

When Networks Don't Work: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Civil Society Initiatives in Central America

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Introduction

“Civil society,” “network,” and “social movement” are imprecise, frequently contested terms. Many social scientific discussions of collective action are characterized by considerable slippage in the use of these and other, similar concepts. To a large extent, this reflects the emergence of new, hybrid organizational forms, as contemporary social movements network with one another, form coalitions, and seek to establish claims to constitute part of national and global civil society. While this paper indicates that it may be heuristically helpful to refine distinctions between these categories, it argues that it is probably more useful to integrate insights from the too often separate streams of scholarship that focus respectively on civil society, networks, and social movements. In particular, the rise in the 1990s of transnational Central America-wide civil society initiatives (and their decline and re-emergence) suggests that: (1) contested notions of civil society have a real-world impact on the shape and activities of diverse social movements and NGOs; (2) that “networks”— far from being durable and potent organizational forms, as scholars of the right and left have forcefully maintained— are at times quite fragile and ephemeral and are characterized by periodic cycles like those of social movements (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 2001a; Castells 1996; Tarrow 1998); and (3) the new prominence of “networks,” whether as political claims or as linked computers or social movements, exacerbates a problem with profound methodological, political, ethical, and representational dimensions that is acknowledged only occasionally in the social movements literature— the appearance of “fictitious” or “shell” organizations and, more recently, “dot causes” or Internet-based advocacy organizations with minuscule or indeterminate constituencies (Tilly 1984:311; Anheier & Themudo 2002:209-10).

Real-World Impacts of Civil Society and Network Debates

It has become commonplace to refer to the 1980s in Latin America as “the lost decade.” With the hindsight of today, it is clear that in many respects the “lost” maxim was not hyperbolic. Despite occasional and scattered signs of progress, the continent is still reeling from the impact of the debt crisis (the result, in part, of overvalued currencies and the “exhaustion” of “statist” models of development, but also of soaring interest rates in the 1970s, falling commodity prices, and anemic taxation systems) and an increasingly volatile globalized economy, the intractable poverty that continues to affect more than a third of the population (and that in most countries is little changed in relative terms since 1980) (CEPAL 2002:64-65), and continuing instability in Argentina, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, and elsewhere. The end of the military regimes and the democratization processes of the early 1980s generated tremendous hopes and opened up political space, but two decades later Latin Americans express very low levels of satisfaction with how “democracy” works in their countries (Latinobarómetro 2002).

In the small nations of Central America, the 1980s were doubly “lost.” Impacted like the rest of the hemisphere by economic crises and restructuring, these countries also became a locus of superpower competition and massive social struggles, suffering levels of violence and destruction that beggar the imagination.

The crisis of the 1980s, however, also gave rise to an unprecedented mobilization of diverse sectors of civil society, particularly in the latter part of the decade when the civil wars ended or ebbed and in the decade that followed. There were several sources of this political effervescence. The reduction of civil conflict and the democratization of the political systems opened up “space” for new kinds of actors to express demands from sectors of society that had been on the defensive during the wars, but which also felt empowered as a result of their participation in a decade or more of arduous struggle. The accords which settled the wars included specific provisions for resettling refugees, incorporating ex-combatants into institutional life and involving civil society in processes of building peace and strengthening national reconciliation. Throughout the region, new notions of rights had taken hold among highly politicized populations, and politicians across the spectrum articulated a new discourse of *concertación* (consensus and reconciliation). Intellectuals who had been downsized as part of public-sector retrenchment, as well as those who returned from exile or from the mountains, flocked to a growing number of non-governmental organizations. Finally, external actors which had been active in the region throughout the 1980s— notably the United States and the European Community— intensified their support for what were, broadly speaking, two competing civil society projects.

“Civil society” is, of course, a contested notion, with a complex genealogy that is beyond the scope of this

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paper. For our purposes, it is worth noting that contrasting theoretical conceptions about how to bound the “civil society” category are often tied to distinct political-economic agendas and views of democratization. Different perspectives generally agree that “civil society” is the associational realm between the household or family and the state. Beyond that, however, at the risk of oversimplifying too much, it is possible to distinguish two polar positions, separated by opposing views on whether to include markets and firms within “civil society.” Those who argue for considering markets and corporations as part of the category typically back a conservative agenda (something ironic, given this position’s roots in Hegel and Marx) which sees “civil society” as a domain outside of and morally superior to the state. They posit choice and freedom of association as fundamental characteristics of both the market and “civil society,” making support for economic liberalization and “civil society” institutions not only entirely compatible, but complementary strategies for checking state power. In contrast, theorists who exclude the market and firms from “civil society” usually consider it a domain of associational life that attempts to defend autonomous collective institutions from the encroachments of *both* the market and the state. Frequently they invoke Gramsci, while conveniently ignoring or downplaying his suggestion that achieving working-class hegemony within “civil society” could be a prelude to seizing state power. In comparison with conservative theorists, they tend to accord much greater analytical importance to how social inequality and power differentials structure or limit political representation (Cohen & Arato 1992; Cohen 1995; Heam 2001; Keane 1998; Keane 2001; Macdonald 1997; Nielsen 1995).

This theoretical polarization was reflected in Central America in two political projects promoted by the two key external actors, the United States and the European Community (after 1993, the European Union). Each project— and here, for heuristic purposes, I am again ignoring some complexities— had a contrasting understanding of the underlying causes of the conflicts and a corresponding conception of democratization. In essence, Washington, and particularly the Reagan and Bush administrations, saw the region’s revolutionary movements, wars and related unrest as rooted fundamentally and almost exclusively in communist subversion and Soviet-Cuban interference. European policymakers— especially (but not only) the Spanish, Scandinavian and German social democrats— emphasized inequality, poverty, systematic human rights violations, and authoritarian rule as central causes of the upheavals. The U.S. approach was overwhelmingly military until the late 1980s, although it also involved encouraging free elections, legal reforms, privatization of public-sector entities, and rapid economic liberalization. Its civil society component involved strong backing for private-sector lobbies and export promotion organizations, many of which received large subsidies from USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) (Cuenca 1992; Echeverría 1993; Escoto & Marroquín 1992; Rosa 1993; Sojo 1992).

European governments, apprehensive about the possibility of a major Central American war that might eventually compromise their own region’s security, actively promoted diplomatic efforts (first Contadora and then Costa Rican President Oscar Arias’s initiative that culminated in the 1987 Esquipulas Accords). Since 1984, they sponsored annual European-Central American ministerial-level meetings (called the San José Dialogue) to hammer out “cooperation” or aid agreements. Most of the sudden increase in flows of European cooperation, however, was channeled through donor NGOs rather than bilateral or official EU agencies. These European NGOs frequently received most of their funding from their respective governments (Ibis -Denmark or Novib-Holland, for example). They nonetheless placed great emphasis on establishing “horizontal” relations with grassroots “counterparts” that permitted medium- and long-term, rather than project-specific, funding. The European vision of democratization aimed at reigning in the excesses of the market and at empowering historically powerless sectors of the population (the poor, indigenous and minority groups, women) so that they could participate effectively in political institutions and combat structural inequalities, poverty and environmental destruction (Biekart 1999; Freres 1998; Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano 1998; Grabendorff 1984; Hansen 1996; Macdonald 1997; Reuben Soto 1991; The Reconstruction of Central America: The Role of the European Community 1992; Sanahuja 1996; Schori 1981).

Increasingly over the course of the 1990s, efforts to theorize “civil society” – and “global” or “transnational” civil society in particular— employed the notion of “network” as an analytical category, a metaphor for a social condition, and a description of emerging organizational and institutional forms, communications technologies, and knowledge practices. “Network” has come to have diverse meanings (again, beyond the scope of this paper), though its genealogy is nowhere near as lengthy as that of the similarly complicated “civil society.” As in the “civil society” literature, with which it overlaps, the new “network” scholarship is characterized by a pronounced left-right split. Here, though, the division is less about how to bound the object of study than over, alternatively, the emancipatory potential versus the danger that network organization implies. In the former camp, one study of “new social movements” is optimistically titled “Networks that Give Liberty” [*Redes que dan libertad* (Riechmann & Fernández 1994)]. Two key works on transnational activism conclude that “dense” networks, with many nodes, are most likely to be effective (Keck & Sikkink 1998:206; Smith 1997:54-55). Castells’ ambitious examination of this “new social morphology”— which includes case studies of diverse social movements, as well as

organized crime— suggests that “networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network” (Castells 1996:470). While acknowledging intellectual debts to Castells, the RAND Corporation’s Arquilla and Ronfeldt argue that “nimble bad guys” – terrorists, criminals, and “militants”– have become more adept than “good guys” at deploying “network” forms and waging “netwar” (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 2001b). Concerned primarily with elaborating new counterinsurgency or “counter-netwar” military doctrine, at times these authors have a troubling tendency to conflate international human rights activists with al-Qaeda or Colombian drug cartels [“They know how to penetrate and disrupt, as well as elude and evade. All feature network forms of organization, doctrine, strategy, and technology attuned to the information age... They are proving very hard to beat; some may actually be winning” (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 2001b:v)].¹ Across the spectrum, from “Networks that Give Liberty” to “Networks and Netwars,” a strong consensus exists about the potency and durability of network forms. As in the broader collective action literature, where the study of unsuccessful social movements is distinctly under-theorized (Edelman 1999; Edelman 2001), only a few lone voices – notably Annelise Riles’ in her ethnographic tour-de-force, *The Network Inside Out*– row against the current and call attention to the possibility that the “network” may be “a form that supersedes analysis and reality” and that its “failure’ is endemic, indeed, ... [an] effect of the Network form” (2001:174, 6).² While perhaps not applicable to all networks in all times and places (as Riles seems to claim), this latter perspective deserves consideration when analyzing the rise and decline of certain civil society networks in Central America in the 1990s. I will return to it in the conclusion.

Regional Civil Society in Central America

This paper examines these issues primarily in relation to the recent history of Central American peasant and small farmer organizations. It looks, in particular, at the meteoric rise and subsequent decline of a regional network of campesino groups, the Association of Central American Peasant Organizations for Cooperation and Development (Asociación de Organizaciones Campesinas de Centroamérica para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo, ASOCODE), which briefly enjoyed an extraordinarily high profile in isthmian politics, attending, for example, numerous presidential and ministerial summit meetings and generating a number of related networks that included both non-agrarian and non-Central American organizations. Founded in 1991 as an outgrowth of a European-sponsored food security education program, ASOCODE rapidly took on a life of its own and garnered growing legitimacy with its elite interlocutors and foreign funders, as well as with campesino activists from different countries, who increasingly recognized that their counterparts elsewhere confronted similar problems and shared the same concerns. The Association was, nonetheless, beset from the beginning by a variety of tensions that ultimately contributed to its undoing. These included differences of nationality and political orientation, entrenched patriarchal traditions, and leadership styles (Edelman 1998). Dependence on foreign donors also created unexpected vulnerabilities. Finally, the meager gains from transnational activism and the continuing salience of national political struggles eventually led some peasant organizations to question their earlier commitment to globalization-from-below and regional-level struggles.

The charismatic and energetic leadership of Wilson Campos, a young Costa Rican activist, helped to maintain tensions within manageable limits and to cement relations with foreign cooperation institutions during ASOCODE’s first five years. Campos moved easily in a range of milieus, from rural farmsteads to presidential summits to U.N. agencies in New York and foundation offices in Europe. Adept at making those with whom he came in contact feel heard and appreciated, he attracted considerable sympathy in policymaking and donor circles. This role, however, entailed serious costs in greatly reduced attention to the local and national organizations in Costa Rica in which he had previously been a key player and in the growing centralization in a single person of duties relating to ASOCODE’s international and internal organizational relations. Other leaders, often distrustful of Costa Ricans to begin with, also resented this concentration of affective attachments and organizational responsibilities.

One way to gain a sense of ASOCODE’s rise and fall is through outlining its funding strategy, which clearly responded to a shift in European cooperation strategies in the late 1980s and early 1990s when multilateral, bilateral and NGO donors let it be known that they preferred to support projects that had a Central American

¹ Arquilla and Ronfeldt played a key role in codifying the U.S. military’s strategy against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Al Qaeda (Pisani 2002).

² Comaroff and Comaroff (1999:33) also call attention to how “Euro-modernist forms” of civil society “may be emptied of substance,... turned into a hollow fetish.... [or] a dangerous burlesque.” At the same time, they acknowledge, as Riles rarely does, that “civil society” nonetheless serves as a vessel for utopian visions and for opening up democratic spaces.

regional, as opposed to a national or local, focus (Biekart 1999:204-6). In 1992 and 1993, three ASOCODE delegations toured Europe, meeting with NGO, EC and European Parliament officials and representatives of the governments of Holland, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Belgium, and France. By 1993, the organization had an annual budget of over US\$300,000, almost entirely from European (and a few Canadian and U.S.) donor groups. A monthly subsidy of US\$1,000 per month was paid to each of the seven national coalitions that made up the Association. The general coordinator's salary was US\$13,000 per year (handsome compensation for a mid-level professional in Central America especially when other perquisites were included, such as the "*aguinaldo*" or "thirteenth month" year-end bonus, the use of vehicles and free housing in Managua). By 1995 the subvention to each national organization had risen to four or five thousand dollars per month for each coalition, most of which was spent as salary for the two representatives that each country assigned to part-time work in ASOCODE's coordinating council (Edelman 1998). In 1996 the Association's budget rose to US\$1.5 million (Biekart 1999:280).

The sudden abundance of resources created a heady atmosphere. Indeed, in the 1994-97 period, according to an internal organizational report, "cooperation resources were so abundant that they exceeded the capacity of the headquarters" to administer them (ASOCODE 1999:24). Perhaps not surprisingly, success in fundraising, together with an intense round of activities, could easily be mistaken for political impact and influence. It also accentuated the top-down character of the Association, lessening its accountability to its national components, and simultaneously created "new needs" that essentially responded to donor offers and priorities (Biekart 1999:286-93).

In the competition for European funding, claiming to be a "popular organization" that "represented" an historically marginalized sector of the population came to be increasingly important. In ASOCODE's case, the degree of "representativity" could be established by summing the impressive, though not always unexaggerated, membership figures of its constituent organizations. A certain hubris or even grandiosity tended to accompany claims of this sort. By 1997, for example, ASOCODE leaders asserted confidently that within a short time they would have expanded the "Campesino a Campesino" extension program— which had only a modest presence outside of Nicaragua— to all of Central America.³

Given the historical antagonism in Central America between "popular organizations" and NGOs, it is striking how much the two forms converged. Analyzing Latin American feminist movements, Sonia Alvarez (1998) calls this a process of "NGO-ization" of popular organizations. ASOCODE, headed by some of the most belligerent anti-NGO activists in the region, resembled nothing so much as a large NGO (a 1999 internal retrospective evaluation indicates candidly that by 1994, the Association had institutionalized its "function as a cooperation agency"). Headquartered in a spacious house in an upper-middle-class neighborhood of Managua, the Association had all of the typical NGO trappings: computers, photocopy machines, faxes, secretaries, maids, a driver, technicians who generated a never-ending stream of project proposals and "strategic plans," and foreign "cooperators," first from Denmark and later Canada. It published a glossy bimonthly newsletter in Spanish and English (the latter, some said, was for the Belizeans, although others conceded that it was primarily for foreign consumption). ASOCODE leaders and technical staff from outside Nicaragua would often dash home (sometimes in Association vehicles) to Honduras or Costa Rica for the weekend. Many became fluent in the banal and repetitive "NGO speak" ("sustainability," "transparency," "participation," "accountability," etc.) devastatingly lampooned in Argentine human rights activist Gino Lofredo's (1991) parody, "Get Rich in the 1990s. You still don't have an NGO?"⁴

Part of the sense that ASOCODE was ascendant derived from its very real access to presidential and ministerial summit meetings and from its membership in the Consultative Council of the SICA (Sistema de Integración Centroamericana), Central America's main supra-national regional governance institution. Several of the national coalitions that participated in ASOCODE used their new-found access to funds to carry out rural development programs and to support struggles for land rights, credit, and technical assistance. At the regional level, however, the principal activity continued to be summit-hopping lobbying, organizational meetings, and training workshops and seminars.

In the early to mid-90s ASOCODE also initiated or encouraged the formation of several new networks: the Indigenous and Peasant Community Agroforestry Coordinating Group (Coordinadora Indígena y Campesina de Agroforestería Comunitaria, CICAFOC); the Central American Indigenous Council (Consejo Indígena Centroamericano, CICA); the Civil Initiative for Central American Integration (Iniciativa Civil para la Integración

³ On the Campesino a Campesino Program, see Bunch (1982), Enlace Sur-Sur (1998), Holt-Giménez (1996), and Núñez et al. (1998).

⁴ For a less jocular approach to the same problem, see Stirrat (1996).

Centroamericana, ICIC); the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo, CLOC); and the Vía Campesina/Peasant Road, which eventually included representatives of farmers' organizations from some fifty countries (Desmarais 2002; Edelman 2003). Following the massive devastation of Hurricane Mitch in October 1998, ASOCODE, together with CICAFOC and a regional network of small coffee producers, set up a new Central American Rural Coordinating Group (Coordinadora Centroamericana del Campo) to join a broader Central America Solidarity Coordinating Group (Coordinación Centroamérica Solidaria) at the Stockholm meeting of European cooperation organizations involved in the reconstruction effort. The proliferation of networks meant a sharp rise in the number of regional meetings, many of which were attended by the same individuals. Some of the more enterprising activists reportedly received full-time salaries simultaneously from more than one network [rather like what Riles (2001:47) reports in the Pacific].

Decomposition and Recomposition: “Crisis,” “Rupture,” and “Transition”

Networks beget networks. The phenomenon is noteworthy, since new organizational structures were assumed or claimed to correspond to new political or economic functions or objectives. Ironically, the most intense period of ASOCODE involvement in creating new networks occurred just before its own decomposition. This section describes an organizational decline that some viewed as a demise and that others euphemistically called a “transition.” The following, concluding section of the paper suggests why processes of network genesis and decomposition are not coincidental, but rather integrally related to each other.

In 1997 and 1998, ASOCODE entered into a period that its own internal evaluation characterizes as “crisis and rupture” (ASOCODE 1999:25). First the English and then the Spanish edition of the newsletter ceased publication. Organizational divisions involved more and more energy, and the Association diminished its lobbying at regional and international meetings. Much of the discord manifested itself in a factional split—present from the Association's beginnings—between the Panamanian and Salvadoran “verticalists” (with orthodox Leninist proclivities), on the one hand, and the five other countries' representatives on the other. Additional controversies divided the coordinating council along different lines, for example, whether the Association should be a regional campesino lobby or attempt to resolve immediate on-the-ground problems in the member countries. The diversity of the constituent organizations and their social bases—agricultural workers, indigenous groups, independent peasants, cooperative members—once seen as a strength, became a further source of polarization as some countries' representatives (Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans, in particular) argued for a narrower orientation toward smallholding producers. Worsening disputes between the headquarters and the different national coalitions over control of resources also led some significant organizations to withdraw and others to be expelled from the national coalitions. Sometimes this occurred because national organizations saw the coalitions which represented them at the regional level as too involved in ASOCODE to attend to pressing issues at home.

In 1999, the Association abandoned all efforts at lobbying international, regional, and national institutions. When donor organizations became aware of the turmoil and withdrew their support, the downward spiral accelerated. Some agencies indicated that henceforth they would reverse their previous practice of funding regional initiatives and channel support earmarked for ASOCODE to its constituent national organizations. The coalition which had represented Guatemala in ASOCODE dissolved, decimated by the loss of cooperation funds and eclipsed by the rise of other more dynamic alliances of Guatemalan peasant organizations (in which it had briefly participated). The lavish headquarters in Managua— an example of what one prescient critique termed network “macrocephaly” (Morales & Cranshaw 1997:55)— closed its doors. “Since March 2000,” an internal report commented in April 2001, “we have not had any financial support from any cooperation agency or organization... the different activities have been carried out with the support provided by their organizers. Operating expenses until December 2000 ... were obtained through the sale of equipment from the headquarters” (ASOCODE 2001:1).

In April 2001, twenty-five delegates (fifteen of them women) from five countries met in Tegucigalpa (representatives from Belize and Guatemala were invited and confirmed their participation, but never arrived). Their agenda was to consolidate what some described as a “transition.” Instead of a costly headquarters and a regional coordinating committee, ASOCODE decided to divide into issue-specific working groups that would communicate virtually or meet physically on an ad hoc basis. The Honduran member coalition, already host to the global Vía Campesina network, agreed to serve as ASOCODE's office as well and to begin the paperwork needed to establish its legal personality in Honduras (and to obtain a Honduran e-mail account). Despite the near demise of the Association, the transition commission's report pointed to a wide range of activities over the previous year: regional “encounters” on agrarian problems and the landless in Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, on rural women in Nicaragua, and on preparing proposals for the civil society Consultative Council of the Central American Integration System (SICA) in El Salvador, as well as participation in forums in Montreal, Madrid, Bangalore, and Nairobi.

Nor did the Tegucigalpa “transition” meeting neglect public relations. The ASOCODE brochure was

updated, a press conference scheduled at the end of the event, and plans were made to announce the new organizational structure on the Association's web page. The Panamanians [in a move consonant with Riles' (2001:32, 89) observations about how networks fetishize their own reports] urged the rest of the delegates "to reaffirm the presence of ASOCODE in Central America, taking advantage of all the documents on the letterhead of the different national coalitions [*mesas*], adding the name of ASOCODE [to each, for] example APEMEMP-ASOCODE, ADC-ASOCODE, COCOCH-ASOCODE" (ASOCODE 2001:8).⁵

Some Reasons Why Networks Don't Always Work

It would be tempting to explain the decline of ASOCODE, its lowered profile in Central American regional politics, and the demise of some of its spin-off networks as the result of bitter factional infighting, a macrocephalic organizational structure, battles over money, or an exaggerated dependence on foreign donors. This would not be wrong. But behind the conflicts between "verticalists" and their opponents, the often opportunistic pursuit of individual or organizational economic security, the currying favor with European cooperation agencies, and the propagation of donor-driven agendas lie some lessons that speak to the role of nation-states in the globalized economy and to the broader limitations of transnational civil society projects.

Networks are typically represented by social scientists and by their participants as two-dimensional linkages between nodes or focal points of equal weight or significance. This portrayal— whether of "chain," "star and hub," or "all channel" network forms (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 2001a:8)— often fails to capture how networks are experienced by those who participate in them (Riles 2001). Network activists, like other overworked professionals, feel the tug of disparate demands emanating from the regional, national and local organizations in which they take part. The network diagrams that show ties between national coalitions (which are very much the same in Central America and in the Pacific) fail to indicate the existence of this third dimension that links national coalitions to their very diverse constituent member groups. Concretely, the same individuals who mobilize delegates for international network conferences may also have to put together a legal team to defend disputed property titles, follow up on late orders for a cooperative's rubber boots, or harvest a field of cabbages. Unlike electrical engineering diagrams, which typically indicate resistance to flows, formal network organigrams imply agile and unobstructed movement of information between nodes or focal points. The network's representation of itself erases political, historical and personal forces that might, in practice, impede the networking process.

The two-dimensional representation of networks— in part an artifact of commonly used graphics software— effaces not just this third dimension of linkages between a "hub" and its components, but also the fourth dimension of how time and periodicity affect civil society initiatives. Social movements everywhere rise and fall, often as part of broader "cycles of protest" (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1984). U.S., European, and autochthonous civil society projects of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Central America shared an urgency born out of a decade or more of severe crisis and inconceivable violence. Over the course of the 1990s, these imperatives receded in importance. Donors experienced "fatigue," became enamored of new fashions, and shifted their attention to other regions— notably eastern Europe and southern Africa— where needs seemed more immediate and political hopes appeared to have greater possibilities of realization. In Europe, in particular, the rightward shift in several key countries led to diminished official support for grassroots organizations in the Third World. And in several countries in Central America, as democratization advanced, traditional political forms— parties, unions, and lobbies— assumed as their own many of the demands initially articulated through civil society initiatives.

Analysts of transnational politics increasingly question the pundits' facile vision of contemporary globalization as a zero-sum game in which states lose as markets and supra-national governance institutions gain. Sassen, for example, points out that while states everywhere are forfeiting their historical role as regulators of financial markets, they continue to play a major role in extending the inter-state consensus in favor of globalization if for no other reason than that national legal systems remain the principal means through which the contracts and property rights so essential in the world economy are enforced (Sassen 2000:61; Helleiner 1994). Tarrow, similarly, emphasizes "that states remain dominant in most areas of policy," such as domestic security, border control and exercising legal dominion with their territories. "Citizens," he says, can travel more easily than before and can form networks beyond borders..., but they still live in states and, in democratic ones at least, they have the opportunities, the networks, and the well-known repertoires of national politics... Those are incentives to operate on native ground that the hypothetical attractions of 'global civil society' cannot easily match (2001:2-3).

⁵ APEMEMP (Asociación de Pequeños y Medianos Productores de Panamá), ADC (Alianza Democrática Campesina [El Salvador]), COCOCH (Concejo Coordinador de Organizaciones Campesinas de Honduras).

The tensions within ASOCODE between the possibilities of regional, transnational organizing and the imperatives of national politics need to be seen in this light, even though for many global networkers (and especially for rural ones) the “attractions” of international travel and a more cosmopolitan lifestyle might be greater than Tarrow indicates. Jorge Hernández, a long-time campesino organizer in Costa Rica, had been a founder in the early 1980s of the politically centrist National Union of Small and Medium Agricultural Producers (Unión Nacional de Pequeños y Medianos Productores Agropecuarios, UPANACIONAL), still by far the country’s largest peasant organization. Later, he had a leading role in the creation of the ASOCODE and the Vía Campesina networks and saw UPANACIONAL, his “base organization,” marginalized from both. An astute, committed activist who was present as part of a Vía Campesina delegation at the “Battle of Seattle,” Hernández explained in 2001 why he and his organization had decided to eschew regional politics and concentrate on national-level struggles:

From UPANACIONAL’s point of view, we discerned two serious problems in ASOCODE. One was the social composition of the movement. There were some groups clearly made up of small and medium-size agriculturalists and others which had labor and other sorts of demands. At the same time that movements like UPANACIONAL were interested in the right to make the land produce— because we live from the land— there were others who were concerned about rural wages, the [cost of] the ‘basic market basket’ [i.e., cost of living]. This began to divide the movement. The other question concerned representation. We valued highly representative organizations, not so much purely in terms of numbers of members, which is important, but also in terms of actions in practice, in real struggle. These exist in all of Central America. But we also saw that there were organizations whose support base wasn’t very clear... They had a great name, but at the moment when pressure tactics were needed, to block a highway or stage a demonstration, their supporters didn’t appear and the leaders still talked about how they had ‘X’ quantity of members... This was notorious and even the cooperation agencies began to talk about organizations that were like shells... We considered that it wasn’t worth being in a process where the concepts of representation were so thin.... The organization that has an agenda of very intense internal, national work prefers to leave aside that type of problems and not get involved in that type of dispute.... It’s very exhausting. Moreover, the national agenda doesn’t wait. The government’s policies don’t wait, nor the free trade treaties nor the pressure that has to be brought on the Legislative Assembly. If one doesn’t do it now, they pass a law or a tax or a new free trade treaty and they put us there without any protection for grain producers, or potatoes, or onions. So the organization has concentrated more on this agenda, which is our responsibility as representatives of the small and medium-size Costa Rican agriculturalists and, much to our regret, it has had to leave aside that regional, more Latin American, world level. In that whirlwind of events and seminars, which often were just images to project to the outside, there was a lot of discussion, a lot of politics, but very little advance in plans that might effectively aid the region’s producers (Hernández Cascante 2001).

The conflict was not simply one of global or regional versus national politics. The tension between politics and the agricultural production that was so central to the Association’s claimed identity also became a source of contention and disputed legitimacy. Sinfiorano Cáceres, a long-time leader of Nicaragua’s National Cooperative Federation (Federación Nacional de Cooperativas, FENACOOOP), served as ASOCODE’s general coordinator in 1996-98. Somewhat later, factional disputes led FENACOOOP to withdraw from the UNAG. Since the national coalitions— UNAG in this case— were the conduits for participating in ASOCODE and had to vouch for their own member groups that sought participation in the regional Association, FENACOOOP (and Cáceres) found itself excluded. “A campesino organization,” Cáceres remarked,

can’t be directed by people who aren’t campesinos.... In ASOCODE— in confidence, through friendship and all that— we realized that there were people who weren’t agriculturalists, who didn’t understand. If I’m not an agriculturalist and to understand the problem of production I have to read a document, that puts me at a disadvantage. Because, in addition to reading it, I have to commit myself, to take it to heart [*asumirlo*]. But if I’m an agriculturalist, I definitely understand the crisis of maize— that’s my production, maize, cassava, citrus. I understand it because I live it and, moreover, I’ve committed my family’s economic base and my intellect to it. There’s a combination of the personal, the social, the interest group [*gremio*], and the political... We’re not outside, nor on top. We’re on the inside. The critical thing is that [the leader] be a producer. He can be an old-timer or someone who recently got involved, or who inherited the farm, not necessarily just a campesino from the countryside, but someone who is a producer. When we talk about leaders, when we get together among ourselves, we say that we need an embrace that encourages us and not an embrace that strangles (Cáceres Baca 2001).

The depictions of ASOCODE as a “whirlwind of events and seminars” or “an embrace that strangles”

unknowingly echo Annelise Riles' assertion that a key distinctive characteristic of network activity is "its dual quality as both a means to an end and an end in itself" (2001:51). While the Fijian and Pacific women's organizations Riles studied might not seem the most obvious point of comparison for analyzing a male-dominated peasant association in Central America, the organizational forms and knowledge practices of each are strikingly similar and suggestive of patterns that are likely ubiquitous in global civil society. These include (1) the constitution of networks that appear, formally, to link organizations, but which also, informally, are based significantly on personal ties between activists (and between activists and funders) and on processes of exclusion which, despite a pervasive rhetoric of inclusion and consensus, reflect an unwillingness to accommodate political differences (or a tendency to explain them as personal in nature), even when these do not exceed the statutory or self-defined mission of the network; (2) an aesthetics that manifests itself in network "artifacts," such as glossy newsletters for external consumption and "agendas," directories, "platforms for action," and funding proposals for internal and donor consumption; and (3) a proclivity for demonstrating the effectiveness of the network with reference to its own self-description and activities. Network practices of representation—submitting proposals, organizing meetings, collecting data, drafting documents—are, Riles argues, all too familiar to academics, which is perhaps one reason why scholars of social movements and civil society have often been unable to establish analytical distance from their objects of study. "In its parody of social scientific analysis..." she writes, "the Network plays on academic sentimentality about finally having found a 'people' who speak our language, who answer our questions on our own terms. It appeals to our collective fantasy about linking up with our subjects and finding in the 'data' exactly what we set out to find" (2001:174).

Concluding Remarks

Why are processes of network genesis and decomposition so integrally related, as I suggested earlier in this paper? This becomes clearer if we accept as a working hypothesis Riles' position that network activity has a "dual quality as both a means to an end and an end in itself." In the case of ASOCODE, the formation of new networks was ostensibly intended to broaden common struggles by incorporating new constituencies. The Central American Indigenous Council (CICA), for example, founded at a 1994 ASOCODE meeting in Panama, sought to involve native peoples alongside non-native peasants in a wide range of campaigns. It also served, however, as a new institutional vehicle for approaching donors and attracting funds. Unable to shake its image as a creation of EU cooperation agencies, its impact was minimal (Tilley 2002:542-50). As ASOCODE entered into decline, the other regional and extra-regional networks it generated took on increasing importance for some of its leaders as sources of employment and outlets for continued activism. This activism, however, remained largely confined to the existing network modes—seminars, workshops, and congresses, each with its corresponding declaration, poster, and funding agency report.

As if to make this dynamic even clearer, in 2001 two new transnational peasant networks emerged in the Central American region. A decade earlier the most salient elite-led regional free-market project was the Central American Integration System (SICA) and peasant efforts to "globalize from below" took place within the Central American region and in explicit opposition to the vision of the dominant groups. Now, however, anxieties about the SICA had shifted and political space was reconfigured as a result of Mexican President Vicente Fox's proposed Plan Puebla-Panamá (PPP), a new regional integration project, funded primarily by the Inter-American Development Bank, that sought to link southern Mexico and the Central American isthmus in a single free-trade and development zone. One network—the Mesoamerican Peasant Platform or Meeting (Plataforma Campesina Mesoamericana or Encuentro Campesino Mesoamericano, ECM)—arose to oppose the PPP, fueled in part by Guatemala's CONIC (National Indigenous and Peasant Coordination, Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina) and by the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo, CLOC), another network which had recently moved its headquarters to Guatemala. While Central America (without Mexico) was the key regional reference point for regional cross-border peasant organising in the 1990s, the PPP has expanded the relevant space to Mesoamerica, which is usually understood to include Mexico and most of Central America. In 2002 the president of an almost moribund ASOCODE joined Mexican organisations in convening the meetings and remarked that the new ECM network "was betting on Mesoamerica as a space of convergence" (CCS-Chiapas [Coordinación de Comunicación Social 2002; Bartra 2002). The group's Action Plan called for gaining the ECM "public recognition as Regional Coordinator" of the organised peasantry in Mexico and Central America, a status previously claimed, in the latter zone at least, by ASOCODE. Thus the ECM's declarations made no mention of earlier networks in the region that had raised similarly militant opposition to free trade (and that still existed, or claimed to), or of the implications of the redundancies of old and new networks operating in largely the same terrain, made up of many of the same organizations, and advancing similar demands (ECM 2002a, 2002b).

The second network to emerge in 2001 had a more ambivalent position regarding Plan Puebla-Panamá and was concerned primarily with influencing the impending free trade treaty between the Central American countries

and the United States and, secondarily, the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas. The Mesoamerican Initiative on Trade, Integration and Sustainable Development (Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Comercio, Integración y Desarrollo Sostenible or Iniciativa CID) brought together organizations excluded from ASOCODE and the Vía Campesina as well as other peasant organizations (such as Honduras's COCOCH) that were key players in both. It also included a range of research and action-oriented NGOs from Mexico and Central America, suggesting that the geographical scope of network activity was broadening irrespective of political orientation. Ironically, both of the activists quoted above as eschewing transnational networking in favor of national politics, Jorge Hernández and Sinfiorano Cáceres, have been participants in this new Initiative, along with their respective organizations in Costa Rica and Nicaragua (Iniciativa CID [Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Comercio 2002]). Supported in part by Oxfam International and the AFL-CIO, this group sought to dialogue with the Inter-American Development Bank and to identify possible "opportunities" that might exist for grass-roots organizations in the proposed free trade treaties. This orientation, as well as the funding sources, is suggestive of an emerging fissure in the peasant networks between pragmatic elements who, along with Oxfam, call for making trade fair, and what might be called "rejectionists" who, like Food First, demand that agriculture be taken out of the WTO and who favor strengthening localized rather than global markets for small agriculturalists' output (curiously invoking new interpretations of concepts such as "subsidiarity," that is, the EU governing principle—articulated first in the Maastricht Treaty— that decision making should be as close to the community level as possible).

It would probably overstate the case to suggest that networks don't ever work or that they simply propagate endlessly with no measurable impact. The development in Central America of a significant sector of highly sophisticated peasant activists could be viewed as one indicator of impressive success [and of the inadequacy of Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals," whom he assumed would never emerge from the peasantry (Gramsci 1971:6)]. Of the several networks ASOCODE helped to initiate several are moribund (or virtually so), but others—like those just mentioned that were born in 2001— maintain intense programs of activity. Those that survive seemed to have learned different lessons from the experience of the 1990s. The Vía Campesina, headquartered in Honduras, has a lean organizational structure which suggests that the dangers of network macrocephaly have been taken into account. It has also achieved a high profile in global justice movements, singled out by *Newsweek* following the 2001 G-8 summit in Genoa as one of eight "kinder, gentler globalist" groups behind the anti-G-8 protests (*Newsweek* 2001:17). Ironically, though, its presence in Honduras is entirely due to the erstwhile strength of ASOCODE, which was once perceived as the most dynamic of the regional units of Vía Campesina. The diversity of rural interests that became a source of conflict in ASOCODE and the strong influence of organizations with pronounced "verticalist" tendencies (such as the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers Movement, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra, MST) have, however, contributed to processes of exclusion from the Vía Campesina. The Indigenous and Peasant Community Agroforestry network (CICAFOC) has shown itself to be similarly vital, in large part by keeping overhead low and by prioritizing the on-the-ground needs of its local base organizations (Rodríguez Gómez 2001).

"On-the-ground" is an inescapable dimension of successful social movements, though not necessarily of the kind of networks that incorporate social movements or that—like the "dot causes," Internet-based advocacy groups with immeasurable constituencies (Anheier & Themudo 2002)—describe themselves unproblematically as social movements. The appearance of "dot causes" and "shell" organizations and networks clearly complicates social scientists' (as well as donors' and policymakers') efforts to evaluate activists' claims. Some suggest that research focus not on organizations, which tends to privilege their claims and obscure less formal processes of political and cultural change, but on the broader "social fields" in which organizations operate (Burdick 1998); this, though, is more easily done with place-based social movements than with transnational networks. The phenomenon of virtual or fictitious organizations also raises thorny questions of accountability, democracy and representation. Part of the potential power of virtual organizations is that their representational claims are difficult or impossible to evaluate and they may have an impact out of proportion to their real numbers— including, at times, impacts that contravene or obstruct the decisions of democratically elected, genuinely representative institutions. While global civil society groups have rightly sought to hold supra-national governance institutions, such as the World Bank, responsible for their actions, the nature of the accountability that ought to be expected of NGOs, social movement organizations and networks is far from clear. As if the emergence of hybrid organizational forms were not enough, responsibilities to elected and appointed leadership bodies, dues paying members and affiliated organizations, donors and beneficiaries, real and imagined constituencies, and broader publics can become hopelessly confused and a source of considerable contention.

Tellingly, even before the ASOCODE network's decline, the images peasant activists used to describe its shortcomings were rich in metaphors of flight and distance from the ground (and some of my richest interviews for this project have occurred— or been arranged— at airports and in the planes that shuttle between Central America's capital cities). Some activists in the mid-1990s grumbled about the leadership as a "*jet set campesino*," while others

noted the network's seeming inability to "land" or bring its ambitious "action platforms" to the ground (*aterrizar*). In a moment of self-critical, retrospective candor, ASOCODE's first general coordinator recognized that "when a leader originates at the base [and then] becomes bureaucratized and distant from the base, the people say that he's become like a kite (*se papaloteó*), that he goes up and up into the sky, and then suddenly the string breaks and he's lost" (Campos Cerdas 2001).

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