

**“Convergence in the Making: Transnational Civil Society
and the Free Trade Area of the Americas”**

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Convergence in the Making: Transnational Civil Society and the Free Trade Area of the Americas¹

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Abstract

The paper analysis the role Hemispheric Social Alliance network in its efforts to build a transnational coalition between labor unions, social movements, indigenous, environmental and citizen organizations throughout the Americas to oppose the establishment of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The prospects of hemispheric solidarity cannot be assumed in face of such heterogeneity of social actors. Drawing from social constructivism and the theory of structuration, the paper will propose a methodological approach to the study of transnational collective action in the Americas by stressing the political value of building discourse coalitions and embedding collective expectations. Defying the official *meanings* of the FTAA project, the Hemispheric Social Alliance has been articulating a counter-hegemonic critique to neo-liberal approaches to development in the Western Hemisphere.

Key words: Transnational civil society; trade integration; the Americas.

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‘[P]ower is about the contestation of knowledge, ideas, and claims to truth in both a more overt and epistemologically necessary way. If knowledge is socially constituted, then that which is good knowledge and that which is legitimate knowledge are also socially constituted’ (Tooze, 1997: 208).

Introduction

At the Miami Summit of the Americas of 1994 thirty-four countries of the Americas (all countries apart from Cuba) announced their commitment to reach a consensus for the establishment of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The launching of the FTAA process was received with great concern by some sectors of civil society throughout the Americas who claimed the FTAA would undermine the prospects for the sustainable development in the region by institutionalizing a system of social inequality, marginality and injustice. In response to the FTAA initiative, a group of civil society organizations and social movements from across the Americas created in 1997 the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) to oppose the FTAA with the prospects of building consensus for an alternative and democratic model of development (Alternatives for the Americas, 2002).

The HSA network is a transnational and multisectoral alliance between labor unions, environmental and indigenous organizations, women’s movements and citizen coalitions claiming to represent 45 million people throughout the Americas. This network has been coordinating a hemispheric campaign against the FTAA that agglutinates many other organizations and social movements throughout the continent. However, Hemispheric solidarity cannot be assumed in face of such heterogeneity. This paper will address precisely the challenges of transnational collective action by proposing a theoretical framework for the study of the HSA in the context of the Hemispheric Campaign Against the FTAA.

It will be argued that transnational collective action is dependent upon the capacity of the network to frame and embed a particular understanding or meaning of the FTAA amongst key political actors throughout the Americas. Collective agency can only take place by the transformative process that results from participating in the sphere of intersubjective relations in which particular interests and normative expectations about hemispheric integration are

framed and diffused. An identity creating process, collective action is therefore about the articulation of a hemispheric discourse coalition.

Why is the FTAA project so controversial?

In order to address the issue of the transnational collective action of the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) it is first necessary to overview some of the central features of the FTAA project. This will show what makes this project so controversial and why it has become the center of attention of a network of civil society organizations and social movements from across the continent.

Covering the geographically largest trade area in the world (Estevadeordal, Goto and Sáez, 2000: 2), a combined population of 800 million and a gross domestic product of US\$ 9 trillion, the FTAA represents the most ambitious trade integration scheme in history (Salazar-Xirinachs, 2001: 280). More importantly, the FTAA also consists in the most asymmetric form of integration ever attempted. In this respect, this hemispheric project has become highly controversial considering that issues of democracy, human rights and development are invariably involved in the process of socioeconomic restructuring entailed in the creation of a more liberalized hemispheric market.

In relation to the democratic nature of the process, the technical complexity of the FTAA agenda compromises the capacity of smaller countries with limited bureaucracies and human resources to represent effectively their interests in the negotiation process. Moreover, for some time the FTAA negotiations were also conducted in secrecy among the appointed national trade officials, and in many cases even without the involvement of the national congresses and parliaments. This explains the absence of a public debate and media attention on the FTAA mostly during the early preparatory stages of the process and the negotiations. As a result from the pressure of the HAS and other civil society organizations to increase the transparency of the process, a copy of the draft version of the FTAA agreement was finally released to the public at the Quebec Summit of the Americas in 2001 (Barenberg and Evans, 2004; Wiesebron, 2004; Botto and Tussie, 2003: 43).

Additionally, the prospects of the FTAA contributing to the sustainable development in the regions seem bleak (Comercio con Justicia para las Américas, 2003). The FTAA agenda does not contemplate any common mechanism to compensate and provide financial assistance to the economic sectors and countries that will be most affected by liberalization. Consequently, if implemented the FTAA could further accentuate the asymmetries in the levels of social, economic and political development that already exist between the areas and countries that would be encompassed by this agreement (Botto and Tussie, 2003: 33-34). That is to say that only the most developed economies in the Americas will be in position to benefit from the FTAA (Sangmeister and Taalouch, 2003). This has led to the denunciation that the FTAA consists of another imperialist attempt of the United States to reassert hegemony in Latin America.

Finally, another controversial aspect of the FTAA is the framework to regulate investments proposed by the United States [1], following the model of the NAFTA Chapter 11. Provision like the NAFTA Chapter 11 subsume all the social and political dimensions of integration to the prevailing imperative to advance free trade, ultimately undermining the regulatory capacity of member states to introduce any modification to their domestic laws that may conflict with private commercial interests (Barenberg and Evans, 2004). This is particularly the case in the areas of health and the environment. The FTAA agreement would therefore privilege corporate interests in detriment of democratic sovereignty (Anderson and Arruda, 2002; Barlow and Clarke, n.d.; Hillebrand, 2003).

The controversial nature of the FTAA project has opened a political debate that has contributed to challenge the legitimacy of neo-liberal understandings of development. Similarly, this political debate has been animated by the increasing emergence of new forms of social resistance struggling against the different expressions of neo-liberal globalization. On the one hand, the possibility of transforming the current hegemonic order requires the existence of the appropriate structural conditions from which a critical mass can flourish. On the other hand, however, the role of political actors in bringing about social change out of such structural conditions is equally crucial. These two dimensions of social reality—structure and agency—will be addressed in the following sections of the paper. The underlying idea bringing them together is that neither of them can exist independently from the other. To take the question of collective action seriously one must engage in the analysis of the interaction between structures and agents. Finally, the theoretical approach to the

question of transnational agency will attempt to go beyond the materialist assumptions that have permeated analyses of the political economy of development. In this respect, the role of ideas and perceptions in political processes as developed by social constructivist accounts will be of central importance to this analysis.

The FTAA as a political opportunity structure for social mobilization

The possibility of political agency cannot be conceived independently from the changing structures of opportunity available to political actors at a given time. The concept of political opportunity structures has been developed in the sociology of social movement literature to understand the emergence and dynamics of contentious politics by social movements (Eisinger, 1973: 11-28; Tarrow, 1983; Tarrow, 1989; Kriesi, 1995). Political opportunity structure refers to the specific configuration of factors that facilitate or constrain the efforts of social movements to bring about social change (Smith, Pagnucco and Chatfield, 1997: 66). Sidney Tarrow proposes to think of political opportunity structures in terms of the increasing access of social movements to formal political systems, the possibility of political alignments with political parties in government or sectors of the electorate and divisions among the ruling élite. The likeliness of social movements to engage in contentious politics will be equally mediated by the kinds of strategies employed by the governments to repress and control emerging expressions of contentious politics (1999: 71-89).

The notion of opportunity structure is indeterminate. It is not a fixed model that can be applied across the board to explain social mobilization in different countries by singling out a set of exclusively objective factors and conditions that determine social mobilization (Tarrow, 1998). This means that we should avoid endowing the concept with a pretended causality it does not have. Namely, no objective conditions are sufficient to determine and explain the emergency of social mobilization. Instead, the concept of opportunity structure serves as an analytical toolbox to address the political process that takes place among actors engaged in contentious politics, political allies and élite groups. Provided it is animated by the sustained patterns of interactions between the contending actors, such a political process is inherently dynamic and path-dependent.

The impossibility of reducing the emergence of social mobilization to the existence of a set of

objective criteria has to do with the centrality of actors' perceptions and/or expectations in the formation of opportunity structures. Brockett explains that structures are subjective insofar as social 'mobilization and action are mediated by perception' (1991: 255). This is also suggested by the analysis of Marisa von Bullow on the participation of civil society organizations in the Summit of the Americas process—where the FTAA consists of a central issue in the agenda. She claims that participation is mostly associated with 'the capacity of social actors to perceive that such opportunities are worthwhile taking' and not simply to the institutional opportunities available for participation (2003: 100, my translation). In this respect, the perceptions of the possibilities of social transformation are inherent to the structures available to social actors to engage in contentious politics. By the same token, the 'political factors that facilitate/inhibit the perception of opportunities for collective action are part of the structure of political opportunities, as well' (Brockett, 1991: 255). The role of the Hemispheric Social Alliance in the campaign against the FTAA can therefore be understood in terms of its efforts to expand the political opportunity structure for mobilization by constructing and diffusion a particular set of expectations towards social change.

The possibilities of transnational connections introduced by globalization (co-ordination of activities, mobility and exchange of information) is transforming the way we understand ourselves in relation to this process, having a direct effect on the nature of globalization itself. Namely, as Cox and Turenne Sjolander put it, '[p]eople's experiences with globalization and reactions to it depend intrinsically upon how globalization redefines agency' (1997: 141). It is for this reason that the notion of political opportunity structures that is presented here is intricately dependent on the agency and perceptions/ideas of social actors involved in contentious political processes.

Nevertheless, this concept of opportunity structure was developed by the literature on social movements to understand contentious politics and mobilization primarily in the context of the nation-state. This is revealed by the vast production of country-specific and comparative analyses of social movements in different national settings developed in this literature—mainly limited to Western industrialized democracies (Brockett, 1991: 253). State-centric approaches become increasingly incapable of accommodating transnational processes, as evidenced by the rise of transborder activism. Riker and Sikkink argue that we need to go beyond the traditional focus on domestic analyses of social movement activity to address the transnational dimension of collective action (2002: 18). Similarly, we need to adapt the state-

centric concept of political opportunity structure to be able to accommodate the ‘transborder social relations’ that exist between various civil society members engaged in advocacy campaigns (Scholte, 2003).

Polity-centered accounts that focus on the interactions between social actors and nation-states and/or international institutions remain very important in order to address the formation and degree of influence of civil society groups, but they fail short to explore the field of interactions taking place among transnational civil society groups. Raimo Vayrynen argues that transnational collective action by social movements has acquired a significant degree of autonomy from the effective control of a single state or a coalition of states. They have a certain independent logic of their own (2001: 237). This ‘autonomous’ sphere of interactions needs to be considered when trying to understand how transnational actors such as the HSA construct and diffuse particular expectations of social change that feed on transnational opportunity structure for mobilization in the Americas.

Until this point it has been established that perceptions and expectations of social change driving political actors into contentious politics are constitutive of the political opportunity structures in which such actors operate. It has also been claimed that opportunity structures need not be limited to domestic political processes. As our case study shows, political processes can also extend along a hemispheric political space mediated through transnational set of relations. Nevertheless these perceptions and expectations of social change do not emanate in a vacuum. Their emergence is always dependent on the existence of conditions favorable for the surge of contentious politics. This is not to say that the content of the ideas and expectations driving social mobilization are determined by an underlying arrangement of ‘objective’ and material structural conditions. As it will be discussed in the following section of the paper, it is the political *meanings* attributed to such conditions—and the strategic use of them (agency)—that are ultimately important when understanding social mobilization. Agency and meaning remain central. In the final part of this section I will identify three main elements that lay out the conditions for the emergence and spread of transnational collective action in the Americas to halt the FTAA project.

The first element that needs to be highlighted is the growing and generalized sense of skepticism experienced throughout the hemisphere towards neo-liberal approaches to development. The structural reforms following the Washington Consensus that were

implemented in the region during the 1990s have not generated a sufficient economic growth to meet the needs of the population (UNDP, 2004: 26). Unemployment, widening socioeconomic polarization and rising insecurity remain to be central problems affecting the region, albeit in different degrees depending on the area. This context has contributed to a changing understanding of the state. Specifically, there is an increasing expectation that the state should assume once again the role of regulator of society (UNDP, 2004: 26). The market-based model of development implicit in the FTAA project runs contrary to this trend.

The second element favoring the emergence of expectations of social change is the fragmentation of social and political order that has characterized the public space in Latin America during at least the last two decades (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992: 3). The structural reforms introduced in Latin America since the 1970s and 1980s changed the corporatist system of interest intermediation that sustained the import-substitution mode of accumulation that prevailed since the 1930s (Chalmers et. al., 1998; Oxhorn, 1998). This fragmentation of social order was in turn accompanied by a generalized crisis of political parties and the dramatic deterioration in the quality of democracy in the region throughout the 1990s (UNDP, 2004). Towards the mid-1990s new forms of representation and organized interests emerged demanding a greater autonomy from the state and intensifying their struggles against the exclusionary consequences of economic restructuring policies (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Seone and Taddei, 2002: 111; Calderón, Piscitelli and Reyna, 1992:24). The weakening of labor organizations throughout the continent favored the emergence of new coalitions between labor unions and groups coming from outside the traditional representation structures advocating issues of community, racism, gender, democracy, human rights, militarism, health and the environment (Kidder, 2002: 270). These cross-sectoral coalitions have served as political laboratories to promote 'creative new participatory strategies as well as new aims' (Hochstetler, 1998: 193).

Finally, the development of information and communication technologies constitutes another element enabling the formation of transborder coalitions against the FTAA. As Meyer and Tarrow claim, 'the tactics and symbols of social protest now appear to spread geographically more easily and more rapidly than they did in the past, both within nations and cross-nationally' (1998: 11). What is new with technology is that it permits the development of political relations and instant communications at a global level unmediated by the constraints

of territoriality. This is what Scholte refers to as the ‘deterritorialization’ of politics (2003) and what Anthony Giddens calls the compression of time and space (1991).

This has implications for the diffusion of contentious politics. As Meyer and Tarrow explain, ‘when a new form of contention or a new campaign demonstrates its power to mobilize large number of citizens or shows up the state’s vulnerability, its use is rapidly triggered elsewhere’ (1998: 11). Moreover, the possibility of instant communication has redefined the understandings of locality. As Cohen and Rai put it, even when people are rooted in specific local realities, communication technologies permits a form of transnationalism that ‘has changed people’s relations to space particularly creating ‘social fields’ that connect and position some actors in more than one country’ (2000: 14). Namely, technology has provided the ground for the creation of ‘imagined commonalities among challengers across social groups and national states’ (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998: 5) that are central to the possibility of establishing new forms of solidarity and participation across transnational spaces in the formation of ‘transnational communities of resistance’ (Drainville, 1995).

The coexistence of the aforementioned elements creates conditions for civil society actors to extend their efforts to challenge the hegemonic neo-liberal approach to development captured by the FTAA initiative through the pursuit of a hemispheric transnational coalition of resistance. Nonetheless, the opportunity structure for transnational mobilization is also dependent on the capacity of the HSA to articulate a common discourse of the FTAA among key social actors across the hemisphere. This is the case since the actors’ expectations towards change are a constitutive dimension of opportunity structures.

Seizing political opportunity: the question of transnational agency

This analysis of the role of the imagination as a popular, social, collective fact in the era of globalization recognizes its split character. On the one hand, it is in and through the imagination that modern citizens are disciplined and controlled, by states, markets and other powerful interests. But it is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge (Appadurai, 1999: 131).

Political opportunity structures do not determine the mobilization of social actors. They instead provide a series of conditions that are favorable for political action. What is of central

importance is to explain what political actors do in order to transform those conditions into effective political practice. In other words, what needs to be addressed is the question of agency, which in our case translates as the possibility of hemispheric transnational collective action in the Americas. To do so it is first necessary to outline some of the main difficulties encountered by the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) network in its efforts to build transnational coalitions with other civil society organizations in the coordination of a hemispheric campaign against the FTAA. In this section of the paper I will propose an approach to understand transnational collective agency that builds on this experience.

The HSA was created on May 1997 at the meeting held parallel to the FTAA Trade Ministerial in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. It consists of a multisectoral network of organizations from across the Americas that brings together labor unions, environmental and indigenous organizations, women's movements and citizen coalitions. Each of the member organizations is, in turn, head of other networks of organizations within each of their respective countries. In other words, the HSA is a network of networks (see table 1 below). The view of hemispheric integration proposed by the HSA is based on a commitment to sustainable and equitable development, protection of labor rights and the environment and the defense of the state as a provider of certain public goods essential to ensure social equity, the respect of human rights and democratic sovereignty.

The HSA has been instrumental in coordinating a Hemispheric campaign against the FTAA. Many other organizations from the Americas who are not members of the HSA network also participate in this campaign. Whereas the HSA does not control the dynamics of the campaign, they are nonetheless the most important actor leading this process. They are responsible for the coordination, administrative work and circulation of information related to the campaign. These activities take place at the HSA Secretariat based in Sao Paulo, Brazil, since April 2002 (coordinated by REBRIP) and before then in Mexico City, Mexico (by RMALC). Most importantly, the HSA has been crucial in establishing and promoting alliances between the different groups that mobilize against the FTAA as part of the same campaign.

Table 1: Networks that integrate the core of the Hemispheric Social Alliance

Network	Origin
Mexican Action Network on Free Trade – RMALC	Mexico
Network for the Peoples Integration – REBRIP	Brazil
Common Frontiers	Canada
Réseau Québécois sur l'Intégration Continentale – RQIC	Québec, Canada
Alliance for Responsible Trade – ART	United States
Alianza Chilena por un Comercio Justo y Responsable – ACJR	Chile
Congreso Latinoamericano de Organizaciones Campesinas–CLOC	Regional
Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores – ORIT	Regional

Such a multiplicity of heterogeneous social actors, representing different sectors, interests, ideological positions and traditions of advocacy work, poses a significant challenge to the efforts of the HSA to carry out collective initiatives (Serbin, 2003: 99). This challenge results from some of the tensions that arise among the diverse composition of members of the Alliance. As Sikkink holds, ‘networks, transnational coalitions, and movements are full of internal divisions and conflicts. Although networks may present a harmonious front to the external world, they often experience deep internal divisions’ (2002: 309). The most prevalent divisions are those between urban and rural organizations and between popular grass-roots movements and (mainly northern) non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As expressed by a leading activist from the HSA, grass-roots organizations tend to be suspicious towards the NGOs that participate in the campaign and to some of the members of the HSA (Hansen-Kuhn, 2004). Suspicion is sustained by the belief that that NGOs are elitist and unrepresentative of the popular sectors. Some of these tensions can undermine the efforts to build and sustain an effective transnational coalition. The meetings of the campaign against the FTAA provided the first opportunity for many social actors to encounter others with whom they now identify as sharing similar hemispheric concerns. Generating trust among the various social actors involved in the campaign results particularly important in this respect.

The building of transnational coalitions against the FTAA by the HSA entails the creation of a new political subject. New identities had to be created in order for mobilization and solidarity to take place. As explained by Graciela Rodriguez from Rebrip, the idea that the FTAA will affect all of the sectors represented by the organizations that today participate of the hemispheric campaign against the FTAA was far from obvious during the early stages of the campaign. Activists had to be persuaded and shown that the FTAA was a common

concern (2004). That is, the FTAA had to become the reason to unite the otherwise fragmented and isolated expressions of resistance to neoliberalism into a common hemispheric campaign. It is only by constructing a common identification with the struggle against the FTAA that it was possible to overcome the particularities of local/sectoral interests in the mobilization of a transnational coalition.

Transnational mobilization requires that people are capable of seeing themselves as being affected by a common reality: in this case the exclusionary effects of the FTAA. Some degree of commonality must therefore be present to cement a mobilizing transnational identity. Nevertheless, there is a limit to such a commonality that is set by the need to acknowledge and reaffirm the local/sectoral identities that provide the bases of legitimization of the social movements. Even if the FTAA could affect directly all of the sectors that have been mobilized, their experience and sense of historical continuity are rooted in their local realities. Moreover, the prospect of subsuming these identities into a single hemispheric identity not only falls beyond the possibilities of the HSA, but it would also be undesirable and contradictory with the pluralistic principles the HSA openly advocates. Hence, the process of constructing a new (transnational) identity does not imply the erasing or silencing of local social identities and loyalties whereas it still requires bridging those particularities as pertaining to a common phenomenon.

There is no contradiction in this process. Identity cannot be reduced to any essential and immutable set of qualities. If this were the case, it could then be argued that conflicting sources of identification must necessarily result in mutually exclusive processes where one form of identity simply imposes itself over the others. However, identity is always multidimensional, flexible and dialogical. Layers complement, conflict and negotiate with each other as part of an always-changing process of becoming. In this respect, it would be a mistake to think of the tensions between local/sectoral identities of the social actors that participate in the Hemispheric campaign as being in contradiction with the vision and identity being fostered by the HSA across the continent. Far from consisting of a zero-sum game, the process of constructing a transnational opposition identity to the FTAA must be understood as a contested terrain where new forms of collective understandings emerge as a result of sustained interactions where identities are negotiated and redefined. Whatever resolution may take place in such a contested terrain of identity formation it must surely be politically effective in terms of triggering mobilization around a common set of objectives.

The construction of this identity is not merely a product of rhetorical exercise. Meetings and collective activities provide opportunities for the negotiation and construction of common identities. Among the main venues we find the Continental Meetings for the Struggle against the FTAA held yearly in Cuba, the World Social Forums, the Americas Social Forum, the Summits of the Peoples and the numerous other activities organized throughout the continent. Nevertheless, three of such events have been prevalent in the formation of a common identity among the coalitions that make up the HSA. Firstly, the III FTAA Ministerial Meeting of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, (May 1997) brought together the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) from the United States, the United Workers' Federation (CUT) from Brazil and the main NGO networks in the region working on the environment and human rights. The original basis of consensus which led to the later formation of the HSA was founded in this first encounter (Botto and Tussie, 2003: 41; Martins 2004). Acting as a 'space of convergence', this encounter permitted the formulation of a double strategy to oppose neoliberal development to be central to the HSA by fostering 'mobilization and protest on the one hand, and debate and formulation of alternatives on the other' (Escribano, 2004).

Secondly, this emerging consensus was later consolidated in the context of the First Summit of the Peoples, as a parallel event organized by the HSA to the Santiago Summit of the Americas (April 1998) convening the most critical sectors to the FTAA process (von Bullow, 2003: 87). Moreover, as Von Bullow argues, it is in this event where the conflict between 'co-opted' and reformist 'insider' and more critical 'outsider' organizations to the FTAA process (as the HSA) was institutionalized (89; Korzeniewicz and Smith, 2003). This dichotomization of civil society in the Hemisphere contributed to the embedding of the oppositional character that defines the nascent identity of the HSA. From this moment, differences between civil society organizations that had been latent since the time the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) process resurfaced with renovated vigor dividing the self-perception of civil society throughout the continent.

Thirdly, the Second Summit of the Peoples held as an alternative venue to the Quebec Summit of the Americas (2001) managed to mobilize 60.000 people to oppose the FTAA project (only 3000 to 4000 were activists and the rest were common citizens). According to Marcela Escribano (RQCIC), in charge of the coordination of this event, the Quebec Summit 'constitutes a turning point in the HSA. Here, the opposition to the FTAA was ratified. This

was possible by the political converge that arose between the social movements to oppose the FTAA. Also, this demonstration raised the awareness among the public of what is at stake in the FTAA' (Escribano, 2004). At this moment internal tensions or ambiguities between competing reformist and critical agendas within the HSA were finally overcome. The (late) disclosure of the draft of the FTAA agreement confirmed what the critics of the FTAA feared mostly. The proposed agreement was simply too far off from what the HSA was proposing. Graciela Rodriguez (Director of Rebrip) claims that it was at this moment that the HSA realized that 'the prospects of being able to modify the terms of the FTAA were rather dim' (2004). Relying on the overwhelming public support for the demonstrations, the HSA set out to lead a Hemispheric Campaign to reject the FTAA project by adopting a more radical position and oppositional identity.

In order for these events to count as identity formation practices social actors must undergo a transformative experience at the level of meanings and self-understanding. Giddens' theory of structuration best captures this process. Socialization occurs when the political actors interact throughout time with a given structure of meaning, therein assimilating and naturalizing its values and norms. One implication of this is that the identity of political actors—and thus their interests—is defined by their interaction with the structures of meaning in which they partake. This view stresses the ontological interdependence between the constitution of the actors and features of structures: actors create inter-subjective structures of meaning which in turn redefine the nature of the actors (Giddens, 1986; Onuf, 1989; Wendt, 1999). In this respect, identity formation practices such as the meetings and events that were previously discussed must be meaningful to those political actors involved in them. In turn, it is through the reproduction of such practices that meaning is derived and conveyed. As Charles Taylor claims, '[t]he relation between practices and the background understanding behind them is therefore not one-sided. If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding' (2004: 25).

Challenging and transforming the meaning of the FTAA project, as presented by the participating governments and institutions involved in this process, consists of a central dimension of the mobilization strategy of the HSA. As Riker and Sikkink claim, 'we cannot understand transnational networks or coalitions unless we grasp that a significant amount of their activity is directed at changing understandings and interpretations of actors' (2002: 12). Furthermore, the agency of transnational actors is defined by their attempts to restructure

world politics by creating and publicizing new norms and discourses (Sikkink, 2002: 306). Our interest here is to understand how the HSA has been involved in the production (but also diffusion) of meaning associated to the mobilization of transnational actors throughout the Americas.

The notion of ‘framing’, derived from the tradition of cultural approaches to social movement theory, provides a useful analytical category to address how the HSA has been engaged in challenging the meaning of the FTAA (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995). Frames refers to an ‘interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment’ (Snow and Benford, 1992: 137). Through frames social movements embed concrete protests in emotion-laden ‘packages’ (Gamson, 1992) and at the same time justify and legitimate their activities and campaigns by appealing to injustice. To put it differently, framing is about the construction of stable interpretations of social reality on the bases of strategically chosen events whereby particular normative and moral understandings of reality are reflected and reproduced. In crude terms, framing is the practice of engineering knowledge and meaning for politically efficacious goals.

By appropriating and subverting the official discourses on the FTAA, the HSA has been able to frame the FTAA the symbolic object around which isolated struggles of resistance to neo-liberalism coalesced in a hemispheric campaign. A counter-hegemonic critique to the neo-liberal model of integration proposed by this agreement becomes the narrative or frame through which collective action is granted with the mobilizing effects of an oppositional identity.

The critique of the FTAA undermines the ‘common sense’ surrounding the notion that market-led approaches to development are the only viable option to seek a better and more just society. Following Gramsci’s use of the term, the challenge of ‘common sense’ refers to the struggle between contending social forces over the creation and legitimization of hegemony, the basis of social order. The framing of the critique to the FTAA stresses the importance of reclaiming public control over an increasingly privatized economy operating without adequate institutional mechanisms to ensure equity, democracy and social justice (Rupert, 2000). Carlos Vilas explains that what is common to social actors in Latin America is the experience of oppression and exploitation in a context of poverty. That is, the

experience of the exclusionary effects of neo-liberal ‘development’ on the most vulnerable sectors of society. However, as the author holds the ‘phenomenology of each of these dimensions [of identity] and the perspectives through which actors approach, conceptualize, and experience them, are contingent’ (Vilas, 1998: 7). In this respect, framing the critique to the FTAA in terms of a demand for public control over an irresponsibly privatized economy serves as a means of re-conceptualizing the multiple and contingent experiences of marginality as being inscribed in a single process of neo-liberal regionalization in the Americas.

After conducting consultations with key social actors throughout the continent, the HSA produced a series of *Alternatives for the Americas* documents (2002). These foundational documents contain the (framed) critique to the FTAA and a proposed alternative vision on hemispheric integration. As a way of promoting their view of integration, the HSA has been trying to make of this policy document ‘the bible’ of activist organizations throughout the Americas fighting against the FTAA (Rodriguez, 2004; Hansen-Kuhn; 2004). Activists from the HSA explained that social organizations are many times pressed to justify their opposition to the FTAA by showing concrete alternative proposals. They claimed that in such circumstance these organizations would be willing to make strategic use of the Alternatives document to defend their positions, thereby embedding a particular language and approach to integration in the Americas (Hansen-Kuhn).

The challenge of framing and diffusing a common view on integration based on a critique to the FTAA project is faced by at least three main requirements. Firstly, the language must be accessible to a non-specialized public—the complexity of an agreement of such scope is invariably loaded with a technical and specialized language. Secondly, the language must be specific enough to be politically effective in ensuring that transnational mobilization translated in the demand for at least a defined set of principles shared among the various activists and organizations. Thirdly, the language must also be sufficiently flexible and broad to allow local groups address their constituencies by being able to connect the critique of the FTAA with a specific repertoire of identifiable issues and rhetorical devices inscribed in their specific social realities. In other words, the possibility of having a transnational coalition mobilizing domestically against the FTAA is intricately dependent on the success of the HSA in constructing a discourse that balances comprehensibility, specificity and generality.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to set out the bases for a theoretical framework to analyze the transnational collective action of a group of civil society organizations opposing the FTAA project. This discussion was not intended to undertake a rigorous and detailed examination of the various frames and discursive resources employed by the Hemispheric Social Alliance to advance a critique to the FTAA. Instead, the contribution has been to articulate a methodology that draws theoretically from the insights of social constructivism and the theory of structuration.

A central theme that articulates the argument of this paper is the co-determining relationship between structure and agency. On the one hand collective action is explained in terms of the interaction between various social movements and organizations along the Americas with an emerging structure of meanings and expectations embedded on critique to the FTAA. New political subjects are created through the appropriation of these expectations, visions and inspirations. On the other hand, initiatives of social actors like the HSA are contributing to reinforce this structure of meanings from which others derive expectations of social change. In an endless circle, agency creates and reinforces structures while structures open the possibilities for the emergence of new subjectivities. This dialectical relation is at the core of the collective action process.

Notes

(1) Both in the context of the FTAA negotiations, sub-regional initiatives as the CAFTA - Central American Free Trade Agreement, the PPP – Plan Puebla-Panama and also in the negotiation of parallel bilateral free trade agreements.

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