

1 Progressive Social Movements during the Pandemic: An Introduction

Social Movements and Covid-19: An Introduction

With the declaration of a global pandemic in March 2020 and the subsequent imposition of lockdown regulations, the immediate expectation was that social movements were destined to enter into a period of latency, or at the very least, invisibility. Given the introduction of severe restrictions on the use of public space, it seemed that Covid-19 had managed to halt the incredibly intense period of global protest that had shaken the world in the autumn of 2019, with peaks of contestation in places as diverse as Lebanon, Chile, Hong Kong and Catalonia. In reality, however, the pandemic period proved to be extremely rich in terms of contentious politics. It was during this period that in Chile, for example, citizens voted to change the Pinochet-era constitution and developed a participatory constitutional process, while protests also continued in Hong Kong, Lebanon and Catalonia (Chan and Tsui 2020; Kassir 2020), albeit in somewhat weakened forms.

Not only did the global wave of protests not come to an end with the emergency, but the health crisis triggered an intense period of contestation, during which activists and organizations from pre-existing progressive social movements remobilized and others emerged around issues such as social rights, labour rights, gender rights and environmental rights, often combining their causes with calls for global health rights. As Sutapa Chattopadhyay, Lesley Wood and Laurence Cox (2020, 1) outlined in their introduction to a special issue of the journal *Interface* devoted to protest during the pandemic, '[t]he world is on fire, with both fever and flame. After a few months of lockdown, things are erupting in new ways. . . . Around the world, movements are strategizing about how to ensure that no one is left behind.' By looking at these social movements, in what follows I will reflect on the opportunities and challenges that the pandemic presents for progressive movements and, more broadly, for progressive politics.

Although the pandemic has not stalled progressive movements, one might, however, expect it to have transformed them, challenging them to adapt to new conditions and pushing them to develop alternative practices and ideas in order to address the emergency. While the pandemic encompasses a long period – that has still to come to an end – in this Element I will focus on two main phases in its evolution: the lockdown phase, between March and June 2020, and the initial reopening, from July to December of the same year. In order to understand this surge in protests, the concepts and hypotheses developed in social movement studies prove extremely useful. Their repertoires of action, organizational

structures and collective framing can undoubtedly be linked to both emerging grievances and broad opportunities and constraints. In addition, research on pre-Covid-19 social movements provides very useful insights for the analysis of the most recent waves of contentious politics, as deeply rooted movement networks and cultures have undoubtedly affected the strategic choices of the various actors converging in mobilizations, showing continuities in terms of organizational structures and repertoires of actions.

As with every intense period of contention, one might nevertheless expect transformation to occur, as social movement organizations, disruptive collective actions and calls for social change spread and new conflicts emerge. Moreover, while much research on social movements has addressed normal, predictable periods, it would seem that theories of social movements require updating in order to understand contentious mobilization in exceptional periods such as the pandemic. There are a number of reasons why this could be beneficial. First and foremost, given that it is an abnormal event, the pandemic challenges the assumptions of predictability, stability and structuration on which so much theorization in social and political sciences is based. As a juncture that is both global in its scale and critical in its nature, the spread of Covid-19 has somewhat weakened the power of existing structures, triggering an ‘eventful temporality’ (Sewell 1996) that challenges routines and increases the importance of agency. Given the high degree of uncertainty, movement choices cannot be built on solid routines, but rather must be taken in the heat of the moment and in the face of unfamiliar circumstances. While pre-existing resources and opportunities are undoubtedly relevant for mobilization, they would appear to have been weakened by the pandemic. This in turn has disrupted existing networks and produced new threats, rendering a number of previously common practices and ideas unsuited to facing challenges that have emerged.

As will be argued in what follows, analyses of contentious politics in such uncertain times can be especially stimulating for theorization on social movements. Indeed, given the fact that social movements set out to challenge authority, we can assume that new codes (Melucci 1996) and emerging norms (Turner 1996) acquire all the more relevance in what Mark Beissinger (2002) has defined as intense times, in contrast to the quiet, predictable, routine periods that social scientists are accustomed to analyzing. While aggrieved citizens do not automatically rebel, moments of high disruption of the quotidian, such as economic crises or wars, have been proven to exacerbate discontent, and with it to increase the potential for the intensification of contentious politics (Tarrow 2015; della Porta 2017). During these intense periods, mobilization is facilitated by available opportunities and resources, but threats and perceived urgencies

can also generate reactions in the form of collective action (della Porta 2020a). Critical moments tend to augment the relevance of collective agency. This is due to the fact that, given the crisis of the existing institutions, emergent actors, such as social movements, can play an extremely relevant role in the construction of new norms and the experimentation of new practices.

While a pandemic is a rare event, studies on social movements have occasionally addressed periods of emergency that, in addition to other health crises, have included natural disasters, deep economic recessions and wars. Research on these classes of events has signalled that although emergencies present particular challenges, they also provide opportunities for contentious politics, deeply impacting on their forms. Their development has partly been linked to the nature of the emergency itself, and partly to the (local/national/global) political and social contexts in which it happens (Aber, Rossi and von Bulow 2021). While structural constraints are present, periods of emergency are rather unstructured and unpredictable and particularly sensitive to the impact of contingent events (Schmitter and O'Donnell 1986; Beissinger 2002 della Porta 2017).

As several studies have indicated, during these intense periods, progressive social movements must face challenges such as:

- the drastic increase in the material needs of a growing part of the population,
- the scapegoating of marginal groups,
- the shrinking of physical space for collective action,
- the centralization of power in the executive branch,
- increasing censorship,
- the frequent deployment of the military.

Faced with such intense pressure, social movement organizations may disband or be forced to invest all of their energy on the immediate survival of their constituency, with little time for long-term strategizing.

However, on the other hand, there are also opportunities for protest, as emergencies enhance conflicts over scarce and direly needed resources that often find their expression in collective action. Faced with the disruption of everyday life, forms of collective action that emerge to deal with immediate needs may bring about politicized claims and practices of self-empowerment. In action, as old social movement organizations encounter new groups that are formed to address a specific emergency, the shared risks might promote alliances and fuel solidarity. It is especially when sacrifices are demanded that claims for citizens' rights tend to spread. The perception that previous arrangements have failed paves the way in the search for alternatives, while ties of solidarity can be fostered by innovation and heated emotions.

The Covid-19 pandemic can be considered to be a particular type of critical moment, as it is driven by a sudden and dramatic emergency that has deeply affected contentious politics. Although lockdown policies, which were established to control the spread of the contagion, initially constrained collective action in the street, contentious politics spread very quickly with various forms of mobilizations addressing the many serious crises that accompanied the spread of the virus. It is particularly noticeable that although the mass media has mainly focussed on anti-lockdown protests, often orchestrated by radical right-wing groups and virus-deniers, within progressive movements there was a rise in protests on issues such as housing, income and education, as well as on demands for participation and against repression. From initial reports and preliminary studies, these protests appear to have been built on previous global waves of contention – from the global justice movement to anti-austerity mobilizations – as well as on the experiences of resistance in different countries to a backlash from right-wing movements and governments (Meyer and Tarrow 2019; della Porta 2020b).

However, these protests also present a number of new characteristics, which may be connected to the sudden rupture produced by the pandemic. While many anti-lockdown protests were very visible, my analysis is instead primarily concerned with the actions of what we might call progressive social movements. Although progress is a contested term (Allen 2016; della Porta 2020), I use it here to define actors that struggle for an inclusive vision of a just society and for a deepening of democracy. Progress is thus understood as aiming for

the liberation (or ‘emancipation’) of collectivities (for example: citizens, classes, nations, minorities, income categories, even mankind), be it the liberation from want, ignorance, exploitative relations, or the freedom of such collectives to govern themselves autonomously, that is, without being dependent on or controlled by others. Furthermore, the freedom that results from liberation applies equally to all, with equality serving as a criterion to ensure that liberation does not in fact become a mere privilege of particular social categories.’ (Offe 2011, 79–80)

In this sense, progressive social movements are those that combine attention to social justice with positive freedom (della Porta and Rucht 1995). The analysis will deal with protests that present claims for broader inclusion of citizens (Ypi 2012).

The specific balance of challenges and opportunities faced by progressive social movements during the Covid-19 crisis is a central question addressed in this Element. Even if research is still at an early stage – and many observations outlined in what follows must therefore be considered as tentative – there are, nonetheless, a multiplicity of reports and initial analyses that make it possible

(and useful) to develop some empirically based reflections on this dramatic period. While time is required to carry out an in-depth assessment of the development and eventual outcomes of these mobilizations within systematic cross-national comparative perspectives, some of their common trends are already visible:

- First and foremost, progressive movements have built upon a complex repertoire of contention, including disruptive protests, as well as forms of mutual help and alternative knowledge building.
- Secondly, these activities have been fuelled not only by existing social movement organizations, but also by newly emerging groups and networks.
- Thirdly, contentious politics has bridged new concerns relating to the health emergency with a core discourse on social justice and civil rights. Activists have pointed to the need to develop social rights, as the pandemic has made the effects of social inequalities, as well as gender, generational and ethnic inequalities, all the more visible and all the more unacceptable. In denouncing declining institutional accountability and in some cases even repression, progressive movements have combined calls for public health and welfare policies with appeals for greater citizen participation.

Against all the odds, the initial stages in the timeline of the Covid-19 pandemic have been marked by what media and activists have already termed a new global wave of protest. Both the fear of contagion and lockdown measures seemed heavily poised to jeopardize collective action. Activists have, however, invented new forms of contention with which to not only express their increasing grievances, but also to spread ideas for change. Focussing on social movements that endeavour to expand social rights and political participation, this Element aims to contribute to the reflection on how the pandemic affects progressive politics in general. While recognizing the fact that the specific impact of the virus has been broadly different in different parts of the world, the Element aims especially at singling out a number of global trends.

The remainder of this section will conceptualize the pandemic period as rooted in extraordinary circumstances, pointing to some expectations related to the dynamics of progressive social movements in such intense moments. Following on from this, and on the basis of initial empirical evidence that can be gleaned from documents and reports on protests covering the twelve months between March 2020 and February 2021, the Element will identify some of the main interpretative lines of contentious politics in emergent critical junctures, looking at forms of contention, collective framing and organizational repertoires. While most of the case studies refer to Europe and North America, an attempt

has also been made to cover cases in the Global South (albeit less systematically). As it is too early to empirically test any hypotheses, use will be made of existing evidence in order to illustrate the plausibility of some of the interpretations put forward on the democratic role played by progressive social movements during the Covid-19 crisis. In examining the mobilization of these groups on social rights and civil liberties, but also the challenges that are still to be addressed, I aim at developing hypotheses rather than proving them (della Porta 2008) while reflecting on specific characteristics of repertoires of action (Section 2), organizational processes (Section 3) and collective framing (Section 4) in an intense period marked by the pandemic crisis. The conclusion (Section 5) will summarize the challenges and perspectives for progressive social movements in the Covid-19 era, suggesting avenues for future research.

Pandemics as Emergency Junctures

The Covid-19 crisis can be defined as an *emergency critical juncture*, characterized by a sudden rupture produced by a catastrophic event, that has an impact on the whole world and is triggered by an airborne, highly contagious virus, which quickly developed into economic, social and political crises. In general, social movements can trigger, or at least adapt to, what neo-institutionalists call critical junctures. These are defined as ‘(1) a major episode of institutional innovation, (2) occurring in distinct ways, (3) and generating an enduring legacy’ (Collier and Munck 2017, 2). In contrast to normal periods, critical junctures are periods of ‘crisis or strain that existing policies and institutions are ill-suited to resolve’ (Roberts 2015, 65).

As in other intense moments in history, progressive social movements might be expected to play an important role during a pandemic, mobilizing for an expansion of civic, political and social rights (Marshall 1992). Given that the expansion of rights is neither a consolidated trend, nor does it proceed at the same pace for different social, gender, generational and ethnic groups (della Porta 2017), progressive social movements have constantly mobilized to defend and extend such rights. This can be seen to have taken place in recent decades, which have been characterized by increasing inequalities and declining democratic qualities (Morlino 2012; Therborn 2013). A crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic can, therefore, be expected to fuel old conflicts and create new ones.

Social rights and democratic qualities are of the utmost importance during emergency periods, which require a careful assessment of the trade-off between different rights and liberties. As Baldwin (2005, 247) noted in a comparative analysis of health policies during the AIDS pandemic, ‘attempts to curtail epidemics raise – in the guise of public health – the most enduring political

dilemma: how to reconcile the individual's claim to autonomy and liberty with the community's concern with safety How are individual rights and the public good pursued simultaneously?' We can add here that exceptional circumstances, such as global pandemics, create dilemmas not only between individual liberties and public security, but also between health protection and other social rights, since lockdown measures halt or dramatically reduce access to social or educational public services as well as other services such as public transport.

During the Covid-19 crisis these dilemmas have been apparent as states of emergency have been called in different forms by different countries. Indeed, the pandemic has been considered

a social and economic shock as well as a political crisis and a psychological trauma. There was an abrupt end to mobility as, one by one, states imposed lockdowns and quarantines with the result that normal life ceased. . . . What at first seemed possible only in a dictatorship became an increasingly accepted way to respond to the danger posed by the coronavirus. (Delanty 2021, 1)

While states of emergency have at different times been contemplated in democratic regimes in order to address various types of disasters, there is no doubt that they affect political opportunities for social movements, reducing the checks and balances on institutions as well as the capacity of citizens to hold their governments accountable. Indeed, in democracies there is a need to justify the use of a state of emergency, which is usually done by claiming that the measures taken are extraordinary, enacted in response to necessity and a lack of alternatives, thus masking the presence of very significant political choices. As Jonathan White has noted, in relation to the financial crisis in Europe in the 2010s,

[e]mergency rule is conducted and narrated as the encounter with unfamiliar situations that demand to be handled on their own terms. It is about doing things differently because the situation at hand is different. At least in terms of its own rationale, but also in view of the creations it gives rise to, emergency rule is geared to the singularity of a certain moment. (White 2020, 188)

Paradoxically, '[w]hile emergency rule entails frenetic decision making, its decisions are rationalized as unchosen and unavoidable in substance and timing' (White 2021, 85).

As governance in emergencies tends to be informal and unaccountable, exceptional powers break with procedural rules, with the suspension of some rights and a centralization of decision-making in the national government. Given that the most important decisions are taken in haste, emergencies also increase discretion, due to a lack of clarity about the limits and the implications of the decisions taken (White 2021, 81). As Sheppele (2010) has synthesized,

emergency scripts involve elements such as executive centralization, with a decline in the power of the parliament; militarization, with the military positioned as key respondent to the threat; procedural shortcuts, as procedural checks are bypassed; ban on demonstrations, with the restrictions on freedom of movement; constraints on freedom of speech, with censorship and criminalization; and decreasing transparency, with governmental action blanketed in secrecy as well as increasing surveillance up to and including anticipatory violence against opponents.

In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, attempts have been made to address the crisis through emergency measures that have dramatically constrained rights of movement, assembly and expatriation. While this has happened to different degrees in different regimes – with more drastic and arbitrary constraints in authoritarian regimes – the very presence of an emergency has undoubtedly affected the functioning of public institutions at all territorial levels and worldwide. Under these circumstances, contentious politics seem all the more relevant, albeit its development is also all the more constrained.

A further aspect that has been highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis is the fact that emergencies not only affect civil rights, but also social rights, as they magnify the effects of the unequal distribution of resources within and across countries. Social protection is especially at stake as living conditions related to core social rights (such as health, work, housing and education) are jeopardized by exceptional circumstances. As is the case during war, catastrophes or deep economic depressions, the disruption of everyday life hits some sections of the population especially hard, increasing class, gender, generational and ethnic inequalities. While a disruption of everyday life has been a common experience worldwide during the pandemic, the degree of suffering has been unquestionably influenced by pre-existing conditions in terms of social rights. The pandemic has highlighted the lethal consequences of differential access to public healthcare, all the more so in countries that have historically had a weak welfare state (such as the United States, but even more dramatically in the Global South), or countries where neoliberal policies enacted by right-wing governments have been more widespread (as in the United Kingdom). Even countries that had once been considered to be endowed with generous welfare provisions (i.e. in Europe) have also seen the negative long-term consequences of the commodification of health services, cuts to resources for public institutions, and reductions to the number of health workers and their salaries. These have all been pointed to as increasing the spread and lethality of the virus. Thus, the coronavirus crisis revealed the ‘weakness of state capacity – underfunded, part-privatized and underprepared health systems’ (White 2021, 77). As a result, while the Covid-19 pandemic was initially presented as having a levelling

effect, ‘as the pathogen infects human beings indiscriminately of social status and the containment measures disrupted the economic engines of whole national economies, the public health crisis in fact laid bare existing inequalities and deepened them farther’ (Azmanova 2021, 244). The importance of concerns for climate change and the urgency with which they need to be addressed has also been highlighted by the fact that it was in the most polluted areas that the contagion was particularly intense and mortality highest. Aside from the increase in episodes of violence against women, the pandemic also made blatantly clear both the importance of care activities and their unequal gender distribution, with women bearing the heaviest burden in this regard.

While an in-depth cross-country comparative analysis of these challenges will require time to be developed, the weakness of the welfare state and the lack or decline of democratic rights seem to have increased social discrimination and the repression of civil and political rights. Trump’s United States, Bolsonaro’s Brazil and Modi’s India are the main illustrations of countries in which weak welfare states and high levels of repression have fuelled the spread of the virus with the most deadly effects. From an historical perspective, general trends that have aggravated the effects of the virus include a reduced capacity for state intervention in social protection as well as a general backlash against the previous achievements of progressive social movements.

Progressive Social Movements in Emergency Periods

Social movements have often played an important role in emergencies, mobilizing in defence of those rights that they perceive as being at risk or more urgently needed than ever. In general, progressive social movements develop in moments of intense change, mobilizing with the aim of turning them to their advantage. As opportunities and resources are not just static givens but rather emerge from relational dynamics in intense periods, social movements can become important catalysts for change, contributing to the emergence of new norms during periods in which ‘usual conventions cease to guide social action and people collectively transcend, bypass or subvert established institutional patterns and structures’ (Turner and Killian 1987, 3; see also Turner 1996).

In social movement studies, attention has turned anew to the role of social movements in exceptional periods, as opposed to normal periods. In periods of crisis and rapid transformation, ‘the accepted norms of behaviour, the ones that guide behaviours in everyday, institutionalized, normal, quotidian activities, don’t apply because of unusual or atypical social contexts: a catastrophe, a suddenly imposed grievance, a moral shock, a disaster. Social actors turn to each other to make sense of the situation, not to some objective and compelling

character of reality’ (Johnston 2018, 8). Thus, critical events, such as disasters, alter both the environmental conditions and our perceptions of them, increasing the potential for coalition but also for division. However, their role as precipitating factors or turning points is, in fact, mediated by existing social movement organizations (Staggenborg 1993), as well as by new movement organizations.

Even before the onset of the current pandemic, the recent past had been defined as a momentous period: the terms ‘the Great Transformation’, ‘the Great Recession’ as well as ‘the Great Regression’ have frequently been used as shorthands to define the period following the financial breakdown of 2008 that triggered the sizeable mobilization of so-called movements of the crises (della Porta 2015; della Porta and Mattoni 2014). In this context, researchers have increasingly addressed protests as transformative events (della Porta 2020a). Moments of rupture are thus recognized as incredibly important in defining new paths for progressive change (della Porta 2017). Indeed, eventful protests are ‘contentious and potentially subversive practices that challenge normalized practices, modes of causation, or system of authority’ (Beissinger 2002, 14).

In general, extraordinary challenges have ‘profound effects on the structuring of strategic action fields across society’ as ‘crises undermine all kinds of linkages in society and make it difficult for groups to reproduce their power’. At the same time, dramatic crises prompt the ‘attribution of new opportunities and threats leading to the appropriation or creation of new organizational vehicles for the purpose of engaging in innovative, contentious interaction with other field actors’ (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 101). A relevant example of an area in which a great deal of research has been carried out on critical junctures is in relation to war. As ‘states make war but war makes states’ (Tilly 1975, 42), political contention has been implicated in the dynamics of war from the onset. This is seen, for example, in advance of a war, with mobilizations for or against war; during a war, in support of or in resistance to the war effort; and in the wake of a war, with the opening up of political opportunities to change state politics and even overturn regimes (Tarrow 2015, 15).

Therefore, moments of crisis often intensify calls for rights by disrupting the quotidian and triggering discontent, but also by creating the expectation that sacrifices have to be compensated by tangible recognition of belonging to a community of destiny (Tilly 1992, 10). Research has, in fact, noted that contention tends to grow during wars: ‘as states impose higher taxes, armies suffer defeats, and the body bags return from the front, enthusiasm for war dampens. Movements develop in reaction to these costs but also against the constriction of rights that almost always occurs when states go to war’