Mapping Political Sociology

Ambiguities and Complexities for Unpredictable Futures

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A metaphor for engaging with social movement hybridity

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Introduction

A significant portion of the future of political sociology hinges on its ability to remain responsive to the ever-changing practices and dynamics of collective action. This does not merely imply that political sociology must continue to consider and investigate collective contention as a building block of "the political" (Nash, 2010). More radically, it entails caring for and embracing the complexity of contemporary social movements – which I understand as pivotal collective political actors that challenge the status quo and consist of "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities" (della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 20). To this aim, I think there is one point that deserves to be to be tackled seriously: we need to engage consciously and willingly with social movements' inherent hybridity. This means we need to address social movements as cross-dimensional projects of change that unfold seamlessly within and between offline and online spaces (pavan and Earl, in press) thanks to the inextricable contribution of social actors (be they individuals or organizations) and the technologies they use to pursue their goals – particularly, digital media.

Without any doubt, ongoing processes of "deep mediatization" are fostering a tighter entwinement between every element of the social world and digital media, their infrastructures, and functioning logics (Hepp, 2020). Against this background, social movement studies have quickly directed considerable attention toward the digital communication practices that sustain collective endeavours. Several research paths have thus opened to clarify the manifold consequences of digital media appropriation within courses of contentious action – from the expansion of the social movement milieux through the construction and spread of online movement networks (e.g. Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2011; Froio and Ganesh, 2019; pavan and Mainardi, 2018; Tremayne, 2014), to the enrichment of movement organizational, ideational, and tactical practices (Cammaerts, 2021; Mercea, 2018; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010), the valorization of movement communication repertoires (Mattoni, 2013) and cultures (Kavada, 2015), and the diffusion of alternative and disruptive digital narratives (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013; Jackson et al., 2020; pavan and Rapini, 2022).

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Regardless of the specific angle taken, theoretical as much as empirical investigations centred on online activism have successfully reclaimed the legitimacy of this form of "flash activism" against harsh criticisms about its ephemeral and inconsequential nature (Earl, 2016). This undoubtedly marks one of the most recent achievements in social movement studies and illustrates the enduring relevance of what della Porta (2025, pp. 2–3) identifies as the three key resources driving their enhancement. First, there is "theoretical eclecticism", which is the unique capability of social movement studies to virtuously cross theories, concepts, and knowledge from different fields – sociology, political science, geography, history, anthropology, normative theory, law, economics, and media and communication studies. Second, there is "methodological pluralism", that is, social movement studies' keenness to "cherish different epistemological traditions [while holding] a positive attitude towards empirical research" (della Porta 2025, p. 3) that employs (often in conjunction) qualitative, quantitative, and, more recently, computational methods. Finally, social movement studies have shown over time a persistent "public commitment" insofar as they produce "knowledge oriented not only towards scientific theorization but also social intervention" (della Porta 2025, p. 2).

At the same time, however, the growing interest in digital media has fostered a spontaneous reorganization of the field of social movement studies around what, to me, appears to be a new "canon" – one according to which digital and physical forms of contentious collective action, as well as social actors and the digital media they employ, are (and arguably should be) treated separately, both theoretically and empirically.

There are at least three reasons that have led to the emergence of this canon and made of the online/offline dichotomy that underpins it a structural component of social movement studies. First and very simply, digital media have only recently become part of everyday social life as well as of the practices of collective contention. In this sense, studies about online activism were added onto and continually had to engage with the torrent of research tackling protests in the squares, the streets and many other physical spaces. Second, there is an inevitable difference between offline and online forms of collective participation, insofar as the former are mediated by technologies that were not originally designed as protest tools but have been repurposed as such by activists as much as by engaged citizens who often mobilize without being formally affiliated with any movement organization (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Mattoni and pavan, 2019). Third, there is a methodological issue, since addressing digital dynamics at scale may require approaches that fall outside the traditional social movement studies' toolkit (della Porta, 2014) as they must be aware of digital data specificities and proactively ready to integrate theory-driven knowledge production with data-driven computational techniques (pavan, 2022).

While these are all valid reasons, there are at least two more why we can (and should) reform this canon and bravely embrace social movement hybridity. First, the online/offline dichotomy does stand in stark contrast to the actual practices in

which social and political change is collectively created. Recent massive protests around the world fiercely demanding the freedom for Palestine clearly exemplify this point, insofar as they are not an isolated outburst but the climax of a constant and relentless mobilization that has brought – and quite literally kept – "all eyes on Gaza" over the past two years. In turn, mobilizations in the streets, the squares, and across the Mediterranean have been – and continue to be – accompanied by the incessant production of digital content and expressions of intersectional solidarity, which testify enduring commitment and care for Palestinians and their cause. There are several good reasons and curiosities for investigating the forms and the substance that this collective mobilization took in different spaces (e.g. comparing different cities and countries, streets, squares, docks, seas, social media platforms, and pieces of news). However, in my opinion, there also are many good ones to investigate such collective endeavour in its entirety, paying attention to how intricate paths of marches winding through city streets cross the constant flow of digital contentious content. These two mobilization paths are the in fact two sides of a precious collective coin.

Second, almost 30 years of research that has followed this canon have given us enough resources to dare moving beyond it. I am not suggesting that research targeting online or offline collective action dynamics should disappear altogether. In fact, targeted research remains fundamental particularly in "intense times" (della Porta, 2025) like current ones, in which collective actors and networks struggling for social justice multiply in spite of narrow opportunity structures, while nativist and conservative mobilizations proliferate and cross the boundaries between institutional and civic spaces (Castelli di Gattinara and Pirro, 2024). However, continuing to disregard hybridity as a defining feature of contemporary social movements lowers the potential for new achievements in two main ways. First, it imposes an artificial linearity – if not an explicit hierarchy – between offline and online mobilizations, thereby hindering a deeper understanding of how social change emerges from their continuous enmeshment. Second, it conceals the actual and increasingly decisive contribution of digital media in shaping the dynamics of social change creation.

Thus, I believe that the future of social movements studies should blend targeted research and a serious engagement with the hybridity of contemporary collective action processes, creatively leveraging what we have learnt so far to move forward and generate new knowledge that, in continuity with the past, is not only academically excellent but, above all, socially relevant (della Porta, 2025; pavan, 2022).

In what follows, I would like to show that this is not a distant possibility but, rather, a development that is already underway. I begin by briefly outlining how social movement hybridity gets lost when the artificial separation between offline and online spaces and forms of action, as well as that between social actors and non-human entities, is upheld. Then, I argue that it is possible to move a step forward by building on the now well-established movement-network perspective (Diani, 1992, 2003, 2015) and metaphorically considering social movements as quilts – that is, as *networks of networks* inhabited by a variety of social and non-human movement agents, interacting with and among one another through a multiplicity of online, offline, and cross-dimensional connections. After reviewing the quilt as a metaphor for

social research, I discuss how it can creatively trouble the current canon of social movement studies and lay new ground to accommodate movement hybridity in our research agendas.

The artificial separation between movement spaces, forms of action and agents

Dichotomic distinctions between offline and online spaces, forms of activism, and agents grow their roots in the antagonism that, in the early 2000s, separated optimistic and sceptical readings of "digitally-enabled" courses of contentious action (Earl and Kimport, 2011). Thus, offline and online dynamics of contention were initially set in opposition – often with the intention of highlighting the (alleged) added values of one form of participation over the other: greater commitment and higher chances of impact in the former (Morozov, 2011), or greater accessibility, inclusiveness, and personalization in the latter (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

Soon enough, however, empirical evidence began to show that online activism would not replace but, at most, complement offline mobilization (e.g. Christensen, 2011). In this context, scholars began to recognize the hybridity of contemporary mobilization endeavours but mostly understood it in terms of linear and unidirectional patterns of influence. Accordingly, they sought to understand whether, when, and to what extent the use in particular of social media might stimulate offline protest (e.g. Bastos et al., 2014; Bastos et al., 2015; Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015; Theocharis et al., 2015) or, occasionally, whether the reverse relationship occurs (Bosi et al., 2022). The impossibility of finding univocal patterns of influence pushed the field one step further and settled its current configuration according to which offline and online spaces and forms of action are considered as connected but, still, mostly addressed separately through targeted research. In this scenario, social movement hybridity is either taken for granted or, at best, treated as a cautious starting point often to legitimize a targeted focus on online dynamics.

At the same time, the rapid spread of digital media within our societies has compelled social movement studies to repair to their long-standing inattention to media (for notable exceptions, see Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Rucht, 2004). In this context, the movement media practices approach (Mattoni, 2012, 2013) has invited scholars to explore more systematically the ways in which movements appropriate different media (both traditional and digital), as well as the knowledge they produce about these tools and the broader media environment in which they operate.

This suggestion has been crucial to rethinking media not as external factors but rather as intervening agents affecting movement dynamics from within. This notwithstanding, the movement media practices approach has only partially succeeded in clarifying how social movements are hybrid also in compositional terms (i.e. they are jointly and actively shaped by human and non-human agents) insofar as its focus has remained steadily set on social movement actors, even if considered in relation to the media they adopt. A similarly crucial but partial success has been marked by the plethora of studies that have examined online contentious interaction stemming from the mundane use of social media – what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) have

termed "connective action". These studies have indeed so far remained centred on communicative choices made by social actors such as individual activists and citizens, social movement organizations, political parties, journalists, and public intellectuals. Henmce, also in this case, non-human entities involved in movement processes – particularly the digital platforms they lean on, their technologies such as hashtags, images, or links, but even the words used to express messages – have largely remained a secondary concern. In the few cases in which they have been considered (e.g. Neumayer and Rossi, 2018; Rossi et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2020; pavan and Rapini, 2022), the analytic focus has been rarely set on more than one movement-related entity at a time, thus invariably maintaining the same single-sided gaze that is typical of social-actors-oriented studies (for an exception, see González-Bailón and De Domenico, 2021).

Clearly, the initial muscular opposition between offline and online spaces, forms of contention, and movement agents is no longer present. However, beyond maintaining a separation between offline and online spaces and forms of action, social actors and non-human entities are rarely brought together. Thus, we are still a bit far from being able to render the "constitutive entanglement" (Orlikowski, 2007) between the physical and digital dynamics, as well between social and the material agencies that characterize contemporary movement processes and fuel them with new possibilities to achieve social change. To be sure, it is still important to investigate how specific strands of social movement action unfold within different spaces and contexts, as this allows to better understand their forms and transformative potential (Mundt et al., 2018). However, it seems less useful to continue assuming that this is all social movement studies can or even *should* do in light of an alleged but, in fact, *artificial* separation which is hardly found in actual contentious practices (Belotti et al., 2022; Maher and Earl, 2017; pavan and Mainardi, 2018).

Alternating the gaze between physical and digital spaces, social actors and non-human entities, as well as between social relations and the semantic connections established among discursive, visual elements, and mobilization frames, prevents us from effectively tackling the simultaneous social and symbolic nature of social movements as "solidarity networks entrusted with potent cultural meanings" (Melucci, 1996, p. 4) that are always in flow. In fact, the collective construction of political alternatives does not occur either linearly or uniformly. Social actors mobilize in contentious dynamics enacting different strategies; they play more central or more peripheral roles, and their strategies and centrality vary over time rather than being defined once and for all. Similarly, different digital tools (not only platforms but also their individual components such as hashtags, images, links, etc.) afford different contributions and are used for different purposes, and not all content has the same likelihood of becoming part of collectively shared imaginaries, nor will these imaginaries remain carved in stone.

Ultimately, in a context in which digital media and, increasingly, artificial intelligence are "in" the movement (Mattoni, 2020), it is not only possible but in fact urgent to explore how foundational movement processes such as organizing, building collective identities, and circulating alternative visions, frames, and ways of living unfold in a hybrid manner. Thinking of a social movement as a hybrid

in dimensional and compositional terms – that is, as fluid and cross-dimensional processes jointly shaped by social actors and non-human entities – allows us to fully appreciate and therefore understand how social change comes about precisely through the construction of collectivities in struggle that are inextricably linked to the content and the visions they put forward, and the means through which they do so. Embracing social movement hybridity means ceasing to be concerned with distinctions and engaging with social movement not as purely physical or purely digital dynamics, but as an inextricable mix of both – one that we have no interest in disentangling but rather should seek to understand and appreciate in its entirety.

Moving forward while resting on a quilt

Current social movement processes are inherently hybrid. What the current canon in social movement studies separates into offline and online dynamics is, in practice, seamlessly intertwined and continuously combined and recombined in and through movement actors' tactical and strategic choices (pavan and Earl, in press) thanks to the concurrent contribution of social and material agencies (pavan, 2014).

But how can we upend the current canon and engage more seriously with social movement hybridity? How can we handle the disorder that inevitably arises from this move but is, in fact, a defining feature of contemporary collective actions? I believe that a first and necessary step in this direction entails finding ways to reimagine social movements as "nomadic" processes (Melucci, 1989) unfolding across multiple physical and digital spaces and inhabited by a plurality of interconnected agents who mobilize their diverse capacities to produce social change.

To this end, I propose we rest on the metaphor of the quilt. As a form of art and craft, quilting consists of the stitching of three layers of fabric. First, the background, which serves as a base to hold together the other two layers. Second, the batting, which provides thickness to the quilt and generates warmth. Third, the top layer, where different blocks are patched together and, while maintaining their uniqueness, contribute to form a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. This distinctive configuration, which blends structure with creativity, has enabled the quilt to serve as a protest tool, one that has the potential simultaneously to channel individual stories of injustice, marginalization, and oppression while building collective subjectivities in struggle – as in the case of the AIDS quilt (Capozzola, 2002) or the quilts produced by the Freedom Quilting Bee during the civil rights movement (Callahan, 1987).

At the same time, quilts have been also used as a metaphor for embracing and investigating complexity. In their theorization of multiplicity as a defining feature of contemporaneity, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) translate their philosophical approach based on the rhizome with respect to space (physical but also normative) using the quilt as a metaphor. Importantly, they distinguish the "striated space" (of institutional control) from the "smooth space" (of multiplicity and resistance to order) by metaphorically opposing embroidery to patchwork quilting. Where the

former technique produces artifacts that have a centre and follow ordered patterns (as embroidered textiles have a back and a front), the latter consists of a "piece-by-piece construction, [an] infinite, successive additions of fabric" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 476).

Certainly, the authors argue, both embroidered textiles and patchwork quilts can be of extraordinary complexity, and, in some cases, patchworks can be arranged along regular patterns that fall close to those of embroidery. Nonetheless, embroidered textiles and patchwork quilts remain alternative (when not directly opposed) articulations of space, with the patchwork necessarily centreless, double-sided and formed by the recurrence of its unitary blocks as an "amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 476).

Taking this argument a step further, Maura Flannery (2001) uses the quilt metaphor to overcome a masculine and exclusionary connotation of the scientific endeavour and to dismiss typical characterizations of science as a "hunt", a "voyage of exploration and discovery" or a "wrestling challenge" to uncover "secrets from nature" or "conquering the world" (p. 630). Flannery uses the quilt metaphor to stress that scientific knowledge is not "uncovered" but, instead, "constructed" (p. 639). In this way, the author reclaims scientific inquiry as an act of crafting that maintains its rationality but also acknowledges more explicitly its practical and creative nature.

Through the quilt metaphor, the processual nature of knowledge-making becomes evident. Flannery indeed argues that "a quilt can only be fully appreciated as a whole, yet in constructing the quilt, attention must also be paid to each square, each stitch, each step in the process" (p. 639). In contrast to a collage, Flannery argues, quilting "often involves very defined patterns" (p. 629) and entails a tension between "creativity and conformity, with great value placed on creativity, but always within a framework" (p. 633). Hence, reasoning in terms of quilting emphasizes the quest for "making" and working relentlessly to achieve the better result given a specific, often limited, set of materials and tools. In fact, Flannery specifies that science as quilting is a bounded activity. However, while available materials constrain possibilities, they do not determine outcomes.

Importantly, in mobilizing the quilt metaphor, Flannery invites us to recognize that scientific research does not configure as linear: the order crystallized in the final product (a scientific article as much as a finished quilt) hides its processual, situated, contextualized, and, perhaps, even chaotic nature. Moreover, thinking of science in terms of quilting brings attention squarely to quilters themselves, who are ultimately responsible for designing and implementing the project, and whose perceptions, intuitions, and intentions are embodied in the final product (p. 639).

Troubling the canon, quilting the movement

The metaphor of the quilt helps us trouble the linearity typically associated with the process of scientific knowledge production, which – like a tree – typically branches out from some central assumptions and is sequentially ordered to reach

higher-order conclusions (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Hence, it provides a valuable resource to counter the current separation and linear ordering of spaces, forms of action, and agents in collective action processes. Seen as quilts, social movements are not solely networks of social actors engaged in political and cultural conflicts on the basis of shared collective identities (Diani, 1992, 2003, 2015). They become *networks of networks* that constantly evolve and reconfigure – often overlapping – in both physical and digital environments, bringing together movement actors, the digital media they appropriate in their everyday practices, the textual and visual content they produce and circulate, the frames and claims they raise, and the responses they deliver to their opponents.

We can think of social actors and non-human entities as the fabrics, the raw materials that make up a quilt; and of the connections among them as the stitches that hold the quilt together and give it form. Just as quilts are made by assembling various materials (pieces of bed sheets, fabric scraps, old tablecloths, even pieces of other quilts), hybrid movement networks are composed of individual activists, social movement organizations, political parties, trade unions, citizens, protest hashtags, words and n-grams, images, links to information resources – and more. Groups of agents can be stitched one to the other within patches, that is, within movement networks of various shapes and sizes. More interestingly, different patches can also be stitched together. Indeed, it is rare for an agent – whether a social actor or a non-human entity – to act in only one way within a movement process, since engagement can take multiple forms (e.g. organizing an assembly, participating in a protest event, producing and circulating digital protest contents, or constructing visual counter-narratives) that intersect in practice far more than they follow each other linearly. For example, a hashtag might be used alongside others in a social media post, but it can also become a symbol printed on a sign carried during a street demonstration. Activists might carry that sign while posting a photo of the protest on their social media, tagging it with a series of other hashtags. Whether and how a similar situation contributes to generating social change is a question that we cannot seek to answer if we keep concentrating exclusively on some of its components – that is, the online construction of movement messages through the interconnection of hashtags, the offline display of contention, and the networks of event co-participation which signal the emergence of a collectivity joined in struggle. We can truly understand and, more importantly, do justice to collective mobilizations only if we stitch all these elements together, drawing semantic connections between hashtags, social connections between activists, and cross-dimensional connections between them.

Within this framework, the current canon of social movement studies helps us build the patches of which quilts are made. This is a crucial task as each patch must be prepared before it can be sewn into place: materials must be selected, edges trimmed and refined, and sizes carefully evaluated. Hence, targeted and single-sided research does not disappear but rather is assigned a new role and, in fact, a whole new value as it becomes foundational to the construction of broader movement quilts. Some patches will be more classic, such as movement networks built through offline collaborations between social movement organizations (e.g. Diani,

2015). Some others will be more eccentric, made of diverse agents (e.g. bots and verified accounts at the same time), as often happens when analysing contentious conversations online (González-Bailón and De Domenico, 2021) or whenever movement actors are related to the events they attend and the claims they raise on those occasions (Diani and Kousis, 2014).

It is nonetheless through the creative combination of individual patches – that is, of different movement networks – that we can literally reconstruct collective action processes as inherently hybrid. In doing so, the process will be gradual but not necessarily linear: one patch will be selected and another stitched next to it, without having to follow a single direction but rather aiming to form motifs that reproduce the complexities of collective endeavours. This non-linear logic provides another way of "creating order out of a multiplicity of pieces" (Flannery, 2001, p. 633). As patches are mutually dependent within motifs and, in turn, the meaning of different motifs depends on the whole quilt, it is possible to move beyond cross-sectional analyses centred on one network at the time, and also to engage in more than the usual efforts to find linear paths within and between networks. Motifs within the quilt and the quilt as a whole do indeed tell stories that are more than the single sum of their parts and, at the same time, each patch gains new meaning depending on how it is positioned within higher-level structures. After sewing patches together, it becomes possible to navigate the manifold and complex geometries that sustain current movement processes, thus stretching the horizon of our inquiries.

The quilt metaphor inspired our research on the construction of cross-field intersectional solidarities between LGBTQIA+ movements and collective endeavours supporting migrant rights in Milan and Madrid (Perego and pavan, 2025). We first carefully crafted two sets of patches, designing networks in which different groups in the two movements supported each other by co-sponsoring protest events through a tactical use of Facebook over time, and networks that linked together the action frames channelled by protesters on these occasions. In this first phase, we crafted extensively – as we designed a multitude of patches for the two cities of Milan and Madrid over a timespan of several years (2011–2019). We then patched these networks together to define motifs that represent different mobilization patterns within each contentious field, collaborations across them, and, at the same time, the construction of a common discourse that accommodated and gave value to multiple experiences of injustice while providing ground to identify common mechanisms of oppression and shared motivations to act in synergy. When we sewed motifs together over time and for the two cities, we created two quilts that recounted us two stories about how intersectionality nurtures political efforts in different contexts. In Milan, where the LGBTQIA+ movement still confronts the challenges inherent in a broader, hostile national context, experiences of racialization have been progressively "incorporated" to construct a common project striving for intersectional social justice. In Madrid, where the broader context is more favourable to LGBTQIA+ actors and claims, not only did we find traces of contamination between the two fields of action but also the introduction of new common lines of contention in relation to which both mobilizations grew.

Sometimes, crafting patches, sewing them into motifs, tackling them together, and observing our quilts was challenging. We lost stitches, or the threads we were using got tangled. In these cases, we started all over again, learning from our mistakes, and joyfully celebrating every time a missed stitch was recovered, and threads were straightened out. Under no circumstances did we think it was a daunting effort, and we never looked nor sewed patches referring to online and offline actions in different ways. We knew that the frames used in the Facebook posts were also percolating in the protest events we mapped. We knew that groups posting and co-sponsoring events were also marching in the streets and meeting in assemblies. To us, what really mattered was to see how different patches would look like together. Ultimately, we made it. We rested on our quilts, we reflected, and we wrote down these stories. We then got back to our quilts, started cutting them down again, and started another project in search for new stories.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that it is urgent to engage more seriously with the hybridity of contemporary courses of collective action. To make room for hybridity in the research agenda of social movement studies, I propose using the metaphor of the quilt and thinking of social movements as *networks of networks* that unfold seamlessly in physical spaces and digital environments thanks to the joint contribution of social actors and non-human entities.

The quilt metaphor troubles the current canon of movement studies insofar as it allows us to overcome the dichotomy between offline and online action, as well as the distinction between social and material agencies that drives it. If we think of social movements as quilts, the need to identify a central focus from which to start our analysis, or against which to measure the relevance of each dynamic we observe, disappears. Instead, we are offered multiple entryways, all equally legitimate, that allow us to explore and appreciate (without rushing to explain) movement processes from very different angles. Moreover, rather than paving the way to test more or less novel relationships between distinct elements or providing a new excuse to choose "what part" of a highly complex mobilization dynamic we should consider, quilted movements lend themselves to being creative terrains of experimentation where questions about hybridity – what it really consists of and how it can contribute to social change – can be asked responses can be attempted.

Perhaps even more importantly, the quilt metaphor is proactive. Quilts exist only as the product of a creative practical effort. This metaphor helps us move from pleas to deal with social movement hybridity to practical attempts to attend to it. Certainly, there is no obligation to sit down and reflect on which motifs we want to design or on how to combine them. It is entirely legitimate to continue working within the current canon and to keep defending the dichotomies on which it is built. However, once the quilt is laid out, continuing to maintain the separation between offline and online spaces and dynamics, as well as between social actors and non-human entities, will appear as what it simply is: one possible choice amongst many others.

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