

# PROTESTS, MEDIA AND "THE MARGINS": A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN GREECE AND TURKEY

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## Resumen

Large numbers of social actors around the world seized upon opportunities to organize collectively, occupy public spaces, and protest on the streets the last years. On the one hand, various studies point out the significant role of social media in the mobilization and coordination of a new paradigm of social movements, in terms of registering multifarious reactions against different facets of capitalist globalization. On the other hand, different perspectives evaluate the very context(s) (structural issues and dislocations) of the materialization of contemporary movements, and the role of different media formats in the implementation of oppositional practices, which complicate the picture. From this point of view, the paper focuses on two examples of the current wave of 'spring protests' – the one

in Greece in 2011 and the other one in Turkey in 2013 – revealing relevant contradictions that have influenced the emergence and the prospects of these protests. By probing into the conventional structures of the two case studies in particular the paper evaluates different parameters and aspects of the resistances conveyed by 'marginalized' social actors respectively ('Aganaktismenoi' in Greece and 'Çapulcu' in Turkey), including: the character of the struggles (social, political, cultural) and their dimension (local, national, international); the role of pre-existing action repertoires and collective imaginations in inspiring the recent practices of contestation; and, the diverse uses (repressive and radical) of different media (mainstream and alternative ones), and their mutual interactions.

## Keywords

Social movements, social media, protests, Greece, Turkey



## **1. Introduction.**

In the discussion about the decisive role of social media in contemporary protest movements, the emergence of another paradigm of social movements has been evaluated: from the 'old' social movements (18th century) - characterized by the struggles of distribution on class-based politics, where print media played a major role in the mobilization of movements; to 'new' social movements - (of 60s-70s in 20th century) and the struggles of recognition on identity-based politics, where broadcasting introduces new elements and a global dimension in the communication of movements; to the return of politics of social issues (unemployment, poverty, class) - though the subject now is not exactly the proletariat or the underclass but well educated unemployed youth, where social media play significant role in the coordination of movements (Vatikiotis and Yörük, 2012).

The recent wave of protest movements, since 2011 onwards - Arab 'Spring', European Movements, Occupy Movement, and Gezi Park - has provided a privileged area of study in regard to the extent to which they should be considered as part of the same "cycle of contention" (Tarrow, 1994). Is there any common framework for the last wave of mobilizations, in the same way global justice movement provided one in the name of fighting neo-liberal globalization linking diverse protests and practices across different parts of the world (Seattle, Porto Alegre, Prague, Gothenburg, Genoa, and Florence among others)? According to Žižek (2013), what unites the protests is that they are reactions against different facets of capitalist globalization. Still, none of these protests can be reduced to a single issue; they deal with a specific combination of at least two issues, one economic (from corruption to inefficiency to capitalism itself), the other politico-ideological (from the demand for democracy to the demand that conventional multi-party democracy be overthrown).

## **2. Internet activism.**

The first phase of internet activism took place in late 1990s and the beginning of our century. The increasing popularity of the internet and the creative uses of information communication technologies fostered the interaction and collaboration of dispersed groups of activists across the world. Emblematic examples of this period are the Zapatista movement in the Chiapas region in Mexico, and the 'Battle for Seattle' against the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting, where their messages were tailored to an emerging global audience. Zapatista resistance movement in Chiapas, Mexico, provided a long-term perspective in global social movement politics (Chadwick, 2006), while the formation of the global justice movement launched a "new kind of politics" (Bennett, 2003). The latter started with the 'Carnival Against Capital' demonstration in June 1999, organizing diverse social groups throughout the world (anarchist, environmentalist, feminist, anti-capitalist, labor and other



groups) that led to the infamous international protest in December 1999 against neoliberal, globalization policies and supranational institutions (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005). The formation of the self-managed activist internet service Indymedia, a global independent information network, was vital for the networking of activism in transnational level. Hence, internet decisively entered the realm of political activism, providing a vibrant terrain for social struggles. In this regard, anti-globalization movement moved from the transnational to national/local, against neoliberal capitalist expansions and accumulation (della Porta, 2012).

The second phase of internet activism has been characterized by the employment of social media in protest movements developed in various countries across the world. The first uprisings 'led' by social media took place in Moldova and Iran in 2009, known as 'Twitter revolutions'. A wave of protest movements mediated by social media has emerged since 2011. It began with the so-called 'Arab Spring' in Tunisia and Egypt, late 2010/early 2011, spread soon after to other countries of the Middle East and North Africa, followed by the "Indignados Movements" in Southern Europe and the "Occupy Movement" in the USA during the spring and autumn of the same year accordingly. Moreover, Gezi Park protests took place in Turkey in the spring of 2013; they were initially addressed against governmental policies (mainly to a redevelopment plan for Istanbul's Taksim square and the overall privatization of public spaces), and gradually included claims against environmental degradation and police violence. Further uprisings took place last year, in Brazil, during the world cup, summer 2014, and in Hong Kong, the student protests, fall 2014. The second phase of internet activism registers significant national dimensions too.

### **3. Recent mobilizations: similar and dissimilar features.**

The contemporary protest movements share some common characteristics. In every case, diverse groups of people from different social, economic, political and cultural backgrounds were organized collectively, protested on the streets, proclaiming dynamically their demands. Crucial parameter of these forms of collective action is their networked mobilization and organization - the role of social networking platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) along with the use of mobile phones and portable devices. In addition, a hybrid of cyberspace (social media) and urban space (occupation of main squares, and protests camps) has been the new arena of their implementation. Finally, the parallel spread of these movements has been endorsed by kind of snowball inspiration among the relevant uprisings.

The related literature review has extensively reflected on the prospects of these mobilizations and the central role of social media in them. Indicative is here the evaluation of recent protest movements either in terms of social media platforms and applications taking the role of traditional political organizations (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013), or along the networking of



the social movements, as the crucial aspect of their development (Castells, 2012), or across the symbolic construction of a sense of togetherness via social media (Gerbaudo, 2012), or even by addressing protest movements as conveyors of a new social imaginary, that of "communing" (Hardt and Negri, 2012). These approaches point out key parameters of the complex practices developed along the interplay between social movements and social media. However, these approaches pay less attention to the context of the development of these movements that raises further issues regarding the development of the protest movements, underlining significant differences among them too. From this point of view, structural issues, dislocations, and histories of contestation as well as the role of other media formats, and their mutual interactions, register important features for consideration.

#### **4. Preliminary reflections: Syntagma square (Greece) and Gezi park (Turkey).**

From this point of view, the paper sketches a number of aspects regarding the context of contemporary protests by drawing on two case studies, the Greek Indignados movement of 2011 and Gezi park movement in Turkey in 2013.

Social demands in Greece had both an international character - against global (IMF) and regional (EU) capitalism, economic crisis, politics of austerity, and national character - against political corruption and the national elites. Donatella della Porta (2012), probing into the European Indignados movements in Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, and Greece) points out that the new wave of protest has continuities and discontinuities with the past - the global justice movement. Indeed, global justice movement has provided a valuable source for the emergence of new action forms and practices in national contexts. Still, the buildup of European mobilizations has also been in direct communication with strong pre-existing repertoires of action in national level: the long tradition and the social capital of activist movements that preceded Indignados movements - see the violent confrontations in the streets of Athens in 2008 after the shooting of a 15-year old boy by a policeman (Vatikiotis, 2011); as well as the support of traditional forms of protest - see union-led and university students' strikes (Psimitis, 2011).

When it comes to the media, the use of Facebook and Twitter in Indignados movements was important in terms of initiating the mobilizations and sustaining the occupations, driving collective action in public space - Syntagma square in Athens. More importantly, social media facilitated the cross-national diffusion of frames, slogans and pictures, echoing messages and calls, especially among Indignados movements. At the same time, mass media coverage and alternative media practices, being embedded into the antagonisms in economic, political and ideological structures of the society, reflected and contributed accordingly.



In the case of Gezi park protest movement the social demands have national character; but in contrast to Greece, Turkey's economy has been booming for the last decade ('success story'). Here, protests were initially addressed against governmental policies (mainly to a redevelopment plan for Istanbul's Taksim square - privatization of public spaces). There is a strong tradition of oppositional local practices related to environmental issues in Turkey (ex. protests against HES (hydroelectric plantation projects). Gradually, protests included claims against environmental degradation, police violence, and even the prime minister himself. In response to Erdoğan's description of the protesters as looters, *çapulcu*, demonstrators took up the name as a symbol of pride, describing their peaceful and humorous civil disobedience actions as 'chappuling'. These protests were radical (not guided by political parties, organizations), and non-violent (despite the violence exercised by police), and they had also as main locus the occupation of Gezi park.

Another significant difference of the implementation of Gezi park protests concerns the mediascape. The strong affiliations between Turkey's media and the governing party AKP (see the initial spotty coverage of Gezi park protests by the national media, which became one of the symbols of the movement - 'penguins' refers to CNN Turk's showing a penguin documentary, while CNN International provided live coverage of the protests), the extensive censorship of journalists, and the repressive uses of new media (the shutdown of YouTube between 2008 and 2010, and on Twitter and YouTube in 2013) reveal the void that social media came to fill in. As many protesters point out, the social media were the only way to present the truth of what is happening to the whole country.

## **5. Epilogue.**

Analyzing contemporary protest movements and the role of social media in them, we need to probe into the conventional structures of the societies, including antagonisms in economic, political and ideological spheres of each society, the pre-existing action repertoires and collective imaginations that have influenced the emergence and the prospects of these protests, and the role of different media formats, both traditional and new ones.

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