CULTURAL CONTEXT OF MULTILEVEL COLLECTIVE SOCIAL ACTIONS: FRAMING, REFLECTION, RESONANCE AND THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL AND LOCAL ANTI-POVERTY MOVEMENTS

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Abstract: In political science as well as in other social sciences much attention has been paid during recent years to the rapid growth of national and transnational activist networks and their increasing impact on domestic and world politics. Together with the proliferation of literature on the topic, concepts of collective action frames, framing processes, mobilizing ideas and meanings and their cultural resonance have gained considerable currency. However, less has been written about the possibilities of and the constraints on the circulation of collective action frames or about the connection between the cultural adaptation of frames and the results of actual collective struggles. The paper explores this understudied issue both theoretically and empirically. After identifying possible links between collective action framing processes and the representational practices of particular cultures based on a review of existing theoretical approaches, the functional consequences are demonstrated by the example of the Global Call for Action against Poverty international campaign and the Czech national variant.

Keywords: non-state actors in international relations; transnational social action; framing; re-framing; cultural representations.

Introduction

Social actions, as collective activities developed both at the national and at the international level with the aim of contesting the agency of powerful entities (public administration, governments and governmental bodies, international institutions etc.), have been the subject of scholarly study for several decades. Over this long period of time, a multitude of approaches has emerged combining the methods and findings of several disciplines, such as cognitive psychology, linguistics, communications studies, political science and sociology. These approaches attempt to explain the logic of actions as well as their objectives, tools and mobilizing strategies. Further, they examine impacts, effectiveness

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and ask under what conditions a social action is likely to succeed (Snow 2004; Benford, Snow 2000; Smith 2002).

Among the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches the analysis of framing processes takes prominent place. It portrays social actions as sequences of several steps. The actions usually start within small groups of specialists who identify problems and make suggestions. Subsequently the issues are elaborated by activists that transform the expert views into messages intelligible to much larger audiences. The messages are expected to draw attention to and raise awareness of the issues and mobilize people into supporting or joining the action.

Within the study of transnational social action that transcends the borders of one state and aims to extend across the international arena, the ways in which frames are adapted so that they can be applied within different national and international environments are explored as well. However, when investigating framing strategies scholars have so far focused especially on methods of selecting and combining information for utilization in different societies. Less has been written about modalities regarding the use of cultural representations, despite the fact that cultural representations are believed to be an important part of the framing process and in bringing issues onto the public agenda at the international level as well (Keck, Sikkink 1998).

The following paper uses this opportunity to contribute to the study of framing processes as important elements of transnational social actions in this monothematic issue of Human Affairs on social and cultural representations in two ways. First, it opens with a general search for the role of cultural representations in framing processes. Second, it tries to explore the possibilities offered by the alternation of cultural representations when adapting frames in order to resonate in different cultures and societies. To fulfil this aim the paper proceeds in the following manner. At the beginning it attempts to outline briefly the substance of collective social actions, framing, re-framing and frame resonance. Then it turns to cultural representations and their use in framing. The theoretical introduction is complemented with a case study of Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) and its national coalition in the Czech Republic.

Collective Social Action, Transnational Activism and Framing Strategies

Despite the intensity, extent and duration of the enquiry into collective social actions there is no universal notion of what the term comprises. To develop a working definition, it is useful to distinguish between its collective and social character. Collective action is the purposeful action of a group of individuals sharing a common interest or common target. It functions according to a specific logic, which was revealed by game theory as early as the 1960s. It was shown, especially by Olson (1965) that an individual participant contributes so little to the results of a collective social action that those who behave rationally are reluctant to join in the actions automatically, despite the fact that they incline towards its purpose. They need to be convinced of the necessity of their personal engagement.

As already mentioned above, a collective social action is usually initiated by a small group of thinkers who interpret situations differently from the way in which they are commonly viewed by the general population. The thinkers identify shortcomings and suggest
possible improvements in terms of changing social practices and laws. Social activists coalesce around the ideas of critical thinkers. Yet, in order to capitalize on public interest, to win further allies, to penetrate social and political discourse, to ensure the communication and the acceptance of the new interpretation (values, norms) by society (or at least by a decisive part of society) and to become politically influential they transform it into a new ideological framework. This means that they function as an interlink between the thinkers and the general public, they transmit the message in an accessible way and they are responsible for finding an appropriate means of communication able to draw attention to and raise public awareness of the issue. The creation of this communication pattern constitutes the substance of framing (Rochon 2000; Smith 2002).

It is clear that framing involves putting ideas into biased contexts that favour certain interpretations or loosely portray reality leaving some elements out in favour of others. A successful frame must not only identify a strategy that will probably lead to the solution of the initial problem but it should also help individuals to cope with the events and situations they face and witness in their lives. It should guide the action so that the individuals align with the frame and join or support the action (Gofman 1974; Brenford, Snow 2000). The success of a frame is often called frame resonance. It is measured especially by the ability to influence broader public understanding.

The resonance of a frame is given by several factors. They include the quality of a frame itself, the power of the message, combining the general findings of experts with unique individual stories and the intensity of appealing to shared principles. However, the nature of the problem to be solved, the economic and organizational resources available for the campaign or the power of the allies backing the campaign also play an important role (Tarrow 2005; Olesen 2006).

Framing and Cultural Representations

Frame creation and frame resonance interrelate with culture and identity. If culture is understood as a process or a set of practices consisting in the creation and the exchange of meanings (Hall 2003, 2) then they must also be connected with cultural representations.

Cultural representations express the meanings behind objects and events. They are used to shape and articulate common meanings and, according to Hall (ibid., 3), include the words used to refer to the objects and events, people produce about them, the emotions associated with them, the values placed on them and the ways in which they are classified and conceptualized. In addition, they enable communication about absent entities (Coleman 2005).

In accordance with this definition, a frame itself might be understood as a kind of cultural representation. However, when taken more analytically a frame comprises representations. If the micro-mobilization of participants reluctant to take part in a social action is considered to be the major aim of framing then persuading the target audience of the urgency of the problem to be solved is key. At the same time, as already stated above it must also show the necessity of personal contribution when struggling for a solution. This means that when trying to create a resonant frame language, images and emotions matter. The resonance may be increased with appropriate use of lexical means to strengthen the message or by...
using suitable images to complete the message. As demonstrated by Dorman (2006) it may consist in on the use of emotional words and images related to social interactions, emotional reactions, aesthetic-sensory experience and abstract qualities such as helpful, unhappy, inaccurate etc. Moreover, a resonant frame may be based on replacing existing cultural representations with new innovative ones. These connections have been elaborated by Keck and Sikkink (1998, 22-23) in what they call “symbolic politics or the ability to call upon symbols, actions and stories that make sense of a situation for an audience that is frequently far away”.

However, Keck and Sikkink match symbolic politics with the use of important positive and negative events ranging from anniversaries to disasters. In fact there are more alternatives. Emotions may be condensed in visual representations as well as in expressions. The resonance of the frame mobilizing against female genital circumcision increased after it was renamed genital mutilation. The narratives of people deprived of their freedom because of their political views and activism gained more attention when told by Amnesty International as the stories of prisoners of conscious (Olesen 2006; Keck, Sikkink 1998).

**Transnational Social Action**

In the initial phases of the long period over which collective social actions were studied they were examined especially at the national level (although were not strictly limited to this). Later on, with scientific and technical progress and the on-going process of globalization, their transnational dimension started to be taken into account as well. As a consequence the literature on transnational activism and transnational social action emerged at the end of the 1990s and during the current decade (see e.g. Keck, Sikking 1998; Rochon 2000; Della Porta, Tarrow 2004; Tarrow 2005; Seidman 2007). It demonstrates that transnational actions represent a growing political force always less and less dependent on the traditional actors of international relations, especially on states, and that they contribute to a large extent to the establishment and better enforcement of global normative standards and to global social change (Rochon 2000; Klotz 2002).

But still, an international action cannot succeed without mobilization at various national levels. Thus, the activist must penetrate (usually through various national organizations) particular national spheres. The potential to establish themselves in several national spheres depends on the nature of the issue and its urgency in each national context. According to Rochon (2000), the spill over is more likely (or may occur almost naturally) if the subject relates to everyday life or if it has direct application to everyday life. In this case one may expect that the cultural representation belonging to a frame is understandable or of similar meaning in various societies.

If this condition is not fulfilled it is necessary to adjust the action by enlarging the scope of the conflict. This is true at the international level by way of a so-called scale shift involving an increased number of actors and bridging over their demands. A scale shift is achieved through two basic mechanisms: linking thus far unconnected sites (brokerage) and transferring information through the use of established channels (diffusion) (Olesen 2006; Smith 2002).
The adaptation may consist in a new way of combining facts and figures, objective information and subjective insights into the matter, as well as on a new balance between the individual and the universal and in explaining local problems and case material collected in particular regions as a consequence of global processes but it is not limited to it (Björndahl 2007; Smith 2002). As the words used and the images accompanying the message resonate differently in different cultures they should therefore be adapted to the value orientation of the target society as well (Dorman 2006).

**GCAP—International Frame**

The Global Call to Action against Poverty campaign was launched as a short-term campaign in September 2004. It began as a grassroots initiative at the Johannesburg meeting of anti-poverty non-governmental activists in order to pressure world leaders into making a breakthrough in the eradication of poverty during 2005. As the key organizers of the campaign viewed it as a success, it was repeated extensively. The campaign is to continue until at least 2015. It concentrates on organizing international events such as protests and demonstrations. It also extends the alliance from above to areas not yet involved. It has been joined by over 100 national non-governmental initiatives and organizations so far (About GCAP 2009).

The original frame outlined by the key activist belonging to the coalition is quite technical in nature, but to a limited degree also employs predominantly negative emotional words and phrases, such as inequality or broken promises (About GCAP 2009). The frame is based, in general, on the so-called Millennium development goals (MDGs) proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in its Millennium declaration of 2000 in order to reduce extreme forms of poverty and their most severe consequences until 2015. They include ending poverty and hunger, promoting universal education, gender equality, child health, maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability and the strengthening of global partnership for development.

Fulfilling MDGs is considered to be the key target. In addition, the frame accentuates major political steps that it is believed will contribute to the eradication of poverty—public accountability, trade justice, a substantial increase in development aid quality and financing, debt cancellation, women’s rights and gender justice, and the need to prevent climate change, a phenomenon which has an extremely negative impact on impoverished individuals and societies (About GCAP 2009). Thereby potential links to other international campaigns are established (brokerage), which provides additional space for transnational action. This may also be the reason why they belong to that rare component of the frame represented by visual images—a lop-sided scale for just trade, a broken chain for debt cancellation, a globe for climate change etc.

Somewhat surprisingly the frame does not employ a definition of poverty. It does not use its images in the materials it offers to its allies either. This may be explained by three facts. First, the notion of poverty is determined culturally and differs both across societies and across social strata. As demonstrated in the World Bank’s seminal study Voices of the Poor, or more precisely its first part, Can Anyone Hear Us (2000), underdeveloped African or Asian societies express poverty in terms of hunger, fear and infliction, while for
the inhabitants of more advanced countries poverty means above all humiliation, shame, bewilderment, and confusion. Second, the research into representations of poverty in the media shows that the notion of poverty may be easily distorted (Clawson, Trice 2000). Third, regardless of its representation, poverty is a multidimensional and multi-causal problem with many modalities in different parts of the world (World Bank 2000).

The GCAP initiative tries to provide the national campaigns with information, documents and advice regarding the development of national actions (diffusion). Within this context it also suggests re-framing strategies. They consist in transforming general MDGs into concrete targets achievable at the national level.

Regarding the cultural representations included in the frame, it suggests creating logos and slogans with which local people can identify, based on a thorough knowledge of the target audience and their concerns, values and views on global poverty and MDGs (MDG Campaigning Toolkit, S.l.). Furthermore, the GCAP has created one worldwide representation of the common struggle for the eradication of poverty—a white band. It does not prescribe a standardized white band. It depends on the national organizations and on the individuals as to whether they prefer wristbands, armbands, headbands or lapel bands. Besides choosing the format, groups operating at national levels are also invited to decorate the band with their own slogan or logo. Wearing the white bands in any shape means expressing solidarity with the campaign. The sale of the ready-made white bands has the potential to provide a source of income for the campaign but in order to raise awareness they are distributed free of charge (What is the white band, S.l.).

The Czech Republic against Poverty

In the Czech Republic the bridge created by the organizers of GCAP at the international level seems to have proved its importance as it addressed quite a numerous and heterogeneous group of organizations. They not only fight against poverty, but also provide development and humanitarian aid or are involved in ethical aspects of international trade, gender equality and ecology. The group joined the GCAP in 2005 and it developed a national campaign entitled Česko proti chudobě (The Czech Republic against Poverty). The title of the campaign sounds quite neutral when compared with other national titles such as Make Poverty History (e.g. Canada), Stop Poverty or the UN’s slogan End Poverty 2015. However, unlike some others (2005 Plus Ten—France) it at least clearly expresses the substance of the campaign.

The frame of the campaign follows the instructions of the GCAP centre as it consists especially in transforming MDGs into a set of 10 requirements addressed primarily to the Czech Republic as an advanced country that is expected to contribute to the eradication of poverty and other negative phenomena in the Third World (Česko proti chudobě—požadavky kampaně S.l.). The transformed frame is even more technical than the original one.

Pursuant to the theoretical knowledge of framing processes one would expect that, as it has been designed for a clearly specified audience, it would use emotions as a cultural attractor but this is not the case. In fact there are no affective words. To a limited extent emotions are expressed by images, yet not in any systematic way. The campaign uses a white armband with a reference to its website. Unlike the global GCAP initiative it also capitalizes
on artistic photographs of international and domestic celebrities wearing the armband. Some people recorded in the photographs display certain expressions but with regard to their variety it may be concluded that the expressions are chosen almost randomly with no special intention regarding the emotional strength of the message.

The images that reflect the MDGs created by students at the secondary school of graphics in Prague are quite different from the international representation of these goals created by the UN, not only in terms of form (photographs instead pictures) but also as far as symbolic expressions are concerned. However, they do not employ emotions systematically either. Although some of them are not emotionally neutral one cannot conclude that emotions aroused purposefully.

Regardless of the fact that the campaign is financially supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and cooperates with many prominent foundations and institutions such as Heinrich Böll Stiftung, the International Visegrad Fund, the Presidency Fund or Czech TV, the resonance of its frame (or the adapted frame created by the GCAP) does not seem to be particularly high among the general public. The results of a public opinion poll carried out for the MFA indicated that only 22% of participants were able to correctly select the title of the campaign from a list of six titles and less than 12% had any knowledge of MDGs (Zahraniční rozvojová spolupráce 2009, 10, 22). As the percentage had declined slightly in comparison to a previous poll carried out in 2006 and there were no differences in the members of the population selected, one may conclude that the message transmitted through the campaign and its current frame did not reach its audience unless they search for the information actively.

Conclusion

Regardless of how difficult it is to generalize on the basis of the findings of a one-case study, it may be concluded that cultural representations not only constitute an important part of frames in social actions but also that their modification is one of the crucial steps within the process of re-framing when transmitting messages and diffusing actions across societies. Although according to existing sources (see especially Olesen 2006) the re-framing is one of the tasks developed primarily by national adherents of the campaigns, the example that has been analyzed in this paper outlines the possibility of a division of labour between international and national activists, where the former articulate the general strategy and the latter implement it in a specific cultural context. The pattern of the division of labour might be useful for societies with weak non-governmental sectors and with a lack of re-framing experience.

If successful or if found to be in accordance with the identity and values of the target society, then the change of cultural representations within the re-framing process increases the probability of frame resonance. However, it does not ensure an adequate response per se as the resonance also depends on several other variables. The “Česko proti chudobě” campaign demonstrates a less resonant frame although re-framed in accordance with the general pattern already used in other campaigns and within GCAP also in other countries. Its insufficient currency may reflect the shortcomings in the use of representations such as the neutral title of the campaign or the group of celebrities promoting the white band.
At the same time it may also be caused by other variables, for instance, negative images of development aid going back to the post-communist past.

Therefore it is necessary to ask how powerful the representations might be when overcoming such obstacles. Would there be any value added if the re-framing process continued and the representations were adapted again? On the base of the findings derived from the case study, these questions cannot be answered immediately but may be understood as an incentive for further research.

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