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Mobilisation

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Mobilisations against world ordering often evade the concepts and categories available for comprehending them. Central to the praxis of many social movements is a challenge to ways of knowing that bolster or render invisible dominant relations of power. When, toward the end of the last century, indigenous Mayan militants of the Zapatista National Liberation Army emerged from the jungles of Southern Mexico declaring that “our word is our weapon”, they gave voice to a longstanding theme of popular resistance movements. From Antonio Gramsci’s insistence upon the importance of struggles over common sense, to the more quotidian ways in which movements challenge the politics of visibility and audibility through practices of active listening and horizontal organisation, popular or “grassroots” mobilisations are often – implicitly or explicitly – struggles for “worlds and knowledges otherwise” (Escobar, 2004:220). Mobilisations are often pitched not only against relations of oppression, exploitation or domination, but also against the very concepts and categories through which such relations are rendered intelligible, natural or legitimate.

International political sociology has a fertile affinity with the often turbulent and transgressive praxis of popular mobilisations. By its very juxtaposition of three troublesome terms – “international”, “political”, “sociology” – it is an approach oriented around suspicion toward pre-conceived categories and dividing lines (cf. Huysmans and Nogueira, 2012:2; Bigo and Walker, 2007:2-3). It prompts us to focus upon practices – not as “cases” of empirical phenomena already known through a preconceived framework, but as situated, historical relationships demanding reflexivity about our concepts and the fields giving them meaning (Bigo, 2012:121; Huysmans and Nogueira, 2012:1-2). It is an approach that asks not only how lines are drawn and categories produced but also engages practices “within” those lines – the liminal, the sites of disruption and contestation not readily understood in terms of an available “scheme of knowledge” or ready-made ontology. Like many resistance movements themselves, international political sociology points us to “other worlds” that may be enacted at our sites of study (Ibid.:3).

Beyond this affinity with the disruptive knowledge practices of political mobilisation, international political sociology is also an approach that enables us to grasp complex entanglements between power and counter-power. As such, it challenges tendencies to classify mobilisations as straightforwardly oppositional or emancipatory. If unravelling relations of power/knowledge is at the heart of the political praxis of many resistance movements, few – if any – movements do this unequivocally. Apparently anti-systemic movements may bolster hierarchies around gender, race or class, while (neo)liberal concepts of control serve to incorporate movements into world-ordering in more subtle ways. By drawing upon resources of social theory to engage phenomena that are

international in character and scope (Bigo and Walker, 2007:1-2; Huysmans and Nogueira, 2012:1-2), international political sociology challenges the disciplinary frames of reference that encourage us to look for the making of world order in the interactions between states and international institutions, or within pre-defined societies through ready-made social forces. The simultaneously empiricist and deconstructionist sensibilities of international political sociology (Bigo, 2010:121) expose the making of global power relations through situated tactics, techniques and strategies, everyday forms of knowledge or relations of production and reproduction – including those at play within apparently oppositional movements.

Rather than reading the resistance off a reified account of power and order, approaches working within the spirit of international political sociology have tended to build their concepts – in different ways and to different degrees – through attention to struggles and mobilisations themselves. We argue, however, that greater engagement with mobilisations, and with the making of subjects in struggle, can take this sort of approach further and allow us to look more deeply into the complex relations between power and counter-power. We therefore advocate a research agenda that takes struggles themselves as a starting point of analysis, tracing the trajectories of struggles so as to identify how struggles expose less visible forms of power and violence; how resisting subjects are produced, where lines of exclusion are drawn, and how struggles are neutralised or contained, in ways less visible from another starting-point (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016a).

Starting with struggles in order to get at situated processes of discipline and dissent also generates a further challenge. Looking into the contingency and heterogeneity of practices through which resisting subjects are made – and unmade – in relation to world order raises important questions about what is at stake in these struggles with regard to more general relations of power. This, we suggest, is an important question to be addressed in future research.

Mobilising international political sociology

Applying the insights of international political sociology to political mobilisation runs against the grain of dominant approaches to resistance, in which the struggles of social movements are read off ready-made accounts of power. Work in the spirit of international political sociology differs, for example, from analysis of how actors with self-authored identities mobilise resources to achieve goals intelligible within a taken for granted framework of governance (cf. Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow and Della Porta, 2005). Likewise, it asks questions distinct from those of historical-sociological analyses of social forces in historical transformations (cf. Colás, 2002). International political sociology directs us to other sorts of questions: to the historically contingent strategies and modes of thought at play in singular struggles, suspending the abstractions that would enable us to identify struggles as instances of social forces or to read their oppositional nature off an analysis of capitalist social relations. Likewise, an international political sociology approach would question accounts that frame transnational mobilisations as manifestations of a “global” resisting subject (a “global justice movement”, “global civil society”, “multitude” and so on), whose emancipatory potential has been already decided in the framing of this object of study (Coleman and Tucker, 2011; Coleman, 2013; Drainville, 2011, 2005).

From the perspective of international political sociology, such approaches risk objectifying the categories through which mobilisations are understood, obscuring the complex interplay between power and resistance, dissent and technologies of order-building. Thus, for example, in an early contribution to the journal *International Political Sociology*, Hans-Martin Jaeger (2007) challenges the presumed emancipatory potential of global civil society as a domain “outside” of the system. Pointing at the way it is “discursively harnessed” in UN discourses of human security and social development, Jaeger (Ibid.:258) concludes that global civil society leads to the “depoliticization” of global governance (see also Amoore and Langley, 2004; Lipschutz, 2005; Coleman and Tucker, 2011). From a different angle, André Drainville (2009:15) explores how the simulation of “cosmopolitan proxies” – be it the “global civil society” hailed by governance institutions or the “We-multitude” supposedly incarnated by the World Social Forum – substitute actually-existing subjects bound up in the realities of place and context and incorporate them into “a false sense of global purpose and unity” (2011:426; 2013:1).

The caution toward ready-made ontologies and abstract categories characteristic of international political sociology implies – in a more positive sense – an empiricist sensitivity to actual practices of struggle. Concepts are built through an engagement with situated practices of mobilisation. In critical security studies, for example, Jef Huysmans (2006:6) identifies an “agency-focused sociological account”, which explores the politics of those who are excluded and rendered “abject” by prevailing security practices. Such an approach begins from the practices of those mobilising against ways they are delimited and excluded by security logics – either as sources of threat or as passive objects of governmental care. Challenging the dominant tendency in critical security studies to position the “others” of security as its passive “constitutive outside” (Aradau and van Munster, 2010:79), the “agency approach” engages the “sites of struggle” at which alternative security claims are made (Huysmans, 2006:6). Peter Nyers and Carolina Moulin’s work on refugee protests, for example, takes as its starting point the political agency of refugees in problematizing the regimes of power/knowledge through which they are comprehended as passive targets of a humanitarian “governmentality of care and mobility” (2007:358). Their focus upon refugees’ own demands to have a voice leads Nyers and Moulin to replace the reified category of “global civil society” with that of “global political society” – a concept that refers not to a thingified collectivity, but is a “strategic concept” enabling them to question the exclusions of “global civil society” (a category that admits only citizens in its count) (ibid:357-9; cf. Nyers, 2006).

Yet there is a further set of questions that we might ask of such approaches. The focus on the agency of “the other” – those rendered abject – still tends to be equated with “reaction”, with political subjectification framed in opposition to pre-defined logics of security – for example those of “care and mobility”. Struggles are defined as oppositional – in advance of engaging with them – simply by virtue of contesting (or by being contested by) the abjectifying logics of security. In Huysmans (2006:6) words, the agency approach is interested in “the power relations that characterise particular *competitions between emancipatory and conservative visions of protection*” (our emphasis). Missing here is attention to actual processes of political subjectification. The making of subjects in struggle may disrupt existing regimes of power/knowledge, but it may also render even the most “grassroots” or “subaltern” struggles open to entanglement within existing relations of power (cf. Coleman and Tucker, 2011:401). How, for example, might the voices of refugees be channelled within the confines of dominant governmental rationalities? For example, Prem Kumar Rajaram (2002) explores how

Oxfam's "Listen to the Displaced" project – explicitly aimed at letting refugees speak for themselves – rendered refugees a problem intelligible within given frameworks of governance by privileging those voices that emphasised material need.

Nyers and Moulin cite Jacques Rancière in setting out their understanding of politics. However, for Rancière, political disruption is not to be found in the demands of those without voice to become countable alongside other citizens. Rather, political subjects are those who make themselves *uncountable* within the dominant allocation of identities and capacities to speak. Such subjects disrupt the very "division of the sensible" upon which hierarchical systems of counting and population management are based (Rancière, 2010:63). They speak "outside the count" of intelligible, manageable parts of the population. Such a perspective points not only to processes of disruption, but, in contrast to Nyers and Moulin, also at the particular (disciplinary) logics through which disruptive political subjects are reintegrated as manageable parts (for example as beneficiaries of livelihood projects designed to overcome material need).

To engage practices of mobilisation with a focus upon the disruptive and upon limits of preconceived categories also requires us to interrogate our own terms of engagement. What might be missed by taking our parameters for analysing struggles from fields of study such as security? Security itself risks becoming "an 'obligatory grid of intelligibility' that sets limits to what...we can call into question" (Coleman and Hughes, 2015:142). Mobilisations are invested or contained by disciplinary logics and apparatuses of power that are not necessarily intelligible from the purview of security studies, with its tendency to focus upon policing, militarism, border security, tactics of juridical exception, humanitarian technologies of population and so on. We have argued elsewhere that desires to unravel "security" logics (including those manifested within the intellectual tradition of international political sociology) often end up reproducing modern, liberal social ontologies in practice. The result is to underestimate violences not comprehensible in security terms (systemic or epistemic violence) and to overlook how security logics intersect with other, more subtle techniques of taming and managing dissent – for example those working through political economic logics, discourses of development, civil society and so on (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016a; see also Coleman, 2013). We propose that this can be overcome by taking struggles themselves as starting points for analysis. Likewise, engagement with struggles themselves might point us to the interplay between these and other disciplinary or governmental logics, such as those constituted around gender (Coleman and Bassi, 2011a), or race (Rosenow, 2013). Starting with struggles themselves can evade both the strictures of ready-made subjects and the confines of pre-defined fields.

Starting with struggles: tracing discipline and dissent

Beginning analysis with practices of struggle themselves, and tracing how these disrupt or – conversely – are invested by relations of power is the approach of a recent collection on the theme of "disciplining dissent" (Coleman and Tucker (eds), 2012). These contributions turn their attention to "the multidimensional relations between situated, context specific practices of resistance and global order" and "the processes of ordering and silencing" at work within processes of mobilization and struggle (Coleman and Tucker, 2011:398). Bice Maiguashca (2011), for example, contests grand masculinized narratives of "anti-globalisation" through attention to the practices of feminist activists. Meanwhile Amedeo Policante (2011) draws upon his own experience

of being “kettled” by police to explore the inscription of images from the “kettle” into a system of signification that obscures the violence of capitalism.

Central to these studies is also the question of political subjectification and how the making of subjects in struggle may bolster – as much as contest – dominant relations of power. Carl Death (2011), for example, focuses upon the practices and mentalities of mobilizations at global summits to highlight the mutually-constitutive relations between neoliberal governmentality and the “counter-conduct” of protesters at global summits (cf. Death, 2010). Louiza Odysseos (2011) applies similar insights into forms of subjectification associated with the struggles of Botswana’s Bushmen against forced relocation, arguing that appeals to discourses of rights and development continue to render the Bushmen subjects that are “available for governmental intervention”.

Taking struggles as an analytical starting point may also direct us toward the intersections between the taming of dissenting subjects and the deployment of security/exceptional practices toward those deemed to exceed the bounds of acceptable dissent. Thus Death (2011) highlights how protestors who refused to participate “responsibly” at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg were subject to the exceptional tactics of state security forces. For Odysseos too the incitation of governable subjects has violent side effects: “those who refuse to be produced as free” in line with liberal rationalities provoke militarised interventions (2010:772). The interplay between the exceptional practices of state security forces and the humanistic discourses of “docile dissent” deployed by international NGOs is the explicit focus of Lara Montesinos Coleman’s (2013) work on peasant mobilisations against BP’s oilfields in Colombia. Coleman highlights what she characterises as a specifically neoliberal variant of rights discourse, within which rights are reduced to private contract and “fixed” – not merely to individual citizen-subjects – but to subjects legible only within the terms of the existing socio-economic model (as stakeholders in an extractivist model of development, or as workers within existing commodity chains). Rights – alongside related discourses such as civil society and corporate responsibility – paradoxically become a tactic of exception and of the confiscation of rights. Thus rights discourse itself comes to complement armed violence against those resisting dispossession (see also Coleman, 2015a).

Starting with struggles and reasoning through attention to practices of discipline and dissent thus makes it possible to extend international political sociology’s characteristic caution toward predefined objects of analysis. It allows us to approach concrete struggles as a means of shedding light on the variegated entanglements between struggles and world ordering. To start with struggles in this way is not to look for instantiations of preconceived resisting subjects (a global working class, a global justice movement), nor is it to locate power in advance by reference to logics whose contours we already know. Rather, it is to approach mobilisations within the spirit of what Foucault (2003:30) once referred to as an “ascending analysis of power”. In other words it is to ask how specific mechanisms of power at play in disciplining, containing and even producing mobilisations are invested or annexed by more global relations of domination (Coleman and Bassi, 2011:239-241; Coleman and Tucker, 2011:404).

Taking struggle as a starting point also moves us away from a tendency prevalent in some other IR literatures inspired by Foucault. These define a new (global, liberal) episteme on the basis of concepts in policy documents and then move to legislate for resistance on this basis. Reading Foucault’s work on biopolitics as a sociology of liberal

rule,¹ scholars such as Michael Dillon and Julian Reid (2009) have drawn upon tropes of contemporary security policy to argue that biopolitics today has changed in line with the turn toward complexity theory in the life sciences. This new biopolitical regime is said to embody a concept of human life as continuously adapting to a turbulent and changing environment. As Reid (2013:355) has argued more recently, this has led to liberal governance “outgrowing its long-standing correlation with security” and finding “new discursive foundations” in the episteme of “resilience”, which is all about “adaptation” instead of “prevention” (cf. Evans and Reid, 2014). This leads Reid to define a path for politics in opposition to these biopolitical logics. There is, he says, “a fundamental antinomy between the resilient subject of neoliberalism and the political subject of resistance” (2013:356). If biopolitical rule emphasises our vulnerability in the face of complex threats (ecological, socio-economic and so on) and tells us we need to adapt and to become resilient, resistance is about refusing to accept this vulnerability and reclaiming our capacity to act, predict and transform the world (Ibid.:355-6, 363-4). Activism which repeats any of the tropes of complexity discourse – for example environmental activism which stresses vulnerability to ecological dynamics – is dismissed in advance as entangled within a neoliberal discourse of resilience (Reid, 2012:68-9, 77).

For those starting with the biopolitics of resilience, struggles are assessed in relation to emergent tropes of policy discourse without looking at how governance or resistance play out in practice (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016b). However, as Jonathan Joseph (2013:39) points out, a closer look at EU international development practices reveals little substance to discourses of resilience. The conceptual basis of resilience in policy-discourse is so thin that it quickly dissolves into a “buzzword” easily exchanged for a host of alternatives. Moreover, despite the rhetoric of self-reliance that goes along with resilience discourse, the effect of this in practice has – paradoxically – been an increasing concentration on detailed micro-management, which indicates that little has changed “on the ground” (Joseph, 2016 forthcoming). This is not to deny significant real-life consequences of resilience thinking, but it cautions us against attempts to homogenise and characterise an episteme on the basis of particular policy documents (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016a; 2016b). Engagement with struggles themselves can throw into relief more heterogeneous rationalities. For example, as Doerthe Rosenow (2012, 2017) shows in her work on mobilisations against genetically modified organisms, traditional rationalities of predictability and control are alive and well in the political-economic and scientific thinking of biotech companies and regulatory bodies. Meanwhile, complexity science is mobilised by anti-GMO activists to challenge and transgress these logics.

The stakes of struggle

We have argued that taking struggles as starting point for analysis prompts us to extend the empiricist and deconstructionist approach of international political sociology. Struggles evade fixed fields of inquiry. They direct our attention to heterogeneous rationalities and technologies of rule across diverse domains. From analysis of the situated processes through which struggles are managed, contained or neutralised we come to see the making of power relations as contingent historical products, rather than reifying them as existing in advance and having their effects down below (cf. Foucault, 2003:30).

¹ For a discussion of the differences between this and Foucault’s own approach, see Coleman and Hughes, 2015.

Yet here we come to a further question: from what perspective can we then make sense of the political stakes of mobilisations? Once we get rid of ready-made emancipatory subjects, once we evade abstract theories and build our account of wider power relations through engagement with situated processes of discipline and dissent, have we lost sight of the “big picture” to such an extent that the most we can say is that “here is an an instance of disruptive political practice”? How can we make more general, political claims while still being sensitive to contingency and heterogeneity? On what normative basis do we make those claims? Within post-structuralist IR there is a longstanding perception that the espousal of alternatives necessarily invokes grand narratives and essentialist readings of the ground upon which such alternatives must be based (e.g. Ashley and Walker, 1990).

However, just as reified categories occlude actual practices, so may metatheoretical mediation of those practices occlude actual lives and struggles. Likewise, eschewal of stable normative grounds for resistance can often lead to immanent understandings of ethics that leave of us with no means of assessing how apparently ethical and humanist practices – in defence of Others, of ‘life’ or alterity (cf. Campbell, 1998) – can in practice be part and parcel of imperialist, capitalist and neo-colonial violence (Coleman, 2015a). Back in the places where mobilisations occur, the question of alternatives and of the wider stakes of struggles is harder to evade. Not just “why fight?” (cf. Campbell 1998), but “for what are we fighting?”, “what are the broader dynamics that have given rise to this struggle?” are key questions for real people negotiating cuts to services, forced displacement, armed repression, ecological devastation or commodification of common resources.

Here, questions of the connections between specificity and generality re-emerge. Engagement with actual practices of discipline and dissent are – as André Drainville (2011:411) notes – “apt to carry thinking from the moment of specifically situated and contingent relationships of power and counter-power” to “broad structural orders” in ways “respectful of the ways in which actually existing human beings negotiate lives sutured at the intersection of the local and the global”. Drainville himself engages questions of generality and specificity in terms of a fluid and dialectical relationship between the world economy and situated struggles. The world economy is not reified so that resisting subjects can be reduced to their position within “it”, but defined in relation to struggles themselves, as “wherever social forces meet world ordering”. It is a “shifting, non-contiguous assemblage of contingent terrains” that both circumscribes and is circumscribed by struggles (Ibid.:414).

Lara Montesinos Coleman develops a related line of argument in a recent article in *IPS* on ethnographic engagement with struggles. A more general understanding of structural power relations does not, she argues, demand an absolute or reified understanding that would legislate for political mobilisation. She calls attention to how a sense of the whole is developed and continually redefined in struggle “as the sketched contours of political subjectivity are filled with content” (Coleman, 2015b:276). Drawing on the work of Foucault alongside the philosophy of physics of Gaston Bachelard, she suggests that struggle itself can be conceived as a sort of experiment, demanding a preliminary theorisation of power, but making its concepts and objects in the course of experimental engagement with power. Thus “[t]o make recourse to the whole in framing political commitment need not entrap us in ways that inhibit the pursuit of exit points” (Ibid.:276). Elsewhere, she argues that ethical categories mobilised in struggle are not abstract values of the sort harnessed in the cosmopolitan and often imperialist projects of humanitarian NGOs. Nor can normative visions in

struggle be reduced to the general ethical commitment to alterity of life advocated in some post-structuralist IR. Drawing on examples of mobilisations against transnational corporations and armed dispossession in Colombia, she (2015a:1072) argues that such struggles “work their normative visions not by appealing to ‘life’ or ‘humanity’ in the abstract but only as terms to be filled with content by exposing and critiquing relations of power that have made real lives unliveable.”

Concluding reflections

Concern to address the wider stakes of mobilisations is not indicative of a desire to legislate for struggles or to read their politics off a reified sense of the whole. It does not imply a retreat from international political sociology’s empiricist and deconstructionist sensitivity to practice, but might nudge us beyond it to address questions of generality or totality. To make reference to totalities does not imply a totalising, essentialist or monocausal analysis (Foucault, 2002:10-11; Connolly, 1989:336-337; Hennessey, 1996:220) off which we can then read the politics of mobilisations. Against the claim that deconstruction is the only way for critical thought to “maintain [its] distance from all presumptively sovereign centers of interpretation and judgment” and evade enclosure within seemingly self-evident matrices of thought and action (Ashley and Walker, 1990:367-8), William Connolly (1992:144-5) underscores that we cannot escape an onto-political dimension to analysis. Every analysis – even those pertaining to critique of any given ontology or “grand theory” – contains fundamental ontological presumptions about the world that inevitably structure the frameworks within which all analyses occur and invest all claims to political purchase.

Reasoning through attention to struggles brings to light precisely the “paradoxical condition” that Connolly (Ibid.:146) describes. The move of “deconstruction” prompted by attention to practice is always and inescapably accompanied by a parallel move of – in Connolly’s words (Ibid.:145) – “projectional interpretation”, which implies that we project ontological presumptions “into detailed interpretations of actuality”. What is important, for Connolly, is that the projectional character of our presumptions is acknowledged. Projection confesses to our own embodiment and entanglement in concrete political situations. What might be called the “double move” of deconstruction and projection has no clear starting- or end-point; we are always already in the middle of it, which means that we always move in an uncertain, in-between space.

From the perspective of engagement with struggles pitched against dominant power relations, it may be that this engagement itself prompts us to further reflexivity about our own received frameworks (cf. Huysmans and Nogueira, 2012:2; Coleman and Hughes, 2015; Coleman, 2015b; Coleman and Rosenow, 2016a) – even our own ontological assumptions and metatheoretical commitments. In the light of the foregoing discussion, the resistance of struggles to insertion into preconceived categories can be seen to occur along two axes. On the one hand, struggles may disrupt and unravel dominant relations of power/knowledge. On the other, attention to the complex and variegated ways in which power relations interrupt and intersect with struggles can shed light on diverse facets of power in the making of world order. Yet engaging mobilisations with an eye to political stakes requires us to adopt a position with regard to militants’ own demands and debates – “why?”, “for what?”, “against what?”. In acknowledging the projectional character of our onto-political assumptions, it becomes possible to assess what is at stake and to offer alternative proposals without grounding

such assessments in ontological certainty or performing a legislative move. Engagement with popular mobilisations may force us to explicate the ontological ground on which we stand, yet at the same time the ambiguities and tensions of struggle prompt a permanent openness to deconstructing whatever may be built upon that ground. It is this in-between space between projection and deconstruction which guarantees that we are constantly working at the limits of knowledge, questioning what is taken as given and universal, and attempting to reconfigure frameworks of thought and knowledge from the perspective of our own embeddedness.

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