RESEARCH DESIGN

THE SPECTRE OF “GLOBALISM”—NEW STRATEGIES OF TRANSNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTALISM TO FACE POPULIST AUTOCRATS. THE CASES OF BRAZIL (2018-…) AND ECUADOR (2007-2017)

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ABSTRACT

In the third wave of autocratization, populist autocrats have chosen transnational advocacy networks as preferential enemies. They use the word “globalism” to describe social movements -- like human rights and environmental -- and also the epistemic communities related to them. In this project, I will conduct two case studies to investigate how transnational environmentalism is reshaping its strategies to face the new challenge.

This work draws on two sets of literature. Modern theories about autocratization show how new populist autocrats destroy democracy slowly. Part of their new strategies is to choose enemies of the “people” and fight civil society movements and their epistemic community (LUHRMANN AND LINDBERG 2019; MÜLLER 2017; MOUNK 2018). In the last twenty years, theorization about transnational advocacy networks has analyzed their tactics and strategies of mobilization. Studies about the struggle between transnational advocacy networks and populist autocrats have only started recently – but they are predominantly focused on the area of human rights (RODRÍGUEZ-GARAVITO AND GÓMEZ 2018).

This work, instead, offers a contribution in the area of the environment. By performing a structured comparison of two cases – Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil and Rafael Correa’s Ecuador– I will map changes in transnational environmentalist movements (ALEXANDER AND BENNETT 2005). I chose the Brazilian and Ecuadorian cases because it will be possible to describe the phenomenon in two different contexts – countries ruled respectively by right-wing and left-wing governments. If the changes are similar to those occurred in human rights movements (RODRÍGUEZ-GARAVITO AND GÓMEZ 2018), they would achieve at least two of the four main areas of policies described by theory (KECK AND SIKKING 1999): communication – with a huge participation of the epistemic community – and leverage, with an expansion of the range of alliances (KECK AND SIKKING 1999). And perhaps the other two: accountability and creation of symbols. The research intends to explain, also, why some areas change while others didn’t.

STATE OF ART

In their classic book “Activists beyond borders”, inception of a new perspective about social movements, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikking give a definition of transnational advocacy networks: “World politics at the end of twentieth century involves, alongside states, many non-state actors that interact with each other, with states, and with international organizations. These interactions are structured in terms of networks, and transnational networks are increasingly visible in international politics. Some involve economic actors and firms. Some are networks of scientists and experts whose professional ties and shared causal ideas underpin their efforts to influence policy. Others are networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation. We will call these transnational advocacy networks” (KECK AND SIKKING 1999).

There is a fascinating dialogue between the definition of transnational advocacy network and the classic concept of civil society developed by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Gramsci considered that civil society was more than “infrastructure” – organizations grown inside the economic battle, like unions, associations of entrepreneurs and liberal professionals. In his view, the “superstructure” – the epistemic community, with the university and the press – also played a very important role (BOBBIO 1999; DE LIMA 2018). Keck and Sikking write about “economic actors and firms” and “networks of scientists and experts”. Indeed, it is possible to understand the transnational advocacy networks concept as the classic concept of civil society adapted – and enlarged – to the landscape of the globalized world of the early 21st century. The “superstructure” of civil society is also related to the concept of public sphere according in the Habermasian conception (HABERMAS 2014).

The political participation of civil society has been considered an index of quality of democracy. “Democratic quality is high when we in fact observe extensive citizen participation not only through voting, but in the life of political parties and civil society organizations, in the discussing of public policy issues, in communication with and demanding accountability from elected representatives, in monitoring official conduct, and in direct engagement with public issues at local level”, (DIAMOND AND MORLINO 2004). The authors summarize the political participation in five verbs: to vote, to organize, to assemble, to protest, to lobby for interests. Four out of these five are related to actions of civil society between electoral periods, increasingly vibrant in western democracies (PATEMAN 1970; EDWARDS 2020).

This vision echoes the concept of polyarchy:

“Not only universal suffrage, but equality of opportunity of access to influence over decision makers through inter-electoral process by which different groups in the electorate make other demands heard” (DAHL 1956). The idea of polyarchy is precisely the foundation of the work of the institute V-Dem, according to the director Staffan Lindberg (DE LIMA 2021). The V-Dem publishes once a year is the most quoted democracy ranking in academic studies. In their reports, V-Dem goes beyond the classic dimensions of democracy – electoral and liberal – and consider also the dimensions participative (related to civil society) and deliberative (related to public debate). There is a complete alignment with Robert Dahl’s vision: “Por el contrario, es su visión diacrónica (hacia el passado pero también hacia el futuro) la que le permiten construir los modelos de cambio de regímen más utilizados por los estudiosos de las transciones democraticas, aplicando apenas dos variables: el grado de debate público (tambíen llamado de liberalización, oposición o competencia) y el nível de participación (movilización ciudadana, ampliación de la arena politica o representación).” (LEIRAS E MALAMUD 1994).

In a paper published in 2019, Anna Luhrmann and Staffan Lindberg, from the board of the institute V-Dem at the time, considered that “gradual declines of democratic regime attributes characterize contemporary autocratization”. In the paper, using V-Dem data, “we demonstrate that a third wave of autocratization is indeed unfolding. It mainly affects democracies with gradual setbacks under a legal façade” (LUHRMANN AND STAFFAN 2019).

By examining the autocratization processes in different countries, the institute V-Dem found some patterns (V-DEM 2021). Populists normally start the autocratization process attacking the epistemic community – the university and the press. Choosing an enemy is a classic procedure in the playbook of populists, who in general divide the inhabitants of a country in “people” and “the elite” – with epistemic community invariable being part of “the elite” (MOUNK 2018 and MULLER 2016). Some supporters and ideologues of populist autocrats use the word “globalism” to define the transnational epistemic community (STACK 2016). It is part of the assault on democracy: “In addition to be anti-elitists, populists are always anti-pluralist” (MULLER 2016). According to him, “for democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal, but also irreducibly diverse citizens” (MULLER 2016).

Most of populist autocrats described in the recent report of V-Dem about autocratization come from the right wing, and consider the transnational advocacy network as a left wing conspiracy. In an insightful essay, sociologist Anthony Giddens pointed that, after the fall of Berlin Wall, the neoliberalism occupied the role of communist revolution as the biggest disruptive force of the political world. The conservatism, in the right wing, and the social-democracy and identitarism, in the left wing, became the alternatives to neoliberalism in this landscape (GIDDENS 1994). Maybe transnational advocacy networks descend from what Giddens called “identitarism” – the former revolutionary left wing that embraced causes like human rights and environmentalism. But even left wing leaders, like Nicolas Maduro and Rafael Correa, used the “othering” strategy against transnational advocacy networks in their populist playbook – a fact that needs to be investigated.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this work is to identify strategies of transnational environmentalist networks when acting in countries ruled by populist autocrats. I will dive deeply in two case studies: the Brazil of President Jair Bolsonaro and the Ecuador of President Rafael Correa.

The two cases seem appropriate because of their similarities – Latin American countries ruled by populist autocrats – and differences – Jair Bolsonaro is right-leaning, and Rafael Correa is left-leaning. There is another difference. In the Ecuadorian case I will reconstitute a whole cycle: the government of Rafael Correa ended in 2017, and after that the evaluation of democratic quality of the country has improved. In the Brazilian case I will observe a real-time process, where one of the most traditional environmentalist movements in the world is learning how to deal with a populist autocrat. During this process, Brazilian democracy has been losing quality, according the V-Dem indexes (V-DEM 2021).

In these two research cases, I intend to describe the fight between populist autocrats and their chosen enemies – the environmentalist movement – in order to bring hypotheses that enrich the theory about transnational advocacy networks, which are facing, nowadays, a new, adverse and challenging context.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The field of this research will be basically composed by elite interviews, understanding elite in a broad sense, as “people and groups that influence strategical decisions that shape living conditions in a society” (HOFFMAN-LANGE 2007). Leaders of environmentalist movements, politicians who interact with them and pundits of epistemic community fit in this scope. According to the scale that goes from “interview” to “questionnaire” (GHIGHLIONE AND MATALINO 1992), I will use the method of semi-directed in-depth interviews. The conversations should be free enough to register new ideas and insights; and simultaneously planned in order to trace, with rigor, the tactics and strategies of the movements along their history -- and how they change when these movements needed to face the new populist autocrats.

Changes are common in the dynamic world of the transnational activism. “Actors do not choose to act solely at the domestic or solely at the regional or global scales, but at various movements in time. They prioritize different sites of action and are constantly adjusting these priorities” (VON BÜLOW 2013). Because of that, part of the interviews will be dedicated to reconstitute the historic way of the transnational environmental networks, avoiding a common mistake in this kind or research:

“The study of transnational movements tends to highlight particular campaigns, which are often short lived. Many analysis capture specific pieces of the framing and coalition formation processes, but fail to examine the fuller dynamics of contention, including lulls, reconstitution, disarticulation, and decline. Fewer still trace contention across scales or through various iterations, or struggle. Social movement theory suffers as a result” (VON BÜLOW 2013).

A first objective of the interviews will be to map which policies each transnational environmentalist network use on a regular basis. My starting point is the classification proposed in the book “Activists beyond borders”: information policies, symbolic policies, leverage policies or accountability policies (KECK AND SIKKING 1999). Information politics: “the ability of quickly and credibly generate politically usable information and move it to where it will have the most impact”; symbolic politics: “the ability to call upon symbols, actions or stories that make sense of a situation for an audience that is frequently far away”; leverage politics: “the ability of call upon powerful actors to affect a situation where weaker members of a network are unlikely to have influence”; and accountability politics: “the effort to hold powerful actors to their previously stated policies or principles” (KECK AND SIKKING, 1999).

Among the tactics of transnational advocacy networks, the boomerang deserves special mention in the interviews. The boomerang consists in “domestic NGOs by-pass(ing) their state and directly search(ing) out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside”, in order to make “international contacts amplify the demands of domestic groups, pry new space for new issues, and then echo back the demands into the domestic space” (KECK AND SIKKING 1999). The boomerang is a classic of environmental movements, especially in the region where our case studies are situated: “This potential concept gained analytic purchase in Latin America, when non – or weak – democratic governments were often unresponsive on the demands of social movements actions” (SPALDING 2015).

It is a classic way of “domestic oriented” transnational activism, according to the typology coined by Sidney Tarrow: “Use of global issue framing to interpret local problems or in the attention that activists give to the role of external pressure as the source of grievances” (TARROW 2005).

These policies and tactics, however, are under pressure in the new context of the rising of populist autocrats. Presidents like Jair Bolsonaro and Rafael Correa posed a new challenge to transnational advocacy networks: “The fact that the new attacks are coming from elected governments, as opposed to the dictatorships from the past, creates a tension between rights and democracy – between the liberal and the democratic components of liberal democracy – that raises the stakes and the difficulty of human rights activism” (RODRÍGUZ-GARAVITO AND GÓMEZ 2018). César Rodríguez-Garavito and Krizna Gómez are the editors of “Rising to the populist change: a new playbook for human rights actors”, a reunion of articles about the new challenges in the area of human rights, and the first answers of the transnational advocacy networks.

Looking at the articles, the editors identify some patterns in the action of populist autocrats against human rights movements:

“Although the list of measures is long and diverse, we posit that in the end they pursue two main goals: to undermine the legitimacy and the efficacy of human rights actors” (RODRÍGUEZ-GARAVITO E GOMEZ 2018). According to populist autocrats, rather than being moved by principles, as in the classic definition (KECK AND SIKKING 1999), the transnational advocacy networks are corrupt and attempt against national sovereignty. As the president of Venezuela Nicolás Maduro pointed, “non-governmental organizations do not exist, just organizations that serve to other governments” (UZCÁTEGUI 2018).

The first answers of transnational advocacy networks, at least in the field of human rights, also follow a pattern, which should be explored in the elite interviews. Most of them are related to the communication process, or to the creation of new alliances, preferable “beyond traditional circles of activism” (TIWANA 2018). In the field of communication, the mantra has been “going beyond the conventional audiences of progressive movements and the liberal media, increasingly attempting to create bridges with other movements and other sectors of society – with the ‘persuadable middle’ that stands between the increasingly polarized factions of contemporary polities” (AMNESTY INTENATIONAL REPORT 2018, APUD RODRÍGUEZ-GARAVITO AND GOMEZ 2018). A good example comes from the activist project “Caravan of Love”, from India, that portrays Muslim families victims of lynching, in order to create empathy and undermine the hate speech of radical Hindus supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (MANDER 2018).

To broaden the arch of alliance is an antidote against the populist argument of the “foreign element” (WOLFF 2018). “There are two complementary avenues for achieving this goal: 1) building a local constituency and strong ties with communities beyond urban centers; and, 2) creating coalitions and alliances with other NGOs as well as other non-NGO social-political actors, such as mass or community-based organizations, civic activists who act more fluidly and sporadically, and political actors” (WOLFF 2019 APUD RODRÍGUEZ-GARAVITO AND GÓMEZ 2019). The alliances will be useful also to obtain financial support, in a context that money transfers from abroad are blocked by most of populist autocrats. A research at Mexico City identified new opportunities of funding – including crowdfunding – for transnational networks that propose a clear “niche of market” (RON ET AL 2018).

My first approach in the Brazilian and Ecuadorian cases suggests that both axis of communication and alliances could be also valid in the environmental area. In Ecuador, the movement Yasunidos used new strategies of communication, going beyond traditional circles of activism, to prepare a mass demonstration against Rafael Correa government (APPE ET AL 2019). The demonstration was against a decision of Ecuadorian president to change environmental policies, in a movement that would affect negatively indigenous people.

In Brazil, according to Ana Toni, one of the leaders of a transnational advocacy network in the country, the opposition against President Jair Bolsonaro’s policies brought new actors to the environmental cause – including important intellectuals and entrepreneurs. The environmental movement in Brazil is also studying the communication strategy of government in order to send its own message more efficiently to Bolsonaro’s traditional supporter groups, in the religious and agribusiness communities. There are important changes in an area – the socio-environmentalism – where Brazil has a huge tradition of activism, a process that started during the years of democratization (TONI, 2021; HOCHSTETLER AND KECK 2007).

These new communication and alliances strategies will be a strong subject in the elite interviews. In the effort to reach broader audiences, new policies of information, symbols and accountability will be required, and new leverage tactics in the alliance building should be developed. Identify them in the field of this research can be useful to enrich the classic Keck and Sikking’s theory – and also useful, maybe, to the action of transnational advocacy networks in real life.

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