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SYMPOSIUM - INTRODUCTION

SYMPOSIUM ON MARIO DIANI'S BOOK

An Introduction

Mario Diani (2015) *The Cement of Civil Society: Studying Networks in Localities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 244, ISBN: 978-107-10000-8.

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Mario Diani's book, the subject of this symposium, departs from the idea that relations matters for civil society or. In other words, as the author points out in the introduction, "(t)ell me with whom you associate, and I will tell you who you are"(p.1). He does this by studying civic networks in Bristol and Glasgow and focusing on 'the production of collective goods' (p.xviii) and on 'collective processes'(p.xvii). Diani broadens the point with one leading question forming the heart of the book: Why should we pay so much attention to networks, rather than to other aspects of civic collective action? To answer this question and delve into how relations and civil society participation in contemporary Western liberal democracies are linked one another, the book illustrates three topics: local contexts of civil society networks as particularly interesting settings to study collective action dynamics; how structural patterns emerge from specific exchanges; and finally, how relational patterns might shape (or be shaped by) organizational characteristics, participation in events, leadership tendencies, and engagement in local politics, for example through public private partnerships. The role of networks in political activism at these different levels constitutes the focus of the reflections contained in the book.

The usefulness of networks and of social network analysis for the study of civil society and social movements was emphasized for the first time by Snow et al. (1986). Since then, the formal characteristics of these networks have been referred to in the development of theories of collective behaviour (Rosenthal et al. 1985; McAdam 1988; Fernandez & McAdam 1988; Marwell et al. 1988; Gould 1993; Diani 1995, 2003). The increasing success of the 'network' concept in the social sciences is linked to its flexibility: it allows the researcher to deal with those phenomena of change that cannot be easily explained if scientific attention is limited to macro-categories such as nation states or formal bureaucracies or, at the other extreme, to individual actors (Mutti 1996). The network analysis approach enables the researcher to emphasize the 'meso' level of social analysis, filling the gap between 'structure' and 'agency' (Hayes 2001) and focusing attention on the connection between the micro- and macro-dimensions (Emirbayer & Sheller 1999). As underlined elsewhere (Cinalli & Fu"glister 2008), social capital scholars have for instance emphasized the importance of social links as resources for individual actors to increase the probability of success of their own actions (e.g. Lin 2001). This ranges from studies on participation and social mobility (Van Deth 1997), migration chains (Piselli 1999), or entry to the labour market (Bagnasco 1999). Networks are also seen as 'vehicles of meaning', crucial for sharing values, frames, and identities (Cinalli 2006). Finally, following the 'Political Opportunity Structures' approach, networks can be interpreted as configurations of a context (environment) of 'opportunities' and 'constraints' to collective action (e.g. Broadbent 2003).

All these theoretical traditions plus relational sociology, social movement studies and research on civil society are relied on in Diani's *The Cement of Civil Society* to support its core idea (a relational view of social structure, both at the conceptual and methodological level) and discuss the three processes mentioned above.

The work rests on a paired comparison of two British cities, Bristol and Glasgow, selected according to a most different systems design (pp. 46-47). These two cities represent very different local political traditions: Glasgow had a high concentration of old left organizations and Bristol a higher concentration of "new" social movement organizations; the former was long a bastion of the unreconstructed Labour Party and the latter a stronghold of "Third Way" political currents; finally the former is a traditional leftist stronghold with a history of long-established working class activism, while Bristol displays a relatively mild level of public engagement, typically on middle class issues. In terms of method, *The Cement of Civil Society* is based upon mixed-method research drawing on interview material and the author's previous extensive body of research. Focusing upon the two cities during the early 2000s, he identifies a number of key civil

society actors and interviews a key representative for each, mapping their reciprocal relations.

This brings us to the crucial point of Diani's work: How is a relational approach able to tell us something important that we would not learn by way of the aggregate approach? A *relational* view of social structures, the author argues, implies that, "(r)ather than as the sum of their components, collectivities are best viewed as complex bundles of social relations, emerging in turn from the integration of several different networks" (pp. 3-4).

In fact, the first chapter of *Cement* outlines the theoretical notion of 'modes of coordination', which help the reader to enter this new perspective and look at the world of civil society and participation with a new lens. Modes of coordination are conceived as "relational processes through which resources are allocated within a certain collectivity, decisions are taken, collective representations elaborated, and feelings of solidarity and mutual obligation forged" (p. 13).

An 'organizational' mode of coordination is defined by limited exchanges of resources and inter-organizational linkages with other groups, as well as little identification with other civic associations. In fact, as the following applied analyses of the empirical cases will show, members of this 'block' (see below) have very few ties either to one another or to members of other blocks. They are alike in virtue of their relative isolation. The opposite is true for the 'social movement' mode: incumbents of this mode display dense exchanges of resources and ties with other associations and a sense of belonging to a collectivity beyond their own group. Actors in these types of block enjoy dense and multiple ties to one another, including overlapping memberships and personal ties. Incumbents of the 'coalitional' mode share with the social movement mode a strong interconnection with other civic associations, but have not developed a strong collective identity. Actors in this block enjoy dense ties to both one another and members of other blocks, however, the ties involved tend to be instrumental. In sum, the (organizational) actors involved exchange resources but their ties do not extend beyond this. For groups in the coalitional mode, collaboration and alliances with other associations are based on mere instrumentality, rather than identity or sense of belonging to a larger cause.

In the second part of the book, building upon this typology of 'modes of coordination' Diani blockmodels each of his two networks (Glasgow and Bristol). In order to analyse the configuration of the actors in more detail and to identify the main online 'coalitions' that are built within the two English cities, he conducts a block analysis which helps to group together 'structurally equivalent' actors (Breiger et al. 1975). This analysis divides actors in the network into discrete subsets called 'blocks', placing actors within the same block if they have similar relations to all the other actors.

Therefore, a group (or block) which is identified in such a way can unify actors who are very different from each other in typological terms (e.g. political parties and skinhead groups), but which are grouped together by virtue of being similar because of the structure of relations into which they are inserted. For each network in each country, three blocks are identified. A 'block model' represents the pattern of ties between and within these blocks. In this sense, a block corresponds precisely to a set of structurally equivalent actors that may or may not be a 'coalition' (as defined by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999), depending on its internal density. Usually scholars classify organizations using 'a priori' categories, namely 'logic' types, to classify similar organizations in terms of ideology or organizational resources (e.g. political parties vs. more informal groups). The advantage of block-model analysis is that it can allow for the classification of, for example, extreme right organizations through (their) 'social relations/networks'.

In particular, the second and third Chapters of the book introduce the cases and units of measurement, and the fourth chapter illustrates how the measurement of civic associations' relational positions facilitates their identification within one of three 'modes of coordination'. The remainder of the chapters consider the relationship between aggregative variables and relational data.

More precisely, Chapter two identifies the basic attributes of the field in both cities. It maintains that both cities have different histories and political cultures but that both were embedded in a common state system (the United Kingdom) that spurred an uptake in civic involvement and activism.

Chapter three assesses the principal factors inhibiting and blocking alliances in the two cities. The following Chapter (four) builds on the findings by revealing the relational structure of civil society in Glasgow and Bristol. In Chapter five the properties of the organizations occupying different structural positions are explored: the incumbents of social movement positions in both cities significantly differ from other organizations in their propensity to identify subjectively with social movements, to identify social or political opponents, and to represent excluded social groups (p.92ss).

In Chapter Six, the book investigates 'The Duality of Organisations and Events', considering a number of key political events in his respective cities, Diani examines which of his organizational actors are involved in which event, and constructs a (two-mode) network of actors and events on this basis. He thus examines how the nature of organizational interactions affects groups' participation in civic and protest events.

The next step in the analytical strategy of the book is to explore how the civic networks in the two cities were internally stratified, identifying the core actors acting as leaders in the civic society field. Chapters seven and eight examine the extent to which the relative relational positioning of specific organizations within the two local civil societies, and the

overall structure of the networks themselves, influence their capacities to exercise political influence. Specifically, the analyses in Chapter 7 show relevant differences between the two cities. In Glasgow, traditional political organizations of the left, such as trade unions and the Campaign for National Disarmament, represented key organizers and leaders of local civil activities. In contrast, these groups did not appear to have any central role in the structure of local civil society in Bristol. Moreover, Bristol's civic associations recognized central actors as influential because of their shared interests, while in Glasgow the reputations of core groups were positively related to their longevity and their ongoing participation in public events (protest or civic). In Glasgow, city politics thus seemed to conform to a more 'public' model of civil society and collective action, in which active and long-lasting participation in urban politics granted not just public visibility, but also an influential role across civic networks.

Chapter 8 illustrates how the various structural positions in the civic network failed to correlate with degree of connection or level of satisfaction with local institutions. The three blocks, social movement, coalitional and organizational, did not display many differences in the ways each interacted with local authorities; unsurprisingly, the level of formalization and bureaucratization of a group increased their level of access to authorities. In spite of the many similarities between the two British cities, there are some important differences however. In Glasgow, the incumbents in the social movement block displayed distinctive traits in terms of ideology and the propensity to adopt protest, while this was not the case in Bristol, where all three blocks shared a low propensity to protest.

How, then, can the relational approach and in particular the 'modes of coordination' introduced in this book help to connect some classic themes in the analysis of collective action and social movements? This is the question Diani poses in his conclusion. How, in sum, can it help us to better understand a 'movement' society(ies)' as our society is currently defined by many scholars and commentators (p.198)? Perhaps regarding 'networks' both as resources and opportunities (Cinalli and Fuglister 2008), as Diani proposes in his thought-provoking book, can be an answer. This means looking at each sector of civil society in any context in terms of a set of actors who, through their mutual interactions, produce their own value orientations; have access to specific resources; and contribute to shape the context of opportunities and constraints within which they are embedded (ib., p. 9).

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