Observing Protest from a Place

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We hope that the readers will use this book in multiple ways, as there are indeed different ways to read it.

Obviously the book intends to contribute to the literature on transnational moments in general, and alter-global movements in particular. It hopes to participate in the cumulativity, or at least comparativeness, of different surveys carried out about social forums and other transnational activist gatherings, about their composition and the diverse reasons of the participation there, a field well studied in particular by Donatella della Porta, Isabelle Sommier, and others. With other previous works, this book will have underlined the role of degree holding activists, and NGO employees, in the architecture of alter-globalism. It also confirms how groups and organizations matter (Fisher, 2005) in the general logistic of transnational activism and as providers of resources.

Maybe what could be the more specific contribution of our book, regarding the sociology of transnational social movements, lies in the attention paid to place, to the division of labor in activism, and to methodology.

The point here was not only to observe a WSF in an African setting (as already done by other scholars, Jackie Smith and her colleagues in particular, or ourselves). Of course understanding the diversity of the people gathered under the alter-global banner is important. But the issue is not only an ethical one, that of observing symmetry between activists from the North and from the global South. It is also to understand the material and intellectual conditions of the participation to such events in a situation which is also asymmetric: in terms of training of activists, of the resources they enjoy, and also of the issues that seem relevant to them. Here division of labor and place effects appear intertwined, as it is the very distance between activists coming from different national settings that worsens classical effects of division of labor in activist organizations, with the risk of not hearing so well all their voices, as, also, the issue of professionalization is particularly large in the NGO sector so active in Africa.

Observing that fact does not entail a pessimistic judgment about activists: it is also a way to understand what are the central positions in the alter-global world, assumed by some organizations that are simultaneously employers, generalists, able to obtain funds from the development industry, to lead advocacy campaigns and at the same time to secure a sometimes
more radical orientation, be it in their base or amongst their leaders. This also explains how it is possible to bring a base made up very often of women, young people, and peasants from the South at major international activist events. This central role of generalist organizations, such as Caritas/Secours Catholique or Oxfam, must be kept in mind to understand not only the material support for action, but also the misunderstandings and gaps played out between participants. Those misunderstandings should not however be considered only negatively; they are also working misunderstandings for action, as the study of relations between activist of different nationalities reveals. It explains how the same slogans can mean very different things; it also enlightens the paradoxes of the link between nationalism, anti-imperialism and internationalism. Paying attention to activist diversity also explains the central role of nationalities or geographical origins in WSF, such as Latin Americans in general and Brazilians in particular, not only because of their anteriority in the WSF process, but also as they comparatively benefit from more resources than their African counterparts, but are also in a position to speak on behalf of the global South, contrary to their northern allies.

Paying attention to place and space does not mean that all politics is always local politics, but rather that all politics should be localized, to understand which local effects come into play in any activist situation, be it local, national, or international. To start with the Senegalese example, the fact that the WSF was held in a moment of concern about the intentions of president Wade to turn for a third mandate also contributed to the audience and the ongoing structure of the movement “Y’en a marre,” who frontally challenged Wade, with the motto “Wade dégage” (Wade clear off!).

Another aspect of our book is to suggest different methodological endeavors to study transnational social movements, hence the use of Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) and Ascending Hierarchical Clustering to study populations in a situation of militancy. This is by no way an attempt to suggest there should be any magic bullet in methodology, but it appeared to us as a very good way to suspend unequivocal reasoning on the direction of causality. MCA makes it possible not only to represent complex data sets, which is an issue when one deals with international populations, and doing so, to map polarities in a given situation. We were determined however to use the World Social Forum held in Dakar not only as an opportunity to “catch” a population, but also to examine the theatrical dimension of the event, hence to pay attention to the performance and representation issues at stake, as the Goffman inspired chapter proves. This is also a way to defend
the idea that quantitative analysis and thick ethnographic description can enrich each other.

The book, we hope, and if one agrees with a decompartmentalized conception of the social sciences, could therefore be a contribution in sociology to the study of transnational social movements but also to the general study of activism, to African studies, and to understanding how the industry of development transforms African societies and their relation to politics. It was not only an opportunity to study the alter-global movement. Recalling the material dimension of activism or the paradoxes and difficulties of transnational activist cooperation should by no means be considered as a way to blame the victim or to be suspicious about activists and how they muddle through the difficulties of acting together in contexts of inequality. Rather, we perceive it as a possible position of the social sciences: by explaining the pragmatic paradoxes in which activists are caught, this can give them an opportunity to appropriate this knowledge and de-dramatize what is so often the basis for conflicts between them.