

Introduction. Disenchanted Prophets: Social Movements between Dissent, Solidarity and Creativity

Jonathan Bach*^a

Elena Pavan^b

^a Global Studies, The New School (United States)

^b Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento (Italy)

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Abstract

Social movement theory, with its Euro-American focus, struggles to capture the radically divergent imaginaries and claims that accompany current waves of protest. The Special Feature titled “The Many Faces of Protest: Rethinking Collective Action in a World of Dissent” examines select progressive protests and their transformative potential in times of deep uncertainty. In so doing, it helps sociologists and others make sense of how the repertoires, domains of action, and prefigurative capacities of collective action are changing around the world today.

Keywords: Social movements; dissent; protest; prefiguration; social innovation.

* ✉ bachj@newschool.edu

This special feature on protest seeks to do justice to some of the stories, practices, and experiences of the struggle for social change that have emerged in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic did not stop protests — quite the opposite, it seemed to have expanded their repertoires, domains of action, and prefigurative capacities.

Indeed, over the last three years, new waves of protest have arisen across the globe, advancing radically divergent imaginaries and claims. On the one hand we have seen a rise in reactionary protests, emerging from conspiracy-minded anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination movements, and entwining with larger conservative, anti-gender, and white supremacist movements which burst into the global public eye with the storming of the US Capitol in 2021. These initiatives leverage a wide range of existing inequalities, made more extreme by the Covid-19 pandemic, into political capital, spurring violent assaults on trade unions and progressive movements as well as alliances with political actors in national parliaments and transnational right wing extremism. These developments accompany a parallel phenomenon of powerful, social justice-oriented protests, most notably the global resurgence of the Movement for Black Lives after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and more recently the indomitable and courageous revolution of Iranian women and youth, the intense and sustained protests in Israel against the reform of the judicial system, and many more (some ongoing, some brutally repressed) from France to Sudan, Thailand to the occupied Palestinian territories, Tunisia to Sri Lanka, and Myanmar to India. Among many others, these are all examples of how the pandemic also functioned as a critical juncture in which progressive collective contentious action has challenged, and even breached, consolidated social and political orders based on structural and cultural inequalities as well as authoritarianism.

In this same short period, theoretical and empirical analyses have quickly mushroomed that try to assess the meaning and the consequences of this global crisis at all levels and in all domains of social life. In this context, the tools we have inherited from social movement theory, with its Euro-American focus, seem to struggle to capture what all this expansion consists of and what it augurs. How can sociologists and others make sense of the manifold organizational and symbolic aspects of contention that give shape to collective action around the world today?

The articles presented here seek to contribute to answering this question by concentrating on a variety of progressive instances and their transformative potentials in times of deep uncertainty. With the notable exceptions of China and Bangladesh, the articles of this special feature do not deal directly with the pandemic, but they all speak to a moment where civil society groups, parties, labor, state actors, activists, artists, and even individual citizens that mobilize outside organizational frameworks are forced to rethink how and why they act collectively at the crossroads between old and new, direct and mediated forms of contentious politics.

Dissent is key to the capacity of collective action to transcend the boundaries of existing normative orders and, even more so, a foundational feature that makes social movements “disenchanted prophets [that] ‘speak before’: they announce what is taking shape even before its direction and content has become clear” (Melucci, 1996, p. 1). And yet, particularly in moments of upheaval, the courage to say no is not enough to turn this prophecy into social change. Thus, social movements must perform their dissent creatively and proactively, showing through their actions that another world is not only possible but, in fact, is already present. As one of the co-editors of this special feature has argued (della Porta & Pavan, 2017), social movements are not merely reactive but become spaces of innovative knowledge production. They develop “knowledge repertoires” that allow for both signaling dissatisfaction and, more productively, the prototyping of viable solutions.

By approaching social movements as socially innovative, as we do here, we seek to avoid

the pitfalls of the structure/agency binary, with its many variations in sociological debates. We are at the same time well aware that innovation does not equal success in any conventional sense. Many of the protests discussed in the following articles equivocate, dissipate, or otherwise flounder in the face of state power, internal divisions, wider social apathy, or all three. And yet, as laboratories of innovation, the social movements considered here actively produce new knowledge about the world, creating shared cognitive systems that make change possible, even if not in a linear fashion, and spreading alternatives that are practical and practicable. Thus, looking empirically at protests, as this special issue does, helps us peer inside the emerging knowledge repertoires of social movements as we enter an era of uncertainty about the very structure of society across democracies and autocracies alike.

The articles assembled in this special feature are meant as brief interventions into protest as a social phenomenon. Empirically grounded and analytically rich, we conceive of them more as research-note style invitations to further discussion rather than full-fledged investigations. In our call for papers we left open how the authors define, delimit, or quantify protests, conceive of protests as networks, assemblages, or discourses, or delve into their internal dynamics or external impacts. We explicitly wanted, however, to de-center and expand the established sociological focus on Euro-America as a site of contentious politics and collective action and look at “other faces” of protest. We only partially achieved that goal in a geographic sense with a rich array of cases from across Latin America, East Asia, South Asia, and Russia, but notably lacking cases from Africa and the Middle East, a shortcoming we must rectify in future issues of the journal. In a substantive sense these articles highlight how intersectionality, art and activism (“artivism”), and changing postcolonial political opportunity structures are shifting the center of gravity in at least three ways for the analysis of social movements in the mid-21st century.

The first shifting center of gravity is the relation of protests to the politics of memory, and with it, the temporal orientation of social movements. As Délano Alonso & Nienass’ (2023) article about the powerful phenomenon in Mexico of unsanctioned public monuments to violence and state abandonment shows, the defining feature of what is called the “antimonumentos” phenomenon is a struggle over what could be considered “national” time. While the Mexican state seeks to emplace violent events within discrete temporal units that fit national narratives, the diverse protests discussed in the article reframe injustice as the continuation of state impunity and abandonment. This raises new questions not only about what it means to hold the state responsible, but how to radically rethink, or undo, the very national narratives that delimit the field for social change. Such national narratives are also challenged in Claudia Horn’s (2023) exploration of intersectional and Indigenous resistance in Brazil to a massive, if globally less well-known, project to create a navigable waterway in the Amazon in order to bring soy to the global market. Both the Mexican and Brazilian cases show how collective action problems are addressed, if not entirely overcome, through an intersectional framing of inequality and injustice within a politics of time.

A key characteristic of collective action that appears in these articles is the ability to exert political pressure outside of traditional political parties or media. Whether through the *antimonumentos* actions (Délano Alonso & Nienass, 2023), the boat caravan along the Tocantins river in Brazil (Horn, 2023), or the burst of artistic energy at the core of leaderless protests that formed the *estallido social* in Chile (Gordon-Zolov, 2023), we see the emergence of alternative and proactive counterpublics. These rely, in large part, on artistic strategies that, as Gordon-Zolov (2023) writes, have “a synergistic and multiplying effect” (p. 52) that the state finds very threatening. It is thus at the intersection of public art and public space that a new politics of collective contention is being forged.

We see this dynamic in a different way in the case of anti-lockdown protests in China during the Covid-19 pandemic. Once again, public space played the key role as protesters in prominent locations held up blank sheets of paper in silent protest at both the lockdown and the stifling of public debate about it. In his article, Chan (2023) sees the short-lived protests as creatively circumventing the considerable constraints on public dissent in China, and therefore uniquely threatening to the state. A second shifting center of gravity can thus be discerned in how social movements respond to increasingly authoritarian states as they adapt their responses to perceived threats. While, as Chan writes, hegemony is never complete, in the articles by him, Zhelnina (2023), and Chakraborty & Mattoni (2023), we see how strong state responses to alternative counterpublics precipitate ever-evolving forms of protest searching for viable options under dynamic and uncertain conditions.

In Russia, for example, Zhelnina (2023) shows us how activists have in the last decades had more of a choice of actions and strategic possibilities than a simplistic understanding of agency under repressive authoritarian regimes might suggest. Centering her analysis around the Bolotnaya protests, she shows how both Russian activists and the regime engaged in what might be called dialectical dilemmas, where activists attempt to harness the legitimacy of the “apolitical” and the state attempts to co-opt or channel social unrest into the “political.” This forms a tight co-constitutive link between the regime and the protests, though as the author points out, the invasion of Ukraine has once again changed the game, making even single protests, let alone mass resistance, nigh impossible. This new rigidity gives rise to a new brittleness, which, together with the large exodus of young professionals, is now restricting the scope for collective action that will force dissenters to look for any viable avenue.

One of these avenues can be found in the “flash activism” afforded by the digital realm. This tactic was important to the protests analyzed in Chan’s (2023) article, and takes center stage in Chakraborty & Mattoni’s (2023) analysis of anti-corruption protests in Bangladesh, where outrage at fake Covid tests exploded on social media in 2020. In the accelerated world of digital expression and censorship, timing is everything. The authors show how the dynamics of acceleration and emboldening of voices, followed by rapid dispersion of the protest collectivity, becomes an important form of political pressure when the risks of being associated with dissent are high, as they are especially in authoritarian and quasi-authoritarian settings.

If the articles on Russia, China, and Bangladesh imply a shrinking space for collective action, the last two articles examine conditions under which elites are, in fact, willing to compromise even in the absence of clearly defined negotiating partners. We return to the case of Chile’s *estallidos sociales*, this time in comparison, respectively, with Argentina and Peru, where the authors seek to account for variation among the response of Latin American regimes to popular revolts against entrenched elites. Picking up a theme from Zhelnina’s (2023) article — that collective action is inherently relational and social movements cannot exist without their counterparts — Donoso, Somma and Rossi examine demonstrations as the nexus where relations between political parties and social movements are made and unmade (Donoso et al., 2023). Donoso and her co-authors highlight the key role of labor in accounting for the striking difference between the role of parties in Argentina (strong presence) and Chile (stark absence).

Guzmán-Concha’s (2023) final article suggests a different explanation. Authoritarian regimes are not all alike, he argues: how they structure the political field matters greatly for the period after their demise. While both Chile and Peru instituted market-oriented reforms post-dictatorship, Pinochet’s neoliberal governmentality reproduced a stable Chilean political field capable of responding flexibly to protests, while Fujimori’s personality-driven reign left Peru a splintered political landscape trapped in a turbulent spiral. Hence, a third shifting

center of gravity emerges around the continuous tension between the present situation and the political structures that consolidate over time, leading collective actors to rethink how and with what means they build alliances, renegotiate their relationship with institutional targets, and seize different contentious political opportunities.

Regardless of the specific angle taken, all articles in this special feature provide timely and inspiring illustrations of how the struggle for change and greater social justice blends solidarity, the antagonism of social conflicts, and the desire to push a system beyond its limits in different and creative ways. We thus see how social movements are not merely adaptive but, rather, innovative processes that shape the social reality from which they emerge and in which they operate. While the pandemic's limitations on collective assembly led commentators to quickly, even recklessly, dismiss the potential of social movements to act as powerful agents of change, the cases presented in the following pages show that the pandemic and immediate post-pandemic time has been in fact a moment in which collective action adapts, from "artivism" to flash activism to intersectional organizing to new forms of institutional negotiation. These brief interventions provide a glimpse into some of the many faces of protest in a world where dissent plays an increasingly central role to the organization of society, whether through repression by ever-more nervous governments or as a means to forge new intersectional alliances in pursuit of long-delayed justice and long-deferred dreams.

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Jonathan Bach – Global Studies, The New School (United States)

✉ bachj@newschool.edu; <https://www.jonathanbach.info/>

Jonathan Bach is Professor of Global Studies at The New School in New York (USA). His work on cultural memory, social transformation, materiality, and urban space includes *What Remains: Everyday Encounters with the Socialist Past in Germany* (Columbia University Press, 2017) and the co-edited volumes *Re-Centring the City: Global Mutations of Socialist Modernity* (UCL Press, 2020, with Michał Murawski) and *Learning from Shenzhen: China's Post-Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City* (University of Chicago Press, 2017, ed. with Mary Ann O'Donnell & Winnie Wong).

Elena Pavan – Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento (Italy)

📄 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8693-5998>

🔗 <https://webapps.unitn.it/du/it/Persona/PER0024413/Pubblicazioni>

Elena Pavan is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento (Italy). Her main research interests pertain to the nexus between digital media and social movements particularly in the field of gender-related mobilizations. Her work has been published in international journals such as *Mobilization*, *Social Movement Studies*, *Information Communication and Society*, *New Media and Society*, *Social Media+Society*.