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Clashing Networks in World Politics

In the summer of 2003, a handful of beleaguered Brazilians appealed for help from a powerful American rights organization. Menaced by new government initiatives, they believed the foreign group had the expertise, power, and connections to turn back the threat. At its Fairfax, Virginia headquarters, the Americans mobilized, sending a seasoned activist to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. On his mission, he gathered facts, met with anxious citizens, and suggested strategies. Soon the Brazilians adopted ideas and approaches the Americans had deployed elsewhere. Ultimately this foreign support helped change the direction of Brazilian law. Meanwhile, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) was busy on other fronts. In the United States, it fought to protect vulnerable citizens at home and abroad. Lobbying Congress, working the courts, and cultivating the media, its operatives crusaded for rights and freedom. At the United Nations, its staff worked with like-minded organizations from other countries to shape international policy. Members of this global network issued press releases, attended conferences, and stressed the moral imperatives of immediate action, not least in Brazil.

In many ways, this might seem an unremarkable story from the age of globalization. Today "local" rights abuses routinely attract overseas concern. Environmental devastation in one region galvanizes action in others. Legislators in the United States and the

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European Union vote on domestic policies affecting foreign societies. And NGOs use the United Nations, the world media, and the Internet to advance all manner of campaigns.

This story was different, however. The Brazilians were not torture victims, and the NGO was not Human Rights Watch. Rather, Brazilian gun owners reached overseas when threatened by tough new laws, including a national referendum to ban civilian firearms sales. The NGO they tapped? America's National Rifle Association (NRA). Various factors led to the referendum's defeat, but the NRA's influence was salient. Its message – honed for decades in the United States – swept Brazilians. The right to own firearms, previously unvoiced in Brazil and absent from its constitution, became a rallying cry. The disarmament referendum, backed both by the government and a transnational gun control network, had been expected to pass handily. Instead, it failed by a 2:1 margin.

In the United States, the NRA's power on national gun issues is famous – or infamous, depending on one's perspective. Less known, the group plays an important role in other countries, at the United Nations, and in U.S. foreign policy. This gun activism and its collisions with control forces are by no means unusual. Although little noted by analysts, most global issues involve not just a single "progressive" movement promoting a cause, but also rivals fighting it. The women's movement has long faced hostility from "pro-family" NGOs. Allying with locals from Sudan to China, this "Baptist-burqa" network is a major presence at UN conferences and other global forums. On ecological concerns, NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and the Sierra Club represent only one slice of the ideological spectrum. Organizations opposing environmental regulation are equally active. More generally, networks battle over the state's role in the economy, with everything from old-age pensions to foreign aid part of a global fray.

Yet for all the frequency with which activist groups clash, scholarly and journalistic accounts have been one-sided. Most focus on movements of the political left: their development, lobbying, and protest. A particular favorite has been the antiglobalization or global justice movement, its small but colorful efforts

to counter neoliberalism drawing media and academic attention. Such research is useful, but contestation over global issues cannot be reduced to battles over economic globalization itself.

More important, whether because of ideological proclivities, sympathy with apparent underdogs, or sheer oversight, analysts miss key parts of the story – rival activism in civil society. To quote political scientist Mary Kaldor, despite "conservative" groups being "extremely powerful," they are "rarely mentioned" in the burgeoning study of global politics. The omission is in fact greater, however. Conflict among rival networks, whatever their ideology, is seldom examined, in favor of studies that highlight one side's efforts to persuade decison makers.[1]

Investigating conflict does more than just plug a yawning empirical hole. It helps answer critical questions in world politics: Why do only a few efforts to create international policy succeed? What explains a policy's scope and strength? These questions suggest that existing research suffers from biases because it has focused on instances in which new policy has been made. But even dynamic campaigns often end with a whimper. Resistance is not the only reason, but it plays a major role. Of course, such "failures" are simultaneously victories for opponents. Analyzing new policy, as well as its subversion and aversion, highlights this reality. In addition, it challenges received wisdom about transnational activism, including the ways in which rival networks emerge, interact, and influence.

In the dominant view, NGOs are a counterweight to state repression and corporate greed, succoring the needy and uplifting the downtrodden. Researchers and romantics have toasted transnational networks as the vanguard of an emerging "global civil society." They offer new avenues of representation. They hand stifled voices a global megaphone. They express popular

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[1] Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003). For exceptions, see Mitchell A. Orenstein, *Privatizing Pensions: The Transnational Campaign for Social Security Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Susan K. Sell and Aseem Prakash, "Using Ideas Strategically: The Contest between Business and NGO Networks in Intellectual Property Rights," *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004): 143–75.

preferences better than elected governments. In this view, environmental, human rights, and social justice NGOs democratize global governance. Few analysts, however, examine the powerful networks opposing these goals.[2]

Some might retort that the novelty of these developments explains the gap. In reality, conflict only appears new because it has for so long been overlooked. Most of the networks noted previously have existed for years – as have their clashes with competitors. Further back in history, celebrated movements fought powerful but forgotten rivals – and suffered decades of defeat. Consider the suffragists, who tangled not only with governments but also with such organizations as Britain's Women's Anti-Suffrage League and the New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage. Earlier still, abolitionists in England, the United States, and elsewhere confronted pro-slavers and anti-abolitionists whose own broad-based, if repugnant, movements interacted across national borders. In the economic realm, transnational movements have battled for centuries over the relationship between markets and societies. Historian Karl Polanyi argued that modern capitalism rose through a "double movement," with promoters of laissez faire matched against workers opposed to it.[3]

In short, despite recent ballyhooing of NGOs as a force for progress, civil society has long worked at cross-purposes. Neglect of these battles does not result from latter-day blindsiding by

[2] Recent work that has begun to fill the gap includes Doris Buss and Didi Herman, *Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right In International Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); William E. DeMars, *NGOs and Transnational Networks: Wild Cards in World Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2005); Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jackie Smith, *Social Movements for Global Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Steven Teles and Daniel A. Kenney, "Spreading the Word: The Diffusion of American Conservatism in Europe and Beyond," in *Growing Apart? America and Europe in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jeffrey Kopstein and Sven Steinmo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 136–69.
[3] Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 76, 132, 149. See also Jane Jerome Camhi, *Women against Women: American Anti-Suffragism, 1880–1920* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1994); James A. Morone, *Hellfire*

newly internationalized conservatives. Rather, it stems from ana-
lytic blinders against studying failed efforts at policy making –
or from political blindness to studying "retrograde" movements.

The Argument

In this book, I make four arguments. First, *transnational poli-
tics is ideologically diverse and conflictive*. Deploying recurrent
tactics and themes, rival networks advance their positions and
slash away at the enemy's. They influence one another's devel-
opment, strategies, and outlook. Clashes attract attention and
raise an issue's profile, useful in later rounds. Confrontation ful-
fills NGOs' internal needs too. How better to galvanize staff,
activate members, and raise funds than combating a reviled foe
seeking abhorrent goals on a vital issue? Contention between
networks – not just between a single network and target states
or corporations – is therefore endemic. Nor does this only fol-
low left-right lines. Such divisions represent an important way in
which combatants understand and promote their goals. Conflict
itself is fundamental, however, its precise orientation secondary.

Second, *the battles cut across institutions and borders*. Duel-
ing networks range the globe, their members working in inter-
national forums and states. Indeed, the latter are central because
those in power domestically determine governmental stances on
foreign policy. Activists scramble for influence at home using
ideas, strategies, and resources from abroad. They deploy devel-
opments in one country to excite or scare constituents in another.
Low-level conflict smolders in blogs, chatrooms, op-eds, and
books. Antagonists amass intellectual phalanxes in think tanks,
university centers, and media outlets, all poised for the next flare-
up. In all this, activists know that they "work on an enormous
canvas, a canvas that encompasses the entire world."[4] So in this

Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History (New Haven, CT: Yale Uni-
versity Press, 2003), 69–82; Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense
of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

[4] Austin Ruse, "Toward a Permanent United Nations Pro-Family Bloc," paper
delivered to World Congress of Families II, Geneva, Switzerland, Nov. 14–17,
1999, http://www.worldcongress.org/wcf2_spkrs/wcf2_ruse.htm.

book, I take the unusual but necessary step of examining inter-locking clashes both in global institutions such as the United Nations and in particular countries.

Third, *this globalized combat influences outcomes, whether policy, nonpolicy, or "zombie" policy*. Prior analyses, mostly of successful policy making, explain it by pointing to persuasion, deliberation, or appropriateness. In this view, one faction's reso-nant framings or cogent arguments convince government officials and broader audiences. Policy is made and progress achieved. In fact, however, the joyful birth of a meaningful new policy is rare. More common is its strangulation, nonpolicy – or its evisceration, zombie policy, the heart and soul ripped out of whatever document painfully issues. Political combat involves a host of unsavory, negative strategies aimed at dissuasion. Oppos-ing activists present contrary ideas packaged in equally appealing terms. More belligerently, they deny the very existence of "crises" that fire their rivals. They stoke fear about the "solutions" pro-posed by their enemies. They bombard their foes' reputations and rationality. Notably, too, the attacks are more than just rhetor-ical. Indeed they must be because framing has limited ability to change the many minds in civil society and government that are already made up. Even as each side builds its own coalition, it works to unbuild its opponents'. As it enters institutions, it strives to exclude its rivals. As it sets agendas, it toils to unset its enemy's.

Conflict between networks is not the sole explanation for the politics of "stasis" or "regress." On many issues, however, oppo-nents wield great power. All this makes certain proposals more or less costly, feasible, or risible for the governments that establish policy. At any one time, it may be difficult to measure the precise effect of rival movements, but by shaping one another's iden-tity and strategies, they influence outcomes. Notably, however, in bitter policy battles, most "outcomes" are at best respites in wars lasting decades. Win or lose, the combatants fight on. They adapt themselves to the changed conditions, even while under-mining them. They assert their root visions in new guises or different arenas.

Finally, *global civil society is not a harmonious field of like-minded NGOs. It is a contentious arena riven by fundamental differences criss-crossing national and international borders.* One side cannot be written off as GONGOs or BONGOs, government or business-organized NGOs. All are part of global politics, even if some are its enemies, sworn to reducing advocacy NGOs to charity providers and eliminating the transnational as a vibrant political sphere. For activists, this diversity poses challenges. How can institutions such as the World Social Forum claim the mantle of global civil society when ideologically contrary voices are not present? More pragmatically, how can they achieve their goals against foes who themselves claim to represent "the people?"

For scholars, the challenge is analytic. Too much of the literature has theorized about global society narrowly, studying only its progressive purlieus. Given such a limited view, policy compromises seem possible through logical persuasion or gentle tutelage. International institutions such as the United Nations appear to enjoy significant authority, even respect. A broader lens reveals deep disagreement, however. Even leaving violent conflict aside, contending groups in democratic societies hold irreconcilable values. They see the world from incompatible perspectives. They despise their adversaries as misguided, self-interested, deceitful, or downright evil. There is limited room for the deliberation so cherished by idealists. Indeed, the combatants do not seek compromise. They long for conquest, working as passionately to thwart their foes as to advance themselves. In these clashes, the rivals deride institutions, whether domestic or international, as political creatures undeserving of deference – unless they do the activists' bidding. Given these chasms, current theories emphasizing appropriateness, learning, and jawboning need to be supplemented.[5]

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[5] Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5, 7; Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 141–61.

If a global civil society is indeed emerging, it is more discordant and less understood than scholars have thus far imagined. In addition, it is more rooted in domestic politics than many have realized. Contending networks seek a glimmer of the global spotlight, but all include NGOs and staffs with local addresses. Most recognize the global as reflective of the national. They therefore devote much of their energy to domestic allies fighting over state policies and power.

Definitions and Caveats

Before proceeding, it is useful to discuss the concept of transnational advocacy networks, first identified by Keck and Sikkink. United by common causes and ideas, such networks include NGOs, foundations, and broader publics, as well as officials of governments and international organizations.[6] The latter have wider concerns but are less amenable to persuasion than often believed because they already occupy partisan camps. Network constituents engage in two broad activities: supporting local groups (the "boomerang" pattern); and swaying international institutions either directly, by lobbying them or member governments, or indirectly, by shaping ideas. In reality, these activities blur, with strategies and conflicts in one realm spilling into the other. For instance, members of both the women's rights and family values networks fight one another over reproductive rights/abortion at the United Nations while aiding local clients battling similar issues.

Networks are shifting and loose-knit. It is seldom accurate to ascribe motivations or intentions to them as a whole because their members differ on particular issues. For that reason, I focus on the organizations composing them. Among these, it is possible to distinguish the more from the less powerful, notwithstanding the lack of formal hierarchy within networks. If state

[6] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 8–10.

bureaucrats are members, they hold considerable clout because in the final analysis, governments make policy decisions. In day-to-day activities, however, dedicated advocacy groups – with their laser focus on specific issues – have greater freedom to promote ideas, concepts, approaches, and proposals that in turn influence states. Accordingly, I highlight NGOs, private organizations whose primary aims are political, social, cultural, or economic. For additional concreteness, I focus on efforts to forge or foil domestic or international law. By contrast, many scholars study norms. Their "emergence," however, is more difficult to gauge and more debatable, particularly because claims to a norm's emergence are usually refuted by opponent networks.

As noted, this book places contention at the center of analysis. One of conflict's most enduring manifestations is the left-right divide, and the cases I examine fall along those lines. I therefore use the terms in this book, not least because the antagonists themselves do so. What do they mean? Some might argue that the "right" refers to groups opposing policy change and the "left" to those promoting it. On issues such as genetically modified foods, however, free-market groups promote new methods, whereas ecology organizations seek to preserve older ones, thus turning the usual meanings of "conservative" and "progressive" on their heads. Indeed, because of their tendentious connotations, I use the latter terms sparingly, primarily to improve readability. A better alternative might be to follow Thomas Sowell's distinction between those who envision mankind as capable – or incapable – of shaping society to political ends. This division, between the "utopian" or "unconstrained" vision on one hand (the left) and the "tragic" or "constrained" on the other taps the source of many contemporary controversies.[7] It is notable, however, that placing a group in one wing for one issue may not predict its classification for another. For instance, the Catholic Church has worked with NGOs seeking gun control but also favors traditional families.

[7] Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2007 [1987]), 9–35.

The upshot: I occasionally use the terms right and left in this book but not as watertight analytic categories. Rather, I apply them to particular groups conflicting over specific goals. At a minimum, the labels are convenient shorthand to emphasize this book's real focus: gaping splits within what is too glibly termed global civil society. It is those neglected fissures and the fusillades across them that matter most. Put another way, my focus is conflict among networks, whatever tags one attaches to them. I intend that the hypotheses I test and the conclusions I draw apply beyond the left-right divide, to nonviolent contention among any opposed networks.

Notwithstanding this broad aim, a few caveats are in order, mostly concerning the controversial ideological terms. Critics might growl that right-wing organizations cat-paw for states and therefore merit no separate analysis. Of course, some groups receive state funds, employ ex-bureaucrats, and work with governments. The same could be said for left-wing networks, however, such as the campaigns for the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the landmines treaty. Others might carp that right-wing groups front for world capital or "neoliberal globalizers." This is hardly universal, however. Critical issues such as family planning and religious belief do not implicate economic interests. In other areas, corporate views are divided, and left-wing causes enjoy business largesse. The Body Shop, Ben & Jerry's, and Reebok may have paved the way, but today even Exxon and RTZ travel this familiar road, flashing the environment and human rights as part of their corporate responsibilities – or marketing plans. In any case, foundation support for left-wing NGOs is rampant. Of course, that is true for the right too. For every Ford and Open Society Foundation, there is a Koch Family or Atlas Foundation.[8]

Is it valid to distinguish left- and right-wing movements by arguing that the former enjoy grassroots support, whereas the

[8] See generally DeMars, *NGOs and Transnational Networks*, 11, 148–52; Volker Heins, *Nongovernmental Organizations in International Society: Struggles over Recognition* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 107–12.