Performing Global Networks
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FOREWORD

ROBERT HOLTON

Inter-disciplinary collaborations like that achieved within this path-breaking volume are rare. It is testimony to the far-sightedness of the Institute for International Integration Studies (IIIS) at Trinity College Dublin, that the research group responsible for the body of research on global networks presented here, was encouraged and funded. This collaboration brings together those working in disciplines like sociology and history, with others working in areas that are themselves inter-disciplinary, such as theatre studies and ecumenics. It also extends beyond the world of scholarly debate to intersecting worlds of performance, social action and policy-making. The effect is an unusual breadth of vision across time as well as space, as well as across the connections and fault-lines that constitute the mobile worlds of migrants, intellectuals, actors, singers, musicians, media representatives, and activists campaigning for human rights.

The idea of the network is a powerful metaphor for multi-centred forms of interconnection, whether electronic, institutional, or inter-personal. This volume is particularly strong on the inter-personal aspects of global networks, including inter-cultural engagement, conflict and co-operation.

As an ongoing participant in this venture, I have become aware of both the difficulty and potential of collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, across frontiers that are often cultural and experiential as much as epistemological and methodological. Much of this potential has yet to be realised in the study of global networks, which is a relatively new field of enquiry. Those who work in the area are still sorting out and establishing what the key questions are, what activities and functions cross-border networks perform, and what network research adds to our understanding of worlds that are rapidly changing in an epoch of globalisation. For this community of scholars I believe the present volume will prove an invaluable resource, combining conceptual innovation and theoretical refinement, with a range of interesting findings, many of them previously unpublished.

This in turn should help refresh what have become rather tired debates about globalisation. Much thinking about globalisation is highly speculative and over-
generalised, as well as being polarised between optimists who claim to see only progress, and pessimists who gaze upon global inequalities with critical dismay. This volume, by contrast, identifies enabling as well as constraining features of the life-worlds of those who live across and through political and cultural boundaries. There is a directness and liveliness here that challenges generalisations and the premature rush to one or other end of the spectrum of views about globalisation. Global networks, as discussed here, are profoundly implicated in the making, un-making, or re-making of the multiple social worlds that go to make up the contemporary global arena. They move us beyond speculation in exciting new ways.

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INTRODUCTION

KAREN FRICKER AND RONIT LENTIN

PERFORMING NETWORKS,
NETWORKS OF PERFORMANCE

Networks are everywhere: from migrant organisations to information technology, from business to social movements, from international governance to global non-governmental organisations, from theatrical collectives to fan clubs, from memory sites to narrative circles. The portmanteau terms networks, and more specifically, global networks, seem to have become the mots du jour in contemporary cultural and social studies. This volume is quite clearly a product of the extraordinary current interest in network studies, but it is also an attempt to step back from the network fray to engage critically in what networks are (and are not) and what ‘networking’ means and accomplishes, and to identify and name some potential limits on the usefulness of network theory and terminology. The overall focus and thrust of this volume is on the work of networks: each of the thirteen chapters focuses on a particular network or set of networks in order to interrogate what they actually do or accomplish, always casting a critical eye on the effects of power and influence that might inadvertently or invisibly circulate, alongside more obvious, intended, or espoused agendas.

This collection follows Grahame Thompson’s rallying cry for a clearer analytical approach to the ways in which networks are ‘enacted, assembled, conducted, and performed,’ (2003, 2-3, our emphasis), understanding ‘performance’ at its most basic level as meaning ‘the working out of anything ordered or undertaken’ (OED, cited in States 1996, 4). However, ‘perform’ here has multivalent meanings, as we have already hinted in the title of this collection.

In order to further explicate the multiple meanings of ‘performing’, ‘global’, and ‘networks’ in the context of this volume, it is important to introduce the unique collaboration which is the basis of our research project. The Global Networks group, funded by and located in the Institute of International Integration Studies at Trinity College Dublin, is a research project comprising
sociologists, theatre scholars, and historians. The volume was inaugurated by a conference in September 2005 at which most of these chapters were initially presented. Our project is characterised in particular by the intersection of sociology and theatre studies. Our theatre-oriented members bring to the collaboration their specific language and tools, in particular the focus on ‘performance discourse, and its new theatrical partner, “performativity”’ (Worthen 1998, 1093) that has marked their field from the 1980s forward. An engagement with Austin’s speech-act theory and Judith Butler’s seminal argument that gender is performance (1990) fundamentally re-shaped the discipline of theatre studies by drawing attention to what Bert O. States has called ‘…the limit-problem of performance… [the fact] that we all are, in a manner of speaking, performers’ (States 1996, 2). This led to a move away from traditional studies of texts and venue-based performances towards a consideration of all social activity as in its way performative, and the expansion of theatre studies into new disciplinary areas: anthropology, cultural studies, tourism, and – crucially, for our purposes here – sociology.

This new interest in human experience as performative dovetails with similar moves in the sociological field, specifically Erving Goffmann’s engagement with everyday life, and his appropriation of the concept of performance as a metaphor for social behaviour (Goffman 1975). The chapters in this volume are clearly marked by this consequent intellectual and disciplinary overlap, and by the appropriation of each other’s language and terminology for use both as metaphor and as active theoretical tools and methodologies.

This merging of analytical and methodological tools is complemented by our shared insistence on scholarship that is socially and politically engaged, something very clearly in evidence in this volume’s chapters. While the writers here make use of the idea of performance as metaphor, we all at the same time focus on grounded, real-world activity, understanding the human actor as someone whose actions have material ramifications. Scholars across many fields have noted a tendency of recent research on social and cultural change to focus on macro-level phenomena and to fail to engage with the individual lives and subjectivities involved (see De Tona and Lentin, and Holton and Holton, in this volume). Our goal here is to insert the actor back into theories of networks and networking, an agenda which of course has double valence in a volume that discusses (amongst other subjects) theatrical and other performance practices. All of the authors here focus on individuals as social agents – as actors in the sociological sense; while some chapters (specifically those by Bisi Adigun, Jason King, Patrick Lonergan and Brian Singleton) doubly define actor as a stage performer who is, by his or her work, taking a role in social change.

Global network theories are not in themselves a wholly new phenomenon. Migration studies have long discussed chain migrations which describe similar
performances (see De Tona and Lentin’s chapter in this volume); while anthropologists use the concept of networks to describe interpersonal relations based on family, kinship and other ties. According to Norman Long (2001, 135), networks may be pre-selected by family and community background, but may also be developed from scratch through friendship and occupation. The advent of information technology was one of the primary stimuli for the current network theory boom, with Manuel Castells’s *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) providing an important reference point to further studies of what has become known as contemporary network society. It is the ‘global’ modifier that marks the contemporary network studies in which we participate as something new; these currents of anthropological, sociological, and cultural studies are now being brought together in the examination of contemporary transnational activities.

It should now be clear that we agree with Holton (2005) that the network metaphor has become the heart of many debates about globalisation. Indeed global network analysis threatens to replace theories of globalisation once focused on systems and structures, social fields, and social movements. But if networks are indeed everywhere, and if global networks are ‘dynamic and flexible types of connection between individuals, groups and organisations that criss-cross the world’ (Rogers et al. 2001, iii), they are also ‘interlocking, changing, and multifarious’. And while they are a sign of ‘human accomplishments’ and global openings, they also expose the costs of globalisation (Rogers et al. 2001). Theories of global networks – as multi-centred rather than being organised around one controlling force – are the product of a new approach that ‘reflects the movement away from general macroscopic views on globalisation’ (Rogers et al. 2001, iv). This calls into question the agency of network actors vis-à-vis global structural forces, and highlights, as Holton suggests, that ‘empirically networks are also assemblages of people, institutions, social practices, interactions and bodies of knowledge oriented to “problems”’ (Holton 2005, 212). Thus we return to performativity – centring on the agency of actors making global networking – which becomes pivotal as global network analysis threatens to replace structural theorisations of globalisation with ‘a concern for myriads of instances of networked connectivity’ (Holton 2005, 209).

As Holton argues (forthcoming), much of the global networks research to date has been quantitative, and based on case study methodologies. Structural analysis, using methods such as sample surveys, measuring characteristics of linkages between ‘units’ – be they individuals, groups, or organisations – has assisted researchers in constructing morphologies of networks. According to Holton, however, these quantitative methodologies raise two main epistemological difficulties when applied to global networks. The first has to do
with analysing network limits, because global networks are characterised by amorphousness and tend to cross boundaries, making it difficult to know the population of actors upon which to base quantitative analysis. The second difficulty – familiar to cultural studies scholars, historians, and sociologists – is the impossibility of quantitative research to account for experience, feelings, emotions, imagined communities, life-narratives and historic memory, which, as subjective data, cannot be easily quantified. While network morphology can be of interest in detailed case studies of networking patterns, this type of structural analysis does not fully take on board social agency and the meanings accorded by actors to their network membership. Nor is it sufficiently dynamic, ‘providing a set of static snapshots rather than a close sense of evolving continuities and changes in what networks do and how they respond to challenges they face’ (Holton forthcoming). If networks are to become more than metaphors for inter-connection, we need systematic evidence of what and who is connected, for what purpose and with what effect.

The chapters in this collection – all of which deal with the subjective rather than the objective – eschew a quantitative analysis of global networks, opting instead for a variety of qualitative research methodologies, from historical archival retrieval, through documentary analysis, interviews, ethnographies and auto-ethnographies, to personal narratives. Such qualitative research methods capture the experiences of actors within networks which quantitative methodologies cannot grasp. Readers will note a similar emphasis in these chapters on the reflexive and processual nature of networks. As Stephen Fuchs has argued, asking what a network ‘is’ is the wrong question, for it is only what it has and will become’ (Fuchs 2001, 270). This implies that networks, differently from other forms of sociability such as encounters, groups and organisations, are fluid forms of social association composed of ‘nodes [that] are not, in themselves, fixed and stable. They are made so by embedding them in relations’ (Fuchs 2001, 252). Networks go to work and, over time, they ‘become more similar and known to themselves, acquiring a distinctive identity, mode of self observation, and history’ (Fuchs 2001, 269). The resulting self-similarity – not necessarily consensus or agreement – means that a working network focuses attention on itself, distinguishes its identity from other networks and draws boundaries around itself.

Analysing social movements as networks, Fuchs emphasises that networks often emerge against all odds, and since ‘nothing activates like activism’, activism is more the result of network participation than its antecedent cause (Fuchs 2001, 270-1). Readers will note an emphasis in the volume on studying social movements as networking, including two chapters focused on the direct testimony of activists: Adina Aviram’s account of her participation in New Profile, a feminist Israeli network focusing on the de-militarisation of Israeli
society; and Bisi Adigun’s story of the creation of Arambe, Ireland’s first African theatre company, a tale which Adigun embeds in his sharp observations of the uses to which contemporary Irish theatre has put the image of the ‘fear gorm’ (black man). Both Aviram and Adigun’s chapters give a potent impression of cultures and social movements in extreme flux, and of their activism as a means of locating and anchoring agency within rapidly changing contexts.

Adigun’s chapter reflects one of the book’s primary sub-themes: the changing face of 21st century Ireland, a subject matter which was a natural outgrowth of this research group’s location in Dublin and its participants’ engagement with Irish culture and society. Jason King and Patrick Lonergan’s chapters complement Adigun’s in analysing and critiquing the growing emphasis in Irish theatre on the exploitation of a certain acceptable ‘brand’ of Irishness, one that might limit the inclusion of migrant cultures such as those represented in Arambe. King and Lonergan ask important questions about the reification of certain understandings of Irishness as Irish theatre becomes an increasingly valued commodity on the high-cultural, international festival circuit, understood here as a network of power and influence. Barbara Bradby and Bart Put’s chapter offers a complementary analysis of the circulation of ‘world’ and ‘migrant’ musics, in contemporary Dublin, examining the ways in which African and other new communities are setting up parallel and in some cases competing music networks alongside existing Irish-led ones. Bradby and Put offer an important critique of the existing literature on transnational music networks, cautioning against the too-easy and judgment-laden attribution of ‘cosmopolitanism to privileged white audiences and a tendency to exclude migrant populations from such discussions.

Further insights into the changes in contemporary Irish culture are offered in Carla De Tona and Ronit Lentin’s analysis of migrant women’s networks – Italian and African – in Ireland, in which they propose the fluid structures of networking as the means whereby women migrants are rewriting the story of global mobility, which has traditionally been gendered male. In his chapter analysing the language and ideas that shaped the Northern Ireland Peace Process in the 1980s and 1990s, Andrew Finlay challenges the stereotypical depiction of Northern Ireland as atavistic and a-cultural, focusing in on very specific, privileged interpersonal relationships as the sites of creation and promotion of conceptions of culture in an Irish and Northern Irish context. Karen Fricker, Elena Moreo, and Brian Singleton’s chapter takes a different perspective on conceptions of Irish identity by examining the identifications of Ireland-based fans with the Eurovision Song Contest, a site at which conceptions of pan-European and individual national identities merge and sometimes clash. Fricker, Moreo, and Singleton’s analysis identifies Eurovision networking as an activity
in which fans share pleasures and identifications with the Contest, but also as a site for the creation and performance of expertise and (within its specific context) cultural power, drawing attention to the invisible meanings which are transmitted via networking activity.

This notion of networks as conveyer of unseen but potent cultural and social influence is also the focus of Brian Singleton’s chapter about the work of the Paris-based Théâtre du Soleil, whose most recent production places the notion of actors’ agency centre stage. *Le Dernier Caravanserail* dramatises the contemporary crisis of conflict migration by staging real-life testimony of illegal migrants from Eastern Europe and the Middle East attempting to migrate to England; the production’s refusal to allow audiences to identify with – to even identify – individual characters is, Singleton argues, Théâtre du Soleil’s uniquely evocative and politically charged means of representing a contemporary phenomenon which by definition must refuse representation. Like Singleton, Gyllian Wylie and Deana Heath and focus on transnational networking activity: Wylie describes a current stalemate between the major international networks which oppose the trafficking of women, and argues that their inability to agree on whether prostitution by definition constitutes trafficking has meant that the overall movement has lost sight of its goals. Heath applies network methodologies to the study of the latter days of the British Empire, arguing that attempts to regulate the circulation of ‘obscene’ materials marked the evolution of new conceptions of governmentality. Robert Holton and Sandra Holton also take a historically-based approach, using the example of a particular family network of Quaker women involved in suffrage and abolition work, to argue (as does Finlay) for the relevance of interpersonal contacts in the study of the network of ideas and influence. Like Heath, Ronit Lentin takes a distant and critical stance on networking activity – in her case, that of Israeli intellectual networks commemorating the Palestinian *Nakba* – in order to analyse what regressive political meanings might inadvertently be conveyed through seemingly well-meaning activism.

While in many ways an eclectic mix, these chapters engage with and inform each other, and hopefully offer readers a sense of the richness and challenges that the Global Networks group experiences as we navigate across disciplinary boundaries in search of new ways of thinking about culture, society, and agency in the age of globalisation. It seems unclear at the time of writing whether global network theory will become institutionalised as a framework for studying the movements of thought, people, and value, or whether its usefulness will have proven to be more fleeting – as a means to describe a particular cultural moment. It was a new paradigm for many of the writers represented here, and while it opened intellectual doors for some, others found it insufficiently focused or of questionable relevance beyond the study of immediately
contemporary phenomena. These remain open questions for readers to contemplate as they explore the chapters that follow.

We wish to thank all the contributors, with special thanks to Prof Robert Holton for his generous foreword. Thanks are extended to the Institute for International Integration Studies, Trinity College Dublin, for its ongoing financial support and encouragement for the Global Network project, as well as to IIIS staff members – in particular Adrienne Harten and Gail Weadick, and postdoctoral fellow Dr Fabrizio Trifiró – who assisted in running the conference where many of these papers were first presented.

References


CHAPTER ONE
FROM THE PARTICULAR TO THE GLOBAL:
SOME EMPIRICAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL
AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS
OF MICROHISTORY WITH REGARD TO A WOMEN’S RIGHTS NETWORK
SANDRA HOLTON AND ROBERT J. HOLTON

Introduction

In the broadest sense the term global networks encompasses both electronic networks for the transmission of information and interpersonal networks involving some kind of social interaction between people, whether face-to-face or organised through media of communication. Examination of interpersonal links forms much of the subject matter of research on global networks. Such relationships have been studied in a number of contexts including migration, business, political advocacy, and terrorism. The common thread in this wide range of research settings is an interest in the ways that networks, as multi-centred and informal types of organisation, operate across political and cultural borders. Much of this work is contemporary rather than historical in focus. It also tends to treat the persons involved in networks as sets of anonymous individuals, whose activities may best be understood solely in terms of their social and cultural location.

Such research might, for example, look at the relations between schoolchildren in a classroom, citizens in their local community, or non-government organisations represented at an international conference. Human agency is recognised but is not generally tied to particular, named persons. Such neglect reflects a general social-science model of social activity in which such processes need not refer to named individuals at all. Reference is typically made to structural aspects in the social backgrounds of sets of individuals, such as
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class, gender, and ethnicity, which are taken to provide the key to life trajectories and outcomes. This model need not exclude accounts of the meaning individuals give to their actions, but where patterns of meaning are linked to social structures it is unlikely to require reference to particular persons. Indeed, in some cases, structures are seen as composed precisely of such patterns of meaning.

For the student of interpersonal networks such a model necessarily neglects much of those lived characteristics and experiences of individuals that take place in relation to particular others, whether spouses, lovers, kin, friends, enemies, bosses, workmates, colleagues, members of voluntary organisations, political comrades, or in many instances a combination of some of these. Such relationships are moreover conducted through time and space, and are intrinsic to memory, identity and biography which are typically constructed in relation to particular persons as much as to grand narratives of struggle and progress, hope and despair.

Emphasising this point is likely to produce one of two reactions. The first is that too much emphasis is being placed on the individual, smuggling ideas of personality-based accounts of social life back into scholarship, at the cost of ignoring structural and cultural forces. The second likely response is that a concern with particular persons raises problems of idiosyncrasy, ones that may lead, in turn, to excessive emphasis being placed on contingent or trivial features of social life. Such objections suggest the need for caution, but do not dispose of the case for studying particular persons within the study of networks. This case need not rest on ideas of pre-formed personalities conducting their lives according to internally-generated will or desire; nor does it necessarily require an abandonment of pattern for contingency in accounts of human relations. The case for particular persons is not inherently a-social in nature, then, though it does require some thought about the nature of sociality.

In this chapter we focus on particular persons so as to explore global networks. By adopting this rather different approach we emphasise the value of understanding specific individuals and the connections between them in ties of kinship, friendship and political commitment that are rooted in personal histories of inter-action. First, though, we look at some theoretical and epistemological similarities between the investigation of networks and the practice of Italian micro-history, in order to emphasise the centrality of particular persons to the constitution and operation of many kinds of global networks.
Social networks, agency and microhistory

One of the most influential works of microhistory is Carlo Ginzburg’s study of peasant culture through the story of a sixteenth-century Italian miller, Domenico Scandella or ‘Menocchio’, in *The Cheese and the Worms* (Ginzburg 1980; and see also Muir 1991). Its focus on surviving cultural fragments of idiosyncratic individual behaviour, in this case preserved within the records of the Inquisition, provides insights into the cosmology of a particular person, the meanings he gave to his actions and the meaningful social worlds thereby created. As practised by Ginzburg and others, this approach involves two main procedures. The first of these is to identify names as the signifiers of particular persons; the second is to undertake a rich empirical account of the ‘how’ of social action, centred on such identifiable individuals. Through this methodology it may also be possible to construct a kind of micro-level collective biography, featuring a network composed of a small group of friends and acquaintances.

While there have been debates about how far Italian micro-historians utilise common analytical procedures (Cerutti 2004), one striking feature of this genre is a refusal to move quickly from the particularities of the lives of individuals to the collective or aggregate level of social life. Premature and inexorable analytical shifts from the social world of individuals within their networks to the social worlds of abstract collectivities, such as classes or communities, appears to the micro-historian to lead to an undervaluation of individual encounters, exchanges and idiosyncrasies. Scepticism regarding the deployment of general categories and theories underlies this position, a scepticism shared by the influential English social historian, E.P. Thompson. The methodological and epistemological programme for micro-history requires, then, a rich empirical analysis of the lives of particular persons within networks of exchange, obligation, solidarity, and conflict.

Maurizo Gribaudi (2004) has provided an intellectual autobiography that is instructive in this respect. He outlines his increasing dissatisfaction with quantitative methodologies applied to structural network analysis in efforts to identify patterns within inter-personal life, procedures that ignore accounts of their lives by individuals. For Gribaudi, the models of sociality generated in such ways neglect the complex and often fragmentary nature of particular lives and inter-personal connections. These necessarily remain ‘a hidden landscape’ unless explored instead through qualitative approaches. So, for Gribaudi the biography of networked individuals becomes crucial to the furtherance of this qualitative research agenda.

In the discussion so far, micro-history has been presented as the study of specific persons in particular settings. This raises the question of how it is
possible to move from the particular to the global. At first sight there may seem to be a profound mismatch of scales here, with so many interpersonal exchanges and ‘hidden landscapes’ somehow embedded in localities and small-scale networks, while global processes cross borders and appear to transcend localities. Much of the contemporary opposition to globalisation is expressed precisely as a defence of local communities and particularities.

Such a concern is, however, misleading. There are also to be found microhistories of cross-border life among migrants, pilgrims, diplomats, activists, and merchants. They remind us that globalisation in its various forms is an outcome of human agency (Hopkins 2002; Bayly 2004; Holton R. 2005) rather than an impersonal macro-level process emanating from larger social structures and processes operating exclusively from above. Through such research the particular is linked to the global in connections that might well be thought of as transnational or translocal in scope, thus challenging connotations of universalism that are often attached to ideas of the global.

The general case for qualitative methods and for the specific use of narrative and biographical genres has recently become more prominent in the analysis of global networks (Jayawardena 1995; Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004; al-Zayyat 2004). In this chapter, however, we take these methodological developments in a more specific direction, emphasising the insights that may be gained through a form of network analysis centred on particular persons. We focus on a women’s network that existed in a period when an earlier technology that included letters, diaries and memoirs fulfilled a similar, if more restricted, function to emails and blogs. These technologies were at least as open to women as to men – indeed among some middle class families such forms of communication and their preservation became the particular responsibility of women, part of a domestic division of labour between the sexes (Holton, S. 2005a). We begin our examination by discussing briefly the use of biographical forms by a number of present-day feminist historians.

**The use of biography among feminist historians**

A number of contemporary feminist sociologists and historians have adopted microhistorical practices and turned to biography, prosopography and collective biography to address a range of research agendas (Stanley 1992; *Gender and History* 1990). These different genres provide accounts of the lives of particular women that may vary both substantively and methodologically (Holton, S. 2000a).

Such approaches have proved valuable, for example, in exploring the connections between the personal and the political, or for examining kinship, sociability or the life course of women (Banks 1981; Levine 1990; Caine 1992).
Alternatively, work of this kind may serve to re-examine some of the stereotypes that have shaped past histories of women and of the women’s movement (Holton, S. 1996); or to demonstrate the enormous variation encompassed by categories such as ‘bourgeois’, ‘liberal’ and, of course, ‘women’ (Riley 1988; Caine 1992; Holton, S. 1994).

The history of women’s rights movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries serves to illustrate some of the various uses of biography. The first example may be termed the ‘Romantic-heroic’ form. This celebrates prominent figures and emphasises the role of particular ‘charismatic’ women in creating social change, rather than focusing on social structures, organisations, groups and subcultures (Sarah 1982; Spender 1982; Purvis 2002). Many of the memoirs and early histories produced by the movement also leaned toward such an approach to history (Pankhurst, E. 1928, and see Dodd 1993; Holton, S. 1990, 2000a).

Another form used by feminist sociologists and historians is that of prosopography, usually reflecting a social-constructionist approach that examines what was shared among leading members of the movement, for example family connections, religious belief, education, and links to male elites (e.g. Banks 1981; Levine 1988). In one especially innovative instance it was found possible by such means to write the biography of a woman who had left relatively little documentary evidence behind her, but the meaning of whose actions was reconstructed in terms of the values, goals and strategies adopted by her closest associates and then linked back to those documentary sources that had survived (Stanley with Morley 1988).

Collective biography provides a further form, focusing on a selection of particular persons to explore variation and a-typicality among women in public life, both within and outside the women’s movement. Through this genre a historian may identify differing life patterns, worldviews or activities among a set of women (Caine 1986, 1992). Or she may challenge stereotypical or established understandings of women’s rights activists as persons quite distinct from ‘the average woman’ by comparing self-representation in a selection of autobiographies; or create a fresh narrative that better acknowledges some of the diversity and cross-currents within this social movement (Holton, S. 1992, 1996, 2000a, 2000b)

A different use of biography is to be explored here, however, one that focuses on particular persons and the links that brought and kept them together. More specifically, it concerns women from among the Priestman-Bright family circle, the study of which has made possible a fresh appreciation of the role of women’s networks in the history of the suffrage movement in Britain, and a fuller recognition, too, of some of their transnational dimensions. These reached backwards decades prior to the foundation of a national suffrage movement in
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the 1860s to the transnational movement to abolish slavery earlier in the century (Midgley 1992; Holton, S. 1994a, 1994b); they also looked forward to the internationalist project among women that arose from the First World War and that played a part in the formation of non-governmental organisations and the creation of the League of Nations. This last body in turn institutionalised a new, transnational effort, however limited and compromised, on behalf of the rights of women (Rupp 1997).

The next section of this chapter, then, discusses the progression from a study of particular persons to the charting of national, international and global networks; it focuses on a set of women’s rights advocates selected from among the Priestman-Bright family circle of ‘Quakers’ (or ‘Friends’, that is members of the Religious Society of Friends, a dissenting church that emerged out of the religious strife that was part of the English Civil War); it also discusses some of the methodological and historiographical issues that arise from such a proceeding.

Charting the Priestman-Bright circle of Quaker women

The importance of Unitarian and Quaker women to the leadership of the British women’s movement has long been acknowledged (e.g. Strachey 1978). This understanding has undergone significant revision in recent years, however: the intellectual foundations of the movement were provided by Unitarian women in the 1840s and 1850s (Gleadle 1995; Watt 1998; Richardson 2000; Plant 2000). Women Friends, by contrast, only emerge as a significant presence in the early women’s rights organisations formed in the 1860s, and even then they were unusual within their church (O’Donnell 2000; Holton, S. 1996, 2005a, 2005b). Similarly, the importance of kinship links in the leadership of the British women’s movement has received increasing recognition in contemporary scholarship (Banks 1981; Levine 1990; Holton, S. 1996, 2005b), and this is especially clear among Unitarian and Quaker figures. The research drawn on here focuses on the particular family circle created by the marriage in 1839 of a woman Friend, Elizabeth Priestman, and the Quaker Radical, John Bright. Some of their sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, great nieces and nephews, and in-law relations subsequently provided both national and local leadership in a range of women’s rights organisations across three generations.

An analysis of this network may be constructed in terms of social-structural and cultural factors: the position of its members among those relatively wealthy sections of the middle class who wealth was built on larger industrial and merchant enterprises, for example, and the relatively better educational opportunities and greater ‘leisure’ enjoyed by women in such circles; or the
sharing of a liberal-Protestant faith that emphasised the equality of male and female souls and membership of a church that, unusually, recognised the ministry of women; or a church discipline that promoted social seclusion, intensive patterns of kinship and extensive religious, business and social networks through endogamy; or participation in a system of church government and an elaborate church calendar requiring extensive travel and sociability, especially among the more well-to-do leadership of the church. Yet other aspects are the transatlantic dimension of both church and Quaker networks consequent on continuing patterns of migration to the United States, the maintenance of kinship and business links between Britain and the USA, and the exchange of travelling ministers between the British and the American branches of the church; or support for the ‘oppositional’ stance of the Religious Society of Friends vis-à-vis the established order, and most especially with regard to a state religion headed by the monarch; or the set of shared values that led this circle to become a notable presence in humanitarian and philanthropic movements, including the abolition of slavery (Isichei 1970; Walvin 1997; Holton, S. 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 2001, 2002).

Such factors undoubtedly assisted in the creation and maintenance of a network of women activists centred on the Priestman-Bright circle. But its members remained unusual among their co-religionists in their readiness to engage in radical politics in general, to promote demands for women’s rights in particular, and to challenge the more cautious among the leadership of the women’s movement to adopt still more controversial causes and methods of campaigning. So any adequate account of this circle of women Friends needs to go beyond the more general characteristics of Quakerism, to focus on its particularity, as evidenced for example in its geographical dimensions.

In the years immediately following the marriage of Elizabeth Priestman and John Bright the influence of this family circle was largely restricted to the north of England: the Priestman family was prominent among Friends in the Newcastle region and the Bright family, based in Rochdale, was similarly so in the Manchester region. In the years that followed, however, the marriage of various members of each family saw this network extend its geographical and social reach considerably. Margaret Bright Lucas (sister of John) settled in London on her marriage, and was a widow by the late 1860s when she became part of the metropolitan leadership of a number of women’s rights organisations. Her family relationships, and the subsequent marriage of her daughter, Kate Lucas, to the future member of Parliament, J. P. Thomasson, also kept alive her links with women’s organisations in the north. In the following decades she became the President firstly of the British Women’s Temperance Association and then of the World Women’s Christian Temperance Union, another body that
brought together British campaigners with those overseas, and especially with those in the United States.1

Priscilla Bright (another sister of John) married Duncan McLaren, an Edinburgh merchant who in the late 1860s also entered parliament, requiring her presence in London for large parts of the year. So, she too not only helped establish local committees and societies in Scotland to promote a range of women’s rights demands, but played a part also in the metropolitan councils of the movement. She and her sister provided, then, a link between local bodies and coordinating national committees located in London. Her connections with the movement in the north of England were further extended by the marriages of her two sons: Charles McLaren married Laura Pochin, the daughter of one of the earliest public speakers on women’s rights in Manchester; and Walter McLaren married Eva Muller, who maintained her place in the metropolitan leadership of the women’s leadership as well as a prominent role in women’s organisations in the north, and was sister to Henrietta Muller, editor of the women’s rights journal, The Women’s Penny Paper and its successor The Women’s Herald. Priscilla Bright McLaren’s step-daughter, Agnes, was also active in women’s rights campaigns and was among the first women to enter the medical profession in Britain.

The marriage in 1847 of Margaret Priestman, close friend as well as sister-in-law of Priscilla Bright McLaren, took her from Newcastle to Bristol. She remained in the south west after her second marriage, and now as Margaret Tanner provided support and leadership across a range of women’s organisations. In time these regularly took her to Europe for conferences with co-workers in an international body to resist the state regulation of prostitution, one that arose from a campaign that had begun in Britain as we discuss below. Marriage also brought her niece (and daughter of Elizabeth Priestman and John Bright), Helen Priestman Bright, to Somerset just as the first suffrage societies were being formed. She became active in the women’s movement mostly at the local and regional level, though her close relation to the three of her aunts discussed above, as well as the standing of her father, John Bright, ensured her a position of national influence. In her new home she was soon able to work alongside her Ashworth cousins and her aunts, Anna Maria and Mary Priestman who also moved to the Bristol and Bath region in the years that followed.

So by the 1870s, the reach of the Priestman-Bright circle extended from the south west of England to the heart of Scotland, and its members were also serving as a link between the local, regional, national and, and subsequently the international, leaderships of the women’s movement. That position reflected shared values and social position, but it was also created by the contingencies of personal life, for example, in the marriages made by particular persons, or the early death of a parent. The especially close relationships between Helen
Priestman Bright (later Clark) and her Priestman and Bright aunts, for example, came about in part because of the early death of her mother: her care and education rendered her in effect the hub of this family circle in its early years.

From the particular to the global: The Priestman-Bright circle and the construction of a transnational network

The charting of this family circle and the part played by its members in numerous women’s rights bodies does not in itself establish its character as a network, however. The formal records of women’s suffrage societies, for example, simply register the presence of several of its members among the leadership, especially at the level of local organisation. The early histories of the movement are similarly limited on this question for they tend to focus on the role of individuals as figureheads around which campaigns became organised. There are only suggestions of the workings of a network, for example, in the organisation of early speaking tours of women suffragists across Britain (some of the first examples of middle-class women speaking from public platforms); or in the role played by their male kin in supporting the demand in parliament (Blackburn 1902).

Fortunately, however, members of this family circle, though widely dispersed by the late 1860s, sustained their close relationships with each other by letter-writing, and some also recorded and reflected on their experience in diaries. Among this group, too, were conscientious collectors of family papers who ensured the survival of such material. Internal evidence regarding the processes by which this collection was generated and preserved establishes the importance of particular persons and their private relationships to its creation. For the existence of the archive in itself speaks of a distinct family culture built upon the fostering of a particular sensibility, one that comprised a shared sense of the past and of the possibilities of the future, that emphasised emotional intimacy within the family and an energetic engagement with civil society outside it. Particular persons and their relationships were thereby rendered the source, the embodiment and the expression of a sensibility on which female identities that were at once domestic and public, feminine and authoritative, religious and secular might be built and sustained (Holton, S. 2005a, 2005b).

Equally, the evidence in this collection demonstrates how members of the Priestman-Bright circle created and operated a national network of women’s rights advocates as a set of particular persons linked by a shared emotional life as well as through mutual assistance, friendships, material resources and family connections. So, Priscilla Bright McLaren might be described, if ironically, as the best represented woman in the land, for her husband, two brothers, both sons, and several brothers-in-law and nephews became MPs. Her oldest brother,
John Bright, was initially uncertain and increasingly hostile in his attitudes to women’s rights. However, the unity of sisters, daughters, nieces and great nieces on the question provided them with the confidence and assurance to continue to express forcefully and in public their own contrasting views, to his increasing discomfort.

By contrast, his younger brother, Jacob Bright, married Ursula Mellor, another figure from this circle who became prominent in both national and local organisations campaigning for women’s rights. He, too, became an unstinting supporter of a wide range of women’s demands, successfully challenging the more cautious approach of John Stuart Mill. He introduced the first women’s suffrage bill in the House of Commons in 1870, for example, while his initiative ensured that some women quickly won the right to stand and vote in local government elections in 1869. In consequence, women in Britain were voting for and serving on local government bodies some 50 years before the parliamentary vote was won.

Their religious affiliation and the reputation of Quaker women for a retiring modesty made the women of this circle especially valuable to the foundation of a particularly controversial women’s rights campaign, one that sought the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. This set of legislation required any woman identified as a prostitute in specified naval and military centres to present themselves for medical inspection, this identification resting simply on the word of a member of the moral police force established for this purpose (Walkowitz 1980). Such inspections were intended to establish whether or not the woman was suffering from a venereal disease. Male patrons of prostitutes did not fall under the acts. Prison sentences with hard labour were the penalty for any woman who defied the legislation (though medical opinion was still at this time divided as to the nosology and diagnosis of venereal diseases, and therapies for their treatment were limited (Holton, S. 1989). Those who sought to overturn this legislation recognised both that it would be difficult to mobilise women, especially middle-class women, around so distasteful a subject, and also that it would need a leadership of unimpeachable respectability. Their determination to take up this cause was one of the earliest sources of tension within the women’s suffrage movement. Many, including John Stuart Mill, thought that any association with such a question was likely to damage other campaigns for women’s rights, including the demand for the vote.

So its initiators turned to a pious and charismatic Anglican philanthropist, Josephine Butler, already well known for her work among prostitutes, and the support she gave to the demand for higher education for women. She in her turn looked to her friends among women Quakers to help create a national repeal organisation. The founding meeting of the Ladies National Association took place in the Friends’ Meeting House in Leeds. A number of women from the
Priestman-Bright circle attended the meeting and two, the sisters Mary Priestman and Margaret Tanner, became the principal honorary officers of this body, as secretary and treasurer respectively. Their contribution was very much in the ‘back room’ of the movement, however, and any detailed examination of their role, and more especially of the mobilisation of their networks, must depend largely on their private correspondence with Josephine Butler, and with other members of the family and friendship circles. In time this movement prompted the formation of an international federation of societies opposed to the state regulation of prostitution, in the councils of which members of this circle again played an active part.

Such material also suggests that this circle saw itself as a radical ginger group within the leadership of the women’s movement, though again it does not appear as such in the formal records of organisations, in movement literature, or in the internally-generated histories of campaigns. The public face presented in such sources understandably sought to obscure or downplay internal tensions and disagreements. Here again, it is necessary to turn to the private papers generated by the intimate relationships between particular parsons to undertake any more detailed analysis of the debates that emerge in their private exchanges among themselves. Such relationships not only allowed or required greater frankness; they also served to reinforce an individual’s sense of the rightness or wrongness of conflicting positions, and provided the occasion for reasserting the shared principles and values that underpinned their position. Such evidence also provides, in consequence, a much fuller picture of the cross-currents and tensions within the women’s movement, one considerably more complex than previously recognised. It also shows how personal letters were the principal means by which such networks were put into operation.

The shared history of the Priestman-Bright circle in terms of a longstanding commitment to humanitarian causes such as the abolition of slavery, for example, provided a further basis on which they built still wider networks. Such involvement also suggested that their networks possessed an international dimension. The collection of their papers was found to contain letters from prominent members of the women’s movement in the United States, for example, leading in turn to the location of further such correspondence among US collections. But the clearest evidence of the international network of the Priestman-Bright circle was found in the histories and memoirs of the US women’s movement, especially those of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a leading figure in its more radical section. She first formed friendships among members of the Priestman-Bright circle during a visit to England to attend the 1840 London Anti-Slavery Convention. These she revived and extended in 1882, during the first of a series of visits to a daughter who had settled in Britain on her marriage to an Englishman. Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s progress around
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Britain during this second visit to Britain saw her move from the home of one member of this circle to another, seeking political mentors for her daughter, and establishing new friendships and political contacts along the way (Holton, S. 1994a, 1994b, 1996).

Moreover, Cady Stanton’s letters and reminiscences make clear that she found the Priestman-Bright circle of suffragists congenial because of their standing as radicals, for example, in their support of more inclusive formulations of the suffrage demand (for some among the leadership sought to limit the demand to single women). This question proved especially divisive among British suffragists from the 1870s to the 1890s, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton openly aligned herself with the Priestman-Bright circle in their support for the more inclusive formulation. She, in her turn, looked to the Priestman-Bright circle for support in her own projects, for example, the formation of an international organisation in support of women’s suffrage built upon their shared networks; or her controversial ‘Woman’s Bible’, in which she and those who agreed with her took issue with a recent new translation of the Bible, and offered their own more liberal readings of it. Here, a focus on particular persons not only serves to advance our understanding of some of the tensions among women’s rights advocates in Britain, it also demonstrates the importance of a shared history and radical identity in efforts to extend the international scope of women’s political networks in the 1880s and to attain a more global reach (Holton, S. 1994a, 1994b).

Similarly, the place of the Priestman-Bright network within radical circles in Britain, as well as their family histories of engagement with abolition, meant that overseas agitators for black rights often came to Britain with introductions to its members. Hence, the fugitive slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass became a guest of the Bright family in the 1840s, and John Bright was a major contributor to the fund established in Britain to buy his freedom. On what proved his last visit to Britain in the 1890s, Frederick Douglass once again was a guest of members of this circle, including John Bright’s daughter, Helen Clark. The African-American civil rights advocate, Ida B. Wells, journeyed to Britain shortly afterwards to enlist international assistance in the campaign against lynching in the United States. She, too, looked to members of this kinship group for hospitality and for help in organising a speaking tour, while her standing and the importance of her campaign was endorsed by Frederick Douglass in a letter to Helen Clark (Holton, S. 2001).

A neighbour and relation of Helen Clark’s by marriage, Catherine Impey, was already involved with a British campaign against segregation practices in United States branches of the International Order of Good Templars, a temperance body with which several of the Priestman-Bright circle were closely associated. She also founded and edited the journal, *Anti-Caste*, to oppose racial
discrimination more generally. Now she raised funds for Ida B. Wells and
helped organise her speaking engagements around the country. Catherine Impey
was also among those who established the Brotherhood Society in Britain, as a
pressure group to fight racism, though as the title of her journal indicates, this
term and the analysis it represents was not yet available to her and her
colleagues. Soon afterwards, too, she was marginalised within the Brotherhood
Society because of the embarrassment arising from her offer of marriage to a
young Indian student involved with this movement (Ware 1992; Fahey 1997;
Holton, S. 2001). _Anti-Caste_ also opened its columns to an early spokesman for
black rights in South Africa, John Tengo Jabavu. He, too, found friendship and
hospitality among members of the Priestman-Bright circle, and especially the
Clark and Impey families, when he travelled to Britain to lobby for the retention
of black voting rights in the Cape within the constitution of the new republic of
South Africa (Holton S. 2001).

The legacy of the abolition movement and their family’s connection with it
was again evident in the black networks among whom the Clarks moved during
a visit to the United States in 1900. So, for example, they visited the African-
American political leader and educator, Booker T. Washington, at his Tuskegee
Institute for black students in Alabama and became subscribers to this venture,
while their home was included in his itinerary when he visited Britain some
years later. The operation of the Priestman-Bright circle was further
demonstrated in the British education provided for Davidson Don Tengo
Jabavu, son of John. This education subsequently saw him travel to Tuskegee to
learn about the provision of black education there, a visit funded at least in part
by his Quaker friends in Britain (Holton, S. 2001). Here, shared friendships
among the Priestman-Bright circle provided the basis for a transnational
network of advocates of black rights, networks that might not only cross several
generations but that served in time to link campaigners across three continents.
The full extent and significance of such global networks can only be charted,
however, by a focus on particular individuals, their personal relationships, both
familial and political, and the private communications between them. In such
ways microhistory in the form of ‘personal history’ may become a basis for a
transnational history of global social and political movements.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have followed some of the procedures of Italian
microhistory to analyse the creation of a women’s network involved in
movements advocating gender and racial equality. In so doing we have
identified the centrality of relationships between particular persons to such
movements, and emphasised the ‘how’ of the social processes involved,
processes that lead us from a particular to a global focus. Those involved in the Priestman-Bright circle were neither poor nor socially marginal, though they often campaigned on behalf of those who were. But the nature of their contribution must have remained largely part of the hidden landscape of histories generally constructed from public records without the discovery of an archive containing their personal papers. Such sources make possible a focus on particular individuals and their personal relationships which in turn allow the charting of networks and processes that serve to link the particular and the global.

Forms of network analysis that focus on particular persons are also methodologically significant in identifying social processes that would otherwise be methodologically hidden when analysts use quantitative and structurally based models. Particular persons become lost to view when anonymous generalised categories take over. Such a way of proceeding may be epistemologically flawed inasmuch as it neglects the meanings that particular individuals give to their actions, and the ways that these become expressed in the life of social networks.

So finally we find a paradox, the expansion on a global scale of links between particular persons in the form of the networks they helped form. We have provided glimpses here of one such transnational network composed of women linked by the particularities of family, friendship, history, locality and religious values who occupied a significant place in the diffusion of ideas, in the mobilisation of political campaigns across borders, and in the creation of leadership in movements for change, in some part because of their very particularity. The personalised relationships involved depended very largely on linkages of friendship and kinship, and emotional ties provided the foundation for informal networks that were also trans-local, transnational and global.

References


