Riding the wave

Some conclusions

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9.1 Movements’ cascade

The wave of protest that started in 2011 was especially visible in those countries that had been particularly hard hit by the financial crisis of 2008 – arguably, the losers of neoliberal globalization (della Porta, 2015). As protests cascaded later on, they also started to become strong and visible in countries that had been considered as winners in neoliberal globalization (such as Turkey or Brazil), as well as those that seemed still to be dreaming of growth and development within a neoliberal consensus (as, for example, Bulgaria and Bosnia – with Venezuela as a case of a difficult attempt to develop an alternative social formation within global capitalist evolution).

With the broadening of the range of countries involved in the protest wave, the chances to investigate common trends in the variety of late neoliberalism also increased. The appeal to a broad coalition of groups and interests is one of the common characteristics of the protest. In fact, “Like the Arab Spring, the Gezi Uprising attracted an unprecedented mix of protesters ranging from opposition political parties, nationalists of sorts, radical-left organizations, anarchist groups, the LGBTTQ and feminist networks, environmentalists, shanty-town dwellers resisting eviction, members of non-Muslim/non-Turkish communities, Alevi organizations, worker’s unions, students, youth, football fans, and the middle classes” (Yıldırım, 2014).

In terms of the class effects of neoliberalism, reflected in the social basis of the protests, we noted a general trend of proletarization of the middle class and pauperization of the working class that produced multi-class mobilization. The myth of the growth of middle class as indicator of progress was challenged by the effects of the precarization of middle class and workers alike, with increasing inequalities within the various forms of neoliberalism that developed in the periphery. These similarities notwithstanding, there was also diversity in the social background of the protests and in their claims. While protests in Turkey and Ukraine involved people with different social backgrounds, in Brazil and in Bulgaria an increasing presence of the middle classes was noted, in a sort of alternance with other
social groups. The middle class remained the only group in the Venezuelan case, while the poor protested in South Africa, but with few connections with workers’ mobilizations.

The changing relations between the state and the market had political consequences in terms of a crisis of political responsibility. As once acquired citizens’ rights now became commodities, citizens started to oppose their various manifestations. In fact, the protests challenged the myth of a consistent relationship between economic and political liberalism, pointing at authoritarian tendencies among the liberal leaders (Tuğal, 2013). A shared element of the protests was indeed the discontent – anger or outrage – at what was perceived as a violation of acquired entitlements by a small and corrupt oligarchy of businessmen and politicians. While the longstanding assumption had been that capitalism needs democracy, and vice versa, anti-austerity protests have shown that late neoliberalism fuels illiberal tendencies, challenging previous strategies of incorporation and, in doing so, becoming less and less tolerant of dissent. Degrees of illiberalism also varied among our cases, as did the regimes’ reactions to the protests – being stronger in Turkey and Ukraine and (much) less so in Brazil, Bosnia, Bulgaria, or Venezuela.

In Turkey – where the Gezi occupation came to epitomize the development of a new spirit – but also in Brazil, Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, taking to the streets proved not just an instrumental form of political participation, whose effects can be analyzed merely in terms of policy achievements, but also an action that transformed the relations among people. Protests become, i.e., transformative in their capacity to create a new way of conceiving politics and citizens’ (ordinary people’s) participation in them.

In order to face the social and political challenges of what has been defined as the neoliberal critical juncture, social movements must rely on the eventful capacity of protests. Social movements in times of crisis have often been defined through two, quite different, categories of countermovements or antisystemic movements. In Polanyi’s (1957) analysis, countermovements reacted to the disruption of a moral economy that left some space for social protection. More recently, Alain Badiou (2012: 5) located a return of history in what he defined as historical riots – “yet blind, naïve, scattered and lacking of a powerful concept or durable organization.” “With a subjectivity based especially on rebellion, they nevertheless allow for the emergence of the inexistent beings of the world” (2012: 56). Notwithstanding their claim to represent the people, however, they are said to lack the idea as well as the political organization that allows going beyond the event (2012). Differently,
Wallerstein’s and Arrighi’s antisystemic movements resist greedy capitalism, opposing the logic of the system, as “to be antisystemic is to argue that neither liberty nor equality is possible under the existing system and that both are possible only in a transformed world” (Wallerstein, 1990: 36; Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein, 1989: 1).

9.2 Shifting class alliances

The 2013 protests have triggered a debate on the class basis of contentious politics in neoliberal times. Our cases point at the relevance of the class basis for recent protests, with a range of capacity to build cross-class coalitions. Data collected on the social background of those who protested do not unequivocally confirm either the thesis of the mobilization of a new precariat, or that of a middle-class movement. In all protests, a broad range of social backgrounds is represented, from students, to precarious workers, manual and non-manual dependent workers, petty bourgeoisie and professionals. Over-proportionally young in terms of generation, the protests also see the participation of other age cohorts whose high educational levels do not correspond to winning positions in the labor market.

This is particularly the case in the Gezi campaign. The social background of the protesters has indeed been described as plural:

The largest single group of protesters was from the manual formal proletariat (36 percent), followed by the non-manual proletariat (20 percent), the informal proletariat (18 percent), the petty bourgeoisie (11 percent), professionals (6 percent), executives (5 percent), and capitalists (4 percent). In other words, more than half of the protesters – approximately 54 percent – belonged to the formal and informal proletariat, the two lowest echelons of the class structure. Adding the non-manual formal proletarians, i.e. white-collar employees and technicians, increases the proletarian participation rate to 74 percent (Yörük and Yüksel, 2014: 111).

More than half of the protesters could therefore be defined as proletarians. It is true, however, that the upper classes were more present in Gezi Park than in the total population. While the middle classes represented about one third of the protesters, they are only about one fifth of the entire population. In addition, while up to 40 percent of professionals took part in the protests, only up to 20 percent of proletarians did (2014: 115). A similar
distribution was noted for wages. Also, “despite the public perception that workers were hostile or at least indifferent to the protests, the surveys show that around two-fifths of all proletarians supported Gezi, while among the upper strata this ratio increases to around three-fifths” (2014: 115). If students and professionals were indeed overrepresented, a majority of those who protested were “predominantly workers, potential workers (students), children of workers, unemployed and even retired workers” (2014: 107).

The social background of protesters in Brazil has been similarly multifarious. According to surveys, protesters were young, the majority of them below 25 years old (and only up to 20 percent of them over 36). They also had high levels of education: no more than 2 percent had only primary-school education, as compared to 54 percent in the overall population, and up to 43 percent had advanced degrees, against 8 percent of the whole population. There was high participation by those with low incomes (around half the demonstrators, up to 88 percent in Rio). So, “a substantial proportion of the protesters came from the lower half of the country’s income distribution – in marked contrast with the image suggested by the data on education levels, which implied that almost all were in the upper half” (Singer, 2013: 85).

In fact, there were two blocs, of similar size: “on the one hand, middle-class young adults, and on the other, people of the same age but drawn from the lower half of the Brazilian social pyramid” (Singer, 2013). These two blocs took on different weights at different moments of the protests, with a shift from a left-wing movement to a rainbow one as the middle class increased their presence in the street, along with more anti-governmental stances (2013). While Brazil seemed to be a success story, the struggle around the right to public transport catalyzed the claims for a right to the city, which the government had left unanswered (Roman, 2013). In fact, as in Turkey, protests in Brazil were said to demonstrate “how stifling the heaven promised by liberalism is” (Tuğal, 2013: 162) – as Lula’s social liberalism had subsidized the acquisition of private cars while public infrastructure for the population was still lacking.

In South Africa, various forms of protest involved different social groups in different social locations: from the workers in the factories to the poor in the neighborhoods. Differently from Brazil and Venezuela, the broad and radical protests over poor public services involved people living in the poorest areas; workers were also involved in large strikes. What was similar to the situation in Brazil and Venezuela, however, was that the poor and the workers rarely converged. Indeed, in social movement studies in South Africa, much stress has been put on the continuous centrality of workers’ struggles and materialistic concerns, with a primary role played
by mobilization calling for economic redistribution. In the 2000s, social movements emerged with explicit links to sister movements fighting against neoliberalism in other countries (Seddon and Zeilig, 2005). Especially in the informal settlements, protests also took the form of a “rebellion of the poor” (Alexander, 2010). In fact, “Since 2004, South Africa has experienced thousands of local protests, many of them popular insurrections, which, taken together, represent a rebellion of the poor. Lack of service delivery has been the main issue, but protesting communities have also demanded the removal of corrupt officials, re-demarcation of political boundaries and employment. In terms of endurance and geographical spread, the movement is unprecedented” (Alexander and Pfaffe, 2013).

In these protests, besides the lack of basic services (among them sanitation, drainage, sewage, water, electricity, and street lighting), there have been claims addressing housing, roads, price of electricity, schools, as well as political corruption and employment. These protests have “strong similarities in forms of contention (burning barricades being common), geographical space (most emerge from townships and informal settlements), organisation (community meetings are typical) and demographics (generally speaking ‘the poor’, particularly those regarded as ‘youth’), indicating that we are dealing with a broad process, rather than merely a set of discrete events” (2013: 4-5). Only rarely, however, have social movement organizations and trade unions allied; instead, unions have been increasingly fragmented and involved in collusion as well as corruption (Ngwane, 2014). Large waves of protest like the public sector strikes in 2007 and 2010 subsided, in fact, due to the lack of connections between the strikers and the activists who mobilized the community protests (Ceruti, 2014).

The Ukrainian Euromaidan has been described as being as multi-class as the Turkish Gezi. While for Maidan the triggering event revolved around the agreement with the EU and main claims were therefore defined in terms of freedom and Western values, ethnographic work on the square highlights a central concern with socio-economic issues that was visible in opinion polls as well as in the claims of previous protests in the country – against changes in tax codes and labor codes, the commodification of education, and the privatization of public spaces (Ryabchuk, 2014; Kvit, 2014). The call for a “revolution of dignity” pitted the people against an oligarchy of business and politicians who had accumulated enormous wealth, leaving the rest of the population in conditions of insecurity (Satter, 2014). The EU was thus considered as a symbol for secure jobs and freedom of travel – in general, better living standards – and there were even claims for nationalization of some enterprises (Ryabchuk, 2014; Leshchenko, 2014).
In Bosnia, while the first wave of protest focused on human rights issues and the rule of law, the second wave in 2014 clearly addressed labor issues, although with a broader alliance between workers and students. Developing in an area well-known for its working-class traditions, protests explicitly aimed at overcoming ethnic definitions and ethnic conflicts, more openly addressing issues of social inequality and unemployment and specifically targeting the privatization program as responsible for the increasing misery of large parts of the population. A cleavage was indeed emphasized between the large majority of the suffering people and the small elite of the rich and powerful.

In Bulgaria, as well, the protests that started on February 4, 2013 and led to the resignation of Prime Minister Borisov saw the mobilization of different groups. Here, however, there was a shift, moving from poor(er) people’s concerns with privatization and electricity bills to the “young, beautiful, and successful” on issues of corruption, up to the student protests in October for justice and knowledge (Rone, in this volume). Developing from a strong wave of contestation of the ACTA agreement on counterfeiting trade, the protests definitely overwhelmingly involved young people, especially from the capital Sofia. However, they also offered occasions for an encounter of the poor and the rich, the “ugly” and the “beautiful.”

Based on observation of the geography of protests, researchers have defined a similar evolution towards broader participation by the middle classes in Venezuela, with a shift towards the wealthiest areas in Caracas and in the country in general. While the initial claims of the protest are also widespread among the workers and poorer sectors of the population – especially about lack of security, high inflation rates, and scarcity of some goods – the anti-governmental tone of the mobilization kept those groups away, or even led them to mobilize in countermovements. The lack of participation by the popular sectors from the impoverished barrios is linked to their support for Chávez and the Bolivarian revolution, which indeed notably improved the life conditions of the poorest groups of the population through better public services but also a network of local associations (Hawkins, 2010).

In sum, while multi-class, the various protest campaigns are not interclass. Rather, they tend to reflect some of the changes in class structure that have characterized neoliberalism and its crisis: in particular, the proletarization of the middle classes and the precarization of workers. Regarding the former, much research has pointed at the declining power of the middle classes, with trends of proletarization of a) independent petite bourgeoisie (transformation of commercial structures brings about the
elimination of independent shopkeepers in favor of multinational corporations); b) free professionals (through processes of privatization of services, creation of oligopolistic firms, de-professionalization through Taylorization of tasks); and c) public employees (through reductions of status and salaries, flexibilization of contracts, and so on). Regarding the latter, precarization affects dependent workers in the industrial sectors (through closing down of traditional Fordist sectors and flexibilization of working conditions) as well as in the tertiary sector, with increases in informal labor, low paid jobs, and precarious working conditions.

In conclusion, rather than a single class, the protests mobilized citizens with a multifarious social background. Boratav has defined the Gezi protests as

[A] matured class-based rebellion against this plundering capitalism. It is class oriented hence; it is against the bourgeois and its State apparatus, the resistance is a collective act by individuals not in a unity of predestination with the system but who are in a dis-unity of predestination with the State and bourgeoisie. Also it is a matured class-based action. [...] People resisting today are resisting against the transformation of their collective property, which has been left by the past generations to present society, into bourgeois private property (2013).

In Brazil, Bosnia, or Bulgaria, as well, various social classes, with their concerns and traditions, participated in the protests. Their movements involved a large majority of highly educated youth, reflecting frustration with the lack of prospects for a satisfying future. Although they often expanded beyond the big cities, the protests did in fact present claims that addressed the increasing inequalities in the global cities. In Turkey, as in Brazil, in Bulgaria, and in Bosnia, at stake was the formation of a restricted oligarchy representing a consolidated coalition of business and political power. In Maidan as well, students, artists, workers, farmers, professionals were all represented. Differently, in Venezuela, the lack of capacity of the organizers to involve a cross-class coalition around their claims testifies to the roots of Chavism among the poor, whose conditions had notably improved under the Bolivarian government. Even when dissatisfied by the post-Chávez course of the party, they expressed their dissatisfaction in different types of protests. Similar to a certain extent is the fragmentation of protest arenas in South Africa where, however, the poor have broadly and frequently contested what activists consider as a betrayal by the ANC of its roots.
9.3 A global crisis of political responsibility

First of all, in the core but also in the peripheries of the empire, personalist forms of political power develop, in some cases inspired by old traditions within authoritarian regimes. In general, the shift in power from the legislative to the executive institutions as well as the transformations in political parties fuel personalistic forms of power. In Turkey, authoritarian democracy assumed the characteristics of Erdoğan’s imitation of the absolute power of the sultanate. As Açıksöz and Korkman (2013) noted, in his uncompromising attitudes during the protests, “Erdoğan embodies a very particular gendered political persona that relies on an innovative (neoliberal) synthesis of Islamist and urban, tough masculinities.” Claiming to represent “the interests of the majoritarian popular classes, while pursuing an orthodox neoliberal, pro-EU, pro-NATO line” (Yörük and Yüksel, 2014: 108), the AKP became increasingly authoritarian during its victorious fight against the secular and nationalist Kemalists (but also against the PKK, the unions, or the Alevi religious minority) with the repression of politicians, journalists, academics, but also army officers (2014). The authoritarian turn of the AKP is in fact linked with a self-perception as the “authentic” representatives of the ‘people’ whose religious/conservative identities and values have been suppressed by the secular republicanism of the Kemalist elite since the founding of the Republic in 1923” (Karakayali and Yaka, 2014: 121).

In general, a growing intolerance towards opposition is linked to rhetoric of legitimation through electoral majority. In Turkey as elsewhere, contentious politics is considered as a challenge to a national community that is seen as represented only and fully by elected delegates. So, in Turkey, this is related with a specific religious vision of the community – as:

[A]part from voting procedures (elections and referendums), the millet cannot and should not have any further political participation. Their volition is expressed through the ballot box, and that means through a democratic process. The national volition in this way approves or rejects the government’s acts and therefore confirms the democratic process. The democracy of the ballot box thus becomes the status of the nation, whose representative and carrier of values is the ruling party, the AKP. Therefore, the party itself is converted into the absolute vehicle of democracy, too (Moudouros, 2014: 184).

The majority is thus deified as “a carrier of an ‘ontological justice,’ while in the same way the political representative of this majority expresses ‘by its
nature’ the right and the fair. Thus, any kind of criticism is marginalized not only as hostile and dangerous, but also as ‘foreign, materialistic and Western’ exactly because it is not recorded on the basis of the common traditional values of the nation – millet” (2014: 184).

In Turkey, Gezi was often defined as a reaction to authoritarian neoliberalism that affected everyday life. So, “The different groups that were camped in the park, from leftists to rightists, from the Islamists to secularists, from the young urbane sophisticates to older ‘mothers of the protesters,’ all encountered the full wrath of state authority. [...] The majoritarian conservatism of the AKP has reconfigured the memory of the Turkish nationalist project through the projection of a neo-Ottoman pro-Islamic and prodemocracy future, but, primarily, through the lens of a past that was once considered glorious” (Abbas and Yigit, 2014: 3). Authoritarianism also ignited protests in a more short-term dynamic. After the brutal repression,

Minorities and majorities, men and women, mostly young but also older people, leftists and rightists, atheists and religionists, simultaneously fused together into a national outcry against the responses to the protesters by the police and the heavy-handedness of the state that emerged over several days and weeks. The events created a national swell of sympathy and ownership. Food was left for the protesters, which was then distributed by volunteers. Yoga classes were set up in Gezi Park at noon every day. Bands played music, and kebab sellers sold their fodder in and around it. There was almost a carnival-like atmosphere, bringing people together rarely detected in Turkish society (Abbas and Yigit, 2014: 4).

The spiral of repression and mobilization was all the more visible in Ukraine where brutal, but also inconsistent repression brought about a rapid and exponential growth in the number of people in the square – from a few thousand to several hundred thousand (Popova, 2014). Protest targeted what was considered an increasingly authoritarian regime, with super-presidential power. It moreover addressed a regime moving towards forms of “soft authoritarianism” (Shevtsova, 2014), with centralization not only of decisional power but also of wealth – including the enrichment of a few protected oligarchs, especially in the circles more loyal to the president, Victor Yanukovivych. Violence escalated, with protesters using not only Molotov cocktails but also blockades and takeovers of governmental buildings, as demonstrators were killed (20 on February 18, 2014, and 70 people two days later), snipers fired on the crowd, and torture was used by the security
service. Illiberal reactions included an attempt to pass new legislation in order to criminalize participation in so-called “mass disruption.”

In Venezuela, as well, protests were fueled by repression, which transformed localized actions into national ones. The issue of lack of security, given high crime rates, was politicized following brutal police intervention (with over 40 people dead), which was then exploited by oppositional politicians. The claims against an illiberal regime were expressed first of all in the call for freedom of the press and freedom of demonstration. After Chávez’s death his successor faced difficulties that were social (with growing inflation rates and scarcity of goods) as well as political – leading to a shift from the more negotiated policing promoted by Chávez to a militarized approach. This had been proposed as a solution to crime, impunity, and insecurity, but its use in the policing of protests also contributed to the spreading of the dissent. As has been observed, Chávez’s success in the incorporation of the Venezuelan workers and poor people was linked to “a reaction to systematic violations of the rule of law that can be interpreted as corruption, particularly in combination with economic crisis” (Hawkins, 2010: 160). While not directly transmitted to his successors, Chávez’s leadership proved capable of creating long-lasting loyalties.

In South Africa, as well, there was a turning point following an escalation of repression by the government led by a former movement-near party, culminating in a terrible massacre reminiscent of the crimes of the apartheid regime. As in Brazil and in South Africa, the cooptation and betrayal of former social movements by a party brought to power thanks to the protest have been denounced by activists and singled out by scholars. This was the case, among others, of social movement organizations active since the late 1990s against privatization and evictions and in support of landless peasants or AIDS patients. A crisis of legitimacy of the former movement-party now long in government has been linked to a mix of neoliberalism and corruption that affected the post-apartheid regime. The ANC’s adoption of the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy is singled out as being at the root of socio-economic inequalities that challenge formal equality (McKinley, 2014). As Alexander (2013) noted, “Increased unemployment, stagnant real wages and heightened inequality arise from the government’s pro-capitalist economic policies. The African National Congress (ANC) government permitted massive capital flight from South Africa soon after it came to power. […] It privatised important industries.” The cooptation of the main trade union, COSATU, but also of the South African Communist Party in an ANC-led Alliance, is stigmatized as weakening the perspective for the Left (McKinley 2014), while claims by the workers and the poor
were not answered and even repressed (Duncan, 2014). Local protests often escalated given the lack of responsiveness of political institutions: “Slow response to long-standing complaints and failure of officials to attend meetings have often acted as triggers. Heavy-handed policing has led to, or worsened, violent confrontations” (Alexander and Pfaffe, 2013). So, “the election of a democratic government, and the preceding struggle, brought an end to racial domination of politics, but economic and social gains have been distributed unevenly. Anger and frustration among the losers has been accompanied by strategic and tactical problems for those challenging the authority of a ‘legitimate’ government” (2013).

In Brazil, although with less open use of repression and a more conciliatory mode, the protests were perceived as a reaction to a growing separation between the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or Workers’ Party) – which had once developed as a movement party – and its former base of reference. Increasing tensions between the party and the social movements on the left had already emerged under the charismatic leadership of Lula, considered by activists on the Left as too ready to accept the pressures of international lending institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The protests later increased against what was perceived as a neoliberal policy, based on increasingly tighter relations between the party oligarchy and business elites. Not by chance, the protest grew on the claims for Paso Libre, free access to public transport, considered as a citizens’ right but threatened by the commodification of public services.

Here as well, the brutality of the police is stigmatized as yet another indicator of the incapacity, since the democratic transition, to deal with the influence of the military and its brutal practices, especially against the poorer groups of the population (see Mendes in this volume). Within less repressive strategies, however, the PT in power in Brazil tended to consider protesters as either right-wing or irresponsible (“vandals and troublemakers,” according to the mayor of São Paulo) towards a party that is presented as embodying the national community as well as representing the real social movements. The protests indeed escalated when the mainly peaceful forms of direct action were met with brutal police repression, with many arrests and injured demonstrators on June 13, with a quick spreading of protest thereafter. Although the president of the republic and PT leader, Delma Rousseff, later promised to consider the protesters’ requests, the overreaction in the policing of the protest on June 13 did produce a quick scale shift in the contention as well as a stronger anti-party rhetoric. In fact, the governmental reactions have to be seen in a context of further distancing of the PT (already under Lula) from the promises of radical social
change (Saad and Morais, 2014; Hunter, 2008; Samuels, 2008). Here as well, anti-political class slogans were widespread, including “The people, united, govern without any party.”

Similarly, in Bulgaria, protesters denounced the oligarchic development of economic and political power in an elitist, rather than pluralist, perspective. Not by chance, the main claim was for the resignation of the prime minister, considered as the incarnation of a system dominated by the monopoly in the energy sector, with strong collusive support on the part of political elites (Rone, in this volume). Although less repressive strategies were used, the president’s offer of “citizens’ committees” to discuss protesters’ proposals did not placate the mobilization. Rather, the protest claims grew more and more critical of those in power, with a refusal of parties as either allies or interlocutors, and demands instead for clean politics. The dominance at the institutional level of widespread patronage as well as the accusation of rampant corruption fueled the protests, also influencing their radically critical stance towards institutional politics.

The delegitimation of the political class proved very strong in Bosnia as well, where demonstrators often targeted the interests and privileges of politicians and their friends in the business sector. The perception of widespread corruption also contributed to outrage against an irresponsible political class. While the first wave of protests met with limited repression, the labor mobilization escalated in response to brutal intervention by the police. The apparent lack of support for human rights by the international institutions present in the country also further contributed to growing mistrust towards those who were increasingly perceived not as protectors, but rather as colonizers.

In sum, a crisis of political responsibility was felt not only where the crisis had hit more strongly and triggered broad and deep protest, but also in countries such as Brazil, Turkey, or South Africa that had been considered as being on the winning side of neoliberal development. In fact, discontent spread even where parties connected to movements had come into power – even if the capacity to keep the loyalty of their movements varied from strong in Venezuela to weak in South Africa, with Brazil in between. Moreover, as the Bosnian, Bulgarian, and Ukrainian cases indicate, protest also challenged the legitimacy of recent political classes in Eastern Europe that apparently failed to get support through promises of well-being in competitive markets. While repression appears as a common choice in light of growing political dissatisfaction, different degrees of brutality are reflected in different degrees of radicalization of conflicts, with cases like Ukraine but also Turkey and South Africa leading the way.
9.4 **Emerging subjectivities**

The movements of the rolling wave, in and around 2013, were also defined as middle class since they addressed issues that were traditionally considered as post-materialist (such as the defense of the trees in Gezi Parks, clean energy in Bulgaria, public transport in Brazil), or because they opposed socialist parties in power. In the vision of the protesters as middle class, their claims have been defined as post-materialist, addressing issues of corruption and for a clean government in Bulgaria and Brazil, but also in Turkey, South Africa and, even more, in Ukraine.

In an opposite view, the collective identity of the 2000s protests has been defined as anti-capitalist. As noted about Gezi Park, under late neoliberalism, “certain parts of the state themselves start to act like capital in commercializing their operations to attain revenues under the pressure of financial constraints, struggles over accumulation often take the form of protests directed against the state itself rather than capital. Since these are struggles against the reproduction by the state of various facets of capital accumulation, these protests always have working-class content” (Ercan and Oğuz, 2015: 116). In this vision, Gezi reflects “a struggle against commodification of nature in the context of the revalorization of capital and the reproduction of the state” (Ercan and Oğuz, 2015: 116). In a critique of the middle-class syndrome, the movements of the 2000s have been seen in fact as signs of a shared opposition to the commodification of public spaces, in an attempt toward, instead, a “commonification,” or constitution of public goods. Karakayalí and Yaka noted that “urban politics and ecology can no longer be seen only as ‘middle class issues’ within a post-materialist framework, in the sense of a frivolous concern of people who suffer from no ‘real’ economic or social constraints” (2014: 120). In fact, a “process of urban destruction/re-construction has become so central to the current capital accumulation regime that in the last few years it has been defined as ‘urban neoliberalism’ or even ‘bulldozer neoliberalism’” (2014: 120). Similarly, protests in Brazil or Bulgaria focused on the very role of the state and claimed for public services as citizens’ rights. In Venezuela, too, the protests initially mobilized in the universities, as students called for more security, pointing at the internal contradiction of a state with rich resources and large growth that has difficulty distributing those benefits among the population. In Bulgaria, as in Brazil, environmental issues were indeed bridged with justice claims.

The interpretation of a middle-class revolt is also criticized from the point of view of the cultural middle-class subculture, which is defied rather
than supported. Regarding Gezi, it has been observed that “the middle class designates what people ceased to be when they started participating in the insurrection, since it refers to all those conditions by default that breed general conformism. From the perspective of the question of agency, this must be called a ‘proletarian’ movement: it is the revolt of those for whom life has become an oppressive term of survival” (Eken, 2014: 431). The call for participation from below is also seen in Brazil or Bulgaria as a turning point, with potential empowerment of citizens in the long term (but less so in Venezuela, where protest either remained rooted in the more traditional forms of the demonstration or escalated into violence, which eventually interrupted any potential for the broadening of the mobilization).

First and foremost, the development of a new spirit has been noted in the occupied squares which represented the space for the formation of new subjectivity, based on a recomposition of former cleavages and the emergence of new identifications. These spaces have been defined, in fact, as spaces of becoming, with “the spontaneous coming together in a moment of ‘irruption’” (Karakayalí and Yaka, 2014: 118). In this sense, “Recomposition is also connected to the emergence of new subjectivities and social practices, and eventually to the emergence of new norms as well” (2014: 118-119).

In fact, in Turkey, the protests were often read as producing and reproducing the conditions for their own existence. The social diversity I have already mentioned brought about the need to invent new categories for the definition of the self. The focus on “becoming” emerges through practices that stress the importance of encounters – often celebrating the diversity of people in the various squares. So, for instance, “in the intermixing of bodies, signs, objects, voices, stories, and emotions, Gezi solidarity renewed existing ties and spawned new intimacies and affections, giving its participants a ‘belonging in becoming,’” as “Amid the temporary absence of the state within the barricaded Gezi zone, heterogeneity of visibilities and voices collectively exist, gaining radical and transformative potentials [...] namely, a queer becoming in togetherness that transgressed self-castigating sensations of anxiety and fear in the face of state violence” (Zengin, 2013). Engaging in the very definition of their identities, social movements express a claim to exist that comes even before the claim of recognition. Regarding the Gezi mobilization, Gambetti (2013) stated, “One reason why the state resented the mobilizations was because they embodied the constative ‘we exist.’” The “collective thereness” (Butler, 2014) of bodies refusing to be disposed of was a manifestation of endurance, but also a demand for existing as part of a larger totality. Frequently heard were statements like “This has never happened before; what is happening here is amazing.” As Avramopoulou
(2013) noted, “If anything, the Gezi resistance made it possible to get many voices attuned to the passionate attachment of claiming ‘to be present, to exist’ (as in the slogans chanted in the streets).”

In these intense times, emotions were strongly felt. Excitement was recalled at the observation of the unexpected: “Everyone was excited and hopeful about the unexpected gathering of millions from multifarious segments of society – soccer fans, feminists, LGBTQs, socialists, Kemalists, environmentalists, Kurds [...] – in the Gezi protests. The forum’s atmosphere was cordial: no harsh debates, no confrontations whatsoever” (Bozcalı and Yoltar, 2013). An element of surprise was emphasized. Extraordinary time also implies “the suspension, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes deliberate, of an awareness of the vulnerability of individual bodies in order to cross that threshold of fear, or, as specified by yet another memorable graffiti printed across the pavement steps that leads to the entrance of the park, to cross the remaining steps to the threshold of fear” (Parla, 2013).

The assessment of living in exceptional moments brings about the breaking of routines, leaving hope for what was once considered impossible. Protesters experience “everyday chance encounters and have the chance to experience a different kind of knowledge going beyond the mere experience of effects. The reason for this is that in the rebellious practice of commoning, people encounter the very causes of their own capacity to act, their ‘trans-individual’ condition, the fact that everything and everyone is enchained in a ‘causal community’” (Karakayalı and Yaka, 2014: 132). In action, citizens indeed change their identification.

Democracy thus developed in the streets. Remaining with the Turkish example,

[T]he Gezi spirit became an historical opportunity by which people creatively engaged in the very definition of democracy. They became active residents of their city by claiming their right to the city as the most basic of their democratic rights. They became politicized global citizens by forging links of solidarity and inspiration with other urban movements around the world. They became conscious bearers of their Ottoman past and their republican present, demanding a change to a brighter future that is at the same time cosmopolitan and democratic. This was to be a democracy beyond its limited definition as the rule of the elected people. It was to be an inclusionary democracy where people engaged in how they were to be ruled, and had a say on what their cities would look like (Örs, 2014: 8).
Maidan – at least in its first moments – was also described as a space welcoming plurality of religion but also ethnicity (from Tartars to Jews, Poles, and Byelorussians, even close to 20 percent ethnic Russians), within an “independent Republic” (Phillips, 2014). Praising horizontality against a corrupt political class – including the oppositional parties – Maidan in 2014 was quite different also from Maidan 2004, in terms of the weak role played by existing civil society organizations (Kvit, 2014). While many and varied groups were formed in Euromaidan (Way, 2014), to coordinate the protest but also to experiment with different ways of living in the square, pre-existing groups were viewed with skepticism – as 92 percent of interviewed protesters proclaimed that they did not belong to parties or organizations (Onuch, 2014a; 2014b). With the heavy repression, however, many cleavages (generational as well as political) and military skills and attitudes (including on the radical right) became more and more prominent (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014).

In Brazil, where about half of the protesters had never participated in contentious politics before (Singer, 2014), the action in the street constituted a space for the development of a sort of rainbow identity. Protests spread the impression that “something was happening deep inside the Brazilian society” (2014). While the claims of the Free Fare Movement were clearly resonant in a left-wing narrative stressing citizens’ rights and public services – indeed, slogans included “There is money for stadiums not for education,” or “If your son gets sick, take him to the stadium” – there was also an attempt to construct a new identity through the mobilization, as many banners said, “Come to the street,” “We are changing Brazil,” “The giant woke up” (Mendes, in this volume). Opposition to a center-left party, long in power, was therefore framed through attempts to rise above the definition of a right and a left, promoting participation from below. While in Brazil the PT had pre-empted protests in the past, the mobilization for Free Fare represented a first experience of political participation for the citizens. The daily demonstrations in June intensified the feeling of sharing a power from below.

While it is too early to assess the degree of changes they produced “from below,” in South Africa as well the protests in the aftermath of the 2011 worldwide mobilizations had apparent empowering effects. In particular, the police killing of 34 striking platinum miners on August 16, 2012 in Marikana has been characterized as a watershed moment, a tipping point, a tectonic shift, or a seismic event (Alexander et al., 2013). The massacre “was a rupture that led to a sequence of further occurrences, notably a massive wave of strikes, which are changing structures that shape people’s lives,”
as “Marikana has revealed structures unseen in normal times, providing an exceptional vantage point, allowing space for collective creativity, and enabling actors to envisage alternative futures” (Alexander, 2013). After the massacre, “First, there has been a shift in the ‘mood,’ particularly among workers, which, while difficult to measure, is indicated by the frequency, form and demands of strikes. Second, Marikana led to the rapid rise of a new union opposed to political alignment, and it contributed to division within COSATU between pro- and anti-government unions. Third, it has spurred the development of a radical new party with the potential to mobilise millions of unemployed youth” (Alexander, 2013). The Marikana protest events represented a model to apply in other struggles as well.

Similarly, in Bulgaria, where regime transition had been an elite issue and changes had been extremely slow, the contention against the privatization of the energy sector paved the way for further mobilization – in the squares and streets of Sofia in the summer, at the university in the fall. The protesters’ claims, especially at the beginning of the mobilization, were resonant with traditional left-wing discourses, justifying constraints on the market in the name of public goods. The opposition to privatization, price increases, and environmental threats were also quite resonant with old and new claims by progressive movements on the left. In a country that had long been ruled by an authoritarian, “real socialist” regime, however, the protesters avoided ideological references. Rather, the narrative was an inclusive one, establishing a dichotomy between the oligarchs and the people:

Let’s not allow political preferences to blind us! The oligarchy and the mafia are what we protest against. It is not important which party we support. Now we are Citizens against the mafia! [...] We are the people who are not represented in the National Assembly. [...] We are not the rich against the poor, the intelligent against the stupid, the beautiful against the ugly, the young against the old, the citizens against the peasants, the right against the left. [...] We are the angry ones [...] even though we smile. Because we follow the rules and we protest against those who ignore them (cited in Rone, in this volume).

In Bosnia, as well, protests developed, in both ways, in a horizontal and participatory format. Horizontality was praised, with the squatting of public spaces aiming at nurturing new repertoires of action but also at promoting new collective identities. While neither parties nor NGOs were welcomed in the occupied spaces, attempts were made to construct alternative unions. If the occupied spaces resonated with the protests of 2011 and beyond, the
organization in plenums as well as the use of facilitators were also taken from previous student protests in the country. While rarely reaching its immediate aims, in Bosnia-Herzegovina the waves of protest also innovated on a (recent and weak) repertoire of collective action, empowering the citizens.

In sum, participants describe experiences of empowerment related to the protests in countries as diverse as Brazil (Mendes, in this volume), Bulgaria (Rone, in this volume), Bosnia (Milan, in this volume), Ukraine (Ritter, in this volume) as well as South Africa (O’Connor in this volume). Besides their capacity to obtain policy and political outcomes – such as the reduction of public transport fares in Brazil or the ousting of the prime minister in Bulgaria – protests had an eventful character in terms of their capacity to build cognitive, affective, and relational resources for future mobilization. While initially protests in Venezuela also emerged spontaneously, the quick intervention of oppositional politicians interrupted the potential for the emergence of a new spirit (Masullo, in this volume). Here, in fact, repertoires of action were not innovated, as violent escalation discouraged processes of cross-fertilization.

Without yet being able to predict the long-term effects of eventful protests, we can however point at their empowering capacity. As neoliberal developments weaken their accumulated resources, social movements need to construct them in action. Failing old identifications, they need to develop a new spirit. They are, i.e., in the process of becoming, rather than being, in a situation of rapid changes, of which they are the causes and the consequences. In the social movements we have analyzed, continuing a trend that had already characterized the 2011 protests (della Porta, 2013a; 2015), the morality of the protesters (and the fellow citizens in general) is opposed to the immorality of those in power. The struggle against corruption (the corruption of the elite) was indeed the common target that allowed the transcendence of ideological counterpositions. Protests have also shown different degrees of eventfulness – as a politics of becoming was most visible in Gezi, emergent but interrupted in Euromaidan, and intermittent in Bulgaria and Brazil or South Africa, while it remained latent in Venezuela.

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