

**“Civil Society in Mexico and Regionalisation
A Framework for Analysis on Transborder Civic
Activism”**

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**Civil Society in Mexico and Regionalisation
A Framework for Analysis on Transborder Civic Activism¹**

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Abstract

The paper theoretically analyses the emergence of oppositional TCA responses towards the disruptive socio-economic effects of regionalisation processes. In particular the paper discusses how neo-Gramscian and Polanyian IPE traditions look at the transborder agency of civil society actors in the making and re-making of regional orders. It notices that these traditions *either* emphasise that: a) agency is conditioned by powerful structures; or b) that agency is making up these structures. While not rejecting this altogether but attempting to go further, this paper advances a critique of both ‘emphases’ on agency and some alternatives.

Keywords: Transborder Civic Activism, Mexico, Trade Politics, Agency, Neo-Gramscian Theories

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Introduction

In the last two decades, the role played by transborder civic activism (TCA) with respect to contemporary processes of regionalisation has been a contentious one. For instance, it has questioned the relationship between regional liberalization agreements and social development. Moreover, it has drawn attention to the challenges that contemporary regionalisation poses to democracy at different levels (i.e. local and national decision-making processes, regional institutions, etc.).

Despite the relevance of these issues for the long-term viability of regionalisation processes, policy makers and scholars have often under analysed or even altogether ignored them. Many analyses on regionalisation in International Relations and International Political Economy have tended to focus heavily on regional trade, financial and labour markets, regional intergovernmental agreements and institutions.

Recently, regionalisation processes have become a prime concern for some sectors of national and local civil society in Mexico. This has taken place in the framework of neoliberal socio-economic restructuring and a long-term process of political democratization. Furthermore, under the structural shifts in governance and power enhanced by globalisation, some sectors of civil society in Mexico have turned to transborder initiatives as a strategy to overcome social and democratic deficits connected to overall processes of regionalisation.

This paper (re)examines theory in the light of three empirical cases of TCA in Mexico. As such, it gives a careful attention to the unfolding interactions between structural forces and agency interventions as key sources of social change. In particular, the paper (re)explores critical approaches in International Political Economy (IPE) rooted on different interpretations of historical materialism. The paper examines how neo-Gramscian and Polanyian IPE traditions look at the transborder agency of civil society actors in the making and re-making of regional orders. It particularly notices that these traditions *either* emphasise that: a) agency is conditioned by powerful structures; or b) that agency is making up these structures. While not rejecting this altogether but attempting to go further, this paper advances a critique of both ‘emphases’ on agency and some alternatives.

The paper has four sections. The first section briefly describes our case study and presents some working definitions of key concepts. The second section focuses on neo-Gramscian and Polayan accounts in IPE that address agency in the making of regional and world orders. It is argued that these perspectives provide useful insights to understand that TCA's interventions don't unfold spontaneously, as a result of pure 'structural contradictions' or in a 'fixed' political economic setting. However, these accounts hold explanatory limitations with important implications for the interpretation of empirical trends of TCA in Mexico.

Acknowledging that the theories and concepts that are critically examined also contain relevant insights to grasp aspects of the social world, the third section of this paper advances some possible alternatives that problematize TCA interventions on regionalisation. This is done on the basis of Gramsci's dialectical understanding of the realm of civil society, and at the same time, on the grounds of a critique to his functionalist view on it. It is argued that this critique which is discussed in detail, offers substantial analytical purchase in explaining TCA interventions in the contemporary political economy of regionalisation.

As such, the framework that is advanced in this paper could be broadly located in the *critical* IPE tradition, drawing among other things on neo-Gramscian, Polayan and post-Marxist insights. The conclusion recapitulates the theoretical position undertaken in this assessment on TCA in Mexico and regionalisation.

Transborder Civic Activism in Mexico

This paper analyses what is here termed as *transborder civic activism* (TCA). In particular, our interest is that of examining TCA interventions in the making and re-making of regions (macro regions like NAFTA) (Hettne 2000). More specifically, TCA refers to the initiatives and activities of formal and informal groups from one or more national civil societies that transcend the jurisdictions of particular nation-states where these groups are territorially based. TCA encompasses an assortment of voluntary initiatives and actions from purposely organised sectors of society. These sectors seek to influence and/or challenge socio-economic and/or political forms of governance, but also to promote the creation and/or the effective enforcement of a set of rights while developing collective forms of identity (Cohen and Arato 1992; Olvera 1999 and 1999b; Scholte 1999).

Contemporary TCA unfolds amidst intensifying conditions of globalisation that activate potentialities for agency in different forms and extents. In other words, the increasing supraterritoriality of capital, governance, finance, technology, and so on prompt transborder interactions among different kinds of agents (Scholte 2001b; Cerny 1995). As these agents interact - enabled and/or constrained by the structural forces that render globalisation - they reproduced and modified these structures. As such, this paper takes a structurationist approach regarding the interplay between structures and agents in the political economy of regionalisation (Scholte 2001, Underhill 2000, Hobson and Ramesh 2002).

Moreover, TCA is treated as part of the social responses unfolding in the IPE that resist, oppose, reproduce and stabilise the status quo in the making of regions. TCA unfolds through supraterritorial means (i.e. global communications) unveiling a global dimension of social interactions between civil society, state, and market actors that runs along with the interactions taking place at national and international level. At the same time that these interactions transcend territorial geography they might also occur in regional and sub-national (local) levels (Drainville 1999, Scholte 1999).

The framework advanced here stems from the analysis of three cases of TCA in Mexico - a network, a campaign, and a forum – and their interventions towards different processes of regionalisation.² These are: a) the Mexican Free Trade Action Network (RMALC) in relation to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); b) the campaign ‘Mexican Citizens Facing the European Union’ (Ciudadan@s) with respect to the Economic Partnership, Political Co-ordination and Co-operation Agreement signed between the European Union and Mexico (EU-MEX Agreement); c) and the sub-regional gathering ‘Permanent Forum of the Great Caribbean Civil Society’ (GC Forum) in relation to the Mexican membership of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) (See Table 1).

There are multiple differences among our cases, for example, as regards their membership, tactics, strategies, etc. and among the processes of regionalisation under examination here. For example, NAFTA was signed in 1994 creating the first free trade area between such unequal partners (Mexico in relation to the US and Canada) under an equal treatment status.

² This analysis derives from mostly primary documentation produced by each case of study and from interviews with its main participants conducted between May 2001 and November-December 2003 in Mexico City and from the author’s own involvement as an activist in these experiences of TCA during 1998-1999.

Since 2000, the EU-MEX Agreement gave preferential access to Mexican products into EU market and includes democratic and human rights clauses. Finally, the ACS has a consultative character among their members on issues of regional economic integration.

TABLE 1
Mapping RMALC, Ciudadan@s and the GC Forum's TCA

Regionalisation Process	Cases	Divergences		Similarities
		Organisational	Membership	
NAFTA Signed in 1994 Members: Mexico, Canada and the US	RMALC launched in 1991	National network	Organisations and networks based in Mexico	The involvement of civil society in processes of regionalisation is seen as an 'end' in itself
EU-MEX Agreement Implemented in 2000 Members : the EU countries and Mexico	Ciudadan@s launched in 1996	Started as a campaign but latter on it became a network	Organisations and networks based in Mexico	Strategic value of transborder civic activism Critical-oppositional view towards official regionalist projects
ACS Created in 1997 Members: Great Caribbean countries	GC Forum launched in 1997	Sub-regional Gathering	Organisations based in the Greater Caribbean Members in Mexico: FAM as member of RMALC	Shared membership (RMALC members participate in Ciudadan@s and these in the GC Forum).

As for our cases, RMALC was the first network of civil society organizations in Mexico to be concerned with issues of trade liberalisation and was launched in 1991 when NAFTA's informal negotiations started between Mexican, the US and Canadian governments' representatives. Ciudadan@s was launched in 1997 and gathered different sectors of civil society *within* Mexico itself. As for the GC Forum, this constituted a transborder civic

initiative in itself that was launched by national civil societies, governments and international institutions representatives of the Greater Caribbean countries as being a space for dialogue on regionalisation processes.

As a common feature among these cases of TCA, they share an opposition towards Mexican government policies on regionalisation: fast unilateral economic liberalization, the lack of political mechanisms to compensate costs of trade opening and the narrow economic view on regionalisation as mere institutionalization of free trade areas and free trade and investment transactions. RMALC, Ciudadan@s and the GC Forum have elaborated specific proposals to oppose the democratic and social development related shortcomings of NAFTA, the EU-Mexico Agreement and the ACS respectively. These groups work on the basis of a 'consented minimum' among their members that on the whole share a view regarding the pro-active role that civil society organisations should play in processes of regionalisation. Nevertheless, this has not entailed a fixed uniformity in other aspects or among their members. Not only their strategies and tactics vary among these experiences of TCA, but also from one member to another, and from one conjuncture to another.

For example, one member can sustain close collaboration with official authorities due to a particular conjuncture. In other cases, one member can reject completely this sort of approach to official circles. This has been the case of *Unión de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas* (UNORCA) [Peasants Regional Independent Organizations Union]. UNORCA is member of Via Campesina and as member of RMALC has rejected collaboration with multilateral banking circles keen to free trade agreements, for example with the Inter-American Development Bank (Interviews 1 and 2).

Moreover, one member can participate in official meetings and be critical to them. This has been the case of DECA Equipo Pueblo's representatives which as members of both Ciudadan@s and RMALC have participated in official gatherings as a strategy to open these to critical views. One member of RMALC noticed that this sort of participation was not simple co-optation because basically DECA Equipo Pueblo doesn't receive economic support from official circles. So, for this person, this is a way in which the conditions to overcome democratic and social deficits of corporate regionalisation could be built up (Interview 3).

Neo-Gramscian and Polanyian Approaches on TCA and Regionalisation

As other traditions in IPE, neo-Gramscian and Polanyian IPE accounts share a set of common assumptions that generate particular explanations regarding agency in the making and re-making of regional and world orders. In broad terms, these traditions stem from a materialist conception of history and as such observe process of change as deeply interconnected to material or economic developments in the social world. However, in contrast to pure structuralist/materialist interpretations, political and ideological dimensions are crucial too. ³

In this section the work of ‘critical’ IPE/IR scholars like – Robert Cox, Andre Drainville, Stephen Gill, Barry K. Gills, Björn Hettne, James H. Mittelman and Adam David Morton – will be examined. These authors have been selected because their respective contributions drawn from, or are associated in different forms with Antonio Gramsci’s work and because some of them have ‘revitalised’ Karl Polanyi’s critique on economic liberalism in IPE. However, the following discussion neither attempts to exhaust in number nor in content the work of these commentators. It will focus on their respective understandings on agency in the making of world orders.

Gramsci’s Historical materialism as ‘critical’ theory

For numerous IPE scholars, Antonio Gramsci’s theories developed in the historical conjuncture of Italian fascism of the 1930s, still bear fruitful applicability to explain contemporary world orders and to guide a critical reflection on the conditions of the world and the prospects of social transformation (Cox 1999, Gill 2003, Morton 2000). In particular, Gramsci’s work has been characterised as a critical engagement with historical materialism that sought to understand the status quo in order to devise a socialist strategy for its transformation (Cox 1999: 4, Gill 2003).

In contrast to other Marxists thinkers, Gramsci was concerned with the emancipatory potential of human agency, to the extent that his work has been characterised as different from abstract structuralism and even portraying a human(ist) character because: ‘historical

³ A ‘pure’ or ‘hard’ structuralist approach explains social change just as the product of structural combinations and relations. See: Scholte 1993, chapter 7.

change is understood as, to a substantial degree, the consequence of collective human activity' (Cox and Sinclair 1996, Gill 2003: 17, Gill 1993).

Gramsci's concern on the prospects of the socialist revolution in the West took him to explore the politico-ideological and cultural conditions that instigated or prevented it. For him, to understand capitalism's resilience it was not only necessary to look at production and its resulting social relations but also to the institutions and the ideas that, in particular historical conjunctures, legitimate it as a social order. For Gramsci, the prevailing social forces in their material, institutional and ideational dimension constituted a particular 'historic bloc' that had prevented the socialist revolution in Western Europe (Gramsci 1971).

As such, for Gramsci a historic bloc (social order) emerges from the interplay between socio-economic relations (base) and political and cultural practises (super-structure). Accordingly, in neo-Gramscian IPE analyses production and the resulting social relations (class relations) are central not only to understanding power, forms of state and world orders but also the institutional arrangements, ideas and discourses that contribute to legitimate a particular world order (Cox 1999, Gill and Law 1988, Gill 1995 and 2003).

Two important implications derive from these assumptions on the historical specificity of world orders. On one hand, mainstream IPE theories on the inter-state system and the market economy as 'given' social orders are challenged as both are explained as historically specific. This implication derives from Gramsci's own historical and dialectical way of thinking which according to Cox: 'serve[s]...to seize the momentary essence of a changing reality' (Cox 1999:5). On the other hand, by considering political and cultural dimensions, Gramsci's work contributes to contests narrow 'economic materialist' interpretations of world orders elaborated by orthodox or pure structuralist interpretations of historical materialism (Cox and Sinclair 1996, Gill 1993 and 2003).

From a pure materialist point of view the political economy is understood in terms of processes of surplus accumulation and class relations. In modern societies it is capitalism what sets the parameters of the political economy (who gets what) and the structures of society. From this standpoint, capitalism intrinsic contradictions such as its propensity to instability caused by the uneven concentration of capital and the failing rate of profits is

ultimately what drives social change and this take the form of class struggle (Hobden and Jones 2001, Palan 2000).

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, powerful structures of the IPE are observed as never fixed but being constantly (re)produced through particular material structures, patterns of ideas, and institutions that legitimate and serve particular interests (Cox 1999, Gill 2003, Morton 2000). In this way, the (re)production of world orders is observed as a constant flux of domination (coercion) and hegemony (consent) and the oppositions that emerge against both forms of power.

In the contemporary world order – from a neo-Gramscian point of view - the powerful mentality of *hyper-liberalism* legitimates certain disciplinary regimes in tune with market rationality that ‘lock in’ policy decisions at different levels (i.e. global, regional, local). Moreover, this hyper-liberalist mentality shapes institutions that help to legitimate US hegemonic and coercive power. In this world order, the hegemony of capitalist production and accumulation has instigated an increasingly unequal global division of power and labour. This is reinforced through neoliberal discourses and disciplinary regimes that promote economic deregulation, a fight against inflation and the reduction of states activities and government’s expenditures.

All of this is institutionalized (‘lock in’) through governance arrangements that discipline national constitutions to the logic of the market. In other words, through *the new constitutionalism of disciplinary neoliberalism*, powerful forces establish rules and institutions that ‘promote the policies and interests of firms and capital owners’ and of powerful states (Cox et al. 1994: 366, Gills 2000 and 1995, Mittelman 2000).

Hegemony, power and resistance

Neo-Gramscian accounts on world orders seek to engage with Gramsci’s own commitment of understanding the relations between structural forces in the making of social orders and to identify possible alternatives emerging from resistance forces (Cox 1999, Gill 2003, Morton 2000). This is why the concepts of hegemony, power and resistance are of crucial importance in this tradition.

Hegemony is an important and contentious reference in Gramsci's work and through it he sought to understand the success and failure of socialist revolution at world-wide scale (Bobbio 1988). In particular, Gramsci argued that the hegemony of one social class over society takes place when power is held through a political, intellectual and moral kind of authority or leadership (consent). Therefore, in his work, hegemony makes reference to a consented form of power that makes possible the identification of people with their political and social institutions and that contrasts with 'coercive' forms of domination (Bobbio 1988, Cox 1999: 5, Gill 1993 and 2003, Morton 2000).

In neo-Gramscian accounts, hegemony is understood as an 'indirect' form of political economic domination which takes the form of 'apparent acquiescence' or a 'common sense' and that it is seen as a characteristic of the whole (the world order) and not of the parts (agents) (Cox et al. 1994, Morton 2000: 257). Therefore, in a hegemonic social order, alternative or contesting views have already been co-opted or subsumed by a powerful mentality that has been internalised as the 'normal way of doing things', as a 'way of life' (Bakker and Gill 2003, Cox et al. 1994).

Nevertheless, hegemony is never complete or monolithic, but transitory and historically specific as 'oppositions can always develop' (Morton 2000: 258). 'Different historical contexts will produce different forms of hegemony with different set of actors' (Mittelman 2000: 184). Therefore, in the analysis of world orders, hegemony (consented domination) is one of the possible forms in which power is exercised and forces of social resistance can always emerge and contest hegemonic forms of power (Gill 2003: xi).

In this way, the concept of power is deeply interlinked to the concept of resistance in neo-Gramscian accounts on world orders. A world order as a 'social process that involves dominant power and resistance to that power' involves 'a hierarchy of states, new forms of power and authority, linked to the globalisation of capital and resistance' (Gill 2003: xiv). Under conditions of intensifying globalisation, power as a form of domination (hegemonic or coercive) is exercised through capitalist exploitation, its accompanying inequalities, its exclusionary discourses and its disciplinary institutions. In this historical context, to resist entails to oppose the 'common sense' of neoliberal policy frameworks on regionalisation, globalisation, development, participation, democracy and so on; but also to oppose universalistic and homogenisation projects (i.e. consumerism, Western culture) (Gill 2003,

Gills 2000, Mittelman 2000). In this conjuncture, resistance can take different forms, but it is often seen as ‘part of a societal response to market driven globalisation’ (Gills 2000:9).

Recent accounts that address the concepts of power and resistance in the making of world orders have tried to observe them in a broader perspective. In particular, it is argued that under transformations in governance both, ‘power and resistance can have different *forms* and *moments*’ as these are shaped by social relations of gender, race, age, class, ideology, identity and by social geographies (the local, national, regional and global) (Gill 2003, xi).⁴

Civil society in Neo-Gramscian perspective

Nowadays, the concept of civil society is often associated to voluntary forms of collective action that to some extent are different, autonomous and/or oppositional to forms of corporate and state power. This notion contrasts in various ways with 18th and 19th century concepts of civil society, including that of Antonio Gramsci’s (Cohen and Arato 1992, Cox 1999, Scholte 2002). As previously noticed in the introduction of this paper, our concept of *transborder civic activism* draws from contemporary post-Marxist conceptualisations on civil society elaborated by Cohen and Arato (1992), its actualisation to the Mexican case by Olvera (1999 and 199b) and keeps some contentious aspects of Gramsci’s view on this social realm because of its explanatory potentials that are discussed next.

Gramsci’s view on civil society contrasts to liberal and orthodox Marxist perspectives. On the one hand, civil society is integrally connected to the state and is not independent, disconnected or an alternative to it as diverse liberal interpretations on civil society assert when ‘detecting’ a moral superiority of the latter (Macdonald 1994: 272). On the other hand, Gramsci’s view on civil society as a realm where the hegemony of the state was consented, sustained, reproduced and channelled; but also where counter-hegemonic and emancipatory forces could also emerge; is different from orthodox Marxist’s views that see this realm as purely related to or expressing the bourgeois social order (Cox 1999, Macdonald 1994)

For Gramsci civil society was the realm where a socialist alternative could take place and hence, he was concerned with the possible strategies that should be followed. As such, he

⁴ Original quotation but the emphasis is mine.

elaborated the concept of '*war of position*' as a long-term counter-hegemonic strategy 'for the conquest of civil society and for the transformation of civil society in an emancipatory direction' (Cox 1999: 8). This strategy was different from a *war of manoeuvre* that could render an immediate victory, but that didn't transform civil society as the cultural/ideological ground of hegemony (Gramsci 1971). Precisely, these concepts are undertaken by neo-Gramscian commentators to 'assess' civil society groups' as 'totalities' of strategic/instrumentally driven emancipatory and counter-hegemonic possibilities. This point will be discussed later in this paper.

Moreover, according to Cox, Gramsci rejected the 'spontaneity' and 'voluntarism' in the notion of civil society elaborated by Toqueville in relation to the flourishing of associations in early US democracy (Cox 1999: 7). For Gramsci, 'there was never pure spontaneity in the construction of social organization but always a combination of leadership and movement from below' (Cox 1999: 6).

To sum up, Gramsci's notion of civil society became an adequate source in order to overcome important liberal shortcomings on the concept. For example, in neo-Gramscian accounts, civil society is not only about an assemblage of actors or autonomous social groups harmoniously gathered. Civil society from Gramsci's perspective is a realm of contestation as power relations are inherent to it as well as 'multiple forms of oppression' (Cox 1999: 10, Macdonald 1994: 268). Therefore, the inherent dialectic in Gramsci's notion of civil society challenges the 'spontaneous' and 'voluntaristic' liberal notions of civil society and the assumption of a 'given' and more or less stable political market (political society). Civil society seen as an arena of hegemony and contestation 'permits an analysis of contradiction and conflict within [this social realm] rather than viewing the primary contradiction as lying between state and civil society' as liberal approaches tend to emphasise (Macdonald 1994: 276).

From a neo-Gramscian view, civil society as a social realm is both 'shaper and shaped' and its agents stabilize and reproduce the status quo but also can drive social transformations (Cox 1999: 5). For the specific purposes of this paper, Gramsci's twofold view of the realm of civil society (the whole) if taken to its parts (TCA) allows, in principle, to elaborate on an analysis of TCA's associative, private and cultural expressions as both (re)producing and/or contesting forms of power in the making of regions. However, it is important to clarify some

major explanatory limitations that this tradition holds regarding agency before proceeding with this automatic ‘adjudication’ of the nature of the whole to one of its parts.

Agency

Neo-Gramscian accounts look at agency in the analysis of world orders emphasizing that: a) agency is conditioned by powerful structures; or b) agency is making up these structures. While not rejecting this altogether but attempting to go further, this paper advances a critique to both views on agency and some alternatives.

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, agency and structure are part of a single set of historical processes and make reference to ‘methodological postulates that help us identify aspects of the pattering and transformation of social consciousness, social action and social relations in different historical situations’ (Gill and Bakker 2003: 21). It is in this level of analysis where the explanatory limitations of this tradition can be grasped as it is argued below.

In particular, neo-Gramscian accounts emphasise that agency is the result of structural contradictions of capitalism *or* that agency is making up the structures in the world order (Cox 1999, Gill 2003, Morton 2000, Underhill 2000). In short, these two emphases on agency derive from a historical materialist epistemology focused on social structures (the situation) rather than on individual agents (Bakker and Gill 2003, Gill 2003: 23). Here a caveat is important. The following section more than merely identifying ‘two different strands’ within neo-Gramscian writers rather suggests two sorts of emphases in their accounts on agency in civil society. It is argued that these accounts have implications on the ways they explain the emergence of associational expressions of civil society at national, regional and transborder levels.

First emphasis: agency results from structural contradictions

Unsurprisingly, the first ‘emphasis’ on agency observes social transformation taking place at a structural/systemic dimension. More specifically, when civil society organisations, social and popular movements are seen as forms of *social resistance* *or* as a *stabilizing forces of the status quo* it is assumed that their ‘agency’ derives from prevailing relations among social structures: capitalism, neoliberal discourses, new constitutionalism, etc. (Gill 1993 and 2003,

Gills 2000). Therefore, the responses of those actors that are *supportive* or *oppose* neoliberal frameworks on regionalisation *are seen as outcomes* of the structures of capitalist accumulation and exploitation that constrain certain social forces and have enabled others.

In the particular case of agency as ‘resistance’ to the ‘common sense’ of neoliberal policy/institutional/ideological/material domination, it is explained as *deriving from* the *dialectic* dynamics that characterised world orders. For Cox, those actors and groups opposing hegemonic-neoliberal forms of globalisation represent a ‘dialectical response to homogenisation’, an ‘affirmation of difference’ (Cox 1997a: 24).

Polanyi: Resistance, Agency and Regionalisation

Agency as resistance has also been explained as part of the ‘double movement’ envisaged by Karl Polanyi to explain systemic transformations. In particular, commentators have revitalised *The Great Transformation’s* core thesis: the ‘self-regulating market expansion’ (the first movement) provokes socially disruptive and polarising trends and the reassertion of political responses (the double movement) (Cox 1996: 32, Cox 1995: 39, Gills 2001, Hettne 1997: 224, Mittelman 2000). In the 1930s conjuncture (world-wide crisis of capitalist accumulation), these political responses took the form of society’s demands on the state that sought to counteract the harmful effects of the market.

In the present conjuncture of an ascendant neoliberal hegemony in the global economy, these political responses (double movement) take the form of ‘sustained pressures for self-protection’ coming from states, but also from civil societies and forces within this social realm which seek to be organised in order to protect themselves from ‘the atomising consequences of the market’ (Gills 1997: 217, Hettne 1997, Mittelman 2000).

As for regionalisation processes, Polanyi’s thesis on a regional order as a response to the disturbances provoked by an unregulated liberal world order has been revitalised too. In particular, his scepticism on the market’s expansion has been undertaken to explain forms of political resistance emerging against ‘neoliberal regionalism’ (Mittelman 2000). In other words, commentators emphasise that regional governance arrangements based upon a self-regulated market have generated important social dislocations, such as income disparities and unequal distribution of free trade benefits, both among regional units (macro-regions) and within countries (micro-regions) (Hettne 1997, Hveem 2000).

The political responses of self protection to these dislocations can take the form of aggressive forms of extended economic nationalism, neo-mercantilism and autarkic alternatives which aim to strengthen particular political economic units (a state, a region) from the external influences of a free market economy. These responses can come either from official sectors as from commercial and civil society actors (Hettne 1997: 223, Hveem 2000, Mittleman 2000, Polanyi 1957 and 1945).

Second emphasis: agency makes the structures

A second ‘perspective’ within the neo-Gramscian tradition emphasises that social struggle has been underestimated in the making of world orders as agents make up the structures of the social world: ‘although social action is constrained by and constituted within prevailing social structures, those structures are transformed by agency’ (Cox et al 1994: 366, Gill 1993: 23). In particular, these neo-Gramscian accounts not only urge to re-insert social struggle in the analysis of world orders as a driven force of social change, but advises that it needs to be addressed as not “over determined” by historical laws (Baker and Gill 2003, Gill 2003: xi).

In specific accounts, agents’ consciousness is acknowledged as ‘an autonomous force’ despite the existence of material constraints (Cox 1999: 16). Therefore, while in the first emphasis contradictions derive from ‘historical structures’, in this second emphasis historical contradictions ‘result from human beings acquiring self-consciousness and capacity to understand and act in historical situations’ (Gill 2003: 22, note 2). In this way, this perspective acknowledges the self-reflexivity of the agents despite structural constraints.

The implications of this emphasis on agent’s self-reflexivity are various. For example, within the neo-Gramscian IPE tradition there has been an attempt to problematized agency in the analysis of world orders. In particular, it is observed that forms of power and resistance as ‘agency’ can take different forms and moments (Gill 2003: xi). The various forms of power and resistance include ‘hegemonic leadership, supremacy, counter-hegemonic resistance, and transformative resistance’ the latter being describe as one that ‘may serve to constitute historical alternatives’ (Gill 2003: xi). At the same time, as ‘various forms of power are connected to different forms and patterns of resistance [these] can be active, passive, localised, global, negative or creative’ (Gill 2003: xvi).

However, in these accounts agency is *either* power *or* resistance. This is partly due to the fact that the neo-Gramscian tradition addresses ‘agency’ from the perspective of the structures (the whole) and hence it tends to portray it as unproblematic and unified ‘actors’, just like problem solving theories do with state actors, interests groups, MNCs (Drainville 1999 and 2003). As such, ‘actors’ in the realm of civil society are seen as part of a ‘progressive movement’ or a ‘passive revolution’ as a form of a counter-revolutionary or restorationist reform from above that prevents mass participation and avoids radical social change (Drainville 1999, Morton 2000).

Certain attempts to ‘problematize’ the ‘actors’ have done this by unveiling how dominant powers co-opted radical groups. These trends in the actors are often explained from the perspective of the ‘big picture’ of *transformismo*, understood as a form of ‘passive revolution’ or ‘change without change’ (Drainville 1999, Morton 2000).

In some other accounts, civil society groups are seen as performing the role of ‘organic intellectuals’, understood as critical agents that ‘serve to clarify the political thinking of social groups, leading the members of these groups to understand their existing situation in society’ (Cox 1999: 16). In other accounts, agents are examined with respect to the ‘level’ of consciousness that Gramsci envisaged in social forces: corporative, class related or hegemonic (Cox 1999: 15). For example, one commentator has argued that due to the fact that RMAC is embedded in a ‘corporative consciousness’ it is unable to ‘challenge the status quo in any essential respect’ because this network ‘just looked out for the interest of a particular group’ (Drainville 1999).

Clearly, these perspectives on the ‘actors’ stem from Gramsci’s own concern in identifying potentialities of emancipation in civil society by taking into account dominant structures without descending into methodological individualism or reductionism (Gill 2003: 11). This is why this level of analysis in neo-Gramscian tradition makes a crucial contribution as a ‘critical’ approach to overcome ‘voluntaristic’ explanations of mainstream IR/IPE liberal and realist approaches.

Explanatory Limitations and Some Alternatives

For the purposes of this paper's argument, the explanatory limitations of these two neo-Gramscian views on agency are not seen related to agency explained within the 'big picture' of relationships unfolding amongst structural forces and actors responses. This, in fact, alerts us about 'the multiple dimensions of power inherent' in the realm of civil society (Macdonald 1994: 281).

The explanatory limitations of this approach derive from other crucial aspects. For example, neo-Gramscian accounts on 'agency' although understand it as collective human activity, tend to display the 'agency' of civil society actors as monolithic and fixed. In other words, their strategies, tactics and objectives are assumed to be coherent with their impacts too: lobbying and collaborating with authorities imply a reformist programme, and hence their impacts are restorationist efforts to sustain the hegemony of capital (Drainville 1999). Therefore, groups and expressions of civil society are 'assessed' with respect to whether their potentialities can drive progressive alternatives or not, rather than explain them by taking into account their contradictions and diversity when driving or not driving those alternatives.

One commentator has already noticed this in early neo-Gramscian accounts on civil society. For her, civil society was addressed in 'one-dimensional terms': as forging the transnational political identity of capital. Accordingly, this perspective did not recognise 'the forms of contestation against the transnational capitalist hegemony which already exist' in civil society (Macdonald 1994: 281). In short, Gramsci's twofold view on civil society as a realm of power and contestation was neglected.

In this paper, we attempt to go a step further with this critique. It is argued that there are crucial aspects of the social realm of civil society and its actors and expressions that have been neglected because of the ways in which agency is addressed by neo-Gramscian commentators as regards to the making of regional and global orders: agency results from *or* is making up the structures.

We start by undertaking Gramsci's original dialectic view of the realm of civil society (the whole) to characterise one of its associational expressions (TCA). In other words, RMALC, Ciudadan@s and the GC Forum's TCA is seen as expressions of *both*, power and resistance

in the making and re-making of regions. For that reason, it is understood that these collective actors are ‘not always neat, rational, and unitary: rather, they contain and express a multiplicity of meanings, varying according to context and historical conjuncture’ (Jelin 1997: 80).

As such, the TCA of RMALC can contribute to reproducing the common sense of neoliberal economic restructuring and also other forms of power within Mexico and abroad (e.g. gender inequality, class structures, etc.). At the same time, this TCA can contest the common sense of neoliberal discourses on democracy and development, but also racist and cultural homogenising discourses within Mexico.

More specifically, a member of RMALC or Ciudadan@s or the Mexican member of the GC Form can work and negotiate with multilateral banks that support trade liberalisation in order to promote these institutions’ own democratisation and transparency. Equipo Pueblo as an active member of RMALC and Ciudadan@s Ciudadan@s has – through its citizen diplomacy area – constituted the transborder *Alliance Facing the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)*.⁵ This alliance seeks to involve legislative representatives in Mexico and other countries in decision-making process on debt contracting.

At the same time, the Equipo Pueblo as part of RMALC co-ordination team has rejected economic support from the IADB and currently promotes a critical position in Mexico against important programs of this bank (i.e. *Alianza Mexicana por la Autonomía de los Pueblos Frente al Plan Puebla Panamá* [Mexican Alliance for the Autonomy of the Communities Facing the Puebla Panama Plan]). This Alliance opposes the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the Plan Puebla Panamá (Interview 1).⁶

Moreover, these groups transborder counterparts also follow their own agendas and mandate which not necessarily coincides in everything with their Mexican counterparts. This is the

5 Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) promoted neoliberal structural reforms since early 1990s in Mexico and Latin America.

6 The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) is a US initiative to create a free trade area from Alaska to South America. For more information on the FTAA from a critical view visit the Hemispheric Social Alliance website: www.hsa.org In this same website and RMALC’s website (www.rmalc.org.mx) can be found information on the the Plan Puebla Panama [Puebla Panama Plan] that involves the creation of an industrial corridor from the Southern city of Puebla in Mexico until Panama financed by the IADB and the World Bank.

case of the Copenhagen Initiative For Central America and Mexico (CIFCA) and Ciudadan@s accordingly to one of its main participants (Interview 5).

Keeping this on mind, the TCA of RMALC, Ciudadan@s and the GC Forum as expressions of both *power and resistance* are understood as ‘slices’ of the contemporary dynamics of social participation, resistance and organisation in Mexico. As such, these need to be critically examined within the particular conjuncture of economic restructuring and a long-term political democratisation. Therefore, we can argue that when these groups managed to expand the public debate around the dominant neoliberal paradigm on the formation of regional units and to increase public deliberation and scrutiny of NAFTA, the EU-MEX Agreement and the ACS in Mexico and elsewhere they can be understood as *oppositional forms of transborder resistance* towards exclusionary and homogenising policy frameworks on regionalisation.

In addition to what has been mentioned above, other important explanatory limitations of neo-Gramscian accounts derive from how civil society is addressed. On the one hand, this social realm is understood from a functionalist perspective, and on the other, this tradition takes for granted the institutions of a modern civil society, at least in a domestic/national dimension. This has serious implications for the interpretations of empirical trends of TCA in Mexico as is argued below.

A functionalist view of the realm of civil society and its actors entails that the TCA of our cases would be examined as means that stabilise and/or contest the hegemony of neoliberal policy frameworks on regionalisation. In other words, civil society, its institutions and transborder associational expressions, actors and impacts are simply functional to the reproduction of capitalism or any other hegemony (e.g. socialist, western culture, male domination, universalism, etc.). Often neo-Gramscian commentators have followed this perspective and as such have contributed to unveiling powerful structural forces in the political economy of regionalisation, but they have neglected non-instrumental/functionalist aspects of the realm of civil society and its actors (Drainville 1999, Morton 2000). This is explained below.

In contrast to this functionalist perspective on civil society, self-called post-Marxist accounts have challenged this reductionism while linking the notion of civil society’s expansion and

democratisation to a political and cultural project contrary to dominant trends of de-politicisation and commodification of public and private life (Cohen and Arato 1992: 155). This project has already been noticed in neo-Gramscian accounts as a crucial step that can give shape to ‘alternative’ world orders (see Cox 1999 and 2003, Gills 1997:217). However, the ‘democratisation’ also named ‘counter-hegemonic struggle in civil society’ is seen as just functional to the construction of an alternative (often socialist) historic bloc.

Accordingly, among neo-Gramscian commentators a central concern has recently been the identification of ‘who will lead’ the democratisation (also named radical transformation) within civil society forces within this ‘post-modern Prince’ in which a unified direction seems unfeasible (Cox 1999 and 2003, Gill 2003).

For some, emergent forces of solidarity and resistance ‘from below’ within the realm of civil society are the sources of radical transformations. In doing so, commentators remark that these dynamics are not linked to power or capital, but to ‘community’ and that they constitute possible routes toward emancipation. This has been defined *as politics from below* and as such ‘may constitute a major *although not necessarily revolutionary change* in the condition of the emerging world order *and perhaps in a more democratic direction*’ (Cox 1993:3, Falk 1999, Gill 1997: 217, Gills 2000, Mittelman 2000).⁷

Nevertheless, once more these accounts observe such dynamics in civil society at sub-national, national, regional and global levels as functional to the particular end of building up counter-hegemony. In other words, civil society is understood in primarily ‘strategic’ terms (Cohen and Arato 1992: 147).

Therefore, this paper undertakes the initial neo-Gramscian acknowledgement of a non-functional dimension within the realm of civil society and its actors as an important reference in understanding that forces of ‘solidarity from below’ might constitute an important and open-ended transformation in itself in a conjuncture of ascendant neoliberal hegemony, depoliticisation and the commodification of public and private life. This is done in order to explain that the contributions of RMALC, Ciudadan@s and the GC Forum’s TCA that have helped to encourage these responses (solidarity, community) within civil society

⁷ Original quotation, but authors’ emphasis

both, in Mexico and elsewhere, cannot be understood solely from a functionalist perspective. In fact, from a functionalist perspective this has been neglected.

Moreover, in assuming the realm of civil society and its 'modern' institutions as a given in contemporary Mexico, the numerous factors that have traditionally obstructed the growth of associational life outside of state corporative structures, its institutionalisation and its effective protection become second order questions (Olvera 1997, 1999a and 2000, Pearce 1997). Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the weakness of the institutions of 'modern' civil society in Mexico when exploring contemporary examples of TCA: from the idea of rights to the principles of autonomous association and free, horizontal communication, but also the ineffective enforcement of substantive rights or the lack of them (e.g. minority rights) and the general shortfalls of a state of right. This is in addition to prevailing material and socio-economic conditions (e.g. capitalist market, neoliberal reforms, socio-economic polarisation, unemployment, etc) (Cohen and Arato 1992: 155, Olvera 2000, Pearce 1997).

In a recent account Robert Cox has noticed the importance of addressing the situation of civil societies in order to understand the role of this social realm in reducing the gap of legitimacy in contemporary post-9/11 world order. 'What are the prospects of a revival of civil society that would be sufficient to become a basis for an alternative order? To attempt an answer to this question, one has to examine the situation of civil society in the different parts of the world' (Cox 2002: xxi).

As mentioned above, the specifics of the realm of civil society in Mexico need to be integrated into the analysis on TCA and regionalisation processes as first order questions. Therefore, this social realm in Mexico, its actors, its institutions, its transborder expressions (TCA) are not taken as an already given 'institutional' context but as a 'movement', a 'space' in constant transformation with different levels of institutionalisation and organisation (Brito 1997, Mosivais 1996, Olvera 1996, 1997 and 1999).

As a result, TCA and its limited social and democratic contributions on regionalisation are observed as one of the possible manifestations of civil society in Mexico. Moreover, these display central transformations on collective forms of action while informing us about a moment in which the 'institutionalised dimension' of the realm of civil society is incipient (Aguilar 1999, Olvera 1999).

Here a caveat is important. To understand civil society and its expressions in Mexico as open-ended processes doesn't mean to stop asking *who* is or who can drive social transformations within this realm and for *whom* are these transformations. These questions are especially relevant amidst economic restructuring and long term political reconfiguration in which powerful interests/actors/forces have 'colonised' numerous of its expressions/spaces. In fact, these questions need to guide critical assessments on the structural forces that enable and constrain certain actors in detriment to others within civil society in Mexico.

Accordingly, the realm of civil society and its transborder expressions (TCA) in Mexico and abroad are not understood as disconnected from the political economy (state and markets), neither are they assessed just in terms of their 'strategic' conquest of 'power' or construction of hegemony. In this paper, our cases of study are observed in terms of their contributions on the political economy of regionalisation and whether these contributions *as open ended processes* advance the influence and control of wider sectors of society in the governance of processes regionalisation (Cohen and Arato 1992).

By open-ended processes, we understand that the public debate, scrutiny and deliberation on NAFTA, the EU-MEX Agreement and the ACS promoted by our cases of TCA has entailed some transformations in associational practises in civil society. It has also entailed some shifts in operational and ideational frameworks within this social realm and among their actors in Mexico and abroad. Although some of these transformations have had a democratic direction, this by no means has meant the full democratisation of civil society in Mexico.

Conclusions

This paper advances some ideas for the analysis of Mexican transborder civic activism (TCA) and processes of regionalisation. In doing so, it reviews different interpretations on civil society in the making of world orders, and particularly those inspired by neo-Grancian and Polanyian insights. These are not seen as fixed apparatus that evaluate 'reality', but as flexible and rich frameworks that can help us to understand the historical specificity of structural forces and agents responses under conditions of increasing supraterritoriality (Gill 1997b: 14, Scholte 2001b).

The paper argues that critical approaches stemming from neo-Gramscian and Polanyian accounts provide useful insights in understanding the emergence of TCA with respect to processes of regionalisation under conditions of globalisation. However, due to their own epistemological and methodological grounds, it can be observed that these traditions fail to provide a more detailed and comprehensive account on agency that could be useful to further explain (problematised) Mexican TCA as both power and resistance.

Moreover, as a result of a critical dialogue between theory and practise this paper judges some methodological strategies often followed to assess civil society's engagement at transborder levels as failing short. In particular, these don't address the complexity embedded in such kind of interactions.

At the same time, the paper has critically examined the methodological strategy often followed by neo-Gramscian commentators focused on detecting 'progressive' forces among civil society actors and address them as 'totalities' of strategic (instrumental) action. On the whole, this view departs from assuming the realm of civil society as 'a given', at least on a domestic/national level, and its actors as one-dimensional: either they are hegemonic or not, restorationist or not, progressive or not, whether they are alongside or against neoliberal regionalism, and so on. Thus, actors in civil society tend to be portrayed as fixed in time and solely driven by a calculated instrumental logic (just like 'interests groups' in liberal approaches!)

It was also pointed out that neo-Gramscian commentators tend to focus on civil society groups' transborder/global expressions, objectives, tactics, strategies, discourses and so on and from this analysis, civil society actors are 'assessed' as totalities of either counter-hegemonic possibilities or restorationist efforts that stabilise the status quo (Drainville 1999, Morton 2000).

This sort of methodological strategy to analyse empirical trends of TCA have important implications. For example, on the one hand, it disappears the 'momentary essence' of the realm of civil society, its institutions and its transborder expressions (TCA) as 'a changing reality' in the making and re-making of regions (Cox 1999). On the other hand, the diversity and ambivalences that coalesce around civil society organisations' objectives, agendas,

strategies, tactics, discourses, membership and solidarities in particular conjunctures become second order questions or are simply neglected.

In the introductory section it was set up this paper's interest on understanding the effect of Mexican TCA on regionalisation in a particular conjuncture, rather than on 'assessing' the objectives, tactics, and discourses of RMALC, Ciudadan@s and the GC Forum. This effect has been defined as open-ended responses of both power and resistance that in the particular conjuncture of altered patterns of governance at regional level are not necessarily counter-hegemonic but oppositional to exclusionary and homogenising neoliberal policy frameworks on regionalisation.

In short, one action of RMALC, Ciudadan@s or the GC Forum participants can contribute to contest the exclusionary aspects of neoliberal policy frameworks with respect to democracy and participation in processes of regionalisation and also other forms of power within Mexico and abroad (i.e. urban centrism). At the same time, another action can contribute to reproduce and stabilise accompanying forms of socio-economic inequality of capitalism but also other forms of exclusion and exploitation in Mexico and abroad (e.g. racism, sexism, etc.). Thus, it was argued that the TCA of RMALC, Ciudadan@s and the GC Forum as oppositional resistance can reproduce but also contest the status quo. However, this view on TCA only captures one dimension of it as has already been argued.

This paper also emphasises that neo-Gramscian accounts often depart from assuming the existence of civil society's institutions as a given set: a context where hegemony and resistance is forged. On the one hand, some implications of assuming the institutions of a 'modern' civil society as a given in contemporary Mexico have been examined. On the other hand, it has been noticed that the notion on civil society actors as instrumental (strategic) agents stems from what Cohen and Arato called 'Gramsci's functionalist reduction of the realm of civil society'. In other words, civil society either serves to reproduce the hegemony of capital or creates the socialist alternative and the counter-hegemonic forces. Civil society is always a means and not an open end in itself (Cohen and Arato 1992: 147).

An important implication of the latter is that in neo-Gramscian accounts on civil society actors and social movements (counter-hegemonic or not) these are seen as performing strategically or instrumentally to achieve a particular end (e.g. alternative hegemony or

emancipation). This is why the focus of these analyses has frequently been that of envisaging the strategies that social forces need to take in order to drive progressive transformations (e.g. war of position).

Although it was noted that some accounts in this critical tradition have already pointed at an emerging ‘solidarity’ among resistance/counter-movement actors in civil society that are not driven by power or money, this has an instrumental role once more: it serves to forge emancipation and counter-hegemony (Cox 1999, Gill 2003, Mittelman 2000, Morton 2000).

Therefore, those contributions of TCA on regionalisation that have posed a challenge to neoliberal discourses on regionalisation processes and have opened spaces to public participation would be understood as crucial ‘means’ to construct a counter-hegemony or at least to resist powerful forces. However, it has been argued that these contributions in a conjuncture of ascendant undemocratic and exclusionary capitalist hegemony also need to be thought as open-ended processes in themselves.

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Interviews

1. **Ms. Susana Cruikshank**. Project Co-ordinator. Citizen Diplomacy Area. DECA Equipo Pueblo. November 11th, 2003 at DECA Equipo Pueblo offices in Mexico City.
2. **Mr. Alberto Arroyo Pichard**. NAFTA and FTAA Campaigns Co-ordinator. RMALC. December 18th, 2003 in Mexico City.
3. **Dr. Manuel Canto Chac**. Member of the Executive Commision. Movimiento Ciudadano por la Democracia (MCD) and member of RMALC and Ciudadan@s. November 16th, 2003 at Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana, Campus Xochimilco
4. **Ms. Laura Becerra**. Executive Director. DECA Equipo Pueblo and member of RMALC and Ciudadan@s. November 19th, 2003 at DECA Equipo Pueblo offices in Mexico City.
5. **Mr. Manuel Pérez Rocha**. Mexico Advocacy Officer. OXFAM. Former Co-ordinator of Ciudadan@s and Member of RMALC. December 10th, 2003 at Mexico City.