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## Sidney Tarrow
## The New Transnational Activism

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*The New Transnational Activism* is the latest offering from Sid Tarrow, one of the kings — along with Charles Tilly and Doug McAdam — of contentious activity, the "TMT" of social-movement theory. In this work, Tarrow turns his sights on global activism to clarify the nature and processes at work in transnational protest. Is transnational activism as novel as some have claimed, Tarrow wonders? Is the spate of global protest since 1999's "Battle in Seattle" a sign of something new, the beginnings of a fusing of domestic and international contention? Or is it old contentious activity wrapped up in new packaging?

Tarrow concludes that there is something new going on, but gets there by extending some old concepts. Globalization, the process that is usually credited for inciting transnational activism, is not the source of these activities. The grievances that have arisen out of global economic integration, for example, are real, but cannot explain when, why and how people engage in transnational contentious activity. Rather, Tarrow says that it is necessary to focus on internationalism — the structures through which globalization is mediated — and its relation to collective action to begin to understand the origins and mechanisms of global protest. As internationalization proceeds, horizontal and vertical relations between state and nonstate actors operating at international, national, and subnational levels generate networks of formal and informal institutions. While the globalization literature has documented the threats these institutions pose — to sovereignty, democracy, diversity and protest — what has been less understood are the possibilities they create, how they open up "an opportunity space into which domestic actors can move, encounter others like themselves, and form coalitions that transcend their borders" (25).

If all this sounds familiar, it is. Tarrow's approach to transnational activism resembles closely the response of "political process" theorists like himself to traditional "deprivation" theories of social action. If globalization processes interest, anger, oppress, and exploit, it is internationalism that generates the barriers and openings that prevent or encourage people to act on those sensibilities. It takes more than frustration to spawn a social movement; the political structure (broadly speaking) must offer up a place within which those frustrations might be articulated and addressed. Tarrow makes the case that this is true as much for transnational as national and subnational movements.

If that is where transnational activism happens, who are the transnational activists? According to Tarrow, transnational activists are, for the most part, not much different from their non-global counterparts. While they may hold transnational contacts, and from time to time engage in transnational conflict, they are "rooted" in local conditions and concerns and the "social networks … resources, experiences, and opportunities that place provides them" (42). It is true that they are unique in their ability to "shift their activities among levels, taking advantage of the expanded nodes of opportunity of a complex international society" (43). But most are committed to and embedded in their localities which ultimately shape their approaches to international opportunities. Local — particularly national or state-level — conditions thus continue to play an important role in a system characterized by internationalization.

What happens when the local and regional meet the international, when the specific interests of and conditions facing "rooted" activists combine with the more general opportunities provided by internationalism? As one might predict, variety happens, and it is highlighting and classifying this variety that constitutes the bulk of Tarrow's book. Tarrow identifies "six processes of transnational contention" — Global Framing, Internalization, Diffusion, Scale Shift, Externalization and Coalition Forming — six ways in which activists approach internationalism in pursuit of their interests. The first two, Global Framing and Internalization, involve co-optation of global themes to fight domestic battles; Diffusion and Scale Shift represent attempts to "move" claims from one site or level to another; and Externalization and Coalition Forming comprise the projection of claims vertically and horizontally, respectively, to international institutions and groups with common cause. Only the last two provide possibilities for prolonged domestic-international fusion, says Tarrow, and only thinly at best given the volatility of international politics, the difficulties associated with establishing and maintaining long-distance trusting relationships between members, and the extent to which local motivating concerns must be "stretched" to coincide with international issues. The others remain either embedded in the local context or provide only temporary connections between the domestic and the international. Tarrow acknowledges that any and all "global" activism has the potential to invigorate social movement actors, introduce new techniques into their repertoires of protest, and otherwise affect the aims and strategies of transnational activists; that cosmopolitanism and cross-border links have accelerated with the increased opportunities for individuals to connect and mobilize inside and outside their societies; and that there is even some indication that younger activists are more likely to feel attachments to the continental or global levels. But he does not read contemporary transnational activism as representing any sort of "swelling tide of history." "Transnational activism," he concludes, "… is more like a series of waves that lap on an international beach, retreating repeatedly into domestic seas but leaving incremental changes on the shore" (219).

While Tarrow's final judgement might be less than inspiring to those who hope transnational activism represents the beginnings of a process toward a "social movement society," his book does the field a tremendous service by taking apart that most elusive of concepts, globalization. Tarrow challenges the sweeping prognoses offered by thinkers who depict globalization as a path to either ruin or emancipation by locating the impetus for transnational contention squarely in grassroots movements, demonstrating that global activism is possible but, well, it is hard. Very hard. While internationalism has generated new opportunities for social movement actors, people are still largely motivated by issues that matter to them directly. This means that the farther activists get from local issues, the more work needs to be done to sustain public interest in their cause. Further, activists themselves must labour to keep up relations with far-flung collaborators whose grievances may be only loosely connected to their own and whose local conditions may demand very different approaches to their cause. Tarrow is not saying that this is impossible; he provides numerous examples of how enterprising individuals and groups have managed to overcome these obstacles and cooperate — often quite successfully — across borders of many kinds. What he shows us, however, is that cooperation will not take the same form each time, that different issues demand different courses of action depending on the actors involved, the local political and cultural conditions that they face, and nature of the international structures within which they are operating.

As he explodes the black box of globalization, Tarrow produces a plethora of new terms and concepts that students of social movements can take up themselves to examine this question further.

The book is chock full of new characterizations of protest, a catalogue bursting with categories and subcategories pertaining to the different ways in which "rooted" activists make use of international opportunities. One cannot help but envision while reading this book the countless case studies that will proceed from Tarrow's classifications, the legions of journal articles in which authors will document evidence of "nesting pigeons" engaged in "mediated diffusion" or "downward scale shift," or indications of a fusion of "global framing" and "externalization" through "information monitoring."

Tarrow makes no apologies for his typologizing. He has been criticized before, he says, for being more concerned with the description of processes than with the correlational analyses and methodological concerns that some believe constitute the only "real" social movements research. But it is necessary, Tarrow argues, to take stock of the "mechanisms of contentious politics" from time to time to help us to understand their operation and outcomes (208). This may sound defensive except that he is right. Moreover, he is good at it. No one could accuse Tarrow of "ivory tower" pronouncements; his classifications are based in a sound knowledge of a broad array of social movements research and case studies, many of which he himself has conducted. Tarrow — alone or in partnership with Chuck Tilly and/or Doug McAdam — has proven adept at pulling these disparate pieces of the social movement puzzle together and presenting them in a "package" that is intelligible and (most importantly to social movements researchers) readily employable. Tarrow provides us with conceptual tools that help us to organize our thoughts and observations around contentious activity, and frameworks that we can actually use.

And it is the relative ease with which the field accepts and takes up these frameworks, our continuing reliance on the "TMT" to pull it together for us, that will no doubt serve as the basis for criticism of this book. In exaggerating the structuralism of the political opportunities approach to social movements, recent critics of the perspective seem as concerned with challenging the "hegemony" of the triumvirate and their associates than offering something new to the field (Goodwin and Jasper 2004). I must admit being vexed from time to time myself by the dominance of these three names in the literature. But the reality is that *The New Transnational Activism* will prove a watershed in the analysis of global activism, even despite the notoriety of its author. Read it now and be prepared for the onslaught of studies that it will most certainly spawn.

**References**

Goodwin, Jeff and James Jasper (eds.). 2004. *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning and Emotion*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

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