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## Introduction

The year 2000 was an unusually busy one for many activists in Canada and the United States. At the time, I was living in New York City and attending three or four meetings a week. These meetings planned for two or three rallies, marches, and protest actions every month. I was not alone. Following the successful demonstrations of November 1999 in Seattle, new activists seemed to spring up as if from nowhere to form “anti-globalization” organizations.<sup>1</sup> Established groups began talking about trade and neoliberalism in new ways, and many activists talked about and experimented with the tactics and styles of organizing that had been so successful in Seattle. In New York, protesters at immigrant rights marches donned black bandannas in the style of the black bloc, and others brought giant puppets onto the picket lines of local labor disputes. Imitating demonstrators in Seattle, many activists pushed past the classic repertoire of marches and rallies and began to engage in direct action. They formed affinity groups, attended trainings in blockading, and experimented with jail solidarity techniques. “Seattle tactics” like black bloc, puppetry, blockades, and jail solidarity spread to activists across Canada and the United States.

At the end of that year, I returned home to Toronto for the holidays. Over drinks, I met with friends active in a local antipoverty organization with the hope of discussing plans for the convergence against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in April 2001. Instead, I listened as they dismissed those protests. “We need to stay local,” they argued. During that week in Toronto, I heard activists who had been in the streets of Washington, DC, protesting the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund a few months earlier distance themselves from the anti-globalization movement, its tactics, and its participants. I became curious. In New York, some of the same conversations about the anti-globalization movement being too white and too disconnected from local struggles and too abstract were also

<sup>1</sup> Following the lead of the movement, I refer to the “anti-globalization movement” and the “global justice movement” interchangeably.

taking place. And yet, New York's anti-globalization coalitions were holding together. Activists there were still experimenting with the tactics associated with the Seattle protests. A year after the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle, why did New York's direct action activists continue to experiment with the Seattle tactics when direct action activists in Toronto largely abandoned them?

On the surface, one would expect the activists in the two cities to respond to the Seattle protests in a similar fashion. After all, they learned about the protest from similar sources. A handful from each city had attended the convergence and returned home to regale others with stories, video footage, and photographs. Information about tactics like black bloc and organizational forms like affinity groups flowed through organizational networks like Reclaim the Streets and Food Not Bombs, trade union networks like the Canadian Labour Congress, and student activist networks like the Canadian Federation of Students. Activists experienced in movement tactics from organizations like San Francisco Bay area's Ruckus Society or Calgary's Co-Motion Collective traveled to New York and Toronto to run activist training workshops. These trainers told stories about the protests and taught local activists about blockading, puppetry, and jail solidarity tactics. In addition to local trainings, some activists made their way to events like the annual Earth First! Rendezvous gatherings or the National Conference on Organized Resistance (NCOR) in Washington, DC. News of the Seattle tactics also spread informally by way of traveling activists who told stories of the Seattle protests as they visited friends and radical projects in different cities.

Media also played an important role in spreading information about the protests and their tactics. Activists in New York and Toronto read the same Web sites, magazines, and newspaper articles discussing movement strategy. They were on the same e-mail lists. Internet communities operated as sites for debate and enabled the distribution of news and information about the use of various tactics. "Indymedia" and other forms of alternative media became key sources of information and discussion about the Seattle tactics. Activists in both cities also learned about the protests, the tactics, and their impact via the mass media. After all, the Seattle protests were nothing if not widely reported. Reflecting on her experience at the demonstration, movement activist and author Starhawk writes: "For once in a political protest, when we chanted 'The whole world is watching!' we were telling the truth. I've never seen so much media attention on a political action" (Starhawk 1999). This high level of visibility made the event a "best case scenario" for diffusion through mainstream media channels.

Activists in Toronto and New York had access to similar sources of information about Seattle; however, their emulation of the tactics used at these protests varied significantly. To understand this difference, we need to look at the relational dynamics that shaped the terrain on which organizations and activists operated in each city. These dynamics influenced whether or not activists could collectively deliberate about the tactics – whether they could

interpret, evaluate, and experiment with them in ways that would make their incorporation possible.

Although the tactics used in Seattle spread widely during the months following the event, they did not spread everywhere. As McAdam and Rucht (1993:58) point out, “the real challenge is not so much in demonstrating the mere fact of diffusion . . . but to investigate systematically the conditions under which diffusion is likely to occur and the means by which it does.” This book recounts the findings of such an investigation. I argue that a particular set of structural conditions needed to be present in the receiving environment in order for diffusion of the Seattle tactics to be successful. Potential adopters need to be able to gather and talk about the tactics in a relatively reflexive, diverse, egalitarian, and open manner. Most of the time, however, categorical and relational inequalities and historical patterns of exclusion make deliberation and diffusion impossible. Because blocks to the diffusion of new ideas are a key reason that waves of protest collapse, this book offers one explanation of why the Seattle cycle dissipated so quickly.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN

To explain the conditions for relational diffusion, this project compares two very similar cases with different outcomes. I trace the diffusion of a cluster of protest tactics from one site to two others sharing a great deal in common. I hold the influence of factors associated with the “sender” site (Seattle and the direct action repertoire it spawned) constant and isolate the causal influence of factors that differentiate the reception process in the two “receiver” sites (New York and Toronto). By focusing on the characteristics of activist organizations and the past and present patterns of interaction and inequality within the two urban centers, I explain variations in the Seattle tactics’ diffusion.

To compare New York City and Toronto, I examine their respective demographics and political economy and outline their relationship with the state/provincial, regional, and federal levels of government. Such data shows the importance of some of the categorical inequalities of race and class within each city. To compare each city’s respective dynamics of contention, I developed catalogs of protest events using *The Toronto Star* and *The New York Times*. These catalogs cover events that took place two years before and two years after the Seattle protests. In combination with interviews with activists and personal journal entries, these catalogs provide a sense of the actors, issues, targets, and networks that underpinned protest and deliberation in each city.

For both Toronto and New York City, I selected three organizations that would be the most likely adopters of the Seattle tactics. All six organizations have a history of engaging in disruptive protest, and all six cited the Seattle protests as having had an influence on their activities. In each city, I chose a global justice coalition, a student organization, and a group focused on local campaigns and issues. I examined the minutes (when available) and

publications of each organization and developed timelines that traced four years of protest activity with Seattle as their midpoint. To understand each group's tactical decision making, I interviewed between four and six of its participants, totaling thirty-two people in all.

To determine how historical and ongoing relationships influenced deliberation and diffusion, I asked each activist about their political biography and about the tactics and strategy, structure, and decision making in their group. I also asked them about the interactions their organization had with both collaborators and other role models. Finally, I asked all respondents whether their organization would experiment with each Seattle tactic, and why they would or would not engage in such experiments.

To understand the way that the activists perceived the different tactics under review, I looked beyond the content of their explanations and considered the more widespread dynamics of particular debates and the practices of argumentation and storytelling that informed them. Like anyone, activists valued certain identities and strategies and dismissed others at particular times and places. Both the form and content of activist conversations influenced the future deliberation and tactical experimentation. As a result, in this book, I look at the stories that activists told while debating property destruction and summit hopping and recounting their subsequent use or rejection of the Seattle tactics. The content of these discussions influenced subsequent relationships and practices by valuing some identities and strategies, but not others. The form of these debates is also important. Therefore, in this book, I examine the evolution of debates around summit hopping and property destruction and argue that the way these two debates unfolded – both online and offline – has facilitated the building of some relationships but not others, influencing deliberation and diffusion.

By comparing the demographic, relational, repressive, organizational, and discursive conditions for deliberation and diffusion in each city, we can understand why activists considered using black bloc, puppetry, blockading, and jail solidarity in New York more than in Toronto. By locating these observations within an understanding of the two different contexts, I show why, unlike their more ragtag equivalents in New York, experienced and well-resourced activists in Toronto were neither interested in nor able to experiment with nor incorporate the Seattle tactics.

#### THE SEATTLE TACTICS

The tactics whose diffusion I am tracking became visible during the protests against the 1999 meetings of the WTO in Seattle. At that time, tens of thousands of protesters filled the streets and blocked WTO delegates on their way to meetings designed to further intensify global neoliberal trade. Activists hung banners off bridges and buildings, while puppeteers and musicians provided an air of celebration. As the day progressed and repression increased, activists wearing black bandannas smashed Niketown and

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Starbucks windows. The police subsequently arrested hundreds of demonstrators and teargassed, pepper sprayed, and beat many others. All of a sudden, direct action protest in the United States was front-page news around the world.

Bringing together labor, environmental, and student movements, the protests in Seattle were a laboratory of innovation and exchange where North American protesters experimented with disruption, communication, and decision-making tactics. Successful in their attempts to shut down the WTO meetings and embarrass both local and national hosts, these protests marked a new wave of direct action activism. Like the waves of protest triggered by the success of the civil rights movement's sit-in tactics and the waves of civil disturbances in the late 1960s or the more recent wave of protest triggered by the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests, the effect of the Seattle demonstrations rippled outward to activists and observers in Canada, the United States, and beyond.

When I asked activists in New York and Toronto how the Seattle protests had influenced their local organizations and practices, they identified four types of effects. First, groups organizing around different issues began to form new multi-issue coalitions. In both cities, large coalitions explicitly identifying with the Seattle protests and the movement against the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization emerged. Second (and related), groups that previously had not worked together began to collaborate. Third, participation – particularly by younger activists – increased in social movement organizations both within and beyond the anti-globalization movement. As one Toronto antipoverty activist explained, “I think a lot of people were more excited about protesting.” Finally, the Seattle protests inaugurated a period of tactical experimentation. During this period, organizations debated, adapted, and experimented with the tactics used in Seattle. These four effects make the connection between the rise and fall of a wave of protests and the diffusion of particular tactics clear.

In what follows, I focus on activist experimentation with the Seattle tactics. After the smoke had cleared and the crowds had dissipated, activists in many countries discussed the meaning and value of the Seattle tactics. Sometimes, they tried them out. This book looks primarily at the spread of black blocs, jail solidarity, blockades, and giant puppets; however, I also consider the spread of other “Seattle associated” practices, including Reclaim the Streets street parties, Radical Cheerleaders, the strategy of targeting corporations, and the adoption of organizational forms like the affinity group and the spokescouncil. Although no single group of activists took on all of these tactics – and global justice activists often expressed disagreement concerning their strategic value – many activists in North America attempted to incorporate one or more of them into their local protests between 2000 and 2001. Since then, whenever summit protests have occurred, black bloc activists, puppeteers, and blockaders have converged to emulate aspects of the Seattle repertoire.

Importantly, none of the tactics I've identified were new in Seattle. Nevertheless, their combined effectiveness during the protests recoded them as "successful," connected them, increased their attractiveness, and revitalized their meaning. As they spread to new contexts, activists adapted the tactics. Black Blocs in Seattle became Black and Pink Blocs in Prague (September 26, 2000); Shutting Down the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle morphed into Shutting Down the Financial District in Toronto to protest government cutbacks to education, welfare, and health care (October 16, 2001). Activists who locked their bodies together in Washington DC at demonstrations against the IMF on April 16, 2000, repeated the tactic to save the DC General Hospital in 2001. Giant puppets and marching bands began to appear with increasing frequency at local protests for community gardens and on picket lines. Meanwhile, "Radical Cheerleaders" developed cheers and dance routines to address issues ranging from health care to queer sexuality.

Despite their proliferation, the extent of activist experiments with these tactics varied. Activists in New York experimented longer with the tactics than activists in Toronto. Although one might look to individual psychology or organizational histories to account for such variations, these approaches are unable to consider how actors in networks, organizations, cities, and countries actively influence the spread of ideas. In order to understand the flow and localization of direct action tactics from Seattle to Toronto and New York, I turn to diffusion theory, which addresses the spread of innovations most directly.

#### THEORIES OF DIFFUSION

Diffusion theory attempts to explain when and how ideas and practices travel. It developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in opposition to evolutionary theory. Whereas evolutionary theories saw social change developing from within an institution or society, diffusion theorists saw change in social practices as being stimulated by the transmission and reception of new ideas across boundaries and borders. Although diffusion has long been seen as a major source of change (Parsons & Shils 1951), increased travel and communication in the period of globalization has attracted new attention to the question (Chabot 2010; Kolins Givan et al., 2010; Tarrow 2005).

Over the past twenty years, many parallel diffusion literatures have developed in relative isolation from one another. One study counted thirteen different diffusion literatures within fields as disparate as rural sociology, clinical epidemiology, marketing, and organizational studies (Greenhalgh et al. 2005, 1). Each of these literatures has conceptualized, explained, and investigated the subject differently. There have, however, been some areas of agreement: innovations tend to be adopted within a population following a general "S" curve, with early adoption leading to a period of rapid adoption and then tapering

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off (Granovetter 1973; Katz 1999).<sup>2</sup> There is also general consensus that the successful diffusion of an innovation is dependent upon the transmitting context, the channels of communication, the context of the innovation's reception, and the character of the innovation itself (Hedstrom, Sandell, and Stern 2000; McAdam 1995; McAdam and Rucht 1993; Myers 2000; Oliver and Myers 1998; Strang and Meyer 1993). However, there is less agreement about the relative importance of each piece of the puzzle. Some research emphasizes the role of the transmitter and highlights the importance of visible and successful events to the diffusion of innovations. Other work emphasizes the importance of channels of communication and suggests that both strong (family and friendship) and weak (acquaintance) ties are important for the effective diffusion of information.

Like McAdam and Rucht (1993), I emphasize the role of the receiving context. In cases like the Seattle protests, the transmitter is widely recognized, and the ties connecting those demonstrations to direct action activists across Canada and the United States are relatively dense and consistent. As a result, differences in adoption must be explained by looking at differences in the characteristics of adopters and/or the patterns and processes of reception. We can begin by considering Katz's definition of diffusion because it allows us to focus both on the process of reception and on the way that diffusion is itself a collective process: "Diffusion . . . [is] defined as the acceptance of some specific item, over time, by adopting units – individuals, groups, communities – that are linked both to external channels of communication and to each other by means of both a structure of social relations and a system of values, or culture" (1968).

Although it emphasizes reception, a definition such as Katz's underplays the process of contestation and interpretation that determines how an innovation's adoption takes place. In the past, theorists have often assumed that adopters imitate other users in a relatively unconscious fashion or, alternately, that they are able to engage in rational calculations of costs and benefits (Strang and Meyer 1993, 487). Research on fads and fashions tends to portray adoption as imitation. This school of thought argues that, under conditions of uncertainty, organizations will tend to imitate other organizations, especially when particular ideas are promoted by opinion leaders or used by those with prestige (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Hirsch 1972; Majahan and Peterson 1985; Thompson 1967). Such processes lead to bandwagon effects, whereby an increasing number of adopters push "laggards" to join them (Granovetter 1978). Although this approach to analyzing the reception of innovations offers some useful insights into the influence of opinion leaders, it presumes their influence to be somehow automatic; however, such an emphasis neglects the interactive and interpretive struggles that shape how potential adopters

<sup>2</sup> Critics of this model note that, sometimes, receiving groups have no direct or even indirect contact with the transmitter, but adopt through a sense of cultural similarity. Sean Chabot adds that sometimes things spread from margin to center (Chabot 2002).



evaluate prestige. Moreover, it fails to consider the importance of the past actions and identities of such adopters.

Emulation and diffusion is more likely when potential users of an innovation see themselves as similar to past users of that innovation in some way. Rogers (2003) noted this and argued that imitation or contagion can be blocked through difference or disconnectedness, pointing out the importance of examining the role of demography on this process. Soule (1997) similarly found that university activists tended to imitate the tactics and strategies of activists at universities that they saw as similar to their own. When they identify with these past users in some way, diffusion becomes more likely.

Other research emphasizes the characteristics of the innovation itself. This work suggests that potential adopters evaluate the costs and benefits of an innovation in a rational manner (Abrahamson 1991, 587; Hedstrom 1994; Strang and Soule 1998, 266). Early work saw such evaluations as independent and made by individuals (or organizations acting as individuals) considering costs and benefits, profit, or impact. This approach often assumes that the criteria for such decisions are easily comprehensible and consistent. However, others argue that the costs and benefits that underlie decisions by potential adopters change throughout a diffusion cycle. Here, feedback loops influence the decision to adopt (Conell & Cohn 1995; Holden 1986; Rogers 1962, 154–5; Silverberg et al. 1988). While the presumption of a rational adopter has been useful inasmuch as it has highlighted the active nature of potential adopters, it presupposes a uniform and abstract rationality removed from its cultural and political context and agreed-upon goals that neglect the way that social categories – including categories of value – are constantly reorganized through processes of interaction and meaning making.

Despite the insights of these classic works, analyses of diffusion that presume either contagion, unreflexive imitation or utility-maximizing rational choice can't explain why activists in Toronto rejected the Seattle tactics while their New York equivalents continued to use them locally. In order to understand this puzzle, we must consider the subset of the diffusion literature that sees adopters and rejecters of innovations as active participants (both individuals and groups) engaged in meaningful social interaction.

Some of the earliest diffusion literature makes a similar emphasis. Both Coleman, Katz, and Menzel (1957) and Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) argued that diffusion was a deeply social process. In their paper on "The Diffusion of an Innovation Among Physicians," Coleman et al. (1957, 269) showed that the spread of the drug Gammalin among doctors was dependent on social ties and social interactions under conditions of uncertainty. In their 1944 study of mass media's effect on voting behavior, Paul Lazarsfeld et al. found that the mainstream media had little influence on voting decisions. Instead, they argued that the influence of received ideas on existing practices, or diffusion was a "two step" process. "Ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population (1944, 151)." While the first step is one of information transfer, the second



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step (from opinion leaders to followers) involves the spread of interpersonal influence (Rogers 2003, 304). Thirty years later, Czepiel (1974) found that such “word of mouth” processes were also crucial in the diffusion of major technological innovations. The recognition of the importance of opinion leaders in the process of adoption shows how social structure influences the flow of ideas. The processes by which opinion leaders exert this influence continue to be understudied. Snow et al (1986) argued that successful diffusion by opinion leaders depends upon their capacity to frame the practice to be adopted as meaningful by using local symbols that facilitate transmission (Snow et al. 1986). Although this characterization of the process depicts diffusion in “top down” fashion, later studies have shown how the process is influenced by both the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of opinion leaders *and* the networks in which those opinion leaders participate (Spalter-Roth, Fortenberry, and Lovitts, 2007).

In recent years, more emphasis has been given to the processes and mechanisms that enable diffusion. In a landmark work, Sidney Tarrow (2005) describes three paths of diffusion and identifies the mechanisms that underlie each. According to Tarrow, there is *relational* diffusion, which relies on close relations of trust; *nonrelational* diffusion, which relies on media; and *mediated* diffusion, which relies on brokers that link transmitters and receivers. Most cases of diffusion involve a combination of paths. In this study, I emphasize relational diffusion among organizations in two cities and the way that activists see themselves as similar to or different from the earlier users of the tactic, the protesters in the Seattle protests of 1999. I look briefly at the way local opinion leaders mediated the localization of the tactics from the Seattle protests. Then I examine the way that activists who receive information about the tactics through nonrelational sources (i.e., mass media, independent media and Web sites) theorized about them collectively (Strang and Meyer 1993, 284). Deliberation underlies relational, mediated, and nonrelational diffusion (Rogers 2003, 284).

This emphasis builds on the approach of Sean Chabot. In his examination of the spread of Gandhian nonviolence from Indian anti-colonial movements to the U.S. civil rights movement, Chabot (2010) considers how the microlevel dynamics of peer-based dialogue underpin diffusion. His study reveals how dialogue allows new ideas to be translated, interpreted, and altered for new contexts. According to Chabot, understanding the form and content of such dialogue will allow us to understand how diffusion takes place. Unlike Lazarsfeld’s portrayal of opinion leaders “spreading the word” to potential adopters, Chabot defines dialogue as “involving two or more active participants who are willing and able to contribute their viewpoints and to engage in rounds of questions and responses aimed at learning from others and expanding horizons” (2010; 104). Here, dialogue reveals itself to be unlike other forms of communication because of its exploratory, pedagogical, and reflexive character. For Chabot, dialogue is crucial to diffusion because it allows potential receivers to translate, experiment with, and integrate innovations (2010; 106).

Although Chabot's approach usefully identifies the importance of dialogue for mediated diffusion, it doesn't consider *the context* that facilitates or limits the possibility of such dialogue. In addition, Chabot dialogue is a kind of communication that is transformative, experimental, and open ended; however, his account illustrates how this happens between individuals, but gives little attention to how this might play out within organizations. For organizations to consider altering their routine practices and adopting new ideas, they must balance organizational histories, practices, identities, and strategies with deliberation – conversations that are relatively equal and reflexive, and diverse, especially if those organizations value collaborative decision making. Consequently, to understand how practices diffuse among organizations, we need to understand when and how such deliberation occurs.

The deliberation underlying a new tactic's adoption by an organization might be seen as an additional "third step" in Lazarsfeld's diffusion model. If the first step of diffusion is from transmitter to opinion leader, and the second is from opinion leader to followers, the third step in diffusion would be among participants within a collectivity considering adoption. Indeed, deliberation appears particularly important for diffusion among the kind of collective actors to be found in many non-hierarchical social movement organizations. This "third step" of deliberation allows participants to decide whether an innovation should be considered appropriate or useful, and whether and how to adapt it for use by their organization.

Such a "third step" of deliberation may not be essential for the reception of new ideas by all organizations; however, it *is* crucial for those with three characteristics – all of which are commonly found within social movement organizations. First, organizations that are non hierarchical do not rely on small numbers of decision makers to direct their strategy and choose their tactics. Instead, and regardless of whether their participation is formal or informal, larger numbers of participants are involved in making these decisions through deliberation and broader discussion. Voluntary organizations often fall into this category. Second, organizations and networks engaged in activities that involve some risk to their participants (whether physical, political, or social) also tend to rely on discussion to strengthen the collective identity required for such action. Social movement organizations that use direct action are examples of this. Third, groups that are pursuing goals that are "fuzzy" also tend to require more discussion than groups whose goals are immediately apparent and shared by all participants and observers. Social movement organizations often incorporate one or all of these characteristics. As a result, their process of experimenting with, adapting, and adopting an innovation relies less on opinion leaders and more on "third step" deliberation. However, such deliberation is most likely under particular conditions.

#### RELATIONAL CONTEXT OF DIFFUSION

Certain relational conditions facilitate diffusion. Two findings appear to be particularly important. The first is structural equivalence – potential adopters