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Ride the Movement Waves

Forum: *Planetize the Movement!*

Donatella Della Porta

I have followed with interest the debate about the need to planetize social and political struggles. While agreeing on the normative side, what I missed is the analysis of which movements we would like to see shifting scale upwards. This analysis is essential to understand the potential paths for “planetization.”

The global justice movement has been interpreted as a sign of the globalization of contentious politics. As decisions moved to the international level, social movements seemed to adapt, targeting international organizations. This was especially the case in Europe, where the EU had acquired more and more competencies, opening various channels of access to civil society organizations. In the beginning of the new millennium, the European Social Forums offered an important public space for the convergence of various streams of progressive movements all over the Continent and beyond. Acting globally, various transnational campaigns were seen to reflect but also fuel the spreading of cosmopolitan values.

At the beginning of the 2010s, mobilizations in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Greece, and the United States, and later on in Turkey and Brazil, up to the French Nuit Debout, were considered part of a common wave of anti-austerity protests. While all of them were triggered by a global financial crisis, they seemed however to be more rooted at the national level, targeting domestic institutions. Moreover, against decisions made by international organizations that appeared to expropriate citizens from their capacity to affect politics, they also addressed issues of national sovereignty and referred to the nation-state as the space for democratic accountability! This happened also in Europe, where harsh conditions were imposed on the countries endowed with

less competitive economies and forced to get loans from the so-called Troika, consisting of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

Towards the end of the decade, the discontent with austerity measures still mobilized a strong wave of protests in various countries and with varying intensity; the crisis of political legitimacy and growing inequality has unleashed strong social movements that, while keeping attention on social injustice, single out some of their specific consequences on violence against women, the peripheral economies, global warming, precarious youth, and self-determination. Several of these movements quickly spread at the international level, through global days of action, promoting the idea that a global view of the problems and global solutions, are needed. Fifty years after the “Hot Autumn” of 1969, with workers protests spreading in Europe, a new global “Hot Autumn” was noted in 2019, with massive protests erupting contemporaneously in Lebanon and Iraq, Chile and Ecuador, Barcelona and London, with protestors often referring to each other, through the showing of each other’s banners and flags. This “Hot Autumn” of 2019 surprised both the mass media and the public with the convergence in time but spread in space of massive waves of protest against increasing inequalities as well as the corruption of the political and economic elites.

If the global justice movement has been a successful example of transnationalization through the creation of arenas of encounters at the world level, anti-austerity protests, while characterized by cross-national diffusion of ideas, were however mainly using the path of domestication, resisting the global crisis and austerity measures imposed by international organizations by massive protests that target national governments. Attempts at building transnational campaigns—such as, for instance, Blockupy against the policies of the European Central Bank—survived, but with more challenges and less opportunities than previous international protest campaigns. In 2019, rebellion spread with frequent expression of solidarity among activists mobilizing in places as distant as Lebanon and Chile, Catalonia or Hong Kong.

It is important to note that these protest tides are related to each other. The three waves are empirically interrelated, with the spreading of ideas across time, through memories and legacies, but also an adaptation to the changing times, through learning processes. Old and new social movement groups meet in the organization of protests. Old activists are mobilized anew, bringing in their experiences and knowledge to new generations that develop new protest tastes, more adapted to their own conditions. In fact, while each of them involved new generations of activists,

each also remobilized previous ones that brought to the new waves knowledge and experiences of past collective mobilizations.

While growing in a moment of still rampant neoliberalism, the global justice movement had seen the convergence of various progressive streams in broad and fluid networks. A meta-frame had developed bridging specific concerns within broader meta-frames that targeted neoliberal capitalism, calling for justice against increasing inequalities as well as for participatory and deliberative forms of democracy. Global and macroregional forums represented arenas for encounters for thousands of groups and tens of thousands of activists; massive demonstrations took citizens back to the streets in contestation of the summits of international organizations, including the EU.

About a decade later, as the financial crisis confirmed the pessimistic prediction of the global justice movement about the lack of capacity of neoliberalism to fulfill its promises of progress and well-being, a new transnational cycle of protests developed, still targeting increasing inequalities and calling for another democracy. Faced with massive participation of the citizens, the *acampadas* (protest camps) represented an innovative form of, at the same time, organization and action. Targeting the austerity measures that national governments had adopted, under pressure from lending international organizations, in the occupied squares activists prefigured different forms of relations, based on participation and discursive quality that adapted those invented by the global justice movement to new circumstances.

Towards the end of the 2010s, new waves of protests against precarity, violence against women, or global warming took over some of the frames of the previous waves, locating those issues within a critique of the existing social and political relations. Fluid networks connected groups active on the territory, often mobilizing citizens for the first time. The struggles against extreme inequalities and corrupt elites resonated with the anti-austerity protests of the beginning of the decade, but within more global waves. While Fridays For Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Ni Una Menos repeatedly organized global days of protest, the massive mobilizations of the Hot Autumn of 2019 were rooted in national cleavages but also expressed rage at a global capitalist development that increased social inequalities and constrained civil rights and political freedom.

While different in their forms and focus, these three waves of contention show us the importance of horizontal networking in bringing together the multitude of existing movements. Catalytic action is indeed very important in creating momentum, but it develops upon existing movement resources and specific dynamics within different movement nets. While strong thinking is relevant to singling out the common enemy in a transnational capitalist class, the building of a unified cosmic story is unlikely as the various struggles need space and time to construct their own knowledge and need horizontal spaces to connect and build trust. More structured organizations have been important in each of the three cycles, and the development and success of movement parties on the Left prove that even very horizontal forms of protest might trigger deep changes in institutional politics. The continuous tension between “vertical” and “horizontal” organizational models seem indeed not only unavoidable but probably useful in order to exploit a moment of big uncertainties but also rife with alternatives.

Endnotes

1. Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015); Donatella Della Porta and Alice Mattoni, eds., *Spreading Protest: Social Movements in Times of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

About the Author



Donatella Della Porta is professor of political science, dean of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, and Director of the PhD program in Political Science and Sociology at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence, where she also leads the Center on Social Movement Studies (Cosmos). She has directed Mobilizing for Democracy, a European Research Council project on civil society participation in democratization processes in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. She is the author or editor of 90 books, 150 journal articles, and 150 contributions in edited volumes. Her recent publications include *Social Movements: An Introduction* (3rd edition), *Can Social Movements Save Democracy?*, *Contesting Higher Education*, and *Late Neoliberalism and its Discontents*.

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