Debate – Forum 2013 Development and Change

Transforming Activisms 2010+: Exploring Ways and Waves

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Across the world, the beginning of this decade has seen an abrupt and seemingly contagious upwelling of civic activism against the prevailing economic and political order. Illustrations of what is going on can be seen in Latin America, such as in Chile, where students took the lead in public protest against neoliberal measures affecting education, or in Guatemala and Ecuador, where indigenous people rallied against illegal mining activities by transnational corporations. In Tunisia, a self-immolation triggered a popular uprising which toppled the regime of President Ben Ali. A common interpretation is that this regime-changing event initiated what would be called the start of the 'Arab Spring' when the revolutionary wave spread to Mubarak's Egypt, Ghadaffi's Lybia, Yemen and Assad's Syria (Bayat, 2013). At the same time, while less spectacular, elsewhere in Africa mostly non-violent large scale protests against the behaviour of incumbent rulers were reported in Cote-d'Ivoire, Malawi, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Ethiopia, Swaziland, Nigeria, Sudan and Mozambique (Gabay, 2012). In India, Anna Hazare headed an unexpected, widely supported anti-corruption movement (Shah, 2011), followed in early 2013 by an unprecedented popular campaign to protect women's rights. At the same time, in China artists have initiated and sustain critical debate on freedom of speech and access to information. In Washington DC activist groups against the Wall Street 'financial mafia' started a movement under the banner of 'Occupy' leading to similar *indignados* mass activism in hundreds of cities throughout the globe (Hayduk, 2012).

These numerous geographically dispersed - but in one way or another related - acts of public defiance and rebellion, suggest that something exceptional is happening within and across multiple political landscapes. This Forum edition of Development and Change therefore contributes to debates about the nature and 'why now?' of multiple spontaneous civic mobilizations. Are these different from previous acts of popular upheaval and the social movements associated with them? And, do they signal a turning point away from a history of a waxing and waning of such activisms?

Obviously, overtly and covertly, all types of activism incorporate specific geo-historical conditions and dynamics. The Arab Spring, for example, likely started many years back in the Western Sahara (Chomsky, 2012). Yet, examples and timings of recent activisms seem connected to each other in ways which suggest that large scale underlying processes are in play that might be perceived as a 'globalisation of disaffection' which has reached a 'tipping point'. In this vein, in identifying a set of common properties across contemporary instances of major public disobedience, some authors argue in favour of the emergence of a new age-cohort of activists, similar to the '1968 generation' (Gills and Gray, 2012: 208). But what exactly are the common elements of now? Might a commonality lie in globally disbursed, timeous expressions of activist social capital emanating from decades of meetings and exchanges, sustained and abetted by advances in communications technology? Are today's commonalities stemming from the inter-generational effects of global economic inter-dependencies that erode prospects of a better future for the many? Is a collective, 'borderless' consciousness and transnational identity emerging in response, for example, to wicked problems such as climate change threatening livelihoods of those who are already vulnerable, escalating inequity and the destabilizing volatility of power shifts between well established and emerging mega-economies? But, across diverse contexts, might commonalities of contemporary activisms both rely on and signal ways in which relational power is being redefined and navigated towards less coercive and dominating modalities? Is this the deep substance of 'transformation' being called for and aspired to?

Such queries were raised by a group of academics and activists trying to pin down what might be the key characteristic in the activisms spreading across the world (Berkhout and Jansen, 2012). Progress in this debate made clear we were not dealing with a 'new' activism, as this would give rise to distractive arguments about (escape from) historical determinism (Icaza and Vazquez, 2013). Distractive also in the sense that the task at hand is to understand what gave impetus, around 2010, to an upsurge of energy where people in all walks of life and locations decided to get to grips with the 'old' politics that determined their lives and future prospects? Hence, 2010 is taken as a point of reference, a sort of milestone towards an uncertain socio-political and economic future which is still unfolding.

This paper will try to position the notion of *Activisms 2101+* in terms of its nature and relevance to current debates about citizens-led socio-political change. We will argue that contemporary activisms constitute a distinct shift in the character of civic engagement as it surfs on waves created by the increased availability and use of social media and electronic

communication. Technological advances are not a cause as such, but they have certainly opened up innovative avenues for people to challenge existing configurations of power. They become better able to challenge the politics and policies of a state that are relied on to gain the compliance needed to propagate and optimize the current economic order: an amoral system for improving human well-being which calls for stability, predictability and attaining social harmony at minimum cost. In addition, new types of spontaneous (political) organizing, viral, non-violent confrontation and forms of 'non-directed' campaigning are emerging that merit attention as additions to an activism repertoire. These capabilities are potentially critical in 'invisibly' spreading, adapting and sustaining the effects of the more overt, media-catching forms of activism that complicate assessments of achievements. Consequently, the lack of overt, publicized mass expressions of disaffection may mislead to a conclusion that, as in the past, activism has dissipated. Such a conclusion may miss the daily activism of the local, of the neighbourhood, of what is under the radar. Yet, such activisms can gain a self-sustain momentum through a technologically enriched repertoire of collaborative agency.[1] Prompted by 'events', less public channels for expression seen in the public 'squares' of Egypt, Russia and elsewhere can feed the 'subterranean' forces of civic agency and politics which emerge elsewhere without a clear linkage (Kaldor and Selchow, 2012).

This debate must recognise that activisms directed at establishing a more inclusive, just, tolerant and sustainable world order described in this volume are mirrored by agency that seeks to champion and impose alternative values seen, for example, in the aims of Boko Haram in Nigeria and of neo-fascist movements observed in Europe. Such a reality points to the ethical and normative challenge of analysing 'activisms' beyond the eye of the beholder. An implicit contention in world views and activisms which seek to gain power towards disparate imagined futures must be born in mind. While problematic, but not addressed in this Forum Issue, in the dynamics of socio-political change the notion of 'uncivil' society and agency must be take into account (Monga, 2009).

The guiding question in our debate is: 'what is the nature of the post-2010 activisms and who are its key actors?' The purpose is to pin down more precisely the extent to which manifestations of *Activisms 2010+* can be characterized as different from one or two decades back. Doing so involves queries about ends and means on the one hand and the actors

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[1] See, for example: #occupytogether, www.occupy. net ; www.causes.com

involved on the other. What, if anything, is distinctive today in serving as an image of the future that is sufficiently shared and communicated to motivate and energise mass mobilisation and why now? Can the (combination of) methods and pathways negotiated and applied to achieve change be differentiated from the past? Here, issues of leadership come into view as does the task of unravelling which actors are actually involved, how they are organized, as well as if and how they are linked to movements in other regions or from across different social divides.

A related issue is to locate contemporary activisms within their time, context, and geographical area. It has been pointed out that the political economy of the Arab Spring was determined by poverty and inequality, as much as the rebellions throughout Europe had to do with impoverishment due to neoliberal austerity measures and the impact of the financial crises (Rocamora, 2012). Along these lines, other analysts more dramatically point at a crisis of global capitalism, also triggered by the environmental constraints on unlimited growth. Gills and Gray (2012: 208) refer to the 'paradox of neoliberal economic globalisation' which simultaneously tends to strengthen as well as to weaken social opposition forces. But why is it all happening at this very moment?

Wallerstein (2002) indicated already a decade ago that after the '1968 revolution' many activists had been searching for 'a better kind of anti-systemic movement', one that would lead to a more democratic and more egalitarian world. He believed the 1968 movement did not really achieve this objective, so the current wave of mobilisations had to be seen in this perspective. The right conditions had been created, according to Wallerstein (2011), for a movement like *Occupy Wall Street* to spark off the struggle: a combination of sustained economic impoverishment of the middle class (the former 'working poor'), with an exaggerated greed by the wealthiest elite (the 1%) which generated the powerful image of the 99 % affected. Still, this does not explain why it happened at this moment in the post-2010 period, or why it also spread so quickly throughout the globe. Therefore, time, context, and space need careful consideration.

A debate on post-2010 activisms also needs to look beyond the short term effect of mobilisations and internal dynamics, but the time frames required to do so pose difficulties. It is too early to assess, for example, the extent to which prevailing political systems and cultures are affected and possibly being transformed. Moreover, is it also too premature to assess whether contemporary power structures manage to withstand increasing knocks on the

door from beyond the 'usual suspects' of poor people and (unemployed) youth to the newly unemployed and still employed middle class whose citizenship is being taken for granted through vote rigging, corruption and other forms of exploitation. Over time such a focus would look to identify 'cracks' in the legitimacy and authority of existing political systems and how ruling elites have responded to challenges to their position.

The situation is nuanced. If we look at the Middle East so far, old regimes in Tunisia and Libya have fallen and more democratic dispensations are emerging. The outcome in Egypt is a new, contested, constitution; while the outcome of an uprising in Syria at the time of writing is less sure. Italy virtually 'suspended' democracy to install a technocratic cabinet to ward off economic collapse. Tthe polity in Greece and Spain have turned to neo-conservative parties as credible implementers of policies required to be 'bailed out' of unsustainable indebtedness.

If we look at the rapid expansion of Occupy or the uprising and spread of the *indignados* originating in Southern Europe, it was clear that political parties as well as the mainstream press have to engage with these campaigns and a potent mix of campaigners, which gives activists increased credibility. One tool of protest was to demonstrate a different and more transparent way of discussion, negotiation and decision-making. Nevertheless, it is still too early to say whether the attraction of a more democratic dialogue in the public arena will undermine the dominant system or bring about reforms that reverse previous political disengagement and apathy.

The relevance of this topic for debate is to better understand what, if at all, an upwelling of global activism means for socio-political futures. Whether it is 'new' compared to the global movement in 'Seattle' or when judged against the Paris student movement of 1968 is less pertinent than identifying distinctive features of means and measures. The current activist outburst seems to be of a larger and broader scale than its predecessors. Even though we definitely are in an era with much better forms of real time, self-directed and networked communication, we suggest that this is an important enabling pre-condition but not the cause of energies directed at reform to how the global order works for whom.

There are two reasons to choose 'activisms' (rather than 'resistance' or 'revolution') as a key concept to characterize recent rebellions and expressions of widespread discontent that are energised from below. That is, public disobedience which self-aggregate, expose, amplify and transmit the micro-activism of the everyday as people seek to gain a hold on forces that

shape their lives (Goldfarb, 2005). The first reason is that the wide range of protest activities are organizationally so different - mobilisations, manifestations, movements, networks, organised virtualities, campaigns, etc. - that these require an overarching and unifying concept. A second reason is that 'activisms' points at more than just one particular form of political action or struggle: it also suggests a non-centralised and innovative momentum of multiple protest expressions. This energy is possibly blending into an entirely new political movement with a very different imagination of the future in which human empowerment and justice are the norm and where societies function on the basis of popular consent, rather than elite control. Several observers (Klein, 2012; Chomsky, 2012) have pointed at this watershed, suggesting a break with previous generations as well as with prevailing utopias. What these new visions of the future are about and what common elements they hold is a central thrust in the debate.

Activisms and drivers of civic energy

A broad conceptualisation of forces pushing *Activisms 2010+* is that the nature of the social dilemmas or 'thick' problems faced by society (e.g., Rischard, 2002) are overwhelming the ability of existing political arrangements to mobilise and align collective action at the multiple sites and scales required (McGinnis, 1999; Ostrom, 2005). It is argued, that failures of poly-centric governance are compounded by a polities' loss of trust and faith in party-political systems – old or newly minted - seen in media manipulation, electoral rigging, voter apathy and, more recently, in the technocratic takeover of elected functions to cope with the European financial crisis with its diminishing prospects for young people and future generations. A general observation is of a hollowing out of democratic principles in existing dispensations on the one hand (Marquand, 2004) and the (autocratic) denial of full citizenship on the other. This dualism is feeding a psychosocial sensibility of political alienation which has now 'virally' spread. This long process reflects and abets a global political economy which has allowed (transnational) corporations to gain a disproportionate role in steering the affairs of states, in influencing international relations and governance and in the privatization of public goods (Harvey, 2011). In short, democracy is being 'privatized'' (Annan Foundation, 2012).

Prevailing (party) political systems typically react to inhibit the emergence of alternatives that cannot be harnessed or controlled (Boyte, 2008). Drawing on and driven by greater awareness of complex global problems – such as threats of climate change to well-being, as

well as economic and other inequities – from a macro perspective, *Activisms 2010+* can be seen as acts of public dissent, disorder and disruption; that is, overflows of collective energy which: (i) are exploring novel ways to counter and circumvent 'traditional' mechanisms and rules designed to restrict and capture spontaneous political engagement; (ii) reflect an imperative to reclaim active citizenship; and (iii) demonstrate civic assertions intended to rebalance power towards greater equity between institutional actors.

Technology provides an 'ethereal' pathway for geographic expansion of activisms. But this mechanism says little about its users. Here the story of means can be complemented by looking at gatherings of international activists opposed to the prevailing economic model. A meeting place has been a series of national rallies and international conferences. This phenomenon is described by Pleyers (2010) in relation to the World Social Forum (WSF) and the emergence of the alter-globalisation movement. Ironically, much of the WSF critical analysis of the global economic model beginning in the early nineteen eighties – dubbed The Washington Consensus - has come to pass (Stiglitz, 2008; Harvey, 2011). The bubble has burst and the scramble is on to define its successor model. It would appear that economic disenchantment shares public space with political disaffection as drivers of civic unrest, mass incidents and protests. Examples are: assertions for autonomy in Kurdish Iraq and Spain's Catalonia; students in Chile, Quebec and Ireland against escalating university fees; (Diaspora) protests against democratic failures – Malawi, Nepal – against corruption – India - and rigged elections, Hong Kong, Azerbaijan; indigenous groups in Bolivia and Ecuador reacting against changes in ownership of natural resources, foreign countries' land grabbing in Africa, and more.

A question arising is the extent to which twin motivators of today's activisms – economic and political – are reinforcing a sense of inter-generational alienation of a form not quite foreseen by Karl Marx or Adam Smith on the one hand, but accompanied by an emerging transnational cosmopolitism on the other. West (1969, p. 15) compares how these two economic philosophers understood alienation in terms of the consequences of the division of labour in response to solving the problem of scarcity. For Smith, the potential for alienation could be countered by education, for Marx by complete evisceration of private property. While the Smithian economic model prevails, the provision of education under current conditions and long-term prospect of 'educated employment' with diploma inflation and high student indebtedness – long known in many developing countries - is itself a cause of a sense

of distrust about and alienation from what the current system had 'promised' both pre- and post-industrial populations.

It can be argued that the financial crisis has exposed and broadened this type of age-related 'malaise' across the world - North, South, East, West – but in net-enabled ways that are giving rise to connected solidarity and collective consciousness that transcends national borders. The advent of 'digital natives' as a 'new' generation has to be factored into accounts of how activisms will impact on economic futures.

Mistrust in party-based representation is endemic (Edelman, 2012). A similar factoring-in of technology will therefore be required to chart how 'netizens' express their disaffection with current political dispensations and institutionalised power relations (Mackinnon, 2012). Can political engagement be regenerated with the aid of an international action repertoire and mutual support system that can cause 'beautiful trouble' (Boyd and Mitchell, 2012)? At issue is the extent to which it is possible and better to rely on the potential for self-organisation of activism – seen in the Arab Spring – and set to expand (Shirky, 2008) as opposed to entering into and changing existing institutional systems. In India, *Aam Aadmi* is a new anti-corruption party gaining support from the poor and middle class alike, who all suffer the curse of rent seeking officialdom. The Pirate Party's success in mainstream German politics is attributed to capturing the 'fed-upness' of the young generation with politics of elites for elites. This debate draws on observations that 'leaderlessness' has been a signature feature of micro-level political agency that can self-aggregate with significant effects (Ross, 2011).

In reinvigorating political agency to overcome disaffection, experience suggests that it would be unwise to rely on revamping existing political systems with their deeply entrenched interests and power holders. The World Social Forum has grappled with, but not resolved, how to create 'open spaces' for dialogue towards consensus decision making rather than majority rule (Pleyers, 2010:28). Progress in this direction is urgently required. At the forefront will be major challenges and challengers in determining the processes required to reach a critical modelling decision. As Wallerstein argued:

> "We may think of this period of systemic crisis as the arena of a struggle for the successor system. The outcome may be inherently unpredictable but the nature of the struggle is very clear. We are before alternative choices. They cannot be spelled out in institutional detail, but they can be suggested in broad outline. We can "choose"

collectively a new stable system that essentially resembles the present system in some basic characteristics - a system that is hierarchical, exploitative, and polarizing. … Alternatively we can "choose" collectively a radically different form of system, one that has never previously existed - a system that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian. (Wallerstein, 2009:23)

In a similar vein, in reflecting on a wide array of forces, Laszlo (2012) postulates a choice between Business as Usual (BAS) and Timely Transformation scenarios (TT). His report of movement towards the latter scenario emphasises the psychosocial dimensions of crisis and the emergence of individual and collective consciousness. Elaborating on this factor, Beckwith (2102) speaks to The Birth of a Global Citizenry and its agency.

> The transformation of an egocentric model of 'me and mine' into a world-centric mindset of 'we and ours' is the vessel that accommodates a revolution in values creating space for the emergence of a global citizenry. … because, *how we govern our individual life determines the character of international relations on our planet*. (Beckwith, 2012: 153, emphasis in original)

In such postulated scenarios, whether or not *Activisms 2010+* is signalling a 'tipping point' in terms of the type and breadth of political motivation and engagement remains a critical issue for discussion. But, to the extent that the world is facing a potential bifurcation of 'choice' in the modality that globalisation will take, a working proposition would be that repertoires of contemporary activisms articulate a scale of disaffection and/or disillusionment with the prevailing order that cannot be bought off or 'cost-effectively' coerced into compliance.

Power, knowledge, and activism

If the above describes some of the higher order imperatives to act, other theories are called for to disentangle specific features of activism on the ground and the issues and contradictions involved. They emerge from the rich discussions held with many authors of articles in this volume.

A tricky terrain of theory relates to activisms that are intended to reconfigure power relations and the choice between civic and uncivil ways of doing so. Put another way, how does this debate approach the ends versus means dimensions of activism? Here it is useful to elaborate on the key features of 'civicness' and the effort that shapes it, that is, 'civic energy' (Fowler and Biekart, 2008; 2011; Biekart and Fowler, 2012). Even though non-violence is considered to be a key feature of civicness, situations can be imagined where, in the interest of the larger

community, particular forms of 'coercive non-violence' are permitted to oppose authoritarian oppression (the cases of Lybia and Syria are examples). However, one should be very aware of the backlash effect of the use of coercive means in the name of 'civic action'. For example, in exerting 'civic muscle' through mass disobedience, the civil rights movement in the United States opened itself up to misleading portrayals of being anti-democratic and racist in its anti-racism, justifying moral condemnation and more active state repression.

In terms of understanding *Activisms 2010+* in terms of *power*, we propose a multi-dimensional view (Fowler and Biekart, 2011:24-26) that recognises a progression from the covert *habitus* of Bourdieu (1997) through defining language and exercising control over public agendas and access to decision-making to more overt coercive forms and expressions (Lukes, 2005). This perspective also applies the frame provided by Gaventa (2006:2). Power 'within' often refers to gaining the sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is a pre-condition for action. Power 'with' refers to the synergy which can emerge through partnerships and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building. Power 'over' refers to the ability of the powerful to affect the actions and thought of the powerless. The power 'to' is important for the exercise of civic agency and to realise the potential of rights, citizenship or voice.

An *Activisms 2010+* lens can be helpful to distil the ways in which a popular challenge to authority is understood today in relation, for example, to "the failure of 1968" to alter and consolidate a different systemic power. More specifically, the debate must connect power to the nature of 'old' politics that seems to be losing its connection to time, place and generations. In regaining politics through activism, what roles and processes can be attributed to: (a) the substance of micro politics expressed at the myriad 'kitchen tables' and 'coffee shops' across social-political divisions and their interfaces; (b) the politics of real-time problem solving enabled by social media and mobile technologies which allow 'virtual' scaling in decision making; (c) what leadership is all about for whom; and (d) prizing open gaps in existing political structures.

The *normative* dimensions of activism as an expression of civic or uncivil agency are also problematic and need to be approached critically. Drawing on evolutionary psychology and a long view of historical-political analysis from Aristotle through Arendt, our working proposition is that humans have deep-rooted pro-social dispositions that can be labelled 'civic' (Dagnino, 2008). Living together simply calls for (acculturated) adherence to some

minimum level of tolerance of 'the other' and a concern 'for the whole' beyond self. There is a natural propensity for individuals and societies to reduce transactions costs and for people to show an asymmetry between anxiety of loss of current assets against the uncertainty of gain from new opportunities in favour of the former (Beinhocker, 2006). Accelerated by modernisation, human propensies therefore steer towards stability and cooperation as the normative basis from which competition emerges (Seabright, 2004). While violent conflicts take place, they cannot be sustained indefinitely. As historian Robert Bates (2001) shows, in the context of statehood there is a limit to which violence can ensure prosperity over time.

The debate in this volume thus explores the extent to which *Activisms 2010+* seeks to alter socio-political relations towards or away from values of inclusion, tolerance, non-violent change and with what scale(s) of 'beyond self' is/are in the collective mind – a locality or neighbourhood, a nation state, the economic system, the global ecology, (layers of) the political order, and so on. In doing so, the debate addresses the paradox of uncivil behaviour to gain more civil ends in how a society functions. But a separate treatment will be required to explore the emergence and meaning on 'uncivil activisms' illustrated in Al Qaeda and mobilization of xenophobic political groupings and their claims on public policy, fed by sections of the media that espouse intolerance.

In addition, as elaborated by the contribution of Icaza and Vazquez (2013), there is an important link between power and knowledge (a 'binary link, in Foucauldian terms) as this very much affects our way of seeing political developments as well as overlooking them (Said, 1978). Post-colonial theorists have suggested examining more critically the cultural identity of 'the other', which stand for those oppressed by imperialism and the holders of power. One typical type of oppression is what Spivak (1998) has called 'epistemic violence': these are efforts to undermine and even eradicate forms of knowledge that are not in line with mainstream Western beliefs. It is therefore essential to value different types of knowing in what Sousa Santos calls 'the plurality of knowledge': "Knowledge exists only as a plurality of ways of knowing, just as ignorance only exists as a plurality of forms of ignorance" (Sousa Santos, 2009: 116). One has to be aware of the various 'ways of knowing' in order to accept that we have a limited grasp of the ways of knowing of 'the other'. Escobar (2004: 210) referred to these other ways as 'subaltern knowledges and cultural practices world-wide' that had been silenced by modernity. This epistemic struggle within a subaltern politics is

probably central to understanding *Activisms 2010+*, and will have to be problematised when we analyse what has happened (the 'event') as well as what has not (yet) happened (the 'non-event').

A further area informing what is being debated is the nature of *organising and mobilizing* seen in *Activisms 2010+*. Existing theories of collective action in relation to social movements posit a range of energising motivations – relative deprivation, political process and opportunity, disaffected claim-making and so on - as well as stages of evolution or progression, such as incubation, action and consolidation (e.g., Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978, 2004). For Tilly (1978: 7), a social movement must: "Evince a minimum degree of organisation, though it may range from a loose, informal or partial level of organisation, to highly institutionalized and bureaucratized structures [.... It must be] founded upon the conscious volition, normative commitment to the movement's aims or beliefs, and active participation on the part of the followers or members." Escobar and Alvarez (1992), on the other hand, have been much more cautious by pointing at the differentiations of the various forms of collective action, warning that "(…) not all forms of collective action have the same social, cultural, or political significance". They echo the point made by Jelin (1986:22) who argued that social movements after all are "objects constructed by the researcher, which do not necessarily coincide with the empirical form of collective action". These positions reflect a substantive critique of organisational and institutional theory informed by a complexity lens. Thompson (2008) argues that social structuration is an intrinsically unfulfilled process of change between different potentially stable states arising from mass collective agency. There is no such thing as an organisation but a variously labelled permanent fluidity in organising with new appearances of underlying socio-political processes and rules as feedback of their effects recalibrates previous choices. The emergence of non-movement movements is one illustration of this phenomenon (Bayat, 2009, 2013). In this sense, Tilly's perspective holds true as long as the 'attractors' of a movement's aims or beliefs are able to exert an adequate shared psychological bond between members over relevant time frames.

It is this empirical form of activisms that is analysed and problematized in more detail in this collection of papers. An opening issue for debate was the extent to which *Activisms 2010+* conforms to these or similar criteria to 'qualify' as social movements, or exhibits a different category of activism? Are we seeing expressions of civic and uncivil agency that are not belonging within civil society as such – a common location for social movement theories - but stem from the self-driven and dynamically organised accumulation of the energies of

citizens from all walks of life and ages. Specifically, is the advent of communication technologies available to the mass of populations across the world giving rise to permanent states of organising across time and space which can create negotiated, fluid organisational hierarchies without recourse to extraction and transfer of resources or designated leaders and sites of leadership? Put another way, is 'mobilizing' in order to bring supporters into action along established story lines of social movements being complemented or displaced by spontaneous aggregating activism of geographically spread situational judgements exhibiting network effects?

Finally, is there anything which is distinctive in the *imagined future*, utopian or otherwise, that acts an attractor for people's energy to change society not seen before? Or are we observing updated variations on previous themes that bring people out of their chairs and onto the streets, risks and all? In either case, what can we learn about contemporary drivers of socio-political processes? And when imagined futures of a new order – be they small or large - are articulated, do pre-emptive responses intended to prevent collective action actually serve activism. For example, does the widespread knowledge of a non-event 'occurring' produce a paradoxical outcome that serves those whose intentions have been thwarted by the authorities? From another point of view, is *Activisms 2010+* changing the repertoire of containment and control employed by existing power holders? These are some of the new questions generated in our Debate .

Comparisons and case studies

Given the wide variety of 'activisms' of the last few years, it is justified to ask whether they really have the commonalities that we have suggested earlier. Can we compare Occupy Wall Street, Spanish *indignados*, Egyptian and Tunisian revolutionaries at all? In their contribution, Glasius and Pleyers explore this question by analysing three different aspects that seem to have common characteristics in many of the activist expressions of recent years: infrastructure, contexts, and discourses. This not to say that several differences do not exist, especially in context, but also in the variety of activist backgrounds. But despite these differences, Glasius and Pleyers argue that the 'movements of 2011' are standing in a tradition of the 'new social movements': "they belong to a new generation of movements that combine and connect socio-economic and cultural claims, materialist and post-materialist demands". Their work shows how internet and social forums have facilitated the growth of intense interconnections between the various movements, which has generated a genuine

'global generation' of activists living the precariousness of the world order. They identify three core features of 'contagion' that keep popping up in the demands of all these movements: 'democracy', 'social justice', and 'dignity'. Even though it is still too early to assess the achievements of *Activisms 2010+*, the authors compare these mobilizations to the portents of 1968 which, by energising a shift in paradigms of thinking, had such a profound (socio-cultural) impact on previous as well as on our generations.

The dynamics of *Activisms 2010+* was most clearly observed in Egypt, where Tahrir Square became the symbolic arena for the resistance to the authoritarian Mubarak regime. Abdelrahman argues in her paper that we cannot simply trace the origins of this rebellion within the previous decade. The impact of the second *Intifada* (at the change of the Millennium) as much as the neoliberal privatization policies a few years later created conditions for the massive Egyptian citizen's uprising that started in late 2010. A wide array of groups was involved in the protests, and Abdelrahman makes a distinction between three categories: the pro-democracy movement, the labour movement, and the citizens groups. However, despite the fact that the rebellion had been nation-wide, and very successful, the weakness of the protest movement became apparent in the post-Mubarak period. Its organizational structure had been spontaneous and diverse. But this feature turned out to be an obstacle after Mubarak's fall and threatened to undermine the revolutionary moment. Just as it happened with previous revolutions in other settings, the protesters were not prepared to take over power. As Abdelrahman (p. 11) points out "they did not develop the kind of skills, including organizational ones, that one day could equip them to match the might of the military establishment or the iron discipline and mass base of the Muslim Brotherhood". Hence, the absence of a strategy to capture state power, which is typical for the new social movements, eventually became a liability after its unexpected success to mobilise the masses against an unjust and exclusive political system.

Bayat reminds us of the unexpectedness of radical and revolutionary change. The Arab Spring was not foreseen by the intelligence agencies of the North, as much as the revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua of the 1970s, while the Soviet collapse and Eastern European revolutions in and after 1989 were also not predicted by the CIA and MI6. How to explain this surprise? Is it because the protest remains silent for a long time and is therefore not spotted by outsiders? Apparently not, since many complained in the wake of many of the revolutions mentioned above. Bayat argues that "the vast constituencies of the urban poor, women, youth and others resorted to 'non-movements'– the non-deliberate and dispersed but

contentious practices of individuals and families to enhance their life chances" (Bayat, 2013: 2). At a certain moment the dispersed struggles of these 'non-movements' started to jell into a more organised form of civic activism which was enhanced by social media, even though it still remained invisible for outsiders as it happened 'in the underside of Arab societies'. The revolt was also no longer dominated by religious leaders, since Islamist politics had begun to lose its momentum a decade after 9/11. The interesting paradox was that the Islamic parties benefited mostly from the protest, which Bayat explains by the changing 'post-Islamist' orientation of these parties. A comparison is made between the street politics of Occupy and that of Tahrir Square, in which Bayat reaches quite a different conclusion than Glasius and Pleyers: street protest in Tahrir Square is not the exception but a necessary civic articulation of everyday subsistence politics. By pointing this out, Bayat provides a new meaning to the concept of revolution which fundamentally differs from how we perceived it in the 20th century.

A period of relative quiet in activisms in immediate post-apartheid South Africa has been replaced by an upsurge of mobilization and protest of citizens demanding 'justice' from the ANC government. A range of 'new social movements' composed of broader sections of society rallied against the impact of privatization measures. Examples starting before and after 2010 are the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the Anti-Privatization Campaign, and the Soweto Electricity First Committee (SECC). In her contribution, Mottiar analyses these more recent movements and calls it 'popcorn' activism: popping up, bursting, but then rapidly diminishing in strength. The latest shift in South African activism is the emergence of 'Occupy-inspired' protest. As a result, it seems the incidental protests are becoming less 'poppy' and more sustainable, since it has led to broader alliances of local and national mobilizations. An example is the Durban *Umlazi* 'occupy', which linked shack dwellers movements, as well as unemployed, and political opposition groups such as Democratic Left Front, all of them strongly critical of the ANC government which did not yet manage to satisfy the expectations of the poorer and more marginalized layers of post-apartheid society. A more broader and interesting finding of this study is that the local protestors were actually inspired by the international, especially Washington DC-based Occupy movements via the circulation of video's in the townships.

The character of *Activisms 2010+* seldom reflects the typical project and programme-bound political economy common to international NGOs (INGOs). Indeed, the advent of spontaneous activism as force of societal change draws attention to the limited effectiveness

of INGOs in doing so (Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin, 2008), leading to a question about a place for international NGO networks in triggering social change. As argued elsewhere, we tend to question the underlying proposition of NGO relevance for bringing about systemic change (Fowler and Biekart, 2011). Notwithstanding this perspective, Harcourt argues there is still a role for international NGOs in post-2010 activisms, albeit conditioned by dispersed but formalised structures. In particular, she points to new forms of organization in international networks that have played an important role when looking at transnational feminist struggles. Harcourt analyses the case of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), an international feminist NGO network founded thirty years ago. Starting as a Washington-based service-delivery provider for large development donors, AWID gradually turned into a transnational advocacy and campaigning network rooted in the global south, engaging a new generation of young activists. In regular 'international forum' settings, AWID offered a key space for a wide range of women's rights activists. The transformation was that the northern and UN-based focus gradually changed to include a more diverse, political and grassroots-oriented approach, moving away from concerns about the success of 'development projects'. Whilst having become more activist, AWID as 'a hub of women's rights and feminist movements' is still running on donor money and employs staff. Harcourt therefore poses a justified question: "can a true political project have 40 paid staff including an executive director?" (Harcourt, 2013: 2). The answer is not encouraging, even more so since donor money tends to divide, create suspicions, as well as generate power inequalities. But AWID is certainly a good example of how the new activisms are stimulating organisational evolution from the traditional NGO realm.

Following Glasius and Pleyers, Jenny Pearce in her contribution also concludes that one of the key dimensions of *Activisms 2010+* (and one of its most positive contributions) is the way it has connected local (neighbourhood) to the global (public square) but, in doing so, provides new understanding of the nature of the power involved at both sites. Pearce makes the important point that activists always have had a difficult position with respect to power. They are, as she paraphrases Mansbridge (2006) 'both fighting power and using power'. Pearce points out that the underlying view of power generally was a conventional one of 'power as domination' or 'power over'. For radical activists, also associated with the 'old social movements' the emphasis was on taking and replacing the dominating power of the existing holders, and replace this with a progressive and alternative political project. But this shift was still top-down and very much hierarchical, which was increasingly criticized, in

practical by feminists movements but also by later 'newer' social movements. Through a series of propositions, Pearce argues that it is time to revisit power, to rethink its meaning and practice in the midst of the revitalized new forms of activism of the new century. She suggests we should shift from 'empowerment' to 'transforming' power. The article argues that this other understanding of power correlates with deepening democracy and participation, conflict reduction and ultimately violence reduction. In order words, it is a means to rethink the meaning and practice of politics itself. The argument is illustrated with experiences of community activists in the North of England, which suggests that an alternative vision and practice of power does exist. What is described is a prefigurative form of power 'because it is about creating something new, it is a practice of constructing new power relations (in the means of movement organising) so that the old ones may become obsolete and the new power relationships might replace them (becoming an end)' This example links to evidence of how new activists in social movements also appear to be rethinking power, such as the anti-globalization movements of the late 1990s and early 20th century and the anti-capitalist movements which emerged in the wake of the 2008 banking crisis.

The rise of digital activism is another development that has strongly affected the character of the *Activisms 2010+* movement. But we have to be careful, as Shah (this issue) points out, to simply assume that these new forms of activism also generate new structures within which citizen activism can be understood. He actually argues the opposite and suggests that digital technologies have forced us to make all forms of protest intelligible, legible and accessible within the framework of the digital paradigm. He demonstrates that this view tends to obscure the existence of different geographical and temporal dynamics, due to what he calls a 'spectacle imperative': if something cannot be tweeted, is does not exist and is thus not part of digital activism. Shah argues that this 'hyper visibility' of mass mobilisations around the world exemplified a 'visual hegemony', which is leading to a homogenous and misleading discourse on citizen activism. He illustrates this with the example of a very popular Chinese TV show on the annual Spring Festival Gala, which is a traditional moment to transmit state-sponsored ideologies and cultural values and watched by many millions. However, with the increased access to cyberspace, digital activists started to challenge the Chinese political and economic monopoly with a 'shanzhai spring gala', which was a bottom-up effort building on global digital democracy mobilizing many Chinese 'netizens'. Its rapid success also raised high expectations, which eventually undermined the shanzhai campaign altogether when it

tried to link up with a corporate TV station. The broadcast was cancelled and the gala transformed into a 'non-event ', not only symbolizing the new digital activism in China, but also nurturing the 'impossible' dream' of making political change happen in China. The paradox is that the advent of a 'non-event' due to regime clampdown is a 'marker' or point of reference which re-energises activism.

A different, but very much related, way of exploring the nature of *Activisms 2010+* is to analyse the epistemologies underlying these social struggles. Vazquez and Icaza (this issue) focus on two recent historical moments in which social struggles had a lasting impact: the indigenous rebellion of the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Mexico 1994) and the anti-corporate mobilization during the WTO-summit in Seattle (United States 1999). Both mobilizations are considered to be crucial sources of inspiration for the Global Social Justice Movement, Occupy Wall Street, the student mobilizations in Latin America, the *indignados* in Southern Europe, and many other recently emerging social activist movements. The authors argue that Seattle and Chiapas should not simply be perceived as reactions to neoliberal globalization or as 'outcomes' of capitalist modernization, but rather as unforeseeable and unexpected moments in social struggles. Arendt's notion of power is borrowed to highlight that political resistance is a moment of creativity which cannot simply be reduced to the negation of repression. Along these lines, post-colonial thinking also would argue that the rebellions (especially in Chiapas) are challenging the modern epistemic knowledge frameworks with their emphasis on chronology. Icaza and Vazquez therefore argue that, rather than seeing Chiapas and Seattle as 'outcomes' of a process of resistance to domination (as 'modern reactions') they can be seen as 'decolonial recreations'. The rebellions can be analysed as beginnings in which the voices of the excluded and oppressed can be heard in a (new) public realm, offering them political visibility and the opportunity to demonstrate alternative political practices. Following Arendt, Vasquez and Icaza argue that the public realm is opened up by the 'political event', which in turn is a condition to realize political freedom. This resonates with Shah's claim of the 'eventfulness' of activism, including that of 'non-events'.

Together, these contributions provide a good starting point for debate about the distinctive character and the 'why now' of the waves of post-2010 activisms. Is contemporaneity with a posited transformative change to the world order simply chance? From this perspective, the debate recalls previous notions of a 'moment' of systemic change tied to mass political assertions of 1968. But it advances a proposition that present-day conditions of

environmental challenges, power shifts stemming from economic globalisation and its volatile adjustments, when allied to technological advances, can amplify and 'invisibly' perpetuate 'events' of people's disaffection at previously unknown speeds and geographical dispersions that will be a necessary feature of collective engagement to address societal problems. In other words, under emerging global conditions – bifurcating or not - the nature and repertoires of *Activisms 2010+* described in this issue may prevent a familiar history of rise and fall of civic engagement typically observed with social movements. Be that as it may, a long view will be needed to see if the proposition holds and if 'uncivil' reactions tilt the trajectory away from the values that *Activisms 2010+* espouse.

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