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A European identity in global campaigning? Activist groups and the *Seattle to Brussels (S2B)* network

What does it mean when activist networks describe themselves as 'European' or 'Global'? Existing studies into the geographic character of such networks have focused on the interplay between multiple 'levels'. However, there is a need for greater research on the discursive function played by geographic descriptors within the formation of activist networks. This article examines the use of multiple geographic descriptors to articulate a particular activist network – the 'Seattle to Brussels' (S2B) network – consisting of European-based groups contesting the form of multilateral trade governance embodied in the WTO. To map out how groups forged relations with one another under a 'European' identity, the article applies a discourse theoretical analysis to extensive empirical data including interviews with activists and participant observation at key events. The article has relevance to understanding both how transnational protest networks are formed and the role of multiple geographic signifiers in global politics.

INTRODUCTION

Governance is increasingly global and yet it lacks a similarly global citizenship by which to contest its development.¹ Scholars searching for an embryonic global citizenship point to social movements that have spread beyond national borders.² Nowhere is this more apparent than in the politics of global trade governance, made explicit every time protesters converge around World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings.³ To maintain protests that straddle national borders, social movements contesting the WTO must somehow incorporate a wide diversity of political groups from multiple territories. Prominent amongst these trade-focused protest networks has been the 'Seattle to Brussels' (S2B) network that positions the collective action carried out within its loose structure as a European division of an otherwise global network contesting the WTO. The name 'Seattle to Brussels' rhetorically links a key event in the narrative of global social movements – large scale protests against the WTO's third Ministerial Conference in late 1999 – to the administrative heart of the European Union.

Geography plays a highly symbolic value for protest networks that transcend traditional political communities – where there is a need to establish new locations in which to base their demands.⁴ In the case of the S2B network, three geographic levels are combined – that is, in addition to claiming itself as representative of ‘European’ and ‘Global’ civil society, it emphasises the national origins of its individual member groups. Geography would seem to be an increasingly minor factor for social movements where new technologies of cheaper travel and digital communication foster new virtual protest communities.⁵ However, as is apparent in the case of the S2B network, geography has a particular significance – otherwise, why not just be ‘Global’ and omit other geographic descriptors?

The article speaks to these issues through analysing what function a European identity plays within the S2B network. It asks both what function the European identity serves for the member groups, and how it relates to the global and national levels linked within the network. For a transnational protest network such as S2B to engage in collective action, it must somehow coordinate activist groups towards joint-strategy and protest. How does the claim to be ‘European’ help establish the collective identity uniting the network’s membership?

The article is structured as follows. Section one considers how transnational protest networks work towards collective action. Even relatively heterogeneous networks develop some form of common identity by which to link individual actions as part of a wider project. As will be argued, the use of geographic signifiers by protest networks should be viewed within this context. Geographic signifiers – whether the nation-state, region, or the globe – help networks: form collective identities; build relations between member groups; and, be represented to those outside the network. To understand how the political demands of different groups are brought together within a common identity, the article adopts a discourse theoretical methodology.⁶ Discourse theory models the relational process through which particular demands become linked, and the role different signifiers play, as section two demonstrates where analyzing the articulation of the ‘Seattle to Brussels’ (S2B) network. Drawing upon participant observation, textual analysis and qualitative interviews with key practitioners, the article considers how a ‘European’ geographic signifier has helped S2B form a collective identity, build relations between groups, and represent a common network. Section three concludes that geography, as the case demonstrates, plays a central role within the formation of collective identities at the heart of transnational protest networks. Activists working beyond national borders must be well versed in using multiple geographic signifiers if they are to bring together groups rooted in diverse territories. Studying how geographic signifiers are used within these networks, as well as how multiple geographies are negotiated, is therefore crucial to better understanding contemporary global politics.

GEOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY IN TRANSNATIONAL PROTEST NETWORKS

For any protest network to function and engage in collective action, the network must somehow coordinate its potentially diverse membership towards joint-strategy and protest. The task of

forming relations between multiple activist groups each with their own particular political demands is not made easier where those relations span national borders. However, transnational protest networks have managed to overcome geographical barriers to be recognised as a significant force within global politics.⁷ Geographers have contributed substantially to how these networks are presently understood, identifying the dynamic processes via which activists interact across multiple levels and borders.⁸ Local campaigns have ‘upscaled’ to the global level, extending their geographical origins to new sites of protest.⁹ Campaigns that may have begun in a narrowly defined location build connections with issues and activists that redefine the spatial dynamics of the network.¹⁰ Traditional levels are reimagined through the physical links built between activists, challenging hierarchical orders in which the local is placed below the national, regional, and global.¹¹

The relations between activists may be thick or thin depending on the frequency and strength of their interaction.¹² Through several media, spanning physical meetings to closed email lists and telephone conference calls, activists must identify their campaign target/s and develop a common vocabulary by which to frame their collective action – whether it is a protest or a joint-petition.¹³ The establishment of reciprocal relations between activist groups facilitates a form of dialogue that, in time, can be expected to have a feedback effect on the character of those relations and the groups in question.¹⁴ Even where social movements are rarely homogenous, the actions carried out in their name require commonly shared identities by which they acquire meaning and resonance for the wider membership.¹⁵ The article understands collective identities to be both prescriptive and retrospective – that is, shaping the initial collective action but also afterwards giving it a particular meaning as a moment of collective action. Geographical signifiers – whether based on the nation-state, region, or a post-territory concept of the global – are one way in which social movements may form a collective identity.

Transnational social movements cross national borders but the representation of different countries or regions is typically uneven.¹⁶ Consequently, research should apriori problematise the descriptive value of any claim that a particular social movement is ‘Global’ or ‘European’. Such claims frequently mask significant disparity between what influence groups from different geographical territories have within the movement. Therefore, rather than treat geographical signifiers as descriptive of the movement, this article asks what part they play in forming a collective identity. In this respect, the article is concerned with how geographical signifiers relate to three core aspects of the movement’s identity. These are as follows. First, how do these geographical signifiers fit within the collective identities used by movements? Second, how do geographical signifiers help establish the movement’s constitutive relations (i.e. between members)? And, third, what part do geographical signifiers serve in representing the movement?

To answer these questions, the article applies a discourse theoretical methodology to the role of a European identity within the ‘Seattle to Brussels’ network – focusing upon its formative campaign, critical of negotiations to expand the WTO’s General Agreement on Trade-in-Services (GATS). Discourse theory treats all social objects – including political phenomena – as constituted within a particular series of relations.¹⁷ The relations between groups facilitating

transnational social movements are the product of articulation, historically contingent upon a wider discursive context in which new technologies have fostered new practices of communication.¹⁸ As Griggs and Howarth have argued,¹⁹ how advocacy groups and individuals form collective identities in response to crises and destabilising events (e.g. the erosion of labour protections) in their environment is not pre-given but, rather, is subject to a constant process of renewal or re-articulation as both their own collectivity and context alters. What distinguishes a movement that claims to be 'European' or 'Global' from any other 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; the 'good' legitimating their collective action; and, the appropriate behaviour to enact that 'good'.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Protest networks are usually not shy in expressing their political demands. The political demands representing both the unified movement and the inclusion of different groups need to be expressed in an explicit form accessible to at least the network's member groups. The article approaches the role of geographical signifiers – and a European identity in particular – in the 'Seattle to Brussels' network within the context of campaigning critical of the WTO's General Agreement on Trade-in-Services (GATS). Political demands are primarily identified through incidences where groups prominent within the network publicly express the movement's identity – within both publications (including critical reports, joint-letters, pamphlets)²⁰ related to the anti-GATS campaign and speeches given at public events. The material on which the analysis is based was collected during a research project conducted during 2003 to 2006. This data evidences how S2B was initially formed and what role a European identity played in the process. In particular, the data was collected at a number of key events related to the then highly unstable meaning of Europe where new member-states greatly expanded the descriptive content of the signifier. Changes to the composition of the European Union provided a background social context in which advocacy groups articulated their particular use of the signifier 'Europe' at the centre of S2B's collective identity. In addition to textual analysis of campaign documents and speeches, the research is based upon participant observation and qualitative interviews which served to further trace how activists and advocacy groups utilized a European identity within S2B. Additional data was obtained via internal campaign evaluations produced by the activists.²¹

Interviewees were selected in two stages: first identifying activist groups across Europe prominent within either S2B's anti-GATS campaign literature or public events; and, second through snowballing an expanded list based on information gained via the first round of interviews. In total, twenty interviews were conducted. Whilst in itself a small dataset, the interviewees selected were mostly individuals identified as prominent within the formation, operation, and overall articulation of the network. This allowed the research good access to understand how these key figures within the network utilized geographic signifiers. To gather a more detailed analysis of how S2B is understood by actors either outside, or on the periphery of, the network it would be

necessary to collect data from a larger set of interviewees. All activists interviewed spoke in their capacity as representatives of the particular advocacy groups collectively forming S2B.²² Participant observation took place at events where S2B's members met, including network-specific meetings and more general debates in which the network was expressed to the public and media including at Third European Social Forum hosted in London, October 2004, and a meeting organised between Western and Eastern European groups in Budapest February 2005. The research discussed here is primarily focused on European groups due to the particular character of the S2B network. The analysis is structured around the three core questions introduced above: how a European identity facilitated S2B's collective identity; where a European identity helped build relations between its member groups; and, what part a European identity played in representing S2B as a network. The analysis begins with an introduction to S2B.

THE 'SEATTLE TO BRUSSELS' (S2B) NETWORK

'Seattle to Brussels' (S2B) claims to be the European branch of the global network 'Our World Is Not For Sale' (OWINFS); both networks campaigning on issues related to a general demand for increased democracy and social inclusion within global economic governance. S2B represents seventy-three groups with a broad range of advocacy interests – 'development, environment, human rights, women and farmers organisations, trade unions, social movements as well as research institutes' – from nineteen European nation-states.²³ As will be explained, S2B helped facilitate the collective action necessary for the formation of a GATS-specific critique of the WTO. The network is informal, made visible through regular meetings and telephone conference calls towards the production of joint-letters, publications, press conferences, and protests.

As one activist commented when interviewed, activity critical of the GATS was not confined to one single network of groups but, instead, took place through a web of overlapping networks.²⁴ Equally, there was not one single collective identity but several to which individual groups could associate themselves. Most evidently, protest activity around the GATS was subject to a near-constant process of re-articulation as the political environment shifted. The material presented in the following sections is intended to help analyse how a European identity featured within this process.

THE FORMATION OF A EUROPEAN IDENTITY

The name 'Seattle to Brussels' respectively draws a link between the site of the landmark protest against a key WTO Ministerial conference and the heart of the European integration project. This link needs to be understood in the context of both the campaign action around Seattle in 1999, and the decision-making structure of the WTO in which the European Commission represents all EU member-states at the WTO.²⁵ S2B is more than a name in that it carries with it a particular narrative. It emerged in the wake of mass protests against the World Trade Organization's third Ministerial

Conference in late 1999, hosted by the city of Seattle. All forms of collective action require shared narratives and myths through which to articulate a common goal whilst incorporating the otherwise divergent demands of the individual groups. Part of the mythology included both the Seattle protests as well as an earlier victory in 1998 against proposals for a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI).

Negotiated within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the MAI was intended to liberalise regulations governing investment between OECD member-states.²⁶ A transnational anti-MAI social movement emerged in the sense that groups in Asia, North America and Europe managed to establish a series of meetings and communication channels through which analysis critical of the MAI was rapidly disseminated amongst national campaigns. The MAI negotiations collapsed when France – which had experienced widespread campaigning based on the fear that the MAI threatened cultural protections – exited.²⁷ National campaigns such as the one in France owed their success to the transnational movement, which had given access to a draft of the MAI negotiating text that many had found unobtainable until a Canadian group acquired it from a private contact.

The Seattle protests that took place in the following year owed much to the network of relations that had emerged in the MAI campaign – given impetus after the MAI's collapse. What became known as the 'Battle in Seattle' serves as a historical landmark, both celebrated and feared respectively by critics and proponents of the WTO. The WTO failed to produce agreement amongst its Member-states who fell into the antagonistic camps of 'developed' and 'developing' countries. To what extent the protesters helped flame this antagonism, or rather factors more directly connected to the regime and its membership directed events, remains a contentious point. For protesters critical of the WTO there was a clear link between their actions and the failure to launch a proposed new round of negotiations – then titled the 'Millennium Round' – at Seattle. Mass protests at Seattle included solidarity protests in other major cities around the world and were seen by the activists involved as a success story when the meeting failed to achieve the launch of the so-called 'Millennium Round'. Mobilisation against the Seattle meeting owed much of its activity to relations established within the loose network 'Our World Is Not For Sale' (OWINFS). In the immediate aftermath of OWINFS' involvement with Seattle, the relations formed between groups that had been involved created a political vacuum. Amidst a sense of self-empowerment, activists were faced with the question of where to go next. An activist prominent at the time explained that this uncertainty led to the realisation that their critique had to be narrowed down: 'We needed to develop our specific arguments about which bits of the WTO were wrong, and why'.²⁸

Discussions between groups based predominantly in North America, Western Europe and parts of Asia (mainly Thailand and Malaysia) led to activists exploring the potential of campaigning around single WTO trade agreements. The WTO's General Agreement on Trade-in-Services (GATS) was argued by dominant groups based in Canada as a new MAI, threatening domestic sovereignty over provision of public services. These discussions spread so that groups elsewhere became involved. At the same time, as the Seattle protests evolved into a series of

narrower critiques, several groups based in Europe decided to respond to the European Commission's role as a dominant force within WTO negotiations.

Many of those groups involved in creating a European movement critical of the WTO already worked with a European identity. For example, one of those groups dominant in what would become the 'Seattle to Brussels' (S2B) network was *Friends of the Earth Europe* (FOEE) – the European arm of the worldwide environmental group. Equally, others had a EU-focused critique already well-established within their agenda – such as the *Corporate Europe Observatory* (CEO), which campaigns against business lobbyist influence in EU governance. The first S2B meeting in April 2000 built upon these groups who already campaigned within a European identity. In addition, however, the formation of S2B was much influenced by groups who lacked an explicit European identity, such as the UK-based *World Development Movement* (WDM).

S2B's European identity was articulated in its name ('to Brussels') and frequent reference to Europe in campaign publications produced in the name of the movement. For example, in July 2001 S2B published a report framing GATS as a threat to democracy, in which the European Commission was presented as the target of their action – as the aggressor threatening democracy in both Europe and developing countries.²⁹ Workshops were organised at key events like the European Social Forum, where new groups were invited to join S2B.³⁰ In March 2003, S2B was used to organise a series of protests and publicity stunts as a 'European day of action against GATS', with groups emphasising the 'European' identity of their actions within press releases.³¹

Drawing upon a discourse theoretical framework, the next section analyses how distinct political demands held by different advocacy groups were brought together under a European identity in the formation of the S2B network.

MAKING EUROPEAN FRIENDS

Discourse theory steers research to focus on the series of individual demands (e.g. 'Save the Environment', 'End Poverty') brought together in the name of the collective movement (i.e. 'Stop the GATS!'). Within the movement, these demands each represent an individual position linked to either one or several member groups. The movement will be dependent upon unifying these different demands, however temporarily, yet it must also first find the means to express these differences between the members' demands if they are all to be incorporated later. This is what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe term the 'logic of difference'.³² Individual advocacy groups and activists each come with their own often deeply entrenched political demands – whether related to the environment, development, or labour rights, for example – such that the possibility of their collective action hinges on ensuring that these particular demands are not effaced. The counterpart to expressing difference – the 'logic of equivalence' – designates the moment in which a central unifying demand emerges behind which those particular political demands may be seen as equivalent to one another.³³ This equivalence between the multiple political demands is temporary since the unity of the movement is dependent upon ensuring both the individual demands and

unifying demand are articulated.³⁴ The unifying demand has to stand in for each of the particular demands incorporated within the movement. To serve this function, the unifying demand has to be effectively emptied of any specific content that might otherwise exclude some of the particular demands. In other words, the unifying demand has to be what Laclau describes as an ‘empty signifier’.³⁵

If the collective identity of a movement is expressed in terms of a geographic signifier – as, for example, ‘European’ in the case presented here – it acts as an empty signifier and so loses the content through which it would otherwise describe a specific geographic territory. However, geographic signifiers like ‘Europe’ come with a series of meanings of which they cannot be entirely emptied. Movements choosing to use these signifiers within their collective identities must somehow adapt the prior meanings of geographic signifiers to their specific purpose.

To establish the relations necessary for any social movement to form, where used, geographic signifiers must be able to be relatively flexible such that they can accommodate multiple political demands. Equally, as much as movements must be inclusive, Laclau and Mouffe stress the importance of exclusion.³⁶ Against the empty signifier unifying the movement’s particular demands, it needs to be clear what the movement is not – what the movement is against. This is usually not a problem for social movements since they are inherently antagonised against, for example, a certain policy proposal. Where geographic signifiers feature within the movement’s collective identity, the construction of a frontier defining the movement’s borders works somewhat differently since, for example, geographic lines do not necessarily mirror alternate policy positions. Geographic signifiers potentially exclude many groups who might yet share the same political demands embodied within the network. How geographic signifiers impact what relations may be formed within a movement is particularly interesting in the type of case considered in this article, where a movement has used multiple geographic signifiers.

The article understands the process of linking different groups under a collective identity as involving a tension between both the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence, as defined above. The formation of S2B was dependent upon a European identity that helped build a temporary equivalence between a broad range of political demands whilst maintaining the expression of their more established individual political demands. For example, at the London European Social Forum in October 2003, a prominent activist within S2B described the movement as follows:

[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 organisations, coming from environmental groups, development groups, women’s groups, farmers’ groups, trade union-related groups, research groups, etcetera, 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).³⁷

In this passage, there is evident use of an equivalential logic and the drawing of a frontier against the ‘other’ (see Figure 1). S2B is not a group but a movement in which groups each with quite distinct political demands are temporarily united. The temporary nature of this unity is important where these groups will often campaign on issues that fall outside the remit of the trade politics contested in S2B. Modelled as both difference and equivalence, as in figure 1, the quoted passage first acknowledges the individual identities. Only after doing so are they united under a common identity, temporarily made equivalent to each other as ‘European’ and supportive of a ‘sustainable socially-accountable democratic trading system’. A frontier marks this unity as distinct to an alternative Europe – one that is ‘corporate-led’. Although not included in the model, on the right hand side of the frontier might also be located the ‘non-European’. S2B is by no means presented as opposed to those outside of Europe, yet its European identity must rest on the non-European being outside the network.

Figure 1. The discursive articulation of the *Seattle to Brussels* network

For activists involved, the motivation for being part of a European network was four-fold. First, it provided what one prominent Dutch activist described as ‘a basis of trust, a network of people whom you know, that may be interested to join in certain activities’.³⁸ Physical proximity meant activists could meet frequently with minimal cost. The functioning of S2B depended upon a select group of individuals representing their own groups but working in close collaboration with one another. The ‘European’ identity of S2B linked those activists through a series of shared experiences as campaigners working within a European political landscape – both in terms of similarities between their national contexts and a joint interest in targeting the European Commission.

Second, it helped facilitate the dissemination of critical information and analysis between European groups and deployed in national-level lobbying of governments. The position taken by the European Union at the WTO meant that positions of individual EU member-states on the GATS were linked as a common voice. National campaigns were therefore dependent upon what happened in other European capitals. The process of EU policy formation necessitated joint-European action by activists interested in influencing the outcome. All activists interviewed emphasised that campaigning targeted at the national-level made extensive use of European-wide coordination within the context of S2B. However, it should be noted that the flow of critical information and analysis was far from uneven, being dominated by groups based in Brussels, Amsterdam, and London.

Third, it allowed coordination amongst national-level campaigns to show an alternative vision of European integration to that claimed by the European Commission. Projecting an alternative Europe was important to GATS campaigning so as to defuse frequent counter-criticism that anti-GATS groups were either anti-globalisation or Eurosceptic. Part of S2B’s campaign activity took the form of direct lobbying of EU Commission officials. Meetings were held between a sub-set of S2B-connected activists and the Commission’s trade directory secretariat. These also included at least one case of a more public ‘debate-style’ meeting at which the then EU Commissioner for trade Pascal Lamy participated. GATS became part of a larger contestation over the meaning and shape of European integration. Significantly, in the aftermath of the anti-GATS activity described above, several activists present in S2B would later be active in the ‘No’ campaign during national referendums in France and Holland over attempts to create an EU constitution.

Fourth, a European identity provided a confidence-building function for campaigners, allowing national campaigners to persuade other groups within their countries that the campaign could attract public attention based on what was happening elsewhere in Europe. For example, one activist stated:

[B]eing able to say to UK activists that there are people in Italy, people in France, people in Belgium, all...[campaigning against GATS], actually gave people a sense of ‘That’s quite inspiring’...You know, to actually inspire people as a European movement. The European identity is important in itself.³⁹

Many groups operated in national contexts where it was initially difficult to attract interest in critiquing the GATS for fear that it tapped too closely into more contentious issues over the role of the market in society. The United Kingdom was one such example where dominant NGOs were afraid to question the market. Anti-GATS activists based in the UK looked then to S2B as a form of security to support their action, with the consequence that several UK groups became highly influential in the overall network.⁴⁰ Interviewees highlighted other significant cases such as the anti-GATS campaign in Austria that organised a large-scale protest in Vienna but was heavily dependent for its critical analysis on groups in Amsterdam and London.

Campaigning in Austria constituted a mass movement with a national identity but that relied extensively upon the 'European' level exchange of information made possible through S2B.⁴¹ The *Stopp GATS* campaign was a collaboration between *ATTAC Austria*, *Greenpeace Austria*, local trade unions, including a students' union, and an 'anti-poverty' network representing many church groups. These organizations operated as the driving body. Surrounding this core group, were around fifty supportive organizations, including environmental groups, women's groups, a chamber of labour, church groups, some trade unions, development groups, and youth groups. These supportive groups carried out strategies and helped to spread information. The organizers saw the campaign as being based upon three main instruments: 1) information; 2) lobbying; and, 3) activism. Information was gained via connections with groups outside of Austria via networks such as *S2B* and *OWINFS*, and their websites and e-mail distribution lists. Those involved cite a Dutch activist prominent with S2B as an important figure within their campaign, despite never having met him in person during the campaign that came to a climax in 2003. Within Austria, further information was collected via connections with groups in Germany, and disseminated through the organization of a regular series of workshops and special days for critical education on the GATS. The campaign began in 2002. In 2003, lectures and workshops criticising GATS were taking place with a speaker somewhere in Austria every week. This allowed the campaign to reach an ever-wider audience. Information was also provided to members of the Austrian parliament, as well as the media, all of whom were previously uninformed on GATS.

Lobbying was targeted at the national and local levels. At the national level, political parties were contacted by letter, requesting their opinion on the GATS. The answers were then publicised. Apart from addressing the political parties as a unified campaign, the member organizations mobilised their memberships to write as individual citizens to each Austrian Member of Parliament, expressing their concern over GATS. In these letters, the demands were laid out clearly as follows: 1) halt the current negotiations; 2) evaluate the effects of earlier liberalisation prior to further negotiations; and, 3) accountability of government for high quality public services should be in the Austrian constitution. All towns and community councils were sent letters in which the *STOPP GATS* presented themselves as allies, warning local government against the potential centralising powers of an expanded GATS. The effect was that nearly 300 local councils signed a resolution to the Austrian government to halt its GATS negotiations.

In terms of activism, there were two separate days of protest. The first took place outside the parliament building, in Vienna, in November 2002, when 188 activists each carried an

information pack critical on the GATS, intended for each of the 188 parliamentary members. As each MP arrived to work, they were presented with a pack. This event was organized in agreement with the Socialist and Green parties, whose MPs came out to meet the protesters and collect their packs. The effect of this day was to create a media presence, reaching the evening news and good press coverage, but also creating awareness within the parliament building, where it was said the folders, in a bright colour, could be seen being carried throughout the parliamentary corridors. The second day of protest was on a more national-scale, involving 200 towns and small communities, in Spring 2003, with activists publicly marking what they alleged to be threatened services, such as schools, hospitals, and train stations. The activists stood outside the various buildings, providing information to people using the service within. This was helped by the municipal council of Vienna adopting, in March 2003, a resolution requesting further assessment of GATS, access to the Austrian negotiating position for local government, and rejecting any further liberalisation of public services.

For those involved, the campaign was a success for four reasons. First, it increased a critical awareness of the GATS amongst both members of parliament and the public. Second, it was seen as helping to force the Austrian government into providing more information on its requests and offers made within the GATS negotiations. Third, it created a wider debate around public services with many politicians openly declaring themselves in favour of publicly funded services. Finally, despite the complexities of the GATS, the *STOPP GATS* campaign was seen as important for developing stronger civil society in Austria, opening up opportunities for further campaigns and actions.

A similar story was repeated in Belgium, led by a mixture of work in the French-speaking regions influenced by *ATTAC France*, and activity in Flanders made possible via the *11.11.11* network.⁴² By Autumn 2004, 55% of all Flemish communes had agreed motions against GATS and its implications for water services. Significantly, these signatories included Antwerp and Gent. Due to the work of *ATTAC*, even Belgium's capital signed an anti-GATS motion. This campaign included radio commercials criticising the GATS as a 'threat' to water provision. As with the Austrian case, activity in Belgium utilized S2B as a means of obtaining key critical information on the GATS as well as sharing strategy.

The next part of the analysis will consider how S2B's European identity was discursively linked to a broader global identity within GATS campaigning.

BRIDGING A EUROPEAN AND GLOBAL IDENTITY

For geographic signifiers to help form the collective identity of a movement, they must help represent the movement. Representation is both self-produced but also referential – where those outside the movement describe it. Claims to being 'European' are therefore subject to contestation by those excluded from the movement, as well as being potentially reproduced or somehow altered. Where the use of geographic signifiers to represent the movement remains relatively stable and

consensual amongst actors both inside and outside the movement, that particular discursive articulation of the movement can be seen as sedimented. Discourse theory treats meaning as 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.⁴³ How geographic signifiers may be utilised to represent the movement is determined by how those signifiers have been previously sedimented – what prior meanings they convey, as discussed above – but also past movements through which at least part of the movement's membership have been aligned. As the case study of anti-GATS activity shows, transnational social movements do not emerge in isolation but take place within a history of earlier moments of collective action, such as other campaigns. Histories of mobilisation bring their own meanings to how movements form collective identities, and what role geographic signifiers play in giving them representation.

The articulation of a European identity in S2B needs to be understood in relation to a series of other identities based on both individual national and global geographic signifiers. According to one of S2B's founding activists, it was actually through discussions with developing-country-based groups such as *Third World Network Africa* (TWNA) that the 'European' focus developed, as a realisation that rather than fight a campaign based upon the perceived impacts of GATS on sectors such as 'retail' and 'finance' in Africa, for example, articulating GATS as a 'threat to public services' in the EU was becoming the most effective means of affecting the wider GATS 2000 negotiations.⁴⁴ This was particularly the case as the campaign developed, with groups such as TWNA advising that 'if the campaign was going to be won, it was going to be won on European public services issues. It wasn't going to be won on the impact of tourism, in the [developing countries]'.⁴⁵

Another activist central to S2B's campaign from the beginning has said that despite an apparent 'European' identity within certain aspects of GATS campaigning, such actions remained at the centre of a 'truly...international campaign' on the basis that they have relied much on globally coordinated activities through such networks as OWINFS.⁴⁶ Indeed, much of the initial articulation of GATS as a 'threat' to be campaigned against was undertaken by groups in Canada that had been prominent within the MAI campaign.⁴⁷ Additionally, the global unions *Public Services International* (PSI) and *Education International* (EI) had been influential in framing the 'threat' in relation to healthcare and education.⁴⁸ In terms of geography, despite much of the activity critical of the GATS having taken place in Western Europe, initial activity within Canada as well as involvement from groups in India and South Africa, for example, mean that GATS campaigning cannot be understood as only a European event. The otherwise extra-European character of anti-GATS activity therefore highlights the significance of S2B's articulation of a European identity within its own GATS campaign where it might otherwise have been described as 'Global'.

The case of UK activity is a good example of S2B's relationship to national campaigning. As stated earlier, the network of dominant development groups representing a 'trade' demand to the UK government was initially reluctant to campaign against GATS.⁴⁹ Mobilisation was slowed by this because each of these mainstream groups had access to a large membership base of individuals identified as concerned about 'development' as well as status in lobbying the

government on ‘trade and development’ matters, meaning that until these groups became active on GATS, it would be hard to articulate the agreement as a threat to ‘development’. Consequently, via WDM, S2B was to play a significant role for national campaigning in this context. This significance became apparent when WDM and another UK-based group working on GATS and active in S2B – *People & Planet* (P&P) – help found a new UK network that was originally set up to help coordinate campaigning on trade amongst development groups but increasingly became representative of the groups.⁵⁰ The *Trade Justice Movement* (TJM), as it became called, included a critique of GATS within its founding set of demands that called for ‘assessment’ of the GATS prior to any expansion.⁵¹ The emergence of TJM was seen as a significant moment in the mainstreaming of a critical GATS demand.⁵² The TJM ran a ‘mass lobby’ of the UK parliament, where members of the constituent groups met their MPs at Westminster in June 2002 with a series of ‘trade justice’ demands, including a critique of the GATS.

This UK-level activity was to feed back into the European campaign. Firstly, WDM had successfully worked to produce an Early Day Motion (EDM 260) tabled by a UK Member of Parliament, which demanded ‘assessment’ of the impact of the GATS prior to any expansion.⁵³ Despite being no more than a petition of Members of Parliament (MPs) due to it lacking any legal basis, it proved the third most popular EDM tabled that parliamentary session, signed by 262 MPs. UK activists had encouraged Dr Starkey to write the EDM, providing guidance on its content, as well as contacting other MPs who were considered as ‘friendly’ to the group.⁵⁴ This UK-level activity translated into contestation directly targeted at the European Commission because the enhanced credibility groups such as WDM could now claim with the support of 262 MPs, one activist recalling that:

[W]e used that a lot. We used it a lot when we were meeting with officials. I used it a lot at meetings in Europe. So, if I was in a meeting with the European Commission, or in a public debate with the European Commission. I was in a debate with Pascal Lamy [then European Commissioner for Trade] and he was telling me that it wasn’t a problem. And I was saying at this public meeting, in a public debate with him, that, “You know, Mr Lamy, you’ve 262 British MPs who signed up to an EDM calling for an assessment of GATS, this is not just me saying this”.⁵⁵

Activists referenced the EDM to underline that GATS was open to critique, strengthening campaigning by groups both within the UK and elsewhere in Europe. The UK government responded to campaigning with the launch of a public consultation from the *Department for Trade and Industry* (DTI) that was open for submissions through to January 2003. Though activists differ in how this event was seen – as a ‘victory’ or as an attempt to simply quieten critics – it did lead to a public hearing by the European Parliament and a consultation launched by the European Commission. For several UK activists interviewed, the DTI consultation represented opening up a certain space for further contestation for a wider set of critical demands including trade unions and development organizations.⁵⁶ In February 2003, the European Commission publicly announced that it would drop education, health and broadcasting from its GATS requests. This was seen by activists⁵⁷ as a victory and came on the day of a pre-planned mass protest in Brussels. Organised by

WDM, the protest represented an equivalential sequence between those groups active within S2B and trade unions, with the latter being responsible for mobilising around fifteen thousand people in the protest.⁵⁸ The importance of UK-based activity in strengthening activism more broadly targeted at the European Commission and other EU Member-states evidences the overlap between national- and European-focused campaigns.

UK activists' presentation of UK-based activity as being a means of affecting the EC suggests a cyclical structure of contestation in which a 'European' process of information-exchange facilitated by S2B has supported national campaigns which have then fed-back into contestation of the European Commission. A similar story was repeated in several other European countries. As described above, both Austria and Belgium experienced similar national-level campaigns that utilized the European identity of S2B as initial support as well as a source for critical analysis. Reports produced by activists dominant within S2B formed the basis for campaign materials used in the Austrian and Belgium cases. Furthermore, these campaigns – targeted at local and national politicians – fed back into legitimising S2B as a 'European' movement.

CONCLUSION – PLAYING WITH MULTIPLE GEOGRAPHIES

The case of a European identity within the formation of the *Seattle to Brussels* (S2B) network has allowed the article to highlight the symbolic role geography plays within transnational social movements. S2B might be characterised as a bridge between two worlds: one world of a 'global' citizenship, as suggested by events at 'Seattle' and the emergence of networks such as OWINFS; and, the other world being the project of 'European' integration. The latter world – 'Brussels' – indicates the role of an external context shaping the formation of collective action embodied in S2B.⁵³ S2B could be understood as a product of the European Union and the position of the European Commission in the WTO. That said, it is interesting to consider how S2B represents one possible strategy for contesting the European Commission as offering an alternative performance of 'Europe'. Whilst S2B has been used as a device to lobby the European Commission, it has exceeded this role to be important in facilitating national-level campaigns. The 'European' identity has facilitated collective action – if only informal information exchanges – which has helped increase the capabilities of groups within their respective nation-states.

Rather than characterise activity critical of GATS as a 'single campaign', one of the most prominent activists interviewed suggested it be understood as 'nodes of activity'.⁵⁴ Activity within Europe has not all been dependent upon S2B. And, arguably, the role of OWINFS and other 'global' networks means that it is often not possible to state that any single moment of collective action – even that claimed in its name, such as an S2B publication – has been dependent upon S2B alone. In the earlier quoted description of S2B, the different groups are united under the 'Seattle to Brussels' banner, which is defined as 'European coordination...towards the development of a sustainable socially accountable democratic trading system'.⁵⁵

As has been discussed in the article, the ‘European’ identity of S2B has facilitated collective action without which much activity – at least in the UK case considered, as well as that in Austria and Belgium – would not have been possible. Yet, the presence of ‘Global’ and ‘National’ points of identification for activity means that there is no single structure to such activity. Though actively making claims to both a ‘Global’ and ‘European’ identity, WDM remains a UK-based group. However, through the sedimentation of interaction with other groups identified as ‘European’, it has helped to contribute to the emergence of S2B and its performance as a constituent part of a wider ‘European civil society’. This performance is reinforced through physical meetings and joint-actions, as well as engagement with – and from – governmental bodies such as the European Commission in addition to advocacy groups identified as ‘non-European’.

Through analysing a particular case of contestation, the article has mapped how activists play with geography. Whilst these activists interviewed framed much of their action as ‘European’ or even ‘Global’, this went hand-in-hand with an equally strong emphasis upon the national identity of S2B’s member groups. Discourse theory has helped draw out the relationship between multiple geographic signifiers – mapping it as a tension between the identities of the individual groups and their collective mobilisation. Given the specificity of the activities described here and the fact that much time has passed since they took place, it is necessary to ask what relevance the article has for understanding present and on-going forms of global campaigning. Contestation against neoliberal economic policies is still the dominant focus of activist network, even if campaigning has moved away from trade to broader economic issues that have arisen in the wake of the global financial crisis. Daily newspaper accounts underline the importance activists place on how they play with geographic signifier: examples like the ‘Occupy’ movement and recent anti-austerity protests utilize a multiplicity of geographic signifiers within their activity. National-identities mix with transnational – whether regional (i.e. ‘European’) or ‘Global’ – identities as activists work to articulate and maintain these moments of collective mobilization contesting contemporary governance. What is then needed is further research on just how present forms of activism manage the tension between the multiple identities that arise – how national-identities do not exclude but may overlap and reinforce transnational forms of political action.

NOTES

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⁹ Routledge (note 8), pp.336-337; Bosco (note 4).

¹⁰ P. Routledge, A. Cumbers and C. Nativel, 'Grassrooting network imaginaries: relationality, power, and mutual solidarity in global justice networks', *Environment and Planning A* 39, pp.2575-2592; H. Leitner, E. Sheppard, and K. Sziarto, 'The spatialities of contentious politics', *Transactions* 33, pp.157-172.

¹¹ Leitner et al (note 10), pp.159-161.

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¹⁶ Cumbers et al, (note 4); J. Smith 'The Uneven Geography of Global Civil Society: National and Global Influences on Transnational Association', *Social Forces* 84/2 (2005) pp.622-652.

¹⁷ Howarth (note 6), p.317; E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, C. 'Post-Marxism without Apologies' in E. Laclau (ed.), *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso 1990), pp.97-132.

¹⁸ Strange (note 9), pp.65-66.

¹⁹ D. Howarth and S. Griggs 'A Transformative Political Campaign?', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9/2 (2004), pp.181-201.

²⁰ A large collection of campaign materials has been archived online within the now dormant website GATSWatch.org administered by an activist who had been central to S2B's GATS campaign.

²¹ WDM (2005) *WDM GATS Campaign 2000-2004: Evaluation* (Unpublished); Sussex, E (2005) *Local and Regional Reaction to GATS and Similar Trade Rules* (Unpublished).

²² The names of interviewees are replaced by the date of when the interview was conducted so as to anonymise the data. In-depth interviews were carried out with activists via a mixture of face-to-face meetings and telephone calls, as appropriate.

²³ This data is taken from the 'Seattle to Brussels' website, available at <<http://www.s2bnetwork.org/>>, accessed March 2011.

²⁴ Personal interview 20th April 2005.

²⁵ J. Orbie, 'The European Union's Role in World Trade: Harnessing Globalisation?' in J. Orbie (ed.) *Europe's Global Role* (London: Ashgate 2009), pp.35-66.

²⁶ D. Egan 'The Limits of Internationalization: a Neo-Gramscian Analysis of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment', *Critical Sociology* 27/3 (2001) pp.74-97; J. Johnston and G. Laxer 'Solidarity in the age of globalization', *Theory and society* 32 (2003) pp.39-91.

²⁷ Johnston and Laxer (note 20), pp.58-59.

²⁸ Personal interview 5th April 2005.

²⁹ S2B *GATS and Democracy* (Seattle to Brussels Network, 2001), available at <www2.weed-online.org/uploads/gats%26democracy.pdf>, last accessed October 2012.

³⁰ Based on several personal interviews, including 14th June 2005 and 11th February 2005. Information on the 2002 European Social Forum in Florence was available at <<http://www.florence2002.fse-esf.org/>>, accessed May 2007.

³¹ Personal interview 11th February 2005).

³² Laclau and Mouffe (note 6), p.127.

³³ S. Griggs and D. Howarth 'New Environmental Movements and Direct Action Protest', in D. Howarth, A. Norval and Y. Stavrakakis (eds.) *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis – Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000) p.55.

³⁴ E. Laclau 'Glimpsing the future' in Critchley, S. and Marchart, O. (eds.) *Laclau – a critical reader* (London: Routledge 2004), pp.279-328.

³⁵ Laclau (note 27), p.280.

³⁶ Laclau and Mouffe (note 6), p.125.

³⁷ Speech given by a prominent activist at 'Panel 1407: Campaign Assembly: taking action against Europe's corporatized trade agenda', organised by the Seattle to Brussels network at the *Third European Social Forum*, London, October 2003.

³⁸ Personal interview 1st February 2005.

³⁹ Personal interview 5th April 2005).

⁴⁰ As illustration of this process, a UK-based activist provided the following anecdote: '[W]e were sitting in a meeting [with UK officials] and we were demanding documents, and the UK GATS negotiator...said, "Well, I'm surprised you're asking us for those. Can't you just get them from some of your European colleagues? I don't know why you come and bother us anymore". And that was a sign that they were watching the way in which we were working in Europe. And when we came back and said that we've heard that the Finnish government has raised concerns, and we've heard that the Italian government is saying this, the UK official were just like "How do you know this?" And, being able to generate within the UK officials of there being a European movement, I think is quite unnerving for them. And, I think there is one key political reason for that, is that we wanted to work across Europe. They actually don't want to work across Europe. You know, the UK government is still struggling with the fact that they have to reach a common European position on these issues. The French get on their nerves when it comes to agriculture. What we were able to do is to say "We're working across Europe effectively. You're still struggling to work across Europe effectively". And, I think that was a challenge for them. And, again, the European identity wasn't just about having a European identity in itself. It's about how you're able to use that in your national context'. Personal interview 5th April 2005.

⁴¹ Information on Austrian anti-GATS activity comes from interviews with activists, web-based campaign materials, as well as a presentation given by members of ATTAC Austria at an S2B conference held in Budapest, February 2005. Web-based materials were available at the website of the 'STOPP GATS' campaign at <www.stoppgatts.at>, last accessed July 2006.

⁴² Information on the Belgium campaign was largely obtained via a personal interview with a prominent Flemish activist (13th February 2005). Some of the account is also based on Sussex, E (2005) (note 21).

⁴³ A. Dreyer Hansen and E. Sørensen 'Polity as Politics: Studying the Shaping and Effects of Discursive Politics', in D. Howarth and J. Torfing (eds.), *Discourse Theory in European Politics – Identity, Policy and Governance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2005), p.96.

⁴⁴ Personal interview 5th April 2005.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Personal interview 14th June 2005.

⁴⁷ This was stated by several interviewees, including a highly prominent activist (8th April 2005) who was a veteran of both the MAI and GATS campaigns.

⁴⁸ EI and PSI *The WTO and the Millennium Round: What is at Stake for Public Education?* (Brussels: Education International; Ferney-Voltaire: Public Services International, 1999). See also: EI and PSI *The WTO and the General Agreement on Trade-in-Services: What is at Stake for Public Health?* (Brussels: Education International; Ferney-Voltaire: Public Services International, 1999).

⁴⁹ Personal interview 5th April 2005. This understanding of the UK Trade Network was supported by other interviewees.

⁵⁰ Personal interview 7th April 2005.

⁵¹ The founding statement of the Trade Justice Movement was available at <<http://www.tjm.org.uk>>, last accessed May 2007.

⁵² This was stressed in interviews with several campaigners.

⁵³ Full text: 'That this House welcomes the statement in the Government's recent Globalisation White Paper that recognises the role of government in ensuring that basic services are provided to all; notes that negotiations to expand the reach of the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services are underway; further notes that the GATS applies to all tradable services, including public services, if they are provided commercially or in competition with other suppliers; further notes that the GATS applies to all levels of government, including local authorities; is concerned over the lack of parliamentary and public debate on this agreement given its far-reaching implications; and calls on the Government to ensure that there is an independent and thorough assessment of the likely impact of the extension of the GATS on the

provision of key services both in the UK and internationally, particularly on the poor in developing countries'. EDM 260. Available at <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk>>, accessed May 2007.

⁵⁴ Personal interview 5th April 2005.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ This was noted in several interviews.

⁵⁷ Personal interview 8th November 2004.

⁵⁸ Based on an unpublished internal evaluation of the GATS campaign by the World Development Movement (see note 21).