

Online and Offline Social Movements: An Interdisciplinary Critical Insight

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Based on the premise that societies are in constant transformation, social change is effectuated through social protest. Moreover, new emerging social phenomena and social formations appear that require new kinds of theorization (Langman, 2005). At the same time, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are becoming more widespread and sophisticated in areas where transnational let alone global problems are tackled. That said the relation between ICTs and social and political phenomena becomes progressively more interconnected leading to the emergence of new interdisciplinary research field including the study of ICTs and social movements (SMOs). Connecting ICTs and technology with social movements also has a historical connotation since the internet has been an outcome of the politics and dynamics of the cold war on the one hand and the anti-war movement and counter culture on the other (Rosenweig, 1998).

Current research therefore needs to take into account the changing role of society, democracy and technology. With respect to the latter, it is worth specifying how technology is conceived in philosophical terms. Two main theorizations of technology can be distinguished. The first one represents the constructivist sociological theorization of science and technology. The basic postulation is that technology is influenced by interests and public processes and is social, more or less in the same way law, education or medicine is (Feenberg, 1996). Marcuse adheres to this view and is considered one of its major advocates. Being a romantic technophobe, Marcuse claims that although technology is neither good nor bad it still has the propensity to become either good, in the case of emancipation, or bad, when it is used for domination. This is conditioned by social actors (the users of technology) and their motives. For example, technology is seen as a tool of domination because of its exploitation by political and economic actors and, in more general terms the broader capitalist social order. The latter is the main cause for assigning mental powers to the apparatus of technology leading to the emergence of a new technological rationality (O'Casey, 2010). Anselmi and Gouliamos (1998) have connected the new technological rationality with the mobilization of displacement. Furthermore, they introduced the concept of "electronic bonapartism" as a phenomenon that responds to the regulatory system of the corporate economy. According to this rationality the individual's thoughts become subordinate to the machine process and as a result it is the machine that directs the individual and not the other way around (Marcuse, 1998; 2001). The second main theorization on technology has been developed by Habermas. Like Marcuse, Habermas also argues that technology is neutral but ceases to be when it is applied outside its actual sphere. At this point technology can generate various social pathologies, which then become the main problems of modern societies. Another difference with Marcuse lies in the fact that for Habermas technology is a 'project' of the human species as a whole, not of some particular historical epoch or of a particular class. At the same time he does not

deny the influence social demands have on technology (Habermas, 1970). Yet the changes of technology are not attributed to technological rationalities as defined by Marcuse. So as Feenberg succinctly underlines, for Habermas technology *'will always be a non-social, objectivating relation to nature, oriented towards success and control. Marcuse would argue, on the contrary, that the very essence of technology is at stake at the reform of the modern industrial system.'* (1996: 49).

The current special issue has sought to adopt Feenberg's proposal of a critical theory of technology that combines elements from these two theorizations and is built on a communication-theoretic basis. Such a critical approach affirms Habermas' critique that technology has general characteristics which qualify its application. At the same time though Feenberg adds another level of critique in order to address how the design of (new) technologies is shaped by the hegemonic interests of the society they serve. That said technology is perceived as a means in which instrumental action-coordination replaces communicative understanding through internet-biased designs. So, *'sometimes technology is overextended, sometimes it is politically biased, sometimes it is both'* (Feenberg, 1996: 67). To put it simply, this special issue is compiled based on the assumption that technologies are not merely the result of social actions but they can also have a significant contribution to social forms.

If we further limit our consideration of technology to the study of ICTs and how these affect democracy and society, then we come across a literature that discusses ICTs in terms of advantages and disadvantages (Postmes, 2007; Van de Donk et al., 2004). In debating the role of ICTs, various scholars advocate that the use and effect of ICTs is so expansive that it has caused a fundamental change in power relations (Castells, 2000: 20). This new paradigm shift constitutes the so-called transformational thesis regarding the role of ICTs. Examples of the transformational potential of ICTs include the rise of a 'network society' (Castells, 1997). This eventually has also led to the emergence of the 'Internet-worked Social Movements' (ISMs), which are new kinds of Internet-based social movements employing new forms of activism, such as cyberactivism, online networks and communities that form new social and political identities. The transformation occurring due to ICTs can be understood in positive terms such as for example an increase in civic engagement through the maintenance and extension of existing social networks, identities and ties (Jennings and Zeitner, 2003; Xenos and Moy, 2007; Wellman and Hampton, 1999). Supporters of the positive effects of ICTs are portrayed as 'cyber-optimists' as contrasted to 'cyber-pessimists'. The latter countenance the transformative potential of the internet too but this is represented negatively. An illustrative example concerns ICTs causing individuals' increasing isolation and limited civic participation (Kraut et al., 1998) or the increased state surveillance at the expense of civil liberties (e.g.: Van De Donk et al., 1995). On the other side, there is another group of researchers who perceive ICTs as merely another means of communication and information, not sufficient for bringing social and political change (Bentivegna, 2006). For them, the internet simply represents a complementary channel in the political game (Hill & Hughes, 1999; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Such views are in contrast to the transformation thesis and put into question the effect of

ICTs. In particular, ICTs are seen as unable to provoke any change in relation to the nature of power and principles of democracy or a shift to a new society (Webster, 2006).

A range of empirical studies have provided evidence for the purported changing nature of social movements, both online and offline. Apart from the debate between 'cyber optimists' and 'cyber pessimists' that has been criticized as banal, and recurs whenever a new tool is introduced, there are other debates in relation to ICTs. Researchers often attempt to address the question of whether ICTs have or not a substantial effect on SMOs and social change. Another line of research focus on whether online or offline SMOs are more effective and, in some cases how they interact. In order to empirically explore these questions researchers conceptualize ICTs and the internet differently. Indeed the way in which scholars conceptualize the internet gives strong indications on which aspect of the internet their study focuses on. Considering the internet as a merely technology rather than emphasizing its communicative capabilities is a sign of technological determinism (Breindl, 2010). Van De Donk et al. (2004) for example use the Online and Offline Social Movements: An Interdisciplinary Critical Insight term 'new media' when addressing the internet conceiving it as a communication media and more generally as an alternative source of information. However, online and offline worlds are increasingly interconnected and a dichotomized opposition between both domains is increasingly criticized (Breindl, 2010).

Bearing in mind that the offline and online worlds of SMOs are interconnected, some of the papers included in this special issue focus on a critical analysis of various SMOs independently of the ICT element. When focusing on SMOs, a number of questions are generally raised: whether social protest is effective in bringing social change; whether the existing constellations of power has changed; or how well the existing theories of SMOs could account for the dynamics in particular contexts. These issues are specifically elaborated by two papers. The first one written by Seppälä addresses the question of power through a critical analysis of the dominant theoretical discourses on globalization, namely liberal cosmopolitanism and radical post-structuralism as opposed to state centrism. Based on the premise that critical theories should have a practical political use, she concludes that the dominant discourses on globalization, as analysed in the new anti-war movement in Britain, replicate the debate between resource mobilization and new social movement theories. As a result this reproduces dualities which does not help explain the potential for social change. As an alternative the author proposes new anti-war movement discourses that combine both instrumental and symbolic notions of power. The second paper of Baka and Garifallou provides another case study from the Greek context and particularly the social unrest provoked by the events of December 2008. The authors use the lens of social psychology to conceptualize contentious events as strategies adopted by minority groups in a process of social change. In particular the authors employ social identity theory and the elaborated social identity model to study the interpersonal, intergroup and ideological processes of collective mobilization. The analysis of the discourse collected during the social protest events in December 2008 in Greece brings to the fore the emergence of an innovative, politicized collective identity of the participants that is based on solidarity, empowerment and the formation of social networks.

The third contribution by Triga employs a social constructionist theoretical framework that builds upon the ideological dilemmas approach in order to explore the ideological resources informing the protest action of the social movement 'I don't pay' in Greece. The author analyses the movement's discursive constructions as these are presented in the descriptions of selected Facebook groups. Hence she analyses an offline movement using its online actions. Her main conclusion is that the discursive constructions of the protest action of the respective social movement may prompt us to question whether on the one hand, everyday understandings of parliamentarism and representative democracy are the main mechanisms that trigger political and social action on the part of the citizens and on the other, whether the financial crisis can be also interpreted as a crisis of political institutions.

Thus far the papers have only tackled the role of technology as supplementary to SMOs in terms of mobilization and/or participation. The following three contributions adopt a more concrete position vis a vis the role of ICTs. Chadjimanolis in his paper uses political opportunity structure theory along with ecological modernization theory in order to examine the environmental movement in Cyprus, a case for which we have a limited literature. His main goal is to investigate the role played by ICTs regarding the internal organization of the environmental social movements and their action repertoires. He analyses the major ideological dilemma between ecology and progress that environmental SMOs attempt to negotiate in order to accommodate the role of ICTs. More specifically, ICTs are used progressively to promote the movement's principal objectives such as green development while, on the other hand, ICTs are seen as hindering ecology by posing new problems. The author points out the ambivalent relationship between ICTs and innovation on the one side and the emergence of environmental movements, their contribution to democratic processes, and citizens' participation in environmental policy-making on the other.

Based on an alternative theorization of SMOs that uses Tilly's social movement theory and DeLanda's assemblage theory, Craviolini et al. address the spatiality and technicity of social protest. In order to achieve this goal they critically evaluate the impact of ICTs on SMOs and particularly the performativity of social action. They conclude that ICTs have an important transformational potential that entails a change from a society of discipline to a society of control. Echoing a cyber-pessimistic argument they conclude that SMOs effectiveness regarding organization is disputed in terms of space and time. In order to rectify this lack of effectiveness, a reconceptualization of SMOs is needed that is sensitive to the complex intertwining of offline and online relationships.

Finally, in the last contribution Mendez takes a largely sceptical stance on the democratizing potential of ICT. Whilst accepting that ICT is having a considerable impact on how citizens, civil society groups, and political authorities interact and produce collective decisions, he argues that this Online and Offline Social Movements: An Interdisciplinary Critical Insight need not entail a transformation in existing political practices. Change may be possible at the margins, and the empowerment of new social actors through social media is likely to intensify, but a paradigm shift towards participatory models of active citizenship is likely to remain elusive.

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