Place, networks, space: theorising the geographies of social movements

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This essay examines how geography affects the different types of networks underlying social movements. The principal argument of the paper is that networks forged in particular places and at great distances play distinctive yet complementary functions in broad-based social movements. Not only does the articulation of these different types of networks result in complementary roles, but it also introduces key relational dynamics affecting the stability of the entire social movement. The purpose of the paper is therefore threefold: to provide a conceptual framework for interpreting the complex geographies of contemporary social movement networks, to stress the contributions of place-based relations in social movements and to assess how activist places connect to form ‘social movement space’.

key words social movements networks relations place territory

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revised manuscript received 22 July 2008

Introduction

In recent years, human geographers have become increasingly interested in social movements and contentious politics. This interest stems from a general recognition that social movements are an important vehicle for transmitting the radically diverse grievances and views of civil society to the state. What has been interesting is that geographers have not only examined what gives rise to social grievances, but also how place, scale and space affect the ways in which people translate their grievances into collective forms of political action (see Routledge 1993 1997 2003; Miller 2000; Miller and Martin 2003; Wolford 2004). In spite of these important contributions, some have begun to question the validity of the concepts used to understand and interpret the geographies of collective action (see Featherstone 2003 2005; Amin 2004; Massey 2004; Marston et al. 2005). It is suggested that concepts based on territorial notions of place and space have lost their saliency in a world increasingly constituted by relational flows. What has been interesting about these debates is not that one position is more persuasive than the other but that these various positions have contributed to revealing the mechanisms and dynamics associated with the various spatialities of human relations. The central analytical task at hand is therefore not to show how one form of spatiality is more important than another, but rather to show how these spatialities articulate with one another in actually existing social movements (Jessop et al. 2008; Leitner et al. 2008).

Much of the recent research on social movements has revealed that networks play a pivotal role in coordinating principal activities and tasks (Routledge 2003; Diani 2005; Diani and Bison 2004; Tarrow and McAdam 2005). While networks are indeed important for social movements, the ways in which these networks are constituted geographically play a decisive role in shaping their specific functions within social movements and the relational dynamics that unfold within them. In this sense, a central proposition of the paper is that the different geographical features of networks play different functions in social movements. Activists have important connections to distant allies and these connections permit the flow of information, financing and political backing between them. However, activists are typically embedded in strong tie relations with allies in...
their localities. These strong tie relations provide a distinctive set of resources (emotional, material and symbolic) that are essential for successful mobilisations. In this sense, the weaker connections of distant allies and the stronger ties of their proximate counterparts permit the flow of distinctive yet complementary resources. Thus, understanding social movements requires us to account for the particular geographical constitution of the complex networks that underlie them.

This is a theoretical paper that outlines one approach to interpret the complex geographies of social movement networks. The first section of the paper examines how different concepts of place (territorial versus relational) have been employed to interpret the activities of social movements. Following from this, the paper examines the distinctive properties found in places of activism. The third section examines how places are strung along to form a ‘social movement space’. And the final section of the paper assesses how the distinctive relational dynamics in these spaces affect what activists can and cannot do during periods of intensive mobilisation.

Territorial and relational conceptions of place

This section distinguishes between ‘territorial’ and ‘relational’ conceptions of place. Both examine social relations in distinct locations but they emphasise different aspects of these relations: the first emphasises the structured cohesion of relations in particular sites and the latter highlights the contingent interactions of diverse (sociologically and geographically) actors. These analytical differences result in important differences in how we interpret the effects of place on the structure and function of networks in social movements. It must be noted that writers contributing to either territorial or relational conceptions of place differ in a number of ways. However, their shared theoretical assumptions about place and space justify their placement in distinctive groups.

Territorial approaches to place: structuration of social networks

John Agnew (1987 2002) has provided a powerful framework for assessing the roles of place on political behaviour. Largely informed by ‘structuration’ theory, he argues that the central processes in the production and reproduction of social relations and institutions occurs through distinct territorial units. Places are sites where wider economic and political process are played out (locations), social and organisational relations develop to mediate micro responses to macro level processes (locale) and spatial imaginaries form to give people a sense of meaning in their particular worlds (sense of place) (Agnew 1987, 28). Agnew maintains that the three basic elements that constitute place overlap through the everyday practices of actors:

By way of example, home, work, schools, church, and so on form nodes around which human activities circulate and which can create a sense of place, both geographically and socially. Place, therefore, refers to discreet if ‘elastic’ areas in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located and with which people can identify. The ‘paths’ and ‘projects’ of everyday life . . . provide the practical ‘glue’ for place in these three senses. (1987, 28)

Sociological attributes of actors (i.e. class, race, gender, sexuality, etc.) are important in shaping general political dispositions; however, these attributes become politically meaningful through geographically embedded exchanges between friends, allies and adversaries. Social relations and networks structured in places therefore mediate how general sociological attributes are translated into the actual political dispositions of people.

Others have focused more narrowly on how relations forged in place influence the solidarity and cohesiveness of collective political action. Several researchers have suggested that place-based networks generate certain ‘relational attributes’ such as trust, loyalty, and duty that facilitate the mobilisation of resources and tighten solidarieties. In a study of social justice movements in Los Angeles, Nicholls (2003) showed that repeated collaborations between immigrant associations, unions, faith organisations and left-wing academics produced a strong sense of trust between leading actors, heightening capacities to mobilise high grade resources to various collective efforts. Others have shown that place-based solidarieties motivate people to join and stick to social movements even when risks to life, liberty and property mount. In his study of the Paris Commune, Gould (1993 1995) shows that neighbourhood solidarieties played a much more important role than class in motivating people to risk their lives and freedom to the cause.

What tied workers from different occupations together in the Commune were the tangible bonds they experienced as neighbours, not the abstract bonds of joint structural position in the capitalist mode of production. (1993, 751)
Others have stressed the importance of place for generating the cultural and cognitive frames that guide collective actors. Cultural representations of place (i.e. ‘sense of place’) provide people with categories to make normative evaluations of what battles are worth fighting for, what battles are best left to others, who to cooperate with, and who to dispute (Emirbayer and Gamson 1994, 1441; Wollord 2004; Auyero 2006). These different approaches stress how place strengthens the relational and symbolic solidarities that bind activists into common political projects.

David Harvey employs Raymond Williams’ concept of ‘militant particularism’ to stress the contradictory character of place: place facilitates enhanced solidarities but these in-group solidarities can introduce cleavages that limit the extension of movements. Regarding the first point, Harvey notes, ‘The crystallization of a relatively permanent and coherent form of local organization, though not sufficient, is a necessary condition for broader kinds of political action’ (Harvey 2001b, 192; emphasis added).

A basic requisite for collective power is that actors develop a degree of organisational and ideological cohesion in places. However, the more a group’s collective power is derived from internal cohesion, the wider the chasm between this clique and the various others in the political field. In this sense, the factors necessary for collective political action (i.e. place-based solidarities) are the same that unleash the dynamics of particularism that fracture social movements. The dialectic logic of cooperation and conflict (captured in the term ‘militant particularism’) is present in all movements and becomes manifest in two different ways: ‘place in itself’ and ‘place for itself’ (Harvey 2001a). In the first instance, localised solidarities and relational attributes are viewed as a means of nourishing and feeding larger scale political struggles. Frames such as ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ help overcome disputes from multiple particularisms and make it easier to maintain the universal character of the movement. By contrast, ‘place for itself’ is when place is conceived as both the means and ends of a political mobilisation. Interests are tied to protect place from forces that threaten a group’s status, privilege and way of life. Secessionist mobilisations, gated communities, Nimbyists and regionalist movements all reflect these types of movements.

In sum, the ‘territorial’ view highlights three distinct ways in which place-based social networks play distinctive roles in social movements:

1. place-based relations translate general sociological attributes (i.e. class, race, gender, etc.) into meaningful political values, dispositions and interests,
2. place-based relations provide relational and cognitive attributes that strengthen the cohesiveness of collective actors and
3. the solidarity derived from place-based relations makes collective action possible but it also creates new cleavages that can threaten the extension of the movement.

A relational approach to place: contingent interactions of diverse people

A number of geographers have recently questioned the basic assumptions underlying the territorial view of place (Amin and Thrift 2002; Amin 2004; Massey 1994 2004 2005 2007; Marston et al. 2005). It is argued that people who reside within a common location have very different sociological attributes, histories, and geographical ties and mobilities. Cohabitation in the same location does not by necessity produce distinctive political dispositions or solidarities. It is often the case that a person’s sense of political community is more clearly shaped by her or his relations with others living on the other side of the world than those living next door. Moreover, globalisation has accelerated the flow of people, resources and ideas across space, making it increasingly difficult for relations in particular places to harden into distinctive social and political units. Concepts that stress structured political relations in distinct geographical areas (i.e. territory and scale) are increasingly problematic in a world defined by mobility and flux (Amin 2004, 33). Finally, Massey stresses that territorial conceptions of place typically feed a politics of nostalgia rather than one of progressive change (1994 2004; also see Amin 2005). Territorial conceptions of place fuel ‘localist or nationalist claims to place based on eternal essential, and in consequence exclusive, characteristics of belonging’ (Massey 2004, 6).

Place matters but in a way that is different from the territorial perspectives described above. For example, Amin and Thrift (2002, 72–3) argue that places within the city should not be viewed as bundles of thick and over-socialised relations that produce distinctive political dispositions and strong-tie solidarities. Rather, these places are areas where actors with different statuses, geographical ties and mobilities interact in fleeting and unstructured ways. These interactions occur through a range of institutional arenas like public areas, schools,
libraries, transportation, associations and government agencies (this is referred to as ‘light institutionalism’). Ideas and feelings are transmitted in contingent interactions. Some interactions may become more routinised than others, but rarely to the point of hardening into structured and strong-tie relations. These types of interactions play a crucial role in influencing the political identities and power relations of people. Anderson (2004), for example, shows that when diverse people interact in these settings, differences tend to be more openly negotiated and social boundaries eased.

People are repeatedly exposed to the unfamiliar and thus have the opportunity to stretch themselves mentally, emotionally, and socially . . . And often, though certainly not always, the end result is a growing social sophistication that allows diverse peoples to get along. (2004, 29)

Others have pointed out that many of the institutions where interactions occur can also reinforce power relations (Bourdieu 1985). These institutions (i.e. schools, hospitals, markets, etc.) have their own distinct rules which reflect the power relations found in general society. When diverse people interact in these settings, the prevailing rules governing social interactions often reinforce hierarchies rather than break them down. Thus, places matter because they contain numerous institutions or sites where diverse interactions occur. These contingent interactions help deconstruct and/or reinforce power relations in various ways.

Massey goes on to argue that the view of place as bundled and territorialised relations has also reinforced the rather unhelpful place/space binary. Such a binary maintains that space refers to the abstract economic and political forces that unevenly structure the lives of people and place refers to the sites where people forge relations and negotiate with these abstract forces (this overlaps with the structure–agency binary, see Leitner and Miller 2007). This binary projects opposed and essentialist qualities on relations developing in space (fluid, general) and place (fixed, particular). In an effort to overcome this binary, Massey suggests that we begin to conceive of ‘space’ as the sum of concrete activities that occur in places, unevenly assembled through a series of relational networks. Space is not more than the sum of these activities; it does not bear any qualities that distinguish it from the individual places that constitute it (this might be considered to be geography’s version of ‘methodological individualism’).

If space is really to be thought of relationally, and also if Latour’s proposition is to be taken seriously, then ‘global space’ is no more than the sum of relations, connections, embodiments and practices . . . Space is not outside of place; it is not abstract, it is not somehow ‘up there’ or disembodied. (Massey 2004, 8)

This position suggests that networks thread activities in different places to form a range of different spaces with varying structures, logics and geometries of power. Place and space do not display any qualities that differentiate one from the other; space is simply a loose aggregation of the qualities found in those different places. Just as there is no singular type of place, there is no singular type of space as its constitution depends on the articulation of particular activities in various places.

Featherstone (2003 2005) has been at the forefront of applying some of these ideas to the study of social movements. He suggests that geographers need to ‘transcend a tendency in political geography to counterpose local and global, of space and place’ (2003, 405). These types of binaries are problematic for both normative and analytical reasons. First, they privilege local relations over distant ones, with the former assumed to be more authentic and therefore more politically legitimate than distant relations and forces. Such views reinforce reactivity, localist and nationalist claims to power. Second, these binaries fix the interests and identities of actors to distinct places, and consequently lead to representations of actors as essentially different from one another and engaged in zero-sum negotiations with adversaries. Such a perspective masks the complex relational exchanges between the multiple actors that are responsible for shaping interests and identities. The cleavages that mark movements do not simply reflect a local (internally homogenous) and non-local (externally different) divide.

Imagining spatial relations in this way becomes a condition for thinking about the political as the site of multiple conflicts and antagonisms. For actors craft their political identities through the ways they engage with geographies of power relations. They do not have fixed interests constituted in relation to already existing spatial configurations of power. (Featherstone 2003, 408)

Before discussing how the most fruitful ideas of the territorial and relational approaches can be integrated, I highlight two shortcomings with the latter approach. First, while the object of study is agency and relations (see Marston et al. 2005), there has never been a clear effort to theorise collective action. This
is partly because the ‘collective action question’ is seen as suspect on normative grounds. When disparate actors are conceived as cohesive forces, essential identities and fixed interests are projected on the actors involved (Amin 2005). This not only silences the internal differences within the collective but it also legitimates territorial claims made on the basis of essential cultural identities. This provides ideological cover for a range of reactionary politics, from defensive nativists to offensive colonisers. While these concerns are valid, an overly cautious approach to collective action can result in important theoretical problems. Advocates of this approach study the agency of political actors but they have not developed the appropriate conceptual tools to understand how disparate actors become powerful political subjects in their own right. The importance of group cohesion (through organisational and ideological means) for the attainment of collective goals therefore remains underexplored. As a consequence, the approach has difficulty addressing key questions: How is it that diverse actors come and stick together in the face of huge risks and uncertainties? What are the principal mechanisms binding these actors together? How do actors learn and innovate upon their activities? How does group cohesion augment the political power of actors? In what ways do the mechanisms binding actors together introduce new problems for achieving political goals? Thus, the absence of a theory of collective action deprives this approach from addressing how activist networks in particular places can become powerful and cohesive drivers of political change.

Second, the assertion that space is the sum of its constituent places (Massey 2004) is suggestive but also parallels the assertions and problems of ‘methodological individualism’ (MI) (Elster 1986 1989). MI confronts the agency–structure issue by eliminating the analytical distinction between the two. It does this by suggesting that a particular conception of a structure (i.e. state, capital, etc.) can only be valid when reduced to the individuals (i.e. politicians, entrepreneurs, etc.) that constitute it. Large structures should therefore have homologous qualities and properties as the individual units constituting them. It is in this sense that large structures are viewed as the sum of their individual parts. Erik Olin Wright (1997) has countered that the process of aggregating individual units into broader structures requires their coordination through a variety of mechanisms created for that particular purpose, thereby introducing new dynamics and relations between the individual parts. The aggregation of individual parts through these (meso-level) mechanisms therefore results in (macro-level) structures that have distinctive properties and qualities of their own. Wright’s intervention supports the basic MI assertion that macro structures need to be broken down into their constituent parts in order to avoid the reification of structures. However, he also argues that to understand how micro, meso and macro elements produce distinctive effects on the lives of people, we need to separate and carefully assess the specific properties of each. Applying these insights to geography, it can be argued that the spirit behind Massey’s argument is a valid one. We should not reify space and see it as a ‘thing’ that is essentially different from place. However, the radical reductionism advocated by Massey and others goes too far and blurs the distinctive properties of place and space. Space is made up of a variety of places but the mechanisms linking these places together produce a space with dynamics and properties that are qualitatively different from the properties of its constitutive places.

Thus, the ‘relational’ view highlights various ways in which networks developing in places can play distinctive roles in social movements:

1. place creates opportunities for diverse actors with similar dispositions to establish contact with one another,
2. the interactions between diverse actors can help breakdown and/or reinforce power relations, and
3. activist nodes in places constitute and are constituted by their broader social movement space. Their particular activities feed into their broader social movement networks but their placement in this particular space also shapes the parameters of their own action.

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Both territorial and relational approaches of place have their distinctive strengths and weaknesses. The remainder of the essay will extend the debate by synthesising the strengths of both. It does this by putting forth two arguments:

1. Strong ties and solidarities built up in particular places over time contribute to enhancing the collective powers of social movement activists. However, places also consist of multiple ‘contact-points’ where diverse activists come into contingent interactions with multiple others (i.e. the ‘light institutionalism’ of Amin and Thrift). These
contingent encounters help whittle away at the boundaries of insular cliques, permitting the flow of new ideas and information between diverse activists.

2 Places where activist nodes form are strung together to constitute a loosely constituted ‘social movement space’ (i.e. consistent with Massey’s argument). The process of aggregating activist places into a social movement space introduces a new set of relational dynamics that are very different from those found in the individual places constituting it (i.e. avoiding the conceptual pitfalls of methodological individualism).

Making activist places: structuring activists and multiplying interactions

The mechanisms used to coordinate collective action in general (typical mechanisms include markets, hierarchies, networks) vary according to the types of action being undertaken. For example, the mechanisms involved in making the collective actions of soldiers, stock traders and activists vary greatly. Social movements are different from other forms of collective action because they are forms of politics made up of a diverse range of organisations and individuals. The heterogeneous character of social movements makes it difficult to integrate and coordinate diverse and independent agents into vertically-integrated, hierarchical organisations. Consequently, the coordination of disparate activists is achieved primarily through social networks (Della Porta and Diani 1999; Diani and Bison 2004).

Granovetter has noted that different types of networks perform different types of coordinating functions (Granovetter 1973 1983). ‘Weak ties’ between actors (i.e. loose acquaintances) permit the distribution of information. The circulation of common information (symbols, political information, events, etc.) to loosely connected actors provides them with a common set of signals which allows them to adjust their individual activities in common ways. While this permits a degree of coordination, weak ties typically cannot persuade activists to contribute their more valued resources to high risk political ventures. Strong ties play a more important role here because they generate forms of ‘social capital’ like norms, trust, emotions and interpretive frames. When these forms of social capital are present, emotional obligation persuades actors to deploy their highly valuable resources to high-risk ventures and trust provides enough assurances that such resources will not be squandered by the malfeasance or ineptitude of others (see Diani 1997; Tilly 2005). Tilly remarks that

Trust networks, consist of ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failure of others. (2005, 12; original emphasis)

Thus, different types of networks perform different functions in coordinating activists: weak ties help circulate information to different activists, and strong ties enable activists to contribute their scarce resources to risky collective struggles.

Although strong ties and social capital are not circumscribed to particular localities and places (see Tilly 2005), place possesses qualities that facilitate strong tie relations:

1 Proximity provides various opportunities for diverse activists to connect with one another. Most importantly, there are more opportunities that issues cut across the specialised areas of particular organisations. For example, local labour unions may develop a concrete interest in environmental issues because polluting industries are located in the neighbourhoods of their working class constituents. While national labour and environmental organisations can appreciate overlapping concerns and interests at an abstract level, local organisations understand this in visceral terms. In addition, there is greater likelihood that activists located in the same area will have many common acquaintances to broker connections between them. Thus, proximity creates more opportunities for issues to overlap between unconnected organisations and more brokers to introduce these organisations to one another.

2 If proximity provides more opportunities for new connections, it also reduces the costs and risks associated with making these connections happen. The uncertainty of new partnerships is typically high because nobody knows what these partnerships will yield. The risks associated with new partnerships increase when the returns are uncertain and start-up costs are high. Small, resource-scarce organisations (i.e. comprising the base of most social movement networks) are particularly sensitive to these types of risks. By lowering start-up costs and uncertainty, proximity reduces the risks associated with new partnerships. While it is certainly possible for resource-poor organisations to develop working partnerships
with distant others, the risks associated with these partnerships make them less probable. Hence, proximity reduces important financial barriers and risks of new partnerships, enabling resource-poor organisations to develop and nurture relations with organisations they would have otherwise shunned if located at a great distance.

Finally, the geographic stability associated with proximity facilitates ongoing contacts and discussions between organisations with overlapping interests. When organisations reside within the same location over time, a stable base exists for repeated collaborations between these groups. Following on Coleman’s work on social networks (1988-1990), repeated encounters between different agents in a geographically stable environment increases the likelihood that their networks tighten into relatively coherent clusters or cliques. For example, in a discussion concerning the networks of South Korean students from different social backgrounds, Coleman shows how the habitual interactions of students through local associations, clubs and churches allowed strangers to develop strong norms and trust for one another (1988, 107). The norms and trust forged through thousands of these local clusters enabled students across the country to mobilise in high-risk confrontations with the dictatorship. Moreover, geographic stability enables activists to engage in frequent face-to-face ritual interactions which charge newly established connections with strong emotional power (see Collins 2004). The more diverse activists interact in particular social movement rituals (i.e. meetings, protest events, etc.), the stronger the emotional attachments to one another and the general cause.

Thus, the proximity of place creates more opportunities for diverse organisations to connect to one another, lowers the costs and risks for organisations to experiment with new partnerships, and provides the stability needed to consolidate new relations into tightly clustered relational units. In this sense, one of the strategic values of place is that it provides favourable geographic conditions for relatively strong-tie networks to develop between different activists. These stronger ties generate forms of social capital that enable diverse actors to mobilise and coordinate their resources in contentious political enterprises. While ‘place’ does not possess a monopoly on social capital, it facilitates strong, social capital generating ties.

When activists share a powerful stock of social capital, they face greater motivation to contribute their valuable resources to high risk enterprises, greater certainty that such contributions will be put to good use and not squandered by the ineptitude or malefaseance of others, and face higher barriers to exist when risks begin to mount. This does not mean that local activists are bound to one another in permanent communities of struggle. Organisations like immigrant associations, unions, churches, etc. have their own affairs to attend to and constituents to serve. However, when common grievances do arise, the stored social capital in existing relational networks allows these different organisations to draw on norms, trust, frames and solidarities to quickly re-group and fight another battle. In this sense, the social capital stored in these networks not only enhances the mobilisation capacities of activists but it also functions as a bridge between specific campaigns and cycles of resistance. Rather than having to re-create the wheel for every new round of struggle, local activists can draw on the stored social capital of their networks and rapidly respond to new threats with an important show of force. In France’s counter-revolutionary region of the Vendée, for example, heightened mobilisation capacities were maintained throughout the nineteenth century because of the stored social capital of priests, peasants and landed elites (Tilly 1964).

While the concept of place employed thus far is consistent with the territorial view of place, place is also an area that harbours multiple ‘contact points’ that spur new interactions between diverse others (Amin and Thrift 2002). In a study of urban places in Chicago, Richard Sennett (1971) employed the concept of ‘contact points’ in a similar way to Amin and Thrift’s concept of ‘light institutionalism’. For Sennett, places are made up of a number of points where diverse groups are brought together into direct interactions with one another. Sennett suggests that constant interaction between diverse groups weakens the boundaries between self and other, making it possible for people to ‘discover’ common interests and values across traditional cultural and sectoral divides. As cognitive boundaries are lowered and mutual values are discovered, diverse individuals are better able to step outside of their conventional boxes, assess the diverse ideas of others in their milieu, and appropriate these ideas to treat their own particular problems.

For activists, the multiple contact points (i.e. protest events, meetings, public places, forums, political institutions, etc.) found in places brings them into regular interaction with diverse people and
organisations. Frequent interactions along a string of contact points create more opportunities for diverse activists to talk to one another in non-competitive environments. While a particular place may have a range of common contact points where diverse activists may interact, proximity ensures that such interactions are frequent and routine enough to whittle away at the cognitive boundaries separating self and other. As the cognitive boundaries between these groups weaken, activists become more willing to listen to one another and appropriate the ideas of other groups. These more open lines of communication between diverse actors produces an environment that is conducive to the innovation of activist repertoires. Even though two activists do not necessarily belong to the same strong-tie clique or cluster, the openness of their dialogues allows them to share and exchange ideas of how to get things done. In this sense, place can be conceptualised as locations with a variety of stable contact points, providing opportunities for diverse activists to forge new and constantly shifting lines of communication with diverse people and organisations. Such open lines of communication are conducive for social innovation.

Place therefore has qualities that support two complementary relational dynamics in social movement networks (reflecting territorial and relational conceptions of place). On the one hand, it provides favourable conditions for diverse activists to initiate and strengthen ties in areas of common interest. As these ties strengthen over time, they become important generators of rich social capital. The shared social capital between local activists improves their abilities to deploy their scarce resources for risky political enterprises. On the other hand, place provides diverse activists with multiple ‘contact points’ where they can come into interaction with others in their milieu. While these complex interactions can spawn new alliances, they also play a role in lowering cognitive barriers, freeing the flow of information between different organisations, and spurring innovation. When these two relational dynamics complement one another in a place, activist networks become strong enough to maximise local mobilisation capacities and open enough to spur the innovative capacities of the local activist community.

Stringing places together into a social movement space

Massey suggests that we should view space as the aggregation of particular places. While the paper accepts this general premise, it also maintains that we are obligated to focus on the process of stringing places into a relatively coherent social space, and following from this, assess how this process introduces relational dynamics in space that are distinct from the dynamics found in the individual places constituting it. The process of stringing local activist clusters into a social movement space does not occur naturally and is the result of the distinct moments outlined below.

1 Establishing new connections/confronting old obstacles

What mechanisms connect local activists to distant allies in the first place?

- Brokerage refers to the development of relations between two or more unrelated actors through the mediation of a third-party broker (della Porta and Diani 1999; Diani 2003; Tarrow and McAdam 2005, 127). The broker (a common acquaintance, organisation, ally, etc.) creates opportunities for activists with similar concerns to meet. Movements that spread through brokered ties are potentially more powerful because they build bridges across geographical, social and institutional boundaries. These types of relations provide activists with a greater opportunity to draw on resources and legitimacy beyond their traditional base of support.

- Public meetings, events and demonstrations also serve as important mechanisms for connecting potential allies. Events like large demonstrations and the European Social Forum provide diverse activists opportunities to encounter one another in unstructured ways. Diverse individuals with overlapping interests communicate with others, assess similarities and explore possibilities for joint action (Ayres 2002; Routledge 2003; della Porta 2005). These events are important ‘contact points’ where geographically dispersed activists have opportunities to establish connections and discover commonalities with distant others.

- Communication technologies and high-speed internet facilitate new connections with distant allies, but they also help sustain newly established relations initiated through brokers and events. As Bennett (2005) notes in his study of the internet’s role in transnational movements, its function is primarily to assist maintaining contact between distant allies, circulating information and coordinating events. New encounters may occur on the internet but rarely do these encounters develop.
into strong working partnerships. Thus, establishing and maintaining connections between distant allies typically involves all three mechanisms, with brokers introducing two or more activists at events and activists maintaining relations through the internet and encounters at other events (Routledge 2003).

When activists forge ties with distant allies, they typically face important obstacles. Broadening the geographical and social base of a political insurgency necessarily introduces a wide range of diverse actors into the mix (della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Tarrow and McAdam 2005). These diverse actors have different ideological traditions, organisational logics and cognitive frames for assessing grievances. While broadening the alliance provides activists with access to new resources and sources of legitimacy, these networks are somewhat fragile because of the radically diverse traditions, ideologies and organisations involved. The distance between these organisations compounds the problems of diversity because it reduces the time needed for diverse actors to meet, share ideas and engage in common actions. This means that there are fewer opportunities for forging the norms, trust and cognitive frames that help diverse actors overcome destabilising differences.

2 Unequal capacities to overcome the obstacles of distance and diversity

While all activists face the obstacles of distance and diversity, not all possess the same levels of economic and cultural capital to overcome them (Routledge 2003). The resources possessed by more affluent individuals and organisations enable greater mobility by providing the disposable income needed to afford high-speed internet, faxes, conference fees, hotels and long distance travel. Moreover, these activists are also better able to contend with legal and administrative restrictions that impede cross-border travel. Higher rates of mobility allow these more affluent activists to establish new contacts with diverse allies and sustain contacts through repeated meetings and ongoing communication. In more formal terms, the capacity to overcome the barriers of physical space provides diverse and distant activists with more time to forge sufficient levels of trust and confidence in others. Finally, activists in possession of economic ‘capital’ are likely to possess important levels of ‘cultural capital’ as well (i.e. languages, writing and communication skills, facility in diverse environments, etc.). The capacity to communicate in multiple languages and cultural contexts enables these activists to comfortably interact with radically different groups in constantly shifting environments. Thus, more affluent activists possess the economic capital needed to overcome the barriers of distance and the cultural capital needed to overcome the barriers of cultural and linguistic diversity.

By contrast, resource-poor organisations and individuals typically lack the financial resources needed for greater mobility, reducing their capacities to start and develop relations with diverse and distant others. Moreover, as international border crossings have become stricter over the past decade, these organisations may lack the legal status and administrative skills to contend with enhanced restrictions. In the event that new contacts are established with distant others, they are more likely to lack the cultural capital needed to engage with strangers over long stretches of time. These organisations often possess contacts with far off acquaintances but their lack of economic and cultural resources can impede frequent and stable interactions. The instability and infrequency of these relations reduces the likelihood that they evolve into substantive partnerships. Thus, reduced economic and cultural capital makes it more difficult for these activists to contend with the obstacles of distance and diversity, reducing their abilities to strengthen relations across geographical and cultural boundaries. As these organisations do not derive great value from distant ties, they are more likely to invest their scarce time and resources on strengthening local ties.

Activists therefore face the obstacles of diversity and distance differently: whereas a small number of activists possess the resources (economic and cultural capital) needed for mobility and communication with diverse others, many poorer organisations have greater difficulty overcoming physical and cultural boundaries. This grounds these latter organisations more firmly in particular localities. The suggested relation between resources and mobility (social and geographic) is by no means an ‘iron law’ but a general tendency shaping the geographic options of different activists and organisations. We can certainly find cases where relatively resource-poor organisations have been more mobile than their more affluent allies in a social movement network but this generally tends not to be the case.
3 The strategic role of mobile activists: building frames and connecting locals to distant allies

As most social movement organisations are relatively poor and face important obstacles to mobility, the burden of developing durable contacts with distant allies falls primarily on the shoulders of the more affluent and mobile activists. These activists play two roles in establishing these connections. First, their increased mobility and cultural dexterity permit them to engage in frequent and stable interactions with activists elsewhere. Frequent interactions help diverse activists form new discursive frames that help provide a common sense of identification (della Porta 2005). Through repeated conversations and debates at meetings and events, common values and ideas are identified and assembled into loosely configured discursive frameworks. Della Porta suggests that these discursive frames assist diverse activists to discover common grievances, targets and values. For example, activists who repeatedly attend events of the European Social Forum have forged what della Porta terms ‘tolerant identities’. Such identities highlight common grievances (e.g. neoliberal globalisation), common targets (e.g. MNCs, states and transnational institutions), and the importance of respecting the differences of the diverse organisations.

Second, not only are these more mobile activists important in forging a common ‘ideological space’ to frame particular struggles, they are also the key brokers that connect resource-poor organisations to activists in distant lands (Diani 2003 2005). More affluent activists from particular localities can engage in stable interactions with diverse others through repeated travel and costly communication infrastructures. When these mobile activists go back to their home base, they talk with their more locally grounded allies about the similarities between their particular struggles and those in distant lands. These activists use their strong reputation (as leaders of important organisations, ministers, labour unions, etc.) in local activist clusters to vouch for the legitimacy of distant allies and the similarities of their struggles (see Coleman 1988). These conversations help locals to discover commonalities across traditional boundaries and identify some of the general causes responsible for their common grievances. In addition, these more mobile activists also help introduce new discursive frameworks (i.e. ‘tolerant identities’) that help locals conceptualise their connections with distant others. In this sense, they assist in connecting locals to distant allies by providing them with the cognitive means to identify with struggles abroad. Thus, mobile activists play two crucial roles: they actively forge new unifying frames, and they build new connections between local activists and distant allies.

4 Uneven solidarities: high levels of identification but low levels of social capital

The factors described above produce uneven levels of solidarity between the local activists and their distant allies. Mobile activists provide connections and diffuse frames that help locals develop a sense of identification with distant others. Identification with struggles elsewhere may encourage locals to reframe and realign their particular battles to reflect the ideas of the general group. For example, activists in a locality may have long struggled against toxic waste facilities (Pulido 1996). Through travels to workshops in other places, mobile activists encounter other organisations facing these same issues. The reinsertion of these mobile activists back into their local milieu allows them to diffuse information and ideas to their less mobile comrades. Local activists learn how their particular struggles share common traits with those elsewhere and discover a powerful discursive frame to articulate their common concerns (i.e. Environment Justice). As locals come to identify with these distant battles, they may realign their discourses, claims, targets and repertoires to reflect those of the general movement. Cognitive identification with this general movement therefore precipitates locals to transform what had been a highly localised battle into one particular front in the general struggle for Environmental Justice. Thus, the identification of locals with allies elsewhere provides sufficient levels of solidarity to realign local struggles with general social movements, transforming a particularistic battle into a new front in this loosely constituted movement.

However, identification does not automatically translate into strong trust, norms and emotional commitments to these distant others. Resource-poor organisations (i.e. the bulk of local activist clusters) are faced with great constraints on their mobility and are therefore deprived of the repeated face-to-face encounters that help produce strong trust, norms and emotional commitments with distant others. They may identify with distant struggles and follow their activities, but the absence of repeated and concrete encounters diminishes shared social capital between them. Mobile activists may
vouch for distant allies but they cannot make locals
develop strong levels of trust and emotional com-
mitment to those people and organisations. It is not
a matter that they distrust distant allies but rather
that they don’t know them well enough to take extra-
ordinary risks on their behalf. Thus, the obstacles
facing resource-poor organisations results in uneven
levels of social solidarity between locals and
distant allies. Whereas many locals may identify
with distant allies, they may also lack strong ties
to the individuals and organisations making up those struggles.

5 Limits on coordination
High levels of identification and low levels of social
capital influence how activists within a network
are coordinated. Social movements typically lack
centralised command functions to coordinate the
diverse actors making up the network. In the
absence of these formal hierarchies, solidarity plays an
important role in persuading network affiliates to
abide by common rules and strategies. Relatively
high levels of identification can persuade resource-
poor local activists to adopt some of the discourses,
claims and tactics of the general movement.
However, low levels of social capital (i.e. trust, norms
and emotional solidarities) reduce the capacity of
movement leaders to persuade local activists to
follow particular rules. Locals may respect movement
leaders, but these distant leaders may not enjoy
enough trust and emotional commitment by locals
to persuade them to follow central commands.
Moreover, when these commands conflict with
existing obligations on the ground, locals are likely
to shrug off the requests and continue to pursue
their activities. Uneven solidarity (high identification/
low trust) means that the leaders of the network
have limited capacities to control and coordinate
the different parts of the network. Locals may adjust
their language and activities to become more consistent with the general spirit of their movement
but they typically resist efforts to directly command
and control local activities. In this sense, the ‘space
of social movements’ is characterised by a strong
centrifugal pull, with local activist clusters guarding
their autonomy against network centralisation.

A movement in mobilisation: formalising
divisions and aggravating cleavages

Social movements have two moments. In the first
moment, they are made up of loose connections
between many activists who share grievances, identify
with a common discourse and ideology, and employ
similar tactics and strategies in their particular political fields (see Diani and Bison 2004; Tilly 2004).
Unity within the movement is a function of identification
with a general cause rather than concerted and
coordinated activities between the different units
that constitute it. In the second moment, this loose
network of affiliated activists is activated for more
concerted and coordinated campaigns (Tarrow 1998).
Coordinated campaigns are intensive forms of
collective action because they require the formulation
of a common strategy, the coordination of resources
and roles, and the emergence of an infrastructure
to steer and oversee the campaign. Increased
coordination and centralisation of social movement
networks enables activists to better pool and deploy
their collective resources, but it also intensifies the
stress on the relational dynamics highlighted above.

Mobilising resources across space

When social movement networks shift onto a
mobilisation footing, activists develop an infrastructure
that enables them to steer and coordinate the
collective. Such an infrastructure often takes the
form of a coalition. The emergence of such an
infrastructure requires a handful of activists to
perform essential leadership functions including
strategising, steering, and coordinating activities
(Mann 1986). The leadership is typically made up of
the more affluent elements of the movement.
The economic and cultural capital of these activists
enables them to overcome important sociospatial
obstacles and interact with diverse and distant
counterparts. Sustained contact over time permits
distant activists to develop a common sense of
trust, shared norms, emotional obligation and
know-how. Because they trust that their contributions
will be matched by those of their partners and their
contributions are likely to be put to good use, this
handful of affluent and mobile activists are more likely to invest their time, personnel, money, knowledge and logistical materials into the infrastructure of a campaign. As the principal investors in setting up coalitions and campaigns, these activists will typically assume leadership roles as well.

All parties in a network may agree that achieving goals is paved by network consolidation and centralisation. However, leaders face a number of constraints in consolidating networks. On the one hand, local activists may identify with distant others and a common cause, but they also view centralisation as a threat to their autonomy and operations. On the other hand, network leaders have weak mechanisms to overcome this local reticence. Low levels of social capital between centre and periphery limit the power of leaders to persuade locals to cede their autonomy to distant and relatively unknown leaders. Flimsy or absent hierarchical structures limit the ability of leaders to compel cooperation as well. Weak ties and weak hierarchies also result in low barriers to exit, with local activists leaving networks when faced with overly aggressive leaders. Thus, local reticence coupled with weak coordination hinders the abilities of leaders to pool, coordinate and deploy collective resources. Successful leadership requires balancing competing needs: the need to establish a centralised command structure and the need to respect the concerns of the movement’s multiple peripheries.

If the tendency of local activist clusters is to resist central coordination, in what ways are they incorporated into national and transnational campaigns? Local organisations that affiliate with campaigns contribute in two complementary ways.

First, a cluster of local activists may affiliate with national and transnational coalitions. Affiliation with a coalition means that locals maintain their operational autonomy but an effort is made to coordinate the timing of their events, the discourses and symbols employed in these events, and the types of targets chosen. For example, the national immigrant rights coalition in France, Contre l’Immigration Jetable, has local variants in most large cities throughout the country. These local coalitions are primarily made up of organisations that already had a long history of cooperating in the arena of immigrant rights. Rather than national leaders creating and directing these local branches, these clusters of local organisers identify with the national network and agree to adopt the name, slogans and some of the talking points of the national coalition.

Individuals and organisations in these localities draw on their existing strong tie networks to mount new rounds of mobilisations but now under the banner of the national coalition. The strong trust, commitment and know-how shared by local activists enable them to launch intensive mobilisations in their localities and regions on behalf of the national campaign. Affiliation therefore permits national coalitions to appropriate the high mobilisation capacities of tightly bound activist clusters while simultaneously permitting locals to maintain their operational autonomy.

Second, individually, resource-poor locals typically do not contribute substantial material resources to coalitions. The scarcity of their resources and the absence of strong trust for national leaders increases the risks associated with making substantial contributions directly to a national campaign. Individual organisations contribute but these contributions are limited to resources that can be easily substituted and do not strain the reproduction of the organisation. The contributions from local organisations are therefore restrained, resulting primarily in generic and substitutable resources (financial donations, information, demonstrators, etc.) to the national coalition. However, when pooled with the contributions of other organisations and those of more affluent individuals and organisations, these resources can amount to an important reservoir of economic power.

The contributions of local activists allow national campaigns to fulfil important functions. On the one hand, the affiliation of local activist clusters with a larger campaign provides national leaders with well-established mechanisms to penetrate multiple localities, recruit individuals within those localities and mobilise intensively on behalf of a national or transnational cause. The national leadership can simply appropriate the existing mobilisation infrastructures in multiple localities and regions rather than engage in the costly enterprise of creating new infrastructures from scratch. In this way, the infrastructures in multiple localities provide a coalition with depth and breadth. Local infrastructures provide the coalition with depth by allowing it to penetrate the grassroots of localities and create a stronger sense of commitment among locals to the movement. Local infrastructures also provide the movement with breadth by expanding the campaign’s profile across space and placing pressure on more politicians and policy makers. Broadening the scale of a mobilisation in this way provides the leadership of national campaigns with a stronger
lever to negotiate with state officials (Tarrow and McAdam 2005). On the other hand, the tangible resources contributed by smaller organisations can be used to finance many of the more costly outlays of a campaign. While these resources enable leaders to coordinate national actions such as demonstrations, boycotts and letter-writing campaigns, they also permit leaders to invest in higher end activities like paid staff, legal battles, lobbying efforts and media campaigns. Thus, local contributions to national campaigns enable a series of crucial functions.

**Internal divisions, power relations and conflicts**

When social movements are activated into actual campaigns, we witness the emergence of a distinct division of labour, one that is shaped directly by the different geographies and mobilities of its diverse participants. Affluent and mobile organisations possess resources (economic, cultural and social capital) that enable them to overcome the obstacles of distance and diversity and forge the initial infrastructure of national and transnational coalitions. A place in the coalition’s leadership circle results from their active participation in developing and designing the coalition. As leaders, they are charged with developing a strategy, pooling the resources of the diverse activists constituting network, deploying those resources to achieve strategic objectives, and persuading diverse activists to coordinate some of their activities with those of the coalition. By contrast, organisations with less economic and cultural capital have greater difficulty overcoming the obstacles of distance and diversity. As distance and diversity trap organisations in their localities, they have fewer opportunities to develop sustained relations with distant others. This reduces the likelihood that these organisations will take an active role in designing, developing and directing national and transnational coalitions. Instead, they contribute their intensive mobilisation capacities and generic resources to the national coalition, with both contributions permitting the national coalition to perform key functions.

While this internal division of labour enhances the collective power of activists, it also aggravates internal cleavages based on class, culture and geography.

First, affluent leaders not only decide the main activities of the coalition, they also play an important role in designing the rules of interaction and governance. Most progressive coalitions take extreme care to ensure equal access within the coalition, but socially constructed rules based on the *particularistic* experiences of leaders do not valorise the experiences and practices of *all* partners equally (Bourdieu 1985). Such rules are often designed in ‘good faith’ but they also reflect the particular world views, norms and dispositions of their designers (typically the more affluent mobiles). The organisations most familiar with these rules and their normative underpinnings are in a better position to benefit from them. As resource-poor and peripheral organisations are less familiar with the dominant rules and norms, they have greater difficulty responding to them. This places another important obstacle to their participation in strategic decision-making processes. This in turn fuels a sense of institutional and symbolic marginalisation. Routledge (2003) provides an excellent example of this in his analysis of the People’s Global Action network. While the more affluent leaders of this network designed rules (in good faith) to guarantee equal access and communication, such rules were based on European assumptions of communicative equity and justice. Having less experience with such rules and norms, the poorer organisations of the Global South had greater difficulty participating in interactions, resulting in feelings of estrangement and marginalisation.

Second, as locals broaden their worlds by participating in diverse and extensive networks, they expect that these better connections will translate into more status and power for their organisations. Prominent coalitions do enhance the power and status of coalition members but this status and power is distributed unequally. Constant contact with political elites and perpetual media exposure allows the affluent leaders to reap much of the status and power flowing to prominent coalitions. The enhanced status and power of these affluent organisations is used to widen the funding base of already affluent organisations, fuelling their growth and prominence in the social movement network. The unequal distribution of status and power contributes to widening the material inequalities between affluent and poorer organisations, aggravating class-like tensions within the collective. Thus, while incorporation in broad campaigns increases the *expectations* of poorer local organisations, the *reality* of distributional inequalities typically results in sharp antagonisms between the more and less affluent activists within a social movement network. When this form of material subordination is coupled with the institutional and symbolic marginalisation described above, resentment against
In sum, social movement networks must intensify their activities and mobilise in a concerted fashion to achieve collective political goals. Mobilisations require formal divisions of labour, with some activists assuming leadership roles and others playing supportive roles. While such divisions make these collectives much more effective and powerful, they also introduce important cleavages and antagonisms that threaten to destabilise them. The longer the campaign, the more difficult it is for the different participants to overcome these conflicts. These types of internal cleavages make it impossible for social movements to stay on a mobilised footing for extended periods, with most coalitions eventually fragmenting along class, cultural and geographical lines (Tarrow 1998; Tarrow and McAdam 2005).

Conclusion

This paper is essentially about the role of geography in shaping social networks. While human geographers have become attentive to the importance of networks, the discussion in the discipline remains underdeveloped and one-sided (i.e. drawn primarily from Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory). This paper has sought to broaden the conceptual field by introducing other theorists into the mix (Granovetter 1973 1983; Wellman 1979; Coleman 1988 1990; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Diani 2004). These scholars have shown that different types of networks play different functions in collective action, resulting in a variety of rich and useful concepts such as strong ties, weak ties and social capital.

Building on these observations, I argued that geography and mobility play central roles in generating the particular network structures of social movements. Place possesses particular qualities that influence the shape of social networks that emerge within it. On the one hand, the proximity and stability associated with place favour the formation of strong-tie relations. The emergence of actors bound by strong norms, trust, emotions and cognitive frames facilitate the mobilisation of valuable and scarce resources to risky political ventures. On the other hand, place is made up of a number of contact points where diverse actors can come into regular interactions with one another. This ‘light institutionalism’ allows actors embedded in strong-tie relations to regularly interact and share ideas with the diverse others that make up a local activist milieu. The qualities of place therefore favour a network structure that is both internally well structured and open to contacts with multiple others in the vicinity. Such a network is strong enough to convince activists to mobilise their valuable resources to risky political enterprises and open enough to circulate innovative ideas between diverse groups.

When activists in places connect to one another, they form what I call a ‘social movement space’. Though such a space is an aggregation of individual places (Massey 2004), the process of aggregating these places produces qualities and dynamics that are very different from those found in the places constituting it. Activists face a number of barriers when connecting activist places. Those with the greatest resources at their disposal (economic and cultural capital) are in the best position to forge the connections and infrastructures needed to bind these places together. The ability to overcome geographical and cultural obstacles makes it possible for ‘mobile’ activists to forge a coherent social movement space but in doing this, they introduce new points of antagonism that pit them into conflictual relations with their less mobile and more locally grounded comrades. When this network of diverse activists remains loose, such conflicts stay relatively latent and inactive. However, when the network begins to mobilise intensively on behalf of a cause, conflicts erupt between the centre and the multiple peripheries, with the latter finding that participation results in new forms of subordination and marginalisation within the collation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John Agnew and Justus Uitermark for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. The three reviewers and the editors also provided a number of excellent suggestions to improve the paper.

Notes

1 The idea that proximity is not a necessary condition for community was introduced by sociologist Melvin Webber (1964) in his concept of ‘community without propinquity’. For more on this issue, see Wellman (1979).

2 The critique of the relational approach is not intended to dismiss the view in its entirety. The objective is to highlight conceptual elements that limit our abilities
to explain key aspects of social movements. The critique of the territorial approach has already been presented in the first paragraph of this section. There is no need to reiterate the arguments made above.

3 For a discussion of how these mechanisms have been theorised as distinct ideal types, see Granovetter (1985).

4 Norms provide different actors with a common set of references of whether a particular grievance merits some kind of collective challenge from below. Strong collective norms among allies provide them with rules and sanctions to govern collective behaviour and high barriers to exit (Coleman 1988 1990). Trust provides assurances and certainty that contributions to an enterprise will not be squandered by the malfeasance or ineptitude of others (Coleman 1988 1990; Portes 1998; Tilly 2005). Shared emotional energy produced through ritualised encounters such as protests, meetings and negotiations fuels dedication to the cause and solidarity to one’s allies (Collins 2004). Common interpretive frames provide the tacit know-how to realise complex tasks (see Storper and Salais 1997).

5 Paul Routledge nicely captures this idea through his concept of ‘convergence space’ (2003).

6 The state can also be an important obstacle but the analysis here will focus only on distance and diversity. The importance of the state as both facilitator and obstacle of these networks will require a future paper dedicated to this subject.

7 Affluence is understood in relative and not absolute terms. While activists and organisations may be more affluent than others in their immediate network, this does not mean that they are ‘rich’ in absolute terms. Many social movement organisations may be poor when compared to richer organisations in their society, but these same organisations may still possess more resources than some of their less affluent allies in the movement. It is argued that such resource advantages place activists and organisations in a better position to overcome the obstacles highlighted above.

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