Transnational social movements: an assessment

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Background

In his excellent paper to this seminar Zigmund Baumann (WPTC-98-03) talked about the discrepancy between Power, which is global and Politics, which is national. When pressed he said that as a sociologist he could not find 'agency' in the gap between Power and Politics, though he did make a reference in passing to the transnational corporation.

[It is perhaps worth saying a little more about the TNCs. One way of understanding their global economic importance is to take them as equivalent units to countries. In this measurement, of the 100 most important economic units in the world today, half are nation states and half are TNCs. As there are about 180 recognized states of the United Nations, this means that 130 of these states have economies smaller than the first 50 TNCs. If, as is commonly supposed, political power grows from economic power the TNC alone provide an important filler in the gap identified by Baumann.]

Like many other authors, Baumann's paper still offers a statecentric view of politics. What we hope to show is that in addition to the transnational corporations, there are *other* significant emerging agents of global change. These are constitutive of a new politics. Some of these are forms of proto-globalization that preceded the nation state and have now re-emerged strengthened – notably world religions and global diasporas (Cohen 1997). Some constitute forms of co-operation within the nation state system. These are Inter-Governmental Organizations (IGOs). The others, of major interest here, are highly dynamic and overwhelmingly newly formed. We'll call these agents transnational social movements (TSMs).

We see TSMs as the *broad tendencies* that often manifest themselves in particular International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs). So human rights, women's, peace, labour, green or student movements are the principal TSMs while nesting within these (and imbricated in a complex way) are Amnesty International, the Peace Brigades International, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, etc. Let me provide some data to indicate the scale of their activity.

Data on Organizations

IGOs	1980s	No. 700.	5000 meetings a year	e.g. Universal Postal Union, NATO
INGOs	1990s	No. 23, 000. Fivefold growth 1970–94.	Spend 15-20 per cent of OECD funds to the South	INGOs provide support to 100,000 NGOs in the South serving 100 million people (only 20 % of world's pop. live in democracies)
Green-peace Internation-al & *Rainbow Warrior* campaign	1985	3 million members in 158 countries	5m. Sign petition on anti-nuclear testing campaign	15,000 in Tahiti force French to allow the docking of Greenpeace ships
Worldwide Fund for Nature	1990s	4.7 million members	In 31 countries including 12 in the South	Projects in 96 countries
Friends of the Earth,	1990s	1 million members	In 56 countries, 23 in the South	Six large UK DIY chains boycott rain forest timber

We've said these organizations are overwhelmingly newly formed. To give you an idea of this, some 60 per cent of one sample of 700 INGOs were formed between 1970–1993, when the data were collected (Smith et al 1997: 46). Over that period the average age of all organizations dropped from 33 to 25 years. As new organizations come on stream this is expected to drop even more radically. In short, we are witnessing an essentially new historical development.

[Historical footnote. The Anti-Slavery Society, the largest surviving human rights organization, was formed in 1839.]

Social Movements: background

How do we characterise and define these shifts in political activity?

The expression 'social movements' has gone in and out of fashion in sociology, probably in response to the unrealistic demands on the notion made by some scholars. As Wilson (1973: 13) suggested, perhaps it goes too far to included fraternities, youth groups, political parties, sects, nudists, voluntary associations, guerrilla organisations, cool jazz or beat literature under the rubric of 'social movements'. On the other hand, as he also points out (p. 5), it is impossible to ignore the influence of the Chartist, the Suffragette,

the Abolitionist, the Prohibitionist, the Pentecostal, the Black militant, the John Bircher or the peace marcher. Even the flying-saucer spotter, the flat-earther, the sabbatarian and the Satanist have managed to attractive sizeable numbers of dedicated followers. 'Social movements' is the only expression in our lexicon that can fasten together these manifestations of popular sentiment.

Defining social movements

Given the many aspects of social transformation covered by the expression 'social movements' you will not be surprised to learn that there are a plethora of definitions and descriptions.

We can start with Wilson's (1971: 8) prosaic definition: 'A social movement is a conscious, collective, organised attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by non-institutionalised means.' He prefaces this formal definition (1971: 5) with a more imaginative, and somewhat more insightful, characterization: 'Social movements [Wilson says] nurture both heroes and clowns, fanatics and fools. They function to move people beyond their mundane selves to acts of bravery, savagery, and selfless charity. Animated by the injustices, sufferings, and anxieties they see around them, men and women in social movements reach beyond the customary resources of the social order to launch their own crusade against the evils of society. In so doing they reach beyond themselves and become new men and women.'

More recent definitions include that of Byrne (1997: 10–11). For him social movements are:
- unpredictable (for example, women's movements do not always arise where women are most oppressed);
- irrational (adherents do not act out of self-interest);
- unreasonable (adherents think they are justified in flouting the law); and
- disorganised (they avoid formalizing their organization even when it seems like a good idea to do so).
    Finally we can refer to Zirakzadeh (1997: 4–5) who suggests that a social movement:
- is a group of people who consciously attempt to build a radically new social order;
- involves people of a broad range of social backgrounds; and
- deploys politically confrontational and socially disruptive tactics.

Recent social movements

Many scholars who have written about social movements in the advanced countries argue that they underwent a sea change from the late 1960s onwards linked to certain underlying changes evident in the industrialized countries from around that time. Touraine (1982) tried to capture the outcome of these changes with the term 'post-industrial society'.

One feature of post-industrial society was a growing middle class of public and private sector employees many of whom worked in the rising cultural, media and knowledge industries. Touraine contrasted the 'old' labour and political movements with the 'new' social movements that represented the interests of those working in emerging occupations. The question of whether there was a clear distinction between 'old' and

'new' movements was a lively debate for a while but the 'old' movement, the international labour movement, is rapidly adopting features that are 'new' (Waterman 1998).

There are seven elements that are 'new':

1. A shift away from a primary concern with issues relating to inequalities in power, ownership and income between classes, towards a growing focus on the construction of cultural and personal identities. Accordingly, as the agendas pursued by social movements have broadened, so too has 'politics' invaded everyday life and intimate social relationships.

2. By the same token, contemporary social movements are far less interested in gaining direct control over state power than previously. However, they seek to defend 'culture and civil society against the technological state' (Scott 1992: 143). They thereby hope to extend personal and citizen control over social life.

3. Non-material needs concerning the quality of life have moved to centre-stage, displacing the satisfaction of economic needs alone.

4. Increasingly informed citizens have endeavoured to open up to wholesale public scrutiny and democratization the decision-making processes going on in economic, political, military and scientific institutions from which ordinary citizens were previously excluded. At the same time, individuals have assumed much greater responsibility for, and autonomy over, their personal lives.

5. Recent social movements consist of dispersed and diverse networks of individuals whose engagement in collective action 'is nourished by the daily production of alternative frameworks of meaning'. Because 'the potential for resistance or opposition is sewn into the very fabric of daily life' (Melucci 1989: 70) the actions undertaken by the members of social movements take many forms in addition to obvious, outward signs of protest.

6. Demands for racial equality and against the exclusion of other social groups (whether these be women, the disabled, refugees, gay people or older citizens) have grown alongside movements based more purely on class categories, though these have not been superseded.

7. When social movements engage in mobilizing protests that require sustained activity they may utilize more democratic and participatory forms than those characteristic of earlier movements.

What are transnational social movements?

Here we are moving on to somewhat new and certainly under-theorised territory. The main protagonists in the debates about new social movements (Touraine, Melucci, the Tillys, Castells, etc.) concentrated most of their fire on the collapse of class struggle in the wake of the 1968 May events and the return to localized, community-based forms of struggle. 'Most of their fire' because certainly Touraine provided the best (by far) analysis of the Polish movement *Solidarity* which he conceived as a successful social movement. The scale remained local and national, however.

There are five reasons to displace the notion of social movements to a global level:

1. During the 1980s most supporters of western social movements began to realize that their concerns and the alternatives they had fought for within the context of their own societies were in fact inextricably tied to much wider global structures and problems. This 'planetization' of people's understanding encompassed many linked agendas for change. [For example, from the early 1980s those involved in the peace movement in Europe and North America began to realize that securing peace entailed much more than pressurizing one's own government to relinquish nuclear arms or curtail military expenditure. It also required a root and branch attack on the entire system of competing nation states obsessed with preserving their territorial sovereignty.]

2. Many issues confronted by the TSMs are inherently transboundary in character. This is most obvious in the environmental field; states acting alone cannot protect their citizens from environmental damage e.g. global warming, ozone depletion, and transboundary air pollution, especially acid rain. [For example, the forest fires in Indonesia directly affected 70 million people in 6 countries.]

3. Economic globalization, global communications networks and the sharing of cultures from around the world have led to people wanting to organize on a transnational basis and having the technological tools – faxes, the Internet, telephones, etc. – to do so. [And in case you think the Internet is only a rich country activity, you might be interested to know one source suggests that the number of people on the Internet in China in 2000 will be 4 million, half of whom won't have a lavatory.]

4. As the activities of the TNCs are transnational, the only way of opposing them is to bypass or augment state structures of power. One good example is the case of Shell whose activities in Nigeria (in Ogoniland) and proposed plans for the disposal of the Brentspar oil rig provoked much outrage. [It is interesting that none of the governments concerned – Nigerian, British or Dutch – did anything effective, but consumer boycotts in Europe cracked them. The extent of Shell's defeat can be seen in their *Report to Society* issued last month and available on their web site (www.shell.co.uk), with a suitable apology from the Chairman.]

5. People in poor, often authoritarian countries need TSMs and desperately try to link up with them. I refer you back to our original chart. Only 20 per cent of the world's population live in democracies. For the other 80 per cent perhaps the most important form of civil society is organizing in alliance with a TSM.

Are TSMs transnational communities?

It is undoubtedly the case that many existing definitions of transnational communities will be basically ethnic or religious in character.

We have referred already to the ways in which forms of proto-globalisation have dusted off their clothes in emerged in new garb in the age of globalization. In the wake of Benedict Anderson's book it now a cliché to say all communities, including nations, are imagined. But in the case of globalizing diasporas and religions, their imagination doesn't have to stretch too far. They are already bound together by common histories, values, belief systems and mythologies.

Undoubtedly, our imagination has to stretch a little further in the case of TSMs: There are three shifts which together involve the constitution of 'community':

- The switch to identity politics
- The demand for more meaningful political participation
- The widening transnational repertoire

The switch to identity politics

Giddens (1991: chapter 7) suggested that throughout most of the period of modernization until the mid-twentieth century, social movements were generally concerned with 'emancipatory politics'. Important examples of emancipatory politics were the struggles to obtain universal suffrage, freedom of movement, assembly and opinion, the abolition of slavery, the rights of workers to engage in free collective bargaining and attempts to curb the worst excesses of capitalist inequality and insecurity by constructing a welfare state. All of these struggles required social movements to gain some degree of direct control over *state power.*

By contrast, contemporary social movements have been less interested in winning direct control of state power. Whereas those involved in emancipatory politics rarely considered the question of exactly what kinds of personal and communal life they might prefer to construct once the basic freedoms had been won, the main focus of social movements has shifted to causes concerning what he calls 'life politics' – the issue of self-realization and questions of personal identity. This has been particularly, though by no means exclusively, evident in the case of the feminist movement, which originated in the USA, swept across the Western world from the early 1970s and has now penetrated most societies.

[Feminism challenged patriarchy; a situation where the leading occupational and power positions in most societies were assigned predominantly to men while women were relegated to domestic roles culturally defined as inferior. However, it has also gone much further than this by compelling women to confront the question of what kind of life course and personal identity they wish to build their lives around; one based predominantly on domesticity, on the pursuit of economic independence or some combination of both. Such issues of feminine identity have also become closely linked to a host of further issues. They include such questions as the nature of sexuality and preferred sexual orientations, control of biological reproduction and who should be entitled to exercise rights over children and the terms on which marriage and other kinds of partnership arrangements should be founded. Thus, political conflicts and processes have *invaded the private realm* where individuals make personal choices concerning their identities, lifestyle preferences and everyday relationships.]

So an important refutation of the idea that Power is global, Politics in national is that the nature of politics has itself changed.

The demand for more meaningful participation

Several writers (for example, Giddens 1991, Beck 1992 and Beck et al 1994) point out that the spread of higher education and developments in communication technology, have allowed many people in the advanced societies to acquire lay expertise. They have become much more knowledgeable about science, technology and the management of

economic life than previously. At the same time, the ever increasing dangers incurred by nuclear energy and weaponry as well as chemical and biological warfare techniques have spurred ever more citizens to demand an end to the previously exclusive rights enjoyed by governments, the military and business corporations to monopolize control over these areas. This was further compounded by the realization that some scientists had placed their expertise and public prestige at the service of such narrow and unaccountable interests.

Even the buttoned-up world of markets and business management, once regarded as out-of-bounds to ordinary citizens has become increasingly exposed to detailed public scrutiny and liable to substantial criticism. Similarly, many are prepared to criticize the economic priorities employed by private companies, governments and IGOs such as the World Bank in their dealings with developing countries. Thus, there has been a demand for the democratization of decision-making in every sphere, not simply 'two-minute democracy' exercised every five years at the ballot box.. Although such demands have not always been met, the point is that citizens are no longer prepared to accept that there are legitimate areas of decision-making where they do not have every right to be fully informed and amply consulted.

The widening repertoire
[The notion of repertoire is drawn from Charles Tilly 19   ]

TSMs increasingly involve not only ' *a new ethic of responsibility*' but also '*a new practice of self-determination and solidarity*' between concrete individuals irrespective of culture or nationality (Hegedus p. 33, author's emphasis). According to Hegedus several social movements demonstrated all these qualities in the 1980s: Solidarity in Poland, the peace movement across Europe, North America and the Soviet Union and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa are examples. In the case of the last internal struggle by the African National Congress and its supporters was crucial in bringing about the ultimate collapse of the South African regime in the early 1990s. So too, however, were the organized and widespread campaigns across Europe and North America, especially on the part of African Americans in the USA. These encouraged students, consumers, savers and investors to engage in actual or threatened boycotts in order to persuade banks, exporting companies and TNCs to cease investing in the South African economy and to withdraw their existing assets.

The Live Aid rock song usefully symbolizes the idea of a new transnational repertoire, 'We are the world', a sentiment we can deconstruct in two important ways:

1. *We* the ordinary, caring people are the true face of the world while those hard-nosed bureaucrats, mendacious politicians and greedy corporations are *not* the world (even if they think they are).
2. We are the *world* in the sense that our identities, personalities and notions of self cannot be separated from the world. The global *is* the local and the local *is* the personal.

As was hinted at in our first interpretation of the Live Aid slogan, a 'we' implies a 'they', an 'us' a 'them', a 'self' an 'other'. And if enough people with enough enthusiasm are

prepared to define themselves as a 'we', they thereby constitute themselves as a community.

Conclusion

I started with Baumann's observation that Power is global, but Politics is national. What I hope we've demonstrated is that this is either erroneous or increasingly untrue:

1. There is an extraordinary range of INGOs out there, nesting themselves within wider movements. They have massive memberships, substantial funds and a very wide range of campaigning activities, which have, we think, to be defined as 'politics'.
2. These movements are best understood as parts of 'social movements' – a concept and practice that correctly identifies such characteristics as their capacity to rapidly mobilize, a vision of an alternative and preferable existence and the use of unorthodox strategies for attracting public support and confronting established institutions.
3. Thus, one way or another, social movements are innovatory. They challenge and push against convention, create new knowledge, develop alternative lifestyles and experiment with effective strategies for achieving their aims.
4. They have become increasing globalized over the last two decades because of the limits of statecentric politics, because they confront problems that are inherently transboundary in their nature, and because they provide an important bridge to dispossessed and exploited people in authoritarian countries, who use TSMs as a means to augment local political participation.
5. Less secure in our minds, but we would still argue the case, is the idea that TSMs are transnational *communities*. An sense of community, if not community itself derives we suggested from the switch from emancipatory to identity politics, the shared experiences of seeking more meaningful forms of political participation, and the evolution of an increasingly globalized repertoire uniting outlooks and actions.
6. Finally, it is perhaps worth mentioning that conventionally the idea of community has often been territorially delimited, but this tradition has now largely be superseded by emphasising the fluid, decentralized and participatory forms of community, organization and action. TSMs seek to persuade broad sections of the population to adopt new agendas for deep changes in social and cultural life. Such a goal calls for a multiplicity of dispersed and highly diverse grass roots activities that involve consciousness-raising and expose the failures of the existing system. TSMs do not need to protect borders, territories and national interests nor do they need they be tied to particular localities. This should not, in my mind, prevent us from seeing them as transnational communities.

*This paper is drawn from a chapter in a forthcoming book, *Global Sociology,* written jointly with Paul Kennedy. Macmillan will publish the book in 1999 or 2000. The bracketed references in the text will be listed in full in the book. Apologies for not inserting them here.