

Bridging the Cultural Gap: Protest and Social Movements (from Mai 68 to 15-M and beyond)

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Abstract:

This volume edited by Britta Baumgarten, Priska Daphi and Peter Ullrich adds the crucial element of culture to the puzzle of contemporary social movement research. By complementing and going beyond the state of the art in social movement research, it offers critical, interdisciplinary, and translocal perspectives in four sections to tackle the concept of culture for social movement research. From the protests of 15-M in Madrid and to Mai 68, this volume updates the idea of social movements as new historical subjects and convincingly bridges the cultural gap in social movement research.

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Baumgarten, Britta; Priska Daphi and Peter Ullrich (Hg.): *Conceptualizing Culture in Social Movement Research*. Houndsmill/Basingstoke/Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 328 S., Hardback, 93.97 Euro. ISBN: 978-1-137-28230-9

The cover picture of the tent city at Madrid's Puerta del Sol that was part of the ¡Democracia real, YA! or 15-M movement is a promising declaration for this volume. Especially since anti-austerity movements from Europe and the US (Occupy, Blockupy, 15M, etc.) and their social and political outcomes have been invoked by scholars from all over the humanities and social sciences in the recent years, but rarely in a satisfactory way. So how to make sense of these outcomes, how to understand the movements' different internal dynamics and local embeddings? This volume answers these questions by focusing on the concept of culture: it "aims to systemize the different concepts of culture in social movement research by comparing approaches, assessing (theoretical) shortcomings, and presenting new ways of cultural analysis in the study of social movements and protest." (p. 1)

Peter Ullrich, Priska Daphi and Britta Baumgarten introduce the volume by locating it within a larger tradition of cultural approaches in social movements research, where they, nevertheless, identify four general conceptual shortcomings to be overcome in the following sections: a "one-dimensionality of culture" (p. 3), a "narrow, sectoral application of the concept of culture" (p. 4), a misleading opposition between culture and structure, and a handling of culture as a stopgap for shortcomings in existing approaches. Eventually, they propose a three-fold model for social movement research by questioning which aspects of culture can be taken into consideration, where culture is to be located with regard to the social, and who enacts, produces, and inhabits culture in which way. The subsequent contributions can be read as possible answers to these questions.

The first section offers different theoretical conceptualizations of culture in social movements. Laurence Cox introduces the reader to Western Marxist traditions and its management of cultural concepts for understanding social movements. For that matter she updates the fruitfulness of Gramsci's, Thompson's or William's works for contemporary social movement studies, both theoretically and methodologically. June Nash's anthropological perspective probably makes the strongest case for the volume's aim: by identifying a cultural disruption of time and space within formerly colonized societies through modern/colonial capitalism, she argues for the importance of culture in understanding social movements: "It is there that an alternative

imaginary of modernization, drawing upon primordial cultural resources, is being forged in social action" (p. 82).

The next section engages with cultural frames and how they condition social movements. Here, the insightful contribution of Britta Baumgarten is exemplary, as she insists that a transnational/-local approach to social movements is only possible by taking into account the importance of different national backgrounds (e.g. national politicians as targets, different media or varying civil society cultures).

In the third part, culture is analysed as an internal phenomenon of social movements by four equally enriching contributions by Priska Daphi, Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Nicole Doerr, and Jeffrey S. Juris. By focusing on the concepts of space, habitus, memory, and performance, these authors provide a mutually supplementing perspective of how culture matters within social movements. This likewise inspires a possible social movement research approach motivated by cultural theory.

The last section of the book asks in which way social movements and protests act on culture. Olga Malets and Sabrina Zajak tackle this question by discussing social movements as agents of cultural transnationalization. In this equally theoretically and methodologically motivated contribution, the authors propose a "framework of cycles of translation [that] can be fruitful for a range of specific diffusion processes across countries, movements, and time." (p. 271) In the only contribution engaging explicitly in an empirical case, Erik Neveu discusses the 'politics of history' and appropriation processes of the events of Mai 68 in France as "memory battles" (p. 275) over protest experiences. This volume's closing argument points to the larger cultural battlefields in which social movements perform, exert influence, or are appropriated.

A committed account, sympathetic to social movements is being delivered by going beyond utilitarian and functionalistic views on their resources, strategies, tactics or aims. By bridging the cultural gap in social movement research, this volume argues that social movements and protests create and have their potential for social transformations within the cultural sphere. The strong theoretical focus of this compilation is alleviated by constant references to the authors' research backgrounds and thus made more tangible. There is also an implicit methodological surplus, whereby especially the articles by Peter Ullrich and Reiner Keller, as well as by Jochen Roose, are helpful. Unfortunately, topical post- and decolonial perspectives are missing, though they certainly could have enriched the debate on global and transnational/-local social movements while avoiding the pitfalls of euro- and globocentrism. The structuring reciprocal relationship between social movements and culture could seem a nuance too mechanical and dualistic, but is convincing for the book's objective and thus highly recommendable as a theoretical orientation for social movement scholars. To sum up, the strength of *Conceptualizing Culture in Social Movement Research* is its advocacy for the importance of cultural analysis that bridges a long-ignored gap within social movement research. This, at the same time, implies a tightrope walking of the slippery, multilayered concept of culture, which the

contributors manage successfully. The cultural gap is bridged within this volume: it is an inspiration to read the very object of study, social movement and protests, as culture; not only for social movement scholars but for everyone, who is interested in the general dynamics of culture as a social battleground over shared meanings and symbols.