

Conclusion

Anti-austerity protests in European and global context – future agendas for research

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Over the past three years, a series of protests rooted in demands for economic and political inclusion have taken place across diverse parts of the globe. The mass mobilization in response to a perceived disenfranchisement in both the economic and the political realms, and the greater fairness and representation demanded by protesters in Iceland during the 2008 “saucepan revolution” appear to be features echoed in a string of subsequent protests, from the Arab Middle East, to the Euro-American “core” of the global economic system. In Tunisia, the harsh security crackdown against protests triggered by the self-immolation of a street vendor sparked an uprising which, between December 2010 and January 2011, successfully overthrew Ben ‘Ali’s seemingly solid authoritarian regime.

Protests were immediately echoed in Egypt, overthrowing President Mubarak in under three weeks (25 January–12 February 2011), then spreading to Syria (26 January), Yemen (27 January), Bahrain (14 February) and Libya (15 February). While the Tunisian uprising is the first and thus far most successful case of popular uprising in the Middle East, the Egyptian case is probably most significant, containing strong social movements pushing for regime change, but also a more entrenched regime, and a degree of sectarian divisions and violence aimed at protesters, albeit not to the extremes reached in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Within Europe, countries that have been particularly hard hit and/or whose governments have been required by international financial institutions to impose austerity measures include Iceland, Spain, Greece, Ireland and Portugal. In all of these countries, citizens have responded by public protest, although to greatly varying degrees. Protests have targeted national political and economic elites for failing to adequately address internal structural problems, and for failing to protect citizens against the effects of the global financial crisis (Shihade *et al.* 2012). They have protested the external imposition of budgetary austerity measures, which, in their opinion and those of a number of scholars (Krugman 2012; Fishman 2012), threaten to worsen both cyclical and structural economic problems. Underlying these protests has been a deep critique of policy-making processes and a strong sense of injustice.

Understanding the roots, development and implications of these protests is a critical challenge not only for several social science disciplines, but also for a

1 range of stakeholders in the public arena, from the movements involved in these
 2 protests to the governments faced with the daunting task of responding to them.
 3 The emergence of anti-austerity protests also throws up a series of questions
 4 which have been hotly debated among scholars:

5 First of all, is this indeed a cycle or wave of protest? Are the protests related
 6 to each other or just superficially similar? What is the connection between the
 7 emergence of movements making similar claims in such disparate geographic,
 8 political, economic, social and cultural settings? To what extent are globalizing
 9 processes responsible for their emergence?

10 Protest waves have been of interest to scholars since at least 1848, when con-
 11 temporary observers spoke of a “springtime of peoples”, while Palmer’s ground-
 12 breaking work on the “Atlantic revolutions” of the late eighteenth century added
 13 to the idea. Over time, new “waves” such as that from 1916–1924, European
 14 anti-fascism, de-colonization movements in the majority world, 1968, post-
 15 Soviet transition, the alterglobalization movement and Latin America’s “pink
 16 tide” have come under scrutiny.

17 However, most studies have either simply acknowledged the empirical reality
 18 of such waves or have described their internal relations in terms of quantitative
 19 macro-indicators, to the detriment of inter- and intra-organizational dynamics,
 20 collective identity processes, and the diffusion of protest frames and strategies.
 21 This descriptive choice constrains theoretical questions as to why such waves
 22 occur at all and what factors explain their timing, geography and characteristics.

23 Marxist and world-systems analyses such as Arrighi, Hopkins and Waller-
 24 stein, and Halperin redress this balance with attention towards the changing bal-
 25 ances of power between popular and elite forces. Others such as Skocpol focus
 26 on the breakdown of particular forms of state power. By contrast, Katsiaficas,
 27 Castells and Linebaugh, and Rediker focus on cross-boundary diffusion, com-
 28 munication tools, and mobile social agents. Nonetheless there is clearly still
 29 much work to be done in order to understand what has been a recurrent feature
 30 of the modern world for the past quarter-millennium.

31 Currently, the question of the relationship between “Arab spring”, the post-
 32 2008 European anti-austerity movements, and the “Occupy Wall Street” move-
 33 ment is unclear, both conceptually and empirically. Moreover, the relationship of
 34 any of these with the wider “Global Justice Movement” since 1999 (whose organ-
 35 izations and networks certainly flowed into the latter two), or with opposition to
 36 neo-liberal IFI (International Financial Institutions) policies in Africa and Latin
 37 America, is also an open question, both theoretically and empirically. Which
 38 brings us to the next set of questions: Are these protests new and unprecedented,
 39 or do they in fact represent continuity with previous cycles of contention, namely
 40 the Global Justice Movement? New versus old debates are popular in the liter-
 41 ature, but are often quite sterile. A more fruitful line of inquiry, and one adopted
 42 by many of the contributors to this volume, asks which elements are new and
 43 which can be seen as developments of previous movements and networks.

44 The contributions to this book would urge us to approach radical claims for
 45 newness with caution. Nevertheless, there are clearly some features of these

current protests that *are* new, whether in degree, scope, or actual innovation. One area that has been much discussed in this regard is the use of ICTs and social media and their impact upon the emergence, dynamics, and extension of the mobilizations: What is the importance of ICTs and social media in mobilizing protest? Is the use of ICTs qualitatively and quantitatively different from previous cycles of contention?

Within the European context the use of social media (such as Facebook) has increased since the early 2000s, as has its acceptability among social movement actors. Yet the ways this use actually shapes the speed, scale and form of mobilization is still unclear and therefore more research is needed in this area. While some scholars outside the social movement studies field call for a conceptual reworking of collective action on the basis of increased ICT use, ethnographic work on social movements has demonstrated that such claims overlook the actual ways in which collective actors use ICTs in physical (face-to-face) social movement settings, and that the interconnection between virtual and physical space and its impact upon mobilization needs to be more fully understood.

The question of continuity or rupture from the Global Justice Movement is salient in discussions of movements' use of ICTs, with strong claims for the importance of social media in the rapidity and scope of the 15-M protests being noted as novel or distinctive. However, the 13-M protests in 2004 were also convoked and spread in a matter of hours, by movement actors firmly located within the Global Justice Movement network in a highly unfavourable political context which involved risk taking and low expectations of success by the organizers (Flesher Fominaya 2011). The difference, of course, is that 13-M emerged from existing networks but did not coalesce into a sustained movement.

Qualitative research, and ethnographic research in particular, is crucial to counteract claims for the radical impact of ICTs on protest activity. For example, Bennett's (2012) claims that 15-M represents a radical departure from traditional forms and logics of social movement organizing display a lack of awareness of the history, development, and actual practices of social movement networks in Spain and of autonomous movements more broadly. If social movement studies is often a self-referential subfield that needs to reach out beyond its boundaries, as we have argued in this book, it must also be said that scholars outside the field would do well to familiarize themselves with the large body of research on social movements over the past decades before making authoritative claims about social movement dynamics. When faced with a lack of clearly visible formal organization, some scholars (including some social movement scholars) mistakenly assume that there *is* no organization or coordination, a conclusion easily refuted by qualitative primary data on autonomous movement networks by engaged social movement scholars. Nevertheless, more research *is* needed to understand the way ICT use alters and impacts upon contentious mobilization; there *is* evidence for some significant changes over the past decade, and surely an engagement with experts in digital communication and new information technologies will yield important insights.

In particular, we might consider a re-engagement with the crucial point made by Linebaugh and Rediker (2001), which is that, at any period in the

development of global capitalism, it is in essence those *same* social actors, production processes, means of communication and transport, and cultural orientations necessary to the construction and maintenance of the system which are also used to undermine it. “Capitalism creates its own gravediggers”, or at least its own resistance, in very literal ways – from the *détournement* of Atlantic capitalism to piracy, the spread of revolutionary ideas and the creation of alternative societies in the eighteenth century to the *détournement* of contemporary social media and Maffesoli’s “society of tribes” to generate new kinds of political mass mobilization – on Wall Street, in Reykjavik, or at Puerta del Sol. Following Hardt and Negri (2001), we might also note that Web 2.0 is itself a commodification of new interactive uses of IT, pioneered most notably by the creation of Indymedia for the Seattle protests: the creativity of capitalism and that of its opponents are not separate, but a cycle of commodification and creative resistance.

What should be clear from this book is that these processes do not operate in the kind of ahistorical, culture-free, technologically determined vacuum that is often presented not only by journalists but also by some researchers who should know better. Social actors – even transnational squatters, cyberactivists or global organizations – are nonetheless deeply *situated*, their wider connections, historical perspectives and attempts at generalization profoundly structured by the specificities of their own networks. City-specific, regional, national and European histories shape social movements: not for all time, but providing the “circumstances not of their own choosing” which they work with (or against) to create new activist identities, organizational and movement cultures, political strategies, and alliances.

This most recent wave illustrates this neatly: if in Europe Occupy overlapped with other anti-austerity movements, its core was nevertheless in North America and shaped by the particular US defeat of the alterglobalization movement following 9/11, while European anti-austerity movements drew on the very different history of that movement there to shape new responses to EU fiscal policies. If European movements looked to the Arab Spring for inspiration, and there was communication in both directions, this does not make the two become as one – rather, they are very differently shaped responses to the particular movement histories and locations of these regions within the capitalist and geopolitical order.

As this book shows, we have to understand locally-situated processes across time with their continuities and ruptures, together with transnational waves which articulate very different national and regional realities, if we want to arrive at an accurate understanding of how social movements continue to be both universal *and* particular, specific to their time and place yet also reaching beyond it and attempting to transform it.

As struggles over austerity seem set to continue and deepen in the EU’s long-running financial crisis, journalistic impressions and commentaries by specialists on state actors are no substitute for serious ethnographic and archival research by engaged scholars who can explain why it is that popular movements do *not* accept the wisdom of EU, state and media actors and instead set their own

agendas which not only overturn those official realities at times (as in Iceland), but are also more broadly reshaping Europe's political landscape in the latest assertion of democracy from below.

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