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SYMPOSIUM – REVIEW/5

CEMENT WITHOUT HEAT?

Gianluca De Fazio

James Madison University, USA

The Cement of Civil Society represents the *summa* of Mario Diani's ambitious efforts of shaping the research agenda and orientation of social movement and civil society scholarship. In this book, Diani systematically presents the empirical findings of his research project conducted between 2000 and 2003 on local urban politics in the United Kingdom ("Networks of Citizens' Organizations in Britain"), while also espousing the value of a relational approach to the study of civil societies at the city level. The added value of the research design - a paired comparison of Bristol and Glasgow - lies in its ability to untangle how different local, social and political milieus may affect the structure of civil society and the development of contentious politics in contemporary Western cities. It also allows for a detailed comparison of actors that share similar structural positions *across cities* and of different structural positions *within each city*.

The epistemological and methodological thrust of the book is to present a *relational* approach to analyze and understand social structures, through the use of an extensive set of network analytic techniques. The conceptual move from studying static structures and their components to tracing the system of interactions among actors requires a methodological shift: from the collection of attribute data on actors' properties and traits for variable analysis, to the collection of relational data. This latter type of data requires the collection of information about the "contacts, ties and connections, the group attachments and meetings, which relate one agent to another and so cannot be

reduced to the properties of the individual agents themselves. *Relations are not the properties of agents, but of systems of agents*; these relations connect pairs of agents into larger relational systems” (Scott 2000: 3; emphasis added). Social Network Analysis (SNA) is the most appropriate method to study relational data.

Relational thinking and approaches can be traced back at least since Simmel and his studies on the geometry of social life. A revival of the analytical primacy of social interactions and networks was theoretically systematized by Emirbayer almost twenty years ago in his *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* (1997). McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) have been at the forefront of pushing their ‘relational persuasion’ into the study of contentious politics, while SNA has become increasingly popular in the study of both contentious and institutional politics. Diani has been a pioneer in the use of a relational approach and advanced SNA techniques to examine social movements. In *The Cement of Civil Society* he marshals an impressive amount of empirical data and granular analysis to promote a very convincing argument about the need to complement aggregative approaches with relational ones. He also provides a precious methodological toolkit, thanks to which scholars can translate relational thinking into a concrete research program. I will now turn to the main questions and findings of Diani’s empirical study, to highlight its analytical and substantive value.

The Cement of Civil Society is an analytical tour de force of the structure and functioning of civil society fields in Glasgow and Bristol, with incredibly dense and detailed descriptions of the range of actors participating in collective public life in those cities in the early 2000s. The conceptual centerpiece of the book revolves around the typology of ‘modes of coordination of collective action’ (Chapter 1). This framework permeates the empirical analyses chapter after chapter, constituting the basic building block utilized to challenge our ways of thinking, identifying and inspecting social movements and civil societies. Diani proposes a typology of modes of coordination based on two analytical dimensions: resource allocation and boundary definition at the field level, rather than at the organizational one (pp. 13-17). Depending on their level of resource exchange with other groups and their degree of boundary work (sense of belonging and solidarity), each actor in the civil society field can fall into one of four distinct modes of coordination: organizational, coalitional, social movement and communitarian (for methodological and substantive reasons, the book focuses only on the first three modes).

Diani applies this typology to perform an x-ray of the structure of civil societies in Bristol and Glasgow, employing a variety of network analysis techniques, such as structural equivalence and block modeling, homophily tests and analyses of network density in terms of ties, resource exchange and social bonds (Chapters 3 and 4). Thus, the position on resource allocation and boundary definition of each actor participating in the civil

society field (more than one hundred groups have been included for each city) is analyzed and bundled together through structural equivalence analysis. The ‘structural bases of civil society’ are thus unveiled by identifying distinct clusters of civic associations; in particular, structural equivalence uncovers the presence of three blocks in the civil society structure that reproduce the three main modes of coordination (organizational, coalitional and social movement). Interestingly, in both cities the analysis reveals the existence of these three blocks/modes of coordination; moreover, Glasgow and Bristol show remarkable similarity in the structure of the civil society field, and how it is distributed according to the different modes of coordination. This is quite striking, as their different local political traditions would have suggested quite different structures of civil societies.

After producing an ‘objective’ photography of the various sections of civil society, based on SNA techniques measuring network density and social bonds, Diani seeks to verify if this picture fits with actors’ self-perceptions. Is there a correspondence between the ‘objective’ blocks and how the actual incumbents of the blocks *perceive* themselves and their ties with other organizations and allies? The meticulous analyses contained in Chapter 5 show a reasonable match ‘between relations and perceptions’ (p. 114): civic groups that had ‘objectively’ been assigned, for instance, to a ‘social movement’ block (rather than an organizational or coalitional one), did indeed feel like being part of a broader social movement. Conversely, incumbents of organizational and coalitional modes did not display such collective identity and solidarity outside of their own associations, confirming the matching between their structural positions and their perceptions. This is a key finding, as it confirms the viability of using the modes of coordination typology not just as an orienting concept, or as a rhetorical device used to rethink how civil societies are structured; it also turns out to be an empirically sound analytical framework that can be replicated and applied in other contexts.

The relational approach pushes the analysis even further, as it identifies how distinct traits of each civic association combined differently depending on their inclusion into one mode of coordination or another. Thus, incumbents of the social movement block shared a belief that they were acting on behalf of dispossessed or aggrieved populations (e.g., ethnic minorities, immigrants) and in opposition to some political or social target. This is in line with the classic conceptualization of social movements as actors typically operating outside institutional channels because of their relative powerlessness. Conversely, civic groups belonging to the coalitional block failed to display such traits; their campaigns tended to be more issue specific and short-term, their alliances being often temporary and instrumental, rather than identity-driven and geared towards broader and long-term goals.

The comparison between social movement and coalitional modes of coordination is further explored in Chapter 6 by looking at patterns of participation in public collective events, both protests and civic ones. The significant analytical purpose here is to establish if coalitions and social movements can be considered as really distinct ‘actors’ with specific properties and dynamics that should be analyzed separately. This assertion goes against what most social movement scholars, at least implicitly, believe, that is that social movements and coalitions are largely overlapping concepts, if not coterminous. The comparative analysis across civic groups in Glasgow and Bristol demonstrates that there is a distinct pattern of strong ties created as a result of participating in protest events, rather than just attending civic, non-conflictual events. In other words, the participation in more contentious forms of politics did have an effect on solidarity, tie strength and, in general, on the formation of those boundaries deemed central to recognize a social movement sector. This finding illustrates the ‘duality of organizations and events’, or how networks of groups are affected by the number of events they shared, and how networks of events can be considered as meaningful campaigns created by multiple actors participating in the same event (p. 118).

The next question connects the structure of civil society with local urban politics: do these different positions in the structure of civil society affect interaction with local political institutions? Namely, does occupying a leadership position in the civic field impact the strength of the relationship and the level of satisfaction with local authorities? In the cases of Bristol and Glasgow, this did not seem to be so. Chapter 8 documents how the various structural positions in the civic network did not correlate with the degree of connection or level of satisfaction with local institutions.

Notwithstanding the many similarities between the two British cities, there are some important differences. According to Diani, “the greater divide in Glasgow than in Bristol between actors occupying social movement positions and the others might be due to the different preconceptions as to the role of collective action that have guided civic actors in the two cities” (p. 196). The history of class culture in Glasgow shaped its local political culture, perhaps explaining why different styles in the level and type of public events conducted can be detected in the two cities. This class-based political culture might also explain the leadership role recognized to appertain to traditional leftist associations in Glasgow. It might also explain the differential mechanisms of alliance formation: in Bristol alliances were driven purely by shared interests, while in class-conscious Glasgow by the level of involvement in public life and opposition to New Labour policies of civic renewal (see Chapter 9).

Diani identifies the two principal themes of *The Cement of Civil Society* in its concluding chapter: “how moving from an aggregative to a relational view of social structure

may enable us to grasp the complexity of collective action within civil society, and how the interplay of civic organizations' properties and relations varies across localities with different social and political profiles" (p. 187). The book undoubtedly succeeds on both fronts, thanks to its conceptual clarity, the painstaking sophistication of the empirical analyses and the analytical validity of its robust relational framework. However, one surprising aspect of this book concerns its quasi-absence of (open) conflict in the civil society field. This apparent lack of conflictual relationships concerns both the relative absence of antagonistic relationships *within the civil society* field, and the very tame relationship between civic networks and political institutions. Maybe it should not be too surprising that in a book on the 'cement' that binds together civil societies, consensus-based mobilization and activism play a preponderant role in the description of the dynamics of local politics. On the other hand, producing actual cement for building construction requires quite a lot of heat. Without taking the cement analogy too literally, it is however a central tenet of politics that sociopolitical 'heat' in the form of competition and conflict with antagonist(s) can go a long way in rallying support for a cause, strengthening bonds, creating collective identities and solidarities, activating and recreating boundaries (e.g., Tilly 2004, 2007), as well as driving groups toward institutionalization or radicalization.

Antagonists can be tangible actors, such as counter-movements, political authorities, police forces, etc., or more impalpable, like neo-liberal globalization. These antagonists, and the germane 'heat' they are supposed to generate, are largely absent in this book. For instance, groups mobilizing *against* some of the key issues that civic networks in Glasgow and Bristol were striving to promote - from the integration of ethnic minorities and migrants, to asylum-seekers rights - are not analyzed in this book (but see p. 200). These issues are at the forefront of contemporary British (and European) political contention, both at the local and national level. The rapid rise of xenophobic campaigns and far-right parties hostile to 'foreigners', Muslims and 'dark skinned' people readily attest to the presence and growing salience of these groups in the last couple of decades. While it might be normatively tempting to exclude such campaigns from the respectable boundaries of what constitutes 'civil' society, it would be analytically wrong to ignore these groups and their public activities, or to relegate them to an elusive 'uncivil society' (see Kopecký and Mudde 2003). Aside from the obvious point that this exclusion would prevent the comprehension of a relevant section of contemporary societies, neglecting 'ugly' mobilization may hamper our understanding of how the 'virtuous' side of civil networks operates: competition for public support and confrontation with antagonists clearly shape groups' identities, inter-organizational ties, alliances and strategies for social change.

To be sure, the absence of these less palatable groups from this book may be an unfortunate result of the data collection process. Certain types of organizations might simply not have been included in the directories of the Voluntary Community Sector, or mentioned by other local community organizations, the two main sources through which the list of civic associations were compiled in this study. Alternatively, these groups might concentrate among the relatively few isolated nodes (less than 10% of the total number of organizations) present in the civic networks, thus escaping closer scrutiny. Of course, it might well be that in the specific historical context of Bristol and Glasgow of the early 2000s, collective action against, say, immigrants and racial integration was virtually nonexistent, or too small to be detected by this study. At any rate, my perplexity on the missing 'heat' from the cement mixture concerns a broader point, lying outside of these specific empirical cases. In particular, it could be fruitful to grant more analytical emphasis to antagonistic practices within civil society by reconstructing networks of conflict based on contentious relationships among civic groups and between the latter and state authorities. This additional analytical dimension might yield a fuller picture of the structure of civil society, more attentive to its interaction with the whole polity and thus closer to the contentious politics approach (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). More emphasis on contentious interactions would also require different ways of interpreting the relationship between civic networks and political authorities. In the book, only a few groups display an overall oppositional attitude toward political authorities, and, outside of the social movement blocks, only a fraction of associations are even able to indicate who the opponents they are working against are. This may merely be the result of civic associations' propensity to maintain good working relationships with local institutions. At any rate, while most civic associations may not have public or private *opponents*, they most likely have precise *targets*, be they specific local or national actors, policies or even global processes. Social movement research has demonstrated how the selection of an institutional target heavily affects the form of collective action activists will choose to advance their agenda (e.g., Walker, Martin and McCarthy 2008). To incorporate a bit more heat into the cement mix, it might thus be a good idea to add a separate focus on targets of action. In addition to asking civic groups about their opponents, it might be worthy to have them identify the intended targets of their activism. The answers to this question are likely to unveil new contentious dynamics between civil society and its political context, further promoting our understanding of how civil societies are structured and how civic networks operate.

The Cement of Civil Society advances such a rich and insightful research agenda that the few points suggested above simply aim to push Diani's program even further, toward

a tighter integration with the contentious politics perspective. This book, in fact, provides an impressive theoretical contribution to the literature on civic networks and social movements. Finally, the epistemological and methodological reorientation Diani proposes throughout this book will certainly embody a long-lasting contribution to the way we think and study the structure of local civil societies.

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