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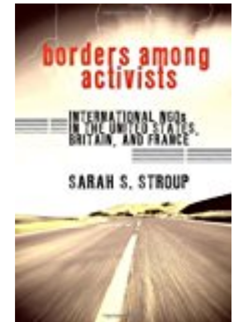
Sarah S. Stroup. *Borders among Activists: International NGOs in the United States, Britain, and France.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. x + 246 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5073-0.



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Sarah S. Stroup explores how national differences divide activists in the United States, Great Britain, and France. Based on six main and twenty "mini-case" studies, Stroup offers an accessible argument explaining how national context produces very different forms of "charity," a term she defines as "organizations that are both nonprofit and aim to serve some public benefit" (p. 11). Her assertion is framed as a challenge to arguments claiming the rise of a "global civil society" and a transformation of world politics by transnational advocacy networks.[1] But the core contribution of the book is not to challenge this earlier wishful thinking, but to carefully explain how and why different nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have developed "varieties of activism," which has caused substantial divergence of approaches among NGOs and has undercut effective collaboration at the global level. These varieties of activism are expressed in unique patterns of fundraising, management, and advocacy, including issue selection and relationships with governments. The book appeals to academics and scholars alike and shows that the field of NGO studies in international relations (IR) has rapidly evolved over the past fifteen years.

One can expect from a book based on dissertation work a carefully developed research design as well as a strong and transparent evidence base. On both counts, the study delivers. The introduction begins by reviewing the case for the convergence of transnational activism. Stroup cites scholars who argue that international NGOs share values of human rights and environmental protection and typically address similar problems, such as poverty or gender inequality. Here, one important factor that Stroup could have added is the role of individuals and the diffusion of ideas driven by the movement of personnel especially at top levels. One of her interviewees, Peter Bell, pushed CARE USA toward more advocacy during his tenure as president from 1995 to 2005. Tracking such individuals may offer a stronger case for the convergence idea than broader claims focused on globalization or shared principles.

Following her account of the convergence thesis, Stroup carefully builds her challenge based on existing scholarship, and argues for the importance of national origins in sustaining divergence and undermining transnational collaboration for common causes. She states that the "relative infrequency of successful transnational campaigns" is a result of "disconnected," not "dysfunctional" NGOs (p. 16). The rest of the introduction and chapter 1 define the national context shaping NGO behavior and explain the organizations she chose to study. The six main case studies are CARE USA and Human Rights Watch (HRW) for the United States, Oxfam and Amnesty International (AI) for Great Britain, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and La Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme (FIDH) for France. Additional evidence is drawn from chapters of each of these organizations based in the other nations (e.g., AI USA and CARE France) as well as twelve other national organizations.

Drawing on social movement studies and sociological institutionalism, her work focuses on four factors: the regulatory framework (e.g., nonprofit laws); variation in political opportunities (e.g., access to government officials); the availability of resources; and the nature of domestic social networks. Chapter 1 elaborates on each and provides a brief overview of the three different national environments. While the regulatory environment is well defined by its focus on how laws encourage or restrict political activities and donations (table 2, p. 70), the others are less clear and the logic of their effects on activism remains more ambiguous. For example, the "social networks" factor focuses mostly on organizational ties and does not identify clear-cut differences that lend themselves to establishing diverging predictions across contexts. The comparative strength of this approach lies in avoiding a reduction of these domestic factors to mere "variables" that lose meaning in efforts to establish suitable indicators and measurements. Instead, Stroup uses her interview evidence in the subsequent chapters to effectively elaborate on how the four factors drive and sustain different world views.

The main empirical evidence is presented in the two middle chapters, first discussing the case of humanitarian NGOs (chapter 2) and next moving to human rights NGOs (chapter 3). Each chapter draws on general information available about each organization (e.g., budget, program activities, etc.) and semi-structured interviews conducted mainly with NGO staff, the majority of whom remain anonymous. What is most compelling is that the book describes how cultural context shapes organizational identities. In the United States, pragmatism and professionalism dominate and contentious advocacy is of limited appeal. U.S.-based NGOs are shaped by a culture of individualism that mistrusts government. In contrast, French NGOs project a more communitarian view that links them as "principled protesters" in a love-hate relationship to the state (p. 191). While French NGOs are outspoken, their advocacy practices reflect a peculiar national understanding of state-society relations.

The post-Cold War period offers some important examples supporting Stroup's case for taking seriously the domestic, but also highlights some of the challenges in showing the power of national origins. While the case for paying greater attention to cultural context is compelling, it is frequently overstated and some opportunities to explore interaction with other sources of NGO behavior remain unexplored. Outside of the field of IR, the idea that NGOs reproduce cultural traits of their home nations is more widely shared simply because nonprofit studies or related fields have focused for a long time on the internal dynamics of these groups.

One of the challenges to the importance of national origins emerges when looking at the evolution of NGO responses to consecutive humanitarian crises since the Biafra war in the late 1960s. MSF was founded in 1971 by doctors unsatisfied with the typical approach taken by humanitarian

NGOs. Public and internal debates about how to most effectively protect human dignity intensified during the 1980s and following the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The fundamental conflict emerging was between those calling for a return to traditional humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality, and those arguing that these principles were increasingly counterproductive and contributed to human suffering, for example, by providing aid to groups responsible for atrocities.[2] These differences point beyond the national level because they account both for the frequent occurrence of splits within NGOs and supranational debates about how to best respond to threats against human dignity.[3] The most important recent case leading to debates beyond national differences was the 2009 indictment of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court (ICC). This has created significant tensions between human rights groups hailing a victory for global justice and humanitarian groups lamenting their expulsion from the Darfur region and an end to the life-saving aid they provided. The ICC is an example of effective global campaigning by an international coalition, but also a good case highlighting differences within the NGO world that focus on what is the most appropriate response to atrocities.

Two broader questions follow from the argument that the behavior of NGOs is more complex than Stroup's account. First, the bulk of her empirical evidence shows national differences, while the two main empirical chapters never get far enough to actually show how these differences undermine transnational collaboration. Without examples of failed or weak campaigns, the claim that domestic differences necessarily undermine transnational activism remains unsupported. We learn plenty about how NGOs are fundamentally different, but not much about how these differences translate into noncooperation. The final chapter offers a short case study focused on Iraq, spelling out some of the policy differences among NGOs, but even here the evidence describes different views, not diverging actions.

Second, differences between advocacy and service delivery organizations create variation that rival the importance of Stroup's argument. Transnational campaigning focused on "naming and shaming" is most important in the human rights area where strength is in numbers and the goal is to maximize media exposure. This is not the case in the humanitarian field. Here, NGOs are much less likely to campaign at all because they primarily focus on the fast and efficient delivery of emergency aid in response to a disaster. For Stroup to find very little evidence for collaboration among humanitarians is thus less surprising and interesting than a similar result in the human rights sector. What undercuts humanitarian collaboration is not so much the absence of isomorphic pressures based on competition for the same funding sources, but the need to deliver distinct services and occupy a niche defined by what they deliver, not where they come from.

Similarly, in the human rights sector, "slow and thorough deliberation" on the part of AI is certainly one reason why the organization often declines to collaborate with other groups (p. 166). However, this feature of their research is neither particularly British nor is it a major factor in explaining noncooperation. Instead, looking beyond the domestic realm points again at competition at the global level: good information about human rights abuses is a resource that AI and HRW compete for by recruiting researchers and domestic activists. For example, HRW scored a major victory against AI when it released the first major, 432-page report on human rights abuses in Kenya after the end of the Cold War (***Kenya: Taking Liberties. An Africa Watch Report*** [1991]). These NGOs are in important ways conditioned or constrained by the transnational encounters they create and sustain.

One key indicator of divergence for Stroup is the contrast between contentious and collabora-

tive approaches taken by different NGOs. Chapter 4 explains how CARE USA opted for working with the U.S. government on humanitarian issues in Iraq, while European NGOs remained antagonistic to the U.S. government. For HRW, Stroup concludes first that the organization came out against the war in early 2004 and later states that it "did not go so far as to condemn the war" (p. 200). Are fundraising patterns or regulatory environment really all that relevant to explain much of the difficulties NGOs had in defining their responses? Some may argue that a more compelling account would address the atrocities committed by the Iraqi regime and diverging perceptions about prior experiences with humanitarian interventions.

Stroup is careful to acknowledge throughout the book possible objections and limitations to her study. She rejects any deterministic view on the power of the domestic context and explains why she did not choose younger organizations or why she did not look at organizational change over time (appendix A). The last point is certainly the more compelling one since all major NGOs included here have undergone significant growth and change over the decades. The better argument may be not to claim continuity, but to point out that the jury is still out on the effects of many of those changes. Some may actually strengthen the role of the national context, including the recent widespread efforts by many federated organizations to turn their country offices in the Global South into full-fledged members (examples include Plan International, Save the Children, and Amnesty's current regionalization strategy).

A final thought moves beyond the relative importance of domestic versus international factors and asks: is divergence really such a bad thing? First, social movement scholars have for some time pointed to the efficacy of "insider-outsider" coalitions. Following this logic, a "single set of universal best practices" and "convergence upon a single model of relief and development" may be ineffective (pp. 15, 131). Instead, contentious and noncontentious strategies complement each other and make NGOs as a global actor more effective, even in the absence of significant coordination among them. Second, many of the problems NGOs take on are complex and have no obvious solutions. If we knew how to deal with climate change or persistent poverty, then the solutions would already be widely implemented. But without an obvious answer to these challenges, there are no "best practices" and a strategy of convergence is suboptimal.

Take, for example, the recent proliferation of rights-based approaches (RBA) among development NGOs. RBA represents a case of rhetorical convergence across two formerly separate sectors of international activism (human rights and development). Within the development sector, the adoption of RBA has led to clear patterns of divergence, some of which are driven by national context. In the United States, CARE embraced RBA early on, while Worldvision, which is the U.S. section of Save the Children, refuses or is very reluctant to adopt the rights language. Stroup's argument can account for this divergence. But what may matter most is how divergence in the implementation of RBA creates new opportunities for complementary strategies, including some NGOs focusing more attention on national advocacy (Oxfam) while others working more systematically with civil society groups below the national level (ActionAid). And this does not even take into account that younger and less well-established groups are likely to experiment with very different models of activism. By studying examples of the largest groups, Stroup not only may have ironically put too much faith into sameness, but may also have missed out on the diversity emerging among smaller and newer groups that will shape the sector in the future.

Borders among Activists makes a compelling case for taking seriously national differences among NGOs. While it does not show that transnational organizing is systematically undercut by

domestic factors, the book does set a new standard in a field still dominated by single case studies of NGOs or campaigns. Stroup's comparative study of two dozen cases establishes a new level of research quality for anyone interested in explaining the behavior of major NGOs. Factors other than domestic structural conditions certainly matter, but any future research will have to take off from this study and wrestle with its conclusions.

Notes

[1]. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, ***Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Ann M. Florini, ***The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*** (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Change and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

[2]. Paul O'Brien, "Politicized Humanitarianism: A Response to Nicolas de Torrente," ***Harvard Human Rights Journal*** 17, no. 1 (2004): 31-40.

[3]. For example, Bernard Kouchner, cofounder of MSF, left the organization in 1979 in protest against efforts to expand its mission. Rakyia Omaar left Human Rights Watch in 1992 and founded African Rights (together with Alex de Wall) to protest HRW's support for humanitarian intervention in Somalia.

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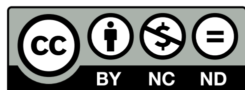

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