Transnational activisms in social movement studies: A research project

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This project aims at contributing to the development of social movement studies, promoting a fruitful dialogue between historians and social scientists as well as a reflection on the conditions and forms of transnational activism. Following this lead, I will propose some reflections on the potential dimensions of variation among transnational activists within contemporary social movements, considering their different forms.

Research on social movements has deep historical roots. Especially in Europe, the labour movement has served as a point of reference for the movements to follow, but important historical turning points have also been promoted ‘from below’, through intense waves of protest. Social historians have documented the forms that these movements have taken, their internal tensions and the ideas and practices they helped to spread, as well as the enormous influence of the labour movement on the growth of citizenship rights and democracy. This contribution has been acknowledged particularly in historical sociology, which has pointed at a broad common evolution, but also at cross-national differences in broad processes of modernisation and democratisation. In social movement studies, Charles Tilly’s work on the long-term evolution of repertoires of contention, as well as William Sewell’s on eventful temporality, have been particularly influential. Occasionally, sociologists and political scientists have analysed movements of the past, using archival sources or historical research as bases for comparative historical analysis. Even more rarely, historians do use sociological empirical analysis of, for example, social movements in the 1960s or 1970s as sources for their own
investigations, especially once archives are open. This potential notwithstanding, the dialogue between historians and social scientists working on social movements has remained sporadic, hampered by disciplinary barriers as well as the difficulties of organising cross-time comparative research. Further, the theoretical and methodological debates within the different disciplines have proceeded in parallel, without much opportunity for exchanges of ideas. This project aim at filling this gap by working around concepts and theories that have been constructed within social movement studies, showing both their potential and their limits when applied to movements of the past.

Combining these insights with research in the social sciences, my aim is to briefly map out some main dimensions around which these different types of transnational activists can be compared, as well as some potential causes for and consequences of these differences. In what follows, I will refer in particular to two recent waves of protests: the Global Justice Movement at the turn of the millennium, and the anti-austerity protests about a decade later. Given the differences in the ways in which these movements addressed the transnational level, a comparison between them could be useful to single out differences on dimensions such as scale shift, diffusion and networking. Additionally, they can help us in understanding the causes for these differences in transnational activisms and their potential consequences.

In social movement studies, reflection on transnational activism developed especially around the Global Justice Movement (GJM). Acquiring global visibility with the protests against the November 1999 World Trade Organization summit in Seattle, the GJM mobilised via a series of counter-summits and social forums that allowed activists from all over the world to meet and discuss alternatives to neoliberal globalisation. Research on this transnational wave of protest pointed at the importance of the economic, social, political and cultural characteristics of
globalisation in order to understand the emergence and forms of transnational social movement organisations, global protests and cosmopolitan framing. In sum, ‘While cross-national diffusion of movement ideas was a long-lasting phenomenon, the need to act globally – resting on the shifts of decision towards international organization and corporations, but also on the opportunities offered by new technologies – gave a new impetus to the transnational dimension of protests and movements.’ This wave of transnational protests seemed to testify for an ineludible trend toward increasingly global forms of globalisation.

While the very actors, frames and practices that had grown during those transnational protests did not disappear, a decade later, anti-austerity protests did not confirm the expectation of growing globalization by targeting especially national governments through domestic campaigns of protest. Even if neoliberalism and its financial crisis were hitting worldwide, the characteristics of the neoliberal economy as well as the timing and dynamics of the crisis varied significantly across countries. In fact, the most visible of those protests followed the geography of the emergence of the economic crisis, rising at the end of 2008 in Iceland, continuing in Ireland and then in the Arab Spring at the beginning of 2011. In that same year, protests spread to Portugal in March, inspiring the so-called Indignados mobilisation in Spain in May and then in Greece, further developing in the United States in September with the Occupy Wall Street protest camp. While the Indignados and Occupy protests lost visibility, similar forms and issues were raised in mobilisations in Turkey and Brazil in 2013, up to the Nuits début in France in 2016.

While, as mentioned, the anti-austerity protests were very embedded in their domestic contexts, the presence of similarities in the protest forms and framing prompted reflections regarding, on the one hand, the convergence of forms of protest given common transnational
social, political and cultural trends – but also, on the other hand, the mechanisms through which ideas spread worldwide, bringing about different paths of scale shift in mobilisation. The transnational counter-summits and global social forum had been presented as typical examples of downward scale shift, having emerged at the transnational level around the World Social Forums, but also at the Intergalactica meetings in Mexico and the global days of action. At the organisational level, the macroregional social forums and then even local forums had followed those examples, but also built upon the organisational resources and networks that had been mobilised in transnational arenas. Cosmopolitanism and globalisation were indeed considered as broad trends that were reflected in transnational protest events and transnational targets.

Challenging the assumption about the nation state as the natural target of social movements, protests followed the perceived shift of power and competences towards international organisations and global capital. Contentious events were thus organised at global summits – especially targeting the international financial organisations, such as the WTO, World Bank and International Monetary Fund, accused of spreading the neoliberal doctrine, but also the European Union, criticised for betraying its proclaimed mission of creating more welfare for the citizens.

Counter-summits involved a complex protest repertoire comprising non-violent direct action in the street, but also forums devoted to the development of an alternative vision of world politics. Not only did transnational protests multiply, they also acquired an empowering capacity given the broad organisational networking and cultural exchanges they brought about. Global justice and another possible world became the basis for cosmopolitan identities; transnational social movement organisations grew in numbers but also in terms of members, assuming a networked form and a fluid structure. Even local social forums kept a strong global reference. Hundreds of thousands of cosmopolitan activists converged in these many transnational occasions for protest,
often thanks to organisational resources activated around forums and counter-summits. Thanks to these deep-rooted cosmopolitans, the mobilisation then spread from the global to the (macro)regional, national and subnational levels through downward scale shift.

Just a few years later, late neoliberalism, with its global crisis, seems to have briskly interrupted the trend towards globalisation of social movements. When the new wave of protest against austerity developed, while keeping a cosmopolitan language, claiming global rights and targeting global financial capital, the protests focused on the national level, with only weak attempts at upward scale-shift through global events, organisations and framing. Indeed, while the global justice movement frequently engaged in cross-border mobilisations, which moved from one country to another, the anti-austerity protests developed around camps, deeply embedded in the urban settings of hundreds of cities across the world.6

In this new wave of protest, transnational ties continued to be relevant and transnational activists still played a brokerage role, but within different forms of diffusion. For the Global Justice Movement, meetings of transnational activists, such as social forums and counter-summits, had a most important role in the global diffusion of innovative ideas pointing at the roles and responsibilities of (some) international governmental organisations, as well as intensifying networking. The very framing of the movement’s common concern with global justice and global democracy developed in those arenas, through the mobilisation of transnational activists embedded in thousands of formal associations and informal groupings. These rooted cosmopolitan activists were thus able to bridge the local with the global and vice versa,7 contributing to the development of global identities.8

Transnational activists also played a most important role in connecting the different sites of the anti-austerity protests, but they acted differently from their predecessors. In the anti-
austerity protests, national sovereignty was in fact a widespread claim, given the visible and
dramatic expropriation by national institutions of the very power to decide about the most
important aspects of domestic policies. In particular, as the Memorandums of Agreement with
international lenders, including the European Union, introduced strong conditionalities on
national budgets, protestors attacked the declining democratic accountability at the domestic
level. National identification also increased as protestors claimed to represent not a network of
minorities, as had been the case with the Global Justice Movement, but rather a large majority –
such as the 99 per cent against the 1 per cent or ‘the people’. In defence of national sovereignty,
Icelandic, Tunisian, Egyptian, Greek and US protestors used national symbols such as flags and
anthems, stigmatising the interference of powerful states, international organisations (above all
the International Monetary Fund and the European Union) and large multinational corporations
as well as global financial capital. In addition, given the different timing and intensity of the
crisis, activists were more concerned than the global justice activists had been with the domestic
political context. Not by chance, surveys carried out at anti-austerity protests in European
countries testify for the importance of domestic governments and challenges.9

Processes of diffusion were however at work in the recent wave of protest, and they were
brokered by transnational activists. Cross-national diffusion of ideas about organisational forms,
frames and repertoires of contentious action travelled from one country to the next via direct
contacts, through face-to-face relations, and by mediated contacts, through the use of new social
media but also using older types of mediated communication. Direct forms of diffusion have
been noted within some geopolitical areas, as Egyptian activists learned from Tunisians, Spanish
Indignados entered in direct contacts with Greek activists but also brought ideas to the Occupy
movement.10 Students as well as diaspora migrants played an important role as transnational
activists, often mobilising individually or in small groups. Moreover, across more distant areas, means of communication helped to quickly spread information and mutual learning.\textsuperscript{11}

These paths of soft diffusion were accompanied at times by some more organised forms of transnational activism. Thus, on 15 October a Global Day of Action, launched by the Spanish Indignados, mobilised worldwide, with protests recorded in 951 cities in 82 countries. In Europe, the ECB acquired centrality as a target for protest campaigns. With annual demonstrations in Frankfurt, Blockupy took on some of the action repertoire and organisation from the EU counter-summits of the previous decade, but developed a more radical discourse and more disruptive forms of action. As the call for the second Blockupy in May 2012 stated,

Together with the people in Southern Europe we say: ‘Don’t owe, don’t pay!’ and resist the rehabilitation of capitalism on the backs of employees as well as unemployed, retirees, migrants and the youth. We reject any cooperation with the German crisis politics, which not only has catastrophic consequences for people in Southern Europe, but also here, where the social division is continued permanently. […] We carry our protest, our civil disobedience and resistance to the residence of the profiteers of the European crisis regime to Frankfurt am Main.

While mobilising tens of thousands in transnational protests, however, Blockupy did not see a similarly broad coalition to that which characterised European Forums and counter-summits at the beginning of the millennium. EU social policies (or the lack thereof) were also targeted by anti-austerity demonstrations such as the first European Strike promoted in 2013 by trade unions against the austerity imposed by EU institutions. In these and other days of global
action the degree of transnational co-ordination of the protest seemed smaller than for the Global Justice Movement, for which the World Social Forums and then the macro-regional Social Forum had represented sources of inspiration and offered arenas for networking. The forms of transnational brokerage in the anti-austerity protests then emerged as, if not weaker, at least different: more grassroots, less embedded in formal social movement organisations, and resting more on connections through social networking sites, participatory web platforms and, to some extent, micro-blogging spheres.

More broadly, in the anti-austerity protests the individuals directly affected by the economic crisis, without previous organisational affiliations, and even ‘first comers’ in the protest arena acquired a more central role than in the GJM – a trend that also affected transnational activists. Although social movement organisations and groups were also present in these protests,\textsuperscript{12} the individual level of participation of common people became a relevant trait of recent mobilisations. The logic of networking in the organisation of mobilisations, which had characterised the intense frame bridging activities in the Global Justice Movement, was to some extent overtaken by a logic of aggregation at the individual level of the participants in and the promoters of the protest,\textsuperscript{13} who adhered to broad collective frames.

Moreover, processes of cross-national diffusion of protest repertoires were more discontinuous with several examples of failed diffusion. For instance, even though the frames of the 2011 protests travelled from Tunisia to Egypt, and then to Spain, Greece and the United States, they did not spread to countries such as Germany or France or the United Kingdom;\textsuperscript{14} to the Czech republic, where protests were intense but localised;\textsuperscript{15} or even to Italy, where protests were present but took different forms.\textsuperscript{16} While \textit{acampadas} were organised in Brussels, London, Amsterdam, or Berlin, their success in mobilisation remained very limited. As Beissinger\textsuperscript{17} had
observed in his analysis of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, and Bunce and Wolchik\textsuperscript{18} in their research on the Orange revolutions, ideas might also spread where conditions are less propitious, but their capacity to produce successful mobilisation is unequal. In fact, a mechanism of assessment of similarities, a condition conducive to cross-national diffusion, can be blocked by structural and cultural differences. Especially in times of socioeconomic strain and political crisis, transnational activists might have limited access to material and symbolic resources.

In particular, when looking at differences in forms of transnationalisation, the Global Justice Movement can be seen as an example of thick diffusion, based on a global organisational network in which social movement organisations as well as grassroots activist groups had a relevant role in supporting (and spreading) transnational mobilisations such as counter-summits and world social forums. In contrast, the recent wave of protests has been characterised by thin diffusion, as information tended to travel quickly from individual to individual through social media. The ability of single individuals to communicate was therefore important to spreading the image of a global wave of protest. Even more important than social movement organisations were single activists who provided web platforms that functioned as aggregators of content. In fact,

The diffusion of information on the protest was therefore characterised by a weak organisational process of transnationalisation. Occasions for face-to-face communication might have improved in time at the individual level – activists travelling cheaply and often – but collective arenas for transnational encounters, such as the social forum, were less central. Indeed, the protest camps like the Spanish \textit{acampadas} quickly achieved world visibility but were mainly national, if not local, in the range of people involved.\textsuperscript{19}
In sum, different contexts brought about different types of transnational activists. The comparison of the Global Justice Movement at the turn of the millennium with the anti-austerity protests a decade later shows that rather than a trend towards increasing transnationalisation, there is an alternance of different paths of scale shifts (downward and upward), different forms of diffusion (thick and thin), different types of connections (networked versus aggregative).

All of these dimensions are in fact linked to different types of transnational activism. Not only, following Sidney Tarrow’s classification, can transnational activists be more or less deeply rooted at the local level (nesting pigeons or bird of passage), they can also be more or less embedded in associational organisational structures: more or less solitary, moving sometimes in storms but also sometimes alone.20

A broad range of examples of forms of transnational activism can further help in singling out important comparative dimensions and classifying them, also comparatively reflecting on their causes and consequences. As various historical cases indicate, the cross-national brokerage capacity of transnational activists varies broadly within different contexts, which provide for different opportunities and constraints at the social, political and cultural levels. Additionally, there is variation in the propensity of different types of transnational activists to perform as translators of movements’ ideas and so the type of (thin or thick) diffusion they are able to foster. Indeed, transnational activists can conceive of themselves as testimony or a evangelisers (like the Quakers), as anti-colonial symbols (as Gandhi), but also as spreaders of an hegemonic Western culture, as promoters of socialist internationalist or of exclusive nationalist or religious identities. Transnational activists can be perceived as part of collectives or as individual heroes, developing people-to-people or more institutional connections.
More interdisciplinary and cross-time comparison is needed in order to better conceptualise and investigate the causes and consequences of different transnational activisms and activists. In order to cultivate this dialogue, some specific skills need to be developed. Just as transnational activists must develop skills in translating different languages, cross-disciplinary research needs scholars capable of translating concepts and ideas. In addition, truly cross-time analyses have been rare, given the differences in the preferred sources and methods. The awareness of engaging with common topics, such as transnational activism, might help to decrease the risk that much knowledge, useful for various disciplines, is ‘lost in translation’.

Addressing these questions, my empirical research aims therefore to single out different forms of transnationalization of contentious politics. Using secondary sources as well as field work, the research will compare different cases within a cross-national and cross-time perspective. Additionally, the research will compare movements with different policy claims (in particular, the movements on refugees rights and the student movements) in order to evaluate the emergence and the role played by different types of transnational activists.

Research in the social sciences has instead investigated through survey data the specific characteristics of transnational activists, singling out general correlations with, for example, high educational levels as well as employment in non-governmental organisations.\textsuperscript{21} Going beyond the aggregate level, life histories allow us to go beyond correlations, pointing at the ways in which the various types of transnational activists are embedded in their historical contexts as well as their effects on it.
Notes

1 Donatella della Porta, Hanspeter Kriesi and Dieter Rucht (eds), Social Movements in a Globalizing World (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Donatella della Porta, Massiliano Andretta, Lorenzo Mosca and Herbert Reiter, Globalization from Below. Transnational Activists and Protest Networks (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, Transnational Protest and Global Activism (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Sidney G. Tarrow, The New Transnational Activism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).


3 Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni (eds), Spreading Protest: Social Movements in Times of Crisis (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2014).

4 della Porta and Tarrow, Transnational Protest and Global Activism


6 Ibid.

7 della Porta and Tarrow, Transnational Protest and Global Activism.


19 della Porta and Mattoni, *Spreading Protest*.

20 Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*.