

Contemporary challenges for the study of social movements: interview with Donatella della Porta

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Défis contemporains pour l'étude des mouvements sociaux: entretien avec Donatella della Porta

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Italian professor Donatella della Porta is a political scientist and world reference in the field of social movement studies. She graduated in Political Science at *Università di Catania* in 1978 and studied under the supervision of Alain Touraine at *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*, where she received the *Diplôme d'Etudes Approfondies* in 1981. She got her PhD at the European University Institute in 1987, with the thesis "Underground political organizations. Leftwing terrorism in Italy" under supervision of Professor Philippe Schmitter. From 1993 to 2003, she was a professor of Political Science at *Università degli Studi di Firenze*. Between 2003 and 2015, she was a Professor of Sociology at the European University Institute. Since 2015, she is a professor at *Scuola Normale Superiore*, where she coordinates the Center on Social Movement Studies - COSMOS (<http://cosmos.sns.it/>).

The main research interests of Professor della Porta relate to the themes of social movements, political violence, protest policing and corruption. As empirical objects, she devoted herself to the study of radical left movements in Italy and Germany, the Global Justice Movement, the construction of the World Social Forum, and more recently contemporary protest cycles such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and *Indignados* in Spain.

Among her main books we can cite introductory works on the theory of social movements (Della Porta, Diani, 2006), studies on political violence (Della Porta, 1995; Della Porta, 2013) and policing on protests (Della Porta, Reiter, 1998; Della Porta, Peterson, Reiter, 2006). More recently, della Porta has been interested in the economic dimension of social processes in interaction with movements and democracy, especially in the context of the adoption of

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How to quote: Fernandes, E. G. (2019) *Contemporary challenges for the study of social movements: interview with Donatella della Porta. Interview granted to Eduardo Georjão Fernandes (interview and translation). Psicologia Política, 19(45), p. 391-399*

austerity policies in Europe. In this sense, della Porta's central concern in the contemporary study of social movements is to “bring capitalism back” (Della Porta, 2015) to the debate as an essential element for the sociological and political understanding of global conflicts.

In her studies della Porta starts from a specific perspective, the Political Process Theory (Tilly, 1978), more recently also identified as Contentious Politics (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001). Analyzing meso level social processes, della Porta seeks to mobilize concepts that are central to those theories, such as repertoires of contention, engagement and interpretative frameworks, to explain the causal mechanisms (Gerring, 2007) that produce transformations in the organizations of social movements, which are always understood in interaction with the other actors of the political arenas.

In this interview we seek to deal with themes related to the contemporary challenges of the field of studies in social movements. We seek to ask della Porta about how the current configurations of global activism impose theoretical and methodological challenges, especially for the explanation of subjective and identitarian aspects of collective action. We also intend to deal with theoretical aspects in relation to specific contexts, such as the growth of extreme right movements and parties in Europe and the end of the cycle of progressive governments in Latin America

Professor della Porta, I would like to start with a more general question: in the contemporary studies of social movements, what are the main dilemmas that scholars have encountered? In other words, what are the main challenges that the contemporary context brings to the study of social movements and collective action?

- I think there are many challenges, because the type of social movements and the type of contentious politics that are developing are different from the ones that were addressed by social movement studies traditionally. So, one main challenge that I tried to address in recent work is how to bring in transformations in capitalism and issues of class. Because the mainstream area of social movements has mainly focused on so called post-materialist (or “new social movements”) and has tended to forget instead the presence of movements that are addressing at the same time issues of distribution and issues of recognition. It is not that these movements were not present in the past. Some researches indicated that material conflicts were still relevant, but not being the main focus of social movement studies. So while cognate fields, like the studies on revolution for instance, still focused on structural changes, this was not so much true for social movement studies. And a problem with reintroducing capitalism in the analysis is that it has been forgotten for a long time, not only in social movement studies, but also in areas like labor sociology. So it is part of a broader challenge. There is still research done, for instance within Marxist type of tradition, but there, I think, the challenge is to take into account also structural transformations but without forgetting agency. So that it is not just a matter of looking at the type of structural basis for social movements, but still you need to understand when and in which directions these types of class conflicts are developing. So politics is still important for me, the agencies of movements are still important for me, but this needs to be combined with issues of class. Then another type of challenge is that social movement studies have mainly focused on left wing, progressive type of movements, while nowadays you have also always questions about which is the relationship between social movements on the left and the development of challengers on the right. It is true that very often the challengers on the right have taken more party type of forms than social movement type of forms, but they [the parties] for sure constantly tried to mobilize also their basis. Yesterday for instance there were the elections in Sweden, with the Swedish Democrats, which is a right wing party, but this party also attempts to mobilize as a social movement against migrants and so on. And for this I think that we need also to develop concepts and methods. Because we have always been lucky to work and do empirical research on the social movements we like, populated by “nice people” that usually welcome us, but now one has to think also in terms of how to upda-

te not only the theoretical tool kits, but also the methodological ones.

To what extent do you think these challenges lead us to question the very concept of “social movements”? Do you think the concept of social movements that is in your book with Professor Mario Diani (Della Porta, Diani, 2006) and that defines movements based on three elements (actors that have a collective identity, linked by dense informal networks and involved in conflicting relationships with clearly defined opponents) is sufficient to account for the multiplicity of contemporary movements? At a recent conference at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Professor Mario Diani even suggested that we should abandon the concept of social movements...

- Well, my friend Mario Diani is always a bit provocative. And I do not think that he really wanted to abandon everything. I have a sort of Weberian conception of concepts. So I think that concepts are ideal types that fit more or less well with empirical reality. And in the phenomena which are relevant nowadays I think there is a component which we can understand through social movement studies. So I do not think that we need to dismiss the concept of social movements. Even though we can discuss, as we have always done, to which extent networks need to be intense and dense in order to be able to call something a movement, we have to be aware of the fact that nowadays movements tend to go visible and invisible very quickly. And that collective identities are very much under construction. So in many cases it is not the “strong” notion of social movements which comes into play, but the fact that there are actors that are loosely networked, use disruptive forms of actions and challenge authorities through disruptive forms of actions. I think it is still very much part of the world we try to understand. What I think is important is to avoid to narrow the focus on a field like social movements. Social movements has been a very successful field, [social movements’ field] is one of the most important areas in the American Sociological Association, in American Political Science Association. Also in countries like Mexico and in European continent [social movements’ field] is more and more important. But the risk is to become self-referential. While I think that what has been useful with the approach on contentious politics is the attempt to open it up to interactions with other concepts. Because, as I mentioned, social movements is an ideal type. When look at concrete actors, take trade unions for instance, we have hybrid forms of actors. We are studying for instance youth protest and you have alternative sport clubs, you have counter cultural events, you have music bands. You cannot say these are the typical social movement organizations, but they are part of networks in which they also mobilize and so on. So I think that we always need to update our concepts to see which type of specification we need, but throwing away concepts means also throwing away knowledge that has been accumulated on these concepts. That is that I think that this knowledge [on social movements] is still important for us.

Specifically, I would like to focus on the concept of collective identity: do you, who studied with Professor Alain Touraine, understand that the concept of identity is an important tool for the analysis of social movements? How do you understand "collective identity" today?

- I think also the concept of collective identity cannot be thrown away. Of course we have to recognize that there are very different types of meanings given to the concept in different disciplines. You cited Touraine. Touraine has an idea of collective identity which would lean towards class consciousness, while others scholars, also in social movements studies have used it in a micro type of perspective, more looking at the ways in which individuals go from an individual identity into an identification with others and how the process is then politicized and so on. So Bert Klandermans for instance, as a Psychologist, has looked at this type of dynamics at the micro level, while Touraine has tried to understand how the big transformations in the identities of classes (and social movements as one of the challenging actors in society) have developed. I have worked more on the meso level, so

more looking at the organizational type of identities, and my impression is that there is nowadays a lot of “identity work”, work which is done in order to try to address the problems of liquid societies. So in order to try to provide identifications that are more easy for progressive social movements to address. So identifications tend of course to interact with ideology, narratives, and I think it is extremely important nowadays, because one of the challenges is developing a counter hegemonic type of narratives. So for me this is related with the collective identities now. Social movements tend to have always worked a lot on the attempt to develop new emerging identities: women’s movement, environmental movement, for example. Now I think that the challenge is to move from fragmented and specific type of identities into more broad and global identities. So at the same time the language of the past needs updating: the working class could not be the only collective identity, but also I think there is an attempt to go beyond fragmentation, and “identification work” is important.

The previous question on identity points to the more subjective aspects of collective action. Do you think that fields that place greater emphasis on subjective processes, such as Political Psychology and Social Psychology, offer contributions to the theories of social movements? How to combine more subjective aspects of social phenomena with more structural approaches of Sociology and Political Science?

- I have often worked on social construction of reality (Berger, Luckmann, 2004), which is not the Psychological type of approach, but I think it offers a terrain on which micro and more meso type of approach can meet each other. Because what I think is important, what is a concern for Sociologists is the fact that we deal with human beings who tend to react not to structural changes, but to their perceptions of structural changes. So what is important is to understand, let us say, for instance, why, in some countries, some types of grievances against or about inequalities produce movements on the left and in other countries instead they turn into xenophobic type of movements. And there I think it is not my own approach to look at the individual levels, at the level of individual type of processes. But I think Social Psychology or Political Psychology could help a lot in understanding the dynamics, the mechanisms through which some types of narratives, some types of stereotypes about the others, but also some more positive feelings, like solidarity, develop. And I am not an expert on emotions, but in several parts of my research I met emotions, because I think social movements are “passionate politics”, they are not really routine type of politics. And I think that these interactions with Psychologists could be very helpful for Sociologists and probably for Psychologists as well in order to go beyond a more individualistic type of approach.

Do you understand that there is a tension/incompatibility between movements that are based centrally on identity as the main claim (as in the case of gender movements) and more traditional movements with a more Marxist bias, whose central agenda is the economic/class dimension? How do you understand the tension that was constituted in recent decades between social movements that focus on identity demands/recognition and social movements that focus on redistributive demands/class struggle? How does this tension contribute to the study of social movements today?

- Well, I think in terms of sociological type of analysis, something that for instance Jeff Goodwin suggested and I am trying to do in one of my next books is to see the class dimension also in movements of recognition. It is not so clear cut the distinction between movements of distribution and movements of recognition, because what counts is the social construction of the claim, of the class, of the collective identities. And so what I am doing now in this book (Della Porta, 2015) is for instance to try to look at the social basis of different movements. From the Catalan independence movement to student movements, to labor movements, precarious works and so on. But at the same time also to react and to go back to a certain extent to literature on class. I got my first degree, my bache-

lor, writing on social classes. And there was at that time a debate about how many dimensions you have in the concept of class. It was a debate between Frank Parkin and Ralf Miliband, among others. And from this debate what I think is still relevant is to see that class is not just the material interest. But it is also issues of status and it is issues of political recognition. So I think that if we put this together, then we see that there are not really movements that could be read just as movements of recognition or movements that could be read just as movements of redistribution, but the issues are combined in what is nowadays defined intersectionality, but which I think that a sophisticated idea of classes already had. So, discriminations in terms of class narrowly understood, gender, race, age and so on I think combine with each other.

One dimension that has been widely studied by social movements' scholars is the use of new technologies and the role of social networks in shaping contemporary activism. How do you think new technologies impact the configuration of collective identities?

It is very broad, it is very important. I have just contributed to a book by Emiliano Treré and others in which the debate was exactly on how technological developments shape, but also are resisted, are used by actors. So agencies and technologies. And what I see is that, of course, communication is important for movements, as it has always been. Movements are, like other actors, using a broad stratification of means of communication. So not only the social media, but also the very old media, from the radio, television, face to face encounter, all the different ways in which public sphere has been defined. So I think one should consider both. There are, of course, technologies that transform the way in which we communicate. And I think that going from WEB 1.0 to 2.0 you had transformations in the capacity of the individuals to produce their own forms of communication, telephones, and iPhones and so on. And this has moved... how can I say? This transformed the structures of social movements. Jeffrey Juris talked of a shift from a logic of networking into a logic of aggregation. So it is true that some of these new technologies allow for flash type of movements, very fast mobilization, but also fast demobilization, because they [the new technologies] make the organization structure less relevant. But at the same time I think that social movement activists are aware of the challenges. So you have very few campaigns that are based only on social medias. And on the contrary if you think about the so called Arab Spring, or *Indignados*, or movements in Mexico and so on, there is a use of social media, but there is also a lot of concerns about physical reoccupation of spaces.

A few years ago we witnessed the emergence of “new” movements and cycles of protest considered innovative, such as Occupy Wall Street, 15M in Spain, the Arab Spring, June 2013 in Brazil. On the other hand, we see recently the emergence of conservative “counter-movements”, such as those that culminated in the election of Trump in the United States; in Europe we witness the refugee crisis and the election of right-wing and far-right governments. Do you interpret the current moment as a period of predominance of conservative “counter-movements”? What position do progressive movements occupy in this context? What innovations have you identified in progressive movements to confront these conservative agendas?

- I tend to be optimistic by psychological needs. My husband says ‘too optimistic’. So I have the impression that we live in trouble times. Gramsci used the term of “interregnum”, a moment in which all is dying and the new is not born yet. So there are moments of, let us say, fast transformations, and I think they are moments of challenges, but also moments of opportunities. We tend to have this very fast process of enthusiasm and disillusion. So 2011 was a year of enthusiasm for the Arab Spring, the Occupy, the *Indignados* and so on, 2013 was Brazil also mobilizing and so on. Then I think there were big moments of disappointment: Trump, there was repression, in Latin American

wave the revival of the left was challenged, but I think that we always have also resistance. In the United States citizens are very strongly resisting Trump, in Brazil the left is under challenge, but in Mexico it [the left] had more success than expected. In Spain for instance you have a situation in which, in the turn of two weeks, you went from the pessimistic perspective of a very right wing, center right with PP and an extreme right with *Ciudadanos*, trying to radicalize, polarize the conflict with Catalonia into a coalition of parties around sort of a renewed PSOE that are going in the direction of a more federalist way. It is always open. So I do not want to be too optimistic about Spain, but I see that from the point of view of the emotions of the people, including friends, scholars I am contact in Spain, the emotional atmosphere changed quite rapidly. So a friend who has been very depressed a few weeks ago told me “yes, we are living a Spring moment in Spain”. And I think that emotions are important, because they bring about sort of positive spirals. So they [emotions] change people. This is one of the lessons in social movements: you need hope in order to mobilize, and I think some of these events are giving hope. It is a challenge, but I would not say that it is a moment in which we just have to survive the great regression. It is a moment of struggle, I think.

One issue that especially interests me when we are dealing with conservative “counter-movements” are the state's strategies for raising the costs of collective action. Recently, studies have dealt with the sophistication of police strategies mainly from the Global Justice Movements in the early 2000s, with the constitution of “strategic incapacitation” models for activism. This is a context that is opposed to a tendency, identified by you between the 1980s and 1990s, of greater tolerance of social protest. How can we explain this more repressive trend today? What is the role of new technologies (such as the use of surveillance cameras and the monitoring of social networks) in the production of contemporary forms of repression?

- I think that it follows from what I said about highly conflictual moment in which we live, in which also repression is increasing. Some researches on the policing of protest show that the type of reactions by the police and by the governments tend to be linked to the perceptions that they have of the activists, of the challengers. While in the period in which there has been more of a move towards de-escalating police, this has been linked to the acceptance of movements that have become more moderate and were perceived as more moderate. Now in this more polarized atmosphere there is an attempt to reduce and deny the protest rights of the people. Together with this I think one should also consider that the type of de-escalating policing that had occurred did not mean that there was an acceptance of every type of protest. It was more of a reciprocal adaption in which what was considered to be worth negotiating was moderate type of movements: trade unions in the period in which they were recognized actors, peace movements, because they [these movements] were considered to be quite supported also by the public opinion. But escalations had always happened, and in moments in which movements are perceived to be more challenging it [the repression] returns. A final point I wanted to make about this is it is always a matter of the perceptions of the elites about themselves. So other actors are perceived to be challenging when the elites feel they are weakening. I think elites perceive that there is a crisis of legitimacy and that they think they need to defend themselves. You think forms of protests, plus, additionally, of course, there are the technologies that can be used, but I think there are also different attitudes by elites that feel legitimized, so there are more tolerant forms of protests, while elites which feel instead delegitimized tend to react more drastically. And in fact I think it is the general trend in some regimes to move from liberal to illiberal forms of democracy. In Latin America there have been these definitions of “*dictablanda*” and “*democradura*”, and you have many cases also in democracies in which there has been a clear restriction. Democratic regimes went into direction of hybrid regimes, like in Turkey, Hungary, Poland...

Now I would like to deal with Latin America. We are experiencing in the region the end of an era of progressive governments and the emergence of conservative governments. Do you understand that there is a connection between the global context of the rise of conservatism and the current Latin American moment? How do you understand the action of progressive social movements in the region?

- What I have learned about Latin America is specially through Latin American scholars. I have supervised PhD students, like Federico Rossi and others, and have read the work of scholars like Kenneth Roberts, who I am following a lot, but I am not an expert in Latin America. So my impression is that it is interesting to develop some systematic comparison between Southern Europe and Latin America, recognizing also the differences within the regions. So not to develop stereotypes about what is typical of Southern Europe or Mediterranean syndromes, or Latin American syndromes, because there is a broad variety, historical experiences and so on. Probably in Latin America even more than in Southern Europe. And I think that for me Latin America is still quite vibrant from the political point of view. There have been a lot of ideas, innovations and so on that have come from Latin America. And even if those hopes of the left-wing revival of a few years ago are now challenged (Venezuela is under stress, Brazil, with a different history, is also under stress), but I still see that Uruguay, Chile, Mexico represent experiences of innovations that I think still mean that it is important to keep channels of interaction globally.

In my period here at the *Scuola Normale Superiore*, I identified, among professors and students, the recurrence of a discourse on the need to combat academic Eurocentrism by producing studies in other realities besides the “Global North”. At the same time, I identify that there are limitations in the importation of theoretical models constructed to understand the “Global North” to the “Global South”, a critique already widely formulated by postcolonial and decolonial authors. In the field of social movements, how do you identify we can produce a theoretical dialogue between “North” and “South”?

- I think that there is this sort of double challenge. On the one hand, there is, of course, a tool kit of concepts that has been developed in certain geopolitical areas and that should be updated in order to be used in other areas. But I think this should not discourage comparative work, because I think that one of the risks which develops in a division of scientific work around area studies is that we consider by default that any areas need to be addressed with very specific concepts. And what I tried to do in some of the recent works (for instance this book “Where did the revolution go?” – Della Porta, 2016) is to say ‘of course, for instance the Arab Spring has some specificities, of course Central Eastern Europe has a different type of historical development’, but at the same time, I think it is very fruitful to try to compare across areas rather than following the traditions of Political Science to focus on most similar cases. Also to compare beyond, because also I think it is more and more important, since different areas are in contact with each other. So you do not have Latin America isolated from Europe, or Europe isolated from Africa. And so this for me means that the attempt to develop cross national comparison, which is also cross area comparison, could be helpful in order to go beyond the sort of colonial use of the concepts developed in the North for the South, but also allowing for going beyond isolation. And if I look at Latin American studies from the perspective I know best, of Political Science, there has been a lot of scholars sometimes using very specific concepts: “incorporation” (Rossi, 2017), for instance. I started to supervise Federico Rossi and did not understand what it was. And I think that reflection on these different concepts (“populism” is another one) is important, so that this type of cross areas comparison must imply also critical learning about different ways in which phenomena have been addressed - in some cases similar phenomena, in other cases different phenomena. But I think that there is a lot of learning to do there. And in fact also in this book on movement parties I found very useful for myself to look beyond the three European cases that we

have addressed, Podemos, SYRIZA and the Five Star Movement, and to look also at the literature by Latin American scholars and experts in Latin America, on MAS, for instance, but also on PT in the past.

Finalist, I would like to raise a question about the position of scholars in relation to social movements. We know that much of the field of study on social movements is formed by researchers and professors who have an ideological position that is convergent with the movements that they study. On the one hand, there is a group of academics who understand that research is an action that is engaged and inseparable of political/transformational purposes. On the other hand, there are those who defend the search for a “scientific neutrality” towards the studied objects. What is your positioning in face of this debate? What do you think is the role of science in face of political struggles?

- I think that it is legitimate to have different positions on a continuum, which is, I would say, moving very often also for individuals. So, for instance, if I take my own life history, in some moments I was also an activist, in some moments I was not. In some moments I tended to work on moments that were more detached from my own work, region and so on. In other cases I also worked with movements in which I was, to a certain extent, involved. And I do not think that it would be ethically correct to say ‘if you want to study a movement, you do not have to participate in that movement’, because I think that we are political beings, that we work on political issues and that it could be wrong to say that it does not happen also for people who work on other fields, that ‘if you study parties you cannot be member of a party’, or others things. But from the methodological point of view I think that it is important, when one does research, even when doing research which is more useful for the movements, to distinguish the moment of research from the moment of taking a political type of position. So, for instance, I tried not to work, from the scientific point of view, on organizations I belong to. Because I thought this would confuse myself and also confuse the other people in the organizations I worked with. Or at least, when you do that, for ethnographic work and other work, try to develop comparative research design in which you also look at other type of organizations. And then what I saw is that very often this has positive implications also for the interactions with social movements. When I was invited to present my work by social movement organizations they did not want to just have an activist with some more knowledge, but they wanted to have some sort of... wanted to know ‘what is truly the reality’. This was the case of the labor movement in the past and so on. So, good empirical research (not biased politically) is important in order to understand what is going on.

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Recebido em: 24/09/2018

Aprovado em: 25/09/2018