

GULBENKIAN IDEAS

Let's talk about the Future of the New Social Movements

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“Real News”

Social movements in the challenge of knowledge for the future

‘We are the experts!’

Interviewed in 1994 about the role that activists engaged in the fight against AIDS had in the development and adoption of the strategy to contain the disease in the United States, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), Dr. Anthony Fauci, said “There are some [activists] who have no idea what the hell they’re talking about” but “there are some that are brilliant, and even more so than some of the scientists” (Fauci 1994 ref in Epstein 1995: (419).

Appointed director of the NIAID in 1984 with the specific aim of combating the AIDS pandemic, Dr. Fauci was initially one of the first targets of AIDS activists, who were protesting mainly because they felt excluded from discussions on the response to the health crisis, the delay in implementing this response and the high cost of the drugs needed for treatment. Following a large demonstration in front of NIAID, Garance Franke-Ruta, one of the leading activists and founder of ACT UP, the most important AIDS group, said: ‘we are the experts, not just the scientists and the doctors’ (Washington Post 2020). In fact, Dr. Fauci was one of the health personalities most attentive to the demands of activists, and he made a determined attempt to involve activist representatives in the development of the national AIDS containment strategy. Years later, this was recognised as one of the main factors in the successes of the strategy against the disease (Power 2011).

This is one of the best-known examples of how social movements can contribute to building knowledge and ‘expertise’, in different ways. Often, this knowledge can be the almost ‘unintended’ result (Giugni 1998, Tilly 1996) of activism itself, thanks to which activists always acquire new competences, knowledge and skills, and is therefore a form of secondary socialisation (Fillieule and Neveu 2019). At other times, it is the consequence of the ‘tasks’ and daily practices of activism, which also produce new identities, cultures and know-how (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell 2008). In yet other cases, as in the aforementioned example of AIDS activism, this knowledge

and expertise are part of the movements' own strategies, repertoire and objectives, thus being a specific form of direct action, which we can define as 'epistemic action'. In any case, in all of these situations, which are otherwise phenomenologically more 'mixed' than described here, social movements are players capable of – and engaged in – building knowledge and expertise that have a significant impact on our lives.

Social movements in the 'real world'

Social movements are collective processes created by players engaged in contentious actions and based on relatively formal networks (Della Porta and Diani 2006). Until the 1950s, social movements were mainly seen by both public opinion and social scientists as collective phenomena, characteristically irrational and impulsive. From that period of widespread protest around the world called the 'Long Sixties' (Marwick 2005), various scholars began to look at movements as essential and, in many cases, 'enriching' components of our societies.

While social movements were gaining legitimacy as social and political actors, the area of study concerned with them – so-called Social Movement Studies – was also becoming consolidated across different disciplines, particularly political science and sociology. Through a non-linear process and with many advances and retreats, it can be said that social movements are increasingly accepted as a common form of political and social participation, alongside others such as voting, and party and union membership.

A symbolic moment of public affirmation and 'sympathy' that some social movements enjoy today is the fact that in 2011, in a year marked by protests such as Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring and the movements against austerity in Southern Europe, *Time* adopted 'the protester' as its 'person of the year', publishing an image of an activist.

Social movement scholars have primarily focused their attention on the role of the political conditions that would underlie the emergence or otherwise of movements, emphasising their clear distinction from institutional players (Tarrow, 1998). Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper on the other hand argue that both social movements and institutional players – such as local governments – are entities whose boundaries are much more fluid than is commonly thought (Goodwin and Jasper 2004).

Social movements, therefore, are not always where we often look for them: activists circulate through different 'arenas', such as grassroots associations and collectives; informal groups; academia; media; local, national and sometimes supranational institutions. At the same time, the distinction between state/institutional arenas and the sphere of 'contentious actors' (such as social movements) is not always so simple to define. For example, we may find governmental players such as local institutions alongside certain social movements against other government players, such as national institutions. In these cases, 'governmental players become movements, at least for a while, thus blurring [...] the distinction between state and movements' (Verhoeven and Bröer 2015: (97).



Cover of *Time*, December 2011

Social movements foreshadowing the future: building practices and knowledge

Although somewhat abstract and theoretical, this introduction is important to realise that social movements and activists are players who circulate between various arenas and that these arenas often overlap considerably. Understanding social movements in this way also means recognising that they do much more than just protest in the street against other players. Indeed, while social movements are mostly known for their more visible and ‘impactful’ activities, such as demonstrations, strikes or occupations, the range of actions in which they engage is very varied, from all those practices that can be defined as ‘direct action’, to activities that fall into the sphere of so-called ‘prefigurative politics’.

‘Direct action’ can be understood as the direct involvement of activists in transforming specific aspects of society through action in itself, such as providing different kinds of help - health, education, food – to people in situations of need and giving this action a political meaning (Bosi and Zamponi 2020). In the so-called ‘prefigurative politics’ we see (i.e. we prefigure) the implementation in the present of the values and changes that we would like to see in the society of the future, without waiting for these changes to be carried out by other players, such as institutions.

Some examples of such experiences might include ethical banks, cooperatives, different types of ‘alternative’ organisations (Parker et al 2014), as well as various forms of individual or collective life choices related to consumption (solidarity economy, vegetarianism and veganism), transport, energy use, etc. (de Moor and Verhaegen 2020). Extending the perspective on social movements to also include these less visible aspects and actions has contributed to discovering and recognising many submerged or even ‘hidden’ forms of protest that are particularly relevant outside Europe and the US, and especially under authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes.

Among these less obvious activities developed by social movements we also find the production of knowledge of different kinds. Besides the area of health, which was perhaps the first to be recognised and in which the abovementioned example of the fight against AIDS is included, activists develop knowledge in many other spheres, such as the environment, the right to the city and democratic participation. Social movements have also been at the forefront in introducing technological innovations or even true inventions, which in recent years have mainly impacted the digital sphere, such as the development of free software.

Environmental movements have developed significant expertise in areas such as pollution, climate change, waste, industrial contamination, the overexploitation of forests and land, the loss of biodiversity and the use of water resources (Kousis 2016, Epstein 2005, Laraña 2001). The variety of experiences and proposals in this field is highly significant, from the solidarity and sustainable economy (Forno and Graziano 2020) to the direct involvement of scientists in many contexts related to environmental problems, either in already consolidated ecologist networks (like, for example, ‘Acción Ecológica’) or in new groups such as the ‘Scientist Rebellion’ (Thompson 2021).

Locally and community-based mobilisation has also been important, especially in the case of industrial contamination, whether caused by long-term industrial activities or in the case of unforeseen disasters (Centemeri 2006).

Another example is the worldwide spread of the Global Justice Movement that accompanied the discussions around the 1997 Kyoto summit (Hadden 2014), while many of the notions that are currently assumed and (almost) scientifically consensual around global warming and the need for the reduction of carbon emissions also reached the public sphere thanks to this movement (Almeida 2019, della Porta and Reiter 2005).

In the area of the right to the city and especially to housing, many activists are also 'experts' in spheres relevant to the cause, such as urban studies (planning, geography, community development), architecture, public policy, sociology (gender, migration, inequalities), or even democratic participation (Accornero et al 2021, Accornero 2021, Mendes 2020, Rossini and Bianchi 2020, Martinez 2019). Highly qualified activists engaged in the struggle for the right to the city can be found in different cities (Lisbon, Barcelona, Rome, Berlin, New York), some of whom are academics or master's or doctoral students while others combine activism with professions related to housing and urban rights (e.g. public officials, planners, various liberal professions such as architects, lawyers, social workers).

The conflict around housing is therefore highly transversal, cutting across different arenas such as academia, formal and informal associations and institutions at different levels of governance. Housing activists have produced extensive knowledge, particularly on the urban dynamics that compromise the right and access to decent housing (such as gentrification, tourism, urban segregation), the health consequences (physical and psychological) of precarious housing, and the negative impact that the lack of legislation or its enforcement has on guaranteeing the right to housing, proposing different solutions from controlled rents to radical planning models.

Social movements have also been essential players in the renewal, innovation and extension of forms of democratic participation (della Porta 2020). The example of the 'participatory budget' is particularly important. First invented and implemented in the context of social movements in Brazil in connection with the Workers' Party (PT), participatory budgeting gained strength and diffusion also thanks to the Global Justice Movement and above all the Porto Alegre Social Forum (della Porta and Reiter 2005, Souza 2000).

From then on, this model of participation has spread in many other contexts, directly or indirectly related to the sphere of social movements such as ethical banks and various cooperatives, small businesses and farms. In recent years, participatory budgeting has also been adopted by many institutions, especially at the local level, as an instrument of 'good governance' in public administration (Shah 2007, Falanga and Lüchmann 2020). Although several experts have rightly warned about the risk that these versions of different instruments of participatory democracy (such as participatory budgeting) may reduce them to top-down formulas (Falanga 2018)

and ultimately to empty shells, this is a significant example of the possibilities of knowledge ‘transfer’ from social movements to other arenas.

More recently, new communication technologies have been considered by social movements to be promising channels for strengthening and extending democratic participation. In this case, the development of software that combines the tools and functions of participatory and deliberative democracy is quite significant, as it stands at the intersection of two areas in which innovations and inventions proposed by social movements have been very significant: democratic participation and new digital technologies (Milan, Lonneke and van der Velden 2018).

What kind of knowledge do social movements produce?

Knowledge within social movements has started to be valued, particularly in the last decade, as an area of study that is still under consolidation. At the same time, the recognition of the value of this knowledge in society still falls short of its potential. Some important studies have focused on the skills that activists acquire during their ‘militant career’ and how these skills are ‘reconverted’ and harnessed the moment they leave activism and join other social sectors (professional, family, educational, etc.). This process has been recognised as having an important impact on knowledge and expertise transfer from the activist arena to others (Fillieule 2010, Fillieule and Neveu 2019). In this sense, activist knowledge and expertise (in the form of skills, competences, habits and values) seem to be the result of activists’ socialisation.

Social movement knowledge has also been associated with their everyday practices, thus being an implicit side to activism (among others, Hosseini 2010). According to Alissa Starodub, this knowledge has a strong relational basis: ‘Within the autonomous social movements a plurality of practices is producing knowledge through experience with others’ (2015: 162). Similarly, Donatella della Porta and Elena Pavan consider the repertoire of knowledge practices as strictly linked to activists’ own experience, which is at the threshold between the individual and collective dimensions (della Porta & Pavan, 2017). Other knowledge practices are recognised in the so-called ‘media knowledge practices’ (Pavan and Mainardi 2019: 2), understood as a way of creating meanings and semantics capable of supporting the struggle (Mattoni 2012). The focus on practices in these and other examples has played an important role in uncovering and illuminating movements’ capacity to produce knowledge, also as part of often hidden ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (Scott 1987).

Close to the view of social movement knowledge as the outcome of their practices is the perspective that considers this knowledge to be ‘alternative’ to other knowledge considered hegemonic (e.g. in academia, in official science, in institutions). Rooted in postcolonial studies and critical theory, this view often follows the Global North versus Global South axis, for example describing social movement knowledge as ‘social thought of the peripheries’, as opposed to ‘legitimate’ knowledge considered ‘deeply colonial, embodying, benefiting from, and contributing to the maintenance of Western imperial power’ (Schroering 2019).

The work of the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos is among the most well-known and important contributions to this perspective. Sousa Santos considers the Global North to be the place (cultural, political and epistemic, even before being geographic) dominated by the ‘monoculture of scientific knowledge’ (2014: 277), which sustains capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and all its satellite oppressions (2014: 27). On the other hand, the Global South is seen as the space of oppressed peoples and ancestral knowledge about land, water, animals and plants, ‘the large set of creations and creatures that has been sacrificed to the infinite voracity of the global North’ (2014: 16). Although he does not talk directly about the knowledge of social movements, Boaventura de Sousa Santos considers them, and particularly the Global Justice Movement, as one of the important players in the resistance against the oppression of the North and against what he calls ‘epistemicide’, that is, ‘the murder of knowledge’ (2014: 149).

The knowledge produced by social movements has also been considered important for a renewal of the social sciences, especially in the areas of sociology and education. Laurence Cox, for example, considers that ‘this knowledge has a critical edge – critique of underlying structure, articulating counter-knowledge, or developing alternative modes of theory, education and research’ (Cox 2014: 967). This knowledge is thus seen as a way of building knowledge that can challenge ‘the social scientific mode of empiricism that stresses the search for mechanisms and causal variables to be generalised’ (2008: 21).

As is evident in this discussion, the knowledge of movements is particularly seen and understood along a cleavage around the alternative versus hegemonic, critical versus positivist/empiricist, or north versus south axis. As in the case of knowledge ‘practices’, this perspective has contributed to identifying, giving visibility and greater legitimacy to forms of knowledge that are often oppressed, as well as to denouncing the existing power inequalities between the different players engaged in knowledge production. However, this division runs the risk, at times, of being somewhat schematic and of unintentionally reproducing the ‘gaps’ and imbalances which it rightly aims to denounce and resolve. While underlining the capacity of movements to build alternative knowledge, this knowledge is often confined to the field of creativity, values, identities and thoughts (Accornero and Gravante 2022; Bringel 2019).

In fact, not all social movements are composed of oppressed people or minorities without resources, and we have many movements in which activists are highly qualified individuals or even experts, such as in the case of the right to the city referred to above, who mobilise, in the conflict, knowledge of different kinds, also academic. On the other hand, minorities and oppressed people or peoples are also often capable of and engaged in building knowledge with an empiricist/positivist basis, which may directly confront the ‘legitimate’ and ‘consolidated’ knowledge of the institutions.

The Landless Workers' Movement (MTS) in Brazil is a significant example of this: with a strong Marxist base, the MTS was created in 1984 with the main objective of agrarian reform. Since then, it has always been committed to a strong critique of capitalism and has adopted participatory forms of engagement as well as radical environmentalism. At the same time, the MTS is also committed to the production of scientific knowledge on key aspects related to the overexploitation of natural resources, such as climate change and the consequences of GMOs, and has developed projects and proposals ranging from GMO-free farms to 'agroecology' (Pellegrini 2009).

Indeed, the very origins of the empirical method and logical positivism are rooted in the desire to 'reform and emancipate society' (Creath 2017) in the face of what were considered to be the sources of many social problems (such as religion or false beliefs about race, class and gender). This explains why many social movements are committed to building knowledge that impacts the sphere of empiricist and positivist knowledge, often also countering the threats of racism, climate denialism, religious oppression and minority or gender discrimination.

This commitment on the part of social movements to create or reinforce empiricist or scientific knowledge is particularly visible in the area of health. For example, patient organisations have in many cases played a key role in 'reframing what is at stake, destabilising existing understandings of conditions and problems and resulting in the identification of zones of 'undone science'' (Rabeharisoa, Moreira and Akrich 2013: 7).

'Real News': Social movements in the challenge of knowledge for the future

There has been growing attention and concern in recent years about the role of various populist individual and collective players – mostly, but not exclusively right-wing – in producing and promoting fake news and conspiracy theories (Bertuzzi 2021, Gerbaudo 2017). Much less attention has been paid to the role of progressive social movements in producing 'relevant' and 'valid' knowledge, although there are, as shown, many significant examples. We can define this 'relevant' and 'valid' knowledge as 'real news'.

Social movements are often engaged in the production of this knowledge in order to contrast fake news and conspiracy theories: this is evident in the case of climate change or, more recently, the pandemic. In this case, it can be seen as a form of epistemic counter-activity. In other cases, this activity is independent of pre-existing 'fake news' or conspiracy theories and has a propositional charge that is justified in itself.

These forms of action developed by social movements can be defined as 'epistemic' because they have the potential to change the way we understand reality and create new categories for interpreting it. Social movements build knowledge as part of their repertoire of action, so this knowledge has a 'contentious' charge. This means that it is based on the recognition of gaps and problems and dissatisfaction with the way these gaps and problems are addressed by other players or the lack of a strategy or intention to address them.

Recognising, highlighting and valuing the positive contribution of the knowledge of social movements in our societies means broadening the range of possibilities and the tools we have to face the great challenges that await us in solving deep-rooted problems in various areas, such as the environment, the right to urban spaces, democratic participation, the use of new technologies and inequalities. At a time defined as ‘post-truth’ (McIntyre 2018), this knowledge can also be a powerful weapon to contrast populism and its corollary of ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories.

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