

Non-Western Social Movements and Participatory Democracy: A Foreword

In 2013, as the cycle of protest that became most visible in 2011 seemed to subside, contentious politics began to re-emerge worldwide in the most disparate parts of the globe, including Turkey, Brazil, Venezuela, South Africa, Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Ukraine. Indeed, the protest spread, inspired at least in part by the anti-austerity movements of the previous years but also presenting some peculiarity. Participants in the new movement often acknowledge the learning process from movements in other countries and the linkages between the protests in 2011 and those in 2013 have been explicitly addressed by scholars such as Goran Therborn (2014). He noted that “paradoxically, it is not so much in the recession-struck Northern heartlands but in the neo-capitalist Second World, and in the—supposedly booming—*brics* and emerging economies, that popular anger has made itself felt” (p. 6). In fact, while the 2011 protests had been most visible during the Arab Spring as well as in the so-called PIIGS countries—Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain—which were suffering the most from the financial crisis and in very contentious environments, some of the 2013 protests developed in countries that were considered as “winners” in economic terms or as very tame in terms of contentious politics. Despite differences, “an emphasis on urban space through the occupation of public squares has been a common characteristic of all of these protests. Real estate bubbles, soaring housing prices, and the overall privatization-alienation of common urban goods constitute the common ground of protests in as diverse places as the United States, Egypt, Spain, Turkey, Brazil, Israel, and Greece” (Tuğal 2013, p. 158).

In addressing these protests, this volume has some important contributions that can open new perspectives in social movement studies. First of all, it points to the need to see protest in its global dynamics rather than narrowing focusing on so-called advanced democracies. The global dynamics of contentious process can be addressed by looking at what I conceptualize as protest cascade, referring to the spreading of protest beyond physically proximate and functionally isomorphic places (della Porta 2017). A *cascade* is defined as “a chemical or physiological process that occurs in successive stages, each of which is dependent on the

preceding one, and often producing a cumulative effect.”¹ In parallel, in a *protest* cascade, protest events occurring in one place trigger a multistage process that, in successive stages, spread in other places, producing cumulative effects. The concept of *protest cascade* points at the process of diffusion of protests towards distant spaces where hypotheses of isomorphism or proximity do not automatically hold.

A second relevant contribution of the analysis of non-Western movements is also in bringing (back?) some perspectives that had disappeared in “mainstream” social movement studies, while instead remaining well alive in research on social movements in the South. Especially relevant, a debate triggered by the protest cascade of 2011 and following years is about the social bases of the protest. In addressing the social composition of the protests, various contributions to this volume address the important issue of the effect of the neoliberal economy beyond the core democratic countries—as well as the various class configurations of the protest as the protest waves broadened beyond the first-comer countries.

The focus on classes and capitalism should not, however, bring about structuralist visions that do not recognize the agency of the citizens, even under authoritarian regimes. Another important contribution of this volume is indeed in the analysis of the political conditions for the development of the protests. Defying the expectation that movements will develop when democratic opportunities open up, the contributors to this volume show that contentious politics is also possible in what have been defined as authoritarian, or at least illiberal, democracies, as neoliberal economic global policies reduce institutional channels for participation, increasing instead repression as well as a perceived decline of civic and political rights. In their challenges, protestors are however going beyond claims for liberal democracy. The movements analyzed here contributed to the spreading of an alternative language, bridging social and cultural concerns. In action, during the protest campaigns, a new “spirit” emerged, giving rise to a sense of empowerment that often lasted beyond the campaigns. Contentious politics contributed, therefore, to the reshuffling of political cleavages and the emergence of new norms and narratives—although with different degrees of success.

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Donatella della Porta

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¹<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/cascade>.



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