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Global Civil Society Shifting Powers in a Shifting World



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Global Civil
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Transnational activism and global social change

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Scholarship on transnational activism has documented important relationships between transnational activism and changes in the normative and institutional arrangements that shape world politics. To summarize the key lessons from this work, we have seen that transnational activists have affected the development of our global polity by: 1) articulating and advancing global norms such as opposition to war and militarism and the prohibition of slavery; 2) domesticating international norms by pressing states to comply with international laws and standards; 3) transforming international institutions by protesting normative contradictions, such as those between global human rights norms and practices of international financial institutions; and 4) developing autonomous spaces where activists can experiment with alternatives to dominant economic and social models and develop networks for advancing new forms of global cooperation.¹

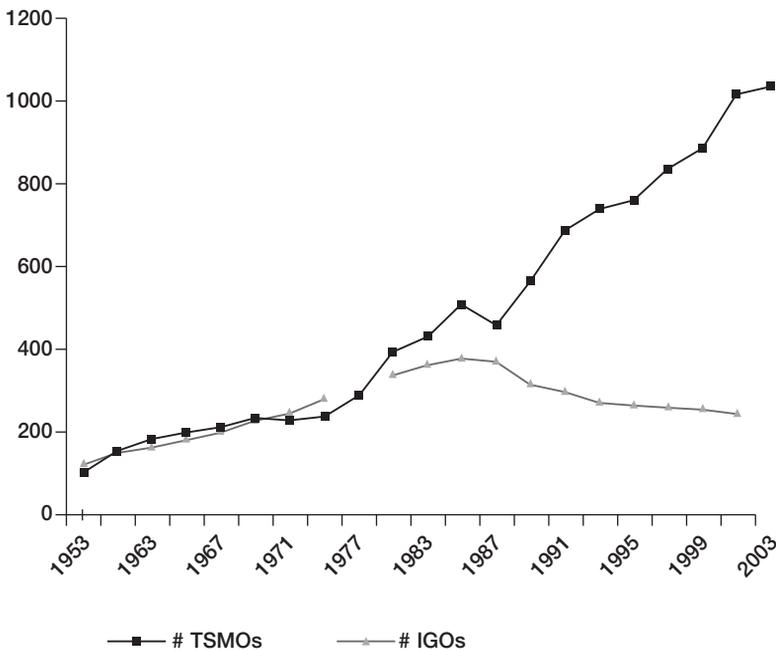
Transnational activism has thus been essential to explaining existing forms of global governance, and understanding its dynamics will help analysts and practitioners appreciate its role in the ongoing transformation of global institutions. Examining patterns of transnational activism over time, we can see a shift in emphasis among transnational activists from the work of articulating and disseminating norms towards efforts to transform flaws in multilateral institutional arrangements, and to develop alternatives to inter-state arenas as the main drivers of world politics. This paper surveys developments in the realm of transnational activism and organization over the past few decades, offering ideas about likely future trajectories.

Historical developments in transnational activism

Although they are absent from many historical accounts of global institutional formation, transnational activist groups have always been active

in promoting and advocating for multilateral norms and standards as a protection against government abuses. For instance, Finnemore (1996) documents the role of citizens' groups in the development of the Geneva Convention on the Laws of War, and Chatfield (1997) shows how anti-war advocates played vital roles in helping establish the League of Nations and later the United Nations. Analysts of human rights also demonstrate the essential role that civil society advocates played in pressing often reluctant states to accept curbs on their sovereign rights (eg, Gaer 1996; Shestack 1978; Tolley 1989). Figure 1 shows the growth in the numbers of transnational non-governmental organizations working to advance social change² and in the numbers of inter-governmental organizations³ over the past several decades.

Figure 1. Changes in numbers of transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs) and inter-governmental organisations (IGOs)



(Adapted from Chatfield 1997, p 21)

We see from this figure that the numbers of transnational social change organizations and the numbers of inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) grew in tandem between the early years of the United Nations and the mid-1980s. After that, however, the number of IGOs has remained fairly steady, perhaps reaching a saturation point. The number of transnational social movement organizations, however, has continued to grow at a rather rapid pace, with sharp increases in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The period of the 1990s was particularly important in offering numerous openings for transnational mobilization in the form of multiple and closely-linked United Nations global conferences. These conferences focused on critical global problems such as the environment, inequality and development, and human rights. They also came at a time when the end of the Cold War created new opportunities for efforts to challenge dominant political alignments and expand international agendas.

Officials within the United Nations often used global conferences to mobilize popular groups from a diverse array of countries around conference themes. They did so out of recognition of the important role civil society actors had long played in supporting international norms of peace, human rights, and equity. They also sought civil society support to advance new multilateral initiatives and to build global constituencies. Efforts to support popular engagement with global conferences by both UN and some national government officials included the provision of resources to encourage transnational civil society cooperation and in particular the mobilization of activists in poor countries. They also included the organization of regional conferences to help activists develop better understandings of the regional impacts of global problems and of the diverse interests and perspectives of groups within the region.

In addition to UN global conferences, popular groups found other spaces to meet and learn each others' perspectives at the sites of inter-governmental meetings around key global issues such as trade, labor, security, and food (see, eg, O'Brien et al 2000; Evangelista 1995; McKeon 2009; Porter 2005; Atwood 1997). Inter-governmental meetings to discuss and strengthen international treaties or to identify emerging problems were settings where civil society groups could come together to protest government policy, advance new ideas for multi-lateral

cooperation, and meet with other civil society groups to share ideas and compare experiences. Over time, these transnational spaces of civil society engagement became more important for activists, who attended international conferences more to meet other activists and build networks than to influence government policies (Krut 1997; Alvarez 1998). Thus, in addition to civil society meetings held alongside official government conferences, activist groups organized their own conferences of civil society groups to reflect on their work and develop new strategies and networks (Pianta 2001; Pianta and Silva 2003; Hill 2004).

The growing influence of global financial institutions in the 1990s, and the predominance of neo-liberal ideology as a guide to policies of global integration and governance, made many activists increasingly skeptical of the United Nations' potential for addressing some basic global problems (see Smith 2008: chapter 9). They began to develop new strategies for advancing social change outside official venues. The protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999 marked a turning point for many movements and activists, signaling the need to target economic policies and institutions as a means of addressing other problems such as persistent inequality, poverty, environmental degradation, and militarism. Following Seattle, more activist networks began framing their struggles in terms of global economic justice, and they focused more attention on global financial institutions like the World Bank, IMF, and WTO than they had in the past. In the meantime, the United Nations had scaled back the global conferences, closing off this space for transnational mobilization and dialogue. While some groups remained engaged with the institution and focused on monitoring and advocating around particular treaty negotiations, many within the growing network of transnational activist groups began focusing more attention outside the UN (Hill 2004).

In 2001, activists that were coming together around an increasingly coherent global justice movement organized the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. That gathering launched what has become known as the World Social Forum *process*, which is now a series of bi-annual global gatherings supplemented by self-organized local, national, and regional Social Forums. These Forums have attracted the attention of a growing number of transnational groups as well as nation-ally organized

and grassroots activists and organizations. Its organizers view it as an “open space” for the articulation of visions of alternatives to neo-liberal globalization and for the development of strategies and networks capable of advancing concrete efforts for global social change (Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Santos 2006; Smith et al 2007).

The World Social Forums have in many ways displaced UN- sponsored forums as sites where people can come together to envision themselves as part of a global political community and where they actively engage in discussions about how the world’s major problems can be addressed. They are sites where global identities and organizing networks are being forged, and where ideas about alternative economic and social models are being developed, refined, and disseminated (Juris 2008; Smith et al 2011). While many activists continue to monitor and target political processes within the UN system, they increasingly do so in conjunction with efforts to advance transnational activist networks and strategies in movement-centered spaces such as the World Social Forums. For instance, climate justice activists have been very active in the WSFs, helping activists understand and follow developments in official negotiations. They bring into the larger WSF discussions an awareness and appreciation of climate justice-related politics within and outside the UN, including, for instance, the 2010 World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, which was hosted by the government of Bolivia and attended by government representatives and civil society groups.

Thus, while the dominant emphasis in early transnational activism was to articulate and establish a set of global norms that transcend national boundaries – such as opposition to slavery, commitments to universal human rights, and recognition of the need to protect the global environment – more effort is now being devoted to addressing contradictions in multilateral institutions and to creating civil society-based solutions to the crises our world now faces.

This brief historical overview helps illustrate the importance of understanding the politics of NGOs and transnational civil society as *ongoing, developing processes* that are being shaped by numerous forces, including large-scale geopolitical and economic factors and multilateral

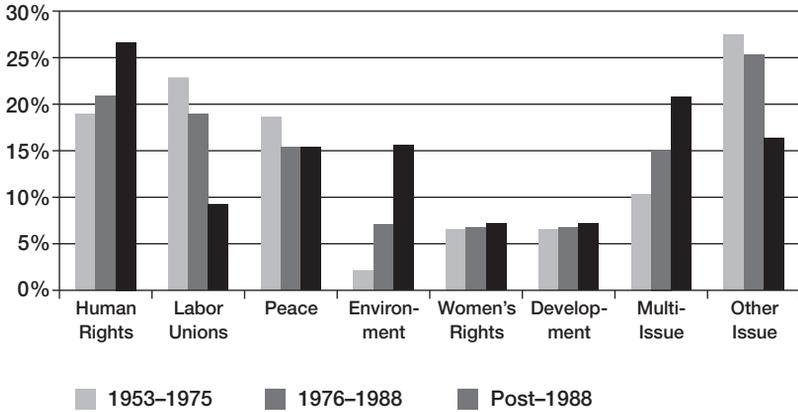
politics and institutions (Fisher 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Smith and Wiest, forthcoming). These processes are also being shaped by interactions among civil society actors themselves. As activists engage with their counterparts from a growing array of other countries, and as they try to influence (often with limited, if any success) multilateral negotiations and policies, they learn new ways of thinking about global problems, and they develop skills and resources for transnational collaboration. Dialogue among activists has thus become an important source of learning and strategizing about global change (see, eg, Rothman and Oliver 2002; Hertel 2006; Brooks 2007; Waterman 2005).

Effects of engaging with IGOs on transnational civil society groups

The United Nations conferences and other processes related to multilateral politics encouraged civil society actors to come together in UN- or UN-supported arenas to discuss global problems and consider how to relate to UN agendas and policies. This played a role in shaping the issues around which citizens mobilized, and indeed it encouraged people to organize transnationally in order to engage in multilateral advocacy work (Smith 2008; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Figure 2 illustrates how issue agendas of transnational social movement organizations changed between the 1950s and the 2000s.

Over recent decades, we have seen increases in the percentages of human rights and environmental organizations active in a rapidly growing population of organizations. The most rapid growth was seen among environmental groups during the post-Cold War period. Also, among the newer human rights groups are growing numbers of organizations focused on promoting respect for economic and social rights in addition to civil and political rights. Another very important trend is the growing proportion of multi-issue organizations, which should be seen as an outcome of the learning that resulted from global conference processes. Conferences provided opportunities for activists working on diverse issues from different national and cultural backgrounds to come together in new ways and to develop their analyses of global problems.

Figure 2. Percentage of transnational social movements organizations in the population by issue-focus*



* For all groups except labor unions, the categories depicted above are not mutually exclusive. Figures are based on the number of organizations active in each issue area as a percentage of all organizations active at any time during the period. The denominator includes every occurrence of an organization during each of the years covered in the time period.

After human rights, multi-issue organizations make up the largest percentage of all transnational social movement organizations active in the post-1988 time period. At the same time, we see notable declines in transnational labor organizations, coinciding with neo-liberal policies and systematic efforts to reduce labor’s power (Harvey 2005). Over time we also see a larger percentage of groups falling into clearly defined issue-groupings, suggesting a convergence of organizational strategies and analyses over time. This is a likely response to the increased institutionalization of the global political environment (see, eg Meyer et al 1997; Boli and Thomas 1999).

The UN’s mission of expanding cooperation among the world’s governments, and its norms supporting principles of democracy and equity in global politics, encouraged groups trying to exert influence in UN politics to expand their geographic reach and representation. The United Nations itself also provided some limited resources and technical support to enhance participation from activist groups in the global South, particularly in conjunction with global conferences. Table 1 summarizes

some of the changes in the geographic makeup of transnational social movement organizations.

Table 1. Geographic variation in participation: North/South*

Headquarters Location	1953–1977	Post–1988	% Change
Western Europe	77%	56%	-21
U.S. Canada	10%	15%	+ 5
Africa	2%	6%	+ 4
Asia	3%	8%	+ 5
Eastern Europe	4%	4%	–
Latin America	1%	5%	+ 4
Global North	88%	75%	-13
Global South	12%	25%	+13
Total number of observations	1993	3240	
Total number unique organizations	294	482	

*This table does not include transnational labor unions.

(Source: Smith and West forthcoming)

Although there is over-representation from groups in the global North in this population, over time we see reduced inequality in North-South participation. This table shows changes in the locations of headquarters of transnational social change groups, and we can see that while most groups are based in the global North, the percentage of groups with Northern headquarters has declined over time. Their numbers are being replaced with new groups based in countries of the global South. The growth in Southern participation is reflected not only in the growing numbers of transnational social movement organization headquarters, but also in more extensive Southern memberships in these organizations.⁴ What is rather surprising is that the end of the Cold War did not bring, at least in the short- to medium-term, substantial increases in proportion of transnational social movement groups based in Eastern Europe, although growth in the region did keep pace with the overall population of organizations (see Smith and Wiest forthcoming).

As was suggested in the discussion above, the changes in the geographic makeup and other features of transnational social change groups have been affected by the larger global political arena, and in particular by the UN global conferences. Illustrating the importance of these global arenas for advancing transnational organizing and movement development, Morgan summarizes how global conferences affected indigenous activists, effects which can be generalized to the larger population of activist groups:

Their effects were twofold: first, they reinforced the understanding that indigenous peoples' problems were shared, therefore strengthening an emerging indigenous identity based on common experiences of historical and ongoing colonialism, and, second, they brought into play a promising arena for the pursuit of goals, one in which norms of human rights influence the behavior of states and assertions of sovereignty and domestic jurisdiction must compete with ideas based on principles (2007, p 278).

Illustrating the important effects conferences had on transnational activist groups, Table 2 compares environmental and women's groups formed in the five-year intervals surrounding major UN conferences with those formed in other years.

Table 2. Comparing women's and environmental groups formed in UN conference vs non-conference years

	Environmental Groups		Women's groups	
	Formed in Conference Years	Formed in Non-Conference Years	Formed in Conference Years	Formed in Non-Conference Years
Southern Headquarters	28%	22%	43%	27%
Ratio of Southern to Northern members	2.2:1	1.9:1	3.3:1	2.3:1
NGO ties (average)	5.0	4.2	4.0	3.9
IGO ties	1.9	1.7	1.2	2.7

Bold = mean difference is statistically significant ($p < .05$)

Table 2 shows that UN conferences did indeed encourage mobilization in the global South. Environmental and women's groups formed in years surrounding global conferences were substantially more likely to have their headquarters in the global South and to have more members in the global South. This pattern held for other issue areas as well (see Smith and Wiest forthcoming).

Two other patterns we see in Table 2 relate to questions about how transnational social movement organizations are relating with other organizations in their environment. Overall, transnational social movement organizations reported more ties to both IGOs and to other international non-governmental organizations (INGOs).⁵ Between the 1950s and the post-Cold War period the average number of ties transnational social movement groups reported to IGOs nearly doubled, and ties to INGOs grew five-fold. But the pattern is a bit different for groups formed in conference intervals. UN global conferences likely contributed to the growth of connections to INGOs, as environmental and women's groups (as well as others) formed around global conferences reported more ties to INGOs. This is not surprising, given that global conferences provided important opportunities for face-to-face meetings among organizers, allowing activists to forge initial connections and outline their plans for how to work together.

Many analysts have emphasized how global institutions and other powerful actors (such as states and corporations) can serve to co-opt civil society groups. They question the ability of non-governmental groups to remain representative of civil society interests and transformative agendas in a context of immense North-South inequality and of intense pressure to engage in multilateral "partnerships" with global institutions, including, for instance, the World Bank or the UN Global Compact (Edwards 2008; Bebbington et al 2008; Hammack and Heydemann 2009). The lack of resources of most civil society groups makes corporate and institutional partnerships an attractive source of revenue, and these partnerships have contributed to what some have called the "neo-liberalization of civil society" (Goldman 2005; Ferguson 2006).

What was rather surprising in our study, then, is that groups formed during conferences, with the exception of environmental groups,⁶

tended to report fewer ties to IGOs than their counterparts formed outside conference years. While we expected groups formed at times of conferences to be more attuned to UN activities and agendas, this was not reflected in groups' reports about their formal ties to international agencies. This tendency might reflect a shift in how activists view their strategic options in the global arena, and a growing skepticism about the possibilities for addressing the world's most pressing global issues within the UN framework. It also challenges the idea that engagement with global conferences and other activities of institutions necessarily leads to the co-optation of activist groups.

This shift away from global institutional engagement is likely being fueled by the growing tendency among some transnational activist groups to frame their goals in more complex, multi-issue ways which do not neatly coincide with many multilateral negotiation settings. It is clear from much of the case study work that civil society groups' participation in UN global conferences and their engagement with counterparts from different parts of the world led them to adopt more structural and complex analyses of global problems and their solutions (Rothman and Oliver 2002; Waterman 2005; Morgan 2007).

Changing patterns of transnational activism

This analysis of transnational activism and changes over time suggests that activist strategies in the global arena are changing over time, as groups develop their networks and expand models and structures for citizen engagement with global politics. The earliest transnational activism took the form of advocacy for international laws and standards (ie, the abolition of the slave trade and laws of war), and later expanded into what Keck and Sikkink (1998) called the "boomerang" model. The boomerang model was a strategy for bringing state practices into alignment with international norms. When states violate international norms or sensibilities, and when groups are blocked from making demands directly on states, activists look outside state borders to bring outside pressure on that government to change its practices. The contradictions between international norms and national practices encouraged this form of claimsmaking.

Once citizen's groups began engaging more routinely in international settings, for instance through consultative arrangements and UN conference processes, they became more familiar with the opportunities and resources available in global arenas, including the treaty bodies and agencies regulating human rights and other issues. They also came into contact with other activist groups working on similar issues. This contributed to the expansion of connections between transnational social movement groups and international agencies as well as to more dense networks among civil society groups.

Ongoing engagement with global institutional processes such as conferences, as well as enhanced communications with other international activist groups, encouraged more exchanges between the global North and South, and this is reflected in the population of transnational social movement organizations. This mixing of activists from rich and poor countries, within the context of global conferences and other spaces, contributed to new analyses and ideas about global problems, their causes, and their possible solutions. Thus, over time, we saw a significant shift to more complex, systemic, multi-issue frames in the population of transnational movement groups.

By the early 1990s, as the post-Cold War period opened up space for more international negotiation around global problems, there was a shift in official aid from direct bilateral aid to the non-governmental sector. This led to a proliferation of groups seeking official aid money, and can be seen to have distorted the work of "autonomous" civil society by making it subject to government agendas and control. Thus, among groups more engaged in intergovernmental organizations and conferences, we would expect to find some co-optation of civil society groups, where NGOs end up supporting (knowingly or not) the goals of neo-liberalism over public goods.

But many groups remained wary of accepting government aid, or their organizational aims were more explicitly critical of the top-down approaches to governance and/or the privileging of neo-liberal economic models. These groups resisted succumbing to the "iron cage" of the interstate arena. They were supported in doing so by a growing network of transnational groups – and the expanding participation from the global South – who defended and reinforced an increasingly coherent critical

analysis of the global economic order. These groups learned new ways to frame their critiques to appeal to diverse sectors of civil society and to expand their global reach.

Thus, in the population of transnational activist groups, Smith and Wiest (forthcoming) observed a notable increase, particularly in the post-Cold War period, of groups articulating what we call a critical human rights frame. These groups see human rights violations as linked to the larger world-economy rather than as the unscrupulous behaviors of deviant governments. Most are pressing for an understanding of economic and political human rights as indivisible, arguing, for instance, for greater recognition in international agreements of the “right to development,” and for “food sovereignty.”

These critical elements of civil society helped found the World Social Forum process, which in turn has provided additional fuel and support for the development of autonomous spaces and projects that challenge the hegemony of neo-liberalism. The rise of the World Social Forum process to a place of prominence in the global activism scene provides additional evidence of a radical shift in transnational activism. As the United Nations proved unable to address pressing environmental and economic problems, activists have sought to expand the autonomous spaces in which they could define agendas and consider options for addressing problems outside the constraints of inter-state frameworks. More importantly, social change advocates have sought spaces where they could identify alternatives to dominant policy agendas that run counter to corporate if not state interests.

While these critical groups are working increasingly in autonomous transnational civil society spaces, many remain engaged with UN and other multilateral processes. Discussions within the World Social Forums, for instance, have focused on developing analyses and strategies for addressing UN conferences on climate change and anti-racism, for instance. An important difference between the conference-focused activism of the 1990s and today seems to be that a consistent and substantial amount of organizing energy and attention has gone to the development of movement-based networks and to sustaining spaces like the World Social Forums, where activists can discuss issues outside the constraints of government-defined agendas.

Thus, while activists do engage with UN conferences, this is not their only and probably not their main form of action. It is as if a lesson from the 1990s conferences is that activist groups must work more consciously to strengthen a *global civil society* as a first step towards advancing better multilateral policies. In the past, close attention to shaping the language of conference declarations and to holding governments accountable to international commitments sapped enormous amounts of energy while providing limited results. While World Social Forum activists are generally skeptical of representative politics, and by and large treat electoral politics as a secondary or tertiary priority, they remain active in national and global institutionalized politics, bringing increasingly coherent and well-defended claims from a denser and more integrated set of transnational activist networks (see eg Smith et al 2011).

Conclusion

This analysis of changes in the population of transnational groups working for social change reveals a dynamic and growing popular movement which is shifting popular attention and energies to civil-society-centered global spaces that are more autonomous from inter-state arenas than in the past. There is growing attention to the exploration of alternatives and visions of how the world might be organized that lie outside the inter-state system.

Within alternative spaces like the World Social Forums, we see the emergence of particular civil society practices that, should they continue, may contribute a great deal to the articulation of new models of transnational cooperation and action that can better address human needs. These include: constant innovation and reflexivity on challenges of enacting participatory forms of democracy at transnational and global levels; innovation aimed at expanding democratic character of civil society; emphasis on relationships and multi-sector alliances over particular campaigns or policy goals; use or tolerance of both insider and outsider tactics; learning from past struggles and avoiding factionalism of earlier movements (see eg Smith et al 2011). These practices both reflect and contribute to the growing power potential of civil society.

Notes

1. These modes of transnational activism are explained further in Smith (2008), and they draw from a rich body of empirical research on transnational activism, including works by Keck and Sikkink (1998); Riles (2001); Foster and Anand (1999); Hertel (2006); Khagram (2004); Della Porta, Kriesi and Rucht (1999); and Willetts (1996) among others.
2. The data on transnational social movement organizations were collected from the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Union of International Associations) for alternate years between 1953 and 2003. The population includes non-governmental organizations with members in three or more countries with an explicit purpose of advancing social change. For more details about the dataset and data collection methods, see Smith and Wiest (forthcoming, chapter 2).
3. Inter-governmental organizations are formal organizations created by agreements among two or more states.
4. Organizational entries in the *Yearbook of International Associations* include the names of countries in which the group claims to have members. We have coded these country memberships for each year the organization is active.
5. INGOs is a larger category of organizations than the one examined in this dataset, since it includes both groups working on social change and those working on other issues such as to advance professional interests, promote recreation, or facilitate cultural or educational exchange.
6. The pattern among environmental groups may be affected by the creation at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 of the Commission on Sustainable Development, which provides an ongoing arena for environmental advocates to work on specific problems and to help shape discussions about environmental treaties. There is no comparable body in other issue areas.

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