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Debate

Transforming Activisms 2010+: Exploring Ways and Waves

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ABSTRACT

The waves of civic activism unfolding since late 2010 at a global level are striking. In major cities of the world, streets and squares have been filled with self-organized citizens demanding attention for social and political rights. The protest images have been televised, downloaded and quickly distributed — seemingly diverse sites and types of activisms being rapidly connected and speaking to each other. Does this scale and momentum signal a tipping point in a 'globalization of disaffection'? Are we witnessing the emergence of a new age-cohort of activists, similar to the '1968 generation'? What were the common elements, and what energy was driving the activisms of the squares and the blog spots? This Introduction to the Forum Debate section will try to position the notion of 'Activisms 2010+' in terms of its nature and relevance to current debates about citizen-led socio-political change. We argue that contemporary activisms constitute a distinct shift in the character of civic engagement as they surf on waves created by the increased availability and use of social media, and by a common set of rights-based demands.

INTRODUCING THE DEBATE

Across the world, the beginning of this decade has seen an abrupt and seemingly contagious upwelling of civic activism against the prevailing economic and political order. In Latin America, students in Chile took the lead in public protests against neoliberal measures affecting education; in Guatemala and Ecuador, indigenous people rallied against illegal mining activities by transnational corporations. In Tunisia, a self-immolation triggered a popular

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uprising which toppled the regime of President Ben Ali. A common interpretation is that this regime-changing event marked the start of what has come to be called the 'Arab Spring', with the revolutionary wave spreading to Mubarak's Egypt, Ghadaffi's Lybia, to Yemen and to Syria (Bayat, this issue). Elsewhere in Africa, while less spectacular, significant, mostly non-violent, large-scale protests against the behaviour of incumbent rulers were reported in Cote d'Ivoire, Malawi, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Ethiopia, Swaziland, Nigeria, Sudan and Mozambique (Gabay, 2012). In India, Anna Hazare headed an unexpected, widely supported anti-corruption movement (Shah, 2012), followed in early 2013 by an unprecedented popular campaign to protect women's rights. At the same time, artists in China have initiated a sustained critical debate on freedom of speech and access to information. In Washington DC, activist groups against the 'financial mafia' of Wall Street started a movement under the banner of 'Occupy' which led to similar *indignados* (and indignant) mass activism in hundreds of cities across the globe (Hayduk, 2012).

These geographically dispersed — but in one way or another related — acts of public defiance and rebellion suggest that something exceptional is happening within and across multiple political landscapes. This Forum edition of *Development and Change* therefore contributes to debates about the nature and the 'why now?' of multiple spontaneous civic mobilizations. Are they different from previous acts of popular upheaval and the social movements associated with them? Do they signal a turning point in the historical waxing and waning of such activisms?

Obviously, overtly and covertly, all types of activism incorporate specific geo-historical conditions and dynamics. The Arab Spring, for example, may have started many years back in the Western Sahara (Chomsky, 2012). Yet, the nature and timing of recent activisms seem connected to each other in ways which suggest that large-scale underlying processes are at play that might be perceived as a 'globalization of disaffection' which has reached a tipping point. In identifying a set of common properties across contemporary instances of major public disobedience, some authors argue that a new age-cohort of activists has emerged, similar to the '1968 generation' (Gills and Gray, 2012: 208). But what exactly are the common elements of 'now'? Might a commonality of these globally disbursed expressions of activist social capital lie in their emanating from decades of meetings and exchanges, sustained and abetted by advances in communications technology? Do their commonalities stem from the intergenerational effects of global economic interdependencies that erode prospects of a better future for the many? Is a collective, 'borderless' consciousness and transnational identity emerging in response, for example, to 'wicked problems' such as climate change threatening the livelihoods of those who are already vulnerable? Or do these activisms arise out of escalating inequity and the destabilizing volatility of power shifts between well-established and emerging mega-economies? Across diverse contexts, might commonalities of contemporary

activisms both rely on and signal ways in which relational power is being redefined and navigated towards less coercive and elite-dominated modalities? Is this the deep substance of 'transformation' being called for and aspired to?

Such queries were raised by a group of academics and activists trying to pin down what might be the key characteristic in the activisms spreading across the world (Berkhout and Jansen, 2012; Harcourt, 2012). Progress in this debate made clear that we were not dealing with a 'new' activism, as this would give rise to distracting arguments about (an escape from) historical determinism (see Icaza and Vázquez, this issue). The task at hand is to understand what gave impetus, around 2010, to an upsurge of energy which led people in all walks of life and locations to try to get to grips with the 'old' politics that determined their lives and future prospects. Thus, 2010 is taken as a point of reference, a sort of milestone towards an uncertain socio-political and economic future which is still unfolding.

This Introduction — and the Debate section which follows — will try to position the notion of 'Activisms 2010+' in terms of its nature and relevance to current debates about citizen-led socio-political change. In this essay, we will argue that contemporary activisms constitute a distinct shift in the character of civic engagement as they surf on waves created by the increased availability and use of social media and electronic communication. Technological advances are not a cause as such, but they have certainly opened up innovative avenues for people to challenge existing configurations of power. Activists become better able to challenge the politics and policies that states employ to gain the popular compliance needed to propagate and optimize the current economic order: an amoral system which calls for stability, predictability and attaining social harmony at minimum cost. In addition, new types of spontaneous (political) organizing, viral, non-violent confrontation and forms of 'non-directed' campaigning are emerging that merit attention as additions to an activism repertoire. These capabilities are potentially critical in 'invisibly' spreading, adapting and sustaining the effects of the more overt, media-attention grabbing forms of activism, complicating any assessment of real achievements. The lack of widely publicized mass expressions of disaffection may (mis)lead to the conclusion that, as in the past, activism has dissipated. Such a conclusion overlooks the daily, 'below the radar' activisms of the local, of the neighbourhood (Pearce, this issue) — the very activisms that can gain a self-sustaining momentum through a technologically enriched repertoire of collaborative agency.[1] Prompted by 'events', less public channels for expression than those seen in the 'squares' of Egypt, Russia and elsewhere can feed the 'subterranean' forces of civic agency and politics which emerge elsewhere without a clear linkage (Kaldor et al., 2012; Shah, this issue).

1. See, for example: #occupytogether; www.occupy.net; www.causes.com

It is important to recognize that the activisms directed at establishing a more inclusive, just, tolerant and sustainable world order described in this Debate section are mirrored by agency that seeks to champion and impose alternative values — seen, for example, in the aims of Boko Haram in Nigeria and of neo-fascist movements in Europe. Such a reality points to the ethical and normative challenge of analysing 'activisms' beyond the eye of the beholder. An implicit discordance in world views and activisms which seek to gain power towards disparate imagined futures must be borne in mind. Although not addressed in this Debate section, in the dynamics of socio-political change the problematic notion of 'uncivil' society and agency must be taken into account (Monga, 2009).

The guiding question in our Debate is: 'what is the nature of the post-2010 activisms and who are the key actors?'. Our aim is to pin down more precisely the extent to which manifestations of Activisms 2010+ can be characterized as different from one or two decades ago. This involves questions about ends and means, on the one hand, and the actors involved, on the other. Is there today an image of the future that is sufficiently shared and communicated to motivate and energize mass mobilization? If so, what is distinctive about it, and why has it emerged now? Can the (combination of) methods and pathways being negotiated and applied to achieve change be differentiated from those of the past? Here, issues of leadership come into view, as does the task of unravelling which actors are actually involved, how they are organized, whether and how they are linked to movements in other regions or from across social divides.

A related issue is to locate contemporary activisms within their time, context and geographical area. It has been argued that the political economy of the Arab Spring was determined by poverty and inequality, just as the protests across Europe had to do with impoverishment due to neoliberal austerity measures and the impact of the financial crises (Rocamora, 2012). Other analysts point more dramatically at a crisis of global capitalism, also triggered by the environmental constraints on unlimited growth. Gills and Gray (2012: 208) refer to the 'paradox of neoliberal economic globalisation' which simultaneously tends to both strengthen and weaken social opposition forces. But why is it all happening at this precise moment?

Wallerstein (2002) indicated more than a decade ago that after the '1968 revolution' many activists had been searching for 'a better kind of anti-systemic movement', one that would lead to a more democratic and more egalitarian world. He believes that the 1968 movement did not really achieve this objective, and that the current wave of mobilizations should be seen from this perspective. The right conditions had been created, according to Wallerstein (2011), for a movement like Occupy Wall Street to spark off the struggle: a combination of sustained economic impoverishment of the middle class (the former 'working poor'), with an exaggerated greed by the wealthiest elite (the 1 per cent) which generated the powerful image of the 99 per cent affected. Yet, this still does not explain why it happened

at this particular moment, or why it spread so quickly around the globe. Therefore, time, context and space need careful consideration.

A debate on post-2010 activisms needs to look beyond the short-term effects of mobilizations and internal dynamics, but the timeframe required to do this poses difficulties. It is too early to gauge, for example, the extent to which prevailing political systems and cultures are being affected and possibly transformed. It is also premature to assess whether contemporary power structures will manage to withstand increasing discontent from beyond the 'usual suspects' of poor people and (unemployed) youth, to the newly unemployed and still-employed middle class whose citizenship is being taken for granted through vote rigging, corruption and other forms of exploitation. Over time such a focus would aim to identify 'cracks' in the legitimacy and authority of existing political systems and how ruling elites have responded to challenges to their position. In the short term, the situation is mixed. If we look at the Middle East so far, old regimes in Tunisia and Libya have fallen and more democratic dispensations are emerging. The outcome in Egypt is a new, contested constitution, while the outcome of the uprising in Syria is, at the time of writing, very uncertain (Bayat, this issue). Italy virtually suspended democracy to install a technocratic cabinet to ward off economic collapse, which was soon sent home by the electorate (in early 2013). The polities in Greece and Spain have turned to neo-conservative parties as credible implementers of the policies required for them to be 'bailed out' of unsustainable indebtedness.

If we look at the rapid expansion of Occupy or the emergence and spread of the *indignados* originating in southern Europe, it is clear that political parties as well as the mainstream press have to engage with these campaigns and with a potent mix of campaigners, which gives activists increased credibility. One tool of protest has been to demonstrate a different and more transparent way of discussion, negotiation and decision making. Nevertheless, it is still too early to say whether the attraction of a more democratic dialogue in the public arena will undermine the dominant system or bring about reforms that reverse previous political disengagement and apathy.

The main motivation for debating this topic is to better understand what, if anything, an upwelling of global activism means for socio-political futures. The relevance of investigating its 'newness' — how it compares to the global movement in Seattle or the Paris student movement of 1968 — is that it helps us to identify distinctive features of means and measures (cf. Icaza and Vasquez, this issue). The current activist outburst seems to be on a larger and broader scale than its predecessors. While recognizing that we are in an era with much better forms of real-time, self-directed and networked communication, we suggest that this is an important enabling pre-condition but not the cause of energies directed at reforming how the global order works for whom.

There are two reasons to choose 'activisms' (rather than 'resistance' or 'revolution') as a key concept to characterize recent rebellions and

expressions of widespread discontent that are energized from below — that is, acts of public disobedience which self-aggregate, expose, amplify and transmit the micro-activism of the everyday as people seek to gain a hold on forces that shape their lives (Goldfarb, 2006). The first reason is that the wide range of protest activities are organizationally so different — mobilizations, manifestations, movements, networks, organized virtualities, campaigns, etc. — that these require an overarching and unifying concept. A second reason is that 'activisms' points at more than one particular form of political action or struggle: it also suggests a non-centralized and innovative momentum of multiple protest expressions. This 'civic energy' is possibly blending into an entirely new political movement with a very different imagination of the future in which human empowerment and justice are the norm and societies function on the basis of popular consent, rather than elite control. Several observers (e.g., Chomsky, 2012; Klein, 2012) have pointed at this watershed, suggesting a break with previous generations as well as with prevailing utopias. What these new visions of the future are about and what common elements they hold is a central thrust in the debate.

ACTIVISMS AND DRIVERS OF CIVIC ENERGY

A broad conceptualization of forces pushing Activisms 2010+ is that the nature of the social dilemmas or 'thick' problems faced by society (e.g., Rischard, 2002) is overwhelming the ability of existing political arrangements to mobilize and align collective action at the multiple sites and scales required (McGinnis, 1999; Ostrom, 2005). It is argued that failures of polycentric governance are compounded by polity's loss of trust and faith in party-political systems — old or newly minted — seen in media manipulation, electoral rigging, voter apathy and, more recently, in the technocratic takeover of elected functions to cope with the European financial crisis. A general observation is a hollowing out of democratic principles in existing dispensations on the one hand (Marquand, 2004) and the (autocratic) denial of full citizenship on the other. This dualism is feeding a psycho-social sensibility of political alienation which has now spread 'virally'. This long process reflects and abets a global political economy which has allowed (transnational) corporations to gain a disproportionate role in steering the affairs of states, in influencing international relations and governance and in the privatization of public goods (Harvey, 2011). In short, democracy is being 'privatized' (Annan Foundation, 2012).

Prevailing (party) political systems typically react to inhibit the emergence of alternatives that cannot be harnessed or controlled (Boyte, 2008). Drawing on and driven by greater awareness of complex global problems — such as threats of climate change to well-being, as well as economic and other inequities — from a macro perspective, Activisms 2010+ can be seen as acts of public dissent, disorder and disruption; that is, overflows of collective

energy which: (i) are exploring novel ways to counter and circumvent 'traditional' mechanisms and rules designed to restrict and capture spontaneous political engagement; (ii) reflect an imperative to reclaim active citizenship; and (iii) demonstrate civic assertions intended to rebalance power towards greater equity between institutional actors (see Biekart and Fowler, 2012; Fowler and Biekart, 2008, 2011).

Technology provides an 'ethereal' pathway for geographic expansion of activisms. But this mechanism says little about its users. Here the story of means can be complemented by looking at gatherings of international activists opposed to the prevailing economic model. One example has been a series of national rallies and international conferences. This phenomenon is described by Pleyers (2010) in relation to the World Social Forum (WSF) and the emergence of the alter-globalization movement. Ironically, much of the WSF's critical analysis of the so-called Washington Consensus, rejected at elite gatherings like the World Economic Forum, has come to pass (Harvey, 2011; Stiglitz, 2008). The bubble has burst and the scramble is on to define its successor model. It would appear that economic disenchantment shares public space with political disaffection as drivers of civic unrest, mass incidents and protests. Examples of this include assertions of autonomy in Kurdish Iraq and Spain's Catalonia; students protesting against escalating university fees in Chile, Quebec and Ireland; (diaspora) protests against democratic failures in Malawi and Nepal, against corruption in India, and against rigged elections in Hong Kong and Azerbaijan; indigenous groups in Bolivia and Ecuador reacting against changes in ownership of natural resources; foreign countries grabbing land in Africa; and many more.

This raises the question of the extent to which the twin motivators of today's activisms — economic and political — are reinforcing a sense of intergenerational alienation of a type not foreseen by Karl Marx or Adam Smith, on the one hand, but accompanied by an emerging transnational cosmopolitism on the other. West (1969: 15) compares how these two economic philosophers understood alienation in terms of the consequences of the division of labour in response to solving the problem of scarcity. For Smith, the potential for alienation could be countered by education, for Marx by complete evisceration of private property. While the Smithian economic model prevails, the provision of education under current conditions and the long-term prospect of 'educated unemployment' with diploma inflation and high student indebtedness — long known in many developing countries — cause a sense of distrust about and alienation from what the current system had 'promised' both pre- and post-industrial populations. It can be argued that the financial crisis has exposed and broadened this type of age-related 'malaise' in all corners of the globe — but in net-enabled ways that are giving rise to connected solidarity and collective consciousness that transcends national borders (Glasius and Pleyers, this issue). The advent of 'digital natives' as a 'new' generation has to be factored into accounts of how activisms will impact on economic futures.

Mistrust in party-based representation is endemic (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2012). A similar factoring-in of technology will therefore be required to chart how 'netizens' express their disaffection with current political dispensations and institutionalized power relations (Mackinnon, 2012). Can political engagement be regenerated with the aid of an international action repertoire and a mutual support system that can cause 'beautiful trouble' (Boyd and Mitchell, 2012)? At issue here is the extent to which it is possible and desirable to rely on the potential for self-organization of activism — seen in the Arab Spring, and set to expand (Shirky, 2008) — as opposed to entering into and changing existing institutional systems. In India, Aam Aadmi is a new anti-corruption party which is gaining support from the poor and middle class alike, who all suffer the curse of rent-seeking officialdom. At the time of writing, substantial voter support for comedian Beppe Grillo's Five Star Party has brought disarray to Italy's governance. His popular message castigating the political class was transmitted using technology which subverted Silvio Berlusconi's virtual control on the mass media. Whether or not this experiment in hyper-democracy will reverse mass disillusionment with a tainted political system remains to be seen. But, like the Pirate Party in Germany, its emergence now signals serious challenges to those benefiting from the old rules and methods of the political game.

In reinvigorating political agency to overcome disaffection, experience suggests that it would be unwise to rely on revamping existing political systems with their deeply entrenched interests and power holders. The World Social Forum has grappled with, but not resolved, the question of how to create 'open spaces' for dialogue towards consensus decision making rather than majority rule (Pleyers, 2010: 28). Progress in this direction is urgently required. On its leading edge will be major challenges and challengers in determining the processes required to reach a decision about changing the world's economic model. As Wallerstein argues:

> We may think of this period of systemic crisis as the arena of a struggle for the successor system. The outcome may be inherently unpredictable but the nature of the struggle is very clear. We are before alternative choices. They cannot be spelled out in institutional detail, but they can be suggested in broad outline. We can 'choose' collectively a new stable system that essentially resembles the present system in some basic characteristics — a system that is hierarchical, exploitative, and polarizing. . . . Alternatively we can 'choose' collectively a radically different form of system, one that has never previously existed — a system that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian. (Wallerstein, 2009: 23)

Similarly, reflecting on a wide array of forces, Laszlo (2012) postulates a choice between 'Business as Usual' and 'Timely Transformation' scenarios. His report of movement towards the latter scenario emphasizes the psychosocial dimensions of crisis and the emergence of individual and collective consciousness. Elaborating on this, Beckwith (2012) speaks to 'the birth of a global citizenry' and its agency: 'The transformation of an egocentric model of "me and mine" into a world-centric mindset of "we and ours" is the vessel that accommodates a revolution in values creating space for the emergence of

a global citizenry. . . . because, *how we govern our individual life determines the character of international relations on our planet*' (Beckwith, 2012: 155, emphasis in original).

In such postulated scenarios, whether or not Activisms 2010+ signal a tipping point in terms of the type and breadth of political motivation and engagement remains a critical issue for discussion. To the extent that the world is facing a potential bifurcation of 'choice' in the modality that globalization will take, a working proposition would be that repertoires of contemporary activisms articulate a scale of disaffection and/or disillusionment with the prevailing order that cannot be bought off or 'cost-effectively' coerced into compliance.

POWER, KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIVISM

If the above describes some of the higher order imperatives to act, other frameworks are called for to disentangle specific features of activism on the ground and the issues and contradictions involved. These emerged from the rich discussions held with many of the authors contributing to this Debate section, reflecting and building on a citizen-centred perspective of socio-political dynamics framed in terms of 'civic driven change' (CDC). This conceptualization of societal processes is an outcome of a substantial discussion located outside of the confines of international aid. Subsequent events and examples of innovations in civic agency alongside activisms — such as social enterprise and local barter systems — illustrate the nature of CDC as a wide political phenomenon (Fowler and Biekart, 2008).

A tricky terrain of theory relates to activisms that are intended to reconfigure power relations and the choice between civic and uncivil ways of doing so. Put another way, how does this debate approach the ends versus means dimensions of activism? Here it is useful to elaborate on the key features of 'civicness' and the effort that shapes it, that is, 'civic energy' (Biekart and Fowler, 2012; Fowler and Biekart, 2011). Although non-violence is considered to be a key feature of civicness, situations can be imagined where, in the interest of the larger community, particular forms of 'coercive non-violence' are permitted to oppose authoritarian oppression (the cases of Lybia and Syria are examples). However, one should be very aware of the backlash effect of the use of coercive means in the name of 'civic action' (see Pearce, this issue). For example, in exerting 'civic muscle' through mass disobedience, the civil rights movement in the United States opened itself up to misleading portrayals of being anti-democratic and racist in its anti-racism, justifying moral condemnation and more active state repression.

To understand Activisms 2010+ in terms of *power*, we propose a multi-dimensional view (Fowler and Biekart, 2011: 24–6) that recognizes a progression from the covert *habitus* of Bourdieu (1977), through defining

language and exercising control over public agendas and access to decision making, to more overt coercive forms and expressions (Lukes, 2005). This perspective also applies the frame provided by Gaventa (2006). Power 'within' often refers to gaining the sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is a pre-condition for action. Power 'with' refers to the synergy which can emerge through partnerships and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building. Power 'over' refers to the ability of the powerful to affect the actions and thought of the powerless. The power 'to' is important for the exercise of civic agency and to realize the potential of rights, citizenship or voice.

An Activisms 2010+ lens can be helpful to distil the ways in which a popular challenge to authority is understood today in relation, for example, to 'the failure of 1968' to alter and consolidate a different systemic power. More specifically, the debate must connect power to the nature of 'old' politics that seems to be losing its connection to time, place and generations. In regaining politics through activism, what roles and processes can be attributed to the substance of micro-politics as expressed at myriad kitchen tables and coffee shops across social-political divisions and their interfaces? Or to the politics of real-time problem solving enabled by social media and mobile technologies which allow 'virtual' scaling in decision making? Or to the prising open of gaps in existing political structures? What does leadership mean, and leadership for whom?

The *normative* dimensions of activism as an expression of civic or uncivil agency are also problematic and need to be approached critically. Drawing on evolutionary psychology and a long view of historical-political analysis from Aristotle through Arendt, our working proposition is that humans have deep-rooted pro-social dispositions that can be labelled 'civic' (Dagnino, 2008). Living together simply calls for (acculturated) adherence to some minimum level of tolerance of 'the other' and a concern for 'the whole' beyond self. There is a natural propensity for individuals and societies to reduce transaction costs and for people to show an asymmetry between anxiety over loss of current assets against the uncertainty of gain from new opportunities, in favour of the former (Beinhocker, 2006). Accelerated by modernization, human propensities therefore steer towards stability and cooperation as the normative basis from which competition emerges (Seabright, 2004). While violent conflicts take place, they cannot be sustained indefinitely. As historian Robert Bates (2001) shows, in the context of statehood there is a limit to the degree to which violence can ensure prosperity over time.

The Debate in this Forum issue therefore explores the extent to which Activisms 2010+ seek to alter socio-political relations towards or away from values of inclusion, tolerance and non-violent change, and investigates the scale(s) of 'beyond self' in the collective mind — be this a locality or neighbourhood, a nation state, the economic system, the global ecology, (layers of) the political order, and so on. It thus addresses the paradox of

uncivil behaviour used to gain more civil ends in terms of how a society functions.[2]

In addition, as elaborated in the contribution by Icaza and Vázquez, there is an important link between power and knowledge (a binary link, in Foucauldian terms) which affects our way of seeing political developments and of overlooking them (Said, 1978). Post-colonial theorists have suggested examining more critically the cultural identity of 'the other', which stands for those oppressed by imperialism and the holders of power. One typical type of oppression is what Spivak (1988) has called 'epistemic violence': efforts to undermine and even eradicate forms of knowledge that are not in line with mainstream Western beliefs. It is therefore essential to value different types of knowing in what Sousa Santos calls 'the plurality of knowledge': 'Knowledge exists only as a plurality of ways of knowing, just as ignorance only exists as a plurality of forms of ignorance' (Sousa Santos, 2009: 116). One has to be aware of the various 'ways of knowing' in order to accept that we have a limited grasp of the ways of knowing of 'the other'. Escobar (2004: 210) refers to these other ways as 'subaltern knowledges and cultural practices world-wide' that have been silenced by modernity. This epistemic struggle within a subaltern politics is probably central to understanding Activisms 2010+, and will have to be problematized when we analyse what has happened (the 'event') as well as what has not (yet) happened (the 'non-event').

A further area informing what is being debated is the nature of organizing and mobilizing seen in Activisms 2010+. Existing theories of collective action in relation to social movements posit a range of energizing motivations — relative deprivation, political process and opportunity, disaffected claim making and so on — as well as stages of evolution or progression, such as incubation, action and consolidation (e.g., Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978, 2004). For Tilly (1978: 7), a social movement must: 'Evince a minimum degree of organization, though it may range from a loose, informal or partial level of organization, to highly institutionalized and bureaucratized structures .... [It must be] founded upon the conscious volition, normative commitment to the movement's aims or beliefs, and active participation on the part of the followers or members'. Escobar and Alvarez (1992: 6), on the other hand, have been much more cautious, pointing out the differentiations of the various forms of collective action, and warning that 'not all forms of collective action have the same social, cultural, or political significance'. They echo the point made by Jelin who argued that social movements are, after all, 'objects constructed by the researcher, which do not necessarily

2. A separate treatment would be required to explore the emergence and meaning of 'uncivil activisms' illustrated, for example, by Al Qaeda and by mobilizations of xenophobic political groupings and their claims on public policy, fed by sections of the media that espouse intolerance. Such a treatment is beyond the scope of this article.

coincide with the empirical form of collective action' (Escobar and Alvarez, ibid.).

These positions reflect a substantive critique of organizational and institutional theory informed by a complexity lens. Thompson (2008) argues that social structuration is an intrinsically unfulfilled process of change between different potentially stable states arising from mass collective agency. There is no such thing as an organization but rather a variously labelled permanent fluidity in organizing, with new appearances of underlying socio-political processes and rules, as feedback of their effects recalibrates previous choices. The emergence of non-movement movements is one illustration of this phenomenon (Bayat, 2009 and this issue). In this sense, Tilly's perspective holds true as long as the 'attractors' of a movement's aims or beliefs are able to exert an adequate shared psychological bond between members over relevant timeframes.

It is this empirical form of activisms that is analysed and problematized in more detail in the collection of papers that follows. An opening issue for debate was whether Activisms 2010+ conform sufficiently to these or similar criteria to 'qualify' as social movements, or whether they are part of a different category of activism. Are we seeing expressions of civic and uncivil agency that do not belong within civil society as such — a common location for social movement theories — but stem from the self-driven and dynamically organized accumulation of the energies of citizens from all walks of life and ages? Specifically, is the advent of communication technologies available to the mass of populations across the world giving rise to permanent states of organizing across time and space which can create negotiated, fluid organizational hierarchies without recourse to extraction and transfer of resources or designated leaders and sites of leadership? Is 'mobilizing' in order to bring supporters to action along established story lines of social movements being complemented or displaced by spontaneous aggregating activism of geographically spread situational judgements exhibiting network effects? Finally, is there anything which is distinctive in the imagined future, utopian or otherwise, that acts as an attractor for people's energy to change society in ways not seen before? Or are we observing updated variations on previous themes that bring people out of their chairs and onto the streets, risks and all? After all, as Abdelrahman (this issue) notes in the case of the Egyptian activists bringing down Mubarak, 'despite their fearless efforts to challenge the regime and its institutions', they 'had no ready plan — grand or otherwise — for the day after'. In either case, what can we learn about contemporary drivers of socio-political processes? And when imagined futures of a new order, small or large, are articulated, do pre-emptive responses intended to prevent collective action actually serve activism? For example, does the widespread knowledge of a non-event 'occurring' produce a paradoxical outcome that serves those whose intentions have been thwarted by the authorities? From another point of view, is Activisms 2010+ changing the repertoire of containment and control employed

by existing power holders? These are some of the new questions generated in this debate on 'transforming activisms'.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

A range of committed scholars working on power, social movements and/or activisms were asked to reflect on the questions mentioned above: below we introduce their contributions to this Debate section. Given the wide variety of 'activisms' of the last few years, it is justified to ask whether they really have the commonalities that we suggested earlier. Can we compare Occupy Wall Street, Spanish *indignados*, Egyptian and Tunisian revolutionaries at all? In their contribution to the Debate, **Glasius and Pleyers** explore this question by analysing three different aspects that seem to have common characteristics in many of the activist expressions of recent years: infrastructure, contexts and discourses. This not to say that several differences do not exist, depending on the context and the activists' backgrounds. Despite these differences, Glasius and Pleyers argue that the movements of 2011 'belong to a new generation of movements that combine and connect socio-economic and cultural claims, materialist and post-materialist demands'. Their work shows how Internet and social forums have facilitated the growth of intense interconnections between the various movements, contributing to a genuine 'global generation' of activists living the precariousness of the current world order. Glasius and Pleyers identify three core features of 'contagion' that keep surfacing in the demands of all these movements: democracy, social justice and dignity. Even though it is too early to assess the achievements of Activisms 2010+, the authors compare these mobilizations to the portents of 1968 which, by energizing a shift in paradigms of thinking, had such a profound (socio-cultural) impact on previous generations as well as on our own.

The dynamics of Activisms 2010+ were most clearly observed in Egypt, where Tahrir Square became the symbolic arena for resistance to the authoritarian Mubarak regime. **Abdelrahman** argues that we must look back more than a decade to trace the origins of this rebellion. The impact of the second Intifada (at the beginning of the new millennium) as much as the neoliberal privatization policies of a few years later created conditions for the massive Egyptian citizens' uprising that started in late 2010. A wide array of groups was involved in the protests, and Abdelrahman distinguishes between three categories: the pro-democracy movement, the labour movement, and the citizens groups. However, despite the fact that the rebellion had been nationwide, and very successful, the weakness of the protest movement became apparent in the post-Mubarak period. Its organizational structure had been spontaneous and diverse. This feature turned out to be an obstacle after Mubarak's fall and threatened to undermine the revolutionary moment. Just as had happened with previous revolutions in other settings, the protesters were not prepared to take over power. As Abdelrahman points out 'they did

not develop the kind of skills . . . including organizational ones, that one day could equip them to match the might of the military establishment or the iron discipline and mass base of the Muslim Brotherhood'. Hence, the absence of a strategy to capture state power, which is typical of the new social movements, eventually became a liability after its unexpected success in mobilizing the masses against an unjust and exclusionary political system.

Bayat reminds us of the unexpectedness of radical and revolutionary change. The Arab Spring was not foreseen by the intelligence agencies of the North, just as the revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua of the 1970s were not anticipated, and the Soviet collapse and Eastern European revolutions in and after 1989 were not predicted by the CIA and MI6. How to explain this surprise? Is it because the protest remains silent for a long time and is therefore not spotted by outsiders? Apparently not, since discontent was voiced in the run-up to the revolutions mentioned above. Bayat argues that 'the vast constituencies of the urban poor, women, youth and others, resorted to "non-movements" — the non-deliberate and dispersed but contentious practices of individuals and families to enhance their life chances'. At a certain moment the dispersed struggles of these 'non-movements' started to gel into a more organized form of civic activism which was enhanced by social media, even though it still remained invisible for outsiders as it happened 'within the underside of Arab societies'. The revolt was also no longer dominated by religious leaders, since Islamist politics had begun to lose its momentum a decade after 9/11. The paradox was that the Islamic parties benefited most from the protest, which Bayat explains by the changing 'post-Islamist' orientation of these parties. A comparison is made between the street politics of Occupy and that of Tahrir Square, in which Bayat reaches quite a different conclusion than Glasius and Pleyers: street protest in Tahrir Square is not the exception but is a necessary civic articulation of everyday subsistence politics. By pointing this out, Bayat provides a new meaning to the concept of revolution which fundamentally differs from how we perceived it in the twentieth century.

A period of relative quiet in terms of activisms in newly post-apartheid South Africa has been replaced by an upsurge of mobilizations and protests of citizens demanding 'justice' from the ANC government. A range of 'new social movements' composed of broader sections of society rallied against the impact of privatization measures, including the Treatment Action Campaign, the Anti-Privatization Campaign, and the Soweto Electricity First Committee. **Mottiar** analyses these more recent movements and calls them 'popcorn activism': popping up, bursting, then rapidly diminishing in strength. The latest shift in South African activism is the emergence of Occupy-inspired protest. As a result, it seems that incidental protests are losing their 'popcorn' nature and becoming more sustainable, with broader alliances of local and national mobilizations. One example is the Durban Umlazi Occupy, which links together shack dwellers' movements, the unemployed, and political opposition groups such as Democratic Left Front,

all of them strongly critical of the ANC government which has not yet managed to satisfy the expectations of the poorer and more marginalized layers of post-apartheid society. A broader finding of this study is that the local protestors were actually inspired by their international counterparts, especially Washington DC-based Occupy movements, through the circulation of videos in the townships.

The character of Activisms 2010+ seldom reflects the typical project and programme-bound political economy common to international NGOs (INGOs). Indeed, the advent of spontaneous activism as a force of societal change draws attention to the limited effectiveness of INGOs in that field (Bebbington et al., 2008), casting doubt on the role of INGO networks in triggering social change. As argued elsewhere, we tend to question the underlying proposition of NGO relevance for bringing about systemic change (Fowler and Biekart, 2011). Notwithstanding this perspective, **Harcourt** argues that there is still a role for international NGOs in post-2010 activisms, albeit conditioned by dispersed but formalized structures. In particular, she points to new forms of organization in international networks that have played an important role in transnational feminist struggles. In her contribution to the Debate, Harcourt analyses the case of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), an international feminist NGO network founded thirty years ago. Starting as a Washington-based service-delivery provider for large development donors, AWID gradually turned into a transnational advocacy and campaigning network rooted in the global South, engaging a new generation of young activists. In regular international forum settings, AWID has offered a key space for a wide range of women's rights activists. The transformation involved a gradual shift in its Northern and UN-based focus to include a more diverse political and grassroots-oriented approach, moving away from concerns about the success of 'development projects'. Whilst having become more activist, AWID as 'a hub of women's rights and feminist movements' still runs on donor money and employs staff. Harcourt rightly poses the question: 'can a political project have forty paid staff including an executive director?'. The answer is not encouraging, especially since donor money tends to divide, create suspicions and generate power inequalities. Nevertheless, AWID remains a good example of how the new activisms are stimulating organizational evolution from the traditional NGO realm.

Following Glasius and Pleyers, in her contribution **Pearce** also concludes that one of the key dimensions of Activisms 2010+ (and one of its most positive contributions) is the way it has connected the local (neighbourhood) to the global (public square) and, in doing so, provides a new understanding of the nature of the power involved at both sites. Pearce makes the important point that activists have always occupied a difficult position with respect to power. They are, as she says, paraphrasing Mansbridge (2001), 'both fighting power and using power'. Pearce points out that the underlying view of power has generally been a conventional one of 'power as domination' or 'power

over'. For radical activists, also associated with the 'old social movements', the emphasis was on taking the dominating power of the existing holders, and replacing it with a progressive and alternative political project. But the shift was still top-down and very hierarchical, which was increasingly criticized by feminist movements and by later, 'newer' social movements. Through a series of propositions, Pearce argues that it is time to revisit power, to rethink its meaning and practice in the midst of the revitalized forms of activism of the new century. She suggests we should shift from 'empowerment' to 'transforming power'. Her contribution argues that this other understanding of power correlates with deepening democracy and participation, conflict reduction and ultimately violence reduction. In order words, it is a means to rethink the meaning and practice of politics itself. The argument is illustrated with experiences of community activists in the North of England, which suggest that an alternative vision and practice of power does exist. What is described is a prefigurative form of power 'because it is about creating something new, it is a practice of constructing new power relations (in the means of movement organising) so that the old ones may become obsolete and the new power relationships might replace them (becoming an end)' (Pearce quoting Maeckelbergh, 2009: 115). This example links to evidence of how new activists in social movements also appear to be rethinking power, such as the anti-globalization movements of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century and the anti-capitalist movements which emerged in the wake of the 2008 banking crisis.

The rise of digital activism is another development that has strongly affected the character of the Activisms 2010+ movement. However, as **Shah** points out in his contribution, we must be careful not to simply assume that these new forms of activism also generate new structures within which citizen activism can be understood. Shah actually argues the opposite and suggests that digital technologies have forced us to make all forms of protest intelligible, legible and accessible within the framework of the digital paradigm. He demonstrates that this view tends to obscure the existence of different geographical and temporal dynamics, due to what he calls a 'spectacle imperative': if something cannot be tweeted, it does not exist and is not part of digital activism. Shah argues that this 'hyper visibility' of mass mobilizations around the world exemplifies a 'visual hegemony' which is leading to a homogeneous and misleading discourse on citizen activism. He illustrates this with the example of a very popular Chinese TV show covering the annual Spring Festival Gala, which is a traditional moment to transmit state-sponsored ideologies and cultural values and is watched by many millions. However, with increased access to cyberspace, digital activists started to challenge the Chinese political and economic monopoly with a proposed 'shanzhai [copy-cat or fake] spring gala', which was a bottom-up effort building on global digital democracy mobilizing many Chinese 'netizens'. Its rapid success also raised high expectations, which eventually undermined the shanzhai campaign altogether when it tried to link up with a corporate TV

station. The broadcast was cancelled and the gala transformed into a 'non-event', not only symbolizing the new digital activism in China, but also nurturing the 'impossible dream' of making political change happen. The paradox is that the occurrence of a 'non-event' due to regime clampdown can be a 'marker' or point of reference which can re-energize activism.

A different but closely related way of exploring the nature of Activisms 2010+ is to analyse the epistemologies underlying these social struggles. The contribution by **Icaza and Vázquez** focuses on two recent historical moments in which social struggles had a lasting impact: the indigenous rebellion of the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Mexico 1994) and the anti-corporate mobilization during the WTO summit in Seattle (USA 1999). Both mobilizations are considered to be crucial sources of inspiration for the Global Social Justice Movement, Occupy Wall Street, the student mobilizations in Latin America, the *indignados* in Southern Europe, and many other recently emerging social activist movements. Icaza and Vázquez are concerned about suggesting 'a before and after 2010 in social struggles' and argue that Seattle and Chiapas should not simply be perceived as reactions to neoliberal globalization or as 'outcomes' of capitalist modernization, but rather as unforeseeable and unexpected moments in social struggles. Arendt's notion of power is borrowed to highlight that political resistance is a moment of creativity which cannot simply be reduced to the negation of repression. Post-colonial thinking would also argue that the rebellions (especially in Chiapas) are challenging the modern epistemic knowledge frameworks with their emphasis on chronology. Icaza and Vázquez therefore propose that, rather than seeing Chiapas and Seattle as outcomes of a process of resistance to domination (as 'modern reactions') they can be seen as 'decolonial recreations'. The rebellions can be analysed as beginnings in which the voices of the excluded and oppressed can be heard in a (new) public realm, offering them political visibility and the opportunity to demonstrate alternative political practices. Following Arendt, Icaza and Vázquez argue that the public realm is opened up by the 'political event', which in turn is a condition for realizing political freedom. This resonates with Shah's claim of the 'eventfulness' of activism, including that of 'non-events'.

Together, these contributions provide a thoughtful starting point for debate about the distinctive character and the 'why now?' of the waves of post-2010 activisms. Is contemporaneity with a posited transformative change to the world order simply chance? From this perspective, the Debate recalls previous notions and over-estimates of a 'moment' of systemic change tied to mass political assertions of 1968. But this Debate on activisms advances an updated, dual and potentially systemic proposition. First, that present-day challenges of environmental instabilities, power shifts stemming from economic globalization and volatility in adjustments, create an unprecedented set of risks to human well-being and uncertainties in socio-political conditions affecting all locations and populations. Second, that current (and anticipated future) technological advances 'contagiously' accelerate, amplify

and 'invisibly' perpetuate 'events' of people's disaffection at previously unknown speeds and regardless of geographical dispersions, and that this will be a distinctive and necessary feature of collective engagement to address societal problems. In other words, under emerging global conditions — bifurcating or not — the nature and repertoires of Activisms 2010+ described in this Debate section may prevent a repeat of the familiar story of the rise and fall of civic engagement typically observed with social movements. Be that as it may, a long view will be needed to see if the proposition holds and if 'uncivil' reactions tilt the trajectory away from the values that Activisms 2010+ espouse.

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