

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Theory-Building Beyond Borders

Federico M. Rossi and Marisa von Bülow<sup>1</sup>

The publication of this book comes at a moment of profound changes in the scholarship on social movements, characterized not only by the broadening of the empirical boundaries of the field, but also by greater methodological and theoretical pluralism. This book stretches the current horizons in social movement studies even further, by proposing new concepts and questions. Contributors have very different objects of study and theoretical backgrounds, but they all share a commitment to a dynamic and relational approach to the study of collective action. The volume is organized around three broad themes, which address key current debates in social movement theory: the interactions between routine and contentious politics, the relationship between protest and context, and the organizational configurations of social movements.

The research agenda put forward by the authors is neither defined nor restricted by geographical boundaries, even though the chapters are all based on field research undertaken in Latin America. As such, this volume contributes to what we consider a much-needed and still underdeveloped theory building dialogue in social movement studies, among scholars from the South and from the North, as well as among scholars specialized in different regions.

In the late 1980s, a group of United States and Western European scholars led an important North Atlantic debate that proposed to build common ground for social movement studies (Klandermans et al. 1988; McAdam et al. 1996). In the same spirit of this pioneering dialogue, this book contributes to current efforts to further expand the theoretical frontiers of social movement studies. More specifically, as other authors have been arguing for the past two decades (Foweraker 1995; Gohn 1997; McAdam et al. 2001), we believe that much more can be done in terms of fostering exchange among researchers that study Latin America and other social movement scholars. We propose neither the uncritical adoption of the theories developed in the Global North, nor a stark opposition between the Global South and the Global North. Instead, we hope to contribute to overcoming what Sidney Tarrow (2012, p. 8) has recently called a “tendency to

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<sup>1</sup> Authors' names appear in alphabetical order, having both contributed equally to this chapter. We thank comments made on a previous version by Rebecca Abers, Adrian Gurza Lavalle, Margaret Keck, and an anonymous reviewer.

closure” in the social movements literature, in reference to the lack of integration between the “growing strand of theorizing” coming from the Global South and research by other scholars.

In Latin America, research groups and publications have burgeoned, without necessarily committing to any specific or rigid set of methods or theories. Whereas in the 1980s the focus of debates in the region was on the challenges and opportunities created by transitions to democracy (Jelin 1985; Eckstein 1989), in the 1990s this focus changed, with a more explicit recognition of the plurality of subjects, repertoires, and processes (Gohn 1997; Álvarez et al. 1998). More recently, we have witnessed an increase in the number of scholars studying Latin American social movements and protests from diverse social science traditions (Johnston and Almeida 2006).<sup>2</sup>

Important research agendas within social movement studies have emerged as a result of Latin American scholarship.<sup>3</sup> A prominent example is Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) path-breaking analysis of advocacy coalitions, which kicked-off a boom in studies about the multi-scalar dimension of social movements in Latin America and all around the world.<sup>4</sup>

Too often, however, arguments and research agendas from various regions have developed in parallel and opportunities for collaboration have been missed. We mention only a few potential areas of dialogue in this introduction. For instance, research on Latin America pioneered studies on the relationship between democratization and contentious politics in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>5</sup> but this literature is not well known among social movement theorists that study other regions (Rossi and della Porta 2009). The recent wave of studies about new participatory arenas presents other opportunities for dialogue and theory building. There is a large and fast growing literature that brings together social movement theories, democracy theories, and state theories to analyze a myriad of experiences, going from local councils to national conferences and participatory budgets.<sup>6</sup> Research on this topic

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2 For an analysis of these changes in the recent literature produced by Brazilian scholars, see Abers and von Bülow 2010 and Kunrath 2011.

3 In part, of course, the visibility of important texts has been hindered by the lack of translations from Spanish and Portuguese. In the past few years, however, social movement scholars studying Latin America have sought increasingly to publish their work in English. According to Poulson et al. (2014, Figure 1), between 2002 and 2010 Latin American movements have been the focus of 16 percent of the articles published in the two main journals of the sub-discipline—Mobilization and Social Movement Studies.

4 For example, Hochstetler (2002); Bandy and Smith (2005); della Porta and Tarrow (2005); Tarrow (2005); Grimson and Pereyra (2008); Pleyers (2010); von Bülow (2010); Silva (2013).

5 For example, Mainwaring and Viola (1984); Jelin (1985); Slater (1985); Calderón (1986); Boschi (1987); Mainwaring (1987); Eckstein (1989); Corradi et al. (1992); Escobar and Álvarez (1992); Brysk (1994); Doimo (1995); Oxhorn (1995); Schneider (1995); Collier (1999).

6 For example, Abers (2000); Avritzer (2002); Baiocchi (2005).

has promoted innovative ways to analyze the intricate and changing relationships between the state and social movements. As we explain in the next section, various chapters of this volume speak to this debate.

Another area that calls for a more intensive dialogue is the integration of identity and cultural studies with social movement research. Since the 1980s, for example, scholars of Latin American movements have been making connections between the cultural and economic dimensions of collective action that non-Latin Americanists would certainly find valuable.<sup>7</sup> Finally, since the 2000s, another focus of debate and theory-building comes from the literature on the political economy of mobilization cycles, which integrates the economic and political dimensions of struggles.<sup>8</sup> In the context of the recent wave of anti-austerity protests in the United States and the European Union, this literature gains renewed relevance, in order to better understand how economic crises and grievances affect mobilization. Again, various chapters in this book address these debates in different ways.

With this concern for expanding and diversifying the conversation among scholars of social movements everywhere, this book speaks to crucial contemporary debates in the general literature. Each chapter includes a review of the international literature, and identifies gaps highlighted by empirical research.

All chapters are empirically grounded in current Latin America and shed new light on key social movements, but they do not seek to present a comprehensive overview of the social movement landscape in the region. Thus, most relevant are not the empirical findings of each author (in many cases—though not all—these have been published elsewhere), but the efforts to situate the actions and challenges faced by the social movements they study in a broader conversation, shedding light on key research problems, and allowing us to move forward in sometimes unexpected ways.

## **Routine and Contentious Politics**

The first section of this book brings together three chapters, all of which focus on the interactions between routine and contentious politics, or what are sometimes called “conventional” and “unconventional” forms of political participation. The chapters by Rossi, Mische, and Abers and Tatagiba present a common general approach to this problem. The authors go beyond the artificial boundaries that much of the social movement literature builds between routine and contentious forms of collective action, while acknowledging the need to analyze the challenges

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7 For example, Sader (1988); Jelin (1990); Escobar and Álvarez (1992); Dagnino (1994, 2003); Foweraker (1995); Álvarez et al. (1998); Garretón (2002); Lucero (2008); Warren (2012).

8 For example, Walton and Schefner (1994); Auyero (2003); Yashar (2005); Almeida and Johnston (2006); Rhodes (2006); Roberts and Portes (2006); Almeida (2007); Roberts (2008); Silva (2009); Rice (2012); Almeida (2014); Rossi (2015).

faced by social movements when choosing how and where to make claims. For all of these authors, this debate requires exploring the interaction between social movements, political actors, and state institutions.

The chapter by Federico M. Rossi presents an innovative conceptual framework for understanding the different strategies of social movements. By differentiating between the well-known concept of “repertoire of contention” and the new concepts of “repertoire of strategies” and “stock of legacies,” readers are offered a different window into the historically rooted processes of strategy making and performing by social movements. These concepts allow us to understand what happens when movements do not deploy their repertoire of contention. This chapter is empirically grounded in a study of the Argentine *piquetero* movement—one of the most important social movements of the region in the past decade. Based on in-depth fieldwork, the author walks us through the maze of organizations, strategies, and ideologies that together make up this fragmented movement.

Ann Mische analyzes the tensions between partisan and civic modes of engagement, thus presenting an important contribution to the literature on activism, and, more specifically, the literature on the relationships between social movements and political parties. She focuses on youth activism during Brazil’s period of democratic reconstruction, presenting an analysis that emphasizes the ambivalence and the tensions inherent in these relationships, which, nonetheless, do not present unsurmountable obstacles to collective action. To explore movement activities in the context of these tensions, she reformulates the concept of “publics” and proposes to go beyond the divide between instrumental and communicative forms of action, so often present—as she demonstrates—among theorists of democracy and of civil society.

Rebecca Neaera Abers and Luciana Tatagiba analyze what they call “institutional activism.” Based on the interactions between social movements and government in Brazil, they present an important contribution to better understanding the porous boundaries between state and civil society. In spite of the recent upsurge in attention to this topic in the context of the rise of leftist governments in the region, the authors argue that this is not a new phenomenon. It is also not limited to a specific public policy issue, as their past research on other policy arenas unequivocally shows. Perhaps, they suggest, this kind of activism has had less visibility in the literature because it has less visibility empirically, and its impacts are unknown.

Interestingly, Abers and Tatagiba show how their analysis of the Brazilian case has strong parallels with Banaszak’s (2009) study about feminists working within the US federal bureaucracy, thus effectively bridging the scholarship on social movements and states in the North and South of the Americas. Students of other regions and of other social movements will also be able to relate to Mische’s analysis of attempts to ban partisan identities in the Brazilian student movement, and will benefit from her agency-centered model for understanding the tensions and ambiguities in the interactions between political parties and social movements. Consider, for example, the relationship between parties and the Civic

Forum in the Czech Republic during democratization (Glenn 2003), and the links between social movements and rightist and leftist parties during the process of neoliberal reforms in India (Desai 2012). Mische's analytical framework also helps to understand other cases in Latin America. To give just one example, there are strong parallels with the ambiguous but continuous process of distancing between the Chilean student movement and traditionally allied political parties (von Bülow and Bidegain, forthcoming).

Similarly, Rossi's conceptual framework will be useful for scholars who seek to explore the link between micro decisions and macro changes in repertoires in other social movements. This framework could help explain, for instance, why and how some of the guerrilla strategies formulated by Ernesto "Che" Guevara for rural Bolivia and Congo were adapted to its urban use by sectors of the Black Panthers Party and, later, the Black Liberation Army in the United States (Young 2006; Bloom and Martin 2013; Freedman 2013). It can also help understand the combination of collaborative and contentious strategies in the interplay between the landless peasants' movement and Brazilian party politics (Vergara-Camus 2009). Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that it is impossible to understand social movements, in Latin America and elsewhere, without considering how they interact with other political and social actors and state institutions in both routine and contentious ways.

### **Protest and Environmental, Economic, and Political Opportunities**

While the first group of chapters moves beyond traditional formulations and boundaries, the second group of authors focuses on a debate that has a long (and contentious) history in social movement studies. These chapters explore the relationship between protest and economic, political, and environmental change. Of course, this is not a new topic in the Latin American literature, much of which sought to understand the relationship between collective action and authoritarianism in the 1970s and 1980s, and, later, the impacts of transitions to democracy.

In this book, we present two contributions on this debate. The chapter by Paul D. Almeida focuses on the effects of a still understudied dimension of the political context on social movements: the role of threats in explaining collective action. While acknowledging that both opportunity and threat may—in complex environments—activate episodes of collective action, this chapter offers new insights by offering a novel typology of threats. Based on extensive knowledge of various Central American cases of mobilization, the author distinguishes among threats of state repression, state-attributed economic problems, and environmental harms. Such a broad approach to threats allows us to move forward in understanding the impacts of the political context on social movements. At the same time, it underscores the dynamic character of collective action. The chapter ends with a call for more research on the timing of threats as catalysts for mobilization.

Ligia Tavera Fenollosa's chapter offers a framework for analyzing the unintended outcomes of social movements, a goal that has been overshadowed by the literature's focus on assessing intended impacts. Based on an analysis of the 1985 Earthquake Victims Movement in Mexico City, the author argues that this movement's success in meeting its stated goals is only part of the story. Most interesting is how the movement contributed to Mexico's democratization process, even though this was not on its explicit agenda. Thus, in this chapter the political context simultaneously influences and is influenced by social movements in unexpected ways that require, as the author argues, distancing ourselves from a movement-centered perspective and thinking of social movements as historical events.

These arguments travel well beyond the geographical limits of Latin America. For instance, the chapter by Almeida presents a welcome call for a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between protest and political context, which can and should be taken seriously by the literature on the topic. An analysis of a variety of threats can help to better explain the emergence of many social movements against mining, transgenic agriculture, nuclear projects, and dams in contemporary Latin America. The analysis of the role of environmental threats can also help explain the emergence of environmental movements elsewhere. For instance, the *Ekoglasnot*, a movement that became the first important defiance to the national Communist regime in Bulgaria (Petrova 2004). Tavera Fenollosa's call for thinking about social movements as historical events presents yet another example of a contribution to a broad debate, which is in no way restricted to the case of Mexico City. Studies of democratization processes in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Northern Africa, also show the relevance of taking an eventful perspective in social movement studies (Beissinger 2002; della Porta 2014).

### **New Organizational Repertoires**

The third debate approached in this book focuses on changes in organizational ecologies and networks of social movements within and across national boundaries. Two chapters address the processes of transnationalization and diversification of organizational forms, and the challenges and opportunities these present for social movements and other civil society organizations.

Adrian Gurza Lavalle and Marisa von Bülow bring together their previous research on organizational ecologies and on transnational networks, respectively, to analyze the intermediation roles of what they call "institutionalized brokers." In spite of the recent interest in the mechanism of brokerage in contentious politics, the creation of specific organizations in charge of intermediation within and beyond civil society has not been the object of systematic research. The authors argue for a dynamic approach to brokerage as a process, in order to better understand how it shapes relationships among actors through time. Thus, the chapter advances

a research agenda that seeks to acknowledge the challenges and trade-offs of intermediation within expanded organizational ecologies.

The chapter by Rose J. Spalding builds on the growing interest in the creation and functioning of transnational networks. More specifically, it contributes to recent efforts at better understanding how and why actors move through multiple scales by introducing two mobilization processes: the “domestic loop” and the “deleveraging hook.” The first shows how domestic networks bring home discourse and framing infused with international learning, thus advancing our knowledge about the national impacts of transnational activism. The second examines activist efforts to address the clash between democratic decision-making and externally enforced neoliberal rules. Based on the author’s extensive knowledge of Central America (and more specifically of the anti-mining mobilizations in El Salvador), the chapter also contributes to better understanding the problems that routinely emerge in North–South movement alliances. It argues for conceptual refinement of the debate about the roles of actors in such alliances, differentiating between types of international nongovernmental organizations.

Both of these chapters build on the international literature and move forward by proposing new concepts and typologies that can be useful in thinking about other empirical cases. For instance, in their analysis about institutionalized brokers, Gurza Lavalle and von Bülow mention how organizations during the civil rights movement in the United States played similar types of brokerage roles. In spite of the recent interest in the study of brokerage in Latin America, this is neither a new topic, nor one that is restricted to the region. Spalding’s analysis builds on previous attempts to study the ways in which national actors strategize and build coalitions beyond national borders. Thus, the framework proposed builds on Keck and Sikkink’s “boomerang” (1998), Tarrow’s “rooted cosmopolitans” (2005), della Porta and Caiani’s “paths to Europeanization” (2009), and von Bülow’s “pathways to transnationality” (2010), and contributes to this literature by further specifying actors and processes. As they put forward new typologies of institutionalized brokers and transnational processes, these chapters present research agendas that open doors for thinking about organizational power and coalition building in different contexts.

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This book seeks to foster a greater dialogue among scholars that study different regions of the world. The various chapters of the book express an underlying common interest of the authors in developing a dynamic-relational approach to the study of social movements. However, this book does not propose a unique vision. Rather, it enriches the field with innovative ideas that travel well to other regions and cultures.

The book closes with a chapter by Margaret E. Keck, in which she discusses the potentialities of this research agenda. The author connects the ideas put forward

separately in the chapters, and, in doing so, masterfully moves forward in the dialogue we propose to generate.

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