of under-representation of voices and interests of the South in some contexts (Doherty & Doyle 2005; Smith & Wiest 2005). An increasing awareness of such risks is emerging in most networks, with an interest in experimenting with novel forms of transnational links involving popular organisations from the South (Sen et al. 2004). In recent years, however, the influence of South-based global networks has increased; in the case of trade issues and mobilisations against WTO policies, groups such as Via Campesina, Third World Network and Focus on the Global South have come to play a dominant role in shaping global activism and interacting with policy-makers (see chapter 5 in this volume).

When the matching of values and principles is problematic, a common normative strategy to disseminate fundamental principles and to enhance the encounter between universal and local values consists of the deployment of the adjacency principle (Tilly 2001). Accordingly, an appeal is made to fundamental principles that are already accepted in other spheres and cases, and an extension to new circumstances is proposed through an appeal to an impartial analogy. Such value transportation provides the mechanism that allows for influencing other spheres of action, both domestically and transnationally. However, since each cultural context is modelled on different values, the result varies because the encounter generated by the norm’s transportation does not guarantee an unconditional acceptance in the receiving community. Moreover, even the cultural domain where the principle has originated can be influenced in turn, thus changing those principles that are claimed to be universal. In both cases of change, the normative interaction between diverse cultural-political contexts produces a new identity, which is fundamental for the promotion of normative change in the political realm (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998).

The coexistence of the appeal to common ideals and to specific local norms and values, in fact, explains also the possibility for activists with different
nationalities, personal motivations, and social background of being involved in a common transnational collective action without having to belong to a specific organisation. By producing a common interpretation of reality that generates feelings of a shared destiny and solidarity, transnational networks nurture a common identity, that is inclusive of very different economic and social conditions, uniting—for instance—poor farmers of the South and affluent consumers of the North as in the Via Campesina network, or groups from indebted countries and from creditor countries as in the Jubilee networks. Such a development represents a major novelty in the forms of political action, as it overcomes the “us” against “them” opposition and moves beyond a strictly antagonistic perspective of the “other”. Such a complex redefinition of identities and interests across national borders results from the ability of transnational networks to develop a common interpretation of global realities—typically with a critique of neoliberal globalisation—, to shape common targets in an autonomous way, and to offer prospects for concrete actions and effective change. This shared identity, however, does not preclude the preservation of diversity, as political visions are always entrenched in grass-root political experiences. Pluralism within networks is then allowed by the simultaneous presence of differing perspectives of action, informed by local motivational sources, and a shared appeal to ultimate values.

5. Global political opportunities and the politics of change

At the core of the mechanisms leading to the emergence and operation of transnational networks resides the perception of the possibility of change in one specific global issue area. While the perception of an unjust situation necessarily constitutes a precondition for action, it is only when the actor recognizes the possibility to have a positive impact on such a situation that mobilisation may start. Necessary for such a mobilisation are two elements: conceptualisation and political commitment.

Transnational mobilisation on global issues should be interpreted as the result of several steps. A crucial challenge for any transnational network is the ability to present the issue at stake in a way that it is perceived as problematic, urgent, and soluble (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Bob 2005; Carpenter 2007). The first step in cross border mobilisations is therefore the production of knowledge and the creation of frames presenting the issue is such terms. A second step consists of the external dissemination and strategic use of such knowledge (Kolb 2005). This is the crucial stage for it is here that information acquires a fully public dimension, thus a political significance. Global public opinion needs to be attracted and its imagination captured for framing the terms of the conflict in such a way that the issue at stake becomes associated to a general interest which requires a public engagement. Often, when networks become active players in the ‘epistemic communities’ of experts of global issues, they tend to be perceived by public opinion as credible sources of information and increase their influence on policy-making.

However, in order to promote change a third step is necessary in terms of acquisition of legitimate representation of the general interests at stake (Jordan & van Tuijl 2000; van Rooy 2004; Collingwood 2006; Brown 2008). Contrasting the
situation of international affairs in which states monopolise power and social actors are structurally excluded, the task consists here in the appropriation of a recognised role in the public sphere, as rightful advocates of general interests. To the question “in the name of whom do you speak?”, transnational networks need to offer a response in terms of reclaiming for themselves the representation of a more general interest than the one relevant for economic and political decision makers (Florini 2000; Hudson 2001; Rajagopal 2003). Once transnational networks succeed, through the process here summarised, in shaping a challenge associated to a particular global issues, the political opportunity for mobilising and network building arises.

The global political opportunity structure within which transnational networks act is complex and multilayered (Tarrow 2001; Thomas 2002; della Porta & Tarrow 2005; Kolb 2005; Tarrow 2005). While the issues that motivate the mobilisation can be ultimately global (though often mediated by the national or local dimensions), the possibility of successful mobilisations is rooted in the structure of political opportunities combining the national and transnational domain of political action. While success necessarily depends on international circumstances, an important role in the rise of global social movements is often played by national conditions (McAdam et al. 1996; Schulz 1998, see chapter 5 in this volume). In national contexts, social movements are rooted in a thick web of social relations and common identities, have access to important resources (human, financial, etc.), but operate in highly formalised political systems that shape and constrain their mobilisation and impact. Conversely, at the global level transnational networks face major obstacles and costs in building up cross border relationships among civil society organisations with different cultures and languages, and have access to highly limited resources. At the same time, however, transnational networks face a political system where the lack of democracy and the innumerable failures to address global problems represent as many opportunities for cross border mobilisations. The lack of a rigid, well-defined institutional setting similar to the national one, widens the options for political action. In different ways, international organizations such as the United Nations or the European Union may provide opportunities for creating political spaces and mobilizing resources to the advantage of transnational networks and national activism (Joachim & Locher 2009; McKeon 2009).

In fact, transnational networks may contribute to expand the political opportunities that are present in national contexts; they often serve as facilitators for providing space to actors who are usually voiceless and excluded (Evans 2000). Transnational networks can also amplify local voices through global “bridges” and “boomerangs”, setting them in the context of global issues and policies, and providing in this way greater strength to local or national activism (Keck & Sikkink 1998, Tarrow 2001; Thomas 2002). At the global level, transnational networks can provide “discursive representation” to global interests that remains unrepresented in the political system (Keck 2004).

In the more fluid space of global politics, the wider opportunities for political action may lead to a variety of strategies by transnational networks. When there is a low degree of conflict and institutional alliances are possible, “vertical coalitions” on selected global issues may emerge. In these, civil society organisations may co-operate, or at least establish a dialogue, with particular
supranational organisations (Willets 2006) and with some "progressive" governments or regional bodies (as in the cases of the International Criminal Court, landmines, child labour, or the Cancun WTO conference). When conflict is strong, on the other hand, it can be easily directed to the highest level, to the core of global decision-making (as in the case of G8 protests), with a highly visible and effective challenge. In both cases, the results are greater opportunities for transnational networks to emerge as a legitimate and authoritative voice for global interests, extending their impact on public opinion and on civil society organisations interested in joining transnational networks and mobilisations.

Transnational networks can thus be understood as functional organisational responses to the new global socio-political environment in which political opportunities on the one hand, and scarce resources (finance, knowledge, etc.) on the other, create conditions in which a network structure can perform better than other organisational forms (Pfeffer 1997). As this combination is inherently contingent, transnational networks tend to have a limited political life. On the one hand, networks are created on specific issues; it is very difficult to change and “reprogramme” them towards a different issue, and in many cases it is just easier to create a new network. On the other hand, social movements and especially networks are cyclical phenomena. The interaction between the set of values shared by social movements and global political opportunities leads to the emergence of different projects of political change, reflecting also the heterogeneity of actors – for instance, balancing more ‘reformist’ and more ‘radical’ attitudes (Pianta 2001b; Marchetti 2009). Individual networks, therefore, fit a specific set of conditions – internal and external to global movements - but when some of them change, the factors that led to their rise may dissolve, mobilisation may decline rapidly and networks are unlikely to re-adapt to new political contexts.

6. Actions

The major instrument of action available to transnational networks is the development of campaigns. They involve coordinated activities, at the global, national and local level, including a wide repertoire of actions – from protest to information and education of public opinion, from lobbying to advocacy of alternative policies. Such actions are made possible, organised or encouraged by transnational networks and derive an important part of their significance and impact from the very presence of coordinated transnational activism.

Typically, a global campaign requires a clear message able to mobilise activists, supporters and sympathisers against a blatant injustice and a well-defined adversary, or in solidarity with the victims. Campaign activities tend to be carried out by the network itself in the case of global events, and by its member organisations or sub-networks when they take place at the country or local level. A successful campaign requires the right choice of action repertoires, levels of mobilisation and targeting of adversaries, in order to maximize both activism and the potential impact on the policy process.

The type of actions organised by transnational networks can be summarised in Table 1, where the nature of activism – focused on civil society itself, educating public opinion, targeting specific institutions, or developing
alternative practices - is combined with its scope - truly global actions, transnational or regional actions, or national/local actions with a global significance. An important part of actions is directed ‘internally’ to network members and global movements, or to the ‘proximate’ world of civil society groups that may be attracted to the issue at stake; this is the case, typically, of the World Social Forum. Other forms of activism specifically target the “external” world of public opinion or global political and economic powers; this is the case of mobilisations on trade, debt, democracy or wars. Actions by transnational networks have a differentiated impact on their internal, ‘proximate’ and external constituencies, and respond to specific needs, challenges and opportunities emerging in different contexts. The examples provided in Table 1 show that major global mobilisations have in fact focused on different types of activities with distinct objectives; therefore, their outcomes need be assessed with different benchmarks. However, the examples also show the difficulty of establishing clear cut divisions between types of action that may have an impact on several ‘targets’, and may involve mobilisations at several levels.

Table 1. Types and scope of activities of transnational networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities internal to civil society</th>
<th>Truly global actions</th>
<th>Transnational or regional actions</th>
<th>National/local actions with a global significance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World Social Forum</td>
<td>European Social Forum</td>
<td>Local Social Forum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public opinion-oriented actions</td>
<td>Global day of action against war in Iraq</td>
<td>Actions on EU External Human Rights Policy</td>
<td>National actions on Climate Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions-oriented actions</td>
<td>Campaign for reforming the United Nations</td>
<td>Anti-Bolkenstein Campaign in the EU</td>
<td>Campaigns on national debt relief for Third World countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concrete alternative practices</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Fair Trade</td>
<td>Zapatismo in Chiapas</td>
</tr>
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Finally, in terms of activities targeting institutions, three different models of interaction with power may be identified: a) acceptance, integration and co-optation in existing power centres; b) external dialogue and criticism, aiming at reform; c) rejection and conflict aiming at radical change. While the models of integration and critical dialogue entail the possibility of re-framing the institutional discourse from, alternatively, inside or outside the policy process, the model of rejection leads to political contestation. The differences in the nature and locus of the strategies pursued by transnational networks and social movements in addressing global issues reflect the variety of actors within social movements,
their visions and attitudes, as well as the specific opportunities that they try to seize. Such differences, however, are not necessarily a factor of weakness; in fact, successful change in global issues requires a combination of differing capacity of resistance, radical visions, alternative practices, policy proposals, and instruments able to introduce specific reforms when favourable political opportunities open up (Pianta, 2001b, Pianta et al. 2009).

7. Conclusions

In this chapter, political mobilisations on global issues have been interpreted through a transnational perspective that allowed to grasp the novelty of global social movements as contentious global political actors. Within them, transnational networks have been identified as key innovatory forms of political mobilisation, able to effectively address global justice and other international issues.

Building on the conceptualisations of global activism by different streams of literature, and on the evidence from a large number of case studies, we have proposed a definition of the key common features that define transnational networks associated to global social movements. They include the nature of networks as organisations, values, political opportunities and types of action. In the last two decades transnational networks have played a major role as backbones of global social movements, mobilising grassroot activists and influencing world public opinion, developing transcultural common identities, formulating multiple campaigning strategies and carrying out political struggles, both against and inside international institutions. Transnational networks have developed a sophisticated political formulation of global issues and have challenged the legitimacy and policies of global economic and political powers. They have given voice to demands for global justice and opened up spaces for public participation in global decision making, demanding greater international democracy.

When policy changes on global issues has been implemented – on debt, trade, food, finance, human rights, human security or the environment - it has usually been influenced by the long term efforts of transnational networks associated to global social movements. If we are to understand how change may happen in global policy, transnational networks have to be recognised as an increasingly important player in the arena of global politics.

References


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