

## Review Essay: 2010+: The rejuvenation of New Social Movement theory?

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*Social Movements in Times of Austerity*. By Donatella della Porta. Cambridge: Polity, 2015. vii + 249 pp. £16.99 (pbk). ISBN 9780745688596.

*Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. 2<sup>nd</sup> updated edition. By Manuel Castells. Cambridge: Polity, 2015. xix + 319 pp. £12.99 (pbk). ISBN 9780745695761.

The first half of this decade has seen a tremendous wave of protest. The universally recognised spark of the Arab Spring was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010. Since then we've seen the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, protests turn to civil wars in Syria and Libya, the uprisings of the *indignadas* of Spain and the Occupiers of Wall Street (and *passim*), the Umbrella Movement of Hong Kong, a range of new movements in Brazil, Chile and Mexico, and much else besides. If we understand this 'movement of the streets and the squares' as a coherent global wave of protest, what exactly does it signify? The two books under review offer interpretations of the most recent wave of protest that may help answer this most central question.

Donatella della Porta is keen to 'bring capitalism back in' (4) to social movement studies, drawing on theoretical work from political economy, political theory and sociology alongside social movement scholarship. Centrally, della Porta wants us to see the protests of 2010+ as an expression of a new class cleavage, theoretically reintroducing 'class consciousness as a necessary, and non-automatic, component of class mobilization' (40). Drawing on Bartolini's (2000) work a cleavage would signal socio-structural, cultural and political or organisational components. Filling out the second and third components may be relatively straightforward: a broad, inclusive identity of 'the 99%' offers an alternative to traditional working class identity while new approaches to prefigurative, deliberative democracy operating through horizontal networks replaces political parties. The socio-structural component is harder to establish as it directs one to search for a common socio-economic base among protest participants. The author is rightly attentive to differences between core, semi-periphery and periphery countries that experienced protests as well as the fact that even in Europe (whence the book's empirical data is drawn) participants' socio-economic situations vary. Many were young, well-educated and mobile, perhaps in *précarité*, while others were direct victims of austerity policies as welfare recipients or public sector employees. This is not a revival of class politics, the author concludes, since neither the diversity of the social base nor the rejection of political organisations aiming at state power fit the older model of cleavage (219). Yet, for della Porta the cleavage concept remains instructive in highlighting exactly these transitions.

While *Social Movements in Times of Austerity* is theoretically broad and includes careful empirical analyses, *Networks of Outrage and Hope* was originally published as a rapid analytical response to unfolding events in 2012. Globe-trotting reportage is made sense of in relation to Castells' (2009)

'communication power' framework in the context of the network society. With further time for thought the 2015 second edition not only includes reflection on more recent events but also a more thorough theorization of what Castells calls the 'new networked social movements'. Movements are networks in and of themselves and additionally take part in extensive, open-ended and continually reconfigured networks 'with other movements around the world, with the Internet blogosphere, with the media and with society at large' (249). As the many case studies and examples in the book show, the online networks are married with disruptive occupations of physical space. Combining the 'space of flows' with the 'space of places' in this way generates a hybrid 'space of autonomy', which is 'the new spatial form of networked social movements' (250). Like della Porta, Castells rightly notes the importance placed by these movement on prefigurative practices, understood largely as embodying future ideals in the organisational structures adopted by movements. For Castells this flows partly from the everyday experience of autonomy of individuals engaged daily in 'mass self-communication' and by the affordances of communication technologies for coordination and deliberation without the need for centralized organizations. A broader, developing culture of autonomy is the central contribution of these movements to the potential for social change.

Both authors make a central claim that something new is afoot with the 2010+ movements. The new empirical characteristics of these movements are explained in relation to wider social changes and, as such, both books can be located in the tradition of the new social movement (NSM) theories that sought to understand the post-60s movements. The usual distinction of NSM theory from other approaches to movements is that they seek to answer the 'why' rather than the 'how' questions. The 'why question' has now been most pithily expressed by journalist Paul Mason in his influential blog post (and 2012 book), *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*. The NSM theorists all posed this question of the movements of the second half of the twentieth century, and the core trio – Touraine (1981), Melucci (1989) and Habermas (1981) – get appearances in both books; their heritage is notable throughout even if it is often implicit.

The rejuvenation of NSM theory here offers much insight, but should also ring some warning bells in relation to the common critiques of those theories. The first warning bell concerns the relationship between movement characteristics and wider socio-structural change. For both della Porta and Castells (as for Touraine and Melucci) participation in movements is an expression of agency and movements have the power to collectively shape their own action, this is especially so for Castells' focus on cultures of autonomy. The challenge here is that explanations of movement characteristics that depend on wider socio-structural change begin to look like structuralist accounts, robbing movements of the agency that all these authors assume is central. This is no blind contradiction but rather was always a recognition of theoretical challenge: for both Touraine and Melucci the study of social movements could be a vital crucible in which to stir the structure-agency debate in search of an alchemical *rapprochement*. The solution here, for della Porta, is in the notion of structuration, which she interprets as offering an account that is both relational and dynamic. Castells' focus on networks is inherently relational. And because he is less interested in mapping networks than in understanding the kinds of relationships they enable and encourage it is also inherently dynamic. While there isn't room here for a full exploration of this issue, a brief discussion of the contextual changes and grievances motivating action may be illuminating.

The immediate context of these uprisings was, of course, economic crisis. After the US mortgage market collapsed into complex chains of toxic debts, products of the sheer inventiveness of financialization unleashed by neoliberal deregulation, economic turmoil spread across the world (but especially Europe) in a range of forms. Neoliberalism's crisis was answered, in the core countries at least, by accelerated neoliberalism under the new title of austerity. Neither Castells nor della Porta

see the crisis as a singular cause of mobilization. Echoing Habermas (1973), both strongly emphasise the developing crisis of legitimacy that followed. Crumbling trust in governments, parties, banks and institutions of all kinds are evidenced. Here della Porta explains how the contemporary form of legitimization crisis results from attempts to depoliticise the administration of state by claiming technical expertise while simultaneously stripping the state of its core competencies through deregulation, outsourcing and the arms-length governance of intermediary organisations. Economic crises revealed the failings of both 'technical expertise' and deregulation while governments' bailouts of private corporations at the public's expense was widely interpreted as further evidence of the undue influence of the market over the democratic state. For Europe and the US this is a convincing account of the generation of a 'crisis in political responsibility', although it is harder to apply elsewhere, where bloody repression and daily corruption had long provided a source of grievance. This is why Castells notes that, 'social movements are not the direct consequence of economic crises, poverty, or authoritarian regimes. It is so in some cases but not in others' (222). Indeed, while neoliberalism's crisis certainly impacted on places like Tunisia and Egypt it was relatively slowly, especially through increasing commodity prices resulting from investors' search for security. When della Porta refers to these as 'anti-austerity movements', then, it results in a flattening form of description that excessively centralises the European experience of neoliberalism. A satisfactory common name for the uprisings of 2010+ really needs to signal the features they genuinely share. Castells plumps for 'new networked social movements' although, since both authors highlight the importance of participants' practices and visions of democratic engagement across the mobilizations, referring to these as new pro-democracy movements would seem more appropriate.

Neither author consider legitimization crisis to lead automatically to mobilization. Referring to political process and resource mobilization approaches to movements, della Porta recognises that the mobilization process is difficult and requires resources and networks. While she does see the movements as bringing together various 'losers' of neoliberalism, it is 'not the total losers, but rather those with grievances, but also specific social and symbolic capital, [who] mobilize the most' (64). Castells' emphasis differs: various grievances activate mobilization through emotion. Anger, we are told, encourages risk-taking behaviour although to take to the streets people must first overcome their fear. This occurs through finding strength in numbers: 'togetherness' generally expressed first online begins to allow people to hope for change, overcoming fear and mobilizing action. This chimes well with recent attempts to bring emotion into the mainstream approaches to social movement studies and goes much further in centralising the effects of affect, perhaps at the expense of the kinds of practical constraints and opportunities that della Porta's broader approach is more alive to. Nevertheless, it is a powerful account, and given the reduced resource costs of online coordination among decentralized networks the balance between these various mobilization factors deserves further serious empirical research. If there really is significant novelty in the most recent wave of protest there is no need to assume that older models apply.

Castells and della Porta may, then, have both improved on the classical NSM theorists in avoiding overly structural explanations for movement forms. A second common critique of the NSM approach was that novelty had been overemphasised: simply put, much of what was 'new' about NSMs was later claimed to be key to the old social movements too. The novelty of the 2010+ wave, for both Castells and della Porta, is centred in participatory modes of democracy that are justified in relation to the diversity of individual participation. For both authors, since the movements were preceded by a crisis in political legitimacy the rejection of representative forms of democracy makes sense and is essentially a reflection of a structural crisis in neoliberal democracies. There are differences in interpretation here too. The most relevant context for Castells is, of course, the network society and

the spreading culture of autonomy noted above. For della Porta, the lack of a shared social base means that these movements have of necessity to accept and work with diversity. Moreover, these movements express a general learning from the Global Social Justice (GSJ) movement which, for della Porta, while aiming at a deliberation in its structures was quite accepting of an associational level of representation or delegation and less centred on the individual. This claim is somewhat problematic – autonomist or anarchist segments of the GSJ movement were always vital and their vision of direct democracy has been adopted with only slight procedural adaptations by the new mobilizations, certainly in the Occupy phase. Della Porta's comparison is based on data from the social forums however, which were an attempt by NGOs and traditional left organisations alongside more autonomous groups to create inclusive, deliberative spaces away from direct moments of protest. But even in Florence, autonomists upset at the insufficiently participatory processes of the European Social Forum were declaring that 'another ESF is possible'. They engaged with the forums in a deeply critical manner and were still focused on confrontational protests in which affinity groups using consensus based decision making were meant to prefigure future modes of inclusive, direct democracy. Both Castells and della Porta do at times show sensitivity to the past roots of the current preferences for individual participatory forms of networked democracy and the latter introduces some interesting attempts to think through the various temporalities that are reflected in movement forms. But ultimately both books stress novelty over tradition and, to that extent, repeat one of the more problematic aspects of NSM theory.

In sum, both books reveal useful directions to understand this dramatic recent wave of protest. There remain unanswered challenges: first in taking account of the different contexts, histories and cultures shaping movements as socio-geographically distant as Cairo is from New York and Madrid is from Hong Kong; second in convincingly interweaving longer protest traditions with more immediate responses to altered contexts. The differences between the two authors are instructive in pointing to areas where further empirical research would be enlightening and movement scholars will find it valuable to read both. Castells' book is a more readable, student-friendly account that would serve as an excellent introduction to the 2010+ protest wave. Graduate students exploring possible frameworks for understanding social movements will find that the theoretical breadth of della Porta's work introduces a range of intriguing possibilities.

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