"Forgotten" Directions in the Study of Transnational Networks

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The articles of this core present a number of innovative studies on transnational networks.[1] Mainstream transnational network research has suffered from a number of theoretical biases which have prevented comprehensive study of the wide range of transnational activism of civil society organisations (CSOs). These biases concern, in particular, the notion of the 'civilness' of CSOs, their Western origin, their bourgeois nature, and their centre-left political orientation in terms of views on global politics.

The first major bias is constituted by the focus on the notion of civilness. With few exceptions, the only networks studied have been those belonging to civil society, whereby the usual understanding of the term 'civil' lies along broadly democratic lines. This has caused the marginalisation of those CSOs that challenge liberal-democratic values in the name of more conservative, religiously inspired political projects. Even more, militant groups, including terrorist groups, have been studied mainly by security scholars, whereas studies of transnational networks have for the most part tended to neglect them.

The second major bias derives from the focus on Western, and in particular English-speaking CSOs. With few exceptions, NGOs and other CSOs from the north, especially those in the United States and United Kingdom, have received much greater attention than organisations based in the south of the world, or in the non-English speaking part of the West. This is due in part to practical reasons mainly related to the dominance of the English language in social sciences, and in part to the Western understanding of the concept of civil society itself, intended as an actor outside the market and the state. As a consequence of this bias, relevant, but 'unusual' CSOs have been left aside. This is, for instance, the case of many CSOs in the Middle East or in China, where the boundaries between the state apparatus and society are more blurred than in the West.

Related to the previous point, the third bias of transnational activism studies is centred on the implicit bourgeois nature of civil society. Very often, the focus of attention on CSOs has prioritised, if not exclusively taken into consideration, only a specific category of organisations. This has tended to include organisations (typically NGOs) that are technical in expertise, formalised in their organisational structure, (neo)liberal in political perspective, urbanised in location and way of thinking, and mainly composed of middle class individuals. Consequently, other organisations that are political rather than technical, not formalised or loose in structure, not necessarily liberal or based in large cities, and composed of poorer and/or weaker social classes have received much less attention.

A final bias pertains to the political orientation of the CSOs' vision of global politics. Another way of looking at these biases is through the lenses of global master frames. In order to locate the discussion, the four major master frames that constitute the terrain for the competition for legitimacy in global politics, that is cosmopolitanism, localism, civilisationism, and neoliberalism, should be taken into account.[2] It is easy to see that the first two categories have been thoroughly studied in the form of CSOs upholding either liberal-democratic values (typically embodied in international non-governmental organisations) or radical leftist principles (typically embodied in transnational social movements). Conversely, transnational networks in line with the master frames of either (mainly religiously-inspired) civilisationism or neoliberalism have been much less frequently analysed, despite their current political relevance.

These biases do not come as a surprise. To some extent, they simply mirror our transnational socio-political reality. The political world is strongly marked by different power positions that favour certain groups over others. This is evident in many domains. Take for instance the role of the international donor community that has too often tended to privilege, in terms of financial support, political backing and media attention, a specific set of CSOs that is basically in line with the biases just mentioned. As a result, it is obvious that research on civil society has also tended to focus more on the most relevant actors of this kind.

Nonetheless, this tendency is not only scientifically and politically limited but, indeed, flawed. In fact, it not only mirrors our world, but also replicates and multiplies it. As a consequence, other actors that may be relevant tend to be marginalised or ostracised. Ultimately, this is not of service to either the scientific ambitions of social sciences or the practical needs of policy analysis and policymaking. Both endeavours need a fair and comprehensive account of the phenomenon of transnational networking. A sound political assessment, in fact, can only be made after such a comprehensive account has been given. In this vein, the set of articles presented in this core aims to contribute to a more inclusive representation of transnational networking and, in this way, of global politics more generally.

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[2]R. Marchetti, "Mapping Alternative Models of Global Politics". *International Studies Review*, 11, no. 1 (2009): 133–156.