

The transnational dimension of protest: From the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street

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ABSTRACT

The workshop intends to analyze the transnational dimension in the recent wave of global protests like the Arab Spring, the European Indignados, and Occupy Wall Street. Literature on transnational social movements flourished in the last decades, exploring social movement networks that organized counter-summits demonstrations and social forums meetings. Most recent protests across the world had, amongst their target, national governments and policies. But they also maintained a strong transnational stance. Starting from a comparative perspective, the workshop focuses on the transnational mechanisms and processes at work in the Arab Spring, the European Indignados, and Occupy Wall Street by paying particular attention to 1) imageries and practices of democracy and 2) communication and mediation processes.

OUTLINE

In the past years, massive protests developed in several countries across the world. Late in 2010 and early in 2011, social movement for democracy flourished in many Arab countries: from Tunisia, Egypt and Libya to Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. In the Spring 2011, protesters initiated peaceful mobilizations in the streets and squares of many European countries, amongst which Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece. At the beginning of Autumn 2011, some activists in the U.S.A. occupied Zuccotti Park, in the Wall Street District of New York. Some weeks later, Occupy Wall Street protests spread in many other cities across the U.S.A. and other countries, like the U.K. in Europe, involving hundred thousands of people.

Many observers and commentators began to compare the revolts and protests that took place in the Arab countries, in Europe and in the United States the past years. Others reacted claiming that it is hard, if not impossible, to compare revolts and protests that are rooted in – in some cases extremely - different political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. Yet, many activists who took part to Occupy Wall Street protests had in mind the Spanish *acampadas* in Madrid and

the thousands of people gathering at Tahrir square in Cairo, Egypt when setting up the campsite in Zuccotti Park, New York. Often, direct contacts developed. Protesters from different countries participated in the construction and diffusion of imageries and practices of democracy that opposed and contested the dominant political systems, being them either authoritarian dictatorships or elected governments. Finally, protesters revolting in Tunisia and other Arab countries employed the same communication tools, amongst which Facebook and Twitter, that protesters in other countries employed during the seasons of the European Indignados and Occupy Wall Street.

The diffusion of protest strategies and tactics, the experimentation with similar practices and imageries of radical democracy, the reciprocal acknowledgment as part of common struggle, and the use of communication channels that go well beyond the national borders indicate that we are facing a wave of global struggles. Although different under many respects, protests occurring in countries across the world not only shared some common aspects, but were also in subtle connection with one another.

Maintaining a comparative approach, the workshop seeks to explore the transnational dimension of the Arab Spring, the European Indignados and the American Occupy Wall Street protests. The aim is to discuss the existence of political and cultural linkages across protests occurring in different regions, countries and continents, as well as the legacy of previous waves of protest.

EXISTING RESEARCH

Literature on global social movements and transnational collective action flourished in the last decade (Kriesi, della Porta and Rucht 2009; Karides, Smith and Beckers 2008; della Porta, Andretta, et al. 2006; della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Tarrow 2005). Scholars developed theories, concepts and mechanism referring to the wave of mobilization on global justice that began late in the 1990s and gained worldwide visibility due to protests against the 3rd World Trade Organization summit, at the end of November 1999 in Seattle. Counter-summits spread across the globe sustained by transnational networks of activists belonging to different countries of the Global North and the Global South. In the following years, the World Social Forum, the European Social Forum and other regional forums proved to be important venues where activists from all over the world could construct a common, yet multifaceted, framework for radical criticism to corporate globalization (della Porta 2007).

Although actors, discourses and practices developed during past transnational mobilizations did not disappear, today we are looking at a new wave of protests occurring across the globe that

requires scholars to update their analytical tools, revise their research questions and look for alternative answers related to the transnational dimension of protests. In particular, two aspects seem particularly interesting when speaking about the transnational dimension of the present wave of protest: 1) practices and imageries of democracy; 2) communication and mediation processes.

Practices and imageries of democracy

Research on democratization processes singled out the relevance of transnational activist networks in promoting protest (Bunce and Wolchik 2001; Bunce, McFaul and Stoner Weiss 2010). At the same time, in the development of transnational networks of different types, the imageries and practices of participatory and deliberative democracy played an important role. Arab Spring, the European Indignados and the Occupy Wall Street protests were embedded in different political, social, cultural and economic contexts. Yet they all developed demands around the idea of democracy and, at the same time, engaged thousands of people in participatory democratic practices. Mobilizations in Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, aimed at overthrowing long-lasting dictatorships and at establishing democratic political systems. Protesters in Portugal, Spain and Greece equally addressed the quality of democracy in their countries asking for the establishment of 'true democracy' and for the accountability of elected politicians while facing a deep economic crisis. In the U.S.A., general assemblies managed through the consensus method transformed the squares of many cities into spaces of public discussion and direct democracy. What spread from one country to the next, and also from a continent to the next, were not only claims for social justice (the "99%" against the "1%"), but also practices such as the protest camps that were, at the same time, a form of claims-making and a prefiguration of participatory politics, in which each participant had the right to speak up and, especially, be listened to. Developing from national and transnational traditions of participatory and deliberative democratic decision making (della Porta 2009a and 2009b), these organizational forms innovated upon them especially in the importance given to the "normal citizens" and discursive quality.

Communication and mediation processes

Research on previous wave of transnational activism assessed the importance of activists' appropriation and creation of online communication tools, amongst which independent informational websites like Indymedia and activist mailing lists like the People Global Action, to sustain and expand transnational social movement networks and mobilizations (Juris 2008; della Porta and Mosca 2005; Van de Donk et al. 2004; Bennett 2003; Bennett 2004). The current wave of global mobilizations also employed online communication tools. Although independent

informational websites and activists mailing lists still exist, commercial social networking sites like Facebook, became a central tool in the communication strategies and tactics of protesters involved in the Arab Spring, the European Indignados and Occupy Wall Street mobilizations. Especially in the case of the Arab Spring, crucial mediation processes also occurred through transnational satellite television networks, like Al Jazeera, that played an important role in the diffusion of imageries linked to global protests from one country to another, frequently relying on reports produced and diffused by citizens with mobile phones (Cottle 2011). More in general, the presence of mainstream transnational media coupled with the localized use of mobile technologies sustained the diffusion of imageries and practices from one protest site to the other. It is therefore crucial to investigate to what extent communication and mediation processes within and across countries sustained the transnational dimension of struggles and the diffusion of protests tactics, organizational patterns, and democratic practices. And to what extent corporate social media, amongst which Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, contributed to the emergence of "digital repertoires of action" (Earl and Kimport 2011) and forms of "connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) at the local, national and transnational level.

PARTICIPANTS AND PAPERS

The workshop aim at bringing together scholars from a range of fields in the social sciences and interested in social movements to address the emergence and diffusion of global protests from the end of 2010 onwards. We expect this workshop to be a venue able to foster an interdisciplinary comparative workshop involving sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and media scholars dealing with unconventional politics and/or focusing on transnational activism.

We encourage papers rooted in different disciplinary fields (political sciences, sociology, anthropology and media studies), that employ either qualitative or quantitative methodologies (or both). We especially look for empirical papers that analyses specific case studies in the context of the Arab Spring, the European Indignados, and Occupy Wall Street, as well as in comparative analyses. We are particularly interested in: 1) A focus on democratic practices and imageries and/or communication and mediation processes. Other topics of interest are: how organizational patterns, mobilizations of resources, and collective identification processes; 2) Papers with a comparative stance in order to grasp cross-national and cross-time variations in global wave of mobilization that spanned from the Arab countries to North American countries. Potential comparisons are: cross-territorial comparisons to grasp similarities and differences between protest events and campaigns within the same country, in different countries, and/or in different continents; cross-time comparisons to grasp similarities and differences between protest events and campaigns that occurred at the same territorial level in different period of times.

BIOGRAFICAL NOTES

Donatella della Porta is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute. Among her recent publications are: (with M. Caiani), *Social Movements and Europeanization*, Oxford University Press, 2009; (ed.) *Another Europe*, Routledge, 2009; (ed.) *Democracy in Social Movements*, Palgrave, 2009; *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (with Michael Keating), Cambridge University Press; (with Gianni Piazza), *Voices from the Valley; Voices from the Street* Berghan, 2008; *The Global Justice Movement*, Paradigm, 2007; (with Massimiliano Andretta, Lorenzo Mosca and Herbert Reiter), *Globalization from Below*, The University of Minnesota Press; (with Abby Peterson and Herbert Reiter), *The policing transnational protest*, Ashgate 2006; (with Mario Diani), *Social Movements: an introduction*, 2nd edition, Blackwell, 2006; (with Sidney Tarrow), *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

Alice Mattoni is Postdoctoral Associate Fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. She has a Master of Research and a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute. Amongst her research interests are social movements and political communication in local, national and transnational settings. She is part of the steering committee of the Standing Group Participation and Mobilization of the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR) and a co-editor of "Interface, a journal for and about social movements". Among her recent publications are *Media Practices and Protest Politics. How Precarious Workers Mobilise* (Ashgate 2012); the edited volume *Mediation and Social Movements*, co-edited with Bart Cammaerts and Patrick McCurdy (Intellect forthcoming); and an edited volume on Italian students movements co-edited with Loris Caruso, Alberta Giorgi and Gianni Piazza: *Alla Ricerca dell'Onda. Nuovi Conflitti nell'Istruzione Superiore* (Franco Angeli 2010).

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