

## IS IT POSSIBLE TO TALK ABOUT A NEW WAVE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS?

DONATELLA DELLA PORTA

First of all I want to say that I'm really sorry not to be there in Bilbao. I need to be in Goteborg. Even if Pedro told me that Bilbao is much nicer, unfortunately I already had this committment. Iam glad however to at least be able to greet all of you and congratulate the founders of Betiko for the great work they have been doing during the last 20 years, and I hope they will continue doing for the next 20 years, because I think the connection between social movements scholars and social movements activists, who are also politicians within institutions, is all the more important, in particular in what Gramsci would define 'a times of crisis', in which challenges and opportunities are quite big.

After greeting you, I want to present some ideas about the contributions that social movements studies can give to this dialog:

what they have done, but also how could this field be broadened and invigorated through the recent developments and improved dialog between scholars and activists.

As many other fields in the social sciences, also research on social movements has been very much influenced by two types of development: one is development in the social sciences, in which research on social movements has been embedded; and one is development of the social movements themselves, so in the social movements that we are studying.

As it is quite well known, social movements studies started to grow especially in the '70s, together with the growth of some types of social movements that were developing after what was considered as the institutionalisation of some old cleavages. They have developed from the attempt to legitimise movements as actors acting within normal politics, following strategic thinking but at the same time also highly committed to the construction of a better world. Social movements studies institutionalised around some main type of concepts like the political opportunities that social movements need at different geographical level, the capacity of social movements to mobilise organisational resources, the framing processes in assesing what is possible to do and how it is possible to change the world.

These have been important concepts to address what was the main empirical type of field at that time. Research focused especially on (at that time) new type of movements, from the environmental to the women's movement, and it focused also on consolidated democracies. So, to a certain extent, social movement studies considered social movements as children of expanding democratic boundaries and increasing social welfares within

Nation-States that were of course interacting with each other, but could still be able to implement so-called citizenship rights – civil rights, political rights, social rights.

The type of research that came out of this focus was – I think – very interesting in a way, innovating both research on social movements, and research in several fields like political science and political sociology that were up to that point very much constrained on institutions. They have been able to investigate and provide evidence on the importance of a vibrant civil society for the development of democracies, but also of the importance of conflicts per se, on the importance to organise a sort of control on the democratic institutions, but also to develop alternative public spheres where citizens could take the lead on developing innovations, ideas and so on. And they have also been able to influence other disciplines – such e.g. area studies--pushing them to become more concerned with at the same time the theoretical development in the field and the expansion of empirical knowledge based on rigorous type of research.

At the methodological level, these achievements were also implemented through methodological pluralism, which is very widespread in the field, and the development of middle-range type of theories. Methodological pluralism was particularly important in an area in which the data are not already available and collected, like in electoral data or statistical data about the characteristics of the population, but to a large extent collected by the researchers. So, several methods like protest event analysis, or surveys during demonstrations, were truly innovative attempts to increment knowledge. But also participant observation or participatory action research have been important in order to try to understand social

movements through middle-range type of theories, historically bounded and contextually grounded theories on how social movements acted, and how it could contribute to the empowerment of the citizens, and the development of better forms of democracy.

Characteristic of this period in the development of these disciplines was that most of us had been committed to social movement activism, but we also wanted to provide empirically sound research, because we thought it could also be useful in order to improve change, transform the world we were living in.

The traditions of social movements studies have been important in producing a useful toolkit of concepts that have been also exported to different geographical areas and different disciplines, becoming influential on other fields than the one on which social movements studies have developed--for instance, in the political geography, in psychology, in various types of history, even in economics, in philosophy, democratic theory, urban studies, gender studies, and so on.

This has been, I think, an important contribution and working around similar concepts has meant a lot in terms of being able to produce cumulative knowledge. Yet the traditions of social movements studies has been very bounded by the analysis of advanced democracies with developed forms of welfare states. Related theorisations have been mainly oriented towards the explanation of the impact of social and political structures on collective action. Some of the most influential scholars in social movements studies developed even a sort of self criticism about the structuralist bias of the first type of research – being it on the

macroconditions for the development of social movements, or on the micro motivations of social movement activism.

The assumption was – we have to explain when and how social movements expand, when and how people participate in different forms of protest. This type of social movements studies were also very much influenced by the type of development in the social sciences, which was oriented towards the attempt to prove, test hypotheses with the idea to be able to explain through singling out independent variables the development of dependent variables.

Social movements studies have however expanded enormously. The first time I met Pedro it was a period in which we were still aiming at reading and commenting upon all what was written in social movements studies. The expansion of the research has been then very impressive, with specialised journals, specialised book series, entire departments – like my own – in which social movements studies take a central role in the analysis. I think there is, though, the risk, that I think Betiko and other institutions are helping us to overcome, of becoming too much closed, too much happy about our own success, and narrowing too much our range of interest. I think that there are now many opportunities as well as a need to go beyond the traditional toolkit of concepts, theories and methodologies. It is a need that is born within the social movements and within the challenges that progressive social movements have to address, and the risk that some non progressive social movements more and more produce. This means for us, scholars, that we have to think about how to update our software in order to being able to understand deep changes in the challenges for progressive politics, but also opening

up, helping empowering alternatives, which are growing at the same time as risks are developing.

In order to do this we have to change our type of approach. We are no longer living in stable, quiet times, in which we can focus on established paths of relation between causes and effects. Rather, we are called to intervene during times of crises. I mentioned a Gramscian interregnum, in which protest is triggered more by threats than by opportunities; in which protestors need to create their own resources by producing critical junctures in which changes can be nurtured from the action itself. So if previous research was looking in the environment for existing resources and opportunities that social movements could exploit, now we need to invest much more on understanding how protest itself – eventful forms of protest – can trigger and empower progressive movements. We are living in exceptional times, that is, times in which events, critical junctures, breaking points, turning points are very important and have political influence in a type of political environment which is extremely volatile. Volatility means in fact that for all the actors involved, old paths of behaviours no longer hold: one needs to adapt very quickly, and to adapt without theoretical or empirical knowledge about how interactions, relations happen between the different types of actors.

We are more and more forced to look not at established paths, but at emergent types of processes, that is, at how social movements can become producers of their own resources, of their own empowerment. They cannot limit themselves to using the resources that are available in the environment but need producing resources themselves in an environment in which the old, traditional types of organisational resources for social movements

have been exploited, attacked, destroyed by the development of neoliberalism.

So what do we need in order to expand our theoretical perspective in this time? I think we need to develop contacts between disciplines but also between scholars, activists, progressive members of political parties, associations of different types, in order to try to understand which type of knowledge is to be produced and how to produce it. And we need to develop upon some new theoretical trends, which have already been developing in the social sciences but need to be expanded and implemented.

One is the trend in the so-called ‘contentious politics’. So social movements are an important phenomenon, but more and more they tend to interact with other types of social phenomenon – some of a revolutionary type, as we had in 2011, but also later on. Social movements need to struggle for democratisation and the deepening of democracies. Ethno-nationalist forms of conflict are re-emerging, cleavages have been reactivated. So, one needs to go beyond the established framework of social movements studies and looking in other types of fields in order to get new ideas.

There is another type of development which I think is also important – social movements have been often studied in isolation from the other actors that intervene in the field. And this I think is a risk for scholars and for activists as well. We risk to go very often quickly from hope to disappointment if we think about the actions of social movements as a sort of revolutionary movements in which everything can be suddenly changed. What we need to consider instead is that other forces, other actors are still alive and kicking, and they mobilise against each type of success of progressive movements. They learn from progressive movements

and they try not only to repress them, but also to build upon some of the strenght of the movements in the squares. The debate about xenophobic forms of politics is also the debate about how some of the ways of mobilising, some of the frames and so on of progressive movements have been appropriated, used by other types of movements.

Second, we have to reflect on a complex net of interactions. Concepts like fields and arenas that have been proposed recently point at the fact that we are living in complex and intense times, in which each wave of contestations creates new emergent networks which social movement activists are embedded in, but also the adversaries of progressive social movements, states and so on are embedded in.

Third, I think we need more focus on the critical junctures, that is more focus on the way in which some specific wave of protest succeeded in producing important changes. Times are not similar to each other: we had long times of stability and times of intensified interactions. We are living in the latter type of times, and what is important to focus upon is the successes and failiures which some of this moment of transformations have brought about for progressive type of actors.

Fourth, we need to expand our attention towards big changes. First of all, in the development of social movements studies at a certain point we lost the concern with the type of conflicts that develop in the society, focusing on the 'how' rather than on the 'why'. Research on the 'why' was carried out in the '70s but was focusing on different forms of capitalism, on different types of transformation. What I think could be very important nowadays is to reopen the reflection on how transformations in capitalism have



political effects and internally impact on social movements. And, viceversa, we have also to look at how progressive movements in the past have been able also to transform and challenge some capitalist type of development. We need to reflect on the class basis of many of these phenomena: how some sort of class coalition can be built, how sometimes progressive forms of class interests are thwarted or politically oriented towards non progressive forms of politics.

We also need to go beyond new social movements type of approaches that developed in the '70s, based on the belief that maybe was correct for the time, that old cleavages, especially the class cleavages but also centre-peripheric cleavages or church-State cleavages, were institutionalised. This is not (or no longer) the case: rather, what we see – Spain is a case in point – is the re-emergence of several of these cleavages. This also resonates with the attempts by progressive activists to develop reflections on intersectionalities, class coalitions etc.. Progressive strategies should take into account the fact that at the same time old cleavages are far from dead but also new cleavages emerge. It is then not very useful to assess if it is better to focus on the traditional working class or on new classes. What is important to do is to find ways to facilitate the interactions between the concerns of different social groups, and also to combine the concerns of the old and the new types of social movements – to see opportunities in this rather than fuel divisions between materialists and postmaterialists, which I think never made sense.

In our research, we need to go beyond protest. We have done a lot to understand how people protest in the street, but we risk to consider social movements as just protest actions, while it is

important to understand also how people meet – the assemblies are important moments for the lives of movements; democracy is made of meetings and social movements do much more than just marching in the street. Moreover, as activists develop ideas, also the production of knowledge by social movements is important for activists and for scholars as well. We have collected number about protest, we have studied protest events, but we have not tried to collect the many innovations, the many ideas that came from social movements – and they are at risk to be lost. We are developing in Florence on these ideas in an attempt to map, chart, reflect upon movements as producers of knowledge. Movements are more and more important in innovating society: the crisis in southern Europe has been a sort of laboratory for movements as service providers that however are not involved in charity but rather want to develop also alternatives such as those embedded in the ideas of the commons, in the ideas that public services should not be imposed top-down but should be managed democratically. I think the *mareas* in Spain or the self-managed clinics, the self-managing clinics in Greece are examples of the way in which service provision goes together with the prefiguration of alternatives.

We have also to pay attention to invisible forms of resistance by people who are deprived of their rights. This happens in dictatorships and hybrid regimes but I think also about migrants, refugees, but also other marginalized groups, for instance the precarious workers that cannot use the traditional forms of protest because their civic and political rights are not recognised.

And we need to see movements within electoral politics. Again Spain is an important example of the relevance for

progressive politics of the interactions between social movements in the streets and social movements within institutions with the construction of movement parties and referendums from below. In fact, in these times of crisis, progressive social movements acquire constitutional power.

Finally, it is important also going beyond consolidated democracies, which means going beyond the geographical areas traditional more covered in our research but also being open to cross-fertilisation with the research tradition that scholars and activists have developed in other context than the European or the American ones. From there come also new ideas on how to study movements.

So I think Betiko has a lot to do in the next 20 years and I hope that in the 40th anniversary I can be present in person, not by a movie. And I hope to know more about the development of this encounter, and I am sure that many of my friends there will tell me about it.

Thank you very much.