

Social movement research in Europe – the state of the art

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Scope and history of the field

As we write this, scenes of struggle on the streets of Europe, of official policy increasingly at odds with popular opinion, and a massive crisis of legitimacy spreading across many countries are repeating a drama familiar since the events of 1789-92, 1830 and 1848 - described in 1850-5 by Lorenz von Stein as “the social movement”. In the uneven and contradictory struggle for substantive democracy across the last quarter-millennium in Europe, unofficial popular agency keeps reappearing as a central figure on the European stage, with a wide variety of forms, issues and ideologies. Research on social movements in this broad sense is a long-standing feature of European Studies under many disciplinary headings: sociology, political science, history, anthropology, geography, industrial relations, women’s studies and so on, and is routinely invoked as part of the background of the study of literature, popular culture, philosophy etc.

When social movements have been part of the making and unmaking of states or threatened to become so - as in 1789-1815, 1848, 1871 in France, 1916 – 1923, 1943-45, 1967 – 69, 1975 in Portugal, 1980-1 in Poland, 1989-90 and arguably again since the turn of the millennium – they can be so omnipresent as to be taken for granted. At other times, such as between 1968 and 1989, the established order and its routines can seem so firmly in control of the institutional (and military) reins that movements are analysed only at their own assigned “level” of action.

In a longer perspective, one of the most important features of social movements as collective popular agency is precisely their waxing and waning: if at one time a “movement” consists of a handful of NGOs or intellectuals, at another it is a piece on the strategic chessboard, and at yet another it may be rewriting the rules of the political game.

Themes in European research

Social movement research in Europe, then, is such a vast field that it is hard to make any useful generalisations. Nevertheless some comments can be made. Firstly, a major and continuing concern of European research on movements has been to *relativise* the tendency of both “high politics” (party-systems, policy-making, international relations) and “social structure” (economics, culture, social relationships) to appear as sufficient unto themselves. Both have routinely been the objects of social movement contention – whether opposition to nuclear war, union organising, critique of everyday patriarchy or the formation of new political parties – and their changes can hardly be understood without bringing social movements into the picture. Secondly, a particular European emphasis has been to explore the ways in which movements have constituted themselves as actors

within Europe: in the formation of states and political parties, in the construction of long-lived political traditions and movement cultures grounded in specific places or social groups. Indeed, many of the actors which are most easily recognised from one European country to the next take this form: trade unions, Christian Democratic parties, environmental groups, women's projects for survivors of rape or domestic violence, social centres, the far right etc.

North American social movement studies, reflecting a situation where movements have rarely posed serious challenges to state power and can plausibly be seen as seeking inclusion in a pre-constituted political order, has often presented institutional explanations of movements' rise and fall, their internal structures and processes and their interaction with states and the media. By contrast, the European situation of multiple power centres, complex national political cultures and a wider spectrum of relationships between movements and states makes such a unified theory problematic (Flesher Fominaya and Cox 2013).

Different European traditions

Hence it is unsurprising that European social movements research does not take the homogenous form of the North American field but reflects a state of moderate diversity and overlapping dialogues. One school draws strongly on US theory and seeks above all to establish regularities; this is particularly true of the work of Donatella della Porta and her collaborators at the EU's COSMOS "centre on social movement studies", who have been involved in large-scale funded research around themes like social movements and democratisation (della Porta 2009) or the wide-ranging interests of Dieter Rucht (Walgrave and Rucht 2010) and his collaborators at the Berlin Institut für Protest- und Bewegungsforschung) or in a different key the long-standing *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* ("Social Movements Research Journal").

Another approach, linked in particular to the newer movements from the turn of the century on, draws strongly on contemporary social and political theory and seeks to analyse what movements mean for society as a whole. This has been the approach followed by, for example, Alain Touraine and those influenced by his interventionist approach (1981) and more recently by groups like activist geographers in Leeds and Leicester (e.g. <http://www.autonomousgeographies.org/>) or the Resistance Studies Network at Gothenburg (e.g. <http://resistancestudies.org/>). A third approach, associated among others with the journal *Interface* and NUI Maynooth, has been to develop closer links between movements' own processes of knowledge generation and academic work in the area (<http://interfacejournal.net>). This diversity of scholarship and the various conversations between and across traditions mirrors the broader conversation within a far wider area of European academia around how to understand and engage with social movements.

Recent developments in the field

In the last two decades, there have been many promising developments in social movement research in Europe: movements have been recognised as significant actors in the context of the crisis of conventional, representative forms of liberal democracy; the transnationalisation of social movement activities with its new avenues for protest and networking opportunities has further fostered this trend; and the development of cyberactivism and the role that alternative media play

in providing movements with non-corporate channels of creating and disseminating information have also attracted much attention.

Crisis of representative democracy

While conventional political participation (in voting or party membership) declines, social movements continue to rise and protest remains a consistent dimension of political engagement. This underlines the increasing relevance of movement action in making demands on power, but more importantly it means that movements are becoming vessels for articulating and enacting a more fundamental critique of conventional, representative politics.

Although social movements have criticised delegation and centralised mechanisms of power since at least the 1960s, the recent wave of popular mobilisations such as the *Indignados*, Occupy and anti-austerity protests across Europe demonstrates a huge popular potential for enacting this critique in ways that prefigure direct, egalitarian and grassroots models of democracy.

Some studies explored how alter-globalisation and global justice movements in particular are trying to experiment with direct democracy in their internal practises while simultaneously developing proposals for institutional democratic reforms (Maeckelbergh 2009). Especially promising is the growing emphasis on the importance of their internal practices, which is essential for a comprehensive understanding of movements (della Porta & Rucht 2013). Key research interests in this area include the complexities of decision-making and the question of power in horizontal movements.

Transnationalisation of social movements

Social movement activities have expanded beyond the traditional focus on the local and the national to encompass a variety of cross-border issues and contexts. This is exemplified by the shift to a multi-level politics in which levels and targets of mobilisation are all interlinked within a complex matrix of supranational arenas and issues, national decision centres and transnational mobilising structures. This interdependency facilitates diffusion of collective action models, ideas and protest itself across national borders.

Among the most prominent reasons for the growth of transnational mobilisation is the weakness of established international politics and growing economic interdependence. The expansion of scope and possible dimensions for action has been accompanied by a shift towards more networked structures of mobilisation and a flourishing diversity of types of cross-border activism (such as global days of action, protest camps, Social Forums, anti-summit demonstrations, transnational campaigns and networks).

Cyberactivism and alternative media

Cyberactivism has played a significant (but not unproblematic) role in the recent development of movements in Europe. Activism in cyberspace as exemplified by the extensive use of various electronic channels of communication and social media is a field where new and creative ways of

communication, information distribution as well as novel forms of participation and action are emerging (Mattoni 2012). Hacktivism – politically motivated hacking – is another type of engagement and solidarity-building that takes place beyond the conventional arenas of activism.

There has also been a proliferation of alternative media, which enhances horizontal circulation of information and decreases movements' reliance on corporate and mainstream outlets. However, both cyberactivism and the developments in alternative digital media raise concerns about their relative efficacy or the “digital divide” between the technology-savvy and others with less access to essential skills and resources.

Future prospects and new directions

Movement-relevant and participatory research

There have been widespread calls for social movement research that is not merely self-referential, dependent on a narrow canon of movement theory and uninterested in engagement with practitioners. The extent to which research is relevant to movements (Bevington & Dixon 2005) might be seen in critical dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

Different forms of movement-relevant and participatory research are being developed in ways that engage with the concerns and needs of movement participants, are constructed through democratic processes and involve sustained relationship-building between all project participants. This naturally challenges the traditional role and position of an academic researcher but also produces richer knowledge, speaking to participants' lived experience and contributing actively to a genuinely participatory democracy in Europe.

Interdisciplinary research

Although the study of social movements is in theory interdisciplinary, in practice research often remains narrowly structured by participants' training. Translation between different disciplinary and theoretical languages and the crossing of methodological boundaries remains the exception rather than the rule, and discussions which have become routine elsewhere in the social sciences are often absent from the field.

In the area of European social theory, which was largely developed through engagement with movements, interdisciplinarity moves researchers away from canonical accounts and positivist categories of movement theory that aim to establish a subdiscipline, and towards more Europe-specific and engaged modes of writing about political mobilisation. Social, political and even psychoanalytical theory in Europe was always shaped by and influenced various movements. Beyond the canonical references to Habermas, Melucci and Touraine, movement researchers have drawn on and continue to take inspiration from theorists and public intellectuals such as Marcuse, Foucault, Bourdieu, de Beauvoir, Lacan, Derrida or Zizek.

Conclusion

At present one of the major challenges for social movements scholarship within Europe is to understand the various anti-austerity movements which – most visibly in the Icelandic “saucepan revolution”, the Greek protests, Spanish and Portuguese *Indignados*, Occupy in Britain and Ireland but more widely in a great range of trade union, direct action, neighbourhood, far left parties, populist formations and other forms – are bringing the EU’s austerity project to the end of its political feasibility and have led to serious political crises in a number of states. Clearly such protests cannot be understood in a framework of “business as usual.” Nor do conventional movement theories adequately explain how such widespread and determined challenges can continue *without* managing to reshape political relations.

Research dialogues around this situation are focussing in particular on comparative and cross-European approaches, attempting to understand the complex articulations of these movements rather than present an image of a politically and culturally homogenous Europe; on historical analysis, insisting that these movements do not come out of nowhere but represent both continuations and modifications of existing movement alliances; and on discussions of the nature of power in the 21st century, which is manifestly neither a simple function of police violence nor of media ownership and representation.

In this context the Council for European Studies’ research network on social movements (<http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/research/research-networks/social-movements>) has been organising joint discussions with its sister networks in the ECPR and ESA and partners such as Harvard’s Berkman Center (2012) and the Transnational Institute (Amsterdam, 2013). The network’s activities at the 2013 CES conference also reflect the importance of these dialogues in developing social movement research in Europe.

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