4 Globalization or Still National Politics? A Comparison of Protests against the Gulf War in Germany, France, and the Netherlands

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I. INTRODUCTION

On 17 January 1991, after a military build-up of five months, the (second) Gulf War entered its ‘hot’ phase with the start of air strikes by multinational forces on Iraqi targets, followed a few weeks later by a ground war resulting in the defeat of the Iraqi forces that had occupied Kuwait. The Gulf War was not only unique in military and political terms, but also as regards the protests it brought about. No other major war in the last decades has led to such immediate and massive protest as the Gulf War. Whereas the war in Korea met with almost no protest at all, and resistance against the Vietnam War took years to reach a significant level, protest against the Gulf War, even before the war had started, had reached a level that was in many countries comparable to the anti-Vietnam War movement in its heyday. This phenomenon illustrates the growing political importance and mobilizing power of the so-called new social movements, including the peace movement, which have developed in the industrialized West since the 1960s.

From the point of view of cross-national influences on political behaviour, and on social movement mobilization in particular, protests against the Gulf War are a particularly interesting object of analysis. The Gulf War case illustrates both the growing importance of international diffusion of protest and the globalization of the issues social movements address. The importance of protest diffusion is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the phrase ‘No Blood for Oil’, which became the peace movement’s key slogan across the globe. This slogan also indicated a common masterframe (Snow and Benford...
which interpreted the war against Iraq as a conflict over economic interests, and thus challenged the dominant interpretation of the war as a morally inspired battle for the liberation of a small, innocent country from the claws of a 'new Hitler'.

In addition, from the point of view of globalization processes, the Gulf War might be considered to be the first truly 'global war'. Backed by UN resolutions that had been endorsed by the large majority of UN member states, no fewer than 28 countries from different continents were directly involved in the anti-Iraq coalition, while many others contributed financially to the war effort. What distinguished the Gulf War most from earlier large-scale wars, however, was the extent to which and the way in which it was covered by the media. On the one hand, probably no other war has received such intense coverage, especially by television, as the Gulf War. On the other hand, this media coverage was as one-sided as it was extensive. Military censorship and extremely limited access of journalists to the war zone made independent journalism virtually impossible. As a result, across the globe, people were confronted with a bombardment of basically similar images, most of them either directly or indirectly stemming from CNN’s coverage, which in turn was largely based on material supplied by the US military headquarters in Saudi Arabia. From New York to Tokyo, from Oslo to Cape Town – everywhere people’s information about the war consisted largely of CNN’s Peter Arnett’s rather limited view from his hotel window in Baghdad, and General Norman Schwartzkopf’s commentary on sophisticated videos showing a clean, bloodless and efficient war conducted with never-failing ‘smart’ weapons.

The global scope of the Gulf War issue and the unprecedented similarity of the information received by citizens of different countries make it almost a setpiece case for investigating how far globalization has advanced and to what extent national contexts still matter. Not only in the field of social movement studies, but in (comparative) political science and sociology in general, tendencies towards increasing cross-national diffusion and globalization of information flows, cultural phenomena, social problems, political issues and decision-making and a whole range of other social and political phenomena are seen by many authors as challenging, or even rendering obsolete the emphasis in the field on the nation state as the crucial unit of analysis (for instance, Hegedus 1990; Featherstone 1990; for a critique see Van Deth 1995). In analysing protests against the Gulf War, I shall contrast this perspective with a more sceptical view, which, though not denying tendencies towards globalization, emphasizes the continuing relevance of national political and cultural contexts. As has been shown in several recent studies, social movements are strongly affected by national political opportunity structures, which provide for a more or less favourable setting for mobilization and shape its form and content (Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1992). Others have stressed the importance of cultural and discursive contexts, which influence social