

# *The New Transnational Activism*

by Sidney Tarrow, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 258 pp.

## Simon Thompson

In his latest book, *The New Transnational Activism*, Sidney Tarrow seeks to understand the character of those forms of contentious politics which exceed the boundaries of the contemporary nation state. In a rapidly globalizing world, how is the nature of political activism changing? Does protest reflect the process of globalization by itself becoming global? Political phenomena like the movement for global justice – which has crystallised around events such as the Battle for Seattle and those that have followed it – might lend support to this view. The protest organisations and networks appear to be global in span, their targets are the institutions of global neo-liberalism, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the G8, and their demands are for global justice. The implication of this account is that, as the power of states has waned, political power has shifted up to the global level. And, since power has shifted to this level, so has resistance; in a globalized world, political protest is also globalized.

This is a view of recent trends and events popular with a good number of political activists, journalists and academic commentators. However, in the book under review here, Tarrow seeks to counter this popular reading. His principal thesis is that contentious politics – including what he calls ‘transnational activism’ – does not float free of nation-states. While processes of internationalization and globalization have provided new opportunities for transnational activism, its significance cannot be appreciated without understanding how dependent it remains on the resources and opportunities provided by nation-states’ political structures. Tarrow’s claim is that states are still key political actors – it is still a ‘state-centered world’ (p. 209), and international institutions exist to advance states’ interests. In tandem with this account of formal political power structures, Tarrow argues that transnational activism is not a form of contentious politics that entirely transcends local and state levels; instead it remains firmly rooted in the domestic – that is, nation-state – context.

Tarrow is perhaps best known for his work in the field of social movement theory. He associates himself with what is called the ‘political process’ tradition of thinking about social movements. This tradition provides him with a number of concepts

crucial to the framework of analysis he develops in this book, including 'political opportunity structure,' 'collective action frame' and 'repertoire of contention' (p. 25). The idea of an 'international opportunity structure' (p. 16) has a particularly important role to play in his analysis. Drawing on this research tradition, and also taking some ideas from international relations theory, Tarrow presents and discusses a wide variety of case-studies in order to describe and delineate a range of processes in which transnational political activists may be involved. On the basis of this account, he then considers whether the nature of political activism has changed, and whether we are witnessing the emergence of new political arenas, and therefore a fundamental change in the relationship between domestic and international politics (pp. 3 and 203).

The principal thrust of Tarrow's thesis can be easily summarised. One part is negative. In response to the popular explanation of the rise of transnational activism as a reflex response to globalization, he contends that this view cannot explain *how* people become involved in transnational activism; to be specific, it fails to identify the opportunities and resources that they need to become active. Moreover, many forms of transnational activism cannot be explained in terms of globalization. For instance, while struggles for democracy and human rights may in part be organised at the transnational level, their claims remain directed at specific states (pp. 5-6). As a result of these considerations, Tarrow seeks to identify the mechanisms and processes involved in transnational activism, and he suggests that such activism is one species of what he calls 'rooted cosmopolitanism.' Another part of his thesis is positive. Although globalization alone cannot explain transnational activism, nevertheless, by distinguishing between globalization and what he calls internationalization, it may be possible to explain how political actors may have both the motive and the opportunity to become transnational activists. Tarrow believes that this explanation enables us to understand the nature and significance of transnational activism.

In order to be able to evaluate Tarrow's thesis, then, we need to understand the concepts that he deploys in order to advance it. Here the ideas of internationalism, internationalization and globalization play key parts. According to Tarrow, 'internationalization' is a process with several facets. It involves an 'increasing horizontal density of relations across states, governmental officials, and nonstate actors,' and increasing 'vertical links among the subnational, national, and international levels,' which lead to 'an enhanced formal and informal structure that invites transnational activism and facilitates the formation of networks of nonstate,

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state, and international actors' (p. 8). Although he is not entirely clear about it, internationalization appears to be a process which leads to a condition Tarrow calls 'internationalism.' He uses this term to refer to 'a dense triangular structure of relations between states, nonstate actors, and international institutions, and the opportunities which this produces for actors to engage in collective action at different levels of this system' (p. 25). Finally, he draws on Robert Keohane's work in order to define 'globalization' as 'the increasing volume and speed of flows of capital and goods, information and ideas, people and forces that connect actors between countries' (p. 5).

Tarrow believes that these distinctions will enable him effectively to understand the character of transnational activism today. His thesis, in short, is that while globalization provides the reasons for protest, internationalism provides the opportunity. In other words, globalization functions as 'a source of interest, ideology, and grievances' for (some) transnational activists, but internationalism provides the institutional and informal framework within which such activism can take place (p. 19). In other words, *internationalism operates as a political opportunity structure at the international level* (p. 16).

Within this broad framework of ideas Tarrow offers detailed descriptions of the various forms of transnational activism. He seeks to devise a taxonomy of different mechanisms and processes which he believes will enable him to understand the nature of this form of collective action. Tarrow focuses in particular on six processes, divided into three types.

The first type are those forms of contentious politics which take place exclusively on domestic ground but which are nevertheless motivated by events at a level above that of the nation-state. The first of these is called 'global framing.' In this case, a group mobilises international symbols in order 'to frame domestic conflicts' (p. 32). For example, political events in a number of indebted countries against the IMF were framed as a protest against the austerity programmes which it imposed (pp. 64-8). The second of these domestic processes is called 'internalization.' In this case, supranational pressures have particular effects in the domestic arena. Tarrow suggests that the kidnapping of two French journalists in Iraq in 2004 as an act of solidarity with French Muslim women not being allowed to wear the veil in certain public places was of internalization (p. 77).

The second type of process is that which links the domestic and international political arenas. One such process is 'diffusion.' Here there is a 'transfer of claims or forms of contention' from one context to another (p. 32). As an example, Tarrow suggests the way in which strategies of non-violence pioneered by Gandhi were later adopted amongst others by the US civil rights movement (pp. 106-13). The other linking process is that of 'scale shift.' In this case, collective action which begins at one level later shifts to another. Here a good example would be the formation of the World Social Forum (pp. 128-36).

The final type of process takes place predominantly at the international level. Again, Tarrow has two particular processes in mind. The first, 'externalization,' involves the 'vertical projection of domestic claims onto international institutions or foreign actors' (p. 32). For instance, in the EU, legal claims for equal pay which moved up from national to European level would be a case of externalization (pp. 152-4). Finally, Tarrow calls the other international process 'transnational coalition formation.' This is fairly self-explanatory. Under this category he places 'the horizontal formation of common networks among actors from different countries with similar claims' (p. 32). The international landmine campaign illustrates this sort of process in action (pp. 173-5).

By describing each of these six processes of transnational activism, and by considering their relationship with and impact on political institutions and practices and national and international levels, Tarrow believes he can successfully defend his claims. To be specific, the most successful transnational activists remain rooted in their domestic contexts, states remain the key political actors, and, while new internationalism provides a range of opportunities for transnational activism, these opportunities can only be taken up by political actors drawing on the resources and opportunities provided by their nation-states.

In some respects, Tarrow's book is highly valuable. It provides a taxonomy of forms of transnational activism that is certain to be taken up by other scholars of global social movements. His account of the range and variety of processes that characterise contentious politics at the international level seems very plausible. He also sends out an important warning to those who would see transnational activism merely as a reflex response to globalization. It is important, however, to signal two important caveats.

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The first concerns one important limitation of the book which Tarrow himself is prepared at least partially to acknowledge. His book is fundamentally a description of processes rather than a causal account of the phenomena it describes. That is to say, it seeks to provide a nuanced account of a wide variety of political phenomena, showing how certain collectives, actions, campaigns, and movements can be compared and contrasted with others. It does not seek to explain why a particular protest happened at a certain time or why a particular movement took the form that it did. As Tarrow admits in passing toward the end of one chapter, 'I do not claim to have either explained transnational activism or predicted its outcomes' (p. 138). Instead we have a phenomenology of international protest based on his readings of an eclectic variety of case-studies. We must also trust that these selected cases are representative of all the cases of their kind.

There is a second limitation to this book which Tarrow does not acknowledge. At the start of the book, he declared that his aim is to consider three principal questions – concerning the effects of transnational activism on the identities of activists, the possible emergence of new political arenas, and the possible fusing of domestic and international politics (p. 3). However, while he provides a partial answer to the first question, Tarrow does little to answer the second or third. His taxonomy of processes of transnational activism reveals the distinctive forms that it takes in today's globalizing and internationalizing world. But it is impossible to determine whether there are new political arenas or forms of politics transcending the domestic/international distinction without fully engaging in the literature on state capacity and globalization in political science and cognate disciplines. In this book, Tarrow assumes but does not demonstrate that globalization and internationalization take the forms that he describes. Thus, against his own avowed aim, he cannot tell us what the character of contemporary transnational activism implies about the residual power of states compared to the power of international and global processes and systems.

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