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Book review:
Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society by
Hakan Thorn.

Although there has been no shortage of works about the South African struggle against Apartheid, the bulk of this output has fallen outside the purview of 'movement studies'. It has been the American 'civil rights' movement that has generally anchored this research tradition, as can be seen in the fact that books such as Aldon Morris' "Origins of the Civil Rights Movement" serve as foundational texts for the field. Hakan Thorn's "Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society" intends to redress this imbalance.

If movement studies have generally sought out the common features among diverse social movements (features often derived from an American 'civil rights' archetype), Thorn finds reason to explore in massive detail the uniqueness of a single one. In it we encounter an Anti-Apartheid movement (AAM) that has been pieced apart in ways strikingly unlike what has otherwise been produced in the great quantity of written accounts about it. Thorn does not aim merely to chronicle the inner workings of the movement itself; neither is he especially concerned with the institution of Apartheid and its eventual demise. Rather more ambitiously, he argues for understanding the AAM as the prototype of the 'new social movement'—which has superseded the church- and labor-based movements of old—and as the historical basis of a 'new' global space of belonging.

Consequently, Thorn's book sits at the crossroads of multiple subfields, and sincerely intends to contribute to each of them. On one front, Thorn interrogates the nature of social movements, seeking to upset commonplace ideas about what distinguishes the 'old' from the 'new'. Not only have observers neglected the internationalization of 'old' movements, prematurely relegating these movements to a historical past; their ideas about how a social movement might look have also tended to presuppose the social conditions of the West, ensuring a blindness toward nonwestern movements. If these oversights suggest a misrecognizing of the role of the nation state, Thorn's approach is to meticulously excise these misrecognitions from the tissue of movement studies. Thus, conventional models such as "Resource Mobilization Theory" or the related "Political Process Perspective" are chastised for treating "...the nation state as a 'pre-given', largely unproblematized, context for social movement action" (p. 12). Rather than simply departing from a 'pre-given' premise, Thorn imagines a space of action and belonging that is shaped by forces both internal and external to the nation state. This space has many anchors, but three in particular: the increasing globalization of the world system, the condition of postcoloniality, and the major fault lines of world conflict (especially the Cold War).

The 'inside/outside debate'—as Thorn refers to the dilemma of locating social movements in relation to nation states—is referenced throughout the book and is linked to another major area of inquiry to which Thorn wishes to contribute: the discourse on globalization. Against a common tendency to infer the dissolution of the nation state from the increasing globalization of social, cultural, economic, and political institutions, the author shows how the nation state sits between the respective influences of “historically instituted national political cultures” and “transnational processes”. Thus the differential impacts of AAM in Britain and Sweden can be traced to how the respective states were each affected by differing internal and external dynamics. In Britain, the AAM shared a closer connection to older anti-colonial and labor movements, which not only enabled more extensive community-building across national borders, but also encouraged the use of direct action tactics characteristic of the earlier movements. Sweden, on the other hand, featured a weaker movement tradition (and weaker ties to transnational activism) bearing official ties to a relatively more ‘open’ social democratic government, leading not only to fewer direct actions but also to anti-apartheid policy. As Thorn notes, the nation state has therefore not dissolved amid globalization, but has become another actor in a global space of interaction:

States are no longer political spaces defined by their territorial sovereignty, but one of many political actors, which enter into alliances with other actors, such as corporations or even social movements (p. 205)

Thorn further criticizes the tendency of globalists to ‘over-emphasize’ the media, and instead redirects attention to the movement of bodies across geographical space and the particular impacts of various contexts of face-to-face interaction. Here we are reminded of the importance of travel and exile to social ties characteristic of ‘new social movements’.

Elaborating his argument in the first part of the book, Thorn applies these insights in part two as he empirically investigates a series of news items that were significant to the anti-Apartheid struggle. Subsequently, he draws extensively on the method of ‘discourse analysis’ to explore how the media frames associated with these news items changed over time and across national contexts. Supplementing the discussion are profiles of movement actor ideal types—the “activist public official”, “the activist priest”, “the exile activist”, “the movement organizer”, and “the movement intellectual”—developed from ethnographic interview data. Ultimately, the result is a powerful depiction of the fluidity of national borders and the inadequacy of movement studies in dealing with this reality. The author resists the excesses often associated with discursive approaches by employing the classic ‘action-structure’ framework so familiar to sociology. Whether or not these parts have added up to the sum total suggested by the book’s title however remains an open question. One wonders if the author has simply discovered one of multiple “global civil societies”, or if the importance of immigration and visa regulation in these matters has not been downplayed. Furthermore, though Thorn pays ample attention to the ways that actors circumnavigate national political boundaries, the equally important issue of national identity is given short shrift, obscuring important differences between “international” and “global” communities. To his credit, Thorn concedes that, “it is...obvious that the concept of civil society needs to be reformulated when transferred from theories of the nation state to theories of a global society,” (p. 203) though he never explores how this might look or bear upon the foregoing analyses. Nonetheless, even if Thorn has ultimately failed to lead us to our promised destination, he has taken us to many important places along the way.

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