REVIEW ESSAY

Transnationalism in the Americas After NAFTA: Power, Knowledge and Resistance

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NAFTA and the Politics of Labor Transnationalism
Tamara Kay

Building Transnational Networks: Civil Society and the Politics of Trade in the Americas
Marisa von Bulow

Zapatistas: Rebellion From the Grassroots to the Global
Alex Khasnabish

In her recent collection of essays, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, Aihwa Ong writes that neoliberalism is ‘reconfiguring relationships between governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality’ and thus represents ‘a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions’ (Ong, 2006, p. 3). The social movements discussed in the three books reviewed can be thought of as products of reconfigurations of power, knowledge, government, and territory in the context of neoliberal economic integration in the Americas. In mobilizing against NAFTA, these movements politicize trade policy, resisting through their very presence a neoliberal agenda that delegates trade policy to the realm of the ‘nonpolitical’ and the ‘nonideological’. Through the redefinition of interests as mutual and the recognition of allies across borders, transnationalism in the Americas can be thought of as an act of resistance in the face of multinational corporations that frequently pit workers against each
other in the ‘race to the bottom’. The three books under review are thus a timely exploration of the processes, complexities, and dynamics of transnationalism in the context of neoliberal economic integration.

*NAFTA and the Politics of Labor Transnationalism* demonstrates the processual nature of building transnational relationships. Kay’s analysis of, not just the outcomes of the institutions put into place by NAFTA and transnational organizing against it, but also the relationships union leaders created, reveals labor transnationalism to be a dynamic and agent-centric process. Analyzing the process of transnational labor organizing has led Kay to focus on the positive outcomes of economic integration; these may be missed by scholars looking for the impact of labor transnationalism on policy. Kay’s attention to the relationships that developed among labor leaders and activists reveals what did come out of the NAFTA—a field of transnational social actors that, through their engagement with hemispheric economic governance mechanisms, became part of a broader tri-national labor movement. NAFTA brought about labor transnationalism by making national actors into transnational actors, through the creation of a new international institutional arena in which trade politics were negotiated and maneuvered. The North American Agreement of Labor Cooperation (NAALC) is an excellent example of this. During NAFTA negotiations, labor activists in the United States, Canada, and Mexico came together to ensure labor rights were a part of economic integration. The result was the NAALC, a side agreement that provided a mechanism for the arbitration of disputes over labor law infringement. Complaints are filed against states for failure to enforce labor laws; they are not filed against individual companies. Furthermore, complaints need to be filed in a country other than that in which the violation took place. NAALC was held by most activists and labor leaders to be insufficient and undesirable; one might think of it as a failure of labor transnationalism. However, what NAALC did do was create a transnational mind-set and forge relationships between labor leaders in the three countries. As one of Kay’s respondents explained: ‘[The NAALC process] has created a paradigm. It has created a mind-set. It’s created a frame of reference in which we understand ourselves in the labor movement to work on a trinational basis’ (p. 116). The NAALC did not just open up an institutional or legal framework to adjudicate labor rights (as insufficient as such a framework may have been); it opened up an ideological space to think about labor rights. In doing so it constituted national labor activists as transnational actors.

An advantage of Kay’s methodology is the attention paid to leaders and activists that did not engage in transnationalism. In this way, she avoids a deterministic oversampling of the dependent variable—those who did forge strong transnational relationships—allowing for a more complex and nuanced account of the dynamics of labor transnationalism. While NAFTA may have contributed to labor transnationalism through the creation of new international institutional arenas, the presence of actors in the institutional field was not always or necessarily a sound predictor of labor transnationalism and is not enough to explain why some unions engaged in transnational social networks and why some did not. Industries that were particularly vulnerable to foreign competition and industrial relocation or those that would benefit from relocation were less likely to forge strong relationships with their counterparts across the border. This is, perhaps, not surprising; indeed, it is what many commentators and scholars predicted. What is surprising is the sheer number of movements that were able to engage with one another despite ideological differences; this suggests that ‘engagement in the field was more critical for generating a transnational relationship than a union’s position on NAFTA’ (p. 73).
Kay also aims to dispute the prediction that NAFTA would lead to high levels of racism and xenophobia in American and Canadian labor unions, as leaders and rank-and-file members made Mexican workers into scapegoats for their economic troubles. She argues that NAFTA prompted union leaders to promote internationalism and combat racist attitudes and stereotypes in their organizations, as they recognized that they needed to work with their counterparts across the border to survive NAFTA. It is a provocative argument that, perhaps, suffers slightly from the lack of a quantifiable method for measuring the presence, absence, or decline in organizational racism among rank-and-file members. Her argument is based on interviews with union leaders and their analysis of the presence or absence of racism within their group. This facet of the book may have been strengthened by the addition of a longitudinal survey of racial attitudes among rank-and-file union members. Overall, however, Tamara Kay has provided scholars of social movements, transnationalism, and labor politics an engaging and informative read, accessible both to specialists and non-specialists.

Von Bulow’s book may, however, challenge Kay’s optimistic account of the power of transnational organizing. *Building Transnational Networks: Civil Society and the Politics of Trade in the Americas* not only explores moments of making transnational links, but also the moments when, and the reasons why, those links break down. Transnationalism is not a static state, but one subject to the ebbs and flows of national concerns, organizational politics, and interpersonal relationships.

*Building Transnational Networks* is a methodical account of how civil society organizations (CSOs) ‘went international’ to combat free trade in the Americas, based on von Bulow’s 20-year study of CSOs in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and the United States. Her combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, her multi-scalar and longitudinal data-set, and her willingness to move beyond structural accounts yield an account that is both innovative and empirically rigorous. Her broad-based approach—which is in contrast to other studies of transnational social organizing which are limited to single campaigns or single organizations—creates an account of the complex and processual nature of building transnational ties. Transnationalism emerges, not as a structure created by the processes of globalization, but as a process of building relationships and forging transnational networks, in which national actors become transnational actors by assigning meaning to international political processes and identifying allies with common interests. Transnationalism, in other words, is something achieved by degrees.

One of von Bulow’s most interesting findings is the extent to which transnational actors and organizations have remained rooted in national contexts. Transnationalism is not a process of moving out of the national realm and into global civil society; rather, it is a re-scaling of local and national concerns. ‘What is new,’ writes von Bulow, ‘is not the emergence of a global civil society, but the increased internationalization of organizations that, for the most part, remain rooted at the local or national scale’ (p. 6). Overall, von Bulow’s book adds a welcome degree of complexity to understandings of the origins, manifestations, and effects of transnationalism.

While labor leaders and CSOs in the Americas were moving into international spheres, a transnationalism of an altogether different sort was brewing in Southeastern Mexico. On January 1, 1994, the day NAFTA went into effect, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) seized towns in the central and eastern part of Chiapas, a state with a large indigenous population. Alex Khasnabish’s *Zapatistas: Rebellion from the Grassroots to the Global* is a study of the origins, political philosophy, and the national
and transnational impact of the Zapatista movement. Khasnabish’s insightful discussion of their political philosophy is the most valuable part of his book. For the Zapatistas, the national and the transnational are linked. Their route to transnational politicking is articulated through the pursuit of local and national goals. Nationalism need not mean adherence to a state or even to the idea of a central authority. Instead of expressing a desire for national or transnational cohesion, the nationalism of the Zapatistas means a desire or respect for difference: ‘The Zapatista struggle is indeed a national one but not in terms of an affirmation of the singular, elite-driven project of “the nation-state”’ (p. 87). For the Zapatistas, local and national concerns cannot be separated from global issues, such that ‘autonomy’ and ‘interconnectedness’ (p. 84) cannot be pursued as separate projects. It is this understanding of the relationship between the national and the international that shapes their route to transnationalism: ‘Within Zapatismo, the concepts of autonomy and interconnectedness are deeply intertwined ... Interconnectedness is the necessary complement to autonomy because a world that does not recognize existence as shared and interdependent is a world pitted against itself, a world doomed to replicate exclusion, division and violence’ (p. 84).

Khasnabish argues that the most important aspect of Zapatismo is not the radical nature of their political philosophy, but the impact that they and their ideas have had transnationally. The Zapatistas, he writes, put the prospect of radical alternatives back into the realm of the possible. This argument is compelling, but would have been more convincing if it had been articulated using a broader set of qualitative or quantitative data and a more rigorous means for its interpretation. This is unfortunate because this claim seems to be the crucial aspect of this volume; indeed, he distinguishes his book from the existing literature by the attention he pays to the networking and movement-building activities that the Zapatistas pursue transnationally as opposed to other accounts that have stressed the national and international structural and political processes of globalization. He claims that the Zapatista movement has been significant for the alter-globalization movement, declaring that when the Zapatistas rose up in arms against the NAFTA and neoliberal economic integration, ‘it was a shot heard around the world’ (p. 168). The power of the Zapatistas, it would seem, also comes from their ability to create transnational social networks and to spread new knowledge throughout that network, thereby infiltrating ‘the political imaginations of diverse groups of people around the world’ (p. 168). His analysis is based on the ‘written archive’ of northern activists discussing Zapatismo’s significance, based on a review of journalistic accounts and writings by activist groups and writers, and brief case studies of two groups and the insights that activists working in these groups have shared with him. However, without a broad-based and longitudinal data-set, a clear methodology for gathering and interpreting data, and a means of measuring transnational impact, readers may remain unconvinced by his claims.

Several broad themes can be derived from the three books reviewed which may impact future research. The first is the role of the nation in mitigating transnationalism. In all the three accounts, the nation does not recede into the background as movements move into transnational spaces; rather, the nation acts as a prism through which transnational links are made, common interests are negotiated, and action is organized. Second, the books challenge the notion that transnationalism is solely a product of structural changes brought about by globalization; rather, it is the product of conscious strategization by national actors working within and against the challenges and opportunities that new international institutional structures provide. Third, these three books suggest that transnationalism
should be seen less as a static state, that is either there or not there, than as a condition made possible through active and perennial construction by social movement actors and subject to dissolution when confronted with conflicting local and national concerns.

Social movements, writes Janet Conway, do not just mobilize supporters and impact policy, but also ‘incubate’ the ‘knowledges and agencies needed to change the world’ (Conway, 2004, p. 239). In the case of transnational movements against neoliberal economic expansion, their very impact may be in the notion of interconnectedness that they ‘incubate’. Khasnabish’s explication of the political ideology of the Zapatistas represents an important intervention into explaining the kinds of knowledge transnational movements have created; however, as the works by Kay and von Bulow suggest, understanding the impact of transnationalism requires careful, sustained, and empirically rigorous analyses of how, when, and why transnationalism appears and how ideology is diffused through the social networks in which movements are embedded.

References


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