*PA*rtecipazione e *CO*nflitto
** The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*
http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
***PACO*, Issue 8(3) 2015: 926-931**
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v8i3p926

Published in November 15, 2015

SYMPOSIUM – REVIEW/5

REVIEW OF MARIO DIANI'S *THE CEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY*

Walter J. Nicholls
University of California, Irvine

At a recent immigrant rights assembly in Los Angeles, California, participants gathered to pressure local law enforcement agencies to stop participating in a federal program to deport "criminal" immigrants. The event's sponsoring organization has been a longtime fixture on the local social movement scene. Its leaders greeted newcomers, talked easily to politicians and journalists, and whispered to their most intimate allies. The strong ties between the leading organization and its allies provided the organizers with the tacit know-how to organize this complex campaign. The strength of ties also provided high levels of trust and certainty needed to facilitate heavy investments into this campaign. Just as important, the impeccable reputation of the core organizers drew in broad support from progressive organizations, expert intellectuals, and an array of influential public officials. The leaders used their legitimacy to access political elites, gain support from them, and tap highly valuable information about the political opportunities available to them. The complexity and depth of these relations were not created overnight. They were cobbled together over a thirty-year period. The particular configuration of relations played a decisive role in pushing the campaign forward and cementing Los Angeles's positioning as a central hub in the country's immigrant rights movement. Relations, in this and other campaigns, mattered.

Mario Diani's masterful new book, *The Cement of Civil Society,* convincingly argues that relations are central to understanding contentious politics. Relations enable the pooling of collective resources, induce emotional solidarities, shape collective identities, and facilitate the abilities of challengers to interpret and act on political opportunities. Diani's book provides the reader with a detailed and step-by-step analysis of just how relations matter in different political contexts. The book does not focus on a specific social movement but the role that networks play in shaping the ways in which a wide variety of civic organizations assert their claims and influence in two cities: Glasgow and Bristol. In particular, the book examines how civic organizations in these two cities developed different relational configurations to assert claims and exercise influence in a wide variety of issue areas (environment, urban redevelopment, housing, globalization, and so on). Through a careful analysis of civic organizations in the two cities Diani has been able to reveal a number of surprising similarities and differences between the cities.

The introduction and theoretical chapter provide an excellent rationale for why a relational approach matters when studying contentious politics. While much of the social movement literature recognizes the importance of networks and relations, "aggregative" approaches continue to dominate. Such an approach assumes that the aggregation of particular traits (resources, frames, opportunities) explains contentious politics in different political contexts. He remarks that "if we have more environmental protests, more citizens identifying with the environmental cause, or more organizations active on environmental issues in country A than in country B, then we have a larger environmental movement in country A" (p. 2). Recognizing the importance of the aggregative approach, Diani points out its limits and makes a case for his relational approach:

> While this is a sensible and careful approach in may respects, what is left out is how the same elements combine in specific relational patterns. It makes indeed a great deal of difference whether the organizations interested in certain issues collaborate, mutually supporting their respective initiatives, and blending them in broader agendas, or whether they do work independently, trying to or whether they do work independently, trying to secure themselves a specific niche. (p. 3).

His aim is therefore not to dismiss aggregative approaches but to identify their limits and reveal how relational approaches can further our understandings of how civil society organizations mobilize in the political field.

Following from this, he introduces the central concept of the book: modes of coordination. Two central mechanisms (mechanisms of resource allocation and boundary definition) combine to form several types of coordination: organizational, coalitional, and

social movement networks. The "organizational mode" relies on formal methods to ensure the pooling of resources and adherence to collective identities. At the other end of the spectrum stands the "social movement mode", which is defined "by the intersection of *dense networks of informal inter-organizational exchanges and processes of boundary definition* that operate at the level of broad collectivities rather than specific groups / organizations, through dense interpersonal networks and multiple affiliations" (p. 18, emphasis in original). Between these is the "coalitional mode". He defines this as instrumental alliances that enable organizations to achieve their specific organizational goals through short-lived alliances and campaigns. Rather than a particular episode of contention reflecting one configuration over another, he argues that all configurations play distinctive yet interdependent roles throughout the episode. The analytical task at hand is not to ask which mode of configuration characterizes the contentious episode the most but how these modes come about, how they interact with one another, and how they play different yet combined roles in advancing the collective efforts of organizations. This formulation introduces a complex yet realistic understanding of contentious political relations, and Diani provides an excellent roadmap to make sense of it all.

The empirical chapters unfold in a disciplined and methodical way. Chapter two identifies the basic attributes of the field in both cities. The chapter provides a strong rationale for why this comparison is interesting and helpful in understanding the unique value of a relational approach to social movements. Chapters three and four lay out the structure of civil society in both cities in response to the changes in the 1990s and 2000s. While many would expect differences in these cities because of their unique histories and cultures, the chapter reveals important parallels in network structures. While Chapters three and four focus on the emergence of alliances and their structuration in distinctive modes of coordination, Chapters five and six assess how the specific alliances and structural features of these cities produce distinctive practices. Chapters seven and eight examine the extent to which the relational structure of local civil society and the positioning of distinctive organizations within them affect their capacities to exercise political influence. This book is in many ways an inspiring guide of how to perform a network analysis. Its methodological approach and theoretical insights reveal countless surprises and convincing explanations.

In spite of its many strengths, Diani may wish to address several issues more directly in follow-up volumes:

First, much of network theory presupposes a collective or functionalist understanding of power. People engage in relations because relations enable them to achieve certain tasks, practices, and goals that they could not have achieved as individuals. The "power to" achieve goals is enhanced through cooperation. Like Diani, sociologist Michael Mann

(1986) once identified the various ways in which people develop different modalities to coordinate their relations, from hierarchical and authoritative forms to more diffused and flatter networks. Unlike Diani, Mann asserts that the relational conditions that make it possible to achieve collective goals ("power to") *necessarily* creates new divisions of labor, hierarchies, central positions, and leaders with oversight and steering capacities ("power over"). The "power to" achieve collective goals gives rise to "the power over",[1] which in turn plants destabilizing seeds of disagreement and conflict. Conflict is born from cooperation. Mann's *dialectical* approach to social networks results in an understanding of political relations that is essentially dynamic, unstable, and prone to change over time and space. While Diani does not ignore centrality and hierarchy in networks (addressed in Chapter 7), the duality of power is not addressed directly in his theory. As a consequence, his theory downplays the inherent contradictions that make political relations dynamic, complex, and subject to change.

Second, Diani should be commended for addressing the geographical and urban literature on politics and social movements. Notwithstanding a handful of contributions (Gould 1995; Tilly 2000, 2003; Tarrow 2005; della Porta et. al. 2013), most social movement scholars have ignored this literature. Diani's effort to address it is admirable. He aptly shows how political fields can vary across localities, and how such variations give rise to different relational configurations. However, an essential question that he doesn't address directly is whether geographic scale (e.g. local versus nonlocal, proximate versus distant) affects how different modes of coordination operate and interconnect with one another. By examining cities as mini-societies, there is an assumption that geographic scale (local, national, transnational) has little or no importance in shaping relational structures and dynamics. Human geographers (from economic to political geographers) have long shown that embeddedness in a common place over time produces relations that differ from distant ones (Agnew 1987; Storper 1997; Routledge 1993; Miller 2000; Nicholls 2011). Long term and repeated engagement with diverse actors in a specific locale facilitate trust and common cognitive frames. These "relational attributes" (see, Storper 1997) lower uncertainties and permit the flow of resources between different actors. They also allow diverse actors to see, evaluate, and interpret complex political information in similar ways. Randall Collins (2000, 2004) adds that face-to-face relations make it easier to perform solidarity-building rituals. Proximity does not necessarily generate relational assets (trust, common cognitive lens, solidarity) but it certainly makes it

[1] "In pursuit of their goals," Mann observes, "humans enter into cooperative, collective power relations with one another. But in implementing collective goals, social organization and a division of labor are set up. Organization and division of function carry an inherent tendency to distributive power, deriving from supervision and coordination" (Mann 1986: 7).

easier. This in turn affects how modes of coordination operate and which ones predominate at different geographic scales.

For example, in the immigrant rights movement in the United States, Los Angeles is very much a part of a national effort but the relational architecture and configurations found in this city are very different from those at the national scale. In Los Angeles, we find strong organizations, these organizations are integrated through well-established social movement networks, and coalitions constantly emerge to move these networks forward in potent campaigns. The embeddedness of diverse actors in complex exchanges has produced relational assets and configurations that make this city a particularly important activist hub. At the national scale, we see the predominance of several large, professional, and national advocacy organizaitons. These several organizations are tightly connected to one another in Washington D.C. Leaders have created a national level, top-down infrastructure to steer the more localized and urban-based activists across the country. The geographical distance between highly diverse organizations made it difficult to generate the kinds of relational assets (trust, common cognitive frames, solidarities) found in Los Angeles. This precipitated more formalized, hierarchical, and authoritative modes of configuration at the national scale. The configuration has introduce a centralized leadership that seeks to impose decisions, order, and discipline across an unruly social movement made up of actors (like those in Los Angeles) with their own independent resources and powers. This has given rise to cleavages between the center (in Washington D.C.) and peripheral yet powerful hubs (Los Angeles, Chicago, among others) not always willing to subscribe to the will and prescriptions of the central leadership. The relational configuration described here is a function of the geography of network formation. Different configurations arise across geographic scales, and these configurations give rise to specific relational dynamics (center – periphery) within a national social movement.

These two points are not criticisms of this outstanding book. They are suggestions for further reflection. As it stands, this is an important book that will serve as a primary reference on social movement networks. I was not only thoroughly impressed by its theoretical and methodological sophistication, but also by its careful and logical structure. Diani patiently guides the reader through an extremely complex process that reveals how relations are constructed and structured, and how they affect practices and influence in two different cities. The book is a must read for any scholar and student interested in social movements and contentious politics.

References

Agnew J. (1987), *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society.* Boston: Allen and Unwin.

Collins R. (2004) *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Collins R. (2000) "Social Movements and the Focus of Emotional Attention," in J. Goodwin, J. Jasper, and F. Polletta (eds.) *Passionate Politics : Emotions and Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 27-44.

della Porta D., Fabbri M. and G. Piazza (2013) "Putting Protest in Place: Contested and Liberated Spaces in Three Campaigns," in W. Nicholls, B. Miller and J. Beaumont (eds.) *Spaces of Contention Spatialities and Social Movements.* Surrey, Ashgate.

Gould R. (1995), *Insurgent identities: class, community, and protest in Paris from 1848 to the commune*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mann M. (1986), *The Resources of Social Power, Volume I: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miller B. (2000), *Geography and Social Movements: comparing antinuclear activism in the Boston area*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nicholls W. (2011), Cities and the Unevenness of Social Movement Space: The Case of France's Immigrant Rights Movement, *Environment and Planning A* 43 (7): 1655-1673.

Routledge P. (1993), *Terrains of Resistance: Non-violent Social Movements and the Contestation of Place in India*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Storper M. (1997), *The Regional World: Territorial Development in a Global Economy*. New York and London: Guilford Press.

Tarrow S. (2005), *The New Transnational Activism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tilly C. (2003), "Contention over space and place", *Mobilization*, 8(2): 221-26.

Tilly C. (2000), "Spaces of contention", *Mobilization*, 5: 135-60.