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Benoît Rihoux et Tudi Kernalegenn

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EXAMINING ACTIVIST TRAJECTORIES ACROSS FLUID BORDERS: THREE MOST WELCOME ANALYTIC SHIFTS

Benoît RIHOUX et Tudi KERNALEGENN

The analysis of social movements and activism has been a thriving field from the 1970s onwards, both in terms of theoretical development and empirical work. It is probably fair to say that the 1970s also correspond to the first more systematic attempts towards the unpacking of the ‘black box’ of social movement dynamics, following successive theoretical developments, especially around resource mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), framing (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, Rochford Jr, Worden, & Benford, 1986) and ‘new’ social movements (Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, & Giugni, 1995; Touraine, 1978). Yet, it is also fair to say that most of the research effort has been concentrating on social movements as such (at the mesosociological level, i.e. as organizations or large-scale networks) and on societal dynamics around social movements, notably through the analysis of political opportunity structures (Kitschelt, 1986; Tarrow, 1998). The bulk of the literature – both theoretical and empirical – has also, thus far, mostly concentrated on Western democracies, especially on successive waves of ‘new’ social movements and forms of contention, and also to some extent on Latin America (Goirand, 2010; Viterna, 2013), but much less on the Middle East and North African countries (Bennani-Chraïbi & Fillieule, 2003). Further: even though a literature on transnational social movements has begun to emerge since the 1990s (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Siméant, 2010), most empirical work has thus far focused on specific national settings – with noteworthy cross-national comparative analyses as well (e.g. Kriesi et al., 1995; McAdam, McCarthy, Zald, & Mayer, 1996), but still considering most frequently national settings as firm points of reference.

In this context, this themed issue of the *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*, which we have followed as coordinators of the peer reviewing

process¹, is very welcome because it provides a triple analytic shift. This also goes along with notable challenges.

The first shift is to move beyond national arenas and, in the process, to put into question national settings as given. This issue therefore contributes to the welcome and growing literature putting “methodological nationalism” into question, i.e. the cognitive bias that assumes that social reality is “naturally” divided into nation-states and that takes *de facto* the nation-state as the unit of analysis to study the social world (Amelina, Nergiz, Faist, & Schiller, 2012; Dumitru, 2014). Indeed, in many real-life situations, and certainly in the Syria-Lebanon case, the formal, administrative physical borders across (nation-)states are not that relevant in terms of social dynamics. The unraveling of the high-intensity conflict in Syria has generated massive population fluxes – including fluxes of activists, and in particular towards Lebanon. Moreover, as the editors and contributors of this themed issue convincingly argue, Lebanese and Syrian societies and politics have been interconnected for quite some time, with fluid borders and cultural interpenetration. Therefore this themed issue does not revolve around a classical, binary cross-case comparative design – as Syria and Lebanon do not in fact constitute separate cases; they rather constitute two intertwined contexts, and the comparative dimension of this themed issue stems from the rich comparative analyses of activist itineraries across these contexts. This first analytic shift is an important one, because it moves beyond the oft too simplistic concept of “diaspora”: the use of the latter still often takes for granted a simple/dyadic distinction between the country of origin and the host country. It also moves beyond the somewhat mechanistic concept of (cross-country) “diffusion”. The attached empirical challenge for the contributors of this themed issue is then to gain a sufficiently deep understanding of both the Lebanese and the Syrian societal contexts ‘on the ground’, with obviously less physical access to the Syrian field. This themed issue therefore admirably contributes to the growing literature on the territories and spaces of social movements (Combes, Garibay, & Goirand, 2016), illustrating the necessity for the analyst to scrutinize beyond state frontiers and institutionalized spaces.

The second shift is to “go micro” – i.e. to focus on *individual* activists and on their trajectories. This also corresponds to a methodological shift: in order to gain a deep understanding of the transformation(s) of activists in the course of their ‘activist careers’ (Fillieule, 2009; Fillieule & Neveu, 2019), several contributors to this themed issue have adopted an ethnographic approach, with field observation, in-depth interviews of activists themselves, this being complemented by access to a diversity of primary sources. This

1. We express our sincere thanks to the numerous anonymous peer reviewers of the respective articles.

builds upon quite a rich research tradition, especially in French and French-language social sciences at least from the 1990s onwards (Avanza, 2008; Combes, Hmed, Mathieu, Siméant, & Sommier, 2011; Fillieule, Beroud, Hirsch, Masclet, & Sommier, 2018), but with a change of focus in terms of the geographic/cultural area covered, i.e. the Middle East (but see Dorronsoro & Grojean, 2015; El Chazli, 2018). All things considered, this themed issue is more about individuals and their respective biographies, and less about networks. However, by covering multiple cases of activists ‘on the ground’, some light is also shed on network dynamics, e.g. learning effects, patterns of influence, transformations of collective action etc. The ensuing challenge for the contributors of this themed issue is also an empirical one: gaining sufficient in-depth knowledge of each one of the activists under investigation. This requires trust-building, linguistic and communicational skills, but also the ability, for each researcher, to maintain the appropriate epistemological and analytic distance vis-à-vis these activists.

Last but not least, the third shift is to bridge different types and forms of activism: non-violent political activism, guerilla-type armed or ‘revolutionary’ activism, but also humanitarian activism. The contributions in this themed issue also cover activism within different organizational settings: political parties, hybrid political/religious/social organizations (the Hezbollah is a case in point), smaller organizations, more informal networks, etc. Notably, exit (i.e. abandoning activism) is also empirically examined as such. In most of the existing literature, these different types of activism and settings have thus far been apprehended as separate objects. What we learn from some contributions in this themed issue is that some individual activists actually travel across different settings in the course of their activist careers, in ways that may at first appear chaotic or even incoherent. This emphasizes the plasticity of ideological references, that are, up to a certain point, “disposable”. We thus view this themed issue as an invitation to leave the “comfort zone” of the analysis of collective action in pacified settings (e.g. liberal democracies, Western societies etc.): in the real-life world of hard conflicts, there are fluid boundaries between armed and non-armed activism, or between more or less ‘moderate’ or ‘radical’ forms of activism. The challenge, then, is to critically consider the existing theories, concepts and models around activism and collective action – as these have been mostly developed by scholars working on (and living in) pacified settings.

Summing up: this themed issue is very welcome because it invites analysts of activism and collective action to move beyond their area of comfort, and because it invites comparativists to question national boundaries and contexts. It also adopts a most welcome self-critical angle, taking two steps

back: questioning the role of scholars as one type of stakeholder among several others, and questioning the use of languages (e.g. Arabic as a 'language of testimony' v/s English or French as a 'scientific language'?) and scholarly concepts in a non-Western environment. Such a cautious approach is very much to be recommended for any social scientist, especially when examining societal contexts that are remote from those contexts that gave birth to most of the established (read: Western) scholarly literature.

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