

## CPS: WORKING GROUP ON CONTENTIOUS POLITICS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Emergent supranational –‘multi-level’– governance structures, dense multipurpose transnational networks, and fading territoriality (even when contradicted by resurgent localism) combine to transform the environment within which contemporary collective action is undertaken. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and contrary to what used to be the case only a few years ago, contentious claims and discourse (or framings) are transmissible almost instantaneously. Assessment of these developments, however, raises more questions than answers. Although categorical (and mutually contradictory –glowing or gloomy) verdicts are in no short supply, most scholars approach the new environment as a puzzle. As Charles Tilly put it in 2004,


[Will] the twenty-first century finally bring social movements to the long-dreamed culmination of People Power across the world? [Will] technologies of communication such as text-messaging mobile telephones ... provide the means for activists and ordinary people to shift the tactical balance away from capitalists, military leaders, and corrupt politicians? Or, on the contrary, [is the recent upsurge in collective action] ... merely ... the last churning of popular politics in the wake of globalisation's dreadnaught?

Seeking a holistic appraisal of contemporary circumstances in a historical perspective, this Research Group seeks to inspire original work –mainly (though not exclusively) within the booming Contentious Politics tradition– to explore topics such as:

- **The new environment as structure: ‘global civil society’ or waning democratic accountability?**

What exactly characterises the ‘complex internationalism’ (Tarrow) brought about by –and reflected in– the operation of supranational institutions such as the WTO, the World Bank, and the EU; NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and OXFAM; and incipient transnational contentious networks such as the World Social Forum, the PGA and ATTAC –  
 engaged in coordinated international campaigns against international actors? Can we speak of a new political opportunity *structure* with a modicum of stability and, if so, how does it influence collective action and social movement prospects? Is the new balance of opportunities and threats likely to serve as a catalyst for the emergence of a new ‘global civil society’ or does it merely underscore proliferating democratic deficits? How do these developments combine with rising police repressiveness (especially after Genoa 2001)?

- **Collective action repertoires: transnational disruption, terrorist violence, and conventional protest in the era of globalization**

What sort of changes are social movement repertoires undergoing? Do they entail genuine transformations or are they merely epiphenomenal and transitory? What is the nature, prerequisites and dynamic of *transnational contention* (both as organizational practice and as vision beyond the nation-state) and how does it materialize in different global settings/ regions? Does it involve mimetic *diffusion*, creative *domestication*, or the imposing *externalization* of northern forms? How can we conceptualise contemporary contentious disruption, and how does it differ from violence and conventional collective action?  


- **Policy content, contentious meaning, cultural framings**

One lasting contribution of social movements literature has been hammering home that collective action entails, requires, and reflects ‘cognitive liberation’ (McAdam): overcoming conventional-apologetic readings of reality and the essentialism of the ‘inescapable present’. although social movements are principally characterized by the practical goals they uphold

(democracy-deepening institutional reform), their experience cannot be reduced to its instrumental-utilitarian dimensions. In addition to being means, movements are also expressive ends, dense cultural outcomes. In the background of neo-liberal predominance, what sorts of cultural framings are likely to be effective in promoting alternative visions of the future? For example, does the movement against neo-liberal globalization lay the grounds for the re-emergence of cogent critical narratives, or is it just another fleeting glimmer in a meaningless world?

- **Organisational structures: old dilemmas and the challenge of transnational networks**

Recurrent impasses of traditional hierarchical structures (an appraisal intensified by the dramatic collapse of communism and the emergence of opaque, state-sponsored forms such as the 'cartel parties') have long spurred an agonising quest for alternatives: organising structures that would be based on loose, semi-autonomous networks at the grassroots level without this precluding leadership-level coordination and common action. How does the organisational landscape look like today, in the era of e-mail, SMS, and low-cost international networking? Do these means of communication help solve the organisational problem or do they merely recycle it by transforming its outer appearances? What about democracy as accountability: the view that 'participatory decentralisation' conceals arbitrariness that prepares the ground for murky compromise and incorporation? And what of policy content? Does present-day ideological polymorphism make a contribution to contentious dynamics or is it merely a reflection of political formlessness?

Aspiring equally to theory formation/adjudication and empirical documentation expected to illuminate a wide range of cases drawn from both the global north and the noticeably less known south, the Research Group will organise conferences, panels at international conferences and special events leading to publication in academic journals and edited volumes. It will also seek ways to build a global data bank of protest events open to scholars internationally, whilst also considering the possibility of starting a specialised journal.

Seraphim Seferiades

Panteion University of Athens  
University of Cambridge