

10 • Hybrid activism: paths of globalization in the Brazilian environmental movement¹

ANGELA ALONSO

Imagine a middle-aged man at Kennedy Airport. He is keen to read a paper about sustainable development in Brazil during his trip to Johannesburg, where he is expected to discuss global warming and deforestation with other activists from across the world. Besides the paper, he finds an overflowing email inbox on his laptop, including calls for demonstrations against World Bank policies in the developing world and proposals to collaborate with Southern environmental management projects. As he proceeds to his terminal, he recognizes someone whom he met at one of the United Nations summits. While catching his flight, he considers once more whether a true environmentalist should contribute to global pollution by globetrotting from one conference to another.

This story is not real, but it could be. Activists like this one continuously travel the world, carrying meanings, experiences and resources with them. At first glance, they are citizens without frontiers. The fiction lies in this statement rather than in my imagined scene. Is it possible to be a global activist without local roots? My research on activists from the two major Brazilian environmentalist organizations, SOS Rainforest and the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA, Socienvironmental Institute), indicates that it is not. Brazilian activists do not just ‘globalize’, they also ‘localize’, preserving deep local roots. In fact, they operate to connect two spaces. Within the global space, they build alliances with foreign groups, and in local space they deal with the nation-state, civil society and communities inhabiting the environments they aim to protect. This, however, is just an analytical distinction. In real life, the experiences of activists make these spaces virtually indistinguishable. As a result, their identities are a hybrid, being at the same time local *and* global. In this chapter, I will make the case for ‘hybrid activism’.

Changing patterns of mobilization

The array of processes commonly known as globalization is generally associated with economic, political and cultural interdependence and

exchange that supersede national territory and government, generating new social spaces, actors and conflicts. Transnational agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund offer new quarry for social movements, who raise grievances beyond the national sphere. In addition, the spread of new technologies, especially the Internet, and of English as an international language, opens new spaces and opportunities for citizen political engagement in the international sphere.

Changes in activism follow. Protest crosses national boundaries, directed to multilateral institutions and international public opinion. New forms of organization arise: fluid global networks of activists, based on transitory solidarities. Movements become multi-issue, building what may be termed meaning packages (Tarrow 2005), the reframing and overlapping of themes and demands. Identity comes to be an issue at stake, continuously redefined. A new profile of activist emerges, circulating among local, national and global spaces.

These transformations of activism presented challenges to existing social movement theories. Political Process (PP) and New Social Movement (NSM) approaches, which emerged in the 1970s, defined social movements by virtue of their relationships to national political authorities and institutions (Tilly 1978; Touraine 1978), and had to develop and amend their theories in order to explain transnational activism.

The NSM tradition developed new concepts such as 'network society' (Castells 1996) and 'information society' (Melucci 1996), presenting democratization of knowledge, globalization and identity as the new main subjects of mobilization. It also fed theories of Global Civil Society (GCS), stressing the innovative character of transnational networks of non-governmental organizations. These were characterized as an empowering force for activists from Southern countries, a globalization-from-below, challenging the globalization-from-above carried out by Northern firms and national states (for instance, Falk 1999).

Meanwhile, PP theory developed into the Contentious Politics (CP) approach, broadening its definition of the field, and considering mobilization that crosses national state frontiers. Tarrow (2005), however, continues to focus on 'transnational' rather than 'global' activism. In this view, domestic claims projected on to international institutions and actors create transnational collective action. The process includes dissemination of global framing and the building of new identities among grassroots movements and national and international groups (*ibid.*). The rise of social movements would still take place, however, within and in relation to the nation-state.

Explanations of Latin American activism followed the first approach

more than the second, reproducing the GCS focus on the innovative political culture of global social movements (Shefner 2004). Both approaches present limits, however. The concept of GCS is normative, considering only emancipating forms of activism, and ignoring violence, such as terrorism, and inequalities between Northern and Southern civil societies (Smith 2005). The CP approach lacks some cultural dimensions of globalization, such as knowledge. More important, both perspectives share the assumption that local and global are actual empirical realms.

McAdam et al. (2001) argued against the state–civil society dichotomy, insisting that there are no physical boundaries separating the two. The same can be said of the local–global dichotomy: they are theoretically constructed spheres. Individuals are embedded in local, national and global realms simultaneously. The globalization of economics and information makes any political action have repercussions at all scales at the same time. This is the novelty of contemporary social movements. They embody a new type of activism that does not operate by shifting from one sphere to another, but rather is local and global all the time, mixing the two in its own fashion: a hybrid activism.

In order to understand it, a new perspective is required. CP and GCS are essentially structuralist theories, facing difficulties in describing how transnational social movements emerge from meanings and actions of tangible individual agents. In contrast, I will focus on how individual biographical trajectories operate the exchange of meanings, knowledge and strategies (Jasper 1997; Polleta 2006) that build the process and structures of political globalization. These concrete social experiences are, as Gaventa and Tandon (2007) argue, constrained by the politics of intermediation (the standards of accountability between activists and local communities) and the politics of knowledge (forms of expertise used to frame contested issues) that they involve.

My cases show how hybrid identities, meanings and trajectories of mobilization are built through two mechanisms identified in Tilly's (2005) discussion of inequality. 'Emulation' takes place when local actors 'reproduce organizational modes already operating elsewhere, importing configurations' (ibid.: 156), while 'adaptation' happens when local actors use existing models, but also invent procedures (ibid.: 84).

Trajectories of mobilization

The global–local path: the case of SOS Rainforest Russell A. Mittermeier is a fifty-nine-year-old New Yorker, the son of German immigrants, who, as a child, dreamed of being a jungle explorer. He studied biological anthropology at Harvard and, while researching neo-tropical monkeys