Coming of Age?

The significance and Limits of transnational activist networks today

At the turn of the 20th century I heeded the calling of a transnational activist network critical of globalization. *Attac* appealed to me with its pacifist ethos that neo-liberal economic globalization is not an inevitable destiny but that a different world is indeed possible. I joined in the belief that *Attac* would provide me with a new sense of collective responsibility and means for political action. This was motivated by a number of factors. Feeling alienated by self-serving party politics and bored by consumerism, I was equipped with a then novel Internet connection, and the conviction that allies beyond the seemingly limiting and arbitrary state borders, were 'just around the corner' of cyberspace. Thus I became a part of an emergent collective that aimed at reconstructing, re-imagining, or re-mapping world politics.[1] I was unaware that scholars of international politics had begun to fathom that they had "come late to the party" in realizing the importance of activist networks as a relevant research agenda.[2]

More then a decade later the salience of transnational activist networks such as *Attac* can no longer be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. Instead it appears prudent to reflect upon the significance and limitations of these formerly 'new kids on the block' that have now come of age. This paper sets out to review a selection of scholarship from this early research period. I consider whether transnational activist networks are conceptualized as an aspect of global civil society, as a manifestation of the internationalization of nation-state politics, or as an example of

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[1] Ronnie Lipschutz, „Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society," Millennium 21:3 (Winter 1992). Page 391

[2] Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, Activists beyond Borders (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Page 4

the privatization of governance. Moreover, as foreshadowed in the introduction, I draw here on my practical experience as an activist and critical scholar in an holistic, yet self-reflexive assessment in especially discussing the limitations of representation and legitimacy of transnational activist networks.

Before proceeding it is necessary to consider the unit of analysis under consideration. A number of terms are used, often interchangeably. The existing scholarship variously refers to non-state actors' non-governmental organization (NGOs); transnational advocacy networks or social movements; and transnational or global civil society. This somewhat confusing multitude of terms arises because there are "not one, but many heteronomous transnational political networks" that that make up a so-called "third force" within civil society.[3] The concept of civil society - itself a social construct - seems nevertheless useful as it denotes an arena of social engagement that exists "above the individual yet below the state", thus enabling an analysis of the ways in which social, political and economic practices are based and carried out from "above" and "below."[4]

I use the term transnational activist networks throughout this paper for the following reasons. I refer to the term *transnational* to allude to interactions across national boundaries of non-state actors such as networks, movements and organization. Most activities of activist networks are, in my, experience too diverse, specific and geographically confined as to be described as truly 'global'. The *network*

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[3] Ibid. Lipschutz, Page 391 in reference to Ruggie's concept of 'Heteronomous' implying that networks are differentiated from each other in terms of specialisation fullfilling a multitude of different fuctions. See further John G. Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis', World Politics 35:2 (Winter 1983), pp. 273-4.
[4] Paul Wapner, „Politics beyond the State: Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics," World Politics 47:3 (April 1995), pp. 311-340, Page 313
Note: Again, there is no agreed definition on the term and authors follow differrent understandings. Hegalians include the economy in this domain. Gramicans view civil society in a three part model in which the state is comprised of political and civil society. Thus for some civil society is distinct from states and the private sectors and for others it is, at least partly, constituted by these. I follow the latter for the purpose of this argument but confine myself to the relationship between states and civil society.

concept, moreover, travels well as it "stresses fluid and open relations among committed and knowledgeable actors working in specialized issue areas" in both formal and informal ways.[5] Thus I follow Keck and Sikkink's useful baseline definition in perceiving actors as *activists* that are "similar in several important respects: the centrality of values or principled ideas, the belief that individuals can make a difference, the creative use of information, and the employment of nongovernmental actors of sophisticated political strategies in targeting their campaigns."[6] I invoke, as in my own case, that it is individuals forming collectives in social webs by seeking communities around common goals and aspirations. In addition, transnational activist networks can include both NGOs and transnational social movements as they refer to a nodal web and "set of interactions among an imagined community to shape collective life that are not confined to the territorial and institutional space of states."[7]

As the discipline of international relations is primarily concerned with the state system in international society, the study of transnational activist networks can provide a novel lens to world politics in general and of specific reconfigurations of the state system in particular. It may be understood as concerned with a "subset of international issues."[8] Moreover, while these networks recognize states they are not state-centric. The study of transnational activist networks recognises that a "politics of collective identity is developing around the world."[9] It is thus "not meant

[5] Ibid., Keck and Sikkink, Page 9
[6] Ibid., Keck and Sikkink, Page 2
[7] Richard Price, „Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Land mines," *International Organization* 52:3 (Summer 1998), pp. 613-644, Page 615
[8] Ibid., Keck and Sikkink, Page 199
[9] Ibid. Lipschutz, Page 398

to replace or subsume interstate relations" but rather enhance scholarly understanding and practical discourse.[10]

The role of transnational activist networks in, for instance, "carrying out boycotts, educational campaigns, and other forms of activity by changing consciousness and disseminating a global ecological sensibility"[11] illustrate a "degree of autonomy" from states which thus appear to no longer to be "omnicompetent."[12] Wapner here has shown how advocacy groups encourage multinational corporations to become 'green', and in doing so operate as not just social but also political actors "considerably beyond state control."[13] For example, as Price demonstrates, activists in the case on the ban on landmines can even "reverse the gun sights" in areas "all-too well monopolized by states" by helping to enforce the discontinued use of certain weaponry.[14] Transnational activist networks are therefore of importance as they can socialize and impact both states and wider civil society strategically.

Other scholars are more sceptical and argue that transnational activism "illustrates the expansion, not the retreat, of the state."[15] Raustiala highlights the "better or worse of NGOs" in accepting civil society state relations as "now part of the cooperative process."[16] Similarly for Anderson, in response to the "process" leading toward the *Ottawa Convention on Landmines*, nation states - especially in the case of International Organizations - are "locked in a romance, a passionately mutual

[10] Ibid., Paul Wapner, Page 340
[11] Ibid., Richard Price, Page 638
[12] Ibid., Ronie Lipschutz, Page 412
[13] Ibid., Paul Wapner, Page 337
[14] Ibid., Richard Price, Page 638
[15] Kal Raustiala, „States, NGOs and International Environmental Institutions," International Studies Quarterly 41:4 (December 1997), pp. 719-740, Page 721
[16] Ibid., Page 724

embrace, offering each other love tokens of confirmations of legitimacy and eternal fealty" with International NGOs.[17] Thus in Anderson's account transnational activism is not vertical, growing from a 'grassroots base' but represents a horizontal conversation "of international elites" often lacking democratic legitimacy. Transnational activism as such is relegated not to a single voice of 'people' or 'masses'; rather, disconnected "organizations in civil society speak each for itself."[18]

While I sympathise with the quandary of these respective accounts, again recounting my own work as an activist, I detect limitations in such perspectives. Simple 'either/or' distinctions used to form bold generalisations of transnational activism will only obscure more than they reveal. As Lipschutz points out, "the disagreement here is over means, and not ends. What we see being discussed in [these instances] is a crisis of means towards an agreed end, and not a crisis of the system as a whole."[19] Transnational activist networks are as diverse and multifaceted as states. 'The good, the bad and the ugly' exist everywhere and simultaneously. As networks transnational activists are nodal points in an existing framework that they might not escape entirely but may seek to reconfigure. This is usefully conceptualized by Keck and Sikkink as taking place in an "arena of struggle" in which transnational networks "embody elements of agent and structure" concurrently.[20] Activist networks are strategic in their choice of engagement and may succeed or fail in negotiating cultural and political change, depending on the nature of this engagement with each other and with states. As such, transnational

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[17] Ken Anderson, „The Ottawa Convention Banning Landmines, the Role of International Non-Governmental Organizations, and the Idea of International Civil Society," *European Journal of International Law* 11:1 (2000), pp.91-120, Page 117
[18] Ibid., Page 118
[19] Ibid., Ronnie Lipschutz, Page 418
Note: Lipschutz discusses a debate in the US over protectionsim and free trade as a threatened base of material reality to invoke how „real interests of society may become obivious to some, who will begin to make an effort to reform or reconstruct the social syste."
[20] Ibid., Keck and Sikkink, Page 7-9

activist networks are today important for the study of international political intricacies; their growing density and visibility continues to impact the "socially constructed realm of international politics" considerably.[21]

Their significance and limitations must therefore be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. While this might irritate some members of the discipline decrying the loss of more parsimonious structural accounts, the study of these networks in fact offers new sites of analysis for much older questions concerning sovereignty and state-centrism. Interesting here is the notion that states – for example in the ban of landmines - are "receptive to being taught" by transnational activist networks "about what is appropriate or useful."[22] In my view, it is less crucial whether states have co-opted some "critical NGOs" or taken advantage of their "specialized resources."[23] What is key is that their significance can no longer be ignored as they noticeably convey some form of socializing reciprocity across boundaries and toward the states they engage. Whether transnational activist networks point to what Bull has speculated to be a world of "new medievalism" thus no longer seems as far-fetched.

Transnational activist networks provide for collective responsibility and a means for political action that have, at least in part, escaped state authority. Keck and Sikkink argue correctly that through persuasion, socialization and pressure transnational activists are political in the ways in which they inform, symbolize, leverage and hold accountable those actors they engage with from both above and

[21] Ibid., Ronnie Lipschutz, Page 390
[22] Ibid., Richard Price, Page 621
[23] Ibid., Kal Raustiala, Page 734

below the state and its international subsidies.[24] Therefore they can contribute to an internationalization of domestic politics as well as to privatizing governance as for instance more recently exemplified in areas such as climate change and indigenous activism.

However, transnational activist networks are, conceptually and practically, limited in a number of ways. Given the confines of space, I can only focus on those limitations that are in my view critical to their continued success or failure. The interrelated notions of representation and legitimacy are among the most contentious issues. Because activist networks exist on all levels, reaching from the local to the international (and back), they conceptually are difficult to grasp. The perspective or "unit of analysis", adopted remains, as Wapner has pointed out, central to this constraint.[25]

Both Anderson and Raustiala thus critique transnational activist groups on the limits their representative 'reach' and legitimacy from above. Raustalia finds that, in the case of transboundary and global environmental problems, international environmental cooperation "must rely on the legitimate coercion over private actors" wielded by states at the international level. Further, "enhanced participation" by NGOs "is not an unmitigated good" *per se;* as it "may exist at the mercy states" it can "yet result over time in the transformation of those dominant actors and of the broader political landscape."[26] Anderson adds in his conclusion that while the ban on landmines is "morally and politically the right thing to do", it masks the fact that "organizations of civil society are by their nature particular, and

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[24] Ibid., Keck and Sikkink, Page 16
[25] Ibid., Paul Wapner, Page 318
[26] Ibid., Kal Raustiala, Page 737

lack the ability to confer general legitimacy."[27] I concur, with both authors, while noting that their findings rests on the assumptions that legitimacy must be democratic, accordingly representative, and ethically sound. It is unclear how such legitimacy might be achieved, or whether it is even feasible in all cases; in this sense, transnational activist networks are seriously limited. While some attempts are promising, such as *Attac's* approach of enhanced discursive and deliberative democratic principles in its activities, they continue to be far from perfect. It is in my experience, nevertheless, evident that the last decade engendered not so much a vertical entrenchment in lack of legitimacy, rather a horizontal learning effort that has utilized best practices and insights gained from improved strategies clearly points toward 'coming of age' of transnational activist networks.

Moreover, as Keck and Sikkink have shown, while transnational activist networks can be multipliers of "access to the international system" and agents of change in domestic politics and culture, local people "sometimes loose control over their stories in a transnational campaign." Thus legitimacy and representation are limited in the ways that "mediation/translation occur."[28] The authors eloquently outline and empirically substantiate the so-called 'boomerang effect', in which networks bypass the state from below and directly search out international allies to bring pressure on their states from the 'outside'. However they pay too little attention on how the reverse effect beginning at the international back to local can impede, distort or threaten the collective identity formation they assume to exist.[29] This view of the 'boomerang effect' questions the general fluidity the authors attach

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[27] Ibid., Ken Anderson, Page 120
[28] Ibid., Page 19
[29] Ibid., Keck and Sikkink, Page 12

to transnational activism and thus, at least in part, leave part of the feedback process static. Notwithstanding this critique Keck and Sikkink are aware of their conceptual shortcoming and provide that networks "operate best when they are dense, with many actors, strong connections among groups in the network, and reliable information flows must involve reciprocal information exchanges, and include activists form target countries as well as those able to get institutional leverage." Density, as they conceptualize it, is therefore not only concerned with quantity but also with quality.[30] Such quality is thus directly connected to notions of representation and legitimacy. Whether Keck and Sikkink should be accused of celebrating the bottom-up lens or if Anderson's more pessimistic top-down view is correct where international NGOs and their elites "are asked to stand in for the 'people,' I argue, is a question of particular context and not of general rule.[31] Ultimately, given my experience in for example demanding more transparency at the 'Group of Eight' meeting in Germany in 2007, I tend to side with Keck and Sikkink insofar as I consider transnational activist to be able to strategically shift in-between agency and structure. When not being allowed direct participation we organized a counter forum instead. However, I also agree with Anderson that transnational activists, working at the international, are in danger to be mere "international civil servants" if they fail to ensure high quality of density by reporting back to the local.[32] When such a reassured and reaffirmed relationship breaks down the "Gramsician hegemony of the elites" is confirmed and it would no longer be accurate to speak of transnational activist networks.[33] In the final analysis,

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[30] Ibid., Keck and Sikkink, Page 28-29
[31] Ibid., Ken Anderson, Page 116
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., Ronnie Lipschutz, Page 418

it is important to connect the nodes of transnational activist networks in a meaningful way by accounting for the full circle they embody. As this is extremely difficult I contend that perhaps 'thick descriptions' of selected cases will allow overcoming these difficulties.

In conclusion, transnational activist networks are significant as they help to provide novel insights into the changing nature of sovereignty and state-centrism in international society. The authors reviewed as such remain at the forefront of conceptualizing transnational activist networks. Their insights are helpful in evaluating transnational activism from a number of vantage points. They highlight that non-state activism is more transnational than global, that both an internationalization of national politics as well as the privatization of governance can be better explained through its conceptual usage. Practically transnational activist networks have indeed come of age as they themselves have gone through an ongoing learning experience. They have furthermore informed as well as reconfigured state practices. Thus while they might not be able to escape the grip of state influence they have, partly, reconfigured the state system from both 'above' and 'below' even in areas thought to be beyond their reach.

As an activist I confirm that their limitations and significance have not gone unnoticed but have rather spurred ongoing debate and changing strategies within its practical discourse. Moreover, given the protracted realization of the seminal scholarship reviewed in this paper I detect considerable overlap and coherence between analysis and practice. In a world that is increasingly boundless transnational activism will rightly continue to seek inroads into realms that civil society actors deem worth of engagement. Whether different campaigns are

ethically sound or democratically representative can only be answered in evaluations of particular contexts and, as I have argued, in applying 'thick descriptions'. In highlighting constraints of representation and legitimacy I hope to have furthered this ongoing course of action. Transnational activist networks have not withered away, nor been subsumed by states but established themselves as important new actors of international politics. I have, in fact, only recently participated in an online campaign with *Attac* in which I supported the cause with insights gained from my scholastic endeavours. And that, perhaps, is a good thing.

Bibliography

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