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Mario Diani, "The Cement of Civil Society. Studying Networks in Localities." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 268 pp.

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Book Review

Mario Diani, “The Cement of Civil Society. Studying Networks in Localities.” Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 268 pp.

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Reviewing *The Cement of Civil Society* means engaging with a book elaborated over almost a decade of theoretically driven empirical work, aimed at updating the sociological literature on collective action within a wide and sweepingly ambitious scope. Without a doubt, Mario Diani’s latest work is worth reading and studying for scholars and students of many different fields – among them network analysis, organizational sociology, political sociology, and social movement studies. This is not to mention its general social scientific interest beyond any of these particular niches.

This work attempts to account for how interactions shape social bonds, how collective actors exchange resources, and how the combinations of all these factors definitively “cement” social life – thereby forming some of the bedrock for what we generally call “civil society.” Thus, the questions it poses are of relevance to anyone concerned with general social mechanisms, and the dynamics affecting social life at a broad level.

The book draws on empirical material gathered over many years through both questionnaires and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This research strategy sets out to use the tools of network analysis to map and investigate relational patterns along several different dimensions: structural positions within the civil society sector, clusters of interactions, and symbolic definitions across groups. This rich data collection is therefore useful for a double long-term elaboration. A quantitative analysis focusing on different dimensions of network structure is constantly triangulated against actors’ qualitative accounts, sharpening our understanding of the collective meanings and perceptions that animate the tangible network dynamics that lie behind social structures. For all of the above reasons, Diani’s work deserves special attention at several different levels: theoretical, methodological and empirical.

Diani’s long-term investment in the book pays off. *The Cement of Civil Society* offers an analytically rigorous and empirically grounded paired comparison of civic networks in two British cities in the early 2000s, namely Bristol and Glasgow. The choice of research design is justified with a double variation. Dissimilar in terms of social structure and political traditions, the two cities nonetheless experienced a common political openness toward participatory channels at local government level during this time period. The two cities are used as ideal-typical local political environments – Bristol with its pluralistic political tradition and new middle-class profile, and Glasgow anchored to a Labour culture and working class composition – against which to analyze the variation in collective action dynamics of civic organizations in relation to a number of different issues. These include ethnic segregation, social inequality, the environment and city regeneration. Thus, as stated from the outset Diani’s book is not simply a fine-grained description of the civil society sectors of two important UK cities, but rather an attempt to break out of some theoretical dead-ends in which extant approaches to collective action have become trapped.

Diani, a disciple of Alberto Melucci, tries firstly to critically integrate the scholarship of his former mentor. He seeks to build on the kind of analysis that looked at loose, informal networks, and that treated social movements as expressions of symbolic conflicts. But at the same time Diani goes beyond this by striving to identify the analytic properties of collective action systems, including less loose and more structured collective forms such as non-governmental organizations, voluntary sector groups and charities [pp. 4-5].

Moreover, the book is dedicated to the “Dean of the invisible college,” Charles Tilly, and takes his contributions to the study of collective action seriously, trying not to take social movements or other types of grassroots politics for granted as clear-cut phenomena with restricted boundaries. These preliminary choices allow Diani to take on an even bigger challenge at both a conceptual and operational level. One of the book’s overarching aims is to explore the viability of integrating social network analysis – usually considered effective in getting at the “static” part of structures – with approaches oriented toward “contentious politics,” which have tended to focus on dynamics and interaction, rather than on static structures.

Working in this vein, Diani comes up with an interesting and novel typology for distinguishing different varieties of collective action: the “mode of coordination.”

With roots in the classical sociological canon and in Karl Polanyi’s work, and taking a leaf out of the contemporary literature on network forms of organizations, the “mode of coordination” concerns the “relational processes through which resources are allocated within a certain collectivity, decisions are taken, collective representations elaborated, and feelings of solidarity and mutual obligation forged” [pp. 13-14].

Both rational and symbolic aspects are taken into account. Different combinations of symbolic definitions (social bonds) and transactions (resource exchange) illustrate the different modes of coordination of collective action. Cross-referencing resources exchanges and boundary work at the field level, the model elaborates four modes of coordination: a “coalitional” one with *intense* resource exchanges but *limited* boundary work; a “social movement” one (intense/intense); a “subcultural/communitarian” one (limited/intense); and an “organizational” one (limited/limited).

The precise and programmatic nature of this terminology is helpful not only in the obvious sense of defining specific typologies of interaction, but also in avoiding the kind of metaphorical use of network ideas that is so common in contemporary discourse.

This typological innovation implies a move away from the kind of analysis of collective action that focuses on the traits of the actors, and toward the study of their relationships. From this point of view, different modes of coordination coexist within any collective process, and the focal point of the analysis is how different actors get involved in different systems of more or less sustained interaction, which in turn are shaped by the properties of the field. The relational approach shows how in different local settings, associations and groups do indeed engage in different relational patterns.

Moreover, far from either reducing social movements to a purely rational phenomenon (as much of the literature on interest groups does), or to uniquely anti-institutional actors (as the contentious politics literature often implicitly assumes), Diani shows how civil society groups and associations differ from both business-oriented organizations and from communitarian/subcultural groups.

Diani is concerned with identifying predictors of alliances, and provides a rich account thereof – from facilitators such as shared culture and certain types of resources, to obstacles such as issue interest, opinion on New Labour policies, protest repertoire etc. This is useful in exploring empirically the tension between properties and relations, and how this shapes the modes of coordination in the two different local settings.

Indeed in chapter 4, the author investigates structural equivalence via a network approach in which “social actors are considered equivalent as being connected to the same alters” [p. 73].

This introduces the issue of “alliance building,” which later in the book is tested in real political processes (like joint participation in real episodes of protest or civic events). Thus in this regard, trying to engage with a huge classical challenge – from Karl Marx to Charles Tilly to Harrison White – the study does not aim simply at depicting the overall structure, but also tries to detect if and how these structural conditions are predictors of collective action. The outcome of the first test, regarding resource exchange, is suggestive of social movement or coalitional modes of coordination in both cities.

In line with Simmel’s classic idea of the intersection of social circles, attention to multiple memberships gives Diani the possibility to assess whether involvement in multiple groups and associations provides a good criterion for pinpointing the existence of a general movement framework, although this choice necessarily precludes exploration of strongly subcultural or sectarian collective actors, due to their strong but isolated ties.

While the empirical tests by block modeling reported in chapters 4 and 5 confirm a correspondence between structural positions and actors’ perceptions, chapter 6 enters finally into the analysis of dynamics.

Collective action over time is studied differently here than in the more traditional approach of protest event analysis, and the analysis is novel in highlighting the importance of “non-contentious” (or “non-confrontational”) civic events. From this perspective, festivals or ritual celebrations have a great impact indeed on collective action, renewing solidarity and creating new ties between actors. These are dimensions that have been little studied by social movement scholars. If involvement in public events matters in creating new social relations, the type of public event differs across the two cities in question – with the Glasgow scene characterized by large-scale engagement in protest, while Bristol showed a major presence of “civic” events.

Chapter 7 shows how network centrality and leadership in the civic fields were affected by the different political cultures and alliances constituting the two local settings. While in Glasgow the traditional working class organizations (trade unions and the Scottish Socialist Party) were organic allies of the civic groups, in Bristol the civic sector showed more differentiation in terms of political agenda, and more autonomy from established political actors. Chapter 8 focuses on the role of political opportunities in the relations between civil society organizations, institutional politics and its governance, and the last chapter concludes by considering the relevance of Meyer and Tarrow’s notion of a contemporary “movement society” [1998].

Diani suggests that social movements should no longer be seen as what James C. Scott called the “weapons of the weak,” and that they have by now been integrated into the standard repertoire of political action for many different types of social groups. For

Diani, this strengthens the argument for the efficacy of a relational analytical perspective based on modes of coordination.

Though it is difficult to make criticisms of such a dense scientific work – based as it is on an immense collection of data, and as refined as it is in its analysis and presentation – it is possible to identify a number of aspects that could be further elaborated. However, such an exercise is superseded by the self-criticisms made by the author in a very promising postface. Diani acknowledges that in spite of the book's premises, it disregards some crucial questions regarding dynamics, while privileging an “unapologetically static” view of the modes of coordination. Likewise, temporal questions should be taken more seriously by advocates of the social networks approach. As for the question of cultural dynamics and how they create new ties, the issue of identity is little explored, as are the qualities of the meanings behind social bonds.

Nonetheless, I cannot but strongly recommend this book, on account of its huge contribution to our understanding of important questions relating to civil society, and also to the main foundations of contemporary social science at the most general level.

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