

Societies and Political Orders in Transition

Ekim Arbatli
Dina Rosenberg *Editors*

Non-Western Social Movements and Participatory Democracy

Protest in the Age
of Transnationalism

 Springer

Societies and Political Orders in Transition

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*To Mümtaz, Emine, and Deniz Küçükbumin,
and to all the anonymous heroes of the Gezi
Resistance*

Ekim

To my loving husband, Stanislav Rosenberg
Dina

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.

September 2016

Donatella della Porta

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

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Introduction: Non-Western Social Movements and Participatory Democracy in the Age of Transnationalism

Ekim Arbatli

1 Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a surge of large-scale protests and social mobilization around the globe. From Iceland's Saucepan Revolution to the first sparks of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, from the Greek anti-austerity protests to Occupy Wall Street, from Brazil's June Journeys to Turkey's Gezi Park protests, the post-2008 period was marked by a series of important events. Many times, these events happened in contexts where they were the least expected. Some mass protests toppled entrenched personalist regimes, such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and ousted autocratic-leaning presidents, like Ukraine's Viktor Yanukovich. In other cases, like the Iranian 'Green Revolution', protesters eventually succumbed to the strong regime response. Yet other movements waned over time, such as the Russian protests of 2011–2012.

This global proliferation of protests also increased scholarly interest in contentious politics and social movements. Recently, there are some excellent volumes discussing various aspects of movement diffusion and protest patterns with a rich array of examples (della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Flesher Fominaya 2014; Moghadam 2013; Castells 2012; Smith and Wiest 2012). Additionally, a plethora of empirical work focuses on particular countries, regions or series of events (Byrne 2013; Faris 2013; Petras 2013; Schuurman and Van Naerssen 2013; Yang 2013; Dabashi 2012; Beinin and Vairel 2011; Broadbent and Brockman 2011). In this volume, we seek to complement these studies by focusing on non-Western social movements in a comparative light. We investigate the emerging characteristics of movements taking place between 2008 and 2016.

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The contributors analyze many diverse and important cases from a comparative perspective and provide a local reseeding of social movements of the last decade. The countries under study are Bosnia Herzegovina, Brazil, Egypt, India, Iran, Palestine, Russia, Syria, Turkey and Ukraine. We have two central arguments: First, we seek to challenge the conventional wisdom that the main goal of contemporary protests is establishing or reinforcing democracy (Tilly and Wood 2013; Kaldor et al. 2012; Amenta and Caren 2004). We argue that this line of thinking suffers from a democratizing bias, and show that non-Western movements are not exclusively motivated by a struggle for liberal democracy. In fact, the problem of real participation (as opposed to traditional demands for political rights) is a more prominent feature of contemporary protests in the global South. Hence, participatory democracy stands out as an overarching claim, framed around three concepts that appear ubiquitous across different settings: real participation, social justice, and dignity.

Secondly, we argue that the outcome-based approaches to the study of social movements can lead to a ‘context-blind’ analysis of events. In many countries of the global South, the socioeconomic problems and political setting make it highly unlikely for protests or social movements to have immediate and tangible policy results. However, this lack of a tangible political outcome does not automatically mean that the protests failed to achieve any substantial change. In order to capture these social and political changes, a more nuanced approach is critical. Rather than a focus on outcomes, we propose to focus on the transformative potential of social movements and their gains in promoting broad-based political participation as a viable alternative.

2 The Non-Western Critique(s) of Liberal Democracy: Participatory Democracy as a Demand

Analyzing the events of 2011 in the Middle East, Kaldor et al. (2012, p. 3) were rather optimistically stating that “an active civil society has begun a movement for democracy across the region”. In retrospect, this observation seems rather simplistic, not only in the light of outcomes, but also in terms of the diverse (and at times divergent) motivations of protest participants. Time and again, context-blind analyses of non-Western movements and the quick adaptation of concepts (such as ‘civil society’) to unique situations fail to capture the reality on the ground. With this assertion, our volume challenges the mainstream approach towards contemporary social movements which claims that people are finally finding their voices through the current wave of protests (Tilly and Wood 2013; Kaldor et al. 2012; Amenta and Caren 2004).

The case studies in this volume show that recent social movements, unlike those at the end of the Cold War, are not exclusively motivated by demands for democratization and civil rights. What is unique about many non-Western movements

today is that their articulation of demands is not only based on a critique of authoritarianism, but of liberal democracy as well. Rather than being a part of the mainstream liberal discourse on rights, these new movements seek to redefine social demands by challenging fixed identities. Even when the discourse of rights is used, it is not immediately obvious that they have the same meaning across different contexts.

In their excellent discussion on the contemporary meaning(s) of participatory democracy, Santos and Avritzer (2005) argue that liberal democracy confined democracy to the political realm, which is understood as the state's arena of intervention. Hence, they claim that "the struggle for democracy is today above all a struggle for democratization of democracy" (p. lxii). Here, the promotion of "participatory democracy", as opposed to liberal democracy, is an implicit claim. As Glasius and Pleyers (2013, p. 557) aptly observe, "this simultaneous demand for and practice of a deeper, participatory democracy goes well beyond traditional demands for the civil and political rights associated with liberal democracy".

In this light, it is important to understand how protesters frame their demands in terms of participatory democracy. Framing allows people "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" different events from their lives (Buechler 2011, p. 146). I will argue that three common frames stand out in current non-Western movements: real participation, social justice, and dignity.

2.1 *Real participation*

First and foremost, the problem of real political participation stands out as the uniting theme of movements. In a study of 843 protests occurring between January 2006 and July 2013 in 84 countries covering over 90% of world population, Ortiz et al. (2013, p. 21) find that "more than 44% of all protests considered between 2006 and 2013 (a total of 376 protest events overall) involve a failure of political representation and political systems". Moreover, they point out that this problem is not unique to authoritarian governments, but also includes formal representative democracies.

The deliberately leaderless formulation of recent social movements in the non-Western context highlights this concern for real participation opposing power hierarchies (Glasius and Pleyers 2013). Rosenberg (in Chap. 2) argues that one of the defining characteristics of the Russian protests was the lack of a strong leadership that was further accentuated as the protests became more digital. In Brazil, Zaytsev (in Chap. 4) notes that the leadership was so fluid that the state authorities had a hard time finding legitimate representatives for negotiation.

There is a clear backlash against power hierarchies of any sort that represent the 'political realm' in the minds of protesters. Many times, the protesters refuse any identification with a political party, with the fear that the movement will be hijacked by a power vertical. As Şahan notes (in Chap. 7), the social forums period created the idea of participatory democracy and leaderless movements, which translated

into the formation of ODP in Turkey as an experiment of “the platform of movements”. This concern was also apparent during the Gezi protests where many participants were wary of any identification with a party or political platform, instead referring to themselves as *direnisci* (resister) and carrying only the national flag (as opposed to any party or organization emblems) as a protest symbol.

Besides the rejection of leaders and political parties, the new movements also seek to achieve broader democratic participation through the empowerment of different groups. The underprivileged groups such as women, indigenous people, LGBT groups, or minorities can find a more inclusive and egalitarian venue for voicing demands in a previously hostile political setting. This point is well illustrated by the large scale participation of women in the Egyptian protests analyzed by Shishkina (Chap. 10). It is also quite apparent in the acceptance of LGBT groups and the “queering” of protests in the traditionally patriarchal settings of Ukraine and Turkey, as shown by Shevtsova (Chap. 6).

2.2 *Social justice*

A second and related theme is the articulation of social justice across non-Western movements. Here, it is crucial to highlight the temporal aspect of protests, namely the post-2008 atmosphere of global economic crisis, for understanding the setting in which these movements took place. On this front, the protests bear some strong similarities to their Western counterparts. For many protesters, ranging from Greece to Iceland, from Spain to the United States, the common understanding was that the roots of the financial crisis are imminently political (Flesher Fominaya 2014; Helleiner 2011). Hence, the critiques were aimed not only against the economic performance of governments, but also against their political shortcomings. Most critically, their failure to address the grievances of the large masses that have had to pay the human costs of neoliberalism raised widespread disillusionment with the system as a whole. This idea of the neglected majority at the expense of a very small, but highly influential and privileged minority was perhaps best captured by the American Occupy movement’s famous slogan: “*We are the 99%!.*”

A similar concern with social and global justice also looms large in the protests across the non-Western world with various slogans and manifestations in different contexts. The popular banner during the Bosnian protests, “*We are hungry in three languages!*” (Hopkins 2014) attests to a similar articulation of socioeconomic problems above and beyond political differences. Likewise, the Brazilian protest wave of 2013–2016 that began over an increase in bus fares highlights the importance of social justice as an overarching theme. Drissel (in Chap. 9) also notes that social justice was one of the local frames used by the Iranian Green Movement to garner global sympathy and support.

2.3 Dignity

The third common demand is related to the emotional component of protest behavior in the non-Western context. Many recent studies focus on the role of emotions such as anger, shame, fear, joy, and pride in encouraging or hindering political participation (Pearlman 2013; Jasper 2014). As Jasper (2014, p. 210) observes, “just as group honor motivates political action, so does a desire for individual honor in the form of dignity. Even in situations where success seems unlikely, people often join movements simply to assert their dignity as human beings who are suffering and can make noise”.

Indeed, many of the current non-Western movements attest to the importance of dignity as a recurring theme. Analyzing the Arab Spring events, Dabashi (2012, p. 10) claimed that the slogan “*Huriyyah, Adalah Ijtima’iyah, Karamah*” (Freedom, Social Justice, Dignity) captures the essence of the mood in the Arab world. In Russia, Smyth et al. (2015, p. 66) point to the role of emotional impulses for political participation among the protesters of 2011–2012 rallies. A number of Russian protesters in the authors’ interviews mentioned their “desire to protect their dignity and self-esteem in the face of the Kremlin’s actions”.

During the first week of protests, Turkish scholar and columnist Ahmet Insel called the events a “Dignity Uprising”, pointing out that this was not a protest for regime change, but rather against the increasingly single-handed, divisive and uncompromising style of Prime Minister Erdogan that offended the dignity of citizens (Insel 2013). One of the most popular slogans of the movement, “*Boyun Egme!*” (Don’t Bend Your Neck!), attests to these feelings of anger and defiance. Similarly, the Euromaidan movement was also called “the Revolution of Dignity” by many participants (Khromeychuk 2015). A civil activist in the movement, Kateryna Kruk, claimed that the Ukrainian people were protesting to preserve their dignity (Kruk 2013):

[W]e no longer want to be treated like cattle; we want an end to corruption. We want respect, justice and freedom. (...) We are not here for politics or money: we are protecting our dignity.

The claim of dignity has a strong echo across many contexts, since it determines the positioning of the individual against the power. As such, the articulation of dignity has strong parallels with both participatory democracy and social justice. While the two latter issues mark the tangible gains that the protesters are vying to achieve, the former sets the emotional micro-foundation around which individuals gather.

3 Studying Non-Western Social Movements: The Role of Context(s) and Outcome(s)

When and how do social movements matter? How can we measure the impact and importance of a social movement? Many scholars focus on outcomes, usually in the form of specific policy or regime consequences, in order to assess the success or failure of social movements. According to Giugni (2008, p. 1583), political consequences can be defined as “those effects of movement activities that alter in some way the movements’ political environment”. Scholars proposed different typologies to identify and measure these policy outcomes (Kitschelt 1986; Gamson 1990; Giugni 1998). In general, the movement is considered to be successful if it can advocate for, and initiate, policy changes in an issue area. Under this approach, social movements and protests can serve both agenda-setting and decision-enforcing functions, or even initiate ‘regime change cascades’ (Hale 2013).

I argue that this way of thinking about protests and social movements is not particularly fruitful for analyzing contemporary non-Western protests, since it ignores the critical role of context(s). Outcome-based approaches create two important theoretical problems. First, the success or failure of a movement is largely subjective and experience-based. As Flesher Fominaya (2014, p. 13) aptly points out, “since the definition of success also very much depends on goals and expectations, the evaluation of success is likely to vary from activist to activist and between movement participants and outside observers, including scholars”. This critique is especially valid for contemporary social movements that feature a highly unlikely medley of participants forming coalitions around broad-based common demands.

Indeed, these coalitions of ‘unusual suspects’ constitute a uniting theme across the cases in this volume: Rosenberg (in Chap. 2) argues that a striking aspect of the Russian protests in 2011–2012 is the partnership between liberals and nationalists. Similarly, Shevtsova (in Chap. 6) points out that the protests in Turkey and Ukraine were remarkable due to the visible involvement and endorsement of LGBT groups in both settings. As the other essays also demonstrate, from Bosnia to India, from Egypt to Brazil, the socioeconomic backgrounds and political ideologies of protest participants are highly varied. Hence, what qualifies as success for one particular group can totally frustrate the expectations of another group within the movement.

The second important issue pointed out repeatedly by scholars is the difficulty of determining which movements have had political consequences (Amenta et al. 2010; Earl 2000; Amenta and Young 1999; Tilly 1999). This can be especially problematic in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian settings where the elites are typically non-responsive to public demands—especially to demands raised through large-scale protests which are likely to risk their political survival. Big social events in authoritarian countries can have a strict win-lose outcome, where the scenarios oscillate between leader overthrow and complete autocratic closing. Hence, we propose to highlight the transformative functions that protests and social movements can play in the non-Western world, rather than focusing strictly on outcomes.