



The Articulation of Transnational Campaigns: A Discourse Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract

The article traces the complex series of relations that are constitutive of transnational campaigning through empirical research, focusing on political campaigning critical of the WTO's General Agreement on Trade-in-Services. Applying the methodology of post-structuralist discourse theory, as developed by Laclau and Mouffe, the article is able to move beyond the search for a 'Global Civil Society' or 'Transnational Advocacy Network', and instead focus on the articulatory process in which the relations central to transnational campaigning are produced. This empowers an analysis that is able to both situate transnational campaigns within the context of other political phenomena – characterised by collective action – whilst highlighting the historically-contingent communicative devices central to the 'transnational' character of such campaigns.

1. Introduction

Through a case study of political campaigning critical of the *General Agreement on Trade-in-Services* (GATS) – held within the *World Trade Organization* (WTO) – the article seeks to understand the complex series of relations that are constitutive of transnational campaigning. This is achieved via applying the methodology of post-structuralist discourse theory, as developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1990; 2001).

Mobilisation critical of the GATS has been facilitated via a series of communicative devices (e.g. face-to-face meetings, joint-protests and press conferences, joint-research, electronic sharing of data, and e-mail lists) operated across national borders on a global scale. However, the apparent 'global' characteristic to such activity is complicated by a series of additional findings. Firstly, the geographical spread of a critical GATS demand is uneven, with much activity peaking within EU countries. Secondly, the range of contestatory actions enacted (e.g. public protest, direct lobbying of government) appears to be contingent upon the regional or national political environment. It is here that discourse theory's wider relational understanding of political phenomena can aid understanding of not only critical GATS activity, but also similar moments of transnational campaigning. Discourse theory's utility is in its acknowledgement that the campaign does not signal a unitary event but is part of a much larger series of social practices including –

but not limited to – campaigns against other regimes of global governance as well as more local struggles. Discourse theory advances further than traditional perspectives on global advocacy movements (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998) by treating the relations involved as part of a much wider series of social practices. In other words, these movements are not isolated from other areas of society – whether at the global or national levels – but are contingent upon relations already existing there.¹

Throughout, the article works to assert the constitutive importance of relations between different demands (e.g. ‘environmentalism’, ‘developmentalism’) – and how they are articulated – to the collective action characteristic of political campaigns. This argument will be constructed via first outlining the utility of post-structuralist discourse theory, and then applying it to trace the articulation and sedimentation of a ‘global’ critical GATS demand. As will be argued, this approach enables enquiry into the nature of transnational campaigning to move beyond looking for ‘transnational advocacy networks’ or a ‘global civil society’, and instead to focus on the formation of the relations constitutive of the research subject.

2. Post-structuralist Discourse Theory

For discourse theory, ‘every social configuration is meaningful’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1990: 100). This is to emphasise that all social practices – including political phenomena – are contextual, relational and contingent (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 4; Howarth 2005: 317). Any social object – such as a global campaign, an advocacy group, or an international regime – obtains meaning to the extent that it establishes a system of relations with other objects (e.g. ‘advocacy groups’, ‘nation-states’), ‘and these relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the object, but are, rather socially constructed’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1990: 100). The term ‘discourse’ refers to this ‘systematic set of relations’, through which social objects achieve being (Laclau and Mouffe 1990: 100).

Every social object is understood to be discursive, though this does not mean that post-structuralist discourse theory is idealist (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 108). Rather, it has to do with the central argument of this approach, that is: social objects *cannot* constitute themselves as objects within the human world ‘outside any discursive condition of emergence’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 108). Hence, Laclau and Mouffe assert the *material* nature of discourse (2001: 108). Here, one must distinguish between *existence* and *being* so as to avoid unnecessary confusion. Everyday practices within the human world are based upon a series of interactions, in which the objects we utilize and are confronted with are inscribed with particular meaning. Thus, objects are ‘always given to us within discursive articulations’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1990: 103). Acutely put by Laclau and Mouffe ‘outside of any discursive context objects do not have *being*; they have only *existence*’ (emphasis added) (1990: 104). This is not to say that a set of individuals meeting at a table does not have existence outside of discourse, but it can only have *being* as a ‘critical GATS conference of advocacy groups’ within a certain sedimented series of social practices defined here as discourse.

2.1 Articulation

Discourses are the product of *articulation*, that which establishes a chain of relationships between social practices/objects such that their identity is modified as a result (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105). As said, it is this relational system, this 'structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice', that is understood here as 'discourse' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105). Collective action can be understood as relational sequences, modelled by Laclau and Mouffe through the twin logics of equivalence and difference (2001: 127-45). Focusing on these twin logics, it is necessary to also introduce the concept of the '*empty signifier*' and '*frontiers*'.

Logic of Difference: Protest movements are understood to be constituted by a series of different 'demands', e.g. 'anti-Third World poverty'; 'decentralise government'; 'support public transport'; 'better labour conditions'. Within the protest movement, these demands are the embodiment of a string of different subject positions, such as: 'development organisation'; 'trade union'; 'local government association'; 'environmental group'. The collective action of a protest movement is dependent upon a logic of difference. Though these demands may form a collective demand – such as 'Stop GATS', as in this case study – that collective action is only possible through the incorporation of difference.

Logic of Equivalence: However, in order for those different demands to collectively constitute a central unifying demand for the movement, it is necessary to have *equivalence* (Griggs and Howarth 2000: 55). The unifying demand provides the identity of the collective action, constructing a series of *equivalential chains* between each of the particular demands. Under the unifying demand – though they remain different – the particular demands are momentarily equivalent to one another, so that, for example, 'development organisation' = 'environmental group'. As said, this is a temporary equivalence – being dependent upon the unifying demand. The moment in which those differences constitute a single campaign, they are momentarily cancelled out 'insofar as they are used to express something identical underlying them all' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 127).

The unifying demand may be based on one of the particular demands, though it (temporarily) loses any particular content when it comes to signify the chain of equivalences constitutive of the collective action. Thus, Laclau describes the unifying demand as the '*empty signifier*' (2004: 280). The empty signifier makes it possible for there to be both different subject positions and an equivalential identity. As said, that emptiness is temporary because it remains as such for only as long as it serves as the point of equivalence between the different demands. Additionally, though the demands are temporarily equivalential to one another in that specific moment of collective action that is politics, they are not equal. The articulatory process sees a hegemonic struggle between demands, providing both the empty signifier and the complex discursive formation in which those demands operate together.

Critical to this unity is the creation of something which is outside the equivalential chain – its 'other', to which it is not equivalential. This is the construction of a *frontier* (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 125). In the case of 'anti-GATS' campaigning, the 'GATS' itself, the WTO, or some other institutions

(e.g. 'big business') are constituted as the 'other', depending on the particular discursive formation at play within the mobilisation.

2.2 Discourses as Unstable

Discourses are not static systems, but are inherently unstable and open to change. As Torfing states, 'the formative order of discourses is not a stable self-producing structure, but a precarious system, which is constantly subjected to political attempts to undermine and/or restructure the discursive context in the course of history' (2005: 14). That is, as constituted by a system of relationality between different social practices/object which are themselves discourses, any one discourse will be forever subject to the contingency upon which it is constituted. Yet, political phenomena are typically characterised by at least the appearance of stability. To understand how this is possible, it is useful to view discourses as *sedimentations*.

2.3 Sedimentation

Meaning is the product of a series of political battles, with any apparently stable discourse only appearing as such because it is the sedimentation of a string of previous battles (Hansen and Sørensen 2005: 96). Discourse, as constituted via a chain of relations constructed between other discourses, is constituted through the sedimentation of these other discourses and, thus, we can talk about social practices/objects as *sedimented discursive formations*. Sedimentation can be understood as similar to Freeden's concept of 'decontestation' within his analysis of ideology and political concepts (1996: 76). Political concepts such as 'liberalism' or 'conservatism' only achieve meaning via a decontestation of the word-concept relationship, so that one can claim '*This* is what liberty means, and *that* is what justice means' (Freeden 1996: 76) (emphasis in original). Political concepts, for Freeden, provide the meaning by which individuals gain the ability to think and act within the political world they inhabit (1996: 3). However, this creates an ineradicable tension. 'While the very nature of political concepts lies in their essential contestability, the very nature of the political process is to arrive at binding decisions that determine the priority of one course of action over another' (Freeden 1996: 76). Political action is dependent upon decontestation being possible because political phenomena – as institutions and decision-making structures – operate via aggregates and averages rather than difference. Sedimented discursive formations are thus the *sin qua non* of political phenomena.

2.4 'Global' Campaigns as Sedimented Discursive Formations

As a social practice, the act of campaigning is both meaningful (Laclau and Mouffe 1990: 100) and embedded within a particular series of relations (Howarth 2005: 317). The relations between groups facilitating 'global' campaigning may be seen as products of articulation, historically-contingent upon a wider discursive context in which new technologies have fostered new practices of communication.

In a perspective which sees all social objects – including political phenomena – as constituted via relational series, the series of relations embodied in a ‘global’ campaign are not necessarily unique. What distinguishes a ‘global’ campaign from any other political phenomena is its particular articulation. This articulation will include the series of practices shaping: who/what constitutes an actor within its political operation; the relations between those actors (e.g. the ‘balance of power’); the ‘good’ legitimating their collective action; and, the appropriate political behaviour to enact that ‘good’. In order for a ‘global’ campaign to be recognised as a social object, its articulation must have reached a certain degree of sedimentation. The degree of sedimentation may be evident in the extent to which one can describe the series of relations constitutive of the ‘global’ campaign as ‘formal’. For a ‘global’ campaign to be recognised as such, then, a discursive context is required that exceeds the campaign itself, in which must be present particular articulations of ‘governance’, ‘advocacy’, ‘nation-state’, and so on. A ‘transnational’ social object could not exist as such without the articulation of ‘nation-states’.

In addition, the social practices from which ‘global’ campaigns are sedimented extend to include both the wider social context, as well as the complex series of practices constituting the emergence of the individual advocacy groups.

Indeed, the genesis of the ‘global’ campaign does not begin when the already sedimented groups come together, but in the much longer articulatory process through which the groups themselves have emerged. This perspective is important because it contextualises ‘global’ campaigns within a historically-contingent process which has required not only the development of certain communicative devices, but also the formation of ‘solidarity’ arguably constitutive of – as will be seen in the case study – ‘development’ and ‘human rights’ groups. ‘Solidarity’ does not necessarily lead to the formation of ‘global’ campaigns because it depends on how it is articulated. In a broad sense, much variance can be observed between ‘development’ groups in the ‘North’ in terms of how they understand ‘solidarity’ with the ‘South’, for example, where some raise funds for specific communities whilst others advocate for change on ‘foreign trade’ or ‘aid’ policies as the expression of their ‘solidarity’.

The role of articulation is particularly evident in the moment of organising a campaign, where a high degree of contingency and change is visible. To illustrate this point, the article will now present case study research into political campaigning critical of the GATS. The analysis will trace out the articulation and sedimentation of a critical GATS demand at the centre of a transnational – or ‘global’ – campaign. However, historically-contingent conditions tied to specific geographical locations can be seen shaping the nature of the contestatory activity, so that a complex understanding of the relations involved is developed that acknowledges both variance and a certain constitutive equivalence between the campaigning groups. Variance and the role of historically-contingent conditions underlines that campaigns cannot be understood as unitary events but are constituted within a much wider discursive context.

3. The Discursive Articulation of a 'Global' Campaign

Campaigning activity critical of the GATS did not emerge in a vacuum, but was made possible through pre-existing networks – or equivalential chains – developed via earlier campaigns.

A Canadian activist prominent in the GATS campaign has said that much of the initial politicisation took place through other campaigns against the *Canadian-United States Free Trade Agreement* (CUSFTA), the *North American Free Trade Agreement* (NAFTA), and the OECD's *Multilateral Agreement on Investment* (MAI) stating that the 'experience that we went through...had a real impact upon mindsets about trade, and what trade can do, and in terms of changing an awful lot, and the impact that can have on people's lives'.² NAFTA was important because it provided the grounds for the development of tri-national relations between groups in Canada, Mexico, and the United States (Stillerman 2003). However, it was the MAI which provided the context in which the development of transnational relations between groups became most ambitious.

According to individuals from many of the groups that would become actively critical of the GATS, the MAI was more important than anything else in terms of creating the context in which GATS could become the focus of a 'global' campaign. For example, one activist interviewed saw the earlier campaign against the MAI as constituting the moment when much of what would facilitate critical GATS campaigning became possible, in terms of politicisation as well as resources, stating:

I think the MAI was quite similar in terms of both raising people's awareness about some of these international agreements – especially finance and investment agreements, and trade agreements – but also in raising people's awareness of the way in which you could use the internet in order to campaign globally. It put a very significant resource at people's fingertips that they've never had before.³

Whilst the internet had pre-existed the MAI campaign, it was the linkages formed through that earlier mobilisation that gave life to a community of websites and e-mail exchanges that would facilitate the dissemination of information constitutive of much of the collective action behind critical GATS campaigning. It is therefore important not to focus too much on the role of the internet alone, but on the linkages through which it would achieve a central role.

Canadian activists played an important role in linking GATS to the MAI. The MAI negotiations had collapsed in 1998 due to disagreement amongst the OECD member-states and its story became a 'victory' narrative for those advocacy groups which had formed transnational relations to campaign against it (Johnston and Laxer 2003; Egan 2001).

3.1 GATS as the 'Next MAI'

GATS was articulated as the 'Next MAI', deliberately tapping into the equivalential chains developed via the earlier campaign.⁴ In 1999, Ellen Gould - who was part of the *Council of Canadians*, which had been prominent within the MAI campaign - wrote an article that was distributed to other groups, which began with the following paragraph:

The lions are on the prowl, again. Just when victory over the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) had given us a chance to catch our breath, a new menace has been spotted in the tall grass of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) may yet prove to be the way the world's corporate lions get their MAI.⁵

The MAI was important to the GATS because some of the relationships and practices became sedimented - as made visible in the emergence of *Our World Is Not For Sale* (OWINFS).

3.2 OWINFS

OWINFS is an informal network of advocacy groups. It is based upon a global sign-on statement, an e-mail distribution list, telephone conference calls, and physical meetings.⁶ OWINFS included PSI, the Polaris Institute and the Council of Canadians amongst its members and would prove an important foundation to a critical GATS 'global' campaign. Its loose body of member-groups cover issues including gender equality, development, environment and human rights, which are aligned together to contest the WTO, as well as other multilateral trade agreements.⁷

The OWINFS network is informal, with no permanent staff. Work is carried out by volunteers from the member groups. Decision-making is claimed to be by consensus, and coordination is made possible via conference calls, though in both cases it is hard to see how this might be feasible with hundreds of organizations. Instead, much relies on what it describes as 'movement leaders'. These individuals are the ones reaching consensus, telephoning each other, meeting, and dominating e-mail-based sharing of information/analysis.⁸

Though some groups, such as *Polaris*, are prominent, the OWINFS membership remains loose - ostensibly based on those groups which have put their name to an OWINFS global sign-on statement. A global sign-on statement is an organization petition - a series of demands usually formed between a smaller set of campaigning groups which is then formally endorsed by other campaigning groups. The value of a sign-on statement is that it spreads awareness of an issue amongst groups, so that campaigning groups are effectively lobbying other campaigning groups to maximise their capacity. Sign-on statements help sediment relations into an equivalential chain, where often groups present the signature to a sign-on statement as indicative of their identity. Though potentially superficial, they do therefore help mark the initial articulation of the relational sequence constitutive of a 'global' campaign.

OWINFS emerged just prior to the Third WTO Ministerial Conference in 1999, presenting a sign-on statement titled ‘No New Round – Turn Around’ that was signed by 1500 organizations,⁹ and that formed the centre of a series of transnational negotiations and information-sharing exercises between advocacy groups seeking to affect the shape of global ‘trade’ management.¹⁰

3.3 A Critical GATS Transnational Campaign

It was after the Third WTO Ministerial Conference that OWINFS included a critical GATS demand, present within a new sign-on statement. Titled ‘*Shrink or Sink!*’,¹¹ it was articulated to bridge an emerging cleavage between those groups who were critical of the WTO and those who advocated its abolition.¹² Its signatory list has superseded ‘No new round – turn around’ to be indicative of ‘OWINFS’ membership. The statement was signed by 429 groups,¹³ less than a third of those on the original list. Whilst this suggests that sign-on statements are but only weak evidence for a ‘global civil society’, the articulatory process involved should not be underestimated.

‘Shrink or Sink!’ makes eleven key demands which are targeted at ‘our governments’, which include:

1. ‘No WTO expansion’;
2. ‘WTO Hands off: Protect Basic Social Rights and environmental sustainability’;
3. ‘Gut GATS: Protect Basic Social Services and public protections’;
4. ‘Stop Corporate Patent Protectionism - Seeds & Medicine are Human Needs, not Commodities’;
5. ‘No patents on life’;
6. ‘Food is a Basic Human Right: Stop the Agriculture Agreement Fraud and Calamity’;
7. ‘No Investment Liberalization’;
8. ‘Fair Trade: Special and Differential Treatment’;
9. ‘Prioritize Social Rights and the Environment’;
10. ‘Democratize Decision-Making’;
11. ‘Dispute the System’.¹⁴

The statement thus constructs a complex series of equivalential chains under the empty signifier ‘Shrink or Sink!’. Each of these eleven demands includes a paragraph creating further equivalential chains so that, for example, in the agriculture demand (no.6) a link is made between the different demands for reducing subsidies and ending ‘import liberalization’.¹⁵ The sign-on statement includes a series of general criticisms of the WTO regarding its ‘democratic, transparency and accountability deficits’, and a bias towards ‘wealthy governments and the corporate lobbies’.¹⁶ The equivalential chain of demands is therefore constructed against a frontier with the ‘other’ embodied by a shorter chain of equivalences between ‘WTO’, ‘wealthy governments’ and ‘corporate lobbies’. The sign-on statement concludes with a pledge for each of the signatories, to mobilise people ‘within our countries’, and to ‘support other people and countries who do so with international solidarity campaigns’.¹⁷ This narrative is similar to that found in the PSI-EI reports discussed earlier, except that the ‘WTO’ is seen as the problem rather than specifically the ‘GATS’. The cause remains the same, articulated here as ‘democratic, transparency and accountability deficits’, and ‘wealthy governments and the

corporate lobbies'. And, the solution repeats the same call for network activity, or 'international solidarity campaigns'.

3.4 A Critical GATS Demand and the Performance of 'Global Civil Society'

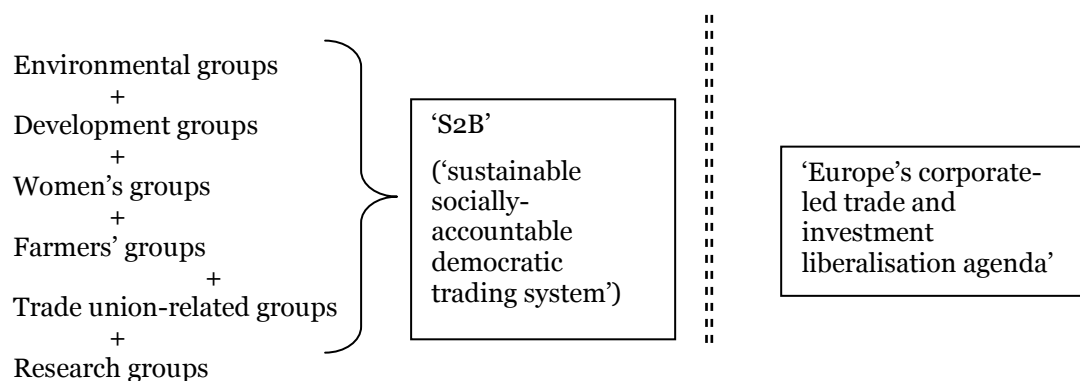
Apparent campaigning success against the MAI and the Seattle WTO Ministerial had created a potential problem for those involved because a question remained as to how to continue activity whilst not adopting demands with any degree of specificity that might limit the equivalential chain. If 'global civil society' is constituted by a particular series of practices (e.g. international meetings, joint-actions), failure to perform those practices means that it effectively disappears. The 'Shrink or Sink!' statement was one attempt to maintain transnational relations between groups, providing an equivalential link between two otherwise potentially contradictory demands. A UK-based activist with a high profile in anti-GATS activity has argued that the 'victory' at Seattle created both confidence for further campaigns but also many questions regarding where to take future activity, stating:

After Seattle, two things were clear. One was that the victory there gave people a lot of encouragement, it gave people a feeling that actually we can change things at this [global] level. We can influence things at this level. And, to empower people in that sense. But, I think on the other hand, it wasn't so clear about what to do next. We all went into Seattle with a general anti-WTO message, or a general reform the WTO message, wherever you were coming from. A lot of us came out of Seattle with an awareness that we need to be a bit more specific. We needed to develop our specific arguments about which bits of the WTO were wrong, and why.¹⁸

This gives an indication of the discursive process that took place in the build-up to a critical GATS demand at the centre of a series of relations suggestive of 'global civil society'. Another response to apparent success was the creation of a regional sub-body of OWINFS amongst groups in European Union member-states. These groups operated in countries that were represented at the WTO via an aggregated negotiating position held by the European Commission. EU groups which had signed the 'Shrink or Sink!' statement formed a regional network called '*Seattle to Brussels*' (S2B).¹⁹ One of its founders has described the network as:

[F]ormed in the aftermath of the Seattle WTO Ministerial Conference because we felt the need for more European coordination, and we ... unite ... very diverse groups of people and organizations, coming from environmental groups, development groups, women's groups, farmers' groups, trade union-related groups, research groups, etc, so it's a broad range of groups coming together, and what really unites us is our jointly challenging...*Europe's corporate-led trade and investment liberalisation agenda*, but we also want to promote the alternative and to work towards the development of a *sustainable socially-accountable democratic trading system* (emphasis added).²⁰

In this passage, there is evident use of an equivalential logic and the drawing of a frontier against the 'other'.

Figure 1. Articulating an advocacy network

To politicise 'trade', it was necessary to dislocate it from its abstraction as a technical issue, which meant confronting that technicalisation. The GATS provided a means to do that, as a WTO agreement around which specific arguments could be articulated. Within European activity critical of GATS, one of the most prominent activists would be Clare Joy of UK-based *World Development Movement* (WDM), who helped co-found S2B. Despite being at the centre of much mobilisation around GATS, she states:

I'm not actually that interested in GATS. What I'm interested in is the extent to which we can educate, empower and inform, and say that there are places where the market stops. And GATS is about that.²¹

It is in this context that campaigning around the GATS should be understood – not as focused specifically on one WTO agreement, but using it as a vehicle for wider demands. This fits within the model of such campaigning as formed via equivalential logics, where the central demand increasingly becomes emptied of specific content by its unifying role.

3.5 The Sedimentation of an 'Anti-GATS' Equivalential Chain

The articulation of a critical GATS demand from a particular demand to a unifying demand – the empty signifier – of an equivalential chain was a gradual process, but this articulation appeared increasingly sedimented where embodied within a series of communicative devices, including: physical meetings; telephone conference calls; e-mail lists distributing information, analysis and strategy news/proposals; and web-sites sharing documents. This has facilitated joint-actions such as: lobbying of politicians and civil servants; global sign-on statements; and, public protest.

Each of these expressions of collective action critical of the GATS sedimented a critical GATS demand at the centre of a complex series of relations, and was facilitated via a particular equivalential chain, though it should not be assumed that there was simply one chain. In this respect, Peter Hardstaff of *WDM* has stated that whilst networks like *Seattle to Brussels* were important, and though there was often overlap with certain individuals or groups present in multiple networks, 'there's no kind of *one* network (emphasis added)'.²² This point is important in that when arguing the existence of equivalential chains constituting the collective action of critical GATS campaigning, the

assertion is not that there was any one chain in particular. Instead, such collective action should be understood as a fluid process open to re-articulation, with the different moments of collective action (e.g. a joint-statement, a protest, an e-mail distribution list) representative of certain moments of sedimentation. This is particularly important with respect to the process in which certain demands become the empty signifier of the wider equivalential sequence. In other words, GATS campaigning was responsive to hegemonic struggles where, for example, a 'development' demand might be more dominant than an 'environmentalist' demand though both remain present. The different moments can be grouped together as constitutive of a wider mobilisation to the extent that they repeat a certain sedimentation that might be labeled as critical of the GATS, as is done here.

In January 2001, a website was created to provide access to the growing literature of critical reports on the GATS and ongoing developments in the negotiations. This was created as a collaboration between the *Transnational Institute* (TNI) and *Corporate Europe Observatory* (CEO), both based in Amsterdam, though in practice the website – *GATSWatch.org* – was the work of Erik Wesselius of *CEO* and *Friends of the Earth Netherlands*. According to Wesselius, his own perception at the time was that GATS had the potential to become the focus of a large campaign between many groups and so required its own critical website.²³ TNI were interested in being part of a project on the WTO and they had an already developed interest in public services, so that GATS became a means to combine the two areas.²⁴ Wesselius also set up an e-mail list (*GATSCrit*) for distributing news, which could be subscribed to via sending an e-mail to Wesselius via the *GATSWatch* website. He also set up a series of closed e-mail lists used for sharing strategy ideas, such as proposing joint protests, as well as distributing basic information such as mobile telephone numbers of other people working in groups critical of the GATS (e.g. *GATS-Strat*, *GATS-Euro*). The establishment of this GATS-specific communications infrastructure has been described as very important by those involved in the mobilisation.²⁵ Wesselius himself has argued that whereas information on certain issues is available through reading a daily newspaper, the media proved a relatively poor resource with respect to the GATS negotiations.²⁶ E-mail lists such as *GATSCrit*, he argues, have helped bring together 'a community of...people who work with different organizations who are pretty well-informed about what's going on with GATS'.²⁷ E-mail lists are also seen to overcome some of the problems encountered in physical meetings where there is a very limited amount of time in which to share information and discuss strategy.²⁸

The first GATS-specific global sign-on statement was launched in March 2001, under the name '*STOP the GATS Attack Now!*' and with 596 signatory organizations from 63 countries.²⁹ The statement was presented as a collective project, though some leadership came from the Canadian-based *Polaris Institute* within the context of the *OWINFS* network.³⁰ *Polaris* argued the need for such a joint-statement, producing the early drafts and coordinating suggested amendments, and helped form the links necessary to get the group signatures.³¹ Other *OWINFS* members, including *PSI*, fed into the re-drafting process as well as gathering signatures from other groups.³² *Polaris'* director was Tony Clarke, who had been prominent within activity critical of the MAI, as well as a leading figure within Canadian-based

campaigns against NAFTA and CUSFTA. His presence provided yet another bridge between GATS and these earlier moments of critical activity.

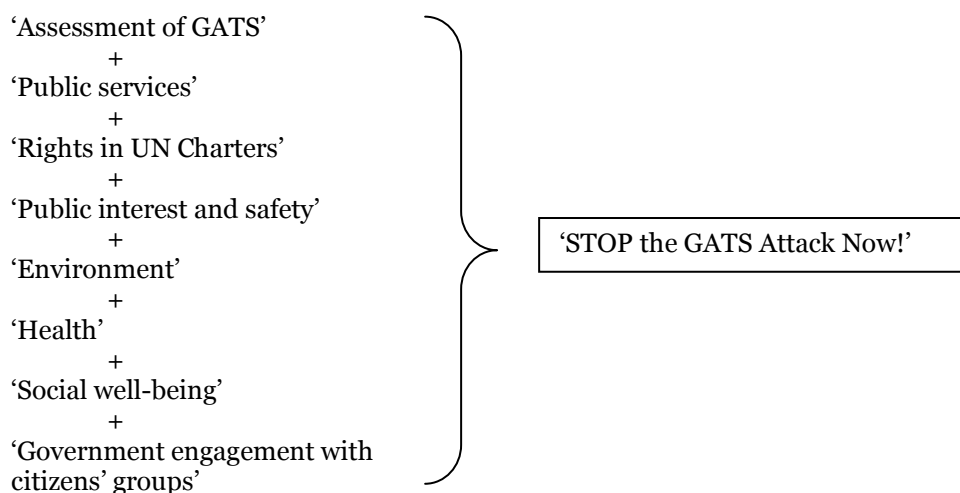
The *'Stop the GATS Attack Now!'* statement warns that the GATS negotiations threaten to:

[R]adically restructure the role of government regarding public access to essential social services worldwide to the detriment of the public interest and democracy itself.³³

This general theme is maintained but expanded so as to claim that the GATS 2000 will impact on social rights, as well as sectors including the environment, culture, natural resources, drinking water, health care, education, transportation, social security, postal delivery, and a variety of municipal services. The statement calls for a halt to the GATS negotiations until seven demands are met, which it lists as: (i) an assessment of the impact of GATS; (ii) confirmation of 'the role and responsibility of governments to provide public services ensuring basic rights and needs of their citizens' based on UN Charters'; (iii) to prevent pressure being applied against domestic regulation related to public interest laws and safety standards; (iv) to 'guarantee the right of governments to require ironclad safeguards for public services that may be threatened by global trade and investment rules'; (v) to provide incentives and resources to ensure all people receive public services 'based on peoples' needs rather than on ability to pay'; (vi) to ensure citizen organizations can participate in the formation of government positions and negotiation of multilateral trade/investment rules; and, (vii) to ensure 'rights and responsibilities of governments to enact and carry out laws' to protect environment, health, social well-being, and that such rules/regulations can be formed with participation of 'citizens' groups in all member countries'.³⁴

The statement represents a complex equivalential chain between several hundred organizations, though based on the seven demands it is possible to represent as:

Figure 2. The articulation of difference and equivalence in 'Stop the GATS attach now!'



For some campaigners the value of a sign-on statement is that it helps raise awareness of an issue amongst groups as well as mainstreaming a demand so

that governments are not able to dismiss it as on the margins.³⁵ However, he also argues that a potential problem is that activity for many groups stops at the level of adding their signature, with no following action.³⁶ Different groups who have signed a joint-statement will clearly have quite different degrees of involvement with that process as well as any resulting activity. In this same respect, quite obviously not all the demands present under a critical GATS demand can be said to be equally active. When discussing the formation of an equivalential chain, the argument is not that the demands are equal, but that they are articulated as equivalential, meaning that they temporarily merge under the unifying demand – the empty signifier. Sign-on statements serve various purposes, but the act of drafting the statement is, as one activist interviewed described it, an important and ‘painful political process [in its own right], where you’re constantly vying over the messages that you want to get across. Trying to do that within a national context is hard enough. Trying to do it globally actually brings to the forefront some of the political disagreements in a coalition, and that’s actually a really healthy process’.³⁷ The process of bringing political disagreements to the ‘forefront’ relates to the other side of the logic of equivalence – the logic of difference – without which the equivalential chain could not operate. Sign-on statements thus serve the dual purpose of ‘cooperation’ (the logic of equivalence) and ‘disagreement’ (the logic of difference).

In combination with the sign-on statement was a meeting and press conference held in Geneva, organized by the *Polaris Institute* and attended by groups from Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America in March 2001. *Polaris* was actively engaged in forging links with groups outside Canada, where according to Tony Clarke, ‘[w]e...programmatically worked at developing the capacities of our partner groups, and so forth, in both India and South Africa, to [critically] address [GATS] issues’.³⁸ This included organizing workshops criticizing GATS, as well as producing ‘various types of tools to be used in those countries in collaboration with partner groups’.³⁹ In Korea, *Polaris*’ Tony Clarke has spoken on GATS as a threat to public services, at an event organized by the *Korean Federation of Transportation, Public and Social Services Workers’ Unions* (KPSU).⁴⁰

In 2001 the WTO published ‘*GATS - Fact and fiction*’, which argued that criticism of the GATS by civil society groups consisted of ‘[s]care stories [which] are invented and unquestioningly repeated, however implausible’.⁴¹ The value of GATSWatch and the e-mail lists (such as ‘GATSCrit’) became evident in the context of the WTO’s publication, when they were used to facilitate a rapid counter-report. This was made possible after an urgent e-mail call was made on the GATSCrit list, distributing the WTO report prior to its public release. The report was first released to journalists before campaigners and so the matter of time was highly significant. In response, a critique of the WTO document was produced by *Friends of the Earth International*, which was then published on GATSWatch.⁴²

3.6 Unequal Mobilisation

Analyzing campaigning as a global mobilization is problematic because it risks suggesting a level of cohesiveness that is not necessarily present. Firstly, the geographical spread of campaigning has been far from even and, despite a

critical GATS demand having first been articulated within global trade union bodies such as *PSI* and *EI*, as well as Canadian groups such as *Polaris* and the *Council of Canadians*, much of the campaigning activity critical of the GATS has taken place in Western Europe. Secondly, the range of contestatory actions utilized in campaigning has been contingent upon the regional or national political environment.

GATS campaigning has had only a relatively low profile within 'developing countries'. John Kinuthia of the Kenyan-based *Consumer Information Network* (CIN) sees the 'global' campaign as 'multiple pronged', in that there are many different forms of activity that operate in parallel to slow down momentum towards the liberalisation of services.⁴³ He sees public protest and international meetings as only part of what is a much wider process to derail the GATS and challenge services liberalisation. The particular political regime within Kenya increases the costs incurred in a public protest, where past WTO-related protesters have suffered arrest and police imprisonment. CIN have worked closely with the Kenyan government, advising caution in GATS negotiations, as well as holding a seat within a national think tank – the Kenya National Committee on the WTO – that provides the government with information on how to negotiate at the WTO. CIN's interest in the GATS stemmed from the Seattle Ministerial. However, importantly, it has received financial support from Dutch organizations, which have invited John Kinuthia to attend forums held by the Dutch *GATS-Platform*, and take part in a lobby of the Dutch government. These forums have brought CIN into contact with prominent figures in campaigning around the GATS, including Erik Wesselius of *GATSWatch*, exchanging information. The *South African Municipal Workers Union* has had active involvement with groups in Canada, organizing workshops at which individuals from *Polaris* have been present, as well as commissioning Scott Sinclair of the *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives* to produce a report articulating GATS as a threat to public health in South Africa.⁴⁴ This supports Keck and Sikkink's 'boomerang' thesis – that 'Northern' groups provide additional leverage to groups in 'Southern' countries with closed governments. This is Kinuthia's 'multi-pronged' strategy.

Groups from the so-called 'developing' countries are said to have constituted the majority of those present at the 2004 Geneva meeting organized by *Polaris*, where campaigners shared strategy/critical research but also organized lobbying meetings with trade delegations representing 'developing' countries.⁴⁵ Related actions have included workshops run by the Geneva-based 'South Centre' – a group critiquing WTO policy from a 'development' perspective – where representatives of 'developing' countries have spent a week where GATS has been problematised.⁴⁶ Groups such as *PSI* have used the Geneva meeting as a means to engage in further lobbying actions between several groups with whom they were able to form links.⁴⁷ *OWINFS* has provided the means by which groups based in 'developed' countries have been able to financially support the involvement of those groups based in 'developing' countries so that, for example, in telephone conference calls that system is set-up in such a way that the better-resourced groups cover the cost.⁴⁸

4. Conclusion

Political campaigning critical of the GATS proves useful for a case study into the formation of transnational campaign activity because: firstly, it exhibits the communicative devices and actions through which mobilisation has been enacted; and, secondly, the uneven spread of a critical GATS demand complicates claims that it has been at the centre of a 'global' movement.

Post-structuralist discourse theory, as has been shown, is concerned not with the geographical character of campaigning activity, but with the articulatory process through which relations between alternative political demands form. As such, this approach moves beyond questioning to what extent activity suggests the existence of a 'Global Civil Society' (Taylor 2004) or 'Transnational Advocacy Network' (Keck and Sikkink 1998) and, instead, looks at that which constitutes the collective action central to campaigns – relations between alternate demands, and their articulation.

Furthermore, whilst a communicative device such as a global sign-on statement provides only weak evidence of a 'network' or 'society', the value of the articulatory process it represents becomes visible in a perspective focused on the formation of relations between different demands facilitative of collective action. In the case study, communicative devices (sharing of information and strategy proposals, telephone conference calls, and international meetings between groups with alternate demands) provide the character of – and the formative process for – a transnational campaign. Consequently, the research has viewed such practices as not only evidence of a transnational campaign, but also interesting in their own right as moments of collective action requiring a particular articulation of equivalential relationships.

A discourse theoretical perspective opens analysis up to investigating the process of sedimentation (or discursive formation), which occurs in the collective action of the campaigning moment. The same is true for those communicative devices not necessarily indicative of a campaign in themselves, but still signaling the collective action of politics.

And, because campaigns are understood to be dependent upon the formation of equivalential chains between alternate demands, a transnational campaign is better understood not as a unitary social object but as a particular moment of collective action constituted via a particular sedimentation of relations between social practices. Depending upon the wider discursive context – meaning that it is historically-contingent – the campaign will be alternately articulated so that certain demands will be more central to its operation at particular moments. Those demands – such as 'development' – are themselves each constituted via a relational series of social practices. In other words, it is a series of series of social practices *ad infinitum*. This is why it is not possible to talk of campaigns as unitary structures, but as the product of an articulatory process exceeding any single social object. This allows a better appreciation of both change and stability within campaigns, where the discursive formation will operate with different degrees of sedimentation. The above process can be seen in the case study, where a critical GATS TAN was facilitated through a historical series of campaigning moments including those critical of CUSFTA, NAFTA, the MAI, the Third WTO Ministerial conference,

but also many earlier moments in which relations between groups but also individuals had been first articulated.

Finally, if equivalential chains are understood to be central to any moment of politics – defined by collective action – then focusing on the series of relations constitutive of transnational campaigns situates them within the context of other political phenomena. As such, the ‘transnational’ character can be seen as a reflection of the particular historically-contingent context in which the campaign takes place – where new communicative devices have enabled the articulatory process to increasingly exceed the borders of the nation-state. Those devices are not extra-discursive – since they are part of the wider discursive context containing particular concepts of communication and human interaction – but they are intrinsically tied to the historical context and, therefore, point to the historically-contingent character of transnational campaigns. Their ‘transnational’ character does not abstract them from the same relational articulatory process of discourse to which all forms of collective action must be subject.

Notes

- 1 For further discussion on the relationship between discourse theory and transnational advocacy networks, please see Strange 2011.
- 2 Personal interview (8th April 2005)
- 3 Personal interview (16th June 2005).
- 4 Gould. E. (1999) *The Next MAI - The latest threat to Medicare and public education has some familiar teeth and claws* (Ottawa: Council of Canadians).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 On its website (see note 21), ‘OWINFS’ describes itself as a, ‘loose grouping of organizations, activists and social movements worldwide fighting against the current model of corporate globalization embodied in global trading systems. OWINFS is committed to a sustainable, socially just, democratic and accountable multilateral trading system’. This information was taken from their website, at: www.ourworldisnotforsale.org/index.asp.
- 7 In addition to the trade agreements held within the WTO framework, OWINFS lists the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP). OWINFS sees this agreements as linked via all being part of the ‘corporate-driven trade agenda’.
- 8 E-mail listservs are e-mails distributed to a subscribed and typically private list of contacts. Usually, any subscribed member can place information, which includes a mixture of analysis of trade policy developments amongst member-states, some relevant newspaper articles, and strategy proposals, as well as general announcements relevant to meetings. The content of these e-mails tends to be informal, ad hoc, with little sense of hierarchical control, though key names dominate with particular individuals serving as information-providers due to the research-nature of their organization.
- 9 This is according to the ‘OWINFS’ website, *op cit*.
- 10 The ‘No new round – turn around’ statement demanded that WTO member-states reject expansion of the WTO, and attracted one and a half thousand signatory organizations.

Specific reference is made to the collapse of the MAI, arguing that it ‘demonstrates broad public opposition to the deregulation of the global economy, the increasing dominance of transnational corporations and escalating resource use and environmental degradation’. The ‘WTO’ serves as the ‘other’ and is equivalentially linked to: ‘concentration of wealth in the hands of the rich few’; ‘increasing poverty for the majority of the world's population’; ‘unsustainable patterns of production and consumption’; ‘transnational corporations’; ‘undemocratic’; ‘untransparent’; ‘non-accountable’; ‘marginalise the majority of the world’s people’; ‘global economic instability’; ‘collapse of national economies’; ‘increasing inequity both between and within nations’; ‘increasing environmental and social degradation’; and, ‘globalisation’. On the opposite side of the frontier to this ‘other’, are ‘International civil society’; ‘workers’; ‘farmers’; ‘other people’; and, ‘the environment’. The statement demands a halt to any expansion of the WTO, and a review to address: ‘the WTO's impact on marginalised communities, development, democracy, environment, health, human rights, labour rights and the rights of women and children. The review must be conducted with civil society's full participation’. The statement is available at: www.twinside.org.sg/title/turn_cn.htm. (Last accessed May 2011).

- 11 The ‘Our World is not for Sale: WTO – Shrink or Sink!’ sign-on statement is available at the ‘OWINFS’ website, as well as being published on several member organization sites, including ‘The Council of Canadians’, *op cit*.
- 12 This was stressed by Nicola Bullard of *Focus on the Global South*. Personal interview.
- 13 This figure was taken from the Council of Canadians website and is said to be correct as of 8th August 2003.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid. A general paragraph encompassing the principles behind these demands is included in the ‘Shrink or Sink!’ statement. It states: ‘We need to protect cultural, biological, economic and social diversity; introduce progressive policies to prioritize local economies and trade; secure internationally recognized economic, cultural, social and labor rights; and reclaim the sovereignty of peoples and national and sub national democratic decision making processes. In order to do this, we need new rules based on the principles of democratic control of resources, ecological sustainability, equity, cooperation and precaution’.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Interview carried out 5th April 2005, shortly after Clare Joy had left the World Development Movement.
- 19 A complete list of S2B members is available online: www.s2bnetwork.org.
- 20 This was stated during a workshop organized by the Seattle to Brussels network at the Third European Social Forum, held in London, October 2003.
- 21 Personal interview (5th April 2005).
- 22 Personal interview (20th May 2005).
- 23 Personal interview (31st March 2005).
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 For example, this was stated in an interview with Marc Maes (13th February 2005) of the Belgium network 11.11.11.
- 26 Personal interview (1st February 2005).
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.

- ²⁹ The full statement is available online at: www.polarisinstitute.org. (Last accessed: July 2006).
- ³⁰ According to interview with Tony Clarke, *Polaris Institute*. The coordinating role of *Polaris* within *OWINFS* was also mentioned in an interview with Erik Wesselius (1st February 2005).
- ³¹ According to interview with Tony Clarke (8th April 2005), *Polaris Institute*.
- ³² Based on interview with Mike Waghorne, PSI.
- ³³ Available at website of the Polaris Institute, *op cit*.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*.
- ³⁵ Personal interview (16th June 2005).
- ³⁶ *Ibid*.
- ³⁷ Personal interview (5th April 2005).
- ³⁸ Personal interview (8th April 2005).
- ³⁹ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁰ The notes from this talk were available online at: http://www.polarisinstitute.org/polaris_project/public_service/articles_presentations/kp_su_pres_oct_04.pdf (Last accessed: July 2006)
- ⁴¹ Available online at: www.wto.org (Last accessed: May 2011).
- ⁴² Available online at: www.gatswatch.org (Last accessed: May 2011).
- ⁴³ Based on response to questions sent via e-mail.
- ⁴⁴ Based on response from SAMWU to questions sent via e-mail. The report was titled *The GATS and South Africa's National Health Act – A Cautionary Tale*.
- ⁴⁵ Based on interview with Tony Clarke (8th April 2005).
- ⁴⁶ Based on interview with John Hillary (7th April 2005).
- ⁴⁷ Based on interview with Mike Waghorne (16th June 2005).
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

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