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EDITORIAL

Bridging social movement studies between Global North and Global South

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ABSTRACT: Social movement studies are an interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and broad field transversal to different social and human sciences, which has been growing and consolidating since the late 1970s. Since then, and concurrent with the intensification and pluralization of protests and protestors around the world, the recognition and establishment of social movement studies inside different areas has accompanied the recognition of social movements as legitimate social and political actors. This variety and diversification of perspectives and object of study has helped to include some 'hidden' forms of protest which are particularly relevant outside Europe and USA, and specially in authoritarian and semi-democratic countries. Despite this, the field of social movement studies – especially in sociology and political science – still shows difficulties in integrating and dialoguing with other approaches to the study of conflict and resistance. Moreover, dialogue with other epistemological sources and particularly with the Global South's knowledge about social movements is still hesitant. If we look at the other side of the coin, many studies on resistance, protest and social movements in the Global South reject what are sometimes considered hegemonic – or Eurocentric – social movement theories, which is also problematic. In front of this, and acknowledging the asymmetries in epistemic power relations, in our view, it is not a matter of opposing center and periphery, or North and South, but of understanding, promoting and developing multiple activist and conceptual entanglements and collaborations. Against this background, thus, this special issue aims to contribute to the dialogue between conceptual perspectives, approaches and fields in the Global North and South around social movements and protest.

KEYWORDS: Global South, Global North, social movement studies, epistemologies, conflict

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1. Introduction

Social movement studies are an interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and broad field transversal to different social and human sciences (such as political science and sociology, anthropology, history, cultural studies, geography and other urban studies, linguistic, social psychology), which has been growing and consolidating since the late 1970s. Since then, and concurrent with the intensification and pluralization of protests and protestors around the world, the recognition and establishment of social movement studies inside different areas has accompanied the recognition of social movements as legitimate social and political actors.

The range of theories, models, approaches, and methods developed in social movement studies is extensive, with many different and sometimes opposing approaches, methodologies and concepts, as well diverse objects (Accornero and Fillieule 2016). In fact, although mostly known for their more disruptive and manifest activities, such as protests, strikes, or occupations, social movements are increasingly recognized as actors engaged in an array of activities, such as direct action (Bosi and Zamponi 2015 and 2020), prefigurative forms of politics (Parker et al 2014; de Moor and Verhaegen 2020), knowledge and learning practices (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell 2008, Hosseini 2010, Starodub 2015, della Porta and Pavan 2017, Pavan and Mainardi 2019).

This variety and diversification of perspectives and object of study has helped to include some ‘hidden’ forms of protest which are particularly relevant outside Europe and USA, and specially in authoritarian and semi-democratic countries. Despite this, the field of social movement studies – especially in sociology and political science – still shows difficulties in integrating and dialoguing with other approaches to the study of conflict and resistance. This is the case, for instance, with post-colonial studies and the culturalist tradition connected to Stuart Hall’s thinking, or James Scott’s perspective on ‘the art of not being governed’ (Scott 2009) and ‘hidden’ forms of resistance (Scott 1987) which, like Michel De Certeau’s approach on the ‘practices of everyday life’ (1998), is particularly suitable for uncovering often invisible forms of protests, particularly in highly repressive contexts (Accornero 2016 and 2022).

On the other hand, the concepts and tools of social movement studies are more and more frequently applied to the study of the South. This is certainly a positive step towards both the inclusion of traditionally understudied areas of the planet into the field of social movement studies, and the recognition of new contentious actors, types of conflict and topics. Nevertheless, the analytical lens forged in the Global North may not be able to firstly detect and subsequently understand phenomena, context and processes in the South. In fact, Northern social movement studies’ genealogy and narrative is necessarily partial, and its paradigms contextually determined, both theoretically and epistemologically. On top of this, the production of knowledge about social movements from the Global South is largely disregarded, reproducing and consolidating a broader schema of a “North” producing theory and a “South” rich in social and political experiences but incapable of theorizing them (Bringel 2019). Although there is significant theoretical creativity in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East and a growing interest in the construction of a “global sociology”, dialogue with the different national and regional traditions of the South is still scarce. In this sense, the South has been incorporated much more in geographical than in epistemic terms into the social movement debate.

If we look at the other side of the coin, many studies on resistance, protest and social movements in the Global South reject what are sometimes considered hegemonic – or ‘Eurocentric’ – social movement theories, which is also problematic. Many approaches thus understand social movements from a categorical ‘binary’ perspective, where the divide Global South vs Global North also channels other divides, such as critical vs mainstream, alternative vs hegemonic, institutional vs contentious. Many of these studies are connected to critical theory and post-colonial studies, for instance referring to the social movement knowledge as ‘social

thought of the peripheries', as opposed to the 'established' knowledge considered 'deeply colonial, embodying, benefiting from, and contributing to the maintenance of Western imperial power' (Schroering 2019).

Works by Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos or the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar are among the most famous contributions developed from the 'Southern vs Northern' perspectives. Sousa Santos, for instances, conceives the global North as a place (cultural, political, and epistemic, more than geographic) dominated by the 'monoculture of scientific knowledge' (2014, 277) which sustains 'capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and all their satellite oppressions' (2014, 27). On the other side, the global South is seen as the space of oppressed peoples and ancestral knowledge about lands, waters, animals, and plants, 'the large set of creations and creatures that has been sacrificed to the infinite voracity of the global North' (2014, 16).

While this binary perspective has been fundamental to address and challenge the balance of power among different actors, such a divide is sometimes stereotyped and it risks, paradoxically, reproducing the gaps it wants to fill, relegating activities developed in southern/alternative/peripheral/oppressed arenas to 'creative' and ideational, ancestral processes which mostly impact the sphere of thoughts, ideologies, values, and identities.

1.1 The two banks of the river

Beyond the asymmetries and power relations, in our view, it is not a matter of opposing center and periphery, or North and South, but of understanding, promoting, and developing multiple activist and conceptual entanglements and collaborations. To do this, it is essential to decentralize our outlook, but without falling into reductionisms and new localisms.

Nevertheless, there are concrete problems which actually contribute to strengthening this divide instead of softening it, and which need to be addressed. One of the difficulties that scholars of social movements from the Global South have in using the theoretical and analytical tools of social movement studies used in the academia of the Global North are the limitations of these approaches in interpreting the diversity of social actors and sociocultural contexts that characterize the political struggle of Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Zibechi 2010; Alexander, Dawson and Ichharam 2006; Bayat 2009). If we consider the Latin American region, for instances, the two decades of the 21st century were marked by mobilizations led by social actors that are not present in the European or US political arena. Throughout these years, in fact, indigenous groups, 'piqueteros', 'pinguinos', 'cocaleros', 'campesinos' have demonstrated a high capacity for organization and mobilization. Moreover, different actors have gathered various 'movements of victims' (e.g., of enforced disappearance, of human trafficking, of femicide), the Zapatista experience, the movements of Afro-descendants, and the movements of Central American migrants who claim the right to mobility and to a better life (Zibechi 2007; Almeida and Cordero 2015).

Another difficulty of integrating North's social movement theory into the study of conflicts and protests in the South is the extreme social and cultural diversity of this area, which makes it difficult to simply translate theories from the Global North, such as resource mobilization or political opportunities models. For example, it should be noted that many current societies in Latin America and the Caribbean emerge from dictatorial regimes, while the democratic transitions often ended up in the implementation of an actual political and economic authoritarian oligarchy that legitimized the application of the neoliberal model (Almeida 2007; McDonald and Ruiters 2012). This means that current social movements in countries as Chile, Argentina, and Brazil (among others) are closely connected to the demands for social justice, for democracy or for the rights of victims.

In the understanding of the discontinuities among North and South, another essential aspect which should be considered is the absence, in most countries of the Global South, of a culture, politics and policies of welfare-state which are instead present in Europe, even if with different degrees. Education and health services are thus privatized and suffer from class and race bias. If we broaden our vision to Africa, Asia and the Middle East, we find many characteristics of collective action in the Global South that counter-distinguish it from political activism carried out in the Global North. First, the repressive and/or authoritarian context where contentious politics mostly takes place. This means that any form of activism occurring in the Global South is high-risky, with murder, forced disappearance, torture and threats being normalized tools used by states, with the support of paramilitary, often private groups (Gravante, Poma, Paredes 2019). For instances, countries like Colombia, the Philippines, Mexico, Brazil, among others, lead the list of murdered socio-environmental activists.

Global South's transnational movements also show a different trajectory due to the structural violence of these countries. For example, if we consider current transnational contentious experiences as 'Friday For Future' and 'Extinction Rebellion', we can see a difference not only in the process of organization and strategies but also in the profile of participants (Poma and Gravante 2021; Gravante and Poma 2020a). In Mexico, for example, we find a significantly higher average age of participants than in Europe, the reason of which should be found in the concern of parents for the involvement of their teenage children due to the harsh state political violence against the activists, which includes high number of kidnappings and rapes (Gravante and Poma 2020b). This implies that the analysis of the process of mobilization, organization, choice of strategy or impacts requires, for this area, other theoretical lenses in respect to Europe, an aspect which clearly emerges in the articles by Ventura Alfaro, by Messineo and by Wenner and Liebherr presented in this issue.

Another aspect that characterizes, in a general way, different forms of activism in the Global South is the close link between political engagement and 'daily life'. Many grassroots experiences in both rural and urban contexts are distant from the 'classic' repertoire of protest and contentious politics. For instance, many mobilizations take the form of social proposals and collective alternatives able to solve problems that concern activists' everyday lives, which result in a culture of resistance and solidarity shared with their community of reference as a whole. If in some cases these experiences also include other forms of actions typical of the contentious political arena (such as demonstrations), in other cases the dimension of the everyday resistance is the only way for these activists' expression (Gravante, Regalado and Poma 2022, Baumgarten 2015).

In this kind of collective action, daily problems (such as access to adequate housing, to water, to public transportation, or other services) are dealt with through the frame of social injustice which goes beyond the cost-benefit logic, and it is characterized by its own culture of resistance and survival in everyday life (Johansson and Vinthagen 2019). If direct action and prefigurative politics are an increasingly common aspect of European mobilizations, the relevance of these strategies in the South should be understood in its specificity. First of all, in fact, this is the consequence of the previous referred context of high level of state violence, which sometimes compromises the possibility of more open and visible forms of protests. Moreover, the lack of basic social rights makes direct and prefigurative forms of action sometimes the only source for providing essential goods and services to deprived people.

Other distinctive aspects in many Global South countries impacting social movements' development are identified by Simin Fadaee in their colonial and post-colonial pasts, in the constant redefinition of the state-civil society relationship, and in their inner intersectionality (Fadaee 2017), so that 'Recognising the prevalent characteristics of Southern social movements is a pre-requisite for a more radical break with the Northern-centric nature of social movement studies, and a move towards a global social movement paradigm' (Fadaee 2017: 47).

2. Can we bridge South and North academic banks?

The answer to this question, which has been present for some time in international debates on social movement studies (Cox, Nilsen, Players 2017; Fadae 2017; Bringel and Players 2015; Cox and Fominaya 2013), is not simple. More than a clear answer, we can debate two aspects that are making the construction of this bridge difficult. First, to build a bridge, it is necessary to ascertain the availability of the people on the two banks, that is, the willingness of the subjects involved to communicate with each other. This aspect is often not clear both in academics from the Global South and in those from the Global North. At the same time, the academic system, based on international events and publications which require a significant investment on the side of the researchers and their institutions in terms of funding, time, and logistics, does not help this dialogue. In this sense, many aspects potentially strengthen the distance between these worlds, as well the disparity of their impact, such as the costs of travelling for participating in large international events, or for English translations and proof-reading, or the increasing diffusion of paid open-access models in high-impact publications, with extremely high costs. All these elements make evident the unequal distribution of resources for research, an inequality that directly affects the diffusion of significant and often path-breaking research experiences in low-resourced areas.

Second, it must be recognized that studies of social movements from both the Global North and the Global South are often characterized by a state-centric approach, in which social movements are studied in their relationship with the state and its institutions. An example of this limit can be seen in the studies of movements' outcomes, which, besides important exceptions (Gaxie 2005, Fillieule 2010; Bosi 2016; Bosi 2018; Accornero 2019; Accornero 2019a; Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Accornero 2021) has mostly focused on the political impacts of social movements, often forgetting cultural and biographical aspects. One way to get out of this impasse may be to strengthen, in the study of social movements, the focus on internal dynamics of mobilization, starting from the experience and biographies of the activists themselves. This also means studying the meanings that activists give to their engagement and to the participation and experience inside specific social movements, the types of imaginaries they prefigure, the values at the origin of their practices and the reason at the basis of their choices.

Actually, in recent years, one of the areas that has showed to be mostly successfully in linking scholars from different countries is the study of the emotional dimension of protest. For example, in Latin America we find a group of young researchers who have managed to establish a dialogue with the proposals and findings of authors such as James Jasper, Helena Flam, Arlie Hochschild (Poma and Gravante 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b) and the challenges of local South's reality, as can be seen in the article by Ventura Alfaro. All this suggests that coming back to the subject of our study, the activist, is a promising way to build an inclusive dialogue that at the same time considers cultural diversities, avoids new localisms and, above all, manages to promote new knowledge in social movements studies. Sharing and comparing research on the meaning that activists from different countries attribute to their protest experiences, on the different impacts that the engagement has on their lives, and on what kind of framework they build and mobilize to interpret their reality can be a good starting point for the construction of this dialogue, as this issue tries to do.

3. The issue: a brick in the bridge

Against this background, and with the aim of contributing to the pluralization of social movement approaches and their dialogue, this special issue brings together contributions which articulate a high variety of analytical perspectives, methods, and models, focusing on an array of cases which are distant not only in spatial terms, but also and mostly in their epistemological implications. While eclectic, the results of the studies

show a common element of continuities in that they arrive, in different ways, to problematize and complexify consolidated understandings both of North and South and to propose innovative ways to bridge – theoretically, methodologically, and analytically – the two banks.

The special issue will start with a particularly timing article by Tetyana Lokot and Olga Boichak on Ukrainian diasporas in the USA, engaged with homeland politics surrounding the Euromaidan protests of 2013 and 2014 and the ensuing occupation of Ukraine by Russia. The study innovatively combines ethnographic and computational approaches to analyse the meanings and feelings associated with Ukraine's Euromaidan protests among the Ukrainian community in the USA. Adopting 'the lens of decoloniality and the ways that it manifests in postcommunist contexts' and the analytical tool of 'Global East', the authors propose a bath-breaking way to look at the conflicting epistemologies which shape our understanding of mobilizations in 'semi-peripheral' countries, addressing the 'liminal' case of diaspora.

The focus on diaspora is also central in the article by Francesca Messineo. Addressing the October 2019 Chilean uprising, the author firstly charts the diffusion of Chilean protests' ideas and practise in social movements outside the country, after she centres the attention on the networks of Chilean diaspora in Italy which supported the uprising from abroad. The innovation of this article is to analyse the epistemological asymmetries between North and South through the lens of transnational solidarity. Moreover, adopting 'feminism as the main example for the indirect transnationalization of contentious frames', Messineo shows how women's movements are becoming central to the mobilization arena in the Global South, contributing to the renovation of grassroots activism as a whole and constituting a kind of 'model movement'.

Indirectly addressed by Messineo, this is a central aspect of the María Ventura Alfaro's article. The author combines feminist, new social movement literature and emotions-centered approaches for the study of mobilization to analyse Mexico's Women's Collective Action through a framework of prefiguration. In doing this, she accepts the challenge of putting into dialogue social movement theory with specific South-rooted analytical perspectives, such as the body-mind-spirit framework as developed by sociologist Rosalba Icaza Garza and Sara Ahmed's perspective of cultural politics of emotion.

Silvia Menegazzi uses content analysis to study how major Chinese, American and European media outlets covered the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. In doing this, the study 'deals with how narratives in world politics affect media framing' and underlines the epistemological bias in media coverage of non-occidental movements. Menegazzi shows how these biases are not only a result of past conditions (e.g. colonialism) or of structural dimensions and problems affecting these areas (violence, intersectionality, lack of social rights), but also an effect of current geopolitical dynamics, which contribute to reinforce specific narratives and reiterate long-term cleavages. The innovation of the article is to introduce the perspective of international relations for understanding the relevance of global politics in the way protest are framed around the world, and particularly in non-occidental countries.

The issue ends with an article by Miriam Wenner and Silva Lieberherrthis which, addressing two local social mobilizations in India, contributes to 'bridging' different epistemological approaches and to extending social movement studies' scope by offering a relational understanding of leader-follower interactions. Based on an extremely rich long-lasting ethnographic fieldwork and intensive interactions with leaders and supporters of the two movements, their analysis of leadership in South Asia, with its contextual specificities shaped by existing roles and normative moral values, contributes to renovating the understanding of leadership and 'trust' in social movement studies as a whole.

Taken together, these pieces represent significant examples of possible ways of bridging and articulating different perspectives in the study of social movements. Not only these studies put into dialogue an impressive variety of sources of knowledge about social movements, eclectically combining approaches, epistemologies and methods, but they also advance a set of proposals on how the challenges emerged from liminal fields are

able to renovate social movement analysis. In this sense, the five studies offered in this issue aim to pay their contribution to the pluralization, problematization and complexification of understandings of social movements, creatively and critically crossing perspectives coming from different traditions, and trying to go beyond pre-determined epistemic assumptions. The number of cases addressed in the issue is limited and consequently, the issue does not have the ambition of building theoretical generalization. Nevertheless, the depth of the analyses offered by the authors and the amount and relevance of problematics mobilized is hopefully a fruitful step in bridging Global South and Global North perspectives in the study of social movements.

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