Transnational social movements and changing organizational fields in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

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Abstract Recent decades have seen dramatic changes in the global political arena, including shifts in geopolitical arrangements, increases in popular mobilization and contestation over the direction of globalization, and efforts by elites to channel or curb popular opposition. We explore how these factors affect changes in global politics. Organizational populations are shaped by ongoing interactions among civil-society, corporate and governmental actors operating at multiple levels. During the 1990s and 2000s, corporate and government actors promoted the ‘neoliberalization of civil society’ and the appropriation of movement concepts and practices to support elite interests. Not all movement actors have been passive witnesses to this process: they have engaged in intense internal debates, and they have adapted their organizational strategies to advance social transformation. This article draws from quantitative research on the population of transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs) and on qualitative research on contemporary transnational activism to describe changes in transnational organizing at a time of growing contention in world politics. We show how interactions among global actors have shaped new, hybrid organizational forms and spaces that include actors other than states in influential roles.

Keywords GLOBAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, GOVERNANCE, NEOLIBERALISM, TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORKS

Since the 1970s, alongside the increasing globalization of politics, we have seen a growing engagement of popular groups in global political arenas and a greater formal organization of global civil society. Transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs) – namely non-state organizations working in multiple countries to advance explicit social change goals – have expanded dramatically in number from 103 in 1953 to 1,798 in 2013.1 They have also, as we show below, become more inclusive of activists in the Global South, and have increasingly shaped global debates and decision-making processes (Anheier et al. 2004; Smith and Wiest 2012; Willetts 1996, 2011).
Over time, they have become more skilled at influencing global political processes and have increasingly adopted more adversarial positions vis-à-vis inter-state institutions (Bennett 2005; Hadden 2015; Sikkink 2005). This growth in the organizing capacities of TSMOs has not developed without resistance. States, corporations and other elites have taken steps to neutralize, co-opt or otherwise influence movements and support elite projects. Movements have responded to these efforts in various ways, with some groups engaging with states and corporations and others actively resisting their influence. We suggest that this cycle of movement action and reaction has influenced both activist organizing strategies and the forms that social movement organizations have taken over the past decade.

In this article, we consider how organizing TSMOs and the larger global polity have changed over time. Our experience of collecting longitudinal data on TSMOs between 1953 and 2013 informed our insights. This analysis also draws on our previous research on TSMOs and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Hughes et al. 2009, 2015, forthcoming; Smith 2008; Smith and Wiest 2012; Smith et al. 2015), as well as on ours and others’ qualitative accounts of social movements in relation to globalizing processes.

We begin by discussing some of the key ways in which elites have responded to pressures from a growing constellation of social movements and popular mobilizations in global spaces that, prior to the 1980s, had seen minimal engagement by non-state actors. States and other elites have mainly responded by attempting to neutralize the effects of social movements and limit the appeal of their messages to wider audiences. We follow this with a discussion of how the changing political landscape has affected social movements as well as how movements have responded to elite attempts to co-opt or otherwise undermine their impacts. We argue that understanding changing organizational populations requires attention to the larger global political context in which these organizations operate. Complex social conflicts and interactions among diverse actors shape organizational strategies and network relations over time. We hope to offer insights that can enhance theorizing about social movement outcomes and organizational change, especially how interactions between social movements, states and other global actors affect organizations, strategic discourses and the larger global political arena itself.

**Elite responses to social movement challenges**

Over the past few decades, the flourishing population of transnational progressive organizations seeking to change international institutions and norms has encountered increasing resistance. States, and the inter-state institutions they control, have gradually limited the access of non-state actors to the official policy arenas in which important international negotiations occur. Whereas the United Nations has been relatively more open to civil society groups compared with the World Bank and other inter-state financial institutions, it has in recent years become more closed to participation from civil society actors and social movements (Charnovitz 1997, 2002; Willetts 2000, 2006). In particular, groups that challenge market ideologies or neoliberal ideas of
governance have less access to the inter-state arenas than organizations increasingly governed by what Da Costa and McMichael (2007) call ‘market epistemologies’.

TSMOs also face resistance from corporate, right wing and government opposition. The expansion of TSMOs and of their activities has triggered counter-mobilization by growing numbers of corporate-sponsored NGOs and a much expanded corporate presence at international negotiations and other transnational policy spaces (Bruno and Karliner 2002; Sklair 2001). Formal transnational organizing by right-wing activists has also been on the rise (Bob 2012; Buss and Herman 2003). In addition, the expansion of government counter-terrorist measures, especially following the September 2001 attacks in the United States, has been used to justify repression against non-violent, progressive groups (Howell et al. 2008; Wiest 2007).

Businesses and other elite groups have assimilated and co-opted movement organizations, discourses and agendas, thus obscuring the boundaries between social movements and actors that perpetuate the status quo. Processes of assimilation, co-optation and other forms of resistance also drive changes in the overall population of organizations and their networks. In Table 1, we summarize some of the discourses and practices elites have used to respond to pressure from movement challengers. Elite strategies can not only demobilize active opposition but also diminish the appeal of movement frames to a broader audience of potential supporters. At the same time, they leave intact existing power relations.

**Table 1: Neutralizing resistance: elite responses to movement challenges**

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<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Discourses</th>
<th>Practices</th>
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<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>Democratization (nominal/from above)</td>
<td>UN global conferences and ‘summit hopping’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Multi-stakeholder governance</td>
<td>Global compact and similar IGO-civil society joint agencies</td>
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<td>‘Depoliticized’ expert knowledge</td>
<td>Techno-managerialism – and NGO professionalization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-optation/appropriation of activist ideas and energy</td>
<td>Hegemonic market epistemologies</td>
<td>Elite-funded projects and ‘upward accountability’ (Lang 2013), also known as ‘non-profit industrial complex’ (INCITE 2007)</td>
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<td>Corporate social responsibility</td>
<td>Public-private partnerships</td>
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<td>Sustainable development</td>
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<td>Resistance</td>
<td>Stigmatization/delegitimization</td>
<td>Business ‘INGOs’</td>
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<td>Counter-terrorism</td>
<td>Conservative movement mobilization (versus inclusive, participatory democracy)</td>
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A principal method that elites use to neutralize the impacts of movements is to appropriate the activists’ language so that it looks as if they are responding to the protestors’ legitimate and reasonable demands. In this way they can engage their critics...
in dialogue and organizational processes that divert energy away from more confrontational actions. A prominent example of this is the term ‘sustainable development’, which many environmental groups now qualify or eschew precisely because corporate interests co-opted it (Sklair 2001). Corporations may also appropriate the discourses of movements to take advantage of market opportunities emerging from a movement’s success, as in the case of renewable energy. Elite appropriation of movement language can be a first step towards the realization of some of the changes that movements seek, such as more ecologically sensible practices or the expansion of markets for fair trade goods. Elite adoption of movement language often contributes, however, to the ‘discursive demobilization’ of movement activists and potential supporters who believe that critical social problems have been addressed (Lynch 1998). In reality, the appropriation of movement discourses in many cases replicates practices that are consistent with market-based, growth ideologies and does little to address activist concerns, yet absorbs movement resources and energies (Cooper 2013; Lucier and Gareau 2015; Lynch 1998, 2013). As critical forces demobilize, elite agents can have freer rein to make their actions appear consistent with movement preferences without making significant changes to their practices.

Co-optation of movement energies and organizations can also occur through the resourcing of elite projects. Since the end of the Cold War, governments, corporations and foundations have been channelling more financial aid to NGOs, in part as an alternative to providing such aid to national governments, which neoliberal ideology holds as inefficient and obstructive to the operation of markets (Bebbington et al. 2008; Ferguson 1990; Keshavjee 2014). This strategy is a central part of what Ferguson and Gupta (2002) call ‘neoliberal governmentality’. By providing restricted funding for civil society groups, elites – including governments, corporations and foundations – can demand accountability to donors and thereby shape the agendas and activities of civil society groups, thus diverting groups from addressing basic needs or advancing more transformative projects (Lang 2013). Another way in which elites work to undermine threats from their opponents is to create new structures or relationships that create an illusion of access while not affording them any real power to effect transformational social change. The examples in Table 1 illustrate how these three strategies contribute to movement assimilation and co-optation. In addition to the more subtle ways in which elites undermine a movement’s impact, we can see more active resistance to challenges in the form of delegitimation/stigmatization, counter-terrorism and elite counter-mobilization.

Sklair (2001: 207) argues that a ‘sustainable development historical bloc’ emerged in the 1990s that used many of the discourses and practices outlined in Table 1 to fend off the challenges that the environmental movement posed to corporate globalization. Promoting what at the time were new ideas, such as corporate social responsibility, during the 1980s and 1990s a growing network of elites, forming what Sklair calls the ‘transnational capitalist class’, developed and consolidated its ideological position in an effort to defend corporate interests in a project of capitalist globalization against expanding transnational social movements. He shows that connections between global capitalist institutions and environmentalists grew dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s,
and that these connections included direct and indirect corporate sponsorship of environmental groups, as well as corporate alliances and collaborations. According to Sklair (2001: 207), ‘the main ideological and practical tasks of the members of this bloc are to deflect attention from the idea of a singular ecological crisis and to build up the credibility of the idea that what we face is a series of manageable environmental problems.’ In contrast to the systemic critiques of radical environmentalists, such a perspective is more appealing to a general popular audience because it requires no fundamental changes in behaviour or in the distribution of power and privilege. Moreover, it allows for technocratic, top-down solutions that reinforce existing structures of governance.

Observing how state actions helped neutralize movement efficacy, some feminist theorists like Nancy Fraser (2013) and Angela McRobbie (2009) argue that elements of the feminist movement have entered into what Eisenstein (2009) calls a ‘dangerous liaison’ with (neoliberal) capitalism. Eisenstein contends that liberal ‘mainstream’ feminism has unwittingly served as a handmaiden to corporate capitalism by campaigning for the integration of women into the capitalist economy on the same terms as men, thereby legitimating neoliberal policies of internal devaluation and welfare recission. Furthermore, she demonstrates how a professional class of ‘gender experts’ working for NGOs facilitated the spread of neoliberalism in the Global South and undermined welfare state capacity (see also Alvarez 2009). Both nationally and internationally, the moves of mainstream feminists have weakened radical political struggles, in part by channelling grassroots organizations and energies towards liberal reforms. Fraser’s (2013) analysis is in line with Eisenstein’s, to which she adds an indictment of identitarian movements for abandoning a politics of redistribution in favour of one of recognition. In the era of global capitalism, she (Fraser 2013: 223, emphasis added) argues, the once emancipatory critiques of ‘economism, androcentrism, etatism, and Westphalianism’ disseminated by transnational feminist organizers, now appear fraught with ambiguity, susceptible to serving the legitimation needs of a new form of capitalism. After all, this capitalism would much prefer to confront claims for recognition over claims for redistribution, as it builds a new regime of accumulation on the cornerstone of women’s waged labor and seeks to disembed markets from democratic political regulation in order to operate all the more freely on a global scale.

In the area of poverty reduction, some movements introduced microcredit projects, which are small-scale loans designed to provide access to credit for women and other borrowers excluded from the formal financial sectors. Such microcredit projects were often accompanied by substantial support in the form of training, market access and other resources. TSMOs such as the Trickle Up Program, Women’s World Banking and the Grameen Bank used microcredit projects in strategic ways to advance women’s emancipation and sustainable local development. However, the financial crises in the world economic system and growing threats from movement critics have led financial elites to seek new strategies for promoting economic growth. Therefore, microcredit
became the new magic bullet with which to address slowing growth and the global financial crisis. The United Nations named 2005 ‘International Year of Microcredit’, and in 2006 the Grameen Bank and its founder, Mohammad Yunus, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (Aitkin 2013; Bateman 2008; Roy 2010). Subsequently, the World Bank initiated its own micro-lending programme based on market-oriented principles rather than on the community-based development principles normally characteristic of movement initiatives.

In more recent years, we are witnessing the emergence of novel forms of organization such as ‘public–private partnerships’, which involve non-governmental, private sector (business or private foundations) and governmental (local, national and, international) agencies in collaborative networks. In response to public pressure and ostensibly to involve multiple ‘stakeholders’ in global decision-making, intergovernmental organizations have also formed new agencies like the United Nations Global Compact, the NGO-World Bank Committee and the World Bank Civil Society Joint Facilitation Committee, which seek to incorporate elements of civil society into governance processes (Willets 2000). A limitation of these bodies, however, is that they fail to address the fundamental inequities of power between civil society and global elites, and they effectively reduce democratic accountability by involving more private actors in governance questions. These entities tend to be highly selective and to exclude groups seen as more ‘radical’, that is critical of market ideology and managerialism. Their processes and structures also tend to privilege better-resourced groups with formal organizations, staff and an organizational presence in the cities where IGOs are headquartered (Gleckman 2016; Martens and Seitz 2015). Since social movements tend to be less formal and to have fewer resources, public–private partnership arrangements effectively exclude or silence those most marginalized by prevailing institutions and harmed by their effects. At the same time, activist energies that might otherwise be devoted to addressing needs that emerge from people’s experiences are channelled into projects defined or controlled by corporate and other elite interests.

For example, the World Bank Civil Society Joint Facilitation Committee, which was the product of a 2001 meeting between the World Bank and the NGO Working Group, claims TSMOs like CIVICUS, the Freedom from Debt Coalition and the Latin American Association of Development Organizations as members. The stated purpose of these committees is to establish transparent and democratic engagement between the World Bank and civil society organizations, but critics argue that, given their failure to address power differentials, these types of committees only create the appearance of participation. In our dataset of TSMOs, we find evidence to suggest that the critics’ suspicion of the World Bank Civil Society Joint Facilitation Committee is justified: although the committee reported having ties to more than a dozen of the TSMOs we studied, only one of these TSMOs reported having a tie to that committee.

The material pressures, strategic calculations and ideological efforts of corporations and their elite allies have compelled some movement organizations originally formed to promote critical approaches to economic globalization to engage in projects that effectively advance the interests of global capital. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) document how NGOs became ‘agents of neoliberal governmentality’, so enabling
Northern governments to divert resources away from Southern ones and engage more
dependent and malleable non-state actors in tasks traditionally taken on by the state.
Similarly, Keshavjee (2014) describes health-related NGOs as ‘transplanting
mechanisms’ for global policy agendas. Researchers might interpret such co-optation
as movement failure. However, that elites see a need to use co-optation in response to
challenges is a sign that movements have some influence over much better-resourced,
more ‘powerful’ actors. Nevertheless, elite attempts to channel movements in less
threatening directions pose an ongoing challenge for activists – a challenge that many
have come to expect and to which they actively respond.

Table 1 identifies repressive elite responses to social movement challenges. One
response involves mobilizing counter-movements and using corporate resources to
create the impression of popular support for corporate agendas, a strategy known as
generating ‘astroturf’ or ‘hijacking the public interest’ (Lang 2013: 208). The Global
Climate Coalition, an oil industry lobby that sought to discredit scientific evidence of
global warming, but disbanded when its origins and intentions became known, is one
prominent example (Bruno and Karlner 2002; Smith 2008: chapter 4). Apart from
mobilizing corporate advocacy groups, elite efforts to suppress or undermine move-
ments include more overt forms of soft and hard repression. Ferree (2005), for instance,
shows how the stigmatization and ridicule of feminist agendas and activism operated
as a form of ‘soft repression’ against the movement. Such tactics are frequently used
against not only feminist but also environmental and anti-free market activists, with
mainstream media commentators echoing elite perspectives to delegitimize and under-
mine the credibility of challengers’ claims. More overt repression has occurred in
global spaces, such as mass actions at the meetings of the World Trade Organization or
G-8 meetings. Arresting and physically abusing protesters serves to criminalize dissent,
deter broader public participation in protests and discourage support for their messages.
The wide-scale mobilization internationally of the rhetoric of counter-terrorism after
September 2001 has reinforced public fears and been used to limit public demon-
strations and to justify repressing groups that oppose official policies.

Limits of elite control

Is Greenpeace’s collaboration in a BP solar energy project, for instance, evidence of
movement failure or movement influence? It is critical for researchers and observers to
bear in mind that the activists who make decisions about engaging with government
and corporate entities are themselves involved in thoughtful strategic calculations and
belong to webs of social relations that have an impact on their choices. These
relationships are multi-dimensional – that is, they are not only about movement–elite
relations, but also about relationships among movement actors, as well as between
movements and various third parties. These relationships also change over time. Thus,
it is problematic to base one’s characterization an actor as ‘co-opted’ on a single act.
Many organizations enter relations with more powerful groups with the intention of
reevaluating that relationship later. For instance, Goldman (2005) found that many
groups that subjected themselves to the World Bank’s attempts to ‘discipline’ civil
society, did so not because they believed in the projects, but simply to try to prevent even worse outcomes. Now that more groups are reflecting on that experience, they are tending either to opt out of or to avoid such relationships altogether. For instance, activist groups that are critical of neoliberal economic policies have largely rejected the UN Global Compact initiative (Smith 2010). Within the larger field, the discourses and analyses of many movement groups reflect a pervasive and internalized critique of ‘philanthrocapitalism’ (Edwards 2008) and the ‘nonprofit industrial complex’ (INCITE 2007).

While movements resist elite attempts to mitigate their influence, the elite groups themselves engage in contestation, with important divisions existing within and between states and powerful corporations that the social movements can exploit. For instance, in this particular era there is evidence of declining US power in the global political order as states and regional groupings assert their own interests in global politics and otherwise challenge US hegemony. Within states, there is also expanding contention over government authority and agendas, as we discuss in more detail below. In addition, as Sklair (2001) notes, the transnational capitalist class operates in ways that counter the interests of national capitalists. For example, the issue of climate change pits corporate actors that profit handsomely from the continued exploitation of fossil fuels against those that see climate change as threatening their economic and personal livelihoods.

With respect to changes in the internal coherence of state authority, globalization has meant that national governments’ monopoly on state authority is under increased challenge from growing numbers of municipal and regional authorities organizing in response to the governance challenges they face (Barber 2013; Slaughter 2004). Global institutions like the World Bank and World Trade Organization typically limit participation to national governments, apart from the municipal leaders who implement international trade and other policies and who face direct repercussions as they are forced to cut public services and compete for external investment. The exclusion of local authorities has denied international negotiators the practical knowledge and accountability that local leaders bring, and has led to policy outcomes that have created unanticipated difficulties for regions, municipalities and local communities alike. In response, to address better the conditions they face in their communities, municipal leaders have become increasingly engaged in their own efforts to organize outside official channels (Barber 2013; Borja and Castells 1997). Thus, we see a rise in hybrid transnational organizations like Local Governments for Sustainability, the World Alliance of Cities Against Poverty, the International Network of Cities on Drug Policy, and the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism.

Social movements in a changing world

Although states and other elites have responded to disputes about social movements in global political arenas by trying to co-opt or otherwise channel them into supporting their elite projects, the movements have reacted in various ways. Many have openly criticized elite co-optation and discourse appropriation, which has led to rethinking and
innovation of movement strategies and discourses. We argue that changes in the organizational population and its network of relations are one outcome of social movement work, and that these organizational changes shape opportunities for subsequent social movement challenges.

One important development is the emergence of new, hybrid organizational forms and spaces, including local authority transnational associations and actors other than states performing influential roles. These changes reflect a global polity less centred on the inter-state system and less subject to the hegemony of states. Increasingly, for instance, we are seeing movements and other global actors generating autonomous spaces and claims that may engage with formal institutions, but are not initiated or promoted via inter-state agendas. Such changes in the nature of transnational organization and politics, we argue, derive from larger shifts in the global geopolitical context and contentious interactions among states, social movements and other global actors that are often less visible in mainstream media and scholarly accounts. While acknowledging that some civil society actors engage in the kinds of elite projects described above, our quantitative and qualitative data on transnational social movement activity reveal a growing range of organization and activity outside the formal, inter-state political arena. Table 2 summarizes some of the social movement strategies that help define a changing global political arena.

The rapid growth of TSMOs in the 1980s and 1990s affected organizing practices; in fact, previous analyses of data on transnational movement organizing reveal important cohort differences between groups formed prior to the end of the Cold War and those formed after the early 1990s (Smith and Wiest 2012). The Cold War significantly shaped the geopolitical arena and its agenda. With its end, new possibilities opened up for advancing new frames and analyses and for expanding ties among civil society actors. The breakdown of the bipolar global order of the Cold War also allowed other states to challenge US and Western hegemony in the world-system, with the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) being the leading contenders. At times, counter-hegemonic states and anti-systemic and counter-hegemonic movements come together, as they did over access to essential medicines and the more recent global climate negotiations during the World Trade Organization protests in 1999. The key point here is that the current world-historical moment of declining US hegemony and expanded contestation over the nature of global economic and political integration provides new opportunities and constraints for social movements, states and business actors. Volatility in global political alignments has opened opportunities for movements to mobilize new publics and to reach constituencies not previously engaged in critical global political policy debates. Such efforts shape the character of transnational organizing. Therefore, to understand and appreciate organizational dynamics, researchers must situate their analyses in this complex world historical context.

In addition to changing geopolitics, this period also saw the proliferation of new information and communications technologies that significantly reduced the costs of transnational organizing, thus enabling people and groups with very few resources to participate in a political space from which they were previously marginalized, if not

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excluded. By working and struggling together, activists in different places and working on different issues developed new ways of framing issues, new techniques for communicating and new strategies for collective action and conflict resolution. Together these helped to break down, though not fully overcome, the divisions of nation, gender, race and class that are structured into the capitalist world-system (Conway 2012; Hertel 2006; Hewitt and Karides 2011; Moghadam 2012; Smith et al. 2016; Sperling et al. 2001; Vargas 2005). The series of United Nations global conferences that took place during this time of relative openness in the geopolitical order provided a focal point, a mobilizing framework and resources that encouraged transnational organizing work. These, in turn, helped to develop more connections between global and local political spheres. More participation by local activist groups in global conversations, moreover, has complicated elite governance projects that have relied on abstract theoretical justifications for policies that often have detrimental consequences for marginalized local populations.

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<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Discourses</th>
<th>Practices</th>
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<tr>
<td>Responding to hegemonic decline and changing political contexts</td>
<td>Transnational dialogue and deepened understanding of global North–South divide</td>
<td>Confrontational stance vis-à-vis IGOs (especially international financial institutions)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Greater understanding and targeting of corporate power and global financial and trade system</td>
<td>Expanded transnational communication, networking, collaboration and alliance-building</td>
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<td>Critique of UN system and its limits</td>
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<td>Extending counter-hegemonic alliances</td>
<td>Climate justice</td>
<td>Shifting ties from inter-state to social movement arenas</td>
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<td>Gender justice</td>
<td>World Social Forum (WSF) process (global, regional and local scales)</td>
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<td>Food sovereignty</td>
<td>World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth</td>
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<td>Rights of Mother Earth</td>
<td>Corporate targets and investor actions – for example, Fossil fuel divestment campaigns</td>
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<td>Building movement counter-power</td>
<td>Another world is possible/alternatives to neoliberal globalized capitalism</td>
<td>TSMO population growth and networking</td>
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<td>Human rights</td>
<td>Strengthened local–global links</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Global citizenship</td>
<td>WSF, World March of Women and other transnational movement spaces outside inter-state system</td>
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<td>Trans-local networks (Desai 2015)</td>
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By the mid-1990s a substantial network of transnational activists and organizations had considerable experience working to influence the inter-state system, especially the negotiations and treaty bodies associated with the United Nations. The process of organizing in the UN helped develop and expand connections between local and global activists and between groups in the Global North and South. For instance, the number of TSMOs with headquarters in the Global South grew from just two dozen in the early 1970s to more than 400 in 2013, and more groups reported having members in the global South. But the numbers alone do not tell us what these changed relationships mean for political activism. Reitan and Gibson’s (2012: 399) observations reflect how a stronger Southern voice has transformed and radicalized activism around the climate negotiations:

Southern-based movements and organizations like Via Campesina, Third World Network, and Focus on the Global South and their grassroots Northern allies … now compete with professionalized NGO advocates to demand that the communities most affected speak for themselves in global environmental negotiations, and mobilize to effect or even halt the negotiations and implementation of what they denounce as false solutions. … The lack of progress in over 15 years of talks and in actual emission reductions has spurred many veteran movement actors to radicalize their critiques and tactics.

The more radical critiques introduced by Southern voices in transnational movements have been echoed in many ways by the growing chorus of local activist groups, whose participation in transnational alliances and networks has been facilitated by communications technology and new opportunities to engage in global debates like the transnational anti-trade protests and World Social Forum (WSF) process. Indeed, in the most recent global mobilizations around climate change, people of colour, who make up the ‘frontline communities’ of those most affected by climate change and economic globalization, have claimed a greater leadership role as ‘new protagonists’ in global environmental justice struggles (Smith and Patterson forthcoming). Similar processes of radicalization resulting from such North–South encounters have been recorded by other scholars working on environmental movements (Rothman and Oliver 1999) and on the women’s movement (Hertel 2006; Moghadam 2012).

Activists’ experiences of transnational relationships across the North and South have thus allowed them to deepen their analyses of the global capitalist system and its effects on different parts of the world. With a more critical and nuanced understanding of global political processes and institutions, activists are better able to evaluate the UN conference process and its various global ‘summit hopping’ strategies. They can challenge what they see as growing corporate influence in the UN, reject or outwit the ‘non-profit industrial complex’ and work towards developing alternative and autonomous bases of power with which to challenge the forces of economic globalization. The more confrontational approach to the inter-state political arena and the 1999 ‘Battle in Seattle’ against the World Trade Organization reflects some of this learning and marks a significant turning point in this regard.
The late 1990s brought mounting challenges to the prevailing international order, both from states and from a growing popular movement for ‘global justice’. The global justice movement helped a wider range of actors engage in global political and economic debates and, significantly, demonstrated how global policies affect people’s local experiences. These shared experiences of the global conference process highlighted the UN’s inability to address the most pressing global problems. They also drew attention to the limits of achieving movement goals within an inter-state framework. In addition, they gave activists opportunities to develop their skills in transnational communication and learning, and helped them appreciate what they needed to enable and facilitate transnational movement building for systemic change. Informed by their experiences of engaging with the UN system and global financial institutions, their mobilizations against global financial and trade negotiations helped them to develop new networks and organizing frames, as well as new kinds of movement strategies and spaces. What these efforts have in common is that they integrate a critical analysis of power, thus attempting to raise consciousness about it and altering its unequal distribution. For instance, terms like ‘climate justice’ and ‘gender justice’ were introduced explicitly to address the institutionalized inequities that systematically marginalize particular groups from decision making (Moghadam 2013; Smith and Patterson forthcoming). Such innovations help to open spaces (however imperfect) for the articulation and dissemination of new ideas and models of action from various peripheries into global arenas (Alvarez et al. 2003; Smith 2014).

Oppositional mobilizations around the WTO and other international financial institutions like the Group of Eight, World Bank, IMF and regional trade meetings, revealed the limitations of such protests for building movement unity and goals. Critics of the movements easily dismissed the protesters by saying that ‘we know what you’re against but what are you for?’ The activists were divided over the challenge of mobilizing large numbers of people in spaces that could easily turn violent despite their efforts to insist on non-violent forms of protest. In this context, the WSF emerged as a space for convening groups opposed to neoliberal globalization and for developing strategic thinking and networks that could strengthen a global movement for a different kind of globalization. Many tens of thousands of activists were and continue to be inspired by the idea expressed in the WSF slogan that ‘another world is possible’. By suggesting possible alternatives to the neoliberal model of economic globalization, and by creating spaces for people to discuss and organize around those alternatives, the WSF became an extremely significant development for transnational social movements. Its role in serving to bring diverse groups together to forge networks and to share ideas, experiences and strategies has helped to consolidate new global discourses, projects and networks. Along with other movement-led initiatives, the WSF helps to take transnational movement politics out of the inter-state arena and into broader, non-state-centred spaces and agendas. Levels of participation in the WSF (which are typically in the tens of thousands and as high as 150,000 for meetings in its founding city of Porto Alegre), along with its perseverance for more than a decade and the diffusion of local, national and regional forums around the world, testify to its political resonance.
As the WSF Charter of Principles states, a critical element of the discourses of activists in the WSF process has been the need for fundamental changes in the global system of capitalism and patriarchy, for strong global movement networks and for deeper global, political and economic analyses to achieve this. Moreover, accompanying this realization is a recognition that organizing strategies targeting only states and/or the inter-state system are not and cannot be effective for achieving many movement aims. Instead, the larger system of globalized capitalism and its cultural and institutional manifestations (which are often localized) have become a focal point for much of the discourse and organizing in the WSF and related spaces. It would seem that the experience and observations of the history of civil society engagement with the United Nations and the inter-state system helped to generate more radical analyses and critiques of that system. The WSF charter, for instance, explicitly links economic globalization/neoliberalism with the militarized, patriarchal inter-state system. Whether or not they come to the space with such a radical critique, the groups attending the WSF are nonetheless exposed to those analyses and presented with accounts and experiences from activists and groups around the world.

In addition to its radical critique of the global structural causes of the grievances that motivate many activists, the WSF believes that it is possible to build a global movement to transform this system and, indeed, that elements of it are already in place in countries throughout the world. The persistent failures of states to be able to address, or even prioritize, increasingly urgent problems such as poverty, inequality and climate change further reinforce the notion that popular initiatives can offer solutions to the concrete needs of people and communities. For instance, the 2007 US Social Forum provided a prominent space in which the displaced residents of New Orleans and its environs could share their experiences of systemic racial discrimination and exclusion and of the state’s incapacity to address growing threats from climate change. Other social forums have echoed the theme of the inherent inability of states to address problems related to neoliberal globalization in terms of increasing ‘precarity’ and systemic ‘social exclusion’ (Smith et al. 2015). Activist strategies and discourses in these spaces suggest that many activists believe that the appropriate response to the challenges of globalization and the existing concentrations of power is to build power through trans-local networking, communication and collaboration (Desai 2015; Escobar 2008; Goodman and Salleh 2013).

Alongside the decline of US hegemony in global political and economic arenas is an accompanying rise in new challengers to global authority. Regional groupings, such as the European Union or BRICs, have become more assertive players on the global stage and are resisting US policies that challenge their interests. In addition to the states competing for influence within the existing capitalist world-system, are other elite actors working to advance alternatives to the prevailing world order and, to do so, they are seeking to create new kinds of spaces that challenge state primacy in world politics. They are joined, moreover, by business actors in search of greater transparency and more responsiveness to social needs (Peña and Davis 2014). In other words, interactions among diverse actors in the global arena are leading to the emergence of hybrid actor networks and forms of activity that operate at different or multiple scales and seek to
address critical weaknesses in the inter-state order (Alonso 2010). As Peña and Davis (2014: 275) conclude, ‘social roles, interests and ideologies do not reflect the competitive social relations presumed by liberal pluralism.’ Thus, we need to understand the boundaries between global actors and spaces as fluid and evolving through both contentious and cooperative interactions (see also von Bülow 2010).

The most prominent example of this is Bolivia’s role in pressing for progress in the global climate negotiations. Following the failure of the UN climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009, President Morales convened a World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth,13 to which he invited governments and civil society groups. The meeting attracted more than 35,000 participants and generated a powerful final declaration that named the consumerist, growth-oriented practices of capitalism as the principal cause of climate change. The document identified a number of proposals for substantially reducing greenhouse gas emissions and altering the power inequities that have allowed the leading polluters to ignore demands for change. Morales brought the ‘People’s Declaration’ to the United Nations General Assembly, which, unsurprisingly, failed to support it. In 2015, Morales again convened a ‘World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Defense of Life’ in Tiquipaya, Bolivia. Although this meeting was smaller than its predecessor, it attracted thousands of participants and generated a similarly radical final document,14 which Morales used to shape his government’s position at the Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations in Paris later that year. Despite the relative lack of attention to the meeting in official circles, many in the activist and climate policy community recognize the World People’s Conference as a pivotal event. At least they see the recommendations it generated (most of which have emerged from movements) as critical to advancing a more realistic and productive global dialogue in response to the climate crisis than those taking place in the UN framework. Movement activists engaged in global spaces like the WSF and People’s Climate Coalition have used these meetings and their final declarations to advance transformative political projects (Smith 2014).

National governments are not the only actors beginning to articulate alternative ideas on how best to govern the world. Growing numbers of municipal and regional authorities have also been mobilizing their responses to the governance challenges of neoliberal globalization. Global institutions like the World Bank and World Trade Organization typically restrict participation to national governments, so exclude the municipal leaders charged with implementing international trade and other policies. This not only undermines democratic institutions, but also deprives international negotiators of the practical knowledge and pragmatic interests that local political leaders can bring to solving critical social problems.

The exclusion of local officials from global governance debates has led to policy outcomes that have created unanticipated difficulties for regions, municipalities and local communities (Frug and Barron 2006; Harvey 2012; Peck 2015). Municipal leaders have responded to this deficit by engaging in their own efforts to organize outside official channels in the hope that this will improve conditions for their communities. For example, at the first WSF, municipal leaders launched a Forum of Local Authorities...
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for Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy, which convenes local authorities, particularly in the Global South, to search for solutions to common problems. The group has ‘sought to strengthen the role of cities as political subjects in the new world stage, promoting greater relevance to the experiences of peripheral cities’. A growing number of TSMOs are organizing local and regional government officials – groups such as Mayors for Peace, or the Association of Cities and Regions for Recycling. While just two such organizations existed in 1970, by 2011 there were 24 groups bringing together municipal officials, of which two-thirds were formed in or after 1990. These developments reflect growing connections between local and global, and an expanding participation in global politics of actors previously marginalized or excluded from debates on how the world should be organized.

Conclusion

The global arena has changed dramatically in recent decades. Factors such as the rise of neoliberalism, the end of the Cold War, expansion of civil society participation in the UN and other global settings, and changes in communications technology have all had an impact on how people organize to advocate change. When these challenges threaten the interests of elite actors, their response is to try to channel the energies of movements in less threatening directions. Interactions between movements and elite networks influence the overall character of the organizational field in which movements operate.

Drawing from our research on TSMOs over several decades, we have offered some reflections on how the changing institutional context and elite responses to movement challenges have shaped contemporary global politics. We argue that elite efforts to co-opt social movements take the form of appropriating movement discourses and using civil society groups to resource elite projects to create illusions of access to power. In these ways powerful actors have been able to obfuscate activist messages and create tensions within movements over strategies and resources. Nevertheless, social movements have responded with their own efforts, generating novel forms of organizing and opening hybrid global spaces for promoting critical dialogues, countering elite co-optation and amplifying popular influence in global politics.

Acknowledgements

Financial support for this research has been provided by the National Science Foundation (SES Award #1323130), by the World History Center, Global Studies Center, and by the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh.

Notes

1. These counts include organizations that (1) have members in at least three countries; (2) are non-governmental (although representatives of governments, such as MPs or municipal officials, may be members); and (3) have a primary purpose to advance some form of social or political change (for more details, see Smith and Wiest 2012).

2. The Transnational Social Movement Organizations dataset is based on organizational records from the Yearbook of International Organizations, collected by the Union of International
Associations in Brussels. Our new research extended the dataset to include alternate years between 2003 and 2013.

3. ‘Non-state actors’ include all that are not national governments or inter-governmental organizations (IGOs). This category includes all ‘non-governmental organizations’, which typically implies non-profit entities and excludes corporations. TSMOs are a subset of internationally organized NGOs (INGOs) working for social change.

4. Feminist activists have engaged in extensive debates on these questions; in fact, a significant segment of feminist activists and organizations retains a highly critical stance towards states and the inter-state system (Alvarez 2009; Alvarez et al. 2003; Mendoza 2002). The World March of Women has helped bring these critical elements together (Dufour and Giraud 2007; Eschle 2005; Vargas 2005).

5. Counter-hegemony refers to actors and actions that challenge prevailing power arrangements in the global system, such as China’s or the EU’s attempts to challenge US dominance in global political and economic arenas. Anti-systemic refers to actors and actions aimed at challenging, transforming and/or replacing capitalism (Arrighi et al. 1989).

6. The conferences provided a predictable organizing model that activists used to structure their internal organizing routines and international mobilizing strategies. The model also helped frame discussions about issues and political strategies in ways that certainly constrained debate, but also facilitated the formation of new networks and a coherent transnational movement arena. In addition, governments and international agencies provided resources to enhance participation, particularly from low-income countries. This brought new voices and actors into the global political process and enabled new transnational networks to form among activists and their organizations.

7. Growth in the number of groups headquartered in the Global South consistently outpaced the growth of those located in the North, although in absolute terms groups headquartered in the North still greatly outnumber those in the South.

8. For explicit statements on the need to work outside the UN system, see Lohmann (2012) and Mooney (2012).

9. The WSF has, of course, been criticized for being influenced by some of the same governmental and corporate forces that its constituent movements oppose (Peña and Davis 2014). The numerous interests and actors involved in the WSF process reveal the complexity of organizational fields and reiterate a key point in our study, that conventional binary modes of thinking are inadequate for understanding complex and fluid organizational environments.

10. Such movement initiatives include a growing number of movement-initiated transnational meetings and workshops. Pianta and Silva (2003) have documented a decisive increase in these types of initiatives in recent years, and far more have taken place within the framework of the World Social Forum process. In addition to the expanded opportunities these settings provide for activists to meet across national borders and develop global perspectives and strategic networks, we see new kinds of ‘hybrid’ spaces like the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. These brought together leaders from counter-hegemonic states (led by Bolivia) and movement actors to discuss an issue that the dominant inter-state arena had failed to address.

11. As Peña and Davis (2014) show, the WSF is not strictly a movement space, and it has been shaped by both the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) and business leaders hoping to advance a more humane form of capitalism. Given the resource demands of transnational organizational gatherings and the concentration of wealth in today’s global economy, it is likely that the organizational fields in which movements operate will likely contain a mix of groups with varying views on whether capitalism can or should be abolished or reformed.

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