SYMPOSIUM – REVIEW/1

THE CEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY
Polity and Policymaking

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When asked to write a comment on Mario Diani's *The Cement of Civil Society: Studying Networks in Localities*, I was flattered. It took me a while to recover from the excitement I felt and to accept the task with pleasure. Two main reasons drove me to write the comment: my love for the network analysis approach and the possibility to question the relationship between policy analysis and social movement literature. Given my basic knowledge of social network analysis (SNA) and of Diani's previous work (most notably, Diani and Bison 2003; Diani and McAdam 2004), I accepted the task without further ado. I had not fully realised, however, the problems I was to encounter in completing this review. I thus have to acknowledge its limitations, which I completed while pushing the boundaries of effort to critique one of the most-cited scholars of the current time.

First of all, I have to admit that I have been working on the "cement of civil society" for a while (Bassoli 2012, 2013; Bassoli and Cinalli 2014; Bassoli et al. 2014a; 2014b). However, I had my own "hidden assumptions," and it is important to spell these out.

- I have always looked for the presence of formalised networks between organi-sations (doing projects together, interlocking directorates, etc.) as the only way to grasp the *cement* idea. I knew that a lot more was happening, but I wanted to stay on the safe side methodologically.

- As a political scientist, I have always looked at civil society with regard to its intersection with the political domain. The core issue of "democraticness" was to be appraised in terms of the relationship between the civil dimension and the political dimension.

- I finally joined the line of those considering new data as desirable, forgetting the implicit difficulty of grasping the internal dynamics of the subject under study.

All of these "hidden assumptions" represent an important point of Diani's work. He shows us that scholars can grasp the presence of networks among organisations using more subtle questions (Chapter 3) and a nuanced idea of co-presence in local events (Diani 2015: §6, Crossley 2015). He emphasises the importance of studying civil society *per se* and provided a good piece of relational research, although I will later criticise the little space dedicated to the political dimension. He finally shows us that old data may be rich and convey a lot of information to help us to understand the general mechanism behind civil society.

Diani's work is overwhelming. He has been able to reshuffle all of the dispersed research of the past ten years in a coherent and brilliant work for which we all were waiting. His research on Bristol and Glasgow deserves this book. Moreover, as scholars, the possibility to reflect and dwell on the methodological implications of the relational turn for our own research is much needed. Diani does exactly that. He provides us with a convincing work on why and how a fully-fledged relational approach to civil society can be used and how this approach may help the aggregative approach to deepen our knowledge of the subject matter. In the following sections, I will tackle two main questions: the intersection between "social movement as mode of coordination" and "social movements" (chapters 1, 3, 4, 9) and the relationship between civil society and policy-making (chapters 7, 8). Later, I will provide some stylistic critiques for the next edition, which I foresee to be longer and more skewed towards network analysis. Indeed, the main problem, as I will explain later, relates to the difficulty in striking a balance between simplicity and technicalities. Nonetheless, I am quite convinced that the road that Diani paved is the one each of us should take.

Social movements and civil society: a matter of polity.

Diani is a social movement scholar. This background constantly surfaces in the text. It is not a small legacy; it is the huge stage on which *The Cement of Civil Society* takes place. Numerous references to social movements, to social movement literature and to its conceptualization are scattered about, so it is impossible to list them all. This is problematic

because it makes the reader struggle among a general conceptualisation of civil society, a contention-driven conceptualisation (see the book preface) and the role social movements play in Diani's understanding of collective actions.

Even though he clearly rejects the hidden assumption about "social movements be[ing] the only promoter of collective actions" (Diani 2015: xviii), he later dwells on "social movement coordination" so much that he leaves us with the impression that this part of civil society deserves more space because of its social (and political) relevance. It is difficult to develop a full argument about this impression; it is almost like the long-lasting taste left behind after a sip of good wine. It is there, but it is difficult to recall the features that created the feeling. Indeed Chapter 9 is the biggest proof of this feeling. In the "last" chapter of the book, Diani departs from the typology (that should be able to travel across cities, countries and time) and dwells on the "social movement mode of coordination" to address the issue of movement societies (Diani 2015: 192-194), the role of local cultures (ibid. 194-197) and movement families (ibid. 199-201). Clearly he is more interested in this mode than in all of the others together. There are good theoretical reasons behind this choice, but he does not mention them, and we tend to fall back on the hidden assumption that contentious politics are deeply related to this specific mode, even though he shows us quite the opposite for Bristol (ibid. 193).

Overall, through the text, he checks if the properties of "the social movement mode of coordination" mirror those that can be found in the literature about social movements. Thus, he implicitly also tests the role that incumbents of this mode have in collective actions and in contentious politics. Notably, Diani often recalls this strategy, and he also clarifies the "inappropriateness of treating coalitions and social movements as largely overlapping phenomena" (ibid. 150) because contention is what makes them different. Therefore, he also provides a test for this hypothesis. Being contentious is a feature characterising social movement modes, at least in considering the tendency to take part in protest events (Chapter 6). Yet having public opponents and self-identifying in social movements (ibid. 93-98) are not shared features of the incumbents of this mode in either of the cities studied. Once again, we have the impression we are (ontologically) dealing with social movements rather than with a segment of civil society expressing specific network traits. Moreover we cannot expect to find social movement organisations (SMOs), because such organisations do not exist (ibid. 114-117).

As mentioned before, Diani implicitly considers incumbents of social movement modes of coordination as those organisations that should have the traits of social movements (ibid. 192-194). However, he contests the existence of SMOs and shows us that self-perception is not enough (Chapter 4). At the end, the reader is left puzzled about the relationship between the relational aspects and the content of social movement.

Given that social movements are defined in relational terms, it is no surprise that incumbents of social movement modes of coordination are those featuring these definitive relational aspects[1]. Therefore, the most interesting questions to emerge from this approach are those mentioned in Chapter 9. They represent the core of future research, based on my understanding: What is the share of organisations in this social movement mode of coordination? What is the profile of the incumbents of this mode? These questions are timely and point directly to the puzzle left to the reader. If social movements are characterised by their relational aspect and content, can we foresee the presence of a set of actors within a social movement mode of coordination that feature the relational aspect but not the content? To clarify by way of an exaggeration: Can we foresee a city with no contentious politics, no protest and no power challenger in which we can identify social movement modes of coordination? If so, as the book seems to indicate throughout, what are we facing? It is not a social movement (lacking some of the aspects) or a coalition (lacking the relational aspects); it is probably some kind of interest group and nothing more. It seems to me that, from a pure theoretical standpoint, the intertwining of the relational aspect and the content aspect of social movements should be better spelled out—at least for those readers who are not as familiar as Diani is with the social movement literature.

Civil society and policymaking

As for the second point I want to raise, what came as a surprise to me is the (relatively) little space Diani dedicates to the relationship between civil society and policymaking. I personally think the *cement of civil society* not only relates to the relationship among organizations, as it would seem to be according to Diani's book, but also to the relationship between the state and civil society. There may be different causes for an enlarged understanding of what constitutes civil society, but here, I want to mention three.

Firstly, in non-democratic settings, civil societies are very different from those found in democratic countries, precisely because of the relationships forged between specific organisations and specific public institutions. It is not just a matter of freedom; but of the specific combination of interdependences between the state and civil society organizations (see for example Magner 2005). It is a question of networks—specifically,

[1] I must admit that blockmodelling may also produce results different from those found in Bristol and Glasgow, but to the best of my knowledge and experience, in most cases, the core of the network will ultimately identify a social movement mode of coordination as defined by Diani.

two-mode networks.

Secondly, what allows us to distinguish civil society from *uncivil society*[2] relates not only to the rule of law (Salvati 2003) or to the degree of legality of the organisations under scrutiny, but also to the exact type of relationship that exists between the state and *uncivil society*, the scarce relationships that *uncivil organisations* have with the state, and the dense network that sustains their sociality. Notably, the contentious features, the internal configuration, the four kinds of coordination and everything written by Diani may be applied to uncivil societies as well. Thus, future research needs to assess the relationship between the state and civil society actors in order to draw a line of distinction based on network properties.

Thirdly, scholars need a proper way to assess the relational aspects of the political linkages between civil society and state actors in order to have a specific interpretation of outcomes. Let me briefly explain this point, as I have been working on it for the past few years with little success (Bassoli 2012, 2013; Bassoli and Cinalli forthcoming). Hopefully someone else will accept the challenge and provide us with a better understanding of the relationship between civil society and the state.

As I made clear at the beginning, I fell in love with SNA while working on the governance at the local level (Bassoli 2010). I have used SNA to explore the relationship between private and public actors within private-public partnership, considering the differential involvement of actors in a set of given policies. Thereafter, I have been working mainly at the local level. Thus, I firmly support Diani's position to work at this level. It is the locus that best allows us to determine network properties and to assess the features of governance (as a mode of governing). The two go together based on my understanding of local policymaking.

The notion of 'network' is now firmly embedded in the general understanding of governance and policymaking. Concepts such as 'policy networks' and 'governance networks' are part of a variety of theoretical developments stressing the importance of both formal and informal interaction between participants in the policy process (Blanco et al. 2011). Nonetheless, little attention has been devoted to the distinction between policy networks and governance networks, and even less to the possible relationship between civil society and state actors. I have to emphasise that governance is made of horizontal linkages between civil society actors, vertical linkages between state actors and, most notably, horizontal linkages between the two domains. In particular, I have argued (Bassoli 2012) and still argue (Bassoli and Cinalli forthcoming) that the horizontal

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[2] There is quite a debate about the use of this term (Bob 2011). In this text, I want to distinguish between the value-loaded concept of civil society and other kinds of "organisations" that are not so civil, such as the Mafia, criminal networks and secret societies.

relations between the policy domain (of political elites and institutions) and civil society allow us to determine the real openness and democracy of the local level.

The little attention devoted to the relational aspect of civil society, as pointed out both in Diani's book and in Crossley's contribution to this symposium, matches the same absence in the governance literature. This is not the place to enter into the longstanding debate about what governance is and what it is not. However, governance is usually either broadly defined (in a catch-all fashion) so as to encompass a huge variety of phenomena, or narrowly defined when used from a peculiar perspective (see Börzel 1998 for a review). Thus, governance may be "characterized by the involvement of representatives of the public, private, voluntary and community sectors in the process of policy decision" (Guarneros-Meza and Geddes 2010: 210). This definition is widely accepted among scholars and has been used to emphasise horizontal transactions in the rise of autonomous, self-governing networks (as in the seminal work of Roderick Rhodes 1996, 1997).

A second important feature of governance concerns its degree of institutionalisation. The point is highly debated because it is intertwined with the concept of governance itself. Regarding the scope of this review and the importance of working on this topic, we do not need any level of formalisation. However, a minimum degree of formalisation may be required in order to enter the proper governance fields. As Börzel and Heard-Lauréote (2009) clearly state, in order to have governance and not just networks (that is to say interconnected actors in the political sphere), some criteria have to be fulfilled. For this reason, formalised governance arrangements have attracted attention under different labels: partnerships (Elander 2002), private-public partnerships (Osborne 2000), multi-sectoral partnerships (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002), and local governance arrangements (Bassoli 2010), etc.

Here, the problem of the relationship between civil society and the state surfaces in all of its importance. We can easily detect different kinds of relations between the state and organisations of civil society. At least three kinds of relationship may exist: formal access to public policymaking (formalised arrangements), informal access to public policymaking or influence of civil society actors over policy actors (constant influence), and no such influence/disperse relationships (scarce relationships). In Chapter 8 (Diani 2015), access to the political sphere is treated as an individual feature of each interviewed organisation. On the contrary, I have always found it to be very informing to look at these aspects as relational characteristics of the civil society under analysis. Some examples may be useful for clarity on the importance of these aspects. I will present two kinds of relationships: formalised access to policymaking and a non-influential informal connection with political institutions.

A good example of a weak relationship between civil society and the local public counterpart is Milan with regards to migrant associations. The policymaking process excludes these associations. No formal, informal, consultative or other means allowing access to municipal policymaking exists. According to Tiziana Caponio (2005), one of the most lucid scholars of this case, the reason must be traced to two factors: a strong political will for exclusion and the parallel process of increasing the importance given to pro-migrant associations in service-delivery. In my article published in this journal a few years ago (Bassoli 2012), I show how a relational approach between migrant organisations and public institutions can be fruitful in underpinning overlooked dynamics. In the city of Milan, we face not only a disperse network of migrant associations but also a two-mode network in which the political institutions are also too dispersed to grant any kind of political relevance (Fig.1's square nodes are the political institutions)[3]. The pure individual measures of connections used as predicators in a Poisson regression (Diani 2015: 173) would not have yielded any informative results in this specific case.

Regarding formalised access to policymaking, scholars can compare different networks based on different relationships. I have already used this approach (Bassoli 2013; Bassoli and Cinalli forthcoming) because it is based on a strong understanding of governance. The approach assesses the extent to which a segment of civil society 1) shares extensive resources in terms of information with policymakers, 2) trusts the policy process and feels its own role to be worth it, and, 3) places crucial weight on the final decision. In other words, it uses a series of questions regarding information exchange, invitations by public institutions and participation in formalised arrangements as three different levels of relationship. Without providing further details that would carry us far from the topic, I would like to present a picture to, once again, provide a better understanding of relational data with regards to political institutions. In this case, it is clear that formalised networks allow us not only to understand which actors have access to which levels but also to distinguish among relational features at the political level[4].

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[3] The research strategy developed two measures for political connection: On the one hand, migrant organisations were asked to identify stable relationships with listed actors, and on the other hand, they were asked to qualify these relationships, mentioning the offices or the people with whom they had developed the relationships. Clearly, the two answers are correlated, but they show impressive differences for different political actors. The latter question is depicted in Figure 1.

[4] In the Turin research we found that all actors that are called to participate in the local policy process eventually do so. Four possible participant roles can be identified: "permanent member of the district or neighbourhood council", "permanent member of a municipal council on specific issues (social services, women, education, etc.)", "occasional member in a municipal committee to solve a specific problem" and "member of a municipal consultation committee or group for a specific policy or issue". Actors could also be invited

Figure 1: The network of Milan migrant associations with public institutions (Bassoli 2012: 90)
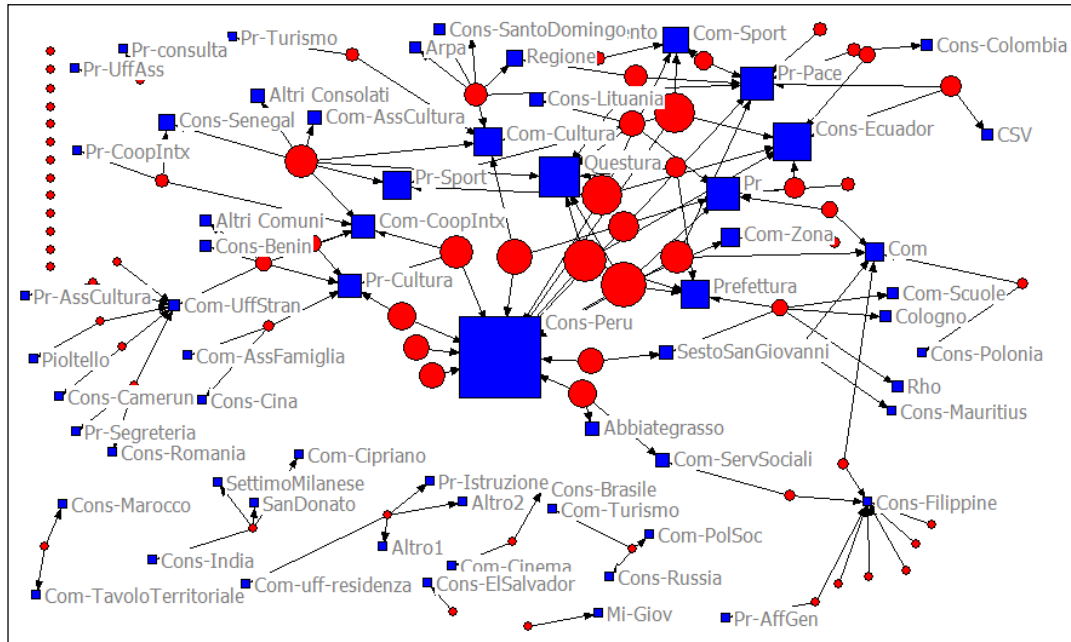

Methodological apparatus and SNA

Diani's book is far from simple. There are different reasons for this; presumably, my difficulties relate to my scant knowledge of some of the topics covered by the book. Nonetheless, the reader needs to be acquainted with a vast array of concepts in order to follow the book. In Chapter 1, the reader has to be aware of the debate around modes of governance, while having a strong social movement background and the capacity to deal with social network techniques. This is not something Diani could have avoided, given the intrinsic complexity of using SNA for a more general audience rather than SNA lovers. Notwithstanding the effort he puts into explaining methodological aspects to the reader (mainly using footnotes scattered thorough the text), I must admit that I had high expectations knowing Diani's precision and love for clarifications. What I miss here is a fully-fledged methodological apparatus, a coherent chapter or anything of this kind as a

to participate at other levels. This open-ended question was recoded into five different levels: other local, provincial, regional, national and European.

reference for those who are able to read SNA and who want to double-check, control or even understand in detail the procedures adopted. Actually, in Chapter 4, which sets the fundaments of his empirical work, he misses an opportunity to explain in greater detail the network he deploys and the blockmodelling procedure. Overall, the presence of the questionnaire he used in the field work and a better reference to precise questions would have helped the reader understand the difference among: interactions, relations, social bonds, perception of influence and so forth.

Figure 2: Participation at different levels in the city Turin on the left, at the local level only on the right (Bassoli and Cinalli forthcoming)
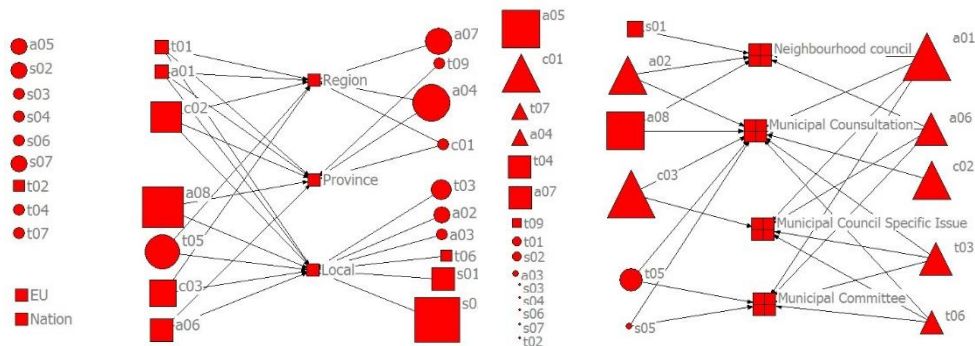
With regards to the methodological issue, Diani addresses a (not so) trivial question about the nature of civil society and the best way to approach its study. Is civil society a network of organisations? Do we need SNA to tackle relational issues? Diani thinks so. He takes it for granted, as do most of the missionaries of SNA, but a book such as *The Cement of Civil Society* should also explain to the lay reader some of the reasons behind this choice. We are in the realm between ontology and epistemology. Regarding this, the most intriguing debate concerning the use of SNA techniques for political science appears in the *Journal of Political Studies* (Christopoulos 2008; Dowding 2001; Marsh and Smith 2000; 2001; Parker 2007). The debate revolves around the nature of policy networks, but we can translate it for civil society. In that debate, the most controversial issues are those related to the ontological and epistemological statuses of networks in political science (Marsh and Smith 2001), rather than the statistical tool itself. Thus, the main question is about the nature of policy networks, which translated for this symposium, is, 'Does civil society exist (only) in the form of networks among organisations'? Are those networks real, or is the network form the perception we have of this social phenomenon? I cannot enter into a debate of this nature here, given my lack of expertise on social movement and civic society literature. However, it is important that we stress

Diani's position here. 'At the theoretical level, analysts of collective action and political participation widely agree on the relational and interactive nature of collective action processes. At the same time, attempts to map systematically the evolution and/or geographical distribution of collective action process are still frequently [..] driven by aggregative conceptions of social structure' (Diani 2015: 2). He also writes, 'The networks formed through these exchanges represented the "cement" of civil society […]. They constituted civil society as a distinct system of interdependence and define "who [citizen's organisations] are"' (2015:1). In other words, civil society is, by definition, a network of institutions, and those relations make it what it is: a network.

With regards to the second question, to the best of my knowledge, the use of social network analysis to deal with relational data is unchallenged. Whatever the ontological status of the network (socially perceived or existing in the 'real world'), as long as networks are not only a metaphor (Christopoulos 2008; Marsh and Smith 2001: 535), they can be addressed with SNA techniques. Like any statistical technique, SNA is appropriate for certain kinds of data—so-called relational data—whether the actors involved are people, firms, local authorities or something else.

We need, as much as possible, to follow this desire to go further in understanding civil society, and we need to take a definite stand in favour on SNA techniques as the proper tool for describing, as far as possible, civil society as specific networks of organizations. Indeed, without a formalized tool, how can we depict civil society as more horizontal? With a core and a periphery? Of course, this information can be fully described without the use of numbers; nonetheless, if data are available, the description of the social network in terms of density, centrality or existing brokers will gain salience and comparability, exactly as Diani's did. In Christopoulos' words (2008:475), 'Such network properties are best contextualised with reference to formal Social Network Analysis'.

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