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Citation: Davies, T. R. ORCID: 0000-0003-1047-9628 (2018). Transnational Movements. In: Ritzer, G. and Rojek, C. (Eds.), The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology. . Oxford, UK: Blackwell. ISBN 9781405165518

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TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS

Thomas Davies

City, University of London
thomas.davies.1@city.ac.uk

WORD COUNT

2232 words

ABSTRACT

After introducing the long history of transnational movements, this article provides an overview of some of the principal transnational structures and processes of transnational movements, as well as their impacts on governments, intergovernmental organizations, and corporations. The diversity of transnational movements and their influence is emphasised, as is their significance across regional contexts. The analysis considers the latest transformations in transnational movements, and concludes with discussion of significant challenges confronting these movements in the twenty-first century.

MAIN TEXT

Social movements have long extended their reach beyond national borders, both in respect of promoting transnational causes, and through developing cross-border structures and processes of mobilization. From eighteenth century transatlantic anti-slavery networks through to the many alternative globalization movements of the twenty-first century, transnational movements have been influential in promoting a wide range of political and social change objectives. Their scope has encompassed anti-colonial, democratic, environmentalist, feminist, human rights, peace, racial equality, religious, and socialist causes, among many others (Berger and Nehring 2017).

Accompanying the renewed attention on processes of globalization that followed the end of the Cold War, transnational movements became a significant focus in sociological research (Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco 1997; Della Porta, Kriesi, and Rucht 1999). The expanding array of institutions of global governance provided new opportunities for social movements to promote causes beyond national borders. At the same time, perceived externalities of processes of economic globalization motivated cross-border mobilizations to address them (Flesher Fominaya 2008).

Although much of the literature on transnational movements is recent, these movements span many centuries. Among the oldest and most influential are transnational religious movements, encompassing a wide array of groups including for example Protestant sects in Christianity and Salafist groups in Islam. From the late eighteenth century onwards, greater specialization, diversification, and secularization took place among transnational movements, as cross-border networks promoting ideals including slavery abolition, humanitarianism, and republicanism proliferated in the Atlantic world, often drawing inspiration from Asia (Davies 2014). By the end of the nineteenth century, the diverse array of transnational movements also encompassed, inter alia, anarchist, anti-imperial, anti-protectionist, conservationist, feminist, pacifist, pan-nationalist, and socialist movements, to name just a few.

Some of the principal global transformations of the twentieth century may attributed – at least in part – to the influence of transnational movements. During the

World Wars transnational peace activists put forward ideas for the formation of a general intergovernmental organization which influenced plans for the establishment of the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations. Subsequently, transnational human rights activism was significant in the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its implementation. Transnational dissemination of Gandhian non-violent resistance strategies was important in movements for decolonization in Asia and Africa, as well as influencing the civil rights movement in the United States. More generally, the expansion in the twentieth century of electoral democratic institutions and provisions for racial, sexual and gender equality, among many other major political reforms, cannot fully be understood without acknowledging the role of transnational social movements in their promotion.

The enhanced authority of intergovernmental institutions that followed the end of the Cold War provided significant opportunities for transnational activism for international reforms. Intergovernmental congresses such as the Rio Earth Summit and the Beijing World Conference on Women were important targets for transnational movement campaigns. Even in the field of international security, transnational movement coalitions succeeded in promoting intergovernmental agreement on conventions banning landmines and cluster munitions. Given the context of processes of economic globalization, transnational corporations have become as significant a target for transnational movements as governments, with the international campaign against unethical marketing of breast milk substitutes pioneering from the 1970s onwards transnational activist strategies in relation to holding corporations to account.

At the onset of the twenty-first century, the promotion of “alternative globalizations” became a prominent focus for transnational movements. The World Social Forums served as regular meeting points for these movements, but after the financial crisis of 2008, these Forums became less influential than new forms of mobilization such as the Occupy movements. At the same time, technological opportunities provided by the internet and social media further facilitated transnational mobilization, and were perceived to be influential in the Arab Uprisings of 2011 (Castells 2015). In the present day, the array of transnational movements is vast, encompassing examples as diverse as transnational Islamist activism, anti-austerity mobilizations, free migration advocacy, and the Time’s Up movement against sexual harassment.

Some of the initial post-Cold War literature on transnational movements was highly optimistic about their prospects. It was even claimed that when considered together they might constitute a “global civil society” offering “an answer to war” (Kaldor 2003). Over time, more pessimistic perspectives have become more prominent, considering transnational movements to be cyclical in their evolution (Davies 2014), or complicit in the reproduction of hegemonic relationships (Buckley 2013; Peña and Davies 2014).

Significant analytical advances have been made in respect of delineating the transnational structures and processes by which movements mobilize. Movements both “scale up” by joining together to form transnational coalitions, and “scale down” by forming sub-regional groups. A prominent example of “upward scale shift” is the formation of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines by an array of national and international social movement organizations in 1992, while “downward scale shift” may be observed in the formation of regional Social Forums following the convening of the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001 (Tarrow 2005).

One of the principal methods by which movements may exert influence transnationally is through a “boomerang pattern” by which groups unable to exert pressure

directly upon their own governments rely on sympathetic movements in other countries to promote pressure from outside, for instance by persuading their governments to impose economic sanctions (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The most prominent example of this model in action is the campaign against apartheid in South Africa, the transnational movement response to which contributed towards the imposition of sanctions on the apartheid regime in 1986. In the boomerang model, the target actors are national governments, but transnational movements also aim to influence intergovernmental policy at both the global and the regional levels (Smith and Wiest 2012). Transnational movements have been especially noted for pioneering new norms of international behaviour subsequently adopted by states in international conventions, the most commonly cited example being the 1997 Ottawa Landmines Convention following the mobilization of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

Given the challenge to state-centric institutions posed by processes of globalization, an important field of research looks into the dynamics of “politics beyond the state” by which transnational movements exert influence not by lobbying governments or intergovernmental negotiations, but instead by targeting public opinion with a view to transformed individuals’ and corporate behaviour (Wapner 1995). The array of transnational movement relations with corporate actors range from cooperative practices such as joint participation in conservationism programmes to conflictual relationships such as consumer boycotts and shareholder activism with a view to transformed corporate behaviour (Newell 2001).

Transnational diffusion of both movement ideas and movement tactics has been one of the most significant processes by which movements operate across national borders (Givan, Soule, and Roberts 2010). Cross-border diffusion of resistance strategies was especially influential among anti-colonial movements during the Cold War, the movements against communist rule in central and eastern Europe in the 1980s, and anti-authoritarian mobilizations across the world in the post-Cold War era. Movements also often frame their goals transnationally as common causes of people in many countries, as was prominently undertaken by the Zapatista movement in the 1990s (Olesen 2005). Some transnational movement goals are framed as issues concerning the welfare of the planet as a whole: environmentalist movements’ framing of humanity’s common interest in addressing the problem of climate change is one of the most prominent examples of transnational framing in the present day.

Transnational processes are not unique to movements promoting purportedly progressive causes such as feminism, global justice, and human rights. They are also a significant feature of reactive movements including nationalist, racist, and religious fundamentalist groups. Having previously been accorded far less attention than liberal and left-wing cross-border mobilization, transnational networking among the “global right wing” has recently become a growing field of investigation (Bob 2012).

Although the range of transnational movements and their apparent achievements is extensive, there are significant constraints on cross-border mobilization. These include both internal constraints such as lack of unity in relation to the objectives to be promoted and external constraints such as the persisting power of national institutional frameworks and nationalist ideologies. Alternative globalization movements, despite their diagnosis of a common problem in the form of contemporary neoliberal economic globalization, have been beset with divisions in respect of the desired goals to be promoted. The principal obstacles to achievement of transnational movement goals include not only the potential

opposition of state and corporate actors, but also the existence of movements promoting different – or even diametrically opposite – objectives (Moghadam 2013).

While much of the early literature on transnational movements tended to concentrate on groups and networks located primarily in the global North, there has since been increasing recognition of the significance of South-based transnational movements. Cities such as Porto Alegre in Brazil, where the World Social Forum began, Johannesburg in South Africa, the base of CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, and Penang in Malaysia, home to the Third World Network and the Pesticides Action Network, are among the many widely dispersed core nodes of contemporary transnational movements.

Among North-based transnational social movement organizations, a growing trend in recent years has been the movement of some of their headquarters away from traditional hubs in the global North to new locations in the global South, as well as reformation of their organizational structures to enhance representation from the South. New accountability initiatives such as Accountable Now have also been developed to address critiques of the legitimacy and transparency of some of the largest transnational social movement organizations (Crack 2017).

Transnational movements remain a significant area for further investigation. Although there are data repositories on highly institutionalized aspects of transnational movements, such as the database of international non-governmental organizations disseminated by the Union of International Associations, the less institutionalized forms of networking and mobilization among transnational movements have been far harder to quantify. It is also very difficult to distinguish the role of transnational movements in the achievement of political and social reforms from the contribution of national movements and other factors in the political, social and economic context.

As democratic institutions appear to be increasingly challenged by the resurgence of authoritarianism in the twenty-first century, the space for transnational mobilization has been increasingly constrained (Heiss and Kelley 2017). The previous opening up of opportunities for transnational movements that accompanied the end of the Cold War appears to have reversed over the course of the twenty-first century, as governments have expanded their provisions for monitoring and control of associational life, while at the same time increasing their limitations on freedom of movement across national borders. The prospects and possibilities for transnational movements to address these constraints demands further attention.

SEE ALSO

Environmental Movements; Global Justice as a Social Movement; Global Politics; Globalization; Human Rights; Transnational and Global Feminisms; Transnationalism; Social Movement Organizations; Social Movements; Social Movements, Networks and

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