Social Movements

An Introduction

THIRD EDITION

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword to the Third Edition</td>
<td>vi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>The Study of Social Movements: Recurring Questions, (Partially) Changing Answers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2</td>
<td>Social Changes and Social Movements</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3</td>
<td>The Symbolic Dimension of Collective Action</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4</td>
<td>Collective Action and Identity</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5</td>
<td>Individuals, Networks, and Participation</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6</td>
<td>Organizations and Organizing within Social Movements</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7</td>
<td>Eventful Protests</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 8</td>
<td>Political Opportunities for Social Movements</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 9</td>
<td>The Effects of Social Movements</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td></td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td></td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is the third edition of a book that was first published in English in 1999 (the Italian edition having appeared in 1997 with the *Nuova Italia Scientifica* publishing press), and then in 2006. Innumerable significant changes have taken place in the political landscape over the last decades – think of the 2011 revolts across the globe, the spread of online protest activity, or the renaissance of right-wing extremism. They have been paralleled by a constant growth of research on social movements and collective action, as witnessed by the proliferation of handbooks charting the field from multiple angles, specialized journals, or references to social movement theory in the scientific literature. Both developments have shaped the drafting of the third edition. On the one hand, we have updated many of our empirical examples, including references to recent episodes of contention and trying to add more materials from a comparative angle. We have also kept, however, many references to earlier movements, as we deem important to draw our readers’ attention to the fact that some basic, core mechanisms of collective action may be found operating across movements that may differ substantially in timing and content. As for our treatment of the literature, given its fast and massive increase, it is even more selective and partial than in the previous two editions. Back in the late 1990s, the first edition of the book also served as a “literature review” of sort, bringing together, as the late Charles Tilly noted, European and American perspectives in the same introductory text. In this new edition, performing a similar mapping function would have been neither feasible, given the exponential rise in the scientific output, nor necessary, as a number of systematic accounts of growth in the field have appeared. As we have promoted some of them (della Porta 2014; della Porta and Diani 2015) and contributed to others (e.g. Fillieule and Accornero 2016; Snow et al. 2019), we know that they can do a much better job at covering the field than we could in this book. Accordingly, this edition presents itself even more neatly as an introductory text, if not one for beginners in social research.

It is also worth reminding readers that they are not being introduced to the full range of possible intellectual approaches to the theme “social movements.” Significant contributions have come from fields such as history, political philosophy, anthropology, or psychology, that are almost entirely neglected here. So are important treatments of social movements by “social theory” broadly conceived (on that see Crossley 2002; Buechler 2011; Cox and Fominaya 2013; Eder 2015). The approach we refer to has established itself mainly at the intersection of sociology and political science, with the ambition of generating theory-driven systematic empirical research. For all its limitations, and despite an empirical focus that is still primarily Western centric, the
conceptual apparatus introduced in this book has also proved a useful tool for many researchers investigating other areas of the world (Ellis and van Kessel 2009; Broadbent and Brockman 2011; Rossi and von Bülow 2015). Ours may not be (it certainly is not) the whole story, but it is an important story. We are delighted to be able to share its third version with our readers.

Florence and Trento, May 2019

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CHAPTER 1

The Study of Social Movements

Recurring Questions, (Partially) Changing Answers

In the late 1960s, the world was apparently undergoing deep, dramatic transformations – even a revolution, some thought. American civil rights and antiwar movements, the Mai 1968 revolt in France, students’ protests in Germany, Britain, or Mexico, the workers-students coalitions of the 1969 Hot Autumn in Italy, the pro-democracy mobilizations in as diverse locations as Francoist Madrid and communist Prague, the growth of critical Catholicism from South America to Rome, the early signs of the women’s and environmental movements, that would have shaped the new politics of the 1970s: all these phenomena – and many more – suggested that deep changes were in the making. In 2018, the fiftieth anniversary of 1968 has stimulated reflections on its long-term effects not only on society and politics, but also on social movement studies (della Porta 2018a).

Accordingly, the study of social movements developed to an unprecedented pace into a major area of research. If, at the end of the 1940s, critics lamented the “crudely descriptive level of understanding and a relative lack of theory” (Strauss 1947, p. 352), and in the 1960s complained that “in the study of social changes, social movements have received relatively little emphasis” (Killian 1964, p. 426), by the mid-1970s, research into collective action was considered “one of the most vigorous areas of sociology” (Marx and Wood 1975). At the end of the 1980s, commentators talked of “an explosion, in the last ten years, of theoretical and empirical writings on social movements and collective action” (Morris and Herring 1987, p. 138; also see Rucht 1991).

Today, the study of social movements is solidly established, with specialized journals, book series, and professional associations. The excitement and optimism of the roaring 1960s may be long gone, but social and political events over the last four
decades have hardly rendered the investigation of grassroots activism any less relevant or urgent. To the contrary, social movements, protest actions and, more generally, political organizations unaligned with major political parties or trade unions have become a permanent component of Western democracies. It is no longer possible to describe protest politics, grassroots participation, or symbolic challenges as unconventional. References to a “movement society” (Dodson 2011; McCarthy, Rafail, and Gromis 2013; Melucci 1996; Meyer and Tarrow 1998; Soule and Earl 2005) seem increasingly plausible, not only in the most advances democracies but even in authoritarian regimes and in the Global South (della Porta 2017a).

To be sure, there has been considerable fluctuation in the intensity of collective action over this period, as there has been in its degree of radicalism, its specific forms, and its capacity to influence the political process. However, forecasts that the wave of protest of the late 1960s would quickly subside, and that “business as usual,” as represented by interest-based politics, organized according to traditional political divisions, would return in its wake, have largely been proved wrong. In different ways, and with a wide range of goals and values, various forms of protest have continued to emerge, in the Western world as well as elsewhere (Ballard, Habib, and Valodia 2006; Beissinger 2002; Bennani-Chraibi and Fillieule 2003; Broadbent and Brockman 2011; Kriesi et al. 1995). At the start of the new millennium, possibly for the first time since 1968, the wave of mobilizations for a globalization from below (often identified as global justice movement) mounted a new, global, challenge, combining themes typical of class movements with themes typical of new social movements, like ecology or gender equality (Arrighi and Silver 1999; della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Smith 2008; Tarrow 2005). Later on, in Latin America as well as in North Africa, in Europe as well as in the United States, the Great Recession and austerity policies have triggered a broad wave of protests that have been influenced by the different times and forms of the financial crises, but also took inspiration from each other (Almeida and Chase-Dunn 2018; della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Kriesi et al. 2012; Rossi and von Bülow 2015).

In truth, speaking of “global justice movements” or “anti-austerity movements” as if they were unitary, homogeneous actors would be very misleading. The initiatives against neoliberal globalization or the elites’ management of the global crisis have been very heterogeneous, and not necessarily connected to each other. They have addressed a range of issues, from child labor’s exploitation by global brands to deforestation, from human rights in developing countries to military interventions by Western powers, from economic deprivation to threats to democracy. And they have done so in a myriad of forms, from individual utterances of dissent and individual behavior to mass collective events, and from a variety of points of view.

Looking at them well illustrates what doing social movement analysis actually means. In their research practice, most of the people who study social movements
focus either on individuals, organizations, or events, in the best instances trying to capture the interdependence between them:

- **Opposition to neoliberal policies can be looked at as the ensemble of individuals expressing opinions about certain issues, advocating or opposing social change.** Globalization has surely raised fears and hopes in equal measure, but the balance is distributed unequally across countries and socioeconomic areas. Repeatedly, public opinion surveys indicate diffuse worries about the impact of globalization over people’s lives, both economically and politically. Although this may be more a diffused concern in Western Europe than in the United States or even more so elsewhere, globalization is undoubtedly at the core of public opinion’s interest these days. Those who are skeptical and often hostile to it represent a distinct and vocal sector of public opinion. Their views are forged and reinforced in dialogue with a range of prominent opinion makers and public figures, exposing the costs and faults of globalization from a Western/Northern as well as an Eastern/Southern perspective, such as Indian writer Arundhati Roy, Philippine sociologist Walden Bello, Australian journalist John Pilger, or economist and Nobel laureate Josef Stieglitz. Books like Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* (1999) may be safely credited with the same impact that Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), or the Club of Rome’s report on *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows, Randers, and Behrens 1972) had on the spread of environmental concerns back in the 1960s and 1970s. Building on this sensitivity in public opinion, anti-austerity protests have also built on and fueled a widespread concern for economic inequalities and social injustice in the public opinion, that in large part started to stigmatize the elites (the 1%) as being responsible for the suffering of the people (the 99%) (Flesher Fominaya 2014; della Porta 2015a).

- **Individual opinions and concerns often turn into various forms of political and social participation.** Moral and philosophical worldviews and deeply felt convictions are then paralleled by specific attempts by individuals to stop threatening developments, redress instances of injustice, and promote alternative options to the managing of social life and economic activity. A possible way of looking at the movements for social justice and against inequalities is, then, by focusing on those individuals who actively express their opposition to neoliberal capitalism. By signing petitions calling for the cancellation of developing countries’ debt, contributing money to the activities of various social movement organizations, mobilizing to stop the building of dams or the effects of extensive exploitation of land in Asia or Africa, blocking access to the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, or Occupying Wall Street, or attempting to stop ships exporting toxic waste to developing countries or trains carrying military equipment, individuals citizens may contribute to the campaigns against neoliberal globalization and its effects at domestic level. They may do so, however, also through actions that affect individual lifestyles and private behavior as
much – and possibly more – than the public sphere. Throughout the West, the recent years have seen the spread of fair trade organizations and practices that have been further fueled as direct practices aiming at the same time to criticize austerity policies and to build alternatives (Boström, Micheletti, and Oosterveer 2019; Monticelli and della Porta 2019). By consuming certain products or choosing to do business only with banks committed to uphold moral and ethical standards, individuals may try and affect the balance of economic power on a broad scale.

- **However, antiglobalization can hardly be reduced to sets of individuals with similar views and behavior.** Rather than on individual characteristics, it may also be interesting to concentrate on the properties of the events into which conflictual interactions take place between powerholders and their opponents; as well as in events in which individuals and organizations identifying with a cause meet to discuss strategies, to elaborate platforms and review their agendas. Global justice activists have been particularly good at staging events – or disrupting opponents’ events – with a strong emotional impact over public opinion and participants alike. Already before Seattle, periodical meetings by international bodies associated with the neoliberal agenda, such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, or the G8, have provided the opportunity for a string of highly visible, very well attended demonstrations trying to both disrupt the specific gatherings and draw people’s attention toward alternative agenda. Events promoted by global justice activists, most notably the World Social Forum gatherings in Porto Alegre and in Mumbai, their European counterparts in Florence (2001), Paris (2003), or London (2004), the corresponding meetings in the South, such as the African Social Forum that met first in Bamako, Mali, in January 2002, all confirmed the vitality and strength of the “movement of movements” (Pianta 2001). Below the global level, critics of globalization have promoted thousands of events, ranging from confrontational demonstrations to presentations of reports or press releases, from religious vigils to squatting into military buildings. Located anywhere from the national to the very local level, those events also support popular views about the existence of a distinctive anti-globalization movement. As the Great Recession spread, protests shifted in scale, with very large waves organized by national networks of organizations mobilized against home evictions, cuts in welfare, privatization of public services, and the like. Long-lost protest camps in highly symbolic public spaces became, for a while, most lively innovation in the repertoire of contention, allowing for highly visible contestation of the existing order, but also the prefiguration of a different world.

- **Other times, by global justice movement are actually meant, first and foremost, the organizations operating on those issues.** The opposition to neoliberal globalization has been conducted by broad coalitions of organizations.
Some – probably most – of them had a long history of political and social activism, well spread over the political spectrum. In Seattle as well as in Genoa or elsewhere, involved in the demonstrations were established political parties, mostly if not exclusively from the left; trade unions, farmers, and other workers’ organizations; ethnic organizations representing both native populations and migrant groups; consumers associations challenging multinational companies; religious organizations and church groups; environmental groups; women’s associations; radical autonomous youth centers (Italy’s centri sociali); and the like. But the criticism of neoliberal globalization has also produced specific organizations, such as Attac, who advocate the so-called Tobin tax to reduce financial gains in the international stock market; People’s Global Action, a coalition of hundreds of groups in the North and the South; or the Rete Lilliput, a net of groupings, associations, and individuals active in Italy on environmental, fair trade, and social justice issues. Beyond the global justice movement, also in other recent mobilizations. The role of organizations that are not directly political is particularly worth mentioning. The spread of fair trade practices is facilitated by the existence of extended networks of cooperatives and small retail operators in the West, who try somehow to reach a balance between ethic-driven public action and market requirements. The reproduction of countercultural networks linking radical activists from all over the place is likewise facilitated by the existence of alternative cafes, bookshops, social and cultural centers, offering meeting points – as well as at times accommodation – to people identifying with radical milieus. From a totally different perspective, the network of Islamic schools, mosques, and other institutions offering support to fundamentalist versions of Islam may also be regarded as providing the organizational infrastructure for the diffusion of that particular version of the opposition to Western globalization (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003). In 2011, the spreading of protest camps from Tahrir in Cairo to Puerta del Sol in Madrid and Sintagma in Athens – and then to Gezi Park in Istanbul and Maidan in Ukraine, built on existing organizational networks at various geographical levels (della Porta and Mattoni 2014). Whatever their specificity, organizations secure continuity to collective action even when the potential for spontaneous, unmediated participation somehow subsides. They also provide resources and opportunities for action to escalate when opportunities are more favorable; as well as sources for the creation and reproduction of loyalties and collective identities.

1.1 FOUR CORE QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENT ANALYSIS

As the example of global justice and anti-austerity campaigning suggests, studying social movements means focusing on at least some of the dimensions we have just introduced, as well as, most important, on how ideas, individuals, events, and
Social Movements

organizations are linked to each other in broader processes of collective action, with some continuity over time. Given their complex, multidimensional nature, it is no surprise that social movements may be approached in reference to very diverse intellectual questions. In this book, we shall focus on four sets of them, broadly articulated. We shall try to relate them to the broader theoretical and practical concerns that have inspired the analysis of grassroots political action and cultural resistance since the 1960s.

The first set of questions refers to the relationship between structural change and transformations in patterns of social conflict. Can we see social movements as expressions of conflicts? And what conflicts? Have there been changes in the main conflicts addressed by social movements? And along what lines? Is class conflict coming back as dominant cleavage? How do different cleavages interact and intersect?

Another set of questions has to do with the role of cultural representations in social conflict. How are social problems identified as potential objects of collective action? How do certain social actors come to develop a sense of commonality and to identify with the same “collective we”? And how can specific protest events come to be perceived as part of the same conflict? Where do social movement cultures and values originate from? Is the construction of collective identities hampered in liquid post-modernity, or does insecurity fuel the emergence of strong identification with larger or smaller imagined communities?

A third set of questions addresses the process through which values, interests, and ideas get turned into collective action. How does it become possible to mobilize and face the risks and costs of protest activity? What is the role of identities and symbols, emotions, organizations, and networks in explaining the start and persistence of collective action? What forms do organizations take in their attempts to maximize the strength of collective challenges and their outcomes but also to develop new knowledge and prefigure a different future?

Finally, it has frequently been asked, how does a certain social, political, and/or cultural context affect social movements’ chances of success, and the forms they take? What explains the varying intensity over time of collective violence and other types of public challenges against power holders? Do the traits of political systems and their attitudes toward citizens’ demands influence challengers’ impact in the political arena? How do protest tactics and strategies adapt to or challenge the closing down and opening up of opportunities? And how do movements themselves construct and appropriate opportunities even in moments of extensive threats?

While these questions certainly do not entirely reflect the richness of current debates on collective action and social movements, they have surely played a significant role in shaping discussions over the last decades. Indeed, the 1960s were important because they saw not only an increase in new forms of political participation but also a change in the main conflictual issues. Traditionally, social movements had focused mainly on issues of labor and nation: since the 1960s, “new social movements” emerged instead on concerns such as women’s liberation and environmental
protection. These changes in the quantity and quality of protest prompted significant innovations in social scientists’ approach to those questions. The principal theoretical models available at the time for the interpretation of social conflict – the Marxist model and the structural-functionalist model – both came to be regarded as largely inadequate.

In Europe, scholars confronted with the new wave of protest often relied on Marxism. However, their attempts to explain developments in the forms of conflict in the 1960s encountered a number of problems. The social transformations that occurred after the end of the Second World War had put the centrality of the capital–labor conflict into question. The widening of access to higher education or the entry en masse of women into the labor market had created new structural possibilities for conflict, and increased the relevance of other criteria of social stratification – such as gender relations.

Indeed, even the most superficial observer of the 1960s could not help noticing that many of the actors engaged in those conflicts (youth, women, new professional groups) could only partly be related to the class conflicts, which had constituted the principal component of political cleavages in industrial societies (Rokkan 1970; Tilly 2004a). Problems posed by Marxist interpretations did not, however, relate only to doubts about the continued existence of the working class in postindustrial society: they also concerned the logic of the explanatory model. The deterministic element of the Marxist tradition – the conviction that the evolution of social and political conflicts was conditioned largely by the level of development of productive forces and by the dynamic of class relations – was rejected. So was the tendency, particularly strong among orthodox Marxists, to deny the multiplicity of concerns and conflicts within real movements, and to construct, in preference, outlandish images of movements as homogeneous actors with a high level of strategic ability (for a critique: Touraine 1981).

In America, collective action was often seen as crisis behavior. Having reduced collective phenomena to the sum of individual behaviors, psychologically derived theories defined social movements as the manifestation of feelings of deprivation experienced by individuals in relation to other social subjects, and of feelings of aggression resulting from a wide range of frustrated expectations. Phenomena such as the rise of Nazism, the American Civil War, or the movement of black Americans, for example, were considered to be aggressive reactions resulting either from a rapid and unexpected end to periods of economic well-being and of increased expectations on a worldwide scale; or from status inconsistency mechanisms (Davies 1969; Gurr 1970). From a somewhat different but compatible point of view, the emergence of political extremism was also associated with the spread of mass society in which integrative social ties based in the family or the community tended to become fragmented (Gusfield 1963; Kornhauser 1959). Isolation and displacement produced individuals with fewer intellectual, professional and/or political resources, who were particularly vulnerable to the appeal of antidemocratic movements of the right and the left.
To some extent, these problems were shared by the most famous version of structural-functionalist approach, that of Neil Smelser (1962), that saw social movements as the side effects of overrapid social transformation. According to Smelser, in a system made up of balanced subsystems, collective behavior reveals tensions which homoeostatic rebalancing mechanisms cannot absorb in the short term. At times of rapid, large-scale transformations, the emergence of collective behaviors – religious cults, secret societies, political sects, economic Utopias – has a double meaning, reflecting on the one hand, the inability of institutions and social control mechanisms to reproduce social cohesion; on the other, attempts by society to react to crisis situations through the development of shared beliefs, on which to base new foundations for collective solidarity.

Smelser's value-added model of collective behavior consists of six steps: structural conduciveness, i.e., a certain configuration of social structure that may facilitate or constrain the emergence of specific types of collective behavior; structural strain, i.e., the fact that at least some trait of the social system is experienced by a collectivity as a source of tension and problems; growth and spread of generalized belief, i.e., the emergence of a shared interpretation by social actors of their situation and problems; precipitating factors, i.e., stressful events that induce actors to take action; mobilization, i.e., the network and organizational activities that transform potential for action into real action; operation of social control, i.e., the role of social control agencies and other actors in shaping the evolution of collective behavior and its forms (see also Crossley 2002, p. 2; Smelser 1962).

Some scholars regard as unfortunate that Smelser's work came out at the time it did, thus ending up being strongly associated with the crisis of the functionalist paradigm. Despite its problems, his was a major attempt to connect into an integrated model different processes that would have later been treated in sparse order, and to firmly locate social movement analysis in the framework of general sociology (Crossley 2002, p. 53–55). Whatever the case, Smelser's approach came to be subsumed under the broader set of approaches viewing social movements as purely reactive responses to social crisis and as the outcome of malintegration, and became the target for the same criticisms. Let us see now how the criticism of Marxist and functionalist approaches were elaborated in relation to the four questions we have identified earlier, but also how those answers where themselves challenged later on.

1.1.1 Is Social Change Creating the Conditions for the Emergence of New Movements?

Given the importance of Marxism in European intellectual debates, it is no surprise that European social sciences were the most eager to explain the rise of the movements of the 1960s and the 1970s in explicit critique of the Marxist models of interpretation of social conflict. Criticism addressed both the most structuralist currents of Marxist thinking, deriving class conflict directly from the mode of production, and those interested in the formation of class consciousness (or class for itself). Certainly,
scholars of the new movements were not the only ones to be aware of these problems. The same difficulties had been raised by those who had studied the labor movement with the aim of explaining the formation of a collective actor, challenging the widespread idea of an almost automatic transformation of structural strains in conscious behavior (Thompson 1963).

Departing often from a Marxist background, scholars associated with the new social movements approach made a decisive contribution to the development of the discussion of these issues by reflecting upon the innovation in the forms and contents of contemporary movements.

Scholars of new movements agreed that conflict among the industrial classes was of decreasing relevance, and similarly that the representation of movements as largely homogeneous subjects was no longer feasible. However, there were differences of emphasis in relation to the possibility of identifying the new central conflict which would characterize the model of the emerging society, defined at times as postindustrial, post-Fordist, technocratic, or programmed. An influential exponent of this approach, Alain Touraine, was the most explicit in upholding this position: “Social movements are not a marginal rejection of order, they are the central forces fighting one against the other to control the production of society by itself and the action of classes for the shaping of historicity” (Touraine 1981, p. 29). In the industrial society, the ruling class and the popular class oppose each other, as they did in the agrarian and the mercantile societies, and as they will do, according to Touraine, in the programmed society, where new social classes will replace capitalists and the working class as the central actors of the conflict.

The break between movements of the industrial society and new movements was also stressed in the 1980s by the German sociologist Claus Offe (1985). In his view, movements develop a fundamental, metapolitical critique of the social order and of representative democracy, challenging institutional assumptions regarding conventional ways of “doing politics,” in the name of a radical democracy. Among the principal innovations of the new movements, in contrast with the workers’ movement, are a critical ideology in relation to modernism and progress; decentralized and participatory organizational structures; defense of interpersonal solidarity against the great bureaucracies; and the reclamation of autonomous spaces, rather than material advantages.

Another contribution to the definition of the characteristics of new movements in the programmed society came from Alberto Melucci (1989, 1996). Drawing on the image proposed by Jürgen Habermas of a colonization of lifeworlds, Melucci described contemporary societies as highly differentiated systems, which invest increasingly in the creation of individual autonomous centers of action, at the same time as requiring closer integration, extending control over the motives for human action. In his view, new social movements try to oppose the intrusion of the state and the market into social life, reclaiming the individual’s identity and the right to determine his or her private and affective life against the omnipresent and comprehensive manipulation of the system. Unlike the workers’ movement, new social movements do not, in
Melucci’s view, limit themselves to seeking material gain, but challenge the dominant notions of politics and of society themselves. New actors do not so much ask for an increase in state intervention, to guarantee security and well-being, but especially resist the expansion of political-administrative intervention in daily life and defend personal autonomy.

It would be misleading to speak of the new social movements approach without remarking that its principal exponents have considerably modified their positions over time. Already in the late 1980s, Offe (1990) recognized the influence of traditional-style political action on the practices of the movements. Melucci increasingly concentrated on the mechanisms by which certain representations of the world and of individual and collective identities are produced and transformed over time. Moreover, he went as far as to declare the debate of the “newness” of contemporary movements to be outdated or irrelevant (Melucci 1996).

This perspective had – and still has – several merits. First, it drew attention to the structural determinants of protest, reevaluating the importance of conflict, at a time when non-class conflicts were often ignored. Compared with the then-dominant Marxist interpretations, the theoreticians of new social movements had two specific advantages: they placed once again collective actors at the center of the stage; and they had the ability to capture the innovative characteristics of movements that no longer defined themselves principally in relation to the system of production. Despite the influence of the new social movements perspective, attention to the relationship between social structure and collective action is by no means restricted to it. A Marxian approach has continued to inspire numerous analysts of collective action who have maintained the concept of social class a central role in their analyses. In many senses, structural approaches strongly influenced by Marxism can be regarded as the predecessors of the thriving research on global justice and anti-austerity movements (Barker et al. 2014; Barker and Lavalette 2015). Some scholars have attempted to locate the new wave of popular mobilization in the global South as well as within the Western world in the context of much larger processes of economic restructuring on a global scale, and from a long term historical perspective, broadly inspired by Wallerstein’s theory of the world system (Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein 1989; Reifer 2004; Silver 2003).

In explicit critique of analyses suggesting the demise of social conflict and its individualization, and most explicitly the end of conflict about distributive stakes, many scholars regard the crisis of the workers’ movement in the 1980s and 1990s, following financial restructuring at the global level, as a largely conjunctural phenomenon. Systemic failure to meet the expectations of the working class from developing countries will fuel a new wave of sustained class conflicts, that will also reflect the growing feminization of the labor force and its stronger ethnic dimension, following mass migration dynamics (Arrighi and Silver 1999). The increasing relevance of “global justice” as a central concern (della Porta 2006) seems to support these arguments. Moreover, and rather unexpectedly, social movements have developed in the South, bridging frames and organizational structures with their northern counterparts. Especially in some geographical areas (such as Latin
America and the Far East) social movement research developed, often within a Gramscian approach, stressing the role of cultural hegemony. Not only research indicated that the class conflicts was well alive in many parts of the world, with a bias view of its decline deriving from a culturally bias focus on the North–West, but what is more Marxism was revisited as a potentially useful approach also to understand the growing focus on social inequality even at the core of the capitalist system (Silver and Karatasly 2014; della Porta 2015a; della Porta 2017b; Cini, Chironi, Dropalova and Tomasello 2018).

Another important attempt to relate social structural change to mass collective action has come from Manuel Castells (Castells 1983, 1997). In an earlier phase of his work, Castell has contributed to our understanding of the emergence of urban social movements by stressing the importance of consumption processes (in particular of collective consumption of public services and public goods) for class relations, by moving the focus of class analysis from capitalist relations within the workplace to social relations in the urban community (Castells, 1983). Later, Castells has linked the growing relevance of conflicts on identity both in the West (e.g. the women’s movement) and in the South (e.g. Zapatistas, religious fundamentalisms, etc.) to the emergence of a “network society,” where new information technologies play a central role.

Yet another original effort to link structural analysis and social movement analysis has been inspired by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Researchers engaged in the analysis of cultural habits (or the cultural predispositions produced by processes of socialization) as well as their structural determinants have used Bourdieu’s insights to explore specific instances of political conflicts, stressing their cultural meanings within the specific fields to which individuals belong. Going beyond economic interests, some scholars explained indeed social movement activism as following needs and desires that derive from values and norms that are typical of specific cultures (or fields). In this sense, action is not rational, but reasonable (Bourdieu 1992). In the Bourdesian perspective, pragmatic sociology has looked at social movements as carriers of broad cultural justifications and shifting capitalist conceptions (Boltanski and Chiappello 2005; Boltanski and Thevenot 1999). From a different angle, and with explicit reference to general theory à la Smelser, Crossley (2002) has used Bourdieu’s key concepts of habitus, structure, and agency to propose a new theoretical model, able to integrate the insights from European and American approaches over the years. In doing so, he has proceeded in parallel with other theoretical work in the broader framework of structuration theory (Livesay 2002; Sewell 1992).

A major criticism of new social movements theory has been that it took as foundational characteristics of new social movements certain traits that were not necessarily new and far from generalizable – such as activists’ middle class origins, or loose organizational forms (see e.g. Calhoun 1993; Kriesi et al. 1995; Rudig 1990). Structural approaches in general have also been faulted for failing to specify the mechanisms leading from structural tensions to action. In fairness, this criticism does not apply to Melucci’s work, and only partially to Touraine’s and
Bourdieu’s (in any case, the latter’s overall influence over social movement studies has been quite limited); while it is surely appropriate for scholars like Offe or Castells, or world system theorists, whose focus is clearly not on micro or meso processes. Certainly, it developed general theorization upon a specific historical context, considering as broad historical trends also some contingent transformations that affected especially some specific geopolitical areas (della Porta 2015a). Whatever the case, the approaches presented here must be regarded first of all as theories of social conflict, more specifically, of the impact of structural transformations over stakes and forms of conflict. And it is fair to say that the questions more directly related to the development of collective action have been more cogently addressed by other intellectual traditions.

1.1.2 How Do We Define Issues as Worthy Objects, and Actors as Worthy Subjects, of Collective Action?

In the 1950s and 1960s, students of collective behavior tended to classify under the same heading phenomena as diverse as crowds, movements, panic, manias, fashions, and so on. Two problems arose from this. On the one hand, although many of them defined movements as purposeful phenomena, students of collective behavior placed more attention on unexpected dynamics – such as circular reactions – rather than on deliberate organizational strategies or, more generally, on strategies devised by actors. As James Coleman recalled (1990, p. 479), the hypothesis that situations of frustration, rootlessness, deprivation and social crisis automatically produce revolts reduces collective action to an agglomeration of individual behaviors. Functionalism so ignores the dynamics by which feelings experienced at the (micro) level of the individual give rise to (macro) phenomena such as social movements or revolutions.

One response to these theoretical gaps has come from symbolic interactionists close to the so-called Chicago School, credited with having developed the analysis of collective behavior as a specialist field within sociology. The concept of collective behavior – contrasted with that of collective psychology – indicated the shift of attention from the motivation of individuals to their observable actions. Already in the 1920s, the founders of this approach – among them, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess – had stressed that collective phenomena do not simply reflect social crisis but rather produce new norms and new solidarities, and viewed social movements as engines of change, primarily in relation to values systems. Subsequently, other students of collective behavior were to make reference to the tenets of the Chicago School, focusing their attention on situations of rapid change in social structures and prescriptions (Blumer 1951; Gusfield 1963; Turner and Killian 1987 [1957]). Tendencies toward large-scale organizations, population mobility, technological innovation, mass communications, and the decline of traditional cultural forms were all considered to be emerging conditions pushing individuals to search for new patterns of social organization. Collective behavior was in fact defined as behavior concerned with
change (for example, Blumer 1951, p. 199), and social movements as both an integral part of the normal functioning of society and the expression of a wider process of transformation.

Rooted in symbolic interactionism, the contemporary school of collective behavior sees particular relevance in the meaning actors attribute to social structures; and the less structured the situations faced by the individual, the more relevant this aspect appears to be. When existing systems of meaning do not constitute a sufficient basis for social action, new norms emerge, defining the existing situation as unjust and providing a justification for action (Turner and Killian 1987, p. 259). As an activity born outside preestablished social definitions, collective behavior is located beyond existing norms and ordered social relations. The study of collective behavior thus concentrates on the transformation of institutional behaviors through the action of emergent normative definitions. These definitions appear when the traditional normative structure comes into conflict with a continually evolving situation. As Blumer (1951, p. 169) put it:

*Sociology in general is interested in studying the social order and its constituents (customs, rule, institution, etc.) as they are. Collective behavior is concerned in studying the way in which the social order comes to exist in the sense of the emergence and solidification of new forms of collective behavior.*

Change, in fact, is conceived of as part of the physiological functioning of the system: social movements are accompanied by the emergence of new rules and norms, and represent attempts to transform existing norms. For example, Gusfield (1963) saw the prohibitionist movement as an area of conflict between social systems, cultures and groups of different status.

The genesis of social movements is in the coexistence of contrasting values systems and of groups in conflict with each other. These are regarded as distinctive parts of social life (Killian 1964, p. 433). Changes in the social structure and in the normative order are interpreted within a process of cultural evolution through which new ideas emerge in the minds of individuals. When traditional norms no longer succeed in providing a satisfactory structure for behavior, the individual is forced to challenge the social order through various forms of nonconformity. A social movement develops when a feeling of dissatisfaction spreads, and insufficiently flexible institutions are unable to respond.

The sociology of social movements owes many of its insights to students of the collective behavior school. For the first time, collective movements are defined as meaningful acts, driving often necessary and beneficial social change. Observations of processes of interaction determined by collective action moreover constitute important foundations for those who, in more recent times, have taken on the task of understanding movement dynamics. The emphasis on empirical research has led to experimentation with new techniques, providing through various methods of field research a valid integration of archive data. Since the 1980s, the interactionist version of the theory of collective behavior has stressed the processes
of symbolic production and of construction of identity, both of which are essential components of collective behavior. This has led to a research program that has lasted over time, as demonstrated by the work of scholars such as Joe Gusfield (1963), and that has become at the same time very influential and diversified (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Melucci 1996; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Oliver and Snow 1995).

In the 1990s, however, some researchers grew dissatisfied with a view of the role of culture in collective action that they regarded as too strategic and rationalistic, in particular by scholars like Snow and Benford (1992) that were conversant with resource mobilization theory. They started to re-emphasize again the part played by emotions in the production and reproduction of social movements. In their view, symbolic production is not only (or mainly) strategically oriented, but it involves feelings and emotions. Moral shocks developing when deeply held rules and norms are broken are often first step in the individual mobilization and, indeed, protest organizations work at transforming fear in moral indignation and anger (Jasper 1997: 107–114). Movements indeed produce condensing symbols and rhetoric oriented to rise various types of emotions in what has been defined as a libidinal economy of movements. As Jasper (1997, p. 220) observed, “Virtually, all the pleasures that humans derive from social life are found in protest movements: a sense of community and identity; ongoing companionship and bonds with others; the variety and challenge of conversation, cooperation and competition. Some of the pleasures are not available in the routines of life.”

The stress on social movement as agents of normative change, that was present in the Chicago School, has been revisited in recent times of accelerated transformation within an emerging concern in social movement studies with “great transformations” as well as protests that – such as the protest camps – triggered big mobilizations (della Porta 2018b). Especially, as protests spread, new norms tend to emerge in the open spaces created by the social movements themselves. Such spaces allow for the development of intense emotions as well as the spreading of alternative visions through various forms of prefigurative politics oriented to practice changes (Wagner-Pacifici and Ruggero 2018).

It is worth noting at least two main problems generated by the collective behavior perspective. On the one hand, despite defining movements as purposeful phenomena, many students of collective behavior placed more attention on unexpected dynamics – such as circular reactions – rather than on deliberate organizational strategies or, more generally, on strategies devised by rational, strategic actors. On the other hand, focusing on the empirical analysis of behavior, they are often limited to a description – albeit detailed – of reality, without devoting much attention to the structural origins of conflicts which subsequently well up in particular movements. While structuralist approaches like the new social movements dealt with the latter shortcoming, organizational perspective like the resource mobilization theory addressed the former. To its basic tenets we now turn.
1.1.3 How Is Collective Action Possible?

In deliberate contrast to conceptualizations of social movements as irrational, largely reactive phenomena, some American sociologists in the 1970s started to reflect on the processes by which the resources necessary for collective action are mobilized. In their view, collective movements constitute an extension of the conventional forms of political action; the actors engage in this act in a strategic way, following their interests; organizations and movement “entrepreneurs” have an essential role in the mobilization of collective resources on which action is founded. Movements are therefore part of the normal political process. Stressing the external obstacles and incentives, numerous pieces of research have examined the variety of resources to be mobilized, the links which social movements have with their allies, the tactics used by society to control or incorporate collective action, and its results. The basic questions addressed relate to the evaluation of costs and benefits of participation in social movement organizations.

In early contributions in this vein, Mayer Zald (McCarthy and Zald 1987; Zald and Ash 1966), Anthony Oberschall (1973, 1980) and Charles Tilly (1978) defined social movements as rational, purposeful, and organized actions. Collective action derives, according to this perspective, from a calculation of the costs and benefits, influenced by the presence of resources – in particular, by organization and by the strategic interactions necessary for the development of a social movement. In a historical situation in which feelings of unease, differences of opinion, conflicts of interest and opposing ideologies are always present, the emergence of collective action cannot be explained simply as having been caused by these elements. It is not enough to discover the existence of tensions and structural conflicts: we also have to study the conditions which enable discontent to be transformed into mobilization. The capacity for mobilization depends on the material resources (work, money, concrete benefits, services) and/or nonmaterial resources (authority, moral engagement, faith, friendship) available to the group. These resources are distributed across multiple objectives according to a rational calculation of costs and benefits. Beyond the existence of tensions, mobilization derives from the way in which social movements are able to organize discontent, reduce the costs of action, utilize and create solidarity networks, share incentives among members, and achieve external consensus. The type and nature of the resources available explain the tactical choices made by movements and the consequences of collective action on the social and political system (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1987).

The existence of solidarity networks once again questioned a widely spread assumption at the time, namely, that movement recruits are mainly isolated and rootless individuals who seek to immerse themselves in the mass as a surrogate for their social marginalization. According to rational approaches, mobilization can thus be explained as being more than the gratification of pursuing a collective good; it also promotes the existence of horizontal solidarity links, within the collective, and vertical
links, integrating different collectives. On the basis of a wide range of empirical research, one can therefore foresee this phenomenon:

Participants in popular disturbances and activists in opposition organizations will be recruited primarily from previously active and relatively well-integrated individuals within the collectivity, whereas socially isolated, atomized, and uprooted individuals will be underrepresented, at least until the movement has become substantial.

(Oberschall 1973, p. 135)

Accordingly, scholars of resource mobilization concentrate their attention on how collective actors operate, how they acquire resources and mobilize support, both within and without their adherents’ group.

Over the years, research on social movement organizations has extended its attention to the relations between organizations and the dynamics going on in organizational populations. Increasingly sophisticated network studies have looked at the interactions between the organizations and individuals identified with social movements (Diani 2015; Diani and McAdam 2003; Krinsky and Crossley 2014; Mische 2008). Concepts and methods borrowed from organizational theory have been applied to the study of the factors behind organizations’ emergence and survival, again with reference to both the national and the global sphere (Atouba and Shumate 2010; Davis et al. 2008; Den Hond, De Bakker, and Smith 2015; Smith et al. 2018; Smith and Wiest 2012; Wijk et al. 2013).

The definition of social movements as conscious actors making rational choices is among the most important innovations of the resource mobilization approach. However, it has been the target of several criticisms. It has been charged with indifference to the structural sources of conflict and the specific stakes for the control of which social actors mobilize (Melucci 1989; Piven and Cloward 1992). Its emphasis on the resources controlled by a few political entrepreneurs, at the cost of overlooking the self-organization potential by the most dispossessed social groups, has also been criticized (Piven and Cloward 1992). Finally, it has been noted that in its explanation of collective action this approach overdoes the rationality of collective action, not taking the role of emotions adequately into account (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). In fact, as some of the most influential proponents of this approach admitted, “early resource mobilization models exaggerate the centrality of deliberative strategic decisions to social movements” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, p. 7), overemphasizing similarities between social movements and interest politics. As in organizational sociology neo-institutionalism focused attention to appropriateness rather than rationality, also social movement studies tended to give more attention to the importance of norms over means and on prefiguration as anticipation of the future (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013).
1.1.4 What Determines the Forms and Intensity of Collective Action?

A most cogent and systematic response to this question has come from the perspective usually defined as “political process” (McAdam 1982; Tilly 1978). This approach shares with resource mobilization theory a strategic view of action – so much so that they are sometimes treated as a unified perspective – but pays more systematic attention to the political and institutional environment in which social movements operate. The central focus of “political process” theories is the relationship between institutional political actors and protest. In challenging a given political order, social movements interact with actors who enjoy a consolidated position in the polity. Charles Tilly (1978, p. 53) famously spoke of movements as “challengers,” contrasting them to established members of a given polity. The concept that has had the greatest success in defining the properties of the external environment, relevant to the development of social movements, is that of “political opportunity structure.” Peter Eisinger (1973) used this concept in a comparison of the results of protest in different American cities, focusing on the degree of openness (or closure) of the local political system. Other empirical research indicated important new variables, such as electoral instability (Piven and Cloward 1977), the availability of influential allies (Gamson 1990), and tolerance for protest among the elite (Jenkins and Perrow 1977). Sidney Tarrow integrated these empirical observations into a theoretical framework for his study of protest cycles in Italy, singling out the degree of openness or closure of formal political access, the degree of stability or instability of political alignments, the availability and strategic posture of potential allies and political conflicts between and within elites (Tarrow 1989, 1994).

To these variables others have been added, relating to the institutional conditions that regulate agenda-setting and decision-making processes. Characteristics relating to the functional division of power and also to geographical decentralization have been analyzed in order to understand the origins of protest and the forms it has taken. In general, the aim has been to observe which stable or ‘mobile’ characteristics of the political system influence the growth of less institutionalized political action in the course of what are defined as protest cycles (Tarrow 1989), as well as the forms these actions take in different historical contexts (Tilly 1978). The comparison between different political systems (for some pioneering works, see Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1995; della Porta 1995) enabled the central theme of relationships between social movements and the institutional political system to be studied in depth.

The political process approach succeeded in shifting attention toward interactions between new and traditional actors, and between less conventional forms of action and institutionalized systems of interest representation. In this way, it is no longer possible to define movements as phenomena that are, of necessity, marginal and anti-institutional, expressions of dysfunctions of the system. A more fruitful route toward the interpretation of the political dimension of contemporary movements has been established.
One should not ignore, however, some persisting areas of difficulty. On the one hand, supporters of this perspective continue to debate delicate problems such as the choice of the most appropriate indicators to measure complex institutional phenomena. First, the lack of consensus on the relevant dimensions of the concept of political opportunities resulted in their exponential growth. Early studies of political opportunities focused on a small number of variables. Since the 1980s, however, the addition of new variables to the original set has expanded the explanatory power of the concept, but reduced its specificity. The concept runs the risk of becoming a ‘dustbin’ for any and every variable relevant to the development of social movements. Most of the concept’s problems arise from the way in which it has been developed, picking up variables from a variety of studies on a variety of movements. This accumulation of heterogeneous variables reflecting different authors’ concerns and ideas has resulted in a concept which, to quote Sartori (1970), denotes much but connotes little. Particularly in international comparative studies, it is impossible to handle the large number of variables and assess properly their explanatory power. Focus on structural variables might shift attention away from how norms and values, referring in particular to movements goals (or discursive opportunities), influence movement strategies as well as their chances of success (Goodwin 2011; Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Jasper 2018).

A second problem arises when we wish to distinguish between ‘objective’ reality and its social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1969). Some changes in the political opportunity structure do not have any effect on a social movement unless they are perceived as important by the movement itself. Structural availability must be filtered through a process of ‘cognitive liberation’ in order to unleash turmoil (McAdam 1986). For protest to emerge, activists must believe that an opportunity exists, that they have the power to bring about change and they must blame the system for the problem. Looking at structural opportunities without considering the cognitive processes that intervene between structure and action can be very misleading. It is important, therefore, to analyze activists’ understandings of available opportunities, the lenses through which they view potential opportunities for their movements (Gamson and Meyer 1996). Perceptions of state response may be particularly influenced, for instance, by its more dramatic manifestations, such as repression, causing the less visible responses, such as negotiation, to be overlooked.

The political process approach has also been criticized externally for its tendency to adopt a kind of “political reductionism” (Melucci 1987, 1989). In effect, its proponents have paid little attention to the fact that many contemporary movements (of youth, women, homosexuals or minority ethnic groups) have developed within a political context and in a climate of cultural innovation at the same time (Melucci 1996; Rupp and Taylor 1987). Lastly – as we have already noted when introducing resource mobilization theories – rationalist approaches to the study of collective action have tended to neglect the structural origins of protest. Other scholars, often associated with the new movements approach, have long pointed at this limit, by raising attention to the cultural dimension, while more recently Marxist approaches have returned upon the relevance of the interaction between the state and the market within the evolution of capitalism (Barker et al. 2014; della Porta 2015a). Within this
perspective, in a moment in which movements tend to proliferate even with a closing
down of political opportunities, attention went to the role of socioeconomic threats as
triggers for collective action (ibid.).

Faced with some relevant transformations in the two main sources of opportunities
for movements – the nation-state and the political parties – research developed in two
main directions. On the one hand, and especially in Europe, attention focused on the
role played by movements, not just within the political system, but also within the
public sphere. In this direction, the discursive opportunities – i.e., the presence of dom-
ninant public discourses on certain controversial issues, which are likely to affect move-
ments’ chances of success – have been stressed (Koopmans and Statham 1999).

Moreover, more and more attention has been paid to transnational opportunities, or,
better said, to a multilevel opportunity structure for movements (della Porta and Tarrow
2005). The development of the European Union as an arena for movement demands
has been discussed more in depth (della Porta and Caiani 2009). Considering move-
ments as part and parcel of the political system, an increasing number of studies has
also focused on their effects, especially in terms of policy process and policy decisions
(Bosi, Giugni, and Uba 2015). What is more, while social movements had been tradi-
tionally considered as ‘strangers at the gate’ of the political system (Tarrow 2012), in the
turmoil of the Great Regression, social movements have been very effective in pene-
trating electoral politics through referendums from below as well as the proliferation

1.1.5 Are These Questions Specific to Social Movement Analysis?

In this book we shall address these different questions: the social determinants of
protest (chapter 2), the role of cultural and symbolic elements (chapters 3–4), the
organizational dynamics (chapters 5–6), and the political context for and effects of
movements (chapters 7–9). But, before doing that, we still have to discuss whether
the questions – and the responses – identified above are peculiar to social
movement research. In many cases, these questions address not just social
movements but collective action more in general. Collective action broadly refers
to individuals, sharing resources in pursuit of collective goods – i.e., goods that
cannot be privatized and subtracted to any of the members of the collectivity on
behalf of which collective action has taken place. Such goods may be produced
within movements, but also in many contexts that normally are not associated
with movements. In our notion, the idea of ‘collective goods’ comprises both
public goods à la Olson and club goods. For Samuelson (1954), the key character-
istics of public goods are non-excludability, and nonrivalrous consumption (i.e.,
no scarcity once the good is produced). A club good is nonexcludable for club
members but excludable for outsiders, possibly (but not necessarily) non-rival-
rous for those with access (Buchanan 1965).

For example, political parties also face the problem of mobilizing their members
and providing them with incentives to join and somehow support the organization – if
anything through the payment of membership fees; so do interest groups
only minding the sectoral – often, very parochial – interests of their specific reference groups (Jordan and Maloney 1997; Knoke 1990). Likewise, even political parties or narrow interest groups focus face the problem of adapting their strategies and tactics to changing environments, as the context in which they operate may become more or less favorable, such as through changes in the attitudes of power holders toward specific parties or interest groups’ demands, changes in legal opportunities for interest representation, or changes in the cultural models with which ordinary people make sense of their political and social world (Panebianco 1988). From a different angle, many voluntary organizations do not identify any social or political opponent to protest against, and their strategies focus entirely on service delivery rather than advocacy, political representation, or challenges to dominant norms or lifestyles. Even these organizations, however, still face problems of attracting and keeping members, securing the resources necessary to promote action, elaborate the cultural models necessary to pursue goals along the desired lines, and framing their issues in order to make them as attractive as possible to the widest audience as possible (Wilson 2000).

As it happens, analyses of social movements and analyses of collective action at large are inextricably linked. Let us say that the experience of social movements reflects phenomena with more than passing analogies to other instance or political or cultural collective action, taking place within political parties, interest groups, or religious sects. Therefore, when we analyze social movements, we deal with social processes that may also be of interest to researchers who do not define themselves at all as social movement analysts. Accordingly, we feel that a lot of what is presented here may be of interest to a much broader audience.

Recently, there have been several attempts to synthesize scholarship on social movements with the aim of linking it to broader theoretical and/or empirical concerns. Some of these attempts have aimed at integrating social movement theory with general sociological frameworks.

A most ambitious development by social movement scholars, openly criticizing the insularity of the social movements studies community, and also drawing heavily on non-Western materials, has been the Dynamics of Contention (DOC) program (McAdam et al. 2001). The main suggestion coming from this approach has been the possibility to combine the knowledge developed in the fields of social movements with those elaborated on revolutions, democratization, and ethnic conflicts, singling out a field of contentious politics, defined as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claim and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claim and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interest of at least one of the claimants” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, p. 5). As Sidney Tarrow (2015, p. 90) summarized, the contentious politics approach focused on episodes of contention, rather than on individual social movements, looking at the relations of different actors within complex political processes. Advocating a dynamic rather than static use of concepts, the scholars involved in this project have tried to single out general mechanisms of contention, defined as “delimited changes that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations”