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Advances in Social Movement Theory since the Global Financial Crisis

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Abstract

The social movement literature in Western Europe and North America has oriented much of its theoretical work towards micro-, meso-, and macro-level examinations of its subject of study but has rarely integrated these levels of analysis. This review article broadly documents the leading theoretical perspectives on social movements, while highlighting the contributions made in recent years with regard to the wave of protests across the globe – typified by the Occupy movement and the 'Arab Spring' – and grievances that are relatively novel in qualitative or quantitative form such as austerity, precarity, and a sense of democratic deficiency. While these novel social processes have invigorated the specialized arena of 'social movement studies' and generated a resurgence of work on social movements beyond the field, we argue for the need to interconnect levels of analysis in order to develop a more insightful account of contemporary contentious politics.

Key words: Protest; financial crisis; social movement studies; levels of analysis; mobilizations

Introduction

The study of protest and social movements can no longer be encapsulated in the typical juxtaposition of the social scientific approaches utilized in North America and in Western Europe. The term 'social movement' has been bestowed with a remarkable variety of meanings in different academic disciplines and interdisciplinary settings. While such

analytical pluralism has long characterized the study of protest and contentious politics, in this short contribution we suggest that the global economic uncertainties brought about by the 2007/08 financial crisis have triggered new waves of political mobilization which frequently defy easy categorization or explanation. As a result, there is considerable ambiguity as to the causes, forms and effects of the new mobilizations.

In addition, there are a number of contradictory developments that hint at the complexity of the field. Whilst it is true that we have seen a sudden wave of public anger and political protest in the aftermath of the financial crash, culminating in 2011 as 'the year of the protester', this has not led to a sustained challenge to neoliberal economics. The new cycle of contention has been distinctive in its global and transnational dimension, but it nonetheless remains shaped by national and sub-national contexts. Despite electoral successes by new populist movements, the centre of the political spectrum has rarely been ousted from power for long. And where its tentative beginnings in Iceland's 'saucepan revolution' culminated quickly in the uprisings across the Arab world, they have often been usurped by repression and counter-revolutionary forces. There is, then, a sense that whilst 'business as usual' persists below the surface there are a multitude of social agents eager to confront power and to 'make history'. It was the re-emergence of the social actor in the new social movements of the 1960s that led Alain Touraine to argue that the way our cultural orientations find expression in collective action is 'the proper object of sociology' (Touraine, 1971: 26). Social thought, thus, turns to the study of the historical agency of movements whenever there appear to be new social cleavages, conflicts and confrontations. Viewed from this perspective, it is no surprise that there has again been an explosion of academic publications on social movements and contentious politics in recent years.

This resurgence must also be examined within the context of changes that have occurred within the field of study over recent decades. The study of social movements is now an established academic field, with disciplines in the humanities and social sciences also experiencing a 'social movement turn'. There are established journals such as *Mobilization* or *Social Movements Studies* as well as newer outlets, multiple special issues of the major journals devoted to social movements, and theoretical concepts developed to define aspects of political contention have gained wide currency across the social sciences and humanities. Nonetheless, the central conceptual questions of social movement research

have not been resolved. There persists significant disagreement amongst theorists in the field as to what the key features of a social movement are, and therefore how to approach the study of protest and collective action. While some have attempted to develop consensus definitions of social movements (Diani, 1992; Rootes, 2007: 610), others have disagreed (Tilly, 1999: 257). This is occurring at a time when Western Europe and North America are experiencing relative declines in the macro-level and 'grand narrative' explanations that underlay a substantial proportion of the academic work on the topic (see Accornero and Fillieule, 2016). In their place there have been attempts to synthesize analytical tools within meso-levels of analysis, such as bridging the gap between structure and culture (e.g. Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015) or an expansion of isolated analytical tools to greater numbers of empirical cases with limited theoretical developments.

In this review of recent advances in social movement theory, we distinguish between three broad levels of analysis: micro, meso and macro. This is not to overstate the extent of their analytical separation. There have long been noteworthy efforts to connect different perspectives and to bridge gaps between divergent theoretical and methodological approaches (e.g. Buechler 2011; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; McAdam et al., 1999). However, continued challenges to the dominant paradigms as well as the pluralization of accounts of the most recent wave of protests necessitate that we renew our focus on the established concepts. How, in other words, might we combine understandings that stress the crisis tendencies of global capitalism with those that focus on individual or local specificities? For the purpose of our discussion, the levels of analysis refer to the spatial scope that the theories address in their attempts to understand and explain the processes, properties and predictors of social movements. Micro-level analysis refers to the examination of social movements with the unit and focus of analysis on social movement organizations and groups. A meso-level analysis places such a focus on a larger collection of actors that make several social movements within the boundaries of a state or a social issue. This level of analysis spans a greater social space and places more complex institutions made up of a larger body of organizations and actors as the central unit of analysis. Theories dealing with meso-level analysis are interested in the interactions between the state and social movements, in the interactions between otherwise separate social movements. Finally, macro-level analysis looks at social movements from the perspective of large-scale

changes that expand beyond states and cross-movement interactions. These changes are large enough in scope that they may produce changes to otherwise unrelated social movements and occur beyond the scope of any individual state. Cross-national generational patterns, transnational economic and political changes, and even relatively stable large-scale or diffused processes such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism and xenophobia, nation-states, citizenship, and neo-colonialism.

However, little work is generated that synthesizes understanding of social movements between micro-, meso-, and macro-level analyses. While some attempts to bridge analytical perspectives have worked to accomplish a synthesis (Martin, 2015; Buechler, 2011), they have often favoured one level of analysis over another (e.g. Oberschall, 1999; Zdravomyslova, 1999; Clemens, 1999; Voss, 1999; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; although see Kriesi, 1999; Rucht, 1999). Instead, a regional divide is (generally) present whereby North American approaches to the subject are often located within the micro-level or middle-range while Western European investigations of social movements have been macro in focus but are increasingly favouring more empirical middle-range work (see Rucht, 2016). We will argue that, based on both the insights and oversights of contemporary social movement scholarship, multi-level analysis is needed to expand our knowledge of contentious politics broadly and address the immediate questions posed by the relative novelty of the processes discussed above.

Our starting point for this examination of recent theoretical contributions to the established literature is the notion that while democratic societies have witnessed a normalization of protest and that unconventional and extra-institutional contention is part and parcel of the political landscape across political systems (both authoritarian and liberal), the post-2008 situation has given rise nonetheless to movement mobilizations that are anything but 'normal'. Instead, they pose fundamental challenges to the economic and political orthodoxy of modern societies. Scholars have noted such shifts as they turned their attentions to the remarkable levels of participation in the Spanish '15-M' demonstrations and the rapid proliferation of media-savvy 'Occupy' encampments across the United States in 2011, for example. Along the way, we have paid witness to anti-corruption protests in Brazil and Russia, a European anti-austerity movement led by the Greek resistance to EU-imposed austerity, and reinvigorated youth and student activism from Chile to Quebec,

from the UK to Iran. The 'refugee crisis' in Europe and the Mediterranean has been met with pro- and anti-migrant activism, and populist politicians of all persuasions have rattled the political establishment. While aspects of recent waves of mobilization are novel we recognize that there have been continuities across a range of contentious processes. Nevertheless new challenges and questions are presented to us by what seems like a global wave of protest since 2008.

We proceed with our investigation of the contemporary theoretical landscape of social movement studies by examining the state of the modern trinity of social movement theories that served as the basis of much of the North American social movement literature in the past decades, namely the frameworks of resource mobilization, political opportunities, and framing. We then explore macro-level theories in the era of the 'newest' social movements. This review of the literature will allow us to specify how scholarship that bridges these levels of analysis will be better suited for the purpose of understanding the processes that have emerged in the Global North since 2008.

Resource Mobilization

Resource mobilization was originally a broad label for theories that contested older collective behaviour approaches which viewed social movements as relatively rare occurrences arising out of the 'structural strain' of social change and increasing grievances among individuals (Jenkins, 1983). However, the framework became more focused on the 'study of the aggregation of resources (money and labor)' as 'resources are necessary for engagement in social conflict' (McCarthy and Zald, 1977: 1216). This framework often promoted micro-level analysis as this 'aggregation' led resource mobilization scholars to examine organizations (ibid.). While various accounts of the framework exist (e.g. the rational actor model suggested by Olson (1965), the entrepreneurial approach rooted in organisational studies of McCarthy and Zald, or the focus on contentious politics by Tilly and Tarrow), for most, movement organizations engage in strategic claims-making, the communication of values and interests, and a discussion of rational and often economically-privileged actors who belied the image of pathological deviants.

Despite its early prominence in social movement studies, resource mobilization has been one of the least developed in recent years (Edwards and Kane, 2014). However, this is not

because of a lack of relevance as studies are still utilizing components of resource mobilization theory in their analysis (ibid.). Recent studies have continued to find resources, including membership, playing a positive role in, for example, union activity (Martin and Dixon, 2010) and obtaining news media coverage (Andrews and Caren, 2010). The latter study found that '[m]ore resourceful organizations are better able to establish and maintain relationships with the news media and may also be better able to signal the legitimacy of the organization and its claims' (ibid.: 857). Yet, like other recent works that cover questions of resources (e.g. Boekkooi et al., 2011; Demirel-Pegg, 2014; Walgrave et al., 2011), neither of these studies discuss 'resource mobilization' explicitly or seek to build on the framework theoretically. Instead, other theoretical concepts such as social capital (e.g. Edwards, 2013; Morales and Ramiro, 2011) have been used to examine similar aspects of social movements. Much of the contemporary literature that does invoke resource mobilization merely adds empirical data across a range of cases to support some of the framework's central claims.

The new wave of protests has the potential to challenge the stagnant state of the framework. Recent investigations into the use of information and communications technology (ICT) within this new protest wave (see Gerbaudo, 2012) allows resource mobilization to integrate ICTs into its framework in novel ways, as Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) found in their study of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Parallels could be drawn with Occupy Wall Street, a 'Twitter movement' (Gerbaudo, 2012: 114), where within a few months of the first encampment in New York City's Zuccotti Park, there were hundreds of #Occupy groups on Facebook, 'liked' by millions of individual user accounts (Gamson and Sifry, 2013: 160). Twitter 'hashtags' became a tool for the sharing of information and the tracking of conversations with up to 120,000 related Tweets on a typical day during the lifecycle of the occupations (Castells, 2012: 172).

It is clear that successful mobilizations in the post-crash era have relied on sophisticated communication channels and social networks, not all of which warrant the traditional emphasis on social movement organizations as 'repositories for the accumulation and concentration of […] resources' (Pichardo, 1988). Divorcing the use of resources from traditional conceptions of organization provides an opportunity to not only reinvigorate a framework that appears under-utilized and under-appreciated (Edwards and Kane, 2014) but also to stretch the level of analysis within which it is used beyond the micro-level.

Political opportunity (structures)

The analysis of political opportunity structures developed as a means of looking at social movements within broader socio-political contexts to see how those contexts constrained and moulded social movement actors, organizations, tactics, and strategies. Early iterations of its use in understanding processes of contentious politics focused on structural accounts.

Eisinger (1973), who was noted to be the first to use the term, examined the responsiveness of local government bodies to residents' claims-making and found that protests and responsiveness had a curvilinear relationship. Little signs of responsiveness led to little protest while significant levels of responsiveness pre-emptively dealt with concerns before protests would take place. When local government was moderately responsive the city was more likely to experience protests because there were signs of hope for progress that was stalled. This analysis was used to explain a wide range of social movement processes and was expanded to examine differences across nation-states. One important contribution to the framework examined how political opportunity structures helped shape the types of mobilization (e.g. conventional or unconventional) commonly resorted to in a particular setting based on levels of openness regarding state 'input' structures as well as 'output' structures – or the means by which the state could implement policy once a decision was made (Kitschelt, 1986).

These contributions developed meso-level analysis of social movements, examining differences across state institutions at various levels (local, regional, national, and supranational). They often branched out into research on single states or particular structures of those states. They also began to explore political processes that were variable rather than structural, and cultural or economic rather than political. Thus scholars in the field argued that the political opportunity perspective was 'becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment' (Gamson and Meyer, 1999: 275) with all variables being lumped together, making the framework increasingly weak (Koopmans, 1999; Meyer, 2004).

Calls to differentiate concepts within the framework and to take a more constrained and cautious approach to applying it (Rootes, 1999) have resulted in the expansion of analytical scope into the areas of 'technological opportunity structure' (Pavan, 2014), 'intellectual opportunity structures' (Waidzunas, 2013), and 'mediation opportunity structures'

(Cammaerts, 2012). The structural and non-structural lumping concern was also recently addressed by differentiating dynamic variables within the political realm (e.g. political party/parties in power, open policy window) from structural ones (e.g. electoral system, strength of judiciary) (see Nulman, 2015a). The cultural turn has also been analysed alongside the more structural approaches more recently (e.g. ibid.; Rosenberger and Winkler, 2014) with movement participants increasingly seen as active interpreters of these structures (McAdam, 2003). Where otherwise a framework focused on meso-level analysis, the cultural turn could lead to further research within the political opportunity perspective to explore micro-level processes.

The Framing Perspective

The framing perspective grew in popularity throughout the 1990s following a series of publications by David Snow, Robert Benford, and associates (Snow and Benford, 1988; 1992; Snow et al., 1986). Since 2000 the framing perspective has been in the mainstream of social movement theory with the 1986 publication becoming one of the most widely cited articles in sociology (Caren, 2012). The perspective, following from Goffman's work (1981) explores how social movements are active agents in the shaping of social movements through the location, perception, identification, and labelling of problems, solutions, and incentives to participate in social movement activities (Benford and Snow, 2000). This in part countered the overly structural aspects of the resource mobilization and political opportunity approaches while still maintaining a sociological examination of social movements. Framing largely loomed at the micro-level of analysis, focusing on the collective action frames of organizations and movements.

Recent studies typically viewed framing as an independent variable and examined how collective action frames affected political or economic outcomes and movement mobilization (Snow et al., 2014: 33–4). The bulk of these studies are empirical (e.g. Bergstrand, 2014; Blocq et al., 2012; Chiarello, 2013) and seek to integrate framing with other theoretical approaches, such as the analysis of emotions (see Blocq et al., 2012; Schrock et al., 2004; Halfmann and Young, 2010), political opportunities (Shriver et al., 2013) and culture (Snow et al., 2013), or within more pragmatic examinations of particular cases (Nulman, 2015a; Rizzo et al., 2012; Shultziner, 2013).

Some recent research has led to theoretical contributions in the case of framing. For example, Faupel and Werum's (2011) investigation of the women's movement in abeyance from the period 1910-1930 highlights the role of declining cultural and political opportunities to the increased use of individualist action frames (frames that focused on promoting individual rather than collective struggle, denied structural barriers to equality, attributed achievements to personal qualities rather than collective efforts, and focused on specific individuals) (Faupel and Werum, 2011: 186). In addition, rather than fine-tuning framing theory, some new contributions have sought to expand it. Halfmann and Young (2010) make a theoretical contribution by exploring collective action framing not with regards to the content of messages but to aesthetic technique. Their focus is on the use of grotesque imagery with regards to social movement mobilization which they suggest 'may intensify the emotional impact and resonance of frames' or break frames (ibid.: 5).

As pointed out by Snow et al (2014: 35–8), there is still ample room for advancing our understanding of the role of framing in social movements. The literature still lacks significant comparative research and the processes involved in constructing, adjusting and subverting collective action frames are still not widely studied. However, some advances have been made on some of these fronts. For example, with regard to the process of collective action frames, Brown (2014) argues that rather than being a highly open processes that actors engage in, it is heavily structured by institutional contexts. This work and others (e.g. Guenther, 2012) provide a renewed examination of framing from a structural perspective – tying framing back into political and national characteristics.

Macro-level analysis of the 'newest' social movements

Mostly a feature of European debates on new left politics, the term 'new social movements' gained considerable traction within protest research in the 1980s (see Melucci, 1980; 1985; Touraine, 1981; Eder, 1985; Kitschelt, 1985; Offe, 1985; Kriesi, 1987; Klandermans and Tarrow, 1988; Tilly, 1988). Advocates of the notion suggested that at least some features of contentious and countercultural politics in Western Europe from the 1960s onwards were 'new', such as concerns with post-materialist values and collective identity. This 'newness', which is perhaps overstated, was suggested to have developed out of macro-variable changes such as large scale shifts in economics and international politics.

Critics, however, pointed out that the break with the politics of 'old labour' and trade unionism had been overstated. Much of the literature therefore acknowledged that the new social movements were more than an effect of the radicalism of youth and student groupings and an upwardly mobile workforce. More than that they often manifested a deepening conflict between marginalized populations and their social control by state and market institutions. With the end of the debate around the new social movements which were carried out as questions of structural social change, large historical-structural explanations have rarely featured in the mainstream of social movement research. Rather, the discipline has settled largely on an instrumentalist-structuralist lens (Johnson, 2009) focused on micro- and meso- level analysis (see Jasper, 2010). On top of those listed above are other more recent theories that come through the cultural turn and largely focus on micro-level examinations of social movements – for example those taking into account culture (Baumgarten et al., 2014; Johnston and Klandermans, 1995), emotions (Goodwin et al., 2001; Ruiz-Junco, 2013) or collective identity (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; McGarry and Jasper, 2015). There is less focus on the question of structural strains or rational choices and instead a focus on how culture and emotions allow for strategy in movement 'fields'.

However, some of these insights continue to be challenged by accounts that build more upon the new social movement approaches, especially post-2008, some of which lie in the European tradition of macro-structural explanations. With the new cycle of mobilization in Europe, research has been interested in explaining the unforeseen rise of new European movements such as the square protests by the *indignados* in Spain, the *aganaktismenoi* in Greece, or the Iceland protests. These, the macro-theorists assert, are part of a general crisis and outrage over the management of the crisis in Europe and have been able to convert street anger into parliamentary gains.

Two works are perhaps symptomatic of this return to theoretical macro-level analyses that stress the importance of networks, identity and grievances, broadly defined, in the face of growing inequality in Western societies. First, Castells' (2012) notion of a network society suggests, like other theories of globalization, that new technologies and information flows create the preconditions for the embedding of local public spheres into a global network of actors that includes protest movements. While technological development in this account is very much driven by information capitalism, and therefore structured by inequalities of

access, it does nonetheless form the basis of new mobilizations and their exercise of communication power. In the internet age, the forms of communication employed for social actors also shapes their form of organization: 'the more interactive and self-configurable communication is, the less hierarchical is the organization and the more participatory is the movement' (Castells, 2012: 15). Second, Della Porta's recent work on anti-austerity protest connects the new mobilizations directly to the question of social structure and political cleavages (Della Porta, 2015). Outlining what she calls 'the crisis of late neoliberalism', della Porta draws on several critical accounts of capitalist development, such as Hardt and Negri's conceptualization of Empire and Wallerstein's world systems theory. In her account, protesters do not appear as individual actors driven by cost-benefit analyses, but as new class formations. Their social base is at least twofold. On the one hand the deregulation, liberalization and privatization of democratic societies results in the ineffectiveness of political institutions to respond to citizens' demands and grievances, leading to mobilizations outside the established channels of political engagement. On the other hand, the social base of contemporary protest is to be found in the precaritization of both middle and lower classes who build alliances on the back of their unmet expectations.

It is worth noting that renewed attention has been paid to critical social theory and Marxism too (some recent examples are Barker et al., 2013; Cox and Nilsen, 2014; Fominaya and Cox, 2013; Schlembach, 2014; 2015). Work by Cox and Flesher Fominaya has argued for the importance of reimagining the tradition of critical theory for understanding European social movements. They point to the importance of reading the historical trajectories of European social movements as precursors to the alter-globalization protest cycle as well as the existence of transnational collective identities within these movements. There are of course real question marks over the homogeneity of such movements, given that they operate in a single market area which remains defined by diverging national characteristics, and indeed a rise of nationalist perspectives on European integration. Work on alter-globalization activism has therefore stressed the diversity of viewpoints and methods of organizing (Pleyers, 2010) and the difficulties of formulating coherent critiques of the neoliberal nation-state (Schlembach, 2014). Notwithstanding such challenges, Blokker (2014) has argued that despite their fragmented nature, European social movements have in common a 'political critique' of capitalism that opposes a depoliticization of market arrangements.

The idea of an Other or Alternative Europe is a case in point.

Contemporary protest and future research

While we have outlined broad theoretical trends within the social movement literature, the new wave of protest since the global financial crisis calls for a much more integrated examination. To sum up this argument we now highlight some of the shared characteristics of contemporary mobilizations, paying special attention to mobilization styles, economic circumstances and the uses of information technology.

While the alter-globalization movement perceived the processes and problems of accelerated economic integration as part of a neo-imperialist expansionary logic (Flesher Fominaya, 2014), the global financial crisis of 2007/08 made the interconnectedness of the marketplace highly salient to a mass public. Nonetheless, whereas the alter-globalization movement focused on mobilizing internationally to confront transnational corporate capitalism, the most recent wave of protest was physically segregated – at local, regional and national levels – whilst insisting on its references to global grievances. We could see this taking place in the localized solidarity networks in Greece (Rakopoulos, 2014; Sotiropoulos and Bourikos, 2014) and in the squares of Egypt, Turkey, Spain, the UK and the US (Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2012). We could also witness shared concerns across these movements with regard to austerity, democracy and the crisis, but we saw important variations that incorporated goals and processes specific to their settings. This then raises questions regarding the diffusion of tactical knowledge, as well as regarding claims-making at the national state-level.

While recognizing the global contexts that have structured the onset of these new mobilizations, their grievances and demands are both broadly generalizable - across organizations, jurisdictions and political borders – and localized with regard to their specific internal and external circumstances. In addition, the economic nature of the crisis continues to produce differential fiscal consequences due to the new international division of labour. For example, the effects of the economic crisis negatively impacted oil prices, meaning that oil-producing countries such as Venezuela were significantly affected. This has helped to foment protest against the leftist Maduro government, particularly within the middle- and upper-classes 'who have seen a deterioration in their life standards and traditional

entitlements' (Lugo-Ocando et al., 2015: 3783). Such mobilizations are dissimilar to those in Europe, for example, where many of the public protests signalled adherence to traditional left-wing political and economic ideas. Research on Portuguese and Brazilian protesters during this time (Estanque, 2015) also found that there were particular class aspects to the protests that reflected not only the particular economic positions the countries were in following the crisis, but also the shifting class cleavages prior to the crisis that were results of the economy's prior positioning and political make up.

Aspects of interconnection between movements may also be a product of increased technological communication – itself a partial byproduct of various economic and political contexts. We would argue that the local level utilization of ICTs by movement actors cannot be discussed outside the context of meso- and macro-level analysis without losing significant depth of understanding. This raises a number of issues: What is occurring across these levels that can help us understand the transmission of information between and within movements? How are micro- and meso-level factors positioning movements' ICT use relative to predictions made by macro-analyses? Some of these questions are already being addressed. For example, Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) writes about the macro-level creation and proliferation of social networking tools such as Twitter and the possibilities their structures provide, but also clearly demonstrates the purposes for which they are used, which are far more localized.

In sum, the theoretical frameworks and concepts that have been developed by social movement scholars have not lost their relevance. Rather, what we have argued here is that they need to be re-considered in the light of the new mobilizations that have emerged in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007/08. This new wave, or cycle, of protest is characterized by shared mobilization styles, by their comparable responses to structural and economic conditions and by increasing communication across mobilizations. And, to better understand them integrated theoretical frameworks must be used to transcend the current narrow levels of analysis.

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