

The fluid market of advocacy network research

Dr. Raúl Acosta (Oxon)
ITESO, MEXICO
rgacosta@iteso.mx

Advocacy networks are coalitions of movements and organizations that have gained unprecedented levels of influence through their soft power strategies. They have become key political actors in local, national and international arenas. The market for advocacy network research, therefore, is not limited to academics, specialists or government policymakers. It is also comprised of individuals and groups that act within the networks themselves who use its analyses and descriptions to enhance their own activities and aid for future plans. The models and language developed by some academics feeds the ongoing activities of such groupings. This paper offers a critical perspective on advocacy network research by identifying four main types of approaches that it may fall into. This classification intends to offer a map of key notes that are directly related to what is offered in the products themselves. It also offers a typology of advocacy networks themselves. This is based on my doctoral fieldwork within two sets of advocacy networks (one in the Brazilian Amazon and the other one in Barcelona). Both elements intend to offer a comprehensive picture of where a researcher may stand in trying to understand the processes and negotiation one witnesses or analyses.

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Advocacy networks represent a tangible form of complex relations outside formal institutions in our information society. In recent years, social scientists have paid increasing attention to networks focused on many different themes in the international arena. It is one specialization of third sector research that has become relevant in a wide

variety of academic disciplines for contrasting reasons. The most relevant of these is the political power that such networks successfully exert around the globe in local or international spheres. Analyses on these and other topics regarding advocacy networks help understand transnational connections, new complex political practices, social organization and ongoing changes in democratic societies and political systems. What makes it a unique niche of the academic research market is the fact that advocacy networks are extremely fluid and intangible organizations, as opposed to other political institutions with which they liaise. Their members, therefore, pay increasing attention to what is written about the networks, thus allowing for academics to exert certain influence in the evolution of such coalitions. This paper offers a reflection on the use of advocacy network research by their members. It is based on my doctoral fieldwork, which consisted in observing two sets of advocacy networks. It puts forward a classification of approaches that can shed light on perspectives and depth of analyses. It also offers a typology of advocacy networks according to my observations and analyses.

This paper is divided in two parts. The first one offers a classification of approaches that conform what I call the advocacy network research market. It is an up-to-date account of a wide array of academic production regarding such coalitions. The second part is about advocacy networks themselves, with a typology of webs that I have developed from my own observations. The conclusion tries to bring these two parts together with a note on research and reflexivity, regarding the fact that those we observe and write about are more likely to read our analyses now than ever before.

I. Advocacy network research

Advocacy networks have been studied with a focus on different aspects of their inner workings, external political influence or place within a wider arena. The classification

included below is an attempt to map academic works on the topic. While it refers only to a fraction of the numerous publications, it is hoped that most of the key ones are included. This should allow for a comprehensive overview of the field's main interests as of yet. I suggest four classifications: descriptive, strategic, situational, and theoretical. These four categories are not mutually exclusive, as one approach usually has elements of several if not all of them. They rather help identify the key note that points to their place within the wider field of academic production. Each of the categories is explained below with references to publications and a brief description of its scope and characteristics.

Descriptive. The term 'advocacy network' is relatively new. The acclaimed and award-winning book that defined it and enhanced interest in it was *Activists Beyond Borders*, by Keck & Sikkink (1998a). In their volume and in a subsequent article (1999) and chapters (1998b, 2002), they defined transnational advocacy networks as influential non-state actors involved in international politics. The members of such networks, Keck & Sikkink explained, "are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchange of information and services" (1998a: 2). According to the authors, information exchange is the key element that lies at the base of the need for the relationship and of the maintenance and development of the networks. With special attention to transnational ties, Keck and Sikkink argue that a strategic use of information keeps transnational advocacy networks as creative and innovative actors that can use such expertise to exert influence in political systems.

Previous analyses had taken on relevant parts of networks, such as NGOs or social movements. Fisher (1997) offers a thorough account of the literature on NGOs regarding the distance that separates intentions from reality. A similar critique had already been put forward by Ferguson (1994), who argued that NGOs actually worked

as ‘anti-political’ by neutralizing local struggles. Others pointed out issues of NGO accountability (Edwards & Hulme 1996). On a positive note, social capital has been considered in an ample body of literature as one of the benefits of the NGO *bloom* (Harriss 2002; Lin 2001; Edwards and Foley 1998). The value of Keck and Sikkink’s approach was that they defined them as a unified web with overarching aims and strategies. In doing so, they defined the concept as a type of political actor worthy of academic and political attention. The literature derived from their initial considerations has spurred a whole body of works relating to international norms, access and management of legal resources, as well as political strategies and mechanisms. Subsequent publications have followed a series of leads regarding collective strategies, their place in political arenas and more theoretical reflections about their significance. These are included in the following classifications.

Strategic. Advocacy network literature feeds directly from social movement theories, especially regarding the concept of ‘collective action’ (Melucci 2001[1996]). Several authors already pointed to ‘coalitions’ among different movement organizations (della Porta & Diani 2003: 124). Some seem to point out that advocacy networks actually stem out of the ‘new social movements’ which started in the 1960s (Martin 2004). One key element that has been adopted is the concept of ‘framing’ (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 2004[1996]), which helps understand codes used to provide meaning and coherence to campaigns and strategies. Through this imported concept from another field, advocacy network researchers have developed further reflections to understand processes taking place within the webs.

Alongside their definition of advocacy networks, Keck and Sikkink identified a key pattern of campaigns that the webs use transnationally: the ‘boomerang’ (1998: 12). This ‘pattern of influence’, as they call it, entails an effort by local organizations or

activists to bring pressure to their states from abroad, after they have found internal channels blocked for changes in policies or legislation. Other authors have identified further patterns within networks, such as ‘blocking’ or ‘backdoor moves’ (Hertel 2006: 6), which allow for weaker members of networks to influence the overarching campaign. Both are called ‘mechanisms’ by Hertel (2006: 5), drawing again from social movement theory (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001: 24-26). ‘Blocking’ consists of action by ‘receiving-end’ activists “aimed at halting or at least significantly stalling a campaign’s progress in order to pressure senders to change their frame” (Hertel 2006: 6). ‘Backdoor moves’, on the other hand, consist on actions by receiving-end activists to augment a campaign’s normative frame by adding “distinct, secondary reference points and/or policy proposals” (Hertel 2006: 6) usually without conflict and indirectly. These strategies help understand procedures within the networks in order to develop theoretical models that would be applicable to a wide range of networks.

Keck and Sikkink identified four types of tactics which networks use in their efforts at persuasion, socialization and pressure:

- (1) *information politics*, or the ability to quickly and credibly generate politically usable information and move it to where it will have the most impact;
- (2) *symbolic politics*, or the ability to call upon symbols, actions, or stories that make sense of a situation for an audience that is frequently far away;
- (3) *leverage politics*, or the ability to call upon powerful actors to affect a situation where weaker members of a networks are unlikely to have influence; and
- (4) *accountability politics*, or the effort to hold powerful actors to their previously stated policies or principles. (Keck and Sikkink 1998a: 16)

All of them entail a strategic use of information and socialized understandings. Their approach is related to Keohane and Nye’s concept of ‘soft power’ (1998; 2001), and Habermas’ ‘communicative power’ (1996). These strategies thus constitute tangible evidence of the use of information as a key element to renew communal decision-making processes challenging professional political institutions.

Situational. Besides specific campaigns and strategies, there has been an increased academic literature on what these networks do in specific political scenarios. Moog Rodrigues (2004) focused on their impact in local politics in Brazil, Ecuador and India. Her focus is on environmental issues, which constitute one of the key issue areas for advocacy networks. Her comparative study deconstructs assumptions about local organizations' roles within wider advocacy networks. By focusing on the way local politics influence advocacy networks, which in turn helped spur specific campaigns, Moog Rodrigues insists in situating action by webs in specific localities. This process not only involves actors and organizations, but the specific social impact that in turn has an impact in local life and environment. Results of campaigns and meetings meant for locals an increased empowerment which was hard to understand and manage, more complex responsibilities than they were prepared to handle, and a political backlash from part of the government as well as local economic and political elites (Moog Rodrigues 2004: 140). These results, with data and testimonies from the referred areas, drove the author to include a series of 'lessons and recommendations' in her conclusions that seem more directed at network members or 'political entrepreneurs' seeking to start up new webs.

Cases as these allow us to understand political changes at a deeper level. Another good example is Riles' ethnography of networks in the Pacific working towards the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. In what is perhaps the best ethnography so far of advocacy networks, Riles (2000) shows how exchanges of information were more symbolic than consequential. Over fifteen months, she participated in the daily work of five or six networks and institutions, providing technical assistance while observing their inner workings (Riles 2000: xv). She describes flows of information in the bureaucratized network in the form of documents

that were ritually negotiated, distributed and then shelved. Riles calls this ‘aesthetic activism’ (2000: 136). A useful and colourful analogy is that of the Fijian mats: “Like mats layered one upon the next in ceremonial contexts, therefore, documents were entities that at key periods of time faded into patterns replicable at seemingly infinite levels” (Riles 2000: 83). She also argued that the bureaucratized language used in network reports is more symbolic than textual. “The document did not exist to be ‘read’ in the academic sense of the term. Rather, after the close of the conference, governments and NGOs would *use* the document by dividing sentences into categories and reshuffling the text into material for quotation in further documents of their own. The carefully crafted patterns of the artefact, delegates knew, would be decomposed into their myriad composite parts” (Riles 2000: 89).

Riles then considers such aesthetics as a performative value of new and fluid bureaucracies, consistent in applying for funds, organizing debates, talks, workshops and meetings, as well as writing the reports each of these deserved. Thus, instead of a relationship with what she calls the *real* (Riles 2000:169), the organizations are more about information collection and management (Riles 2000:179-180), and in this way they mirror UN agencies and intergovernmental organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank. These organizations define the world and its needs according to their fact-finding missions and reports in a similar fashion to how governments work. Grasping statistics, data, and measurement for human suffering, violence, and well-being, entails a way to grasp the ‘real’, and to classify it, to provide taxonomies and scales. It is, incidentally, a similar process to that of academia. What Riles witnessed, then, was an advocacy network that was more involved in its own reification than in addressing the issues. It is, then, very similar to how Herzfeld (1993) described the nation-state as a religion, practiced in the form of governmental bureaucracy reifying itself (mirroring

Durkheim's concept of religion as society worshipping itself). In all the rituals that advocacy networks engage in, their heritage from religious organizations and kinship structures seems unshakeable, and thus more traditional power structures continue even within network structures. Thus, all the new forms of distribution of information and organization may just be a discourse that perpetuates power structures, just like governmental bureaucracy does (Lefort 1986).

Theoretical. All the mentioned approaches include theoretical reflections that seek to define in broader terms the observed phenomena. Some reflections, however, clearly point to the way advocacy networks might actually be proof of a fundamental change in the way society members collectively reflect, decide and act upon perceived needs. Several researchers start out their enquiries with a direct engagement to this level of interpretation. An approach in this line, for example, is the use of the concept of 'knowledge', regarding the way advocacy networks allow for local expertise and experience to be shared with groups from faraway places (Stone 2002). Even though it may seem descriptive, in reflecting upon exchanges and linkages authors actually position their analyses in a different sphere from a mere analysis of specific activities or policies. As with previous approaches, theoretical perspectives on advocacy networks draw heavily on social movement theory. Many abstractions used in this literature can be understood more as understandings of organizational strategies rather than deeper political processes.

Perhaps what this taxonomy of approaches shows is a lack of relevant theorizing regarding the characteristics of advocacy networks. Keck and Sikkink pressed the importance of transnationality in these webs. Such matter, however, is not exclusive of these organizational forms nor does it contain its essence. A clue for understanding role of these webs in the contemporary world can be found in Rifkin's foreword to Fisher's

Non-Governments (1998: viii), where he states that due to de-industrialization and the concentration in highly sophisticated knowledge posts, civil organizations such as NGOs are actually filling gaps in the provision of services and creation of a wider sense of community. A similar argument can be found in much of the literature on NGOs. As happens with the social movement literature, academic production on advocacy networks also feeds from what has been written about these organizations.

Boli & Thomas' (1999) edited volume on the history of international NGOs provides a clue for what has become one of the main concepts underlying analyses of advocacy networks and their activities. *Constructing World Culture* explores experiences and histories of civil organizations from 1875 until the end of the 20th century. They defend the idea that our world has become a single polity, and that civil organizations have become political agents spreading understandings, helping shape moral values and allowing for previously uncommon dialogues.

These characteristics are closely related to the shrinking of our world (Giddens 1990) and the multiplication of channels of collaboration (Friedman 2005) that technology has enhanced. They are facts of our information age (Castells 2000a; 2000b) and clearly involve social processes that follow technological developments (van Dijk 2006). What seems to be missing is a direct link with these matters, as advocacy networks entail a break from professionalized politics as practiced through governments and political parties.

II. Types of advocacy networks

Several authors agree on the importance of advocacy networks in promoting for certain agendas in local, national and international political arenas. The most popular issue areas are human rights, environment, gender, and development. Numerous publications

limit their scope to revising one or two of these. A broader perspective on patterns of action and reach is still missing. DeMars (2005) focused on the flexibility of NGO networks in terms of ambivalence, branding them as ‘wild cards in world politics’. His comprehensive analysis of what NGO networks are, is rooted on a realist vision that describes how norm models are ‘enforced’ or ‘implemented’ in different corners of the globe (DeMars 2005: 19). It is what Khagram, Riker & Sikkink describe in their edited volume about how such networks are *Restructuring World Politics* (2002a). The difference between both books on the topic is that while DeMars offers a version of network volatility, Khagram, Riker & Sikkink seem to point to their ongoing virtuous activity. An example of this view refers to dams. They claim that transnational activism has changed the public perception of dams from positive to highly contested (2002b: 207-8). Such perception, they argue, has had direct consequences for local politics, but also for international agreements and norms. They go on to explain how this same pattern of influence in international politics can be witnessed in different issue areas. DeMars, on the other hand, is somewhat suspicious of networks that fall outside government structures. He claims that their fluidity and flexibility can be led by a political influence market and therefore hijacked by different interest groups. Both analyses come from an International Relations perspective, as much of the literature on NGO ‘bloom’ of the 1990s (DeMars 2005: 36). In both cases, there is a challenge to different degrees of the realist paradigm, which tends to dismiss the influence of non-state actors in international politics, with perspectives from the pluralist and globalist ones.

DeMars points to the need of “a new theory that is conceptually independent of the social actors that it analyses, that cuts across issue-areas and other conventional distinctions that distract attention from the political impact of NGOs, and that directs

empirical attention to the variable and particular consequences of NGO action” (2005: 40). It is the purpose of this paper to offer a map of the main themes of academic work being carried out regarding advocacy networks to add to this perspective. One of the premises of this paper, furthermore, is to do this by promoting a dialogue between disciplines that have an interest in the topic. What follows is a classification of advocacy networks and their activities derived from observations and analyses stemming from my doctoral research. It is hoped that it will contribute to the literature with the aim of further theorizing. Perhaps it is through an interdisciplinary approach that these complex political actors can be best understood.

For my doctoral research in Social Anthropology, I observed and analysed two sets of advocacy networks: one in the Brazilian Amazon, and another one in Barcelona, with links to the whole Mediterranean region (Acosta 2007). My focus was on the internal political structure that allowed for negotiations and decision-making processes. My interest in the topic was that such organizations defy identity-based agreements and entail a dialogue that crosses several types of boundaries (e.g. class-based, cultural, political, and national). After spending seven months in each of my field-sites within a single NGO in each case, as well as working inside committees and attending meetings of the several networks such NGO participated in, I can put forward the classification explained below. As part of contextual research, I also attended four meetings of the World Social Forum, two in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2003 & 2005), one in Mumbai, India (2004), and one in Caracas, Venezuela (2006). The examples of projects, ideals and activities that follow are all taken from my field notes and research. In all cases, I keep anonymity of my informants and change details of projects to avoid any harm or misunderstanding.

From the activities, aims and strategies I observed in networks during my field research, I have classified advocacy networks into four categories: 1) *Project driven*: Those where NGOs and interest groups (e.g., social movements) come together for a specific task; 2) *Value driven*: Those whose members share a set of values which drive them to try and disseminate them to a larger audience; 3) *Exploratory*: Those that try to innovate ways of solving problems or sharing knowledge; 4) *Contestatory*: Those dedicated to challenge specific policies, politicians, institutions or corporations. Because of the complexity that network structures entail, though, an organization may take part in one or more of these types of networks at a time, balancing the needs and tensions that this brings. As network theory suggests, the value of such webs is the information exchange that takes place within and because of their structure.

Project driven. When different organizations identify a single strategy or project that needs to be carried out in partnership with others, a *project-driven* network is established. These usually entail a time-restrained or goal-accomplishment commitment that limits the network's life-span. Because of previous project experience of some of the convening organizations, meeting and general task management is usually in the hands of a few professionalized NGOs or individuals. The 'political entrepreneurs' (Keck & Sikkink 1998: 12) that lead efforts towards an effective influence in government or private policy-making must usually keep up a constant effort to maintain a cohesive network. Each constituent organization or grouping has its own agenda and its commitment depends on how well the whole network functions and how justly tasks are distributed. If there is a perceived manipulation of the general topic towards benefitting one of the convening organizations, the smaller ones will abandon the coalition. When the issue area has a long history of activism or organization, most of

those involved in the different member organizations or movements already know each other and have high levels (or at least realistic levels) of political trust in one another.

One example of this type of network is a coalition of organizations, movements, expert groups, and individuals that came together in Brazil to stall the paving of a highway that connects the state of Mato Grosso, in the Southern edge of the Amazon forest, and the city of Santarém, in the Amazon River basin. The participating organizations sought to exert enough influence in the Brazilian federal government in order to have assurance of a governance model for the area before the paving of the highway. All stakeholders, movements and organizations agreed with the road paving, but wanted to ensure a strategy that would help avoid deforestation, reduce social conflicts due to land tenure matters, and protect local communities in the area. The main reason behind the paving was pressure by large soy producers from the South to reach the Santarém port in order to save fuel and time in their exports to Europe and China. The advocacy effort implied tough political negotiations between all stakeholders, including large soy producers. One of the convening NGOs for the network provided scientific information that helped all those involved make informed decisions. Its members' expertise also provided structure and efficiency for their meetings. Their assumed role as mediator allowed them to bridge between contrasting visions (and ideologies) of how to go about the potential paths. The result was a collectively negotiated regional development ideal based on shared legitimized scientific information. This in turn was well received by the federal government, which took into account many of the network's suggestions for its regional development plan.

In Barcelona, an example of this type of network was one that came together in order to make the government train local gardening personnel and inspectors to reduce the amount of pesticides used in green areas and crops. The network started from the

visit of an issue network from Northern Europe to a local event. A small local NGO pursued the offer to come back later on for such a purpose, and started to convene for the network to raise funds and start liaising with the government for a workshop and a couple of talks. After months of negotiation and information sharing, the event was finally carried out with the support of the regional Catalan parliament, and the central Spanish government. Through this project, the local NGO that convened gained expertise in the topic and started to take part in negotiations on related issue areas at the European Union level in Brussels. The workshop for government personnel and inspectors was combined with the annual meeting of the specialized network at the European level. This in turn allowed for contacts to be developed and further projects to take off.

Value driven. The most common reference to ‘value driven’ networks is about those joined by religious principles or values. Two of the largest European NGO networks are religious (one Catholic and another Christian). They usually apply such values to their own projects and guiding principles, as was the Jubilee 2000 campaign for debt relief for poor countries. There are, however, other types of values that bring networks together. In our information era these can be either ‘Enlightenment values’ (evidence-based scientific understandings); identity-based (ethnic, gender); or ideological (Marxist, anarchist, liberal, etc.). These diverse values set in motion a series of ethical conventions that support certain attitudes or ideals. In a similar vein to more formalized organizations, networks must strive to clarify their ideals, aims and projects within an ethical framework that justifies them.

Several of the Brazilian networks I observed were based on a set of values that tries to bring together different aspects of Enlightenment ideals. It combines an evidence-based approach to describing natural landscapes and ecosystems, with a social-scientific

understanding of local communities and social dynamics. It is called socioenvironmentalism, and started out from regional Amazonian environmental movements that combined an interest to protect local inhabitants' rights to live in the forest if they chose to. The renowned activist who remains at the heart of socioenvironmentalism is Chico Mendes, a rubber-tapper who was interviewed by Gro Brundtland for the landmark report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, which coined the term 'sustainable development'. One example of a network based on such values was a coalition focused on the protection of springs that fed a river tributary to the Amazon. The complexity of the situation is startling: the springs are being threatened by an increased soy production in the Southern Amazon forest, in quantity as the plants around them are destroyed to increase crops, and in quality, as more chemicals are used for soy production. Such springs, however, are extremely important for a region that lives on water for crops, cattle, humans and the forest itself. Furthermore, the affected river crossed an important national park for indigenous communities. Several expert NGOs convened this network, using a combination of reliable scientific information, with anthropological analyses and a long experience with local communities. The network, in fact, grew out of a decades-long indigenous leaders' worry at ongoing environmental degradation.

The example of a value-based network in Barcelona was one against what was known as the Universal Forum of Cultures, or Forum Barcelona 2004. It was a large exhibition in the style of the world ones that exalted scientific and technological breakthroughs as well as nation-state achievements and significance (Harvey 1996). This one, on the other hand, claimed to focus on three main issue areas: peace, multiculturalism and sustainability. By doing so, it borrowed heavily from alternative movements even though it was an official event, heavily funded and merchandised

through government and private channels. The network that came together to oppose it and denounce its outright false use of its flag issue areas. The network members clearly framed their critiques to the Forum along the lines of 'social justice' principles. They prepared information brochures, and wrote books which shed light on the business and urban re-development strategies behind it (Varios 2004; Trallero 2004; Martí and Del Olmo 2004). Those involved in the network were particularly shocked to see social justice slogans being 'used' by what they perceived as a business strategy to enhance tourism and finance urban re-development projects within Barcelona.

Exploratory. The newness of advocacy networks explains their ongoing search for ways of exerting influence and proving their political legitimacy. There have been many ways in which network entrepreneurs and activists have sought to piece together a framework for further innovations. One of the best examples of this search is the World Social Forum, which was convened for the first time in Porto Alegre in 2001 as a counter-event to the annual World Economic Forum, which started in Davos, Switzerland, in 1971. It was launched as an effort by civil society organizations from different corners of the world to push a social agenda onto international politics. Its organizers claimed that the best way to do this was to allow for activists and other CSO members as well as interested individuals to dialogue about the state of the world regarding justice, economic inequalities, conflicts and other situations. The event's slogan hit a popular tone by stating that 'Another World is Possible'. During the meetings as well as in their preparatory stages, organizations and individuals are free to dialogue about any conflict that may be of their interest, with the purpose of further networking to share knowledge and expertise from one another. In each annual meeting there are hundreds of seminars, talks and workshops organized by topics and themes. The event as a whole is supposed to provide an opportunity for those opposing

professional politics as it exists today to imagine potential new ways of organizing society and the Earth's resources. This is why I call these networks 'exploratory', as they aim at exploring new options for social life.

In Brazil, several of the organizations I observed and followed were involved to some extent in the World Social Forum. One of these networks organized a whole series of talks within one of the annual gatherings in Porto Alegre. They distributed leaflets with information, invited scientists and community members, and addressed environmental and social issues from the Brazilian Amazon region. They used their participation as a showcase for the conflicts arising from ongoing economic and political forces in the region. It seemed to be a provocative statement that directly questioned the logic behind market and political forces behind deforestation, increasing social tensions and the expansion of the soy frontier. It was an outlet for their projects and campaigns for a deeper reflection about what needs to be changed in order to ensure a more peaceful coexistence for all stakeholders sharing the same resources.

In Barcelona, the key network I observed was the organizing committee of the Mediterranean Social Forum (FSMed). Even though it was part of the same global movement of the World Social Forum, the logic behind this regional meeting was to bring together activists and organizations from around the Mediterranean. The reason to develop a working network in this area was in direct opposition to the European Union's aim to establish a zone of influence along the area. This is part of a project called the Europartenariat or EuroMediterranean process; its initial treaty was signed in Barcelona in 1995 by heads of state of both Europe and the rest of the Mediterranean basin. It entails a series of political, investment, trade and social agreements between the EU and the rest of the countries in the Mediterranean basin. Many organizations and individuals involved in the FSMed accused the official process of prioritizing economic

gain for the EU while legitimizing repressive regimes in the region. One of the objectives of the intergovernmental process is to reach a free trade agreement, in order to bring more industrial production to southern countries and open up their markets to European products. The network, therefore, had the overall purpose of denouncing publicly this state-led project, with testimonies and calls from locals and organizations. They wanted to force the governments to understand that there may be other solutions to development issues in the area.

Contestatory. The most common activity of social movements and civil participation is to oppose an official decision, that is, one taken by government officials claiming to represent public interest. This principle is what lies at the heart of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001), and is one of the reasons why academics focused on advocacy networks draw heavily from social movement literature. One of the elements of this literature most used to describe actions by advocacy networks is the concept of ‘framing’ or ‘collective identity’ (Tarrow 1998: 13). Even though it is useful in the sense of the need to unify elements that bring organizations and individuals together, evidence shows that these elements are not limited to ‘identity’, but are far more complicated. It is rather easy, however, to have a clear idea of a network when it opposes something, be it an official policy, a physical object –usually built–, a government, or an individual. The network in these cases comes together with the sole aim of stopping whatever it is its members oppose. It might not achieve its aim, but its activism and ongoing campaigning might help inform many people who would otherwise not have access to specialized information. In this sense, such networks accumulate experience and tend to learn from one another, applying methodologies and strategies that have worked elsewhere.

An example of such a network I witnessed in Brazil was an anti-dam coalition. Several environmental organizations got together with indigenous rights NGOs to oppose the building of a dam in one of the rivers within the Amazon forest. In a meeting for the creation of a different network, one of the leading law experts involved in the coalition remembered how easy it had been to unite all those taking part in it: “the uniting message was clear: ‘no to the dam’”. Working towards that opposition was simple because all those involved had a different angle to criticize the dam from. This provided a full mosaic view of all the reasons why a dam was not suitable for the area.

In Barcelona, on the other hand, the strongest network I witnessed of this type was the anti-war one. It was a movement that crossed boundaries which limited other networks. All those involved could say they opposed any mass killing in principle. It is what drove more than one million people out to the streets on February 15, 2003, the day of a coordinated anti-war-on-Iraq marches in many cities around the world. The coalition organized a rally every time a critical situation would arise, such as the scandal on American soldiers’ abuse of inmates of Abu-Ghraib prison. I was told by many informants that the conveners of this network had a strong legitimacy and drew together activists and CSO members from a wide array of movements and organizations who would otherwise never take part in the same events.

Conclusion: Research and reflexivity

As advocacy networks become more common in our political landscape, research about them gains in perspective, form and depth. The market for such analyses, however, sets a difficult dilemma: if activists and advocacy network members follow strategies and characteristics that were identified by an academic, they might perpetuate an imaginary process that was the product of a partial understanding. The innovation that advocacy

networks entail by their own right should allow them enough leeway to improvise and create as they develop. Tensions within their committees and negotiations should not have to be restrained by formulas and structures that arose from an academic, as poignant as she or he may be. Our role as observers entails high levels of responsibility within a highly fluid environment. Numerous coalitions have already adopted the term ‘advocacy network’ as part of their officially registered name. Any reflection on campaigns and strategies can therefore find its way to practitioners who will possibly make use of them. By situating the specific focus of the networks’ activities one is analysing, and describing ones point of departure and interest in the topic, as many researchers already do, academic production will provide a valuable map for understanding these key new political –and social, and cultural– phenomena.

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