

Transnational Networks and Changing Human Rights Norms

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Unexpected Power: Conflict and Change among Transnational Activists. By Shareen Hertel. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. 176 pp., \$45.00 cloth (ISBN: 978-0-8014-4507-1), \$17.95 paper (ISBN: 978-0-8014-7324-1).

In their pathbreaking work on transnational advocacy networks, Margaref Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) argued that “[m]odern networks are not conveyor belts of liberal ideals, but vehicles for communicative and political exchange, with the potential for mutual transformation of participants” (quoted on p. 3). This observation is an important one that has been underexplored in much of the rapidly growing literature on transnational activism. *Unexpected Power: Conflict and Change Among Transnational Activists* by Shareen Hertel helps fill this gap. Drawing upon hundreds of interviews with activists as well as primary documents, Hertel shows how transnational advocacy campaigns affect activist networks, our understandings of human rights, and government policy.

Unexpected Power examines two familiar transnational advocacy campaigns, namely the campaign against child labor in the Bangladeshi garment industry and the campaign to end pregnancy testing in the *maquiladoras* on the US–Mexico border (for other examples of work on these campaigns, see Brooks 2002, 2005; Bandy 2004; Carty 2004). Hertel uses disciplined, configurative case studies to uncover how two distinct “mechanisms” of interorganizational dynamics emerged in these two cases and what effect each mechanism had on the campaign. In the Bangladeshi case, Hertel argues that differences between the interests of activists from outside and inside the country led Bangladeshi development groups to block the transnational campaign to end child labor. US activists supported the Harkin Amendment in the US Congress, which called for economic sanctions against industries using child labor to produce goods imported by the United States. But Bangladeshi activists—including child workers themselves—resisted this strategy because it would further restrict economic options for Bangladeshi children and their families while challenging the predominant norms regarding the conditions under which children might be allowed or expected to work. Mexican activists, in contrast, engaged in “back-door moves” to expand the framing of the conflict beyond challenging pregnancy testing as a form of discrimination against female workers. Mexican activists at local and national levels spoke in terms of women’s “right to work” and called upon society as a whole to uphold its responsibility for human reproduction.

Hertel not only offers insightful analyses of how transnational activists framed and carried out these campaigns, but she also evaluates the impacts of these struggles on policy and on the movements themselves. Neither campaign achieved much in terms of the policy goals each sought to advance. The agreement between the United Nations, the International Labor Organization, and the textile industry to provide Bangladeshi child workers with educational opportunities proved unsustainable and yielded modest results. The Mexican case also

failed to bring systematic change to the *maquiladoras* or to other industries in Mexico, largely because NAFTA's side agreement on labor does not provide any enforcement mechanisms. Nonetheless, the key point of *Unexpected Power* is that the relatively powerless groups in these transnational networks were able to have important influences on the framing and dynamics of each campaign. Although many might argue that Northern activists use their disproportionate resources and political access to dominate decision making in transnational networks, less powerful actors can in fact help define the terms in which transnational struggles are waged.

Unexpected Power helps open up the black box of transnational advocacy networks to show how transnational campaigns structure opportunities for activists to engage in discussions among themselves as well as with their target audiences: the general public and policymakers. Hertel emphasizes that actors within transnational networks can differ markedly in their understandings of norms and policy objectives and that a distinct political process operates within networks to define transnational campaigns. For instance, Human Rights Watch's use of the NAFTA side agreement on labor to try to end gender discrimination in the *maquiladoras* created a political opportunity for Mexican activists to open a wider national debate over economic and social rights that would not otherwise have been possible.

Hopefully, this study will encourage scholars to pursue new research on the internal politics of transnational networks while pushing Hertel's conclusions even further by suggesting how structural divisions among activists can be overcome. For instance, Hertel focused on the campaign level of analysis, and thus she did not explore the ways individual activists and groups adapted their understandings of human rights norms in response to their experiences. It is not clear, however, how much Northern and Southern activists have actually learned from and changed in response to these attempts at cooperation. Moreover, what can we expect of future transnational campaigns—more of the same, or advances that better integrate conflicting notions of human rights? Is there evidence that activists consciously use transnational campaigns to help expand discursive and mobilizing opportunities for national and local movements?

Unexpected Power also reveals a strong need for analysts to address the question of how broader social structures influence the opportunities for human rights activists to challenge the existing order. Media reports, governments, and even some academics are quick to chastize more privileged (usually Northern) activists, such as anti-child labor activists, whose actions end up harming those they seek to help. But in some ways privileged activists are also victims of institutional structures that deny them real opportunities to affect change or even to define the terms of the debate. For instance, Hertel shows how Mexico's constitution and labor laws provide opportunities for Mexican human rights activists to advance a more holistic notion of rights that integrates economic with political and civil rights. US activists, by contrast, operate within a legal framework that denies economic human rights and that systematically channels activism away from structural critiques. Might not scholars better help activists and policymakers see the institutional iron cages that obstruct effective transnational dialogue and cooperation for human rights? Can such analyses generate insights into national and international policies or organizational strategies that can help foster transnational cooperation and more effective problem solving?

Unexpected Power was a very enjoyable book to read. It is clearly written, well organized, and engaging. It is also short enough to make it a useful supplement to undergraduate or graduate courses on transnational activism, human rights, or global labor issues. It nicely complements some other important works in this area, such as books by Valentine Moghadam (2005) and Nancy Naples and

Manisha Desai (2002). The research agenda Hertel outlines is an important one, and her methodology for analyzing the internal dynamics of transnational networks can provide a fruitful foundation for future research and theory building in the field of transnational advocacy and global change.

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