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# The Urban Question Revisited: The Importance of Cities for Social Movements

WALTER J. NICHOLLS

## Abstract

*What roles do cities play in fostering general social movements? This article maintains that cities facilitate particular types of relations that are good at making high-quality resources available to mobilizations operating at a variety of spatial scales. However, while large and complex urban systems may be well suited for these types of relations, whether they actually develop depends on the nature of local power relations between political authorities and civic organizations. In certain cities local configurations of political power may favor the growth of these relations, with these cities becoming important nodal points in geographically extended social movement networks. In other cities, by contrast, local configurations of political power may hamper the formation of these relations. This is a theoretical article that draws on network theory to inform the conceptual framework and a variety of empirical cases for illustrative purposes.*

## Introduction

What roles do cities play in the formation of general social movements? The 'urban question' has concerned observers of social movement over the years. From the young Karl Marx to leading social movement scholars of today, analysts have grappled with the ways in which cities contribute to or block contentious political activities at national and transnational scales. In spite of this general concern, few have actually opened up the urban 'black box' to identify the processes and mechanisms that allow cities to play specific roles in broad social movements. The most notable exceptions have been Manuel Castells and Ira Katznelson. Both identified the specific qualities of cities in capitalism, and highlighted the ways in which these specifically 'urban qualities' influenced the grievances, organizational forms, and consciousness of insurgents. In spite of their considerable efforts, their concerns and assertions never spilled over into the mainstream social movement<sup>1</sup> literature.

This article revisits the urban question by arguing that the special contribution of cities results from the complex social and political relations found within them. Cities stimulate the formation of diverse groups with strong ties. These strong ties enable actors in these groups to pool and concentrate high-grade resources to address particular concerns. The diversity of strong-tie groups makes available a wide variety of *specialized* resources with a range of potentially beneficial uses for social movement campaigns. However, the rich and diverse resources found in complex cities can only yield their

I would like to thank William Sites for his detailed and insightful comments on an earlier draft of the article. The three reviewers also provided a number of excellent suggestions and criticisms.

1 Social movements are defined here as collective forms of contentious politics activated for the purposes of achieving political goals through non-traditional means (e.g. protest, boycotts, public campaigns versus strictly electoral politics) (see McAdam *et al.*, 2001).

advantages when weaker ties or bridges are built between different groups. Location in a common urban system facilitates bridging opportunities because actors have better information of the resources and organizations 'out there', there is a greater availability of brokers to establish contacts between different groups, and it facilitates the transposition of resources from one context to the other. Thus, the specific role of the city for general social movements is in its function as a *relational incubator*, facilitating complex relational exchanges that generate a diversity of useful resources for campaigns operating at a variety of spatial scales.

This theoretical article aims to contribute to recent efforts to understand how insurgent networks are formed in cities and how these networks contribute to social movements (see Diani, 2005; Baldassari and Diani, 2007). The first section examines different ways in which the 'urban question' has been treated in the literature. The second section examines how cities can provide optimal conditions for mobilizing diverse and specialized resources. The third section assesses how states block connections between different associations in cities. The final section draws on two empirical cases (Paris and Los Angeles) to illustrate how these processes shape insurgent network structures in different cities.

## The 'urban question': locating the specificity of the city

This section examines how scholars have identified the specific role of cities in social movements.

### The specificity of the city I: fragmenting mobilizations in spaces of place

Manuel Castells was one of the first scholars to investigate the role of cities in national social movements. He began by defining the specific role of cities in monopoly capitalism. Cities were spaces where the labor force is concentrated and reproduced (1977: 237). States intervene in this process by organizing the production and distribution of key consumption goods like transportation, housing, welfare supports, healthcare, etc. The contradictions in fulfilling these consumption functions resulted in structural grievances that triggered urban mobilizations: the more the state intervened in the arena of consumption, the more it found itself failing to meet the conflicting expectations of both 'capital' and 'the people', the more the people responded through urban mobilizations, and the more class conflict was displaced from the apolitical sphere of the market to the highly political sphere of the state. Particular *urban* grievances and mobilizations were therefore direct reflections of the general system's incapacity to fulfill its reproductive functions. Following from this, the *Party* played the ultimate brokering role by bridging work and urban struggles into a new 'bloc' that would bring about a historical break with capitalism (Pickvance, 2003: 103). Thus, urban movements could be connected with work place movements (by the Party) because both emerged from distinctive yet complementary contradictions within the general capitalist system.

Castells broke with his particular variant of structural Marxism in *The City and the Grass-roots* (1983). He ceased to identify the specificity of the urban from its particular role in ensuring key functions in monopoly capitalism. Instead, he highlighted three variables that distinguished political activities in cities from those occurring elsewhere. First, collective consumption continued to be a central factor in shaping the grievances and interests of urban residents. However, the emphasis shifts *from* how consumption grievances reflect contradictions in the structural underpinnings of monopoly capitalism *to* how people articulate their consumption concerns in ways that reflect their immediate everyday needs. Second, place and local networks provide people with identities that give meaning and purpose to lives. The defence of *territorial identities* becomes a powerful motive for joining political mobilizations. Third, the local state reinforces the

particularistic concerns of urban insurgents through the use of clientelistic and divide-and-rule tactics. These variables (consumption, territory, state) intersect to confine urban mobilizations to the defence of particularistic territorial concerns in their 'spaces of places' (i.e. reactive utopias). This undermined their abilities to shift the scales of their operations to confront the spaces where real power operates, that is, the global 'space of flows'.

While the young Castells identified the specific urban qualities that allowed cities to play a strategic role in broader anti-systemic social movements, the older Castells identified the qualities that fragmented urban insurgents into thousands of reactive conflicts. This latter view became influential in the 'urban social movement literature' of the 1980s. As this literature grew, the *conceptual gap* between it and the mainstream 'social movement' literature widened (see Pickvance, 2003). A basic definition had developed among leading social movement scholars that 'social movements' were political insurgents connected through geographically extensive networks, common grievances, and common ideological principles (McAdam *et al.*, 2001; Diani and Bison, 2004; Tilly, 2004). Castells' conception of 'urban social movements' stressed the localized and particularistic qualities of urban mobilizations, thereby placing them outside the conceptual scope of mainstream social movement scholars. The gap between these literatures is problematic because it takes us away from a robust inquiry into the strategic roles of cities for more general social movements. The mainstream social movement literature is full of studies that relate the rise of social movements to cities. For example, Douglas McAdam's (1982) classical study of the Civil Rights Movement suggests that a key factor in making this movement possible was the urbanization of the American South. In another important study, Roger Gould (1995) demonstrates how place of residence was a central factor motivating people to risk life and limb for the Paris Commune. While these and other studies refer to the importance of cities, they do not examine the qualities that allow cities to play this strategic role. Thus, the aim here is to revive the 'urban question' by examining the specific processes that allow cities to play these strategic roles in broader social movements.

### The specificity of the city II: the dialectics of relational diversity and institutional control

To revive the 'urban question', we need to first identify the specific qualities that differentiate cities from other social structures (Saunders, 1981). Richard Sennett (2002) identifies this specificity in the dialectically linked processes that structure urban life. Cities are spaces of difference, alterity, and freedom. The radical diversity found in cities provides individuals within them with a sense of freedom because they are no longer bound by the tightly circumscribed roles, norms and expectations found in homogenous places. As life in the big city reduces 'identity closure', individuals enjoy a degree of cognitive freedom that makes it easier to establish new connections with strangers (Sennett, 2002: 43). Hence, the concentration of diverse social relations in cities creates more freedom for people to sidestep narrow subjective categories of self and other, loosening the cognitive straitjackets that inhibit connections across difference. These new connections between diverse individuals make it possible to step outside of conventional boxes, draw on diverse resources and ideas, and create new solutions for old problems.

Sennett goes on to suggest that the *thesis* of alterity and freedom in cities plants the seeds of its antithesis: control and rationalization. The diversity, alterity and freedom of cities trigger the erection of a range of bureaucratic organizations to control and rationalize this increasingly fragmented society. States order complex urban worlds by creating policies and apparatuses that govern the different functional and geographical areas of cities. The different techniques deployed to control and rationalize diverse worlds ultimately form the complex regulatory grids that manage and structure spaces of diversity. Thus, Sennett's view is interesting because it stresses that cities are spaces

where these dialectically linked processes unfold with the greatest intensity: they are spaces where intense diversity precipitates new and innovative relational exchanges but they are also spaces where this radical diversity sparks a dense network of institutional controls to rationalize the 'wild' character of urban life.

Drawing largely on this dialectical view of urbanism, the following sections examine how the *generative* and *disciplinary* processes unfolding within cities influence how urban insurgents contribute to broader social movement networks.

## The city as a generative space: forging strong and weak ties

This section examines the basic features of social movement networks and then assesses how relations forged in cities contribute to social movements.

### Social movements as networked relations

A central quality that distinguishes social movements from organizations, parties, and special interest groups is that they are *networks* of distinct organizations and individuals participating in an effort to realize a collective goal through non-traditional means (Diani, 1997; della Porta and Diani, 1999; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Diani and Bison, 2004). As different actors and organizations are faced with common grievances, they may seek to build connections with one another in order to pool their resources and devise common strategies to pressure political officials. Though actors may cooperate in a common political enterprise, they do not cede organizational autonomy to the collectivity. Their horizontal character increases the importance of 'soft' infrastructure such as trust, norms, symbols, identities and emotions for coordinating activities (Melucci, 1996; della Porta and Diani, 1999). While trust enables actors to contribute resources to a collective enterprise, common meaning systems and normative codes help actors to stick to high-risk collective enterprises. In this sense, 'networks contribute both to creating the preconditions for mobilization and to providing the proper setting for the elaboration of specific world views and lifestyles' (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 14). Following from this, scholars have sought to understand how the quality of these ties affect mobilization capacities of movements (Granovetter, 1973; Diani, 1997; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Tilly, 2005). To understand how the quality of ties affects mobilization capacities, it is useful to return to Granovetter's (1973; 1983) discussion of the tradeoffs between strong and weak ties:

*Strong ties* result from the 'combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie' (1973: 1361). Where there is dense reciprocity, high levels of intimacy and intense emotion (e.g. strong ties), we would expect to find greater motivation, greater certainty in others, and higher barriers to exit. As a consequence, people would be motivated to participate in high-stake collective action, contribute their most valued goods to these efforts, and stick to these activities even when the risks of losing their most valued goods mount. Strong ties, in other words, enhance collective capacities because they encourage sustained contributions of high-grade resources to collective endeavors. The absence of strong ties increases uncertainty between networked actors which, in turn, reduces the willingness to contribute prized resources to a collective enterprise over an extended period of time. Granovetter and others also stress the drawbacks of strong ties (Granovetter, 1973; 1983; Portes, 1998). A network that is primarily composed of strong ties can close off connections to other groups, impose excessive claims on group members, restrict individual freedoms, and lower collective standards (Portes, 1998: 16–18). When actors cluster in closed and insular networks, they are deprived of connections to others in possession of diverse resources and information.

*Weak ties* to a range of diverse acquaintances from across the social system generate opportunities to access new resources and information. The absence of weak ties cuts a group off from these flows, requiring it to depend on a much more limited range of

resources and information for survival. Isolation of this sort can lead to the group's impoverishment and disempowerment. However, where weak ties dominate a network, we would expect lower levels of emotional intensity which would reduce one's level of commitment to a collective enterprise. People tend to be less motivated to risk life and limb for an acquaintance than they are for a loved one. Also, weak ties have lower barriers to exit and therefore result in fair weather friendships, making these partnerships prone to disbanding when presented with greater risks. Thus, while weak ties present movement networks with important resources, weak ties alone can lead to disempowerment through excessive diffusion of relational ties.

Granovetter (1983) suggests that optimal network structures combine both types of ties, with each contributing complementary sets of resources to the collective enterprise. 'Weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle; but strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available. I believe that these two facts do much to explain when strong ties play their unique role' (*ibid.*: 209). This network configuration seems the most capable of mobilizing high-grade resources resulting from strong intimate bonds while allowing them to continue to capture resources, information and support from diverse contacts throughout the social system. Social movements that fail to achieve this optimal balance risk either relational diffusion from overly weak ties or balkanization from overly strong ties.

I hypothesize that complex urban centers facilitate two key processes that enable strong-weak tie network configurations: the proliferation of diverse, specialized, and resource-rich groups bound by *strong ties*; and more opportunities for weak ties to be created between individuals and organizations embedded in strong-tie groups. Whereas the first process generates a diverse range of specialized resources that could potentially be useful for social movements, the second process facilitates that these specialized resources become accessible to broader movement networks.

### Let a thousand flowers bloom! Concentrating diverse strong-tie groups in cities

Urban sociologists and geographers from different theoretical traditions have long noted that complex urban systems are generative structures of social heterogeneity (Park, 1952; Burgess and Bogue, 1964; Saunders, 1981; Soja, 2000; Massey, 2004). Large urban systems contain complex divisions of labor, functional divisions of space, highly varied socioeconomic topographies, a multiplicity of political territories, and strong cultural variation. The structural complexity of cities results in the proliferation of diverse cultural, occupational and political groups operating in distinctive and overlapping spatial niches. Whereas the structural complexity of cities is a generative force of sociospatial diversity, geographic stability and proximity increases the likelihood that strong ties develop within these diverse groupings of people. Coleman (1988; 1990) has argued that geographic stability and face-to-face proximity facilitate the *closure* of social networks. When people interested in common issues (work, neighborhood, schools, culture, etc.) have the opportunity to meet repeatedly about their concerns, there is a greater likelihood that strong norms, trust, emotions and interpretive frameworks develop between them. These relational qualities (norms, trust, emotions and interpretive frameworks) improve the abilities of actors to perform collective tasks with greater ease, efficiency and expertise.

- *Norms.* Network closure enables the development of common norms. These norms provide common expectations that inform the behavior of collective actors while making available mechanisms to ensure compliance with expectations. For example, Coleman (1988: 106) demonstrates how geographic stability facilitates network closure between parents with children in the same school. Repeated interactions between parents on a daily basis allow them to develop a common set of expectations



concerning acceptable behavior for children. In cases where parents are geographically mobile (change of schools) or distant (distance from the school), network closure fails to occur, which weakens norms and mechanisms for maintaining social control.

- *Trust*. Network closure also encourages trustworthiness between different actors in a network (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1985; Portes, 1998). High levels of trust provide a greater degree of certainty, which permits people to contribute their valuable and unique resources to a collective enterprise. The absence of closure reduces trust, weakening assurances that the contributions of prized resources will not be squandered by the malfeasance or ineptitude of others (Tilly, 2005).
- *Emotional energy*. Collins (2004: 64) argues that bodily proximity is necessary for producing high levels of emotional energy needed to fuel dedication and solidarity to collective enterprises. 'Bodily presence makes it easier for human beings to monitor each other's signals and bodily expressions; to get into shared rhythm, caught up in each other's motions and emotions; and to signal and confirm a common focus of attention and thus a state of intersubjectivity'.
- *Interpretive frameworks*. Network closure also enables the construction of common interpretive frameworks between actors, which improve their abilities to perceive tacit information in similar ways and use it to mount common projects (Storper, 1997; Storper and Salais, 1997). These frameworks can be thought of as the collective know-how developed and shared by a group of experienced actors. In this instance, shared interpretive frameworks enhance the intellectual capacities of actors.

While common norms, trust and emotional energy make it more likely for actors to contribute their most valued resources to risky collective enterprises, common interpretive frameworks provide the 'know-how' to combine these resources in effective ways. Such tight bonds enable complex problems to be addressed in effective and specialized ways. In cities, we will find a diverse range of individuals and organizations bound by strong ties, from union militants to community-based organizers to intellectuals. Thus, to reiterate a central point, complex urban areas are responsible for the proliferation of a range of strong-tie groups with capacities to generate high-grade and specialized resources.

### Building bridges and circulating resources: the importance of weak ties

While cities spur the proliferation of strong-tie groups, they also facilitate weaker connections between these strong-tie groups. The specialized resources and skills generated by strong-tie groups are not trapped inside them and can be *appropriated* for the purposes of another cause (Coleman, 1988; 1990; Portes, 1998). In a discussion of the 'appropriability' of organizations and resources, Coleman (1988: 108) suggests that 'an organization that was initiated for one purpose is available for appropriation for other purposes, constituting important social capital for the individual members, who have available to them the organizational resources for effective opposition'. I address this by examining how cities facilitate processes for diverse groups to pool their specialized resources.

#### Cooperation by necessity: urban issues as a structural push

Strong-tie groups may possess the knowledge and skills to treat problems in specialized areas, but these resources may not be adequate to treat problems outside those narrow domains. Actors may find they lack sufficient levels or types of resources to address certain problems. If the problem is pressing and needs to be addressed, organizations will be required to seek out relations with those in possession of the appropriate resources. The multifaceted character of urban issues (i.e. redevelopment, housing, transit) can serve as a useful 'push' for developing these types of connections. *Urban issues affect diverse groups simultaneously while leaving any single group ill-equipped to deal with the problem by itself*. For example, the redevelopment of a blighted neighborhood with a new Walmart Supercenter directly affects the labor, business, transportation and the

planning concerns of the different communities in the area (Sites, 2007). Not only does this project directly impact a variety of groups, but the multifaceted character of the problem leaves any single group ill-equipped to address the issue in an adequate way. In this way, urban issues can function as an *initial* 'structural push' to spur common cause coalitions made up of different strong-tie groups.

#### Forging durable ties: from brokerage to interdependencies

Necessity may encourage insurgents to look for the assistance of others but these insurgents need to know which organizations have what resources, and they need to have some way of contacting the organizations in their possession. Tarrow and McAdam (2005) highlight the importance of 'brokerage' in creating new ties between diverse organizations. Brokerage means that connections between two or more unrelated agents are created through the mediation of a third-party broker (*ibid.*: 127). Brokers can be a common acquaintance, a mediating organization, or even coordinate events and workshops. When unrelated organizations reside in the same urban area, there is greater likelihood that they will have common acquaintances that can serve as third-party brokers. The more brokers there are, the better information insurgents will have of the resources in their urban environments, and the greater accessibility to the organizations in possession of those resources.

Once initial contacts are established between previously unrelated organizations, they begin to experiment with how to pool and exchange resources. The more actors from different strong-tie groups (unions, immigrants associations, neighborhood groups, intellectuals, etc.) contribute their resources to others, the greater the obligations of others to reciprocate in kind (Coleman, 1988: 102). As the number of outstanding obligations (past and future) increases in a network, the more rights individual members have to call upon the assistance of others for their particular campaigns. Membership in the network provides actors with *rights* that allow them to call upon the resources of others to advance their particular causes, but membership also *obliges* them to contribute their own resources to other members of the network. For instance, access to the specialized resources of immigrant associations by unions depends on their willingness to make their own resources available to these actors when called upon. As reciprocal ties develop between groups, social mechanisms (norms, conventions, etc.) are formed to ensure the equitable exchange of resources between partners. The development of a 'moral' economy between strong-tie groups helps create a relatively independent and cohesive social structure where the resources of particular groups are partially collectivized and made available to others. These webs of network ties are not social movements *per se*, but rather relational conduits that make a wide variety of resources available for different coalitions, mobilizations and campaigns.

#### Forging identities and cultures: 'tolerant identities' and cultures of resistance

The emergence of this web of urban-based interdependencies requires common normative frameworks to stabilize and orient relations (Snow *et al.*, 1986). The diversity of the organizations involved (from churches to unions to intellectuals) and the issues being addressed (from redevelopment to immigration) make it difficult to form a common discursive frame. Della Porta (2005) provides a useful discussion of how heterogeneous organizations involved in the European Social Forum formed a common framing identity. Individuals representing different organizations talked to one another about concrete and pragmatic issues in a variety of workshops and meetings. Through repeated deliberations, debates and actions, new collective norms and identities were forged, solidifying emergent ties and providing insurgents with a common sense of purpose. Rather than the new identity reflecting any particular ideological, social movement or organization tradition (i.e. communist, anarchist, liberals, labor, environmentalist, etc.), the stress has been placed on valorizing the *diversity* and *inclusiveness* of these new relational exchanges (*ibid.*: 186). Parallels can be made with the urban insurgent networks considered here. Diverse insurgents maintain their distinctive organizational, political and ideological traditions but they also recognize



their dependence on diverse and inclusive networks to address complex issues. Whereas tolerant identities provide a normative justification for complex alliances, loosely articulated concepts such as 'justice' provide diverse actors with a common objective that can be applied to a wide variety of issue areas. Thus, the frames binding diverse actors are forms of bottom-up populism based on the pragmatic appreciation of diversity, difference, and justice.

When a web of insurgent networks is well developed and common frames forged, a 'culture of resistance' can emerge in urban places. These cultures not only provide insurgents with a coherent identity but they also give a profound sense of meaning to collective forms of resistance. These cultures are captured, produced and reproduced through symbolic products like the built environment, songs and poetry, and stories of past battles and struggles. The symbolic architecture emerging from well-established insurgent networks can exist relatively autonomously from the insurgents themselves, with artists and poets using insurgent exploits and lore as the raw material for their cultural products. When such cultures are robust enough, they can become strongly associated with their places of origin, working to revive the dedication of insurgents while helping to recruit others (locals and nonlocals) into urban insurgent networks (Routledge, 1993; 1997). For example, the culture of resistance that developed in Berkeley, California during the 1960s helped recruit people throughout the country to local insurgent networks.

#### Flexible mobilizations: building equivalencies across issue areas

The militants comprising these urban clusters are engaged in different issues and embedded in networks and hierarchies operating at different geographical scales. Labor unions, immigrant associations, and church organizations have their own priority issues and geographical structures. As interdependencies and mutual obligations develop between these specialized groups, militants not only begin to perceive their particular issues in complementary ways but they also feel obliged (strategically, ideologically and emotionally) to mobilize on behalf of their allies. The *practice* of mobilizing across issue areas and geographical scales creates opportunities for militants to learn about other issues and *discover* how these issues are equally responsible for determining the livelihood conditions of their constituent groups. While labor unions may initially lend their support to immigrant associations for instrumental reasons (i.e. traditional coalition), the deepening of these relations in the practice of mobilization results in the incremental discovery that immigration issues are equally responsible for determining the lives of the working class as are workplace regulations and contracts. Discoveries of this sort create what Mouffe (1996: 5) has called a 'chain of equivalences', a process through which actors realize how their particular struggles are equally determined by a series of mutually connected forces (i.e. 'overdetermination').

Issues like labor, immigration, transportation and the environment have their own strategic and tactical particularities, with each varying according to opportunities—constraints, alliance structures, and geographies. The more insurgent clusters mobilize in these different areas, the more they gain key insights and knowledge in a range of political and geographical terrains. The accumulation of this collective knowledge produces two effects. First, the strategic planning of militant groups shifts from a focus on a particular issue area (i.e. labor) to a focus on multiple issue areas (i.e. labor, environment, immigration, transportation, etc.). As the strategic battlefield broadens, insurgents draw up plans for mobilizations on equivalent fronts in the general war for social justice. For example, trade unionists come to view the advancement of working-class living conditions as equally dependent on successful mobilizations over labor regulations, immigration and the environment. In this sense, the 'chain of equivalences' is made concrete through the practice of developing plans to strategically maneuver at the intersection of social, political and geographical forces. Second, the accumulation of this type of strategic knowledge provides urban insurgents with enhanced flexibility to respond to new threats and grievances in a range of issue areas and geographical terrains.

The well-established ties between urban insurgents combines with their broad and varied knowledge, enabling them to quickly assemble, strategize and deploy resources in a variety of issue areas and geographical terrains. Within a short time, the same cluster of insurgents from a city can play a major role in municipal living wage campaigns, metropolitan-based environmental justice campaigns, and national immigrant rights campaigns. To reiterate a central point: these insurgent clusters do not belong to any particular social movement, but their mobilization capacities and enhanced flexibility enable them to deploy specialized resources for a range of campaigns unfolding at different spatial scales.

This section highlights two general processes. First, complex urban systems spur a diversity of strong-tie groups in possession of specialized resources that can be useful for social movements. In cities like Los Angeles, Chicago and London, a vast array of groups (unions, associations, religious groups, funding and technical agencies, cultural groups, specialized professions, academics, students, etc.) produce specialized resources that can be appropriated for different campaigns operating at different spatial scales. Second, common location in urban centers makes it easier for weak-tie connections to be established between different groups. The urban functions as a relational incubator, nourishing a variety of complex exchanges that help make specialized resources available for a variety of mobilizations.

### **The city as institutional cage: channeling associations into narrow geopolitical fields**

The next task of the article is to theorize how states can block the types of connections between different groups in cities. Following on Sennett's dialectical characterization of the *urban*, this section suggests that the relational diversity of cities triggers a wide series of state controls. Such controls shape the connections between the diverse insurgents in cities.

Social movement scholars have long highlighted the importance of states in shaping claims and cycles of protest, with recent efforts examining how these structures shape the network structures of insurgents (see McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1998; McAdam *et al.*, 2001; Diani, 2003; Osa, 2003). This section is informed by these efforts but it also departs from them in one important way. Traditionally, the political process approach has used an 'elite power' view of the state, whereby the development of social movements depends on the degree of cohesion/division among political elites (for an excellent discussion of 'elite power', see Mann, 1993). While the shifting configurations of elite power are important, this section highlights the effects of 'bureaucratic rationalization' on urban insurgents. This perspective maintains that modern states *need* to rationalize diverse social relations in order to foster a productive society and to avoid anarchy and social breakdown. The rules and institutions created to achieve these state functions structure the interests, specialties and networking capacities of associations, ultimately *caging* them into narrow policy and political fields. Political elites (functionaries and politicians) assume control over key institutional levers and use their 'power over' associations for political advantages. Thus, rationalization is a primary structuring process that shapes the concerns, specialties and networking strategies of particular associations.

A central puzzle of modern society has been that increased social differentiation and heterogeneity has not resulted in anarchy and chaos (Granovetter, 1985). Weberians (Weber, 1978; Mann, 1986; 1993) have argued that for modern societies to remain stable and productive, political leaders needed to establish common norms and governing structures to coordinate society's increasingly differentiated parts. Universal laws provide general rules while a common administrative apparatus ensures the uniform implementation of these rules across national space. Though rules and regulations are general, states also need to take into account the socioeconomic and geographic

particularities of their societies. This requires distinct strategies, regulations and agencies for particular functional (i.e. economy, labor, housing, agriculture, etc.) and geographical areas (i.e. borough, city, region, state and national). By developing institutions to address these functional and geographical differences, states are better able to govern and coordinate the different parts of the system. However, this also reinforces social and geographical differences by caging social activities within distinctive institutional walls (Mann, 1993). In this sense, efforts to regulate and coordinate diversity also spur the institutional compartmentalization of sociospatial differences.

While states need to develop rules to coordinate diversity, they do not simply impose these rules from above. Legitimacy for rules is achieved through consent, realized through the incorporation of the 'people' into rule making and implementation processes (Mann, 1993: 82). Civic organizations are a principal vehicle for incorporating 'the people' into these processes. Civic associations are presented with a variety of openings to express their concerns in their particular areas of interest. For example, housing associations can engage in housing policy by lobbying, consulting and partnering up with public officials. While this allows the plural interests of the associational world to influence state rules and policy, it also requires associations to directly interact, engage and ultimately internalize the institutions and codes that structure their particular fields of interest. As associations become channeled into these narrow fields, they undergo a process of professionalization which further hardens their specialization. For Weber, professionalization essentially meant that people engage in politics primarily because it is their 'profession' to do so and not simply because of their dedication to the cause (Weber, 1994: 318).

When people and organizations 'live from' politics in this way, securing resources from the state becomes a principal factor in shaping the substantive goals and actions of organizations. For civic associations, obtaining these resources requires them to develop goals, strategies and actions that reflect the expectations of public sector functionaries and/or party bosses. On the one hand, public functionaries use their leverage over civic associations to demand they perform *specialized* tasks with great efficiency and 'professionalism'. Functionaries ensure compliance with these expectations through competitive bidding, assessments and periodic evaluations. On the other hand, party bosses are also charged with distributing state resources and 'favors' to civic associations. Receipt of resources and favors from bosses obliges associations to reciprocate by meeting political expectations. Thus, when associations become 'professional' operatives in particular fields, they must contend with the expectations of public functionaries and party bosses, with the first demanding them to perform with great technical efficiency and the second compelling them to calculate with Machiavellian skill. These constraints compel associations to meet the narrow expectations within their particular field, with those veering from expectations risking the loss of resources and influence.

The *form* of the regulatory state further fractures the associational sector into a multitude of specialized fields. The regulatory state is divided along sectoral (i.e. education, health, trade, etc.) and geographic lines (i.e. borough, municipality, region, nation, international, etc.). Civic associations are often channeled into a sector (i.e. housing) at particular geographical scales (i.e. municipality). Though the issues associations address have complex and interconnected causes with varying geographic origins, their positioning within specialized 'geopolitical' fields compels them to treat these issues in narrowly defined ways. This locks associations into particular ways of thinking about and addressing issues (making it difficult to 'think outside the box') (see Morin, 1981). These cognitive straitjackets compound fears that investing outside their narrow fields diverts scarce resources from the concrete and immediate needs of the organization. Thus, the state's interactions with the associational sector channel individual associations into narrow and highly specialized geopolitical fields. The compartmentalization of associations reduces their capacities to recognize the benefits of making substantial investments in areas outside their particular fields.

Cities are different from other spaces because of the sheer quantity and complexity of the institutional constraints found within them. The *sedimentation* of national, regional, metropolitan, city and neighborhood institutions places urban-based civic associations at the intersection of a highly complex institutional web. How associations are placed in this institutional web can channel them into distinctive, mutually exclusive and non-overlapping geopolitical fields. For example, a city like Paris may have hundreds of different civic associations with direct concerns for the plight of immigrants. However, these associations are embedded in a city with a high degree of institutional sedimentation, resulting in their placement in mutually exclusive and non-overlapping geopolitical fields. As associations representing first-generation, second-generation and undocumented immigrants are channeled into distinctive geopolitical fields, the boundaries separating their interests and activities harden. The hardening of such boundaries places another hindrance to meaningful collaborations. Cities like Paris may have high levels of associational diversity but intricate institutional channels track these associations into narrow geopolitical fields, reducing their willingness to engage in durable partnerships with one another.

While these institutional 'trenches' exist in all cities (Katznelson, 1981), they take on different forms according to different periods of state development. The past two decades have been marked by intense innovations in urban forms of regulating state-civil society relations. During the 1980s, the main innovation in the Anglo-American world was the 'roll back' of resources and opportunities for associational engagement (Peck and Tickell, 2002). The Thatcher government initiated the most self-conscious effort to extricate associations from the policy-making process of cities while the Reagan administration shut down many of the programs that called on associational participation (Thornley, 1991; Eisinger, 1997). Governments in the rest of Western Europe took a different approach. They targeted new areas to partner up with different segments of the associational sector and they developed new instruments to regulate these relations. In Germany, for example, the leading associations of the 1970s squatter movement partnered up with the state in the 1980s and 1990s to help manage the production and distribution of low-income housing (Mayer, 2000). The 1980s and 1990s was therefore a period of important innovations in the form of state-civil society relations, with certain innovations limiting opportunities for associational engagement, others expanding opportunities, and still others doing a little bit of both. When states reinforce their institutional channels, associations tend to become more specialized and professionalized in their narrow fields, making it more difficult for them to establish new political relations outside these domains. However, when these institutional channels break down, opportunities open up for developing new types of connections with diverse others.

## **Pathways of urban network formation: comparing immigrant mobilizations**

The last section examines how urban network structures are shaped at the intersection of two dialectically linked processes: relational diversity and institutional control. The discussion uses exploratory research on Paris and secondary research on Los Angeles to illustrate the different pathways of network formation in cities.

### **Robust institutional channels: 'segmented alliance structures'**

Paris is the French city with the highest concentration and diversity of associations. Growing anti-immigrant sentiment in France has provided the basis for an alliance across associational sectors. The groups engaged in these activities are traditional human rights associations, first- and second-generation immigrant associations, labor unions and

religious-based organizations. The primary vehicles for these campaigns have been a series of coalitions. Contre l'Immigration Jetable (CIJ), a coalition made up of more than 100 organizations, is the most recent of these coalitions. Although a diverse range of associations and organizations participate in this coalition, a handful have committed substantial resources while the rest show up to events and sign petitions but do not supply much else beyond these symbolic contributions. Based on these different levels of contributions, the coalition can be divided into two basic factions.

- 1 *Strong tie core: grounding the coalition.* Four human rights organizations, all based in Paris, constitute the core of Paris's immigrant rights network. These are relatively large and institutionalized organizations that date back to at least the first world war. The state has historically provided these associations with important subsidies to treat immigrant and refugee issues at a national scale. Their specialization in this field has created strong incentives to direct their scarce resources to invest in immigrant rights campaigns. These Paris-based human rights organizations have spearheaded a series of national coalitions from the mid-1980s to the present, with CIJ being the latest. With many of the same individuals working together on these campaigns over two decades, strong norms, trust, emotions and interpretive frameworks have been forged between them. These strong ties have provided the certainty needed to deploy substantial resources to these campaigns, including money, logistical support, legal expertise, political legitimacy, and most importantly, leadership. Thus, specialization in immigrant rights has provided individual associations with an 'objective' interest to invest scarce resources in these campaigns while 'strong ties' have provided the assurances that heavy investments would not be squandered by the ineptitude or malfeasance of their partners.
- 2 *Second tier supports: immigrant associations, labor unions, religious groups.* Outside this core group, a number of support organizations contribute symbolic resources (i.e. sign petitions and show up to demonstrations) but not the types of heavy resources seen above. In this instance, there are weak ties to the core associations but these ties are *too weak* to support more substantial contributions to the coalition. Within this category of hesitant contributors, there are several groups.
  - *First- and second-generation immigrant associations.* Thirty years ago a number of highly innovative immigrant associations appeared to present important challenges to the political system (Siméant, 1998; Péchu, 2004). Today, many immigrant associations devote much of their time to providing neighborhood services like after-school programs and promoting events like ethnic festivals (Hamidi, 2003). This change has resulted from their incorporation into urban programs aimed at developing partnerships with associations to solve problems in low-income neighborhoods (i.e. *la banlieue*) (Garbaye, 2005). Over time, increased dependence on public resources compelled associations to focus on activities that would ensure more funding and to avoid activities that could prompt funding cuts. Investing heavily in immigrant rights campaigns would divert resources from fundable activities (i.e. services to low-income communities) and place them in 'unfunderable' activities (i.e. immigrant rights campaigns) that risk sparking the ire of local political patrons. Facing these institutional constraints yet feeling a sense of solidarity with immigrant struggles, these associations contribute symbolic resources (signing petitions and showing up to demonstrations) but they do not invest heavy resources (time, money, social capital) into these campaigns. Consequently, France has a peculiar situation of having an immigrant rights 'movement' *without* the substantive involvement of immigrant associations.
  - *Labor unions.* In terms of labor unions, the maintenance of neo-corporatist arrangements with the state has encouraged unions to focus on protecting the rights of their members within the central state. This has meant that most of the resources



available for protest activities are used to enhance the leverage of union negotiators with state ministers. This results in large investments in mass protests and public sector strikes (transport and education being the most frequent targets). As the struggle to maintain their influence within the state has become the central priority of labor unions, few resources are left over to support other activities. Many unions are receptive to the plight of immigrants (some more than others) but immigrants are also viewed as 'unorganizable' and therefore a population with little strategic value for the labor movement (Haus, 1999). Given the priority of defending their influence within the state and the low strategic value placed on immigrants, unions have endorsed CIJ and signed its petitions but have not contributed heavy resources like money, paid union staff, strategists and research support.

- *Religious organizations.* French political culture has long frowned on religious organizations taking an active role in the political sphere (Kaltenbach and Tribalat, 2002). Facing this high bar of entry, the Catholic Church mobilizes politically only around core concerns like public funding for parochial education. Outside its core areas of interest, the Church has remained relatively silent on an array of political issues. Immigration is further removed from the core concerns of the Church establishment because immigrants to France are primarily Muslim. Like other second tier supporters of CIJ, the Church establishment feels that it has a moral obligation to 'say' things in support of immigrants but it has no direct interest in contributing heavy resources on their behalf. In terms of Muslim organizations, their negative cultural and political capital has meant that the bar to enter the political game is even higher than the bar set for the Church. When mosques and Muslim associations participate in mobilizations, the media and public undermine the legitimacy of the actions by attributing complicity with radical fundamentalists. Under such conditions, leaders of immigrant rights coalitions have not sought out the assistance of Muslim groups, in spite of the important skills and resources possessed by these groups.

These segmented relations have resulted in the uneven mobilization of resources. On the one hand, direct interest in the issue of immigration and strong ties between human rights organizations in Paris have encouraged them to contribute their specialized resources to the coalition. Such resources have included money, legal knowledge, skills in running campaigns, and media expertise. As a consequence, the coalition has been able to perform a variety of functions exceptionally well, including devising strategies, policy analysis, media management, political lobbying and legal debate. On the other hand, immigrant associations, labor unions and religious organizations have been channeled into narrow geopolitical fields that touch on immigrant rights but that do not address them directly. While they sympathize with the plight of immigrants, they do not recognize the direct connection with the issue of immigrant rights or the benefits of investing heavily in these types of campaigns. The absence of substantial resources from these diverse sources has reduced CIJ's capacities to perform key functions, including recruiting older and second-generation immigrants (due to the lack of strong support of immigrant associations and mosques) and gaining the support of certain segments of the white French population (due to the lack of strong support of unions and the Catholic Church). Thus, Paris is interesting because diverse and experienced organizations mobilize on behalf of immigrant rights but the segmented character of their relations undermines their abilities to translate their good will into real political power. In this instance, ties are too weak to mobilize sufficient resources to advance their political goals.

### **Weak institutional channels: opportunities for 'cohesive alliance structure'**

In the United States, Los Angeles has become a model of innovative networking and coalitions (Pastor, 2001; Nicholls, 2003; Gottlieb *et al.*, 2005; Milkman, 2006). A durable network of labor unions, immigrant association, churches and university

academics has permitted insurgents to deploy the city's diverse resources to a number of struggles. The breakdown in state (national and local) channeling techniques has played an important role in making this network structure possible. At the national level, the tradition of corporatist negotiations (albeit soft when compared with European corporatist traditions) between national sectors of the labor movement and the state closed under the Reagan administration. In this context, insurgents in the labor movement argued that scarce resources should be invested in reorganizing the base rather than engage in futile efforts to revive labor's influence in the state. The renewed emphasis on building a new base of constituents in the 1980s spurred several important unions to launch campaigns to organize low-income immigrant workers. Immigrant associations and churches were sought out in these early campaigns because they possessed legitimacy and strong ties to new immigrant communities (Bonacich and Gapasin, 2001). At the local level, institutional channels for incorporating associations began to close as well, with federal resources for urban programs declining nationally by 66% between 1981 and 1993 (Eisinger, 1997: 3). This massive decline in resources meant that cities had fewer resources to subsidize associations. While veteran associations in the east and south sides of Los Angeles saw subsidies contract, resources were not made available to incorporate the new Central American associations spawning throughout the central city area. Thus, the breakdown of national and local channeling mechanisms created new opportunities for building diverse insurgent alliances in the city.

In this context of massive institutional change, the agents of innovation were not necessarily veteran associations and actors. Among the labor militants in Los Angeles, organizers close to the 'social movement unionism' line became the most vocal advocates of innovation (Milkman, 2006). These insurgents argued that organizing campaigns were most successful when they drew on the support of wide segments of the local population. The first campaigns to put these principles into practice were the Unite Auto Worker campaign to stop plant closures and the Service Employee International Union's 'Justice for Janitors' campaign. These campaigns helped create new contacts with immigrant associations, churches, and university instructors. Among the new Central American associations, a high proportion of their leaders were trained in broad-based organizing in their home countries (Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001). Salvadoran refugees had developed particular skills working in alliances made up of party activists, labor unions, peasant associations and the Church. Moreover, the local Catholic Church became directly involved in coordinating relief for new (mostly Catholic) immigrants and refugees. While the Church establishment resisted the more radical currents among its base, it nevertheless made important resources available for early campaigns.

These organizations responded to their changing institutional context by incrementally building connections to one another through concrete campaigns (Pulido, 1996; Keil, 1998; Pastor, 2001; Nicholls, 2003; Gottlieb *et al.*, 2005). While early labor campaigns helped establish initial contacts between people and organizations, these initial contacts evolved and strengthened through mobilizations concerning multifaceted *urban* issues like the living wage, public transit, downtown redevelopment, Walmart expansion and urban sustainability. Urban campaigns were effective in fostering collaborations because diverse groups felt equally threatened by these issues and no single group of organizations possessed sufficient resources to address these issues alone. Moreover, investing in these urban campaigns would yield relatively equal benefits for the diverse participants. While urban issues provided insurgents with a structural push to invest substantial resources in common cause coalitions, sticking to these coalitions contributed to a sense of mutual trust and obligation between the partners (Nicholls, 2003: 888). This sense of mutual trust and obligation has been complemented by the embrace of the inclusive discursive frame of 'social justice' by network members. This urban network is not a social movement *per se* but a cohesive alliance structure that permits urban insurgents to pool their diverse and specialized resources and deploy them

in a variety of *local* and *national* campaigns, from anti-gentrification struggles to recent immigrant rights mobilizations.

For instance, immigrant associations in Los Angeles helped spearhead a national campaign against federal anti-immigrant legislation in spring 2006. A core tactic of the national campaign was to mobilize immigrants in synchronized protests in cities around the United States. Organizers in Los Angeles were able to mobilize the most people within the national campaign, with more than a million residents turning out in two separate protest events in a month. While most commentators explained the high turnout by pointing to the efforts of a handful of Spanish-speaking DJs, similar levels of radio coverage in other cities did not produce similar levels of turnout. Depending strictly on formal media to spread one's message has been shown to be an insufficient mobilizing technique because 'people rarely *act* on mass-media information unless it is also transmitted through personal ties' (Granovetter, 1973: 1373, emphasis in the original). More important than simple radio coverage were the ties immigrant associations had developed with churches and labor unions throughout the urban area over the previous 20 years. These ties were called upon to assist in transmitting information to members, who in turn, diffused the information to even smaller circles of friends and family. This networking process combined with media exposure to spur a massive turnout that ultimately helped to modify national legislation.

Both the Paris and Los Angeles cases share a number of features in common. Both cities are the principal gateways of immigration in their respective countries, both have a high concentration of diverse associations with some interest in this issue, and these associations have a number of direct and indirect contacts with one another. In spite of these similarities, we find very different network structures with very different capacities to deploy local resources to national immigrant rights networks. To explain these differences, three factors have seemed to play particularly important roles (in descending order of importance). First, the weakening of institutional channels permitted Los Angeles insurgents to step outside their specialized fields to forge new relations with others. In Paris, by contrast, robust institutional channels were tracked forming diverse associations in different geopolitical fields. Second, in Los Angeles, the concentration of new and highly innovative insurgents (especially union organizers and immigrant associations) with bridge-building interests and experience are found. These insurgents were able to respond to their changing institutional contexts while the older associations in the city were locked into traditional patterns of networking. In Paris, robust institutional channels tracked new insurgents (first- and second-generation immigrant associations) into narrow geopolitical fields (service provision in municipalities) while reinforcing the narrow concerns of traditional organizations. Third, urban problems provided innovative insurgents in Los Angeles with a strategic space to build up new relations with one another. These factors resulted in a cohesive alliance structure in Los Angeles with high mobilization capacities and a segmented network structure in Paris with low mobilization capacities.

## Conclusion: cities and social movements

This article aims to contribute to recent efforts to reassess the role of cities in general social movements (Gould, 1995; Nicholls and Beaumont, 2004; Diani, 2005; Baldassari and Diani, 2007). It does this by examining the processes that spur and block the formation of particular alliance structures in cities. First, the complexity of large urban systems and geographic proximity and stability increases the likelihood of a diverse range of strong tie groups in possession of high-grade and specialized resources. These resources can be very useful for social movements operating at a variety of spatial scales. Second, the only way in which these high-grade resources are

made available to social movements is when weak ties are forged between strong-tie groups. The formation of weak ties is more easily achieved when these groups reside in the same city because transversal urban issues provide diverse actors with an initial structural push to cooperate, actors have better information of the groups and resources 'out there', and there are more brokers to help establish connections between different actors. Cities that contain optimal strong-weak tie coalition structures can become important resource mobilization platforms for a range of mobilizations and movements operating at a variety of spatial scales. Cities like Mexico City, Paris, London, Chicago and Los Angeles have all achieved this strategic role at one time or another. However, whether actors in strong-tie groups actually develop connections to others in their urban system depends on state channeling techniques. While channeling techniques can block connections between insurgents, these techniques often break down and present opportunities for new bridge-building activities.

This theoretical article has focused on a single issue (why cities matter for social movements) and a single geographical terrain (how relations unfold within cities). However, a full theory of cities and social movements needs to identify how cities connect with other spaces of insurgency: spaces of national and transnational networks; and the space of the countryside. This article is therefore a first step in a larger project on cities and the multiple spaces of contention.

First, greater attention needs to be paid to how territorialized and urban relations interact and shape social movement networks operating at regional, national and transnational scales. The focus here has been on the processes and mechanisms inside cities. This has meant less space has been dedicated to the dynamic relations between localized network structures and broader relational ties. Tarrow and McAdam (2005) address this issue by examining how national networks are constituted by territorially grounded insurgents and assessing how this process introduces a certain degree of instability and dissonance in these broader networks. While these scholars examine how the 'local' shapes nonlocal social movement networks, Diani (2005) has examined how transnational social movement networks shape the concerns and issues of local organizations. What these and other studies clearly show is that territorialized relations and extensive networks 'mutually constitute' one another, with each playing distinctive roles in the elaboration of robust social movements (Massey, 2004).

Second, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many scholars and activists explored the 'urban question' in direct relation to the 'rural question'. Marx, Engels and Lenin viewed the city and countryside in contrasting terms with regards to the formation of revolutionary socialist movements. Cities spurred these movements because they concentrated the working classes in space and exacerbated capitalist contradictions. The countryside hindered these movements because the dispersed and individualized character of peasant life weakened social bonds and made peasants more prone to authoritarian rule. Mid-century 'third world' revolutionaries took the opposite view, seeing the tight bonds of country life as helping the revolutionary cause and the anomic character of city life leading militants to embrace individualized and decadent bourgeois pastimes (Sennett, 1971: xv). While past debates were framed in terms of an either/or question (cities or countryside facilitate or hinder movements), it seems that both spaces possess distinctive qualities that can contribute to, or block, transformative movements. The question should not be which of these spaces is *more or less* important for movements but what qualities allow these spaces to play strategic roles in movements, and how can these spaces become fused into robust transformative struggles for social justice. These questions are particularly important in the global South where city and countryside are combining in new ways to create powerful social movements.

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## Résumé

*Quels rôles les villes jouent-elles dans l'alimentation des mouvements sociaux généraux? Elles facilitent des types particuliers de relations qui réussissent à rendre des ressources de qualité accessibles à des mobilisations opérant à divers échelons spatiaux. Pourtant, si les grands réseaux urbains complexes sont sans doute bien adaptés à ces types de relations, leur développement effectif dépend de la nature des relations de pouvoir locales entre les autorités politiques et les organisations de citoyens. Dans certaines villes, les configurations locales du pouvoir politique peuvent favoriser l'intensification de ces relations, ces villes devenant d'importants points nodaux au sein de réseaux de mouvements sociaux de grande ampleur géographique. Dans d'autres, en revanche, les configurations locales du pouvoir politique peuvent gêner la constitution de ces relations. Cet article théorique utilise la théorie des réseaux pour éclairer le cadre conceptuel et plusieurs cas empiriques à titre indicatif.*