Domestic and Transnational Perspectives on Democratization

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The disciplinary separation between comparative politics and international relations is regularly challenged but persists as a result of institutional inertia and hiring practices. This essay uses the issue of democratization in an attempt to go beyond rhetoric and to develop a framework that integrates the role of transnational activism into the analysis of domestic regime change. Comparative research on democratization confirms that underlying socioeconomic conditions affect the long-term sustainability of democratic reforms. The initiation of such reforms, as well as the process they take, can best be understood using an agency-based framework that links domestic and transnational forces. Outside interventions are a potent factor in challenging authoritarian practices, but they do not simply displace existing domestic practices and conditions. Although transnational activists and scholars often celebrate the empowering role of networking and mobilization, the long-term effects of such interventions are still poorly understood. Transnational ties may distract domestic activists from building effective coalitions at home or undermine their legitimacy overall. Transnational scholars and activists can learn from comparative research how different domestic groups use outside interventions to promote their interests at home.

The domestic effects of international processes are attracting increasing attention within comparative and international relations (IR) scholarship. Comparativists have suggested for some time that international factors play a significant role in the process of democratization (Huntington 1991; Pridham, Herring, and Sanford 1994; Whitehead 2001). Within international relations, the idea of the “second image reversed” (Gourevitch 1978; Cortell and Davis 1996) is not new, but it has recently garnered increased interest. A major focus of such inquiry has been on the successes and failures of promoting democratic change from the outside. Studies have explored the effectiveness of coercive strategies such as military interventions (Peceny 1999; von Hippel 2000), the role of diffusion among countries (Wejnert forthcoming), the effects of international institutions and foreign aid (Hathaway 2002; Henderson 2002; Knack 2004), and the significance of transnational nongovernmental activism (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Boli and Thomas 1999a; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). No agreement on the effectiveness of such outside interventions exists—given that some studies are decidedly optimistic whereas others come to negative conclusions.

Most of these studies focus on the external structures and agents promoting change and spend little or no time explicating the targets of such interventions. The purpose of the present essay is to develop an integrative framework for analyzing regime change that simultaneously incorporates the most recent international
relations and comparative research on democratization. Comparativists have developed a number of socioeconomic explanations for regime change that confirm the link between economic and political change. This relationship is particularly relevant in accounting for the long-term sustainability of democratization and the survival of established democracies. But a macro view of political change reveals little about the process and the interactions among participating collective actors. Understanding why and how authoritarian practices are being challenged requires a shift from a structural to an agency-centered perspective on regime change. Challenges to authoritarian rule and repressive practices increasingly create transnational coalitions between domestic activists, international institutions, and outside supporters. The interventions of these coalitions shape domestic outcomes by offering new opportunities for mobilization to elites defending the status quo and their opponents. Initial research on transnational activism has largely focused on the power of such mobilization to challenge repression (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Thomas 2001) but has neglected less desirable consequences. Outside interventions may offer short-term and often life-saving protection to domestic activists; they may also create resistance to the idea of foreign imposition or distract the opposition from building effective domestic coalitions (Lynch 2004). As transnational mobilization becomes more ubiquitous, comparative research offers the necessary tools to understand domestic variation in its outcomes.

This essay is organized as follows. The first section presents and defends a narrow definition of democracy and democratization informed by experiences with the latest wave that began in southern Europe in the 1970s and peaked with the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. The second section discusses the contemporary IR literature on the domestic consequences of international institutions and transnational activism promoting democratic principles. The third section contrasts the pervious discussion with current debates among modernization theorists proposing an endogenous explanation of democratization. The last section shifts from a macro- to a micro-perspective and presents an agency-centered view of democratic change that focuses primarily on the role of rival elites. The analysis of the actual process of regime change through the lenses of participating societal groups offers an opportunity to integrate the influence of international institutions and transnational activism into the study of democratization. The conclusions suggest avenues for future research aimed at increasing the links between comparative and IR scholarship and discuss some of the policy implications of taking a transnational perspective on regime change.

**Defining and Defending Democratic Practices**

Democratization is a process that predominantly affects the political system and increases popular participation in public affairs. Democratization may be desirable for its own sake, or because it furthers other objectives such as political stability and economic growth. In larger political communities, popular participation is mostly indirect, and collective decision making is regularly exercised in the form of electoral competition for public office. Effective participation and competition require at least formal equality among the populace and minimum levels of transparency and accountability. Equality ensures that everyone has the ability to participate in public affairs; accountability and transparency are requirements to help the populace make informed decisions about electoral and policy alternatives.

The claim of equal participation is usually based on the assumption that individual human beings share intrinsic qualities and are capable of determining their own affairs. This axiomatic perspective is, then, used to justify the existence of human rights and their universal application (Gerwith 1989). Although this universalistic perspective makes intuitive sense to many, it is also strongly contested by
claims of cultural relativism (Renteln 1990). To avoid being caught in this universalist–relativist divide, a definition and defense of democracy should begin with an investigation of its opposite: the claim that nondemocratic rule is justifiable and superior (Linz 2000).

The claim of authoritarian superiority assumes that a single ruler or a minority has superior knowledge of politics, collective interests, and the community as a whole. Even though other types of professionals usually derive their authority from specialized and superior knowledge too, politics as a sphere of activity is viewed as different. First, politics involves decisions regarding the distribution of resources and values that affect all areas of community life and is not limited to any particular field such as education, health care, or monetary policy. At issue is whether anyone can legitimately claim superior knowledge of something that is more than the sum of its parts. Second, politics aggregates individual interests that are subject to change over time. Once again, can any political authority claim knowledge of these changes in different subcommunities and individuals? Responding in the negative to these questions suggests that democracy is superior not on the basis of the inherent values of its participants “but because of the absence of such a quality, or of our capacity to know such a quality” (Saward 1994). In effect, democracy represents the superior political system not because it is particularly reflective of universal human nature but because it best recognizes its limits as well as the limits of collective decision making.

A defense of democracy and democratization leads to questions regarding how effectively to operationalize and measure democracy as a system of government characterized by popular participation. In effect, should democracy be narrowly defined and limited to the governmental realm or should the definition include aspects of the broader social and cultural structure of a society? A broader definition of democracy denies the autonomy of the political sphere and reduces it to a reflection of economic (Marxist theories) or cultural conditions. In such definitions, political institutions are of secondary interest and democratization is the result of social developments outside the political sphere. In contrast, pluralists (Schumpeter 1942; Sartori 1962; Dahl 1971) view the political realm as autonomous and defend a procedural, rather than substantive, definition of democracy. Democracy is considered to be a method or procedure of government rather than a certain commitment “to any particular set of social and economic objectives” (Weiner 1987:5; see also Shin 1994:142). The emphasis here is on the selection of leaders rather than the actual participation of the public in its own political affairs.

Robert Dahl’s (1971) widely recognized concept of “polyarchy” emphasizes the two dimensions of contestation and participation to assess a nation’s progress toward the ideal of “democracy” (for a critique of the concept, see Ware 1974). Contestation emphasizes the existence of recurring free and fair elections. It entails the availability of alternatives at the time of voting, uncertainty about outcomes, the irreversibility of voting results, and assurance that elections occur regularly (Przeworski et al. 2000:16). Participation measures the extent of involvement of the citizenry through partisan, associational, and other forms of collective action (Dahl 1971:3–20). These measures of polyarchy then offer opportunities to correlate degrees of competition and participation with other aspects of the community and compare the results across nations. Does the regular occurrence of elections make leaders more accountable and responsive to the public (Przeworski et al. 2000:33)? Are democracies defined in this way less likely to engage in aggressive foreign policies? Does democratization increase the likelihood of internal strife (Snyder 2000)? Is a high level of participation positively correlated with economic growth?

Democratization from a pluralist perspective either enhances levels of competition for public offices or increases the inclusiveness of the political system. For Dahl (1989:221), the key institutions are elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, the right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative
information, and associational autonomy. Such a procedural view is not necessarily incompatible with more substantive notions of democracy. Schumpeterian and other elitists have long been criticized for not valuing participation beyond election day and for ignoring the educational effects of democracy on the participants themselves (Bachrach 1967; Pateman 1975). And, indeed, formal democratic decisions can leave sections of the population below the social and economic standards needed to support democratic procedures in the first place (Offe 1994; Merkel 1996:36).

The participatory aspect of Dahl’s definition of polyarchy offers opportunities to integrate questions of education and economic equality back into the definition and measurement of democracy. Apart from guaranteeing the formal right to vote or freedom of speech, a more democratic society enables its citizens to make informed electoral choices through the provision of education. Basic health care and other services also allow citizens to fully enjoy their rights to participate in democratic decision making. Hence, a more narrow and procedural definition of democracy should not be understood as a limit to democratization but as an effort to distinguish change within the political realm from other and broader processes of social change.

Scholars analyzing the recent global wave of democratization have voiced skepticism about the sustainability of the political reforms. Many former Soviet republics are today again under authoritarian rule and a similar backlash affected newly established democracies in Africa and Asia during the 1990s. The proliferation of terms such as “informal polyarchy” (O’Donnell 1996) and “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 1997) has led to conceptual confusion (Collier and Levitsky 1997) but has also highlighted efforts by political leaders that “are deliberately contrived to satisfy prevailing international norms of ‘presentability’” (Joseph 1998:4). In many cases, the introduction of multiparty elections briefly increased competition within the political system even though they were not followed by broader democratic reforms. The “fallacy of electoralism” (Karl 1986:34) serves as a reminder that a procedural definition of democracy is primarily a research tool, not a normative commitment to a certain political system. In effect, what narrowly defining democracy facilitates is the ability of researchers to compare across countries and enhances their ability to understand the interactions among political, economic, and social factors.

Using a narrow definition of democracy and democratization also opens the field to the study of so-called established democracies and their struggles to extend and consolidate popular participation and contestation. In the United States, for example, women gained the right to vote in 1920. It took almost another half century to pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which banned literacy tests and called for the federal government to be more proactive in securing black registration and voting rights. With millions of legal and illegal immigrants living and working today in the United States and in European countries, democratization poses a problem for these Western democracies even as it is a challenge to openly authoritarian regimes.

**From Authoritarian to Democratic Rule**

Scholars of democratization (O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Karl 1987; Karl and Schmitter 1991; Przeworski 1991; Gunther and Higley 1992; Schmitter 1994; Remmer 1995) have used the most recent global shift toward democratic governance to develop an agency-driven literature that challenges the traditional modernization perspective. In this agency-focused perspective on social change, actors are not primarily driven by their economic positions and systemic imperatives but make autonomous choices based on defined interests and their interactions with other groups or individuals within their communities. Rather than reducing agents to a placeholder in a given social position, an agency-driven perspective investigates how individuals and groups make behavioral choices when faced with the uncertainty of building complex coalitions for political change or for
maintaining the status quo. Although this focus on social actors and their choices has vastly improved our understanding of democratization, it has neglected to deal with ideational and external influences on regime change.

Modernization describes a process of social mobilization in which democracy follows economic development, wealth accumulation, and functional differentiation. Early proponents (Lerner 1958; Lipset 1960; Deutsch 1961) claimed that economic growth beyond a certain threshold level instigated social change in the form of urbanization, increased literacy, and media exposure. As a result of this transformation, new political actors emerged mainly in the form of middle classes with distinct political interests and a desire to participate in national political affairs (Hadenius 1992:77–80). The emergence of social groups generating their income independent of the state diversified political interests and led to challenges to the political control of authoritarian rulers. Such middle classes were likely to demand representation in return for taxation and be less vulnerable to corruption and repressive practices. However, modernization theorists never explicated the actual process of democratization and remained content with correlating the state of economic development with the prevalence of democratic practices.

Early skeptics of the linear and unidirectional relationship between economic and political development advocated by modernization theorists pointed to outliers such as less developed, but democratic India or the wealthy and authoritarian Arab states. Empirical studies (for example, Neubauer 1967) testing the modernization claims of the early 1960s found that socioeconomic development beyond a certain level did not promote democracy. Others warned that modernization theorists failed to fully understand the consequences of social transformations such as result from urbanization and media exposure. In particular, Samuel Huntington (1968) predicted that imbalances in economic growth patterns would cause political instability instead of democratic change. In response to these empirical and theoretical challenges, scholars with a modernization perspective have either sought to improve upon the first generation of such theorists without giving up their original claims or have moved away from the strong claim that economic development always precedes and causes political change.

Authors following the first variant have been mainly concerned with (1) improving their statistical methods, (2) explaining “outliers,” and (3) identifying those issues within the broad process of modernization that have the strongest impact on democratization. As a result, factors such as urbanization and the mass media have lost prominence over time, and education has emerged as the most prominent link between economic and political development (Hadenius 1992; Helliwell 1994). Modernization theorists (Moore 1996:59) have also argued that the leaders of rich but undemocratic oil-producing countries have successfully decoupled wealth creation from social change and subverted the emergence of a self-sustained and independent middle class.

More skeptical scholars of the second variant have questioned the validity of the broad-ranging conclusions derived from Seymour Martin Lipset’s (1960) original claim and its implied causal path. For Axel Hadenius (1992:146) “sixty percent of the variation concerning the level of democracy” in his selected 132 countries is explained by seven structural factors (literacy, commodity concentration, trade with the United States, capitalism, percentage of Protestants, military expenditures, and average fragmentation), although “other things too probably have an impact on democracy, and . . . these factors could be either of a structural or an actor-oriented nature.” Tatu Vanhanen (1990:191) has argued that socioeconomic or economic development “is only an intervening variable that correlates positively with democratization because various power resources are usually more widely distributed at higher levels than at lower levels of socioeconomic-economic development.”

In fact, the modernization perspective has evolved across time to put greater emphasis on the process and the participants in regime change. With national
experiences defying the modernization logic, some students of political regime change began to focus on the agents shaping such change. Although the main focus of this shift remains the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, elite-driven approaches have also been used effectively to account for the breakdown of democracy (Linz and Stepan 1978). An agency perspective assumes greater autonomy from underlying economic and social conditions as well as the ability of elites to defy structural constraints. Moreover, this shift reflects not only the limits of the modernization perspective but is part of a more general trend of rational choice based challenges to macro-structural and functionalist arguments (Bates 1997; Remmer 1997:50; Merkel 1999:105).

In this essay, an argument will be made that structural and agency-based perspectives offer important answers to the puzzle of domestic regime change even as they remain limited in their ability to integrate external and ideational pressures for change into the analysis. A transnational perspective offers opportunities to bridge the gap between structure and agency and to link IR and comparative scholarship by adding international norms and institutions as well as transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) into the analysis of the sources and trajectories of domestic regime change. International norms of democratic governance and human rights provide an increasingly dense ideational structure shaping the ideas and interests of transnational and domestic activists. On the agency side, transnational NGOs function as transmission mechanisms for diffusing international norms into a domestic context. Their peculiar principled character and methods of mobilization are a significant factor shaping regime change. This view expands the study of the structural environment to include norms about what defines acceptable democratic practices. Figure 1 suggests how international norms and transnational actors interact with domestic factors in the process of democratic change.

External Dimensions of Political Regime Change

Democratization is not just a by-product of economic development but a process embedded in an international normative order. Transnational activist networks diffuse democratic principles, support domestic allies, and exert pressure on authoritarian regimes. The constructivist literature in international relations has been exploring for some time how international norms shape domestic preferences and policies (Finnemore 1996; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Thomas 2001). This literature claims, at least in its rhetoric, that agency and structure are mutually constitutive. As the source of social change, the literature focuses on the emergence of increasingly well-defined guidelines in the international arena regarding the domestic conduct of governments and the shape of a democratic polity.

With the creation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, the international community established universally valid norms of domestic conduct broadly defining ideas of democratic governance. These norms were meant not merely as
restrictions but as opportunities to create consensus and direct cooperative relations among actors. “Norms are therefore not only ‘guidance devices,’ but also the means which allow people to pursue goals, share meanings, communicate with each other, criticize assertions, and justify actions” (Kratochwil 1989:11). The greater the difference between domestic conduct and international norm, the more likely it is that domestic or transnational groups will mount efforts to expose the contradictions. International norms present an opportunity to challenge the status quo with reference to a universally accepted and institutionalized set of principles.

In contrast to the mainstream of the agency-based literature and its focus on self-interested behavior (Colomer 1991; Przeworski 1991), the proposal to be made here is that the growing relevance and visibility of international norms transforms the domestic competition for national power. This argument is not simply about self-interested elites negotiating a transition process but about the ability to use and adapt to opportunities offered in the international realm.

**The International Context and Domestic Regime Change**

Even though a consensus is emerging on the significance of international influences on regime change (Pridham, Herring, and Sanford 1994; Whitehead 2001), surprisingly little systematic work has explored the exact mechanisms linking international norms and domestic political change. As discussed earlier, scholars of democratization are still predominantly comparativists and skeptical about the relevance of international forces. Even though those in international relations (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Grugel 2003) are increasingly taking an interest in the domestic consequences of international processes, their efforts usually underestimate the significance of the domestic realm as the main battleground for social change (Checkel 1998).

Sociological institutionalism as one of the main sources of constructivist thought claims that the international system is primarily social and not material (McNeely 1995; Finnemore 1996; Meyer et al. 1997). Sociological institutionalists typically pursue their claim that “[c]ulture lies at the heart of world development” (Boli and Thomas 1999b:17) by pointing to cases of policy diffusion and homogenization in the absence of similar material conditions. In explaining such cases of similar practices and institutional evolution, sociological institutionalists invoke the homogenizing influence of world culture, including such principles as universalism, individualism, rational voluntaristic authority, rationalizing progress, and world citizenship. Sociological institutionalists assume that these principles “define the nature and purpose of social action” (Boli and Thomas 1999b:17). “Culturally and historically contingent beliefs about what constitutes a ‘civilized’ state . . . exert a far greater influence on basic institutional practices than do material structural conditions” (Reus-Smit 1997:583). States are not primarily viewed as monadic actors focusing on predefined self-interests, but as members of a community they share with other states, international institutions, and increasingly vocal groups of transnational activists. This world culture “creates and legitimizes the social entities that are seen as actors” (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987:12). Social change is not driven by internal functional needs and socioeconomic or economic development but by external norms pressure, institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and mimicry (Klug 2000). Nation-states are understood as “constructions of a common wider culture, rather than as self-directed actors responding rationally to internal and external contingencies” (Meyer et al. 1997:152).

Many IR scholars, and in particular constructivists (Wendt 1999; Philpott 2001), challenge neorealist claims (Waltz 1979) that the logic of the international system has remained unchanged since the emergence of states. With the creation of the UN, principles of domestic governance were universally accepted by the international community of states. Following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
in 1948, states developed and adopted a whole array of human rights and other treaties directly impinging on their domestic conduct. With the significant expansion of such institutions within the last fifty years, state actors face growing formal and informal limits to their domestic policy choices. The number of such agreements has grown, creating a denser network of institutional regulation, although the acceptance measured in numbers of ratifications has also increased (Schmitz and Sikkink 2002). Human rights norms have experienced a “norms cascade” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) and are today a common standard for domestic conduct. Although democracy itself is not globally established as a right, the full implementation of all UN human rights agreements would formally create such a condition in all nations of the world (Franck 1992). In Europe, membership in the European Union and the Council of Europe is conditional on the establishment of a democratic government. In the early 1990s, the Organization of American States outlawed the removal of democratically elected governments. Hundreds, and by some counts even thousands, of NGOs promote and diffuse norms of democratic governance on a global scale.

Transnational Relations and the Spread of Democratic Norms

Although sociological institutionalists (Meyer et al. 1997:160) acknowledge the role of collective actors in spreading world cultural principles, their structural perspective prevents them from exploring the independent role of such agents (Lynch 2004:344). In the best sociological tradition, they are reduced to expressing pre-defined social and cultural positions. “Rapid global changes across dissimilar units suggest structure-level rather than agent-level causes. They do not, however, prove them. One also needs to specify the mechanism of change and show the common source of the new preference and behavior” (Finnemore 1996:22). To trace the process by which international norms enter the domestic realm, we will rely here on the transnational literature and investigate the role of nonstate actors in diffusing ideas of democratic governance.

Transnationalism emerges naturally as part of the state system, but traditional theories of international relations have largely ignored such interactions or reduced them to the power and interests of states (Krasner 1995; Charnovitz 1997). A brief flurry in the transnational literature (Keohane and Nye 1971; Willetts 1982) in the 1970s did not create a sustained research agenda. After the end of the Cold War, however, this agenda reemerged, aided by the constructivist shift and with a narrower definition of transnational activism. The current scholarship differs in two crucial aspects from the earlier generation of research. First, those involved have separated multinational corporations and violent nonstate actors from their study of a growing global not-for-profit sector (Risse 2001:259; Price 2003:580). Instead of deriving political significance from economic or military might, the new generation of scholarship has focused mainly on organizations promoting norms and ideas such as human rights and environmental protection (Keck and Sikkink 1998:29). Second, the new generation of scholars did not adopt a zero-sum logic claiming a decline in state power as a direct result of the rising transnational sector. The main research question was no longer whether transnational relations really mattered (measured in declining state power), but how they mattered.

A wide range of terms has been used to describe the agents using transnational relations to further their goals. These include references to private citizen networks, NGOs, transnational advocacy networks, and global civil society. In some cases, the transnational network is dominated by state-employed scientists (Evangelista 1999); in others it is a coalition of NGOs (Price 1998; Glasius 2002); and in still others it reflects the bottom-up activism of individual citizens organized in less structured social movements. Clearly, the IR literature on transnational activism and the comparative literature on social movements overlap (Tarrow 2001; Khagram, Riker,
and Sikkink 2002). However, very few studies have looked at failed campaigns or at transnational activism with morally questionable or overtly destructive goals (Price 2003:601).

Advocacy is used by transnational activists as a form of foreign policy directed at states, intergovernmental organizations, and other nonstate entities. It is no longer primarily aimed from the bottom-up at one single government, but represents a tool of autonomous NGOs challenging their limited formal participation in global affairs (Florini 1999). The most successful NGOs have adopted state-like strategies to become significant global actors. Defying the limits of state boundaries, transnational NGOs gather their own information, create and maintain constituencies, raise financial resources, use collective decision-making processes, and develop independent policy goals. Unlike states, transnational NGOs are not limited by diplomatic etiquette or expectations of reciprocity in relation to other state actors.

Research on the effectiveness of transnational mobilization focuses on (1) the characteristics of the issues involved, (2) the promotional networks that are built, and (3) the targets chosen. With regard to issue characteristics, the literature highlights the level of international institutionalization as a reflection of global agreement on a given norm. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998:204) have claimed that issues of bodily harm and equal opportunity are more likely to succeed than others, but little empirical evidence exists to support this assertion. Scholars studying network characteristics have emphasized the role of expertise as a crucial aspect in legitimizing transnational activism in the absence of significant material resources. This emphasis goes back to the idea of “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992) and is effectively used by Matthew Evangelista in claiming that “transnational networks that have sought to tame the Russian bear by promoting disarmament and respect for human rights were ultimately successful” (Evangelista 1999:390).

Moral authority is also based on claims of impartiality and refusal to engage in “politicking.” Human rights NGOs established themselves as actors in global affairs because they collected information about violations across all nations and contrasted them with the rhetorical commitment to human rights expressed by governments. Moreover, transnational activists are effective in linking domestic causes to particular international audiences. The landmines issue became a success after NGOs had collected sufficient information to frame it as a genuine global problem as well as impose a human rights perspective on a topic previously framed as a national security issue. This source of moral authority based on expertise and appeal to universal principles, however, has been criticized for its alleged lack of democratic accountability and popular representation (Anderson 2000; Price 2003:590). For the purpose of developing a bridge between the transnational and the comparative literatures on democratization, the issue of representation plays a significant role in the translation of international norms into domestic practice. Authoritarian leaders regularly reject outside interventions promoting democratic principles by asserting sovereignty and challenging the legitimacy of transnational activists. This process shows engagement across the international-domestic divide and shifts attention to the target characteristics of mobilization. Here, the IR literature emphasizes variation in vulnerabilities to network pressures.

In the volume initiating the “second wave” of transnational scholarship, Thomas Risse-Kappen (1995) emphasized the central role of “domestic structure” understood as the availability of “access points” and “winning coalitions” for transnational activism. With little regard to comparative subtleties, a weak and fragmented state was viewed as more easily penetrated from the outside, even as activists faced greater difficulty in creating an effective coalition for achieving their goals. Subsequent scholarship has simplified this argument by identifying the degree of “normative fit” or resonance between international norms and domestic understandings (Hawkins 2002). Both the simplified domestic structure and resonance
arguments are, however, problematic because they suggest that transnational mobilization is most successful when it is least needed (Price 2003:593).

In the case of democratization and human rights promotion, transnational mobilization typically challenges the domestic political structure (authoritarian rule) as such. Here, scholars emphasize the availability of strong ties between transnational activists and domestic allies. In Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) “boomerang pattern,” the domestic opposition receives crucial outside protection and support from intergovernmental organizations and NGOs. In a subsequent volume (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999), the interactions between domestic activists and international supporters was set against the reactions of authoritarian leaders who are slowly pushed from a position of denial to tactical concessions and, eventually, significant policy changes. This “rhetorical entrapment” (Risse 2000) of authoritarian leaders using their own commitment to universal principles contained in the UN Charter depends on the continued activism and pressure of transnational activist coalitions. “In this sense, democratization can be seen as both a contributing cause and an effect of the expanding role of transnational civil society” (Price 2003:595).

This generally positive assessment of transnational activism has been challenged recently by still another new generation of researchers. Transnational mobilization as a tool of empowering domestic activists is not always available and depends on the ability of domestic groups to market their cause to outside interests (Bob 2001). Even if transnational activists take an interest and turn their attention to a particular cause, the effects do not necessarily promote democratic change. When outside support solidifies, domestic activists may become “uprooted” and isolated from the local community (Mendelson and Glenn 2002:23). In turn, defenders of repressive practices may mobilize against outside interventions by reasserting national autonomy and questioning the legitimacy of such activism (Schmitz 2001). If domestic groups receive foreign aid and other material support, their agenda is often driven by donor objectives rather than domestic needs (Henderson 2002). This result makes it easier for the opponents of change to frame the interventions as yet another example of imperial imposition (Thompson 2002). By bypassing traditional channels of democratic legitimation, transnational activists may get things done in the short-term but undermine democratization in the long run.

Having established that transnational activism and international norms matter but can have both positive and negative effects on domestic political regime change, let us explore how we can synthesize these literatures with the existing comparative scholarship on democratization.

**Modernization: Endogenous Development?**

Current debates on the link between socioeconomic and political development are shaped by Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi’s (1997) claim that economic wealth sustains democracy but does not necessarily create conditions for its emergence. Driving this research is the basic empirical observation that a higher percentage of democracies exist among rich rather than among poor nations. Przeworski and Limongi reject the conventional wisdom, which claims that economic growth leads to the emergence of democracy. In their words, the correlation only supports a much less expansive claim, that is, “once a democracy is established the more well to do a nation, the more likely that it will survive” (Przeworski and Limongi 1997:156). In a subsequent study, Przeworski and his collaborators asserted that the “probability that a dictatorship will die and a democracy will be established is pretty much random with regard to per capita incomes, about 2 percent per year. But the probability that, once established, a democracy will survive increases steeply and monotonically as per capita incomes get larger. Indeed, democracy is almost certain to survive in countries with per capita incomes above $4,000” (Przeworski et al. 2000:273).
In a direct challenge to Przeworski and his colleagues, Carlos Boix and Susan Stokes (2003) confirmed that wealthy democracies are more likely to survive but reasserted that economic growth, indeed, does cause democratization. Their crucial variable to explain democratization was not wealth per se but the level of equality in the distribution of income. Additionally, they claimed that the role of economic development (measured in per capita income) in democratization was more pronounced before than after World War II. Countries democratized at lower levels of income before 1945, whereas authoritarian regimes have become less vulnerable to economic growth since the 1950s. Boix and Stokes (2003:544) argued that “early-industrializing countries achieved income equality at lower levels of per capita income than did later-industrializing ones.”

In effect, the research of Przeworski and Limongi challenged the traditional view of democratization within comparative politics that extrapolated from the West European and North American experience of the nineteenth century when rapid economic development coincided with the emergence of democratic governance (Lipset 1960; Neubauer 1967). Modernization scholars have claimed that the “third wave” of democratization (as well as its ebbing) confirms their arguments for an endogenous process. According to Lipset, Kyoung-Ryung, and Torres (1993:157), the correlation between socioeconomic development and democracy is “more pronounced in the early 1980s than in the late 1950s.” Democratization is the long-term result of increasing wealth and its effects on levels of urbanization, literacy, education, and the availability of information to citizens. Economic development enables the social promotion of individuals and groups within society and allows for the emergence of autonomous political structures. A more educated population will eventually demand greater political participation.

According to this perspective, democracy may even be harmful to economic growth. “Political development must be held down, at least temporarily, in order to promote economic development” (Huntington and Nelson 1976:23). Conventional wisdom held that authoritarian regimes can generate greater economic growth than democracies (de Schweinitz 1959; Huntington 1968; for a summary of arguments, see Przeworski and Limongi 1993:52ff.) because they are more insulated from popular demands and particularistic interests. Democracies are more likely to waste income for consumption rather than long-term investments for economic stability and growth. In a more recent version of this logic, Adrian Leftwich (1996:239) argues that “what the West should do is to support only those dedicated and determined developmental elites who are seriously bent on promoting economic growth, whether democratic or not. For by helping them to raise the level of economic development it will help them also to establish or consolidate the real internal conditions for lasting democracy.”

Reverse Causality: Is Democracy Good for Economic Growth?

Studies suggesting a possible reversal of causality between economic growth and democratic development were taken more seriously when the “third wave” of democratization slowly gathered momentum in the mid-1980s. Arend Lijphart (1977:230ff.) made clear that “to the extent that it [the correlation between economic development and democracy] indicates a causal relationship, it may well be that democracy rather than economic development is the cause.” Przeworski and Limongi (1997:60) argued twenty years later that ideology rather than empirical evidence determined the results of earlier modernization studies. Given that many authoritarian regimes supported the United States in the Cold War, asserting a negative impact of democracy on economic growth made political if not economic sense.

Larry Sirowy and Alex Inkeles (1990) have identified two additional perspectives regarding the traditional modernization view. Some challengers have claimed that
democracy institutionalizes competition within the political sphere and thus complements a strategy of economic growth based on a free market ideology (Olson 1993). According to this view, it is not the negative direct effect of increased consumption that makes a difference, but the positive indirect effects of institutionalizing complementary structures in the economic and political spheres. A second perspective argues that the evidence shows no significant relationship between type of political system and economic development.

The comprehensive study of democracy and development done by Przeworski and his colleagues in 2000 concludes that the type of political regime has little effect on economic growth. Even though populations in democracies do experience greater increases in per capita income than their counterparts under authoritarian rule, this result is due to demographics rather than politics. As wealth grows in both types of regimes, per capita income increases more in democracies because they have systematically lower fertility rates than authoritarian regimes (Przeworski et al. 2000:264). Although democracies do not necessarily fare better with regard to economic growth in general, they do a better job of distributing wealth and creating more stable political conditions. Also, particularly vulnerable groups such as women experience comparatively higher levels of deprivation under authoritarian rule and are more likely to profit from a combination of democracy and economic growth.

Limits on an Endogenous Perspective

The limits on a modernization perspective for understanding democratization involve both methodological and theoretical issues. The dominance of large-N studies in the field creates correlative evidence but does not help us trace the causal path of such a complex social change. More recently, scholars (for example, Bollen 1993; Munck and Verkuilen 2002) have also questioned the validity of the indices used to measure the dependent variable “democracy.” “The central finding of the cross-national statistical research . . . [does] not validate the theoretical accounts that have often been associated with [democracy], in particular modernization theory. Nor do cross-sectional correlations allow us to make adequate inferences about causal sequence” (Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens 1993:72). Qualitative studies have also shown that the underlying theoretical assumptions do not hold across regions and countries. In particular, the Latin American experience since World War II and the persistence of authoritarianism in rich oil-producing states undermine the claim that economic development is a determinant cause of democratic change (Ross 2001; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2003). Critics also point out that middle classes, which have been described as the central agents of change, do not necessarily promote democracy (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992).

In addition to these methodological and theoretical challenges from within the comparative field, the results of modernization research also lend credence to the role of external factors. Take, for example, the most recent statement of the theory as presented by Boix and Stokes (2003). These researchers found that the role of economic development in democratization was more pronounced before rather than after World War II. Three quite distinct international explanations can account for these results. First, after World War II, the newly established Bretton Woods institutions began to systematically disburse financial resources to developing countries. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, these aid flows were abused by authoritarian leaders to sustain domestic support through corruption and the acquisition of means of repression. Second, the United Nations established the principle of national sovereignty and promoted the end to colonial rule. The leaders of newly independent nations used the external recognition and “negative sovereignty” (Jackson 1990; Clapham 1996) to solidify their domestic power bases. Third, during the Cold War, the United States directly supported many
authoritarian regimes in Latin America and elsewhere that actually had relatively high levels of per capita income. These factors offer that a competing explanation to Boix and Stokes’ domestic focus on economic equality as the main cause for democratization. They account for why authoritarian regimes emerging after World War II survived at relatively higher levels of per capita income.

Socioeconomic explanations artificially insulate domestic economies from the outside world. In many developing nations experimenting with democratization after World War II, economic development was heavily influenced by the global trading system (GATT and, since 1995, the World Trade Organization or WTO) and the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As the interventions of these international financial institutions have become more targeted and contested, the domestic, the international, and the transnational have, in turn, become more intertwined. Bi- and multilateral donors have redirected large parts of their aid away from governments toward the nongovernmental sector both in the North and in the South. In theory, aid can now no longer be used by elites to support corruption and authoritarian practices, but instead reaches the targets with greater precision and effectiveness. The IMF’s Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) are increasingly intrusive and require specific institutional changes (for example, an independent central bank) and public policies (for example, privatization). In the 1990s, the World Bank developed a focus on poverty reduction that aims to increase equality as a precondition for more sustainable economic growth.

Although these policies are rhetorically defended in discussions of economic growth, they are strongly contested by nongovernmental activists (O’Brien et al. 2001). Some of the critics reject the work of international financial institutions altogether, whereas others call for reforms and more opportunities for developing nations to take advantage of free trade. The WTO can force developing countries to open their markets to foreign products but it has failed to effectively take on protectionism in the developed world. Large-scale infrastructure programs supported by the World Bank have been criticized for disenfranchising local populations (Khagram 2002). Globalization critics have targeted the IMF’s Structural Adjustment Programs for their austerity measures and charged that they increase rather than decrease poverty and foreign debt (Donnelly 2002). What matters in the discussion here is not who is right or wrong concerning the role of such international financial institutions but the global context in which development is defined and linked to domestic political change.

To conclude, the emergence of democracy is not exclusively linked to socioeconomic prerequisites. Even though socioeconomic development and political change are closely related, the relationship is neither unidirectional nor necessarily linear. What wealth does do is make democracies less likely to fail. Moreover, increases in per capita income are positively related to democratization if wealth is spread evenly across society. And, furthermore, research shows that democracy does not create higher or lower rates of economic growth than authoritarian rule, but it does produce greater equality and more protections for vulnerable sections of society. But it is important to note that the most recent research on the modernization paradigm also confirms Dankwart Rustow’s (1970:346) insight that “the factors that keep a democracy stable may not be the ones that brought it into existence.” A shift from a structural to an agency-driven perspective might offer us opportunities to better understand why authoritarian regimes come under pressure and how the processes of democratization unfold. Such a perspective also opens up the discussion to a consideration of the influence that transnational actors and international institutions might have on this process. “At this stage the problem is less one of identifying ways in which the international system may impinge upon domestic political choice than of integrating international forces within the framework of comparative theory” (Remmer 1995:108).
Changing Perspectives: The Role of Contingency and Agency

Structural and agency-driven accounts of democratization should not be seen as competing explanations for the same outcome but as complementary efforts to understand complex social and political change. “Structural developments may be necessary to create an environment favorable to democratization and eventual consolidation, but unless powerful and determined local actors step up to lead the way, even weakened authoritarian regimes may find themselves with an extended lease on life” (Berman 2001:459ff.). The argument to be made in what follows is that the role of domestic actors in leading efforts to democratize is not only shaped by socioeconomic conditions, it is also influenced by the external environment that includes international institutions and transnational activists. Before introducing the IR literature on the global promotion of norms related to democratic governance, it is important to present the agency-driven perspective because this approach suggests the domestic link to this transnational literature.

The more sustained shift from structural to agency-oriented approaches builds on a variety of intellectual predecessors. Rustow’s (1970) piece entitled “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model” was the first systematic challenge to the idea of cultural or economic prerequisites for democracy (aside from national unity). Also in the early 1970s, Dahl’s (1971) Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition and Albert Hirschman’s (1972) A Bias for Hope: Essays on Development and Latin America held that successful democratic change should be managed by moderate sections of both the old regime and the opposition.

These intellectual predecessors only entered the mainstream of comparative politics in the 1980s when authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe and Latin America began to break down. Transitions from Authoritarian Rule (O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986) supported the earlier claims with in-depth case studies of regime change. Instead of a focus on immutable economic and cultural conditions, the new scholarship emphasized the study of “possibilism” (Hirschman 1972) and an empirical concern for the role of elite factions in negotiating so-called pacts in democratic transitions (Collier and Norden 1992). Uncertainty, elite actors’ concerns with future reputation, “passions” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986:25), and the art of “crafting democracies” (Di Palma 1990) replaced the prior probabilistic determinism generated through quantitative data processing.

Within the agency-centered school of regime change, several distinct approaches have emerged (for overviews see Bos 1994; Desfor Edles 1995). Whereas Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986:4) have argued that “normal science methodology” is not applicable in situations “where ... parameters of political action are in flux,” Przeworski (1991) has endeavored to show precisely that this was still a social science project within the grasp of conventional hypothesis-testing, utilizing a rational choice perspective. “Yet while [their] approach focused on strategic analysis, it shied away from adopting a formalistic, ahistorical approach inherent in the abstract theory of games” (Przeworski 1991:97). In contrast, Przeworski conceptualized transitions as a series of games among changing elite actor groups whose behavior is directed at maximizing their respective utilities.

Przeworski (1986) has claimed that leaders who are potential liberalizers assume, often mistakenly, that the controlled inclusion of some sections of the opposition will strengthen their own position within the ruling elites. This leads to a mutually reinforcing process of popular mobilization “from below” and partial interest in liberalization generated “from above.” Przeworski explicitly rejects the functionalist idea that authoritarian regimes break down as a result of a legitimacy crisis. “What matters for the stability of any regime is not the legitimacy of this particular system of domination but the presence or absence of preferable alternatives” (see Przeworski 1986:52). Individual discontent will remain meaningless as long as avenues for collective action are missing. If such projects are available and credible, the
perceptions, strategies, and actions of relevant actors will determine the process and the outcome of change. These strategies are dictated by the cost–benefit calculations of the collective actors in the opposition and among the regime elites. If the expected results for the opposition (more freedoms, material well-being, and political participation) are higher than the risks (threats to life, imprisonment, and so on) then the opposition will continue to press for change.

The regime elite, in turn, are likely to be split into hard-liners and moderates over the question of liberalization. Successful transition is most likely if moderates ally themselves with the opposition and become reformers in the process. With growing societal mobilization, the incentives increase for potential liberalizers to separate themselves from the rest of the ruling elite and resist further repression. Moreover, the threshold for individual participation in societal mobilization appears to lower with the growing visibility of splits within the regime (Collier and Norden 1992:234; Przeworski 1992:108). As challenges to leaders become more pronounced, uncertainty increases and a moderating spiral produces ideas about viable alternatives to authoritarian rule. “This is why they (authoritarian leaders) are so afraid of words, even if these words convey what everyone knows anyway, for it is the fact of uttering them, not their content, that has the mobilizing potential” (Przeworski 1992:107).

This uncertainty creates incentives for all parties to choose democracy as a common institutional framework because democracy is the only governing system that establishes minimal protections against arbitrary rule and guarantees all parties involved the chance of gaining or regaining power in the future. Democracy is attractive for outgoing authoritarians because it allows them to compete for political power in the future. The opposition does not necessarily gain, but abstract institutions such as parliaments and the judiciary do. “Political forces comply with present defeats because they believe that the institutional framework that organizes the democratic competition will permit them to advance their interests in the future” (Przeworski 1991:19). Hence, it is not the substantive but the procedural and representative side of democracy, as highlighted by Dahl (1971), that makes democracy a likely choice in situations involving a fundamental political struggle. In this intriguing scenario, democracy emerges in the absence of any positive material or cultural developments and reflects merely the interest maximization strategies of powerful actors. From this rationalist perspective, democratic transitions are not an end in themselves but a means to seemingly universal strife for maintaining and maximizing one’s economic or power position vis-à-vis other societal groups.

The move toward an agency-centered view is not limited to the initiation of regime change or to the outcome of democratization. After initial steps toward more democratic governance, elites are repeatedly faced with choices to restrict or expand participation and contestation. Even when a new and democratically elected government takes power, its leaders are faced with such choices and the logic of maximizing their interests in the face of uncertainty. Moreover, recent scholarship has also emphasized the central role of elites in the breakdown of democracy (Bunce 2000; Bermeo 2003).

As we have just seen, an agency-centered perspective explaining regime change puts emphasis on the choices of leaders and elites. The emergence of democracy is viewed as occurring on a “shoestring,” given that it does not require any normative commitments or altruistic behaviors. Elites simply maximize their interests under uncertainty, and democratization happens to be the most compatible course of action. Only democratic institutions guarantee all parties that they do not permanently lose power to their enemies. This explanation of accidental democratization is appealing because it can account for changes in the behavior of authoritarian leaders without having to assume their sudden conversion to democratic values.

There are, however, two main challenges to this view. First, as just intimated, the perspective creates insufficient room for the role of the normative considerations
that are often promoted by external actors and institutions representing democratic values. Second, the agency-based explanation of democratization neglects to account for the sources of the initial uncertainty. Why should we assume that decision makers have confidence in the power of newly created and untested democratic institutions? If authoritarian leaders are in control, why would they choose democratic change as their first preference? What precisely is the source of uncertainty that moves them to choose democratization and not another course of action?

Although an agency-based view of democratization represents an important shift away from faceless structural explanations, it remains biased toward a domestic account and neglects two important dimensions of social interaction during processes of regime change. In the first place, as we noted earlier, democratization is often shaped by international and transnational forces outside of the domestic realm. These actors purposively intervene in transition processes and influence the outcomes by mobilizing material and normative resources. And, in the second place, democratization cannot be reduced to a mere exchange of strategic information among elite groups; it also requires parties to make normative choices and expose themselves to shifts in their self-identifications and changes in their fundamental preferences. “Strategically powerful players may develop normative commitments to democracy, or they may become persuaded that the ancien régime was unjust or illegitimate in ways that will cause them to accept frustration of their interests to a degree” (Shapiro 1993:131). The structure in which elites are embedded can be reduced neither to a rational pay-off matrix nor to the underlying socioeconomic conditions. Instead, the structural context contains not only nonmaterial factors such as human rights and other norms established in international society but also social relations with other groups and, in particular, connections between elites and their followers (Haggard and Kaufman 1995). Sustained popular protests are frequently a condition leading to the initiation of regime change (Bratton and van de Walle 1997), and elites’ relations with the general public influence the power they yield during negotiated transitions.

A more embedded view of elites and their interactions shifts attention away from the preferences of agents to a fuller understanding of the interactions among them. Even though conventional views portray actors as mere “incumbents of social positions or systemic imperatives” (Macy and Flache 1995:74), a relational perspective gives agents more autonomy in seeking opportunities and rejecting constraints. The social position of an actor does not in itself determine the choice of preferences and actions taken to further one’s interests (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994:1416). Preferences form as a result of interactions with other actors and the social environment, both of which provide actors with models for self-definition and appropriate behavior. In this essay, the focus of discussion has been mainly on the social relations across borders rather than on the domestic relations among different groups.

The democratization process bears witness to the growing significance of transnational linkages across state borders. Transnational mobilization diffuses norms of democratic governance across the globe and affects domestic political change. Such interventions become part of a domestic struggle among elites and the populace seeking to influence the direction of political regime change. Global norms of democracy do not simply obliterate domestic practices; they create unique patterns of political development in concert with domestic conditions.

**Conclusions**

Political regime change is a domestic process exposed to international and transnational interventions. These continuous and often principled interventions are not just “shifting winds of change that blow in intermittently from abroad” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997:32). They are sustained efforts with the purpose of shaping
regime change by strengthening principles of democratic governance. Among established democracies, levels of participation and contestation vary, and although democratization may at some points be irreversible, it is never complete. Democratization in the United States commenced in 1789 and only began to fully include women in the early twentieth century. Despite more than a century of sustained economic growth, African Americans did not enjoy the formal recognition of their civil rights until well after World War II. Even though the struggles for women’s rights and civil rights were largely fought and won domestically, their transnational dimensions have been well documented (Dudziak 2000; Borstelmann 2001) and further strengthen the view that democratization as a process exhibits significant external and ideational components.

Understanding the effects of outside influences on domestic regime change is a joint task for comparative and IR scholars. The modernization perspective is particularly helpful in understanding the long-term viability of democracy. Economic development is positively related with democratic governance. But as we have learned, the effects are more pronounced if wealth is more equally distributed among the members of the polity. A complementary agency perspective of regime change offers opportunities to trace the process of change and to inquire into the motives of individual and collective actors. Such a view also opens analysis to the integration of influences generated on the transnational and international levels. The mobilization of transnational activists explains why and how authoritarian leaders face political uncertainty and pressures to democratize. The focus on “pacted transitions” elaborates the choices of elites once the first steps are taken, but this formulation does not explain from where this initial uncertainty comes. International institutions and transnational actors shape a social environment in which domestic actors must operate as well as the distribution of opportunities and constraints surrounding mobilization and activism.

The integration of transnational mobilization into the analysis of democratization is not a one-way street. Constructivists have yet to fully adopt the existing scholarship on political regimes and domestic social change to explain how international norms and transnational mobilization create variation in domestic outcomes. Principles and norms promoted from the outside rarely obliterate an existing domestic structure. Such interventions do not just empower domestic allies; they also create resistance. The transnational literature contributes to our understanding of regime change and diverging paths among political transitions by emphasizing the institutional and social context in which the decision makers are located. Elites negotiating democratic change are not only embedded in a wider societal context with opportunities for mass mobilization but also a transnational context of international institutions and potential allies.

Apart from further integrating IR and comparative perspectives on democratization, this essay leads to three specific suggestions for future research. The first focuses on NGOs and their networks, the second addresses their interactions with other democracy promoting agents, and the third calls for a translation of the insights into practicable policies for activists and policymakers. Nongovernmental organizations and their networks are not just vessels for universal norms and principles; they vary greatly with regard to how they are organized internally and their choices of strategies and tactics. Just as liberal IR and foreign policy scholars challenged the dominant neorealist paradigm by opening the “black box” of the state, an upcoming generation of transnational scholars need to be encouraged to systematically and comparatively dissect the internal characteristics of NGOs and their networks and link these to policy outcomes. Despite their name, nongovernmental organizations are often eager to mimic the state model by attracting a population of members, developing intelligence about others based on independent investigative capabilities, sustaining a hierarchical governance structure, and pursuing a foreign policy with defined goals toward others (Schmitz forthcoming).
In the human rights field, the two leading organizations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, represent contrasting visions regarding how to link internal organizing to the external environment. Although Amnesty International is a membership based and financed organization with sections in more than fifty countries around the world, Human Rights Watch is a lobbying organization with no membership that is funded by large foundations. As a result of these differences, Human Rights Watch has proven to be more flexible in changing its focus and embracing new challenges to human rights, especially since the end of the Cold War. At least to insiders, Amnesty International is known for its internal strife between national sections and the international secretariat in London. This strife has slowed the organization’s ability to adapt and innovate. Positively put, Amnesty International’s membership base of over one million demands greater democratic legitimacy than occurs in Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International’s secretariat has been able to effectively use individual members to help with research and campaigns. Even though Human Rights Watch is more likely to lobby the US government and mobilize impersonal media support, Amnesty International is more likely to organize grassroots campaigns and is less likely to be denounced as an organization promoting the interests of the United States. These differences and trade-offs have consequences for the effectiveness of each organization.

The more visible and influential transnational organizations become, the more scrutiny they will face from their opponents and the general public. Critics (see, for example, Anderson 2000) of the growing significance of nonstate actors have raised issues regarding accountability, transparency, and internal decision-making procedures. Authoritarian leadership is common in NGO circles and often stands in stark contrast to the demands made on others to democratize and increase transparency. Just like state leaders, many NGO activists must learn to accept that participation and accountability ultimately strengthen the organization and its goals.

Significant differences not only exist within organizations, but also between NGO networks built around a given cause. Networks are often heavily dominated by relatively resource rich northern NGOs and their agendas (Jordan and Van Tuijl 2000). This imbalance can undermine the legitimacy of a cause, affect campaigns negatively, and lead to a backlash in the target nation (Schmitz 2001). If local activists in a struggle for democratic change are overly dependent on outside sources for financial support and legitimacy, they may become distracted and lose their ability to build networks at home (Henderson 2002). Prolonged outside support undermines local ownership of the democratization process and creates a fertile ground for nationalist rhetoric.

Although NGOs may be united by principles, they are often divided as a result of the competition for scarce resources (Cooley and Ron 2002), media attention (Bob 2001), and control over valued information and strategies. Competition among NGOs is not necessarily a bad thing, especially if it forces organizations to innovate, become more transparent, and use resources more effectively. But just like the internal make-up of individual organizations, the external environment of their activism has yet to come under systematic investigation. The rise of Human Rights Watch during the 1980s has not only given former Amnesty International activists new job opportunities, it has forced the older organization to become more media-savvy and campaign-driven. For many years, and not the least due to the indirect pressure of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International debated its narrow focus on political prisoners and finally dropped it in 2003 in favor of a more flexible and broader human rights agenda, including efforts to strengthen its media presence.

Most of the prominent NGOs have distinguished themselves as particularly capable of capturing the attention of the global media (Dale 1996; Lahusen 1996). The standard story of transnational activism usually contains some reference to mobilizing the general public or policymakers through media outlets. What is still less well understood in the literature, though, are the reverse effects of media
exposure on the NGOs and their choices of goals and strategies. The global dominance of human rights rhetoric has led many local groups to reframe their message in the language of universalism and rights in order to gain more international support. But such a course of action may be hazardous and put smaller and less technologically advanced groups at risk of being ignored (Bob 2002). Even though media exposure can be a powerful short-term tool for emergency interventions, its role in sustaining democratic change in the long term is questionable.

Finally, both comparative and IR scholars can make a significant contribution to improving the practice of transnational activism. Nongovernmental organizations typically lack the resources to review the effectiveness of their campaigns and to adjust to short term changes in the domestic and international environments. We need a comparative literature on transnational nongovernmental activism and its strategies to rival and supplement academic debates about states’ foreign policies and the effectiveness of certain policy tools. As scholars broaden their definition of international actors beyond the class of states, activists can expect to gain more feedback on how to develop effective strategies for social and democratic change.

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