



## PROTEST AND DEMOCRACY

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## Transnational Protest: “Going Global” in the Current Protest Cycle against Economic Globalization

*Jeffrey Ayres and Laura Macdonald*

In September 2012, a group of several dozen Vermont farmers and citizens gathered outside a Doubletree Hotel in the suburb of South Burlington to greet the attendees of the Vermont Feed Dealers Association conference with protest signs declaring their opposition to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Holding signs emblazoned with such slogans as “NO GMO,” “Sustainable Corporate Dominance,” and “Friends Don’t Let Friends Plant Monsanto,” the protesters lined the access road to the hotel so the attendees—arriving to see a speech by the vice president for national affairs of the Monsanto Corporation—were faced with the show of opposition to genetically engineered crops and foods in the state of Vermont. In comments at a news conference following the protest, representatives of several small family farms that participate in Burlington-area community supported agriculture (CSA)—including Flack Family Farm and Full Moon Farm, as well as the director of Rural Vermont, a nonprofit food advocacy organization that opposes corporate industrial agricultural practices in the state—espoused a vision of an ecologically sustainable and diverse agricultural community, free of corporate control and GMOs. In articulating her stance against Monsanto and global corporate agribusiness, Rachel Nevitt of Full Moon Farm declared, “what is sustainable here

folks is our voice of dissent . . . our desire for honest and just, moral and environmental action must be sustained” (Spring 2012).

Meanwhile, a contentious fall evolved into an early winter of discontent for North American activists opposed to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations taking place that December in Auckland, New Zealand. The TPP negotiations involved twelve Asia-Pacific states in talks designed to liberalize and promote trade and investment across the region; this included such controversial issues as changes to procurement rules to enhance corporate bidding rights, the creation of an investor-state provision to empower corporations to sue for purportedly lost profits, and the delaying of the introduction of and sale of generic drugs. Spearheaded by the social-activist organization the Council of Canadians, the Washington Fair Trade Coalition, and the US-based Citizens Trade Campaign, over two hundred people representing environmental, Indigenous, family-farm, seniors, and labor groups gathered in British Columbia’s Peace Arch Park on the BC-Washington border to protest the New Zealand negotiations and to raise awareness of the launch of a tri-national campaign against the TPP by Canadian, American, and Mexican activists. Activists held a cross-border organizing summit and released what they called the “North American United Statement Opposing NAFTA Expansion through the Trans Pacific Partnership,” with the goal of convincing over a thousand North American social-activist organizations to sign on to the statement opposing the TPP. In announcing the start of the tri-national campaign, the Council of Canadians trade campaigner Stuart Trew, an organizer of the cross-border event, predicted that “the people of all three countries will come together . . . at this symbolic moment to call for openness and democracy in trade agreements, and for a completely different vision of globalization that puts the interests of people above profits” (Council of Canadians 2012).

While these stories may seem to involve completely separate issues and events, we believe that they are in fact tied together in a long-running political drama of contentious protest against economic globalization.<sup>1</sup> An initial protest cycle spread largely across the developing world in the 1980s against structural adjustment, fed into anti-globalization protests more globally in the 1990s, and then reemerged with anti-austerity and Occupy protests in the second decade of the twenty-first century. This wave of

contentious protests affecting diverse regions of the world—what we characterize herein as the third global protest cycle against economic globalization—illustrates a number of transnational characteristics. In this chapter, we analyze several characteristics of the shifting and dynamic nature of transnational contentious politics and present two short case studies that display some of these characteristics. Our efforts directly respond to themes developed by Arce and Rice in the first chapter of this volume, including their provocative discussion of the connection between protest and democracy (or the lack thereof), as well as their concern with the political consequences of protest, including possible political realignments, and with what they characterize as the economic threats of globalization and inequality against protest activity. Our main goal is to analytically “unpack” protest activity that is often simplistically mischaracterized as “going global,” and to provide examples of how people have employed diverse strategies of a transnational character to contest the negative effects of economic globalization.

## Theorizing Transnational Contention: “Going Global” Unpacked

This chapter focuses on the transnational dimensions of contemporary social protest. As noted in chapter 1, some authors believe globalization has led to a broad acceptance of liberal-democratic norms and “the end of politics” (the “depoliticization” argument), while others argue that it has resulted in a dramatic increase in social movement activity and protest, with the increased transnationalization of contentious politics (the “repoliticization” thesis). Similar to Rice (2012), we believe that the picture is considerably more complex than either of these two extreme positions suggest.

Within this current global protest cycle, we are attracted to the concept of transnational contentious politics for several reasons. First, we find it analytically more helpful to focus on “contentious politics” as a broader phenomenon than social movements, because it allows us to include protest actions that seem transnational in some respects but lack a more sustained and organized cross-border character. Tarrow has defined contentious politics as “collective activity on the part of claimants or those

who claim to represent them relying at least in part on non-institutional forms of interaction with elites, opponents and the state” (1996, 874). In his work with McAdam and Tilly (1996; 2001), Tarrow has emphasized the more long-term evolutionary character of contentious politics. McAdam (1982) has also argued, moreover, in his well-known study of the American civil rights movement—in which he developed the now ubiquitous political process model—that social protest is the result of long-term, historical sociopolitical upheaval and change. The two cases of various forms of collective claims-making with cross-border characteristics we briefly discuss in this chapter—the global food sovereignty movement and protests against North American trade politics—can be seen as part of a wider pattern of decades-long, variegated, and still-developing processes of contentious politics against economic globalization.

Second, as noted above, we are concerned about the common use of the term “transnational social movement,” which fails to capture important features of a considerable amount of contemporary protest activity. Over the past two decades, there has been an evolution in research on transnational protest—some of which arguably got caught up in the heady days of global justice protests during the late 1990s, as seen at such meetings as the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization Ministerial, the 2001 Summit of the Americas meeting in Quebec City, and the G8 meeting in Genoa—that has considered in different ways the role of the state and international institutions in shaping this protest. Some of the earlier research wrestled with the potentially paradigm-shifting character of global protest (Della Porta, Kriesi, and Rucht 1999; Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002; Smith and Johnston 2002; Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco 1997). These authors have often suggested that the state was retreating as a site for social protest as power shifted to non-state actors such as nongovernmental organizations, multinational corporations, and international institutions such as the WTO, the World Bank, and IMF (Matthews 1997). Were transnational social movements emerging as the dramatic new corrective to transnational capital, replacing increasingly enfeebled labor unions and political parties that appeared to lose their ability or willingness to serve as countervailing powers against capital (Piven and Cloward 2000)? This perspective moved from the “methodological nationalism” characteristic of early social movement theorization toward a “methodological

transnationalism” that failed to capture the complex and contradictory forms of interaction between local, national, and global scales. In some ways, this enthusiastic heralding of the emergence of global social movements mirrored the enthusiastic view of proponents of globalization who saw it as an implacable force that would inevitably erase national differences in a wave of harmonization and convergence. Both advocates and opponents of globalization thus tended to portray political and economic change as unilinear and uniform across the globe.

In the current context, we are struck by the more complex, multi-linear, and diverse character of the interaction between protest and economic globalization. We also argue below that the dichotomies between national and transnational should be replaced with a multiscalar understanding of contemporary political changes. We emphasize the cyclical pattern of contentious political behavior against economic globalization that has evolved over the past several decades—as opposed to evidence of a consistent and sustained trajectory of growing cross-border collaboration between activists from multiple countries—in other words, what one would expect from a transnational social movement (Guidry, Kennedy, and Zald 2000; Moghadam 2005; 2013; Smith and Johnston 2002). As Oliver and Meyer (1998) have noted, “social movements come and go,” with social unrest frequently coming in waves of widening distribution and diffusion of protest events or actions, organizations, frames, and beliefs across a population. Scholars have written of “contentious decades,” such as the 1960s (Gitlin 1993; Isserman and Kazin 2011), and even “rebellious centuries” (Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975). We find it more analytically helpful to see the examples of widespread protest against economic globalization since the global financial crisis of 2007–08 as one protest cycle in a longer-term pattern of contentious politics against economic globalization. We place the short case studies of transnational contentious politics within Tarrow’s (2011) conceptualization of a cycle of contention.

The latest wave of protest that has been occurring in many different parts of the world over the past few years—from Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter in the United States, to anti-austerity protests in Europe, to Indigenous mobilization against mining projects in Guatemala—are, we argue, part of a third coherent global protest cycle against economic globalization. This protest cycle has at its core grievances and

opposition to the prescriptions and perceived outcomes of economic globalization—trade and financial liberalization, deregulation, privatization, tax cuts, and cuts to social spending (Harvey 2007)—and growing inequality, economic insecurity, unemployment or underemployment, and democratic decline. The targets of protest are thus more diverse and less clearly defined than in earlier cycles of contentious protest. Moreover, compared to the two previous protest cycles against economic globalization, which tended to involve protest actions more geographically concentrated in either the developing South or the developed North, today's cycle of protest is more globally dispersed, and is reflected in a myriad of multi-scale processes of contention against economic globalization. Smith's recent study of what she calls the "competition between the neoliberal and democratic globalization projects" (2008, 8), captures part of this ongoing process of contentious politics. More specifically, what we would identify as the second global protest cycle, occurring largely in the post-Cold War era, Smith feels has been defined as a contest between these two visions of "how the world should be organized" (2008, 8).

In fact, we agree with Moghadam's (2013) argument that there have been two previous cycles of collective action and protest, which should encourage us to analytically link earlier phases of structural adjustment and trade liberalization to the most recent period of unrest against austerity, inequality, and corporate power. The structural adjustment policies advocated by the IMF and the World Bank—which devastated wide swaths of people across the developing South and resulted in food riots and widespread unrest in the 1980s and '90s (see Walton and Seddon 1994)—should be recognized as having contributed to a longer-term historical process of contentious political action against economic globalization (Heckscher 2002). This first protest cycle, then, which was aimed largely against structural adjustment, is connected to the second wave of mobilization against trade liberalization and financial speculation that developed in the 1990s. This is evidenced by the protests and campaigns mounted against trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Maastricht Treaty of the European Union, the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment, the creation of the World Trade Organization after the completion of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the Free Trade Area of the Americas

(FTAA), which was launched in 1994 but, as discussed below, eventually defeated (Smith 2001; Smith and Smythe 1999; Shoch 2000). These protests against “free trade” clearly targeted specific instances of economic globalization, and the multilateral nature of these targets tended to foster transnational alliances among social movements. Most of the movements that emerged in this second phase failed to prevent the signing of the trade agreements they were targeting (except the FTAA), and as a result, they eventually lost steam.

In addition to reflecting on the cyclical character of protest activities, we also present a multiscale approach to understanding transnational contentious politics drawn from critical geography. Early approaches to analyzing social movements were implicitly based on a form of methodological nationalism in which relevant processes of political mobilization were assumed to occur within discrete, territorially defined nation-states, despite evidence that social movements from an early stage often unfolded across multiple geographical sites (like temperance movements or antislavery movements). Political process models, for example, took for granted that the main targets of social movement organizing were the governmental institutions of a given country. As discussed above, early literature on transnational social movement activity tended to shift from the national to the international level of analysis. More recently, some authors have reasserted the continuing relevance of the national level (Silva 2013). All of these approaches, even if they talk about geographic scale, shifting scale, and jumping scale, tend to take for granted the analytical separation between the “national” and the “international” or “transnational,” or between “inside” and “outside.” As we see in the examples of protest discussed below, these analytical distinctions are increasingly irrelevant and distracting in the context of the current phase of globalization.

## Transnational Contentious Politics against Economic Globalization

The latest protest cycle clearly shares a number of characteristics of what Oliver and Meyer have referred to as “waves within waves and campaigns within movements” (1998, 9). Contentious politics against economic globalization has either transcended national boundaries or played out in



a multiscalar form in what Tarrow (2005; 2011) has referred to as processes of transnational contention. He has developed a rubric of three sets of contentious transnational politics, evolving from processes that are more domestic to transitional to international. This tends to maintain the separation between domestic and transnational, rather than analyzing sufficiently the complex relations between different scales (Silva 2013). However, the three types of activity he identifies provide useful insight into the multiple ways in which social forces interact across borders and in which the national and international intersect. The three sets are differentiated by their degree of cross-border permanence and connection to the potential development of genuinely transnational social movements. They are: 1) global framing and internalization/domestication; 2) diffusion and scale shift; and 3) externalization and transnational coalition formation (Tarrow 2005, 32). While these transnational processes interact and often take place simultaneously, we will present here two examples that we feel typify the more common protest mechanisms occurring within the third global protest cycle against economic globalization: global framing and transnational diffusion.

### *Global Framing and Contentious Claims-Making around Food Sovereignty*

The spring of 2012 was a busy time for food activists in the state of Vermont, as the Vermont Right to Know GMOs coalition engaged in protest actions and rallied thousands of Vermonters against GMOs. The Vermont Right to Know GMOs coalition is a cooperative project of three major statewide advocacy groups—Rural Vermont, NOFA-VT (Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont), and VPIRG (Vermont Public Interest Research Group). It collaborated on a number of claims-making tactics designed to give Vermonters access to information about GMOs by requiring the labeling of genetically engineered food products sold at retail outlets in the state of Vermont.

The core messages in the Vermont Right to Know GMOs campaign—the right to know what is in one’s food, the ability to make informed choices, and the ability to choose whether or not to buy genetically engineered food—echoed concerns expressed on the streets of Rio de Janeiro,

Brazil, that same spring, as peasants, small farmers, Indigenous peoples, migrants, consumer and food activists converged on the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. Dubbed “the third Earth Summit” following previous global meetings in Stockholm in 1972 and Rio in 1992, this massive world gathering of tens of thousands of activists mobilized to oppose the “commodification of life” and to challenge the official governmental summit to consider alternatives to the economic global agricultural model. What arguably tied these two mobilization campaigns together was a process of “global framing” through the concept of “food sovereignty,” and a vision of a decentralized food system that meets the needs of local communities, supports local farmers, and sustains the working landscape.

Global framing, while considered the most domestic of transnational political processes, involves the manipulation of meanings, ideas, and interpretations at different scales, from the local and the national to the global. Specifically, global framing involves the use of internationally recognized symbols and meanings to shape local or national claims-making—when international symbols frame domestic conflicts (Tarrow 2005, 32)—as local activists consciously connect to and borrow from globally recognized messages in campaigns. Activists engage in framing processes to create simple, easy-to-understand messages or meanings, frequently highlighting the injustice of a particular context or policy, in the hopes of attracting a greater number of participants to their cause. A collective-action frame contains the meanings or messages activists use to “dignify claims, connect them to others, and help to produce a collective identity” (Tarrow 2011, 144). Frames help to “underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable” (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). Global framing, then, connects local and global concerns in a process of dignifying claims as oftentimes marginalized groups find their concerns legitimized by connecting them to much more widely publicized global actions and campaigns.

Global framing around the concept of food sovereignty illustrates how local grievances about food access, safety, production, and distribution in the small state of Vermont have become increasingly intertwined with more widespread concern and global opposition to the political economy

effects of market orthodoxy that have especially shaped global agricultural policies over the past two decades. Vermont has a well-recognized history as an independent-minded, countercultural, grassroots-oriented state whose citizens for centuries have emphasized direct democracy, local citizenship, and small-scale frugality (Ayres and Bosia 2011). In more recent years, Vermont's "back-to-nature" political and cultural traditions have created a social infrastructure ideal for nurturing the development of a grassroots rebellion in defense of the place of food, as it has become a state that has been in the vanguard of local actions that Starr and Adams (2003) describe as antiglobalization claims-making. Farmers' markets, urban gardening projects, farm-to-plate restaurants, community bartering, food cooperatives, and local currencies flourish in Vermont—localized actions that reflect a preference for local empowerment over how food is grown, sold, and distributed, as well as a small-scale reaction against perceived threats to Vermont's unique traditions from global economic forces. As Patel (2009) has argued, at its most basic, food sovereignty is a radical egalitarian call for social change, is concerned with a palpable inequality in power, and operates through global framing processes. Vermont food activists appropriate the food sovereignty message as a means of "challenging deep inequalities of power" at the "core of food sovereignty" (Patel 2009, 670).

Accordingly, the conceptualization of food sovereignty advanced nearly two decades ago by the international peasants' movement *La Vía Campesina*—created in 1993 by farmers from Latin America, North America, Asia, and Europe—underscores this concern with democratic empowerment reflected in food-related claims-making across Vermont: "Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture . . . to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant. . . . It promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production" (Rosset 2003).

*La Vía Campesina's* origins overlap with the heyday of economic globalization in the early 1990s. During this period, many academic and political observers had become enthralled with the "end of ideology" thesis, which suggested that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the undermining of its Communist command-economy model marked the

irrefutable triumph of the United States and its capitalist market-orthodox model. La Vía Campesina emerged in reaction to the evolving ideological emphasis on the liberalization of trade and investment, deregulation and privatization, tax cuts, and the elimination of social programs embodied in various free trade agreements and institutions of regional or global economic governance, such as NAFTA, the IMF, and World Bank, the EU and the WTO (Desmarais 2007). La Vía Campesina evolved from its founding in 1993 in Belgium through a strong sense of unity between the challenges experienced by farmers in both the developing South and industrialized North. Reitan (2007, 152) argues that through transnational scale shift, La Vía Campesina spread globally, remaining strongly rooted in local places but networking from local to national to global, developing a strong presence amongst small-scale farmers' organizations, Indigenous peoples, and peasants from Brazil to India to France. The symbolic "glue" that connected La Vía Campesina at different scales is the concept of food sovereignty, which by the end of the 1990s had become a master collective-action frame providing groups at different scales and in different locales and national settings with an alternative to economic globalization.

To better understand how the meanings of food sovereignty have been shared through global framing, it is important to appreciate how the idea of "sovereignty" has been juxtaposed against the perceived local and national impacts of economic globalization. The conceptualization of sovereignty developed by La Vía Campesina clearly taps into the widespread concern about the implications of economic globalization for democracy. Moghadam's discussion of democratic deficits is helpful for understanding how the call for food sovereignty has become a global collective-action frame shared at different scales—and clearly appropriated by food activists in Vermont—for expressing and underscoring meanings associated with a sense of both the material injustice associated with economic globalization policies and the narrow political limitations of democracy in this era as a result of four factors:

- 1) displacement of decision-making from the local or national domain;

- 2) huge income inequalities and the concentration of wealth among an ever-smaller proportion of the population;
- 3) the capture of government by the business sector and other moneyed concerns; and
- 4) the tendency of some democratic transitions to marginalize women and minorities. (2013, 75)

Similar to activists around the world, Vermont food activists are attempting to reclaim the space for democratic action that they perceive has been eroded through the forces of globalization and the increased power of unaccountable, unelected transnational actors like multinational corporations.

The ongoing “Vermonters Feeding Vermonters” local food sovereignty campaign clearly illustrates how food sovereignty has been appropriated to shape contentious claims-making around food across the state, once again drawing upon Vermont’s long tradition of embracing localism as a countervailing force against wider national or global political and economic pressures. The statewide social and economic advocacy group Rural Vermont has led the local food sovereignty campaign over the past two years, collaborating with the Vermont Coalition for Food Sovereignty as well as farmers, engaged citizens, grassroots organizations such as the Brattleboro, Vermont–area Post Oil Solutions, to encourage towns across the state to pass resolutions in support of food sovereignty (Russell 2012). During Town Meeting Day in March 2012—Vermont’s still-vibrant practice of local citizen-led direct democracy in the classic New England town hall tradition—Rural Vermont successfully organized eight communities to pass local food sovereignty resolutions to support Vermont’s community-based food systems. Encouraging towns across the state to embrace local food systems, the resolutions (some tailored to the particular concerns of each town) proclaimed that “these diverse communities all support the vision of a local food system that meets the needs of our community, supports our farmers, and sustains our lands” (Rural Vermont 2012).

While Rural Vermont is not formally a member of La Vía Campesina, it is a member of the National Family Farm Coalition, which is part of La

Vía Campesina. It works “through collaborative efforts locally, statewide, and nationally to ensure that policies made will strengthen family farms, sustain rural communities, and promote local food sovereignty” (Rural Vermont 2018).

Global framing is clearly at work here. Processes of transnational attribution (Reitan 2007, 19) are connecting Rural Vermont’s efforts around local food sovereignty initiatives in the small state of Vermont with similar themes of local empowerment, family and community farming, and environmental sustainability on display during the mass mobilizations around food sovereignty and the People’s Summit at the Rio UN+20 conference (Global Justice Ecology Project 2012). Farmer Peter Harvey, a resident of Calais, one of the Vermont towns that passed a resolution in support of food sovereignty in 2012, stated that

Food Sovereignty is about taking back our basic rights to be able to choose what we eat in a country and state that increasingly is forcing us to eat industrially manufactured food. Food Sovereignty is about allowing people to eat food that their neighbors grow, produce, and share on a small local scale, without the threat of violence from the giant food industry and state government regulators (Rural Vermont 2012).

As farmers in Vermont identify with food sovereignty claims resonating at UN summits, “global thinking” is occurring—what Tarrow (2005, 68) identifies as the global framing process by which global symbols and meanings enter domestic political struggles. To be sure, global framing around food sovereignty in Vermont has not created formal and sustained collaborative cross-border networks between Vermont farmers and farmers in other countries. Yet, in local food sovereignty campaigns in Vermont we can see how local activists cognitively link to symbols, meanings, and ideas that resonate globally through different scales in diverse local, national, and global food sovereignty campaigns. As such, they are participating in processes of transnational contention that link, at least symbolically and ideationally, activists from remote corners of the world.

## *The Limits of Transnational Diffusion in North American Trade Politics*

Another typical form of transnational protest identified by Tarrow (2005) takes the form of “diffusion,” which involves the spread of similar claims and protest tactics across international borders. Transnational diffusion may unfold as relational diffusion, involving the transfer of claims, tactics, and information through networks of trust and preexisting social ties, or through non-relational diffusion, characterized by the spread of information through mass media and electronic communications. Transnational diffusion contrasts, then, with the previous category of “framing,” which again occurs solely on domestic territory (in our previous case in Vermont) and involves the manipulation of globally recognized meanings and symbols to shape specifically domestic conflicts. Transnational diffusion can be seen in the decades of resistance to economic globalization in the form of trade agreements among North American partners. Social activists in Canada, the United States, and Mexico have collaborated and interacted dynamically over time and adopted similar claims, forms of analysis, and repertoires of contention in their opposition to these agreements. A historical overview of the evolution of North American contentious politics reveals two key points: 1) there has been some direct trinational cooperation illustrating clearly relational diffusion at different phases among activists in the three countries, although this cooperation has been limited and sporadic, and has never been sufficiently institutionalized to be termed a transnational social movement; and 2) North American contentious politics has been cyclical in character, with clear highs and lows in protest activity. Moreover, this narrative also reveals how state-level strategies and the limited form of regional integration adopted across the continent has constrained the potential for deeper and more sustained forms of transnational collaboration.

The first phase of contentious protest activity in response to international trade agreements in North America was national rather than transnational in character, but was a clear precursor to what we have described as the second cycle of transnational protest activity that focused heavily on opposition to trade agreements. The decision by the Canadian and US governments to negotiate a Canada–US Free Trade Agreement

(CUSFTA), beginning in May 1986, launched an unprecedented level of social movement organizing in Canada in opposition to the agreement. Two main coalitions emerged, one based in Quebec, the Réseau Québécois sur l'Intégration Continentale, and the other based in English Canada (first called the Pro-Canada Network and later the Action Canada Network, or ACN). These coalitions brought together a diverse group of actors who had previously had only limited contact with each other—labor movements (traditional opponents of free trade), nationalist organizations (the Council of Canadians), environmentalist groups, churches, farmers' organizations, women's organizations, and a wide range of other actors representing a diverse cross section of Canadian society and cultural elites.

As well, two political parties, the centrist Liberals and the center-left New Democratic Party, opposed the agreement, which did find strong support in the big business community as well as the governing Progressive Conservative Party (Ayres 1998). Because of the unprecedented diversity of the anti-free-trade coalitions, these groups had to develop new forms of thinking about globalization (not a word in common use in this period), and the ways in which trade politics (formerly perceived as a relatively technical and apolitical topic) had broad and menacing implications for such diverse issues as women's rights, social policy, the environment, and cultural identity, as well as more traditional topics such as employment (Macdonald 2005). The Canadian activists thus pioneered new forms of analysis of the disruptive impact of economic globalization and new techniques of protest and dissent.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the victory of the Progressive Conservative Party under Brian Mulroney in the so-called "free-trade election" of 1988 ensured the deal's passage, despite opposition from the other two political parties and a wide range of Canadian civil society.

This protest activity did not, however, "go global" or even binational in this phase because of the low level of concern among the American public about Canada and the asymmetric levels of dependence between Canada and the United States. A 1988 poll showed that 90 percent of Canadians had an opinion on the CUSFTA, while only 39 percent of Americans interviewed were aware of the agreement (Thompson and Randall 1997, 286–7). According to John Foster, a leading figure in Canadian transnational activities, Canadian activists "found it difficult to identify friends" in Washington since their concerns about issues such as cultural



sovereignty, control over water and resources, and regional investment “were not an easily understood language inside the Beltway” (2005, 210).

This relative inattention to trade politics among American civil society shifted rapidly and dramatically, however, when the US, Canadian, and Mexican governments decided to negotiate a North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992. Both US and Mexican civil society mobilized rapidly in opposition to the agreement, with substantial transnational diffusion occurring in the form of shared tactics and claims-making against NAFTA. Canadian activists, who predicted that NAFTA would occur, had begun reaching out to Mexican civil-society groups in the late 1980s, and they had participated in a forum in Mexico City in 1990. A few months later, the Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio (RMALC) coalition was formed. There were contacts and communications between Mexican and Canadian activists that had worked in the Action Canada Network—with RMALC activists directly crediting that group’s coalition-building style as a model for their own unfolding work in Mexico. Shortly after the formation of RMALC, more contacts ensued between North American groups as Canadian activists met with their US counterparts in Washington (Foster 2005, 153).

After 1990, trinational linkages flourished among the Canadians, Mexicans, and two US-based coalitions, the Citizens’ Trade Campaign (which spearheaded the legislative campaign against NAFTA and the fast track authority), and the Alliance for Responsible Trade, which had a longer-term focus and mobilized at the grassroots level throughout the United States (Macdonald 2005, 30). The important role of Congress in trade decisions and the more permeable nature of the political opportunity structure in the United States created greater openings for civil-society participation than the more centralized form of decision-making in Canada under a majority government, and certainly Mexico’s still authoritarian political context. This situation created incentives for transnational alliances, since Canadian and Mexican movements could attempt to block the agreement by cooperating with their US allies in order to influence Congress. Throughout this period, civil-society participants from the three countries developed a shared analysis of the problems created by the free trade deal for the majority of the citizens of the three countries, and they adopted similar tactics accordingly.

This intense period of joint lobbying, advocacy, and protest led to the emergence of a process in the United States and Mexico that the Canadians had pioneered: the linking of trade issues to a wide range of social issues, such as the environment, women's issues, poverty, and social development, as well as the traditional concerns of trade unions and farmers' organizations. This trilateral activity also had some impact on the domestic orientation of Canadian and US social movements, as groups from the North, especially trade unions, were challenged by their Mexican counterparts to reexamine their traditional nationalist and at times xenophobic attitudes. Although some important differences remained in the analyses of the three countries' anti-free-trade coalitions, movement participants developed a series of trilateral statements and documents that presented critical analysis of the assumptions underlying regionalization, pushed for greater transparency in the negotiation of the deal, and developed alternative policies based on concern for equity, environment, labor rights, and social justice. Even in this phase of transnational cooperation—which illustrated significant relational diffusion between activists and groups increasingly collaborating with each other to protest NAFTA—linkages between actors in the three countries still remained relatively informal. According to Foster, the key links between the diverse civil-society actors represented by the national coalitions “were often working groups representing or reporting to larger coalitions. The working groups met quite frequently and developed intense working relationships with their counterparts in each country, while national coalitions met much less frequently and developed less collaborative and more general positions” (2005, 210). As a result, Tarrow's (2005) concept of “transnational diffusion” of protest activities is a more appropriate category for understanding trilateral social movement activity in North America than notions that expect higher levels of coordination and organizational development.

The trilateral coalition eventually failed to block the signing of NAFTA, although US president Bill Clinton did include novel trade and environment side accords in order to appease opposition within his own party and in civil society more broadly. This phase of trilateral opposition against NAFTA marked the high tide in relations among civil-society actors in the three countries during what we have called the second phase of mobilization and protest against economic globalization. Not

surprisingly, this high level of activity and cooperation across borders abated somewhat after the signing of the agreement. In particular, the sparse institutional framework established by NAFTA (in comparison with the EU or even APEC or Mercosur) created a political opportunity structure remarkably impervious to civil-society interventions (Ayres and Macdonald 2009; 2012a). In this context, the North American region was shaped more by “double bilateralism” than by strong trilateral linkages (Golob 2012). The advance of the free trade agenda in the form of the FTAA initiative created new opportunities for transnational cooperation and continued diffusion of claims against free trade policies. North American civil-society actors became leading players in the construction of the Hemispheric Social Alliance (Foster 2005), a transnational alliance dedicated to derailing the agreement that would have created a free trade zone including all of the nations of the Americas excluding Cuba. This alliance continued to use tactics developed in the North American context, including demands for the release of negotiating texts and the development of alternative proposals to free trade deals. This time, civil-society actors, combined with New Left governments emerging in South America (particularly Brazil and Argentina), successfully opposed the signing of the FTAA.

At the same time, the previously supportive context for civil-society cooperation after the fights against NAFTA and the FTAA has declined in the current phase of economic globalization in the North American region. After 9/11, North American governments attempted to achieve higher levels of regulatory harmonization and security cooperation in the form of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP). The SPP was, if anything, less transparent and open to civil-society participation than NAFTA, since governments were explicitly attempting to bypass the popular debate and legislative review that had threatened the ratification of NAFTA by working through trilateral committees of government officials (see Ayres and Macdonald 2012a). After the SPP initiative disappeared in 2010 with the election of President Obama, Canadian and US officials have pursued the same goals—but without Mexico—in the form of a security perimeter that would embrace Canada and the United States. The logic of double bilateralism has thus come to limit the political opportunity structure for joint tactics across the three countries,

and the United States' customary disinterest in Canada has resulted in little transnational cooperation in response to the security perimeter (Ayres and Macdonald 2012a). Initially, in the case of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), all three countries joined in talks, which led to some joint activity and diffusion of protest tactics. However, the election of US president Donald Trump, his use of populist and nationalist anti-trade and anti-Mexico rhetoric, and his January 2017 executive action formally withdrawing the United States from the TPP, has only reaffirmed double bilateralism. During the talks over the renegotiation of NAFTA, which culminated in the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), civil-society groups in each country attempted to influence the process, but there were no sustained trilateral linkages. In truth, the links between civil-society actors have largely faded almost twenty years after the implementation of NAFTA.

Overall, the history of transnational contentious politics against free trade highlights several key aspects of our argument. First, we see in this narrative the rise and fall of protest activity over time, with organizing peaking during the second phase of economic globalization and declining during the current, more diffuse and complex phase of economic globalization. Thus, it highlights the highly conjunctural nature of mobilization, as well as movements' tendencies to wax and wane over time unless faced with highly favorable conditions. Secondly, this contentious political behavior conforms strongly to Tarrow's (2005) concept of transnational diffusion. The protest campaigns and activist groups based in the three countries shared ideas, tactics, and knowledge over time, but the actual coordination of protests was minimal, and institutionalization was nearly nonexistent. Ultimately, the low level of institutionalization of both NAFTA and the trilateral coalitions opposed to it arguably contributed to the eventual decline of trilateral activism.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sketched out the complex and often messy and incomplete character of transnational protest activities in the modern era. Economic globalization has resulted neither in the "politicization" or "depoliticization" of protest activities. Neither has protest inexorably spread to take on

purely global characteristics or definitively retrenched to local or national terrains. Instead, as we have described, protest activities have tended to be cyclical in character, with phases of ebb and flow. During the most recent phase of the long cycle of protest against economic globalization, durable, sustained, and coordinated actions across national boundaries have been rare, despite the hopes of earlier authors writing about the transnationalization of protest. Instead, as we have described in our two case studies of advocacy around food sovereignty and against North American free trade, activists have learned to draw upon frames, discourses, and strategies developed elsewhere, and have adopted them in response to local realities. Activists thus constantly engage in “scale-jumping,” making strategic use of transnational methods rather than abandoning the local and the national in the pursuit of global dreams. This tendency may in part reflect the paucity of political opportunities available at the transnational level, as we see in the case of advocacy against free trade, but it also points to the tenaciously local and place-based nature of many aspects of the contemporary struggles against economic globalization, as the case of food sovereignty politics makes clear.

Finally, this discussion clearly has relevance for the larger questions raised in this book about the relationships between democracy, protest, and globalization. Economic globalization is commonly seen as raising thorny issues for democracy because it involves the transfer of authority away from at least potentially accountable and democratic actors, such as states, to transnational bodies that are unelected, nontransparent, and that lack mechanisms for democratic participation. While optimistic accounts might suggest that the transnationalization of protest is a viable response to the transfer of political authority to these institutions of global governance in this era, our discussion highlights some of the problems with this approach. The inherently cyclical, transitory, and geographically uneven character of transnational protest described in this chapter means that the potential for these protests to make a strong contribution to global democratization is quite limited. In fact, the current global backlash against economic globalization, illustrated in the 2016 British vote to leave the European Union, the election of US president Donald Trump, and the rise of antiimmigrant and xenophobic attitudes across the United States and Europe seems to portend more broadly a spreading antidemocratic

trend. While democratic struggles are inevitably multiscalar and can benefit from transnational processes of framing and diffusion, much of the work of democratic struggle remains stubbornly local and/or national in character.

## NOTES

- 1 In the interest of consistency with this volume, we use “economic globalization” throughout this chapter to refer to the economic trends, policies, and institutions we have traditionally referred to as “neoliberal.”
- 2 Note that while Canadians and Americans were launching a free trade agreement, Mexicans were engaged in diverse and widespread forms of domestic social protest against the harsh impacts of structural adjustment policies that had been adopted by the Mexican government as part of its agreement with the International Monetary Fund following the country’s 1982 debt crisis.

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