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SYMPOSIUM - REVIEW/2

NOT TO MOCK MODES OF COORDINATION (MOC), BUT TO RAISE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR MEASUREMENT

Review of Mario Diani (2015) *The Cement of Civil Society: Studying Networks in Localities*, Cambridge University Press.

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Relations between and across civic associations and protest groups are important. How and the extent to which such 'organizations'[1] co-operate, maintain shared identities, share participation in protest- or civic-events and interact with political institutions can determine the shape of civil society. Consequently, they might determine its efficacy. Indeed, the relations that 'cement' together civic associations and protest organisations can be viewed as the bedrock of politics, particularly at the local level. In *The Cement of Civil Society* (henceforth *Cement*), Mario Diani builds on this (so far as I know) undisputed but often overlooked notion that relations matter for civil society.

I take the following approach in this review essay. I begin by commenting on the valuable contribution of this book to the field of social movements and contentious politics. I then appraise some of Diani's self-acknowledged weaknesses of the 'Cement' project. Third, I look in some more depth at methodological issues and try to understand how

[1] Notes that the term 'organizations ' is used here as short-hand for groups and networks that also fall under this, in addition to formal organizations.

the research findings may be impacted by the forms of analyses adopted. The latter will constitute my main area of critique, mostly centred around what might be viewed as a mismatch between the operationalisation and measurement of modes of coordination. I want to be clear that I have no intention to belittle the strongly justified research design, and I acknowledge that use of CONCOR – the method Diani uses to determine structural equivalence among three distinct 'blocks' of actors – is widely accepted. But, for someone as fascinated by both the topic and methods as I am, I see reason to discuss the extent to which some of the findings could be considered to be an artefact of the method rather than a true reflection of the structural position of actors. Anyone familiar with my own work will know that, throughout the years, the work of Diani has been a huge source of inspiration to me (see, for example Saunders 2007a; 2007b; 2013; 2014) and I look forward to continued dialogue to strengthen our work on social movement and/or civic networks.

For a number of reasons, *Cement* is a very welcome contribution to the literature on civic associations and the related field of social movement research. It brings relations to the forefront of the extensive theoretical and empirical material presented. As all fans of relational approaches will attest, the position of actors in society can often tell us as much, if not more, about their nature than the sum of socio-demographic (or aggregative) data that it is possible to collect on them. Yet aggregative approaches are not entirely dismissed by Diani, but are instead used to enrich understandings of the relational patterns that are uncovered. In this way Diani has, consciously or unconsciously, followed the advice of Jasper (1997,61), who, in reaction to Diani's (1995) work on green networks in Milan, advised that 'we need to push beyond the network metaphor … to see what resources, rules, cultural schemas and patterns of interaction lie behind it'.

The book has great value in two other ways: first, it takes a very broad look at civic organisations, stressing the importance of conceiving civil society as 'a distinct system of interdependence' (p.1), and viewing social movements as part of a broader field of interacting organisations. Although Diani outlines and illustrates an approach – using relational data – to disentangle social movement organisations from other forms of civic action, the broad approach is useful. It recognises that movements, coalitions and organisations, in reality, can and do work on heterogeneous issues with more or less interaction among them. To study such interacting fields as separate movements or types of organisations does not always make theoretical or empirical sense, not least because it could artificially restrict our lens and do some injustice to conveying the essence of the real work that goes on in local politics. It is for a similar reason that in my own work I have talked of 'environmental networks', rather than 'environmental movements'

(Saunders 2013). Movements are – by some accounts – conceived of as necessarily engaging in semi- or non-institutional forms of action. Yet, as Diani's work shows (Chapter 5), this restricts our focus to a small sub-set of organisations, excluding interesting and potentially interrelated organisations from analysis (see also Saunders, 2014). Doherty's (2001) *Ideas and Action in the Green Movement*, which stresses that green organisations must challenge the social order, for example, excludes many organisations (including Friends of the Earth and the Royal Society for Birds), which I show in *Environmental Networks and Social Movement Theory* (Saunders 2013) to have links with their more ideologically moderate counterparts. In *Cement*, Diani usefully shows how organisations with a social movement mode of coordination in Bristol appear not to be particularly challenging to institutions, and tend *not* to engage in protest. This does not make them uninteresting cases to study, for they still shape local politics in fascinating ways. Diani explains these organisations' lack of engagement in politics in terms of the culture of Bristolian politics, even if other variables derived from the classic political process / political opportunities approach appear to be unable to explain the shape of Bristol's civil society (Chapter 8).

Second, the study also gives due emphasis to local politics and local political processes, which are often overlooked at the expense of the national, and, since the 1990s, global (or at least international, e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998) ones. As Diani himself argues in *Cement*, communities are the arena in which the politics most meaningful to citizens takes place.

It is a great strength of the book that Diani is candid about and defends aspects of the research design which might otherwise, to a sceptical reviewer, be deemed weaknesses. In so doing, he precludes many points that a critical review might raise. Why, for example, use the term 'cement' in a study about networks, which are dynamic? Why focus on networks at one point in time (over a decade ago) and so ignore recent developments in information communication technologies that have, since then, evolved significantly?

Arguably, it does make sense to focus on a particular point in time as a *starting point* for discussing a new theoretical and methodological approach to the study of civic networks. The importance of tracing changes to such networks over-time is discussed in the final chapter of *Cement*. As networked organisations institutionalise, Diani argues, perhaps they turn into more isolated organisations? However, his argument earlier on in the book is that – depending on local political cultures – organisations may be very well networked to other civic associations at the same time as exhibiting features of formalisation and bureaucracy. An open question remains how one might distinguish an emergent movement mode of coordination from a coalition, especially with a study that presents data from a snapshot in time. A coalition – defined as a temporary coming together

of organisations – might represent the early days of a movement rather than a coalition *per se* (Saunders 2014). Thus it is only by studying networks over time that we can distinguish an emergent movement from a coalition.

The 'aged' data, generated in the early 2000s, is defended on the basis that it allows decent reflections and, for Diani, ensures that the book is not just representing a popular fad, but makes a real contribution to theory development. It is hard to disagree with this defence because many great social movement books focus on the past and give us useful insights for the future (for example, the notable tomes from the great Chuck Tilly). The age of the data seems less problematic than does restriction to one brief historical epoch. I understand the importance of assessing networks during down times (re. Melucci 1996 and the concept of 'latency'). But in that regard, it seems rather a tease to be informed about the more vibrant political culture in Britain at the end of the 1990s (Liverpool Dockers, anti-roads movements, the rise of alter-globalisation movements and inter-ethnic conflicts / riots, Chapter 3). If only we could turn back the clock to generate comparative data from that point in time. For other reasons, it would be useful to fast-forward to the digital age: what effect do information communication technologies (ICTs) have on civic networks? I agree with Diani and others (e.g. Polletta, Chen, Gardner and Motes 2013) that organisations remain the bedrock of social movements, but ICTs' effect on civic networks still begs examination. Moreover, Diani's rationalisation of using 'aged data' to generate theory may be slightly overstated, for his real aim seems to be to test the heuristic power of his typology rather than generate a theory. The typology seems sound, but as I alluded to earlier, I have some doubts about the reliability of the empirical measurement of that said typology (more, below).

Diani's typology of modes of coordination, which represent the sum of a particular set mechanisms which govern how groups and networks organize, represent, decide, and foster belonging (Saunders, 2014), is based on two axes. These are boundary demarcation, which in relational terms refers to the extent of the generation of strong social bonds that allow development of a sense of identity; and resource allocation, which, in a relational sense pertains to collaborating, sharing decision-making etc. Diani's typology of modes of coordination suggests that organisations with restricted boundaries (i.e. those that have a strong organisational self-identity rather than a broader movement identity) and dense (but, by implication temporary) resource exchanges, display coalitional modes of coordination. Those with restricted boundaries and very few resource exchanges represent organisational modes of coordination. Organisations that have multiple and tolerant identities but few resource exchanges are seen to represent subcultures or communitarian modes of coordination and those with multiple / tolerant identities and dense exchanges represent social movement modes of coordination.

In each of the analytical chapters of the book, the distribution of aggregative data on organisational properties is compared across three 'structurally equivalent' blocks of actors which he equates with three of his ideal types of modes of coordination: organisational, coalitional and social movement. The three structurally equivalent blocks consist of one with dense social and transactional bonds (broadly representing a social movement mode of coordination); one with (moderately) dense transactional bonds , but without strong social bonds (a coalitional mode of coordination) and a third that is very loosely connected (an organisational mode of coordination). These three distinct patterns of relations appear to hold for both cities, and at surface level appear to satisfactorily approximate his modes of coordination. But a very close examination can generate some doubt in the fit of the data to the typology. One concern is that the network of most important collaborators seems to be almost exclusively used to reveal the three positions and this is largely because the social bonds networks were so fragmented for all but one block. It might seem rather coincidental (and convenient) that the exact same relational patterns hold across both cities. The sub-cultural / communitarian mode of coordination is not substantively analysed due to a lack of data, and this may be partly due to the difficulty of generating data on subcultures, which are not necessarily found among the types of civic organisations Diani surveyed. Further, recall that Diani's modes of coordination typology is – in theory – represented by a two-by-two matrix (social bonds against resource exchanges). Yet the data themselves seem to reveal the need for three rows (or columns depending on which way one presents the matrix) on the resource exchange axis. These are: strong density, moderate density and high density (see Table 1). Block 1 has low density of resource exchanges and weak social bonds, and is classified, seemingly accurately, as organisational modes of coordination. Block 2 has medium resource density and weak social bonds and almost fits the typology, except the typology anticipates resource exchange density to be 'high'. Block 3 has high density of resource exchanges and strong social bonds. That, too, fits quite neatly with the typology, sitting quite squarely in the cell of social movement modes of coordination. I would postulate that missing data in the top left and bottom right cells of Table 1 exist because of – in practice – the close relationship between dense resource exchanges and multiple identities with strong bonds. I would hesitate to even hint at the direction of causality, but either could be said to lead to the other, particularly among the sample of organisations.

Table 1: The extent of fit between the typology and the blocks of 'structural equivalence'

		Resource exchange		
		High density	Medium density	Low density
Boundary demarcation	Limited identity (weak social bonds)	Theorised as coalitional, but not found in the data	Block 2 – classified as coalitional but not theorised in this way	Block 1 – classified and theorised as organisational
	Multiple identity (strong social bonds)	Block 3 – classified and theorised as social movement	Not theorised, not found in data	Theorised as subcultural / communitarian but not found in the data

But a bigger concern – at least for me – is that the structural equivalence appears, at best, to be very approximate. One very easy way to considerably address this complaint might be for Diani to consistently prefix 'structural equivalence' with 'approximate' throughout the text. Yet I would suggest going a step further than this because in some cases the approximation of structural equivalence appears highly questionable. In his defence, Diani does blockmodel the data only on a single component – that is on a part of the network in which each actor is connected to at least one other. Therefore, the blocks appear to be more robust than in an earlier piece drawn from the same data by Diani and Rambaldo (2007), in which isolated actors were mistakenly allocated to different blocks of 'structurally equivalent' actors. Isolated actors might be viewed as relatively structurally equivalent through their complete lack of connections to others, and certainly they should not appear in different blocks of even approximately equivalent actors. For this reason, isolates should always be excluded from blockmodels prior to analysis (see Figures 1-3 in Diani and Rambaldo, 2007). In *Cement*, Diani takes great care to justify the use of CONCOR on a *connected component*, which is a great start. But let me indulge myself by pointing out some peculiarities that appear to persist in assigning actors to blocks, despite the care Diani has taken. The nodes are unnamed in Figure 4.1. and Figure 4.2 of *Cement*, so here I rely on description. If one takes a close look at the lowest triangular node to the right of the sociogram in Figure 4.1 it is possible to discern that this actor is apparently linked to only two others, but it has been assigned to the social movement modes of coordination block, characterised by dense relations. To the left, near the bottom, a circular node represents an actor which is also connected to only two others but this one has been assigned to the organisational mode of coordination, characterised by low density. I understand that, by virtue of the connections that their alters have to others in the network, the overall position of these nodes is likely to be quite different. Their everyday experiences of networking may be similar, yet they end up being classified as being at different ends of a continuum of modes of coordination.

The oddity of some of the assignment of actors into blocks is probably partly an artefact of the use of CONCOR. The algorithm produces 'highly idealized patterns of interaction from the complex interweaving of thousands of paired relationships' (Breiger 1976, 134) and only exceedingly rarely accurately represents the real network position of every actor in a network. Indeed, social network analyst experts Wasserman and Faust suggest that the inductive approach to blockmodelling using CONCOR should only be used 'with a great deal of caution' (Wasserman and Faust 1994, 381) and this is partly because of the 'fuzzy' way it converts actors into approximately structurally equivalent actors [2](Scott 2000, 154). I would be less sceptical if more information had been provided around two key points. First, it would be instructive to have more information on why it is that Diani sought a three-block solution in CONCOR. Those unfamiliar with CONCOR should note that it allows the analyst to partition the data once (into two blocks) and to repartition further (into three, perhaps even four or more blocks) until a number of blocks are revealed that make sense to the analyst (Scott 2000, 137-48). The typology suggests the need to differentiate between organisations with low and high resource exchanges, so why did Diani seek to identify a three-block solution, which would inevitably generate a middle position? Is it a coincidence that a similar block model fits both cities, despite quite different distribution of organisational types across the blocks in Bristol and Glasgow, as revealed by the analysis of local political systems and the aggregative data on organisations? The second important question to answer is: how well do the block models fit the actual data? It would be very useful to know, for example, how many fairly poorly networked organisations end up being misallocated to the most densely connected block, and how many well-networked organisations are misallocated to the organisational modes of coordination block.

To resolve such issues in my own work, I have elected to use what I term 'deductive blockmodelling' (Saunders 2014; Saunders et al 2014). The idea here is to hypothesise expected relations between and across blocks, and then to test the extent to which the actual network data fits the hypotheses. This approach also approximates (rather than strictly measures) structural equivalence, but it at least selects a number of blocks justified by theoretical expectations, and routinely specifies the extent to which there are 'errors' in the final matrix.

Since I lack some faith in the way in which organisations are categorised into having organisational, coalitional and social movement modes of coordination, it is then difficult to judge the veracity of the analysis that follows. But this does not mean that I will not be an advocate of the essence of the *Cement* research programme. The need to consider

social movements as part of a broad field of organisations, to look beyond protest to networks, to hold back from labelling coalitions as social movements until they show signs of persistence and to complement relational with aggregative data are important lessons to take forward into future research on networks of civic associations and social movements. I also firmly stand by Diani's request for conceptual clarity in the use of the concept of social movement. Nonetheless, I am quite sure that this work will not settle the debate about what does and does not constitute a movement. It goes against the grain of many other existing definitions of social movement forms. Despite my reservations, *Cement* has huge potential to positively sway the direction of the field of research on social movements / civic association. I hope it succeeds at encouraging scholars to take a broader look at associational fields in a relational perspective.

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