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The Cement of Civil Society

Civil society is frequently conceived as a field of multiple organizations, committed to highly diverse causes and interests. When studied empirically, however, its properties are often reduced to the sum of the traits and attitudes of the individuals or groups that are populating it. This book shows how to move from an "aggregative" to a relational view of civil society. Drawing on fieldwork on citizens' organizations in two British cities, it combines network analysis and social movement theories to portray civil society as a system of relations between multiple actors. "Modes of coordination" enable us to identify different logics of collective action within the same local settings. The book exposes the weakness of rigid dichotomies, separating the voluntary sector from social movements, "civic" activism oriented to service delivery from "uncivic" protest, and grassroots activism external to institutions from formal, professionalized organizations.

Mario Diani is Professor of Sociology in the University of Trento and ICREA Research Professor at UPF Barcelona. His publications include *Social Movements* (with Donatella della Porta, 2006), *Social Movements and Networks* (coedited with Doug McAdam, 2003), and *Green Networks* (1995). He was the European editor of *Mobilization* from 1997 to 2005 and has served on the editorial board of a number of journals, including *Contemporary Sociology* (2006–8) and, currently, *Interest Groups and Advocacy* and *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*.

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The Cement of Civil Society

Studying Networks in Localities

MARIO DIANI
University of Trento and ICREA-UPF Barcelona

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For Chuck Tilly, dean of the invisible college,
In memoriam

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Acronyms

CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
FOE	Friends of the Earth
GCVS	Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector
POS	Political opportunity structure
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SA	Sturmabteilung
SMO	Social movement organization
SSP	Scottish Socialist Party
STUC	Scottish Trade Union Council
TUC	Trade Union Council (England)
Voscur	Voluntary Organisations Standing Conference on Urban Regeneration

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Preface and Acknowledgments

It should not come as a surprise that books on contentious politics turn out to be themselves an object of contention. In this case, contention started with the title. As my friends Henrik Ernstson and Lorien Jasny noted, a book about civil society networks, that is, about the mechanisms that connect civic organizations, and their interaction with specific localities, should not carry a title that draws attention to static features of the political process. They may have a point, yet I have decided to stick with *The Cement of Civil Society*. This is not just because the draft has been around for so long that I have become fond of the title; nor because I welcome the opportunity to pay an oblique homage to a great social theorist such as Jon Elster. Rather, I decided to stay with the "cement" metaphor because an unapologetic reference to "static" features of social processes might actually be useful at a time when the pendulum has perhaps swung a little too far in the direction of "dynamics" – or more accurately, of the rhetoric on dynamics. Let me be clear about this: attempts to map changes, in particular, changes in network structures, are crucial. And it is true that most analyses of networks tend to adopt a static perspective. However, some advocates of the "dynamic turn" have perhaps placed too much emphasis on the accounts of a few key individual actors, taken as the structuring principles of whole collective action fields; other times, familiar acquaintances like the good old political opportunities of the classic social movement agenda have resumed service as important explanatory factors, this time in order to account for the configuration of specific fields. As this book shows, a systematic look at network structures may still generate meaningful insights on collective processes. Most importantly, an analysis that is mainly – although not entirely – situated at a single point in time and space may help us to identify useful analytic categories that may guide our analysis of civic networks over time. In this particular case, I propose a typology of "modes of coordination

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of collective action," based on different combinations of basic mechanisms of *resource allocation* and *boundary definition*.

The application of this model to networks of citizens' organizations focusing on the production of collective goods in two British cities, Glasgow and Bristol, in the early 2000s, enables me to address some "unacknowledged practices" and "hidden assumptions" that seem to me quite common among analysts of social movements. The first "unacknowledged practice" is the persistent tendency to analyze collective phenomena as aggregates of discrete, individual units. Of course, at the theoretical level, very few would agree with such a bold claim: on the contrary, most analysts would argue that collective processes are best conceived as systems of relations. However, the practice of our research is still quite different. Whether we are analyzing civil society, a specific organizational field, a social movement, a coalition, or a protest campaign, we often measure the properties of their individual components (sometimes persons, at other times organizations or events), look at their distribution, and draw inferences about the nature of the collective process from the aggregation of its constituent elements. Many useful insights derive from such a strategy, but this is only one side of the story, and it may at times generate misleading interpretations: collectivities, whose elements look very similar in terms of means and percentages, may sometimes turn out to be very dissimilar, because those elements relate to each other in very different ways. That's exactly what I found in Bristol and Glasgow, and what makes them an interesting object of study.

Another "unacknowledged practice" stems from the "hidden assumption" that social movements are the only promoters of collective action, or at least the only fully accomplished and legitimate carriers of political and social change. Hence the tendency to label as "social movement" any phenomenon of interest, or any instance of collective action that analysts deem worthy of attention; up to the point of equating the flows of information between tweeting citizens, interested in a cause, to the "structure of social movements." The diffusion of new types of media and the resulting alterations to communication patterns actually render even more urgent a discussion of the different forms through which collective action may be coordinated. Not all actors, and sometimes not even the majority of actors mobilizing on "new," or at least poorly represented causes, act as social movements, and there is no reason why we should treat them as such; conversely, many organizations are embedded in structural patterns that somehow reflect social movement mechanisms without matching at all the stereotypical traits of "social movement organizations." Glasgow and Bristol are valuable settings for trying to address these issues: they consist of civic organizational fields that are broad enough to allow for considerable variation in network patterns, yet are still small enough to enable detailed investigation.

Yet another "hidden assumption" has to do with the idea that collective dynamics are interesting only when a great deal of things are happening. In contrast, the book illustrates the value of exploring collective action at times in

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which "little is happening." Although both Bristol and Glasgow have rich traditions of collective action, and remarkably different ones too, and a lively civil society, at the time of the project they were not going through major instances of campaigning. The opportunity to observe how cultural differences affect patterns of alliance building and collaboration would indeed have been more limited had the study taken place during a phase of intense mobilization. That might have distorted our interpretation by increasing, temporarily and somehow artificially, interorganizational density. When the mobilizations against the Iraq war started to gain momentum toward the end of 2002, for a moment I cursed my bad luck: I was thinking, in line with conventional wisdom in the social movement studies community, that it would have been exciting to map the networks that were developing against the war. How sad that the first and most massive round of data collection had actually just been completed.... On reflection, however, I congratulated myself on my good fortune: the antiwar campaign would have artificially inflated both connectedness and (possibly) fragmentation within the civic sector. Moreover, we know a great deal already about mobilization processes and the role of networks within them; we know far less, it seems to me, about the structure of collective action at times of low mobilization. My late mentor Alberto Melucci contrasted times of intense campaigning (which he called "visibility") to phases of demobilization (or, in his language, "latency"). While he mostly associated latency with self-reflection and cultural production, this book can be seen as an exploration of public collective action at times of latency. The web of interorganizational connections that develop between civil society organizations does not necessarily reflect the presence of social movements, but it points to the multiplicity of modes through which collective action is coordinated even in the absence of major conflicts.

Finally, this book also takes on the "hidden assumption" concerning the desirability of working with "new data." I hope to make a convincing case for the value of working with material that some might regard as out of date. While there might be a growing biographical motivation behind my taking the side of the aged, I have always been genuinely convinced that working with data that are a few years old may be advantageous to the quality of the output. Time may provide a better understanding of processes than we might gain when monitoring the deployment of collective action "live." What is great for a journalist is not always great for a social scientist: how many "instant books" or "instant articles" on the Arab Spring have survived the check of the "Arab Winter"? The most substantial advantage of working with "ageing data" comes, however, in terms of intellectual discipline: to put it bluntly, you cannot win over publishers and reviewers because you are exploring a "hot" topic. A broader argument is required, something that can be of interest even to those who are not at all interested in the empirical cases analyzed in your writings. This is always a requirement with quality publishers, of course, but it applies even more to data that for one reason or another may not appear

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exciting to contemporaries. Today, the benchmark on this ground is probably Bent Flyvbjerg's much celebrated *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, which draws some of its empirical inspiration from the conflicts surrounding the location of a bus station in Aalborg, Denmark. Having had the dubious pleasure of spending a Sunday afternoon there, years ago, I can confirm it is difficult to think of a less exciting subject in itself. By comparison, studying networks of civic organizations in Britain leaves you feeling like John Rex in those "ten world-shaking days" in 1917 Russia. While I am not claiming Flyvbjerg's theoretical breadth, this book has been written in the same spirit, namely, trying to show the general relevance of apparently modest cases.

So much for the possible contributions to be made by this book. While its reception in the scientific community is uncertain, what is certain are the huge debts of gratitude that its author has incurred over the many years in which work has been in progress. The specific origins of *The Cement of Civil Society* go back to the project Networks of Citizens' Organizations in Britain that I led between 2000 and 2003 as part of the Democracy and Participation Program, promoted by the Economic and Social Research Council (contract L215 25 2006). I am deeply grateful to program director Paul Whiteley for his support and intellectual openness. In Glasgow, coinvestigators Isobel Lindsay and Satnam Virdee offered their intellectual input at various phases of the project, while Juliana MacKenzie took charge of the fieldwork. The assistance of Denise Bula, Fiona Macintyre, and Lynne Davies is also gratefully acknowledged, as well as the colleagueship and friendship of David Judge, Gerry Stoker, Tom Mackie, Wolfgang Rüdig, and my other colleagues in the Department of Government of the University of Strathclyde. In Bristol, Derrick Purdue and Murray Stewart, then on the staff of the University of the West of England, played a vital role in the research process, coordinating an experienced team of interviewers and sharing their deep knowledge of the local scene.

When designing the project, valuable insights on the intricacies of city politics and traditions, as well as of British politics at large, came from Helen McNeil, Damian Killeen, Rosie Kane, Wallace McNeish, Mark Brown, and Graham Smith in Glasgow; from Jean Erskine, Simon Bale, Rohit Barot, Steve Fenton, Paul Burton, Ian Coates, Judeline Ross, Derek Wall, and Margaret Jones in Bristol; as well as from Donatus Anyanwu and Greg Smith in London, and Peter Stokes in Birmingham. Thanks are also due to the innumerable representatives of local groups and associations who generously accepted to be interviewed about their activities and views. I regret I cannot mention them all here.

The debts incurred by *Cement* stretch, however, much beyond the confines of the specific study, as it builds in many ways on twenty-five years of work on collective action and, increasingly, its social network dimension. Thanks are therefore due to the colleagues and friends whose work has inspired me over this long period: the late Alberto Melucci, Mayer Zald, and Roger Gould,

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This book would have never been completed if I had not profited, after a few hectic years as dean of the Faculty of Sociology in Trento, from a research chair at the Catalan Institute of Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA) and Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) in Barcelona. I am very grateful for their support to ICREA directors Jaume Bertranpetit and Mariona Costa, former UPF principal Josep Moreso, and my colleagues in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at UPF, in particular, Clara Riba, Ana Safranoff-Yankillevich, Blanca Garces, Daniela Bellani, Gosta Esping-Andersen, Jacint Jordana, Javier Arregui, Jorge Rodriguez, Luis Ortiz, Mariano Torcal, Mariona Ferrer, Mathew Creighton, Monica Clua Losada, Nacho Lago, and Veronica Benet-Martinez.

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Closer to home, Silvia and Stefano were there with their rich, warm, and complex personalities, and their highly heterogeneous approaches to civic engagement. In their different roles and capacities, Bepi Tomai and Bruno Corna provided me over the decades with great examples of what a public intellectual and a committed citizen is. They are both badly missed. So is Paolo Donati, much more than a coauthor. It hurts to think that his copy of *Cement* will remain undelivered.

The cover of this book has a story too, a story that mixes the personal and the public. It comes from an advert by Italian designer Franco Bassi for Olivetti in the 1960s. Not everyone may be aware that in the 1950s Ivrea, Olivetti's company town, went through an unusual experience of progressive social engineering in Adriano Olivetti's attempt to promote a socially and culturally sustainable program of industrial development. This established Olivetti not only as a leading typewriter manufacturer but as an advocate of civic community values, and as a promoter of culture, the arts, and indeed social sciences: the library of the Olivetti Foundation was probably the only one in Italy in the 1950s that provided easy access to social science literature, and all the sociological classics were available in Italy thanks to Edizioni di Comunità, the publishing house founded by Adriano Olivetti. I was lucky to spend the first twenty years of my life in Ivrea, before the transition to the world of computers and information processing proved too hard for the company. This cover pays homage to a distinguished example of civic engagement and community building from an enlightened industrial leader, nowadays seldom witnessed. I am grateful to the Olivetti Archives (in particular to Enrico Bandiera) for granting permission to use his artwork here, and to Franco Bassi's nephew, professor Luca Bruché, for his personal encouragement.

Ultimately this book, however, is for Chuck Tilly, a constant source of inspiration over the years. It was a privilege to be among the many that profited from his incredible energy and expertise despite never being formally connected to him in any mentoring or collegial relationship. Anybody who had the good fortune of sitting in seminars or simply engaging in conversation with Chuck knows how difficult it was to find him at fault on matters of fact: his command of the literature and historical material alike was prodigious. Well, I think that this time I have found him out, if posthumously. One of Chuck's sources of pride was, in his own words, the distinction of "never having chaired a university department or served as a dean." At least on this issue, he was certainly wrong. He may never have been the dean of a physical institution, but if the idea of the "invisible college" makes any sense at all, it would be hard to think of anybody other than Chuck Tilly as its leader. Let me salute the dean of the invisible college.

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