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Politics in Flux: Continuities and Transformations in Processes of Collective Action

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1. INTRODUCTION

Phenomena of collective action – of collective political conflict[1] – are neither uniform nor stable. They comprise institutional and non-institutional actors as well as routine, confrontational, or even violent forms of action. They take place in different arenas, change over time and involve individuals in different ways, roles, and trajectories. This variance and heterogeneity corresponds to a diversified research landscape, with separate fields of research specializing on different phenomena of collective action, such as social movement organizations, political parties, NGOs, interest groups, and armed groups. As these fields of research have generally preferred to affirm the boundaries between them and to highlight the special relevance and particular nature of the conflicts, actors, and forms of action that they study, the connections and continuities between these phenomena have been under-researched. This neglect is striking, for one thing, because many episodes of political conflict cannot easily be placed in one single category. They are shaped by interactions between very different types of actors, involve a range of different forms of collective action, and can shift between arenas and levels of conflict, such as labour struggles transforming into electoral conflicts, accompanied by disruptive protests and violent confrontations. Moreover, neither actors nor repertoires are stable and timeless entities, but are part of dynamic processes, adapt, and change over time. Social movements, for example, may institutionalise into political parties, bringing their goals to the electoral arena; while political parties may seek to draw on extra-institutional forms of mobilizations to increase their power. We encounter activists who, at the same time, prepare food for those in need, are on the forefront of public demonstrations for migrants' rights, and are elected representative within the institutions; and we see collective actors that present themselves in different ways in different arenas, depending on whom they interact with. The politics of collective action, in other words, are in a constant state of

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[1] As simple as it is, with collective action we refer to a group of people acting together, in a context of socio-political conflict, to affect a common goal. It is neither restricted to specific types of collective actors nor to specific forms of collective action or types of socio-political conflicts.

flux, with different types of action, actors, and conflicts co-existing, interacting, shifting, and transforming over the course of episodes of political conflict.

In this article, we seek to build upon and further develop processual perspectives that highlight continuities and transformations of collective action across time and within specific contexts, and throughout individuals' and collective actors' trajectories. In particular, we aim to improve and expand theoretical and conceptual tools for capturing continuity and transformation, emphasizing the need for processual-comparative research to explore related phenomena in different social, political, and cultural settings and across time. We discuss methodological innovations that can help to analyse and explain continuities and transformations in processes of collective action, thus setting the stage for the papers that comprise this special issue and pointing out concerns and arguments that connect them.

2. PROCESS, CONTINUITY, AND TRANSFORMATION

The argument laid out in this article is not entirely novel, of course. It builds on processual approaches that have emerged in research on mobilization and political struggles over the past three decades (for an overview see Bosi and Malthaner, forthcoming). Because, even if continuities and transformations are under-researched aspects of collective action, they are inherent to the notion of process itself. After all, analysing processes means to describe and explain how things change over time, within a sequence of events, rather than looking for correlations between dependent and independent variables, within the imagery of a «general linear reality» (Abbott 1988). A process ontology is made up of events rather than substantial entities. Hence, processual research refers to tracing the dynamic of collective action in sequences of interactions, unfolding over time, among multiple collective actors. These temporal sequences are not linear and do not progress through fixed stages. They are open-ended, rather than being oriented toward static outcomes or shaped by deterministic general laws, because of changing contexts and contingency (Sciarrone 2021). By studying the ways certain types of actors, forms of action, and types of conflicts develop across stages, processual perspectives, to some extent, presuppose the existence of continuities between different phenomena (e.g. continuities between different forms on a continuum of action-repertoires), while at the same time relying (explicitly or implicitly) on the idea of transformation as the very essence of the processes that produce social change.

Processual approaches in research on social movements, for example, which emerged in the 1970s from a pointed critique of perspectives that portrayed protest as deviant behaviour resulting from social strains or the breakdown of social order, emphasized continuities between movements protest and institutional politics. They argued that protest is not separate from institutional politics, but merely «politics by other means» (Tilly 1978). Research on protest cycles subsequently traced the transformation – e.g. institutionalization or radicalization – of actors and forms of action over the course of conflict-episodes (Tarrow 1989, 1998; Koopmans 2004). Similarly, in research on political violence, processual approaches sought to explain phenomena such as clandestine political violence (or "terrorism") as the outcome of processes of escalation in collective conflicts, driven by interactions between protest movements and repressive state-actors as well as intra-organizational and ideational dynamics, resulting in gradual shifts towards increasingly radical perspectives, militant forms of action, as well as the formation of armed underground groups (Neidhardt 1981; Della Porta 1990, 1995; White 1993; Zwerman, Steinhoff and Della Porta 2000). Thus, rather than exceptionalizing and reifying political violence as a phenomenon sui generis, processual approaches connected it to a broader spectrum of non-violent and violent forms of political action and traced the way armed groups are formed by semi-clandestine networks of militant activists, noting the continuities between different forms of collective action and types of collective actors while also pointing out the transformations that this process entails and possibly produces.

Whereas these studies focused on particular processes within a limited range of phenomena, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly started their *Contentious Politics* project as a deliberate attempt to re-integrate the broader research landscape on collective action, which they saw as compartmentalized into sub-fields that focused on phenomena such as strikes, democratization, social movements, nationalism, ethnic mobilization, revolutions, or wars, which were studied in isolation (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 9; see also Tarrow and Tilly 2007; Aminzade *et al.* 2001). By conceiving of these phenomena as part of a common, overarching category of «contentious politics», they also sought to re-connect them at an analytical level, identifying similar, recurring causal processes and mechanisms, which could be observed across different types of collective actors, forms of collective action and types of conflicts. Thereby, *Dynamics of Contention* focused its attention on transformations across different forms of contentious

politics[2], referring not only to conventional categories of political struggle, such as «revolutions», but also distinguishing – and examining shifts between – «contained» and «transgressive» forms of contention, for example (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 7). *Dynamics of Contention* has been broadly discussed and – despite fierce controversy and partial rejection – has inspired a whole generation of scholars working on collective action, taking a processual turn. Yet, whereas some aspects of the book, such as process-mechanism explanation, have been taken up and further developed (see e.g. Demetriou 2009), studying continuities and transformations across types of collective actors, forms of collective action and types of conflicts remained a side-concern of process-scholars, including scholars in the field of social movement studies, who only slowly started to venture beyond their pre-defined field of interest (Della Porta and Diani 2015). One reason for this, one could argue, is the persistence of the fields' boundaries and priorities. Another might be the tendency in processual analysis to focus on explaining the outcome and identifying recurring causal mechanisms, rather than looking in detail at the process itself: at the micro-dynamics and transformations, and at the contingencies and hard-to categorize fluency that shape sequences of events and the interactions of actors involved.

There are a number of important exceptions, of course, among them research on the shared (and diverging) trajectories of social movements and revolutions (Goldstone and Ritter 2018; Beissinger 2022), as well as works on the relation between political parties and social movements (Goldstone *et al.* 2003; McAdam and Tarrow 2010; Heaney 2013; Della Porta *et al.* 2017; Hutter *et al.* 2018), nationalism and social movements (Beissinger 2002; Mees 2004), and direct social action and protest (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, 2020), as well as protest and litigation (Ellefsen 2016; Taylor and Tarrow 2024). Moreover, a number of studies on political violence have started to focus on processes that connect different forms of violence (and non-violent collective action) as well as the transformation of violence (see Alimi, Bosi and Demetriou 2012; Della Porta 2013; Bosi, Malthaner and Demetriou 2014; Alimi, Demetriou and Bosi 2015) and the transition to civil wars and out of these (Wood 2003; Viterna 2013; Shesterinina 2022).[3]

Our research-agenda on continuities and transformation in processes of collective action draws upon – and seeks to further develop – these lines of work and their conceptual contributions. Yet, within the various strands of "processual analysis" in research on collective action there are quite different understandings of what this perspective entails. In the following, we outline an understanding of processual analysis that, as we argue, lends itself to the study of continuity and transformations, which includes addressing the paradox question of whether categorical distinctions of different "forms" of collective action, types of collective actors and conflicts, are essential to processual analysis or whether they contradict its explanatory logic.

3. TYPES OF COLLECTIVE ACTORS, FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION, TYPES OF COLLECTIVE CONFLICTS, AND TEMPORALITIES OF CHANGE.

As others before us (Aminzade *et al.* 2001; Goldstone 2003; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001), we seek to reconnect a research-landscape fragmented into different phenomena of what we have called "collective action", or "collective political conflict" – which we have presented as the more general category or phenomenon – by studying the processes that link them. This perspective implies that we conceive of these different "forms" not as phenomena *sui generis* – each with their distinct causes, requiring distinct explanatory models – but as manifestations of interlinked social and political processes that can be traced and examined within a common analytical framework. However, making the case for an integrated perspective on collective action does not mean abandoning analytical distinctions. In contrast to theories that explain generic and *amorphous* (form-less) phenomena like "rebellion" or "violence", by pointing to equally general "root-causes", our aim is to capture continuities and transformations in processes of collective action as a dynamic, *polymorphous* phenomenon.

Examining transformations and continuities, in other words, requires analytical distinction. Given that the ambition is not to build a case history of the social phenomena under analysis, but a case study which «goes beyond the case history in attempting a range of analytical purposes» (Pettigrew 1997: 33). At the same time, a processual perspective is incompatible with

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2 See McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001: 34; 55-71; 160-190;193-199)

3 In addition to research on processes of radicalization/escalation leading to clandestine political violence, scholars have also started to recognize the fluent boundaries between violent insurgencies, civil wars, and other forms of mobilization and political violence; a fact that Sidney Tarrow had pointed out already in 2007, warning scholars from: «reifying the category of civil war and downplaying the relationship between insurgencies and 'lesser' forms of contention. Escalation to civil war

from nonviolent contention or from less lethal forms of violence; transitions from civil wars to post-civil war conflict; co-occurrence between core conflicts in civil wars and the peripheral violence they trigger – none of these was exhaustively examined in these studies» (Tarrow 2007: 589).

any kind of reified or essentialized understanding of "forms" or "types". As phenomena of collective action are continuously changing, continuously in the making, and "forms" are merely analytical distinctions to capture patterns in a process. In other words, processual approaches do not deny the existence of particular types of collective actors, forms of collective action, or types of collective socio-political conflicts – and to some extent rely on conventionalized categories to capture transitions – but they suggest to unpack these categories to reveal the complex and contingent sequences of interactions that take place and contribute to the their development, as «it makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa)» (Emirbayer 1997: 289). In this view, entities (such as collective actors) are merely metaphors of ongoing processes, continually in a state of becoming. In fact, focusing on the processes of continuity and transformation requires a shift in focus away from the continuity and transformation of an object – a type of collective group, a form of collective action or type of collective conflict – and to continuity and transformation as processes. This is in line with Pettigrew's (1997: 341) suggestion that the language of states needs to be «superseded by an active language of becoming, emerging, developing, transforming, and decaying». "Unpacking" these categories also means to explore their empirical relevance as signifiers within collective processes: the ways in which individuals and groups develop a notion of themselves as a particular "type" of collective actor (an identity as a "movement" or a "party") and an understanding of what they are doing ("protest"), and the ways in which these forms of action are recognized and interpreted (as a form of collective action) by others. And it means to examine how academia has reified and inscribed explanatory paradigms into particular categories (such as "terrorism").

As a first step to capture and analyze the continuities and transformations addressed in the articles in this special issue, we suggest to distinguish between shifts/changes in forms of collective actors, forms of collective action, and forms of socio-political conflict. This distinction – basic as it is – is important, inter alia because the various sub-fields of research often define and denote their object of study by emphasizing one of these aspects; that is, by using a terminology of collective actors (i.e. research on "social movements", "political parties", "unions", etc.), forms of collective action (i.e. "protest", "political violence", "terrorism" etc.), or types of collective socio-political conflicts (i.e. "electoral politics", "labour conflicts", "revolutions", "civil wars", etc.). Yet, there is a tendency to conflate these aspects

and conceive of these phenomena as coherent clusters of corresponding types of actors, forms of action, and conflicts. So, for example, the study of political parties focuses on conventional forms of action in institutionalized political conflicts, whereas movements are assumed to use extra-institutional forms of protest; and armed groups are examined as actors in violent conflict, but rarely are investigated in their overlap with social mobilizations or their involvement in conventional forms of action during non-violent phases of conflict. Moreover, individuals are often profiled as if having some specific characteristics that predestine them to participate in one particular form of collective action only, and one type of actor ("terrorists" are part of terrorist groups that use terrorism), rather than tracing their trajectories between and across different types of activism and conflict.

Collective actors are groups of people attempting to bring or resist change by acting in some concerted fashion. What defines the nature and shape of a collective actor – and its transformation – is quite variable: it can be its organizational structure (de-centralized, hierarchical, functional differentiation, etc.), level of resources, goals, collective identities held among its members, its legal status and recognition within a political system, its use of certain forms of collective action, a position in a specific conflict, or all of these. Social movements, for example, are conceived of as informal networks that share a distinct collective identity and are involved in conflictual relations with political opponents (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 20). Some qualities endure more than others, but there is no constituent that persists unchanged. For example, social movements can transform over time into formal, professional organisations pursuing political change (institutionalisation), becoming, as Snow et al. have put it: «more and more institutionalized, with some of them evolving (at least partially) into interest groups or even political parties» (Snow et al. 2004: 8). Movements can also fragment and radicalize, with some groups or social movement organizations transforming into semi-clandestine or clandestine armed groups (radicalization). This might happen within a wave contention or out of some transformative events. Following the de-escalation of a violent conflict during peace processes, for example, armed groups can transform into political parties (disengagement from political violence). Grassroot organizations and voluntary groups, finally, can politicise into social movement organisations during a period of conflict (politicisation); or, conversely, social movement organizations might professionalize and bureaucratize, adopting the forms of non-governmental organizations (NGOisation). Collective actors should then be viewed not as something made,

but as processes in the making. Individual activist roles and careers may mirror organizational transformations, shifting from movement activism to party politics, for example (institutionalisation at the activist level). In fact, individuals, collective actors and context are interdependent and can mutually construct each other. However, it is also true that individual activists' trajectories are not necessarily congruent with transformations at the collective level. Individual activists may continue within the same line of activism, moving to another group, for example (transfer processes), can participate in different collective actors at the same time (multiple participation), move to different roles (moving up in the group/organization), shift from being involved in non-violent forms of political participation to violent ones (radicalization process at the activist level), disengage from activism altogether (disengagement process), or not disengage from political participation as a whole, but only from political engagement in a group (abeyance process). As Ziad Munson (2008: 4) writes «becoming an activist is a dynamic, multistage process, not a singular event or discrete decision».

Forms of collective action are the means used by collective actors to accomplish their goals. Continuity and transformation, then, can be captured by identifying variance in the specific practices used, which range from lobbying, fundraising, litigation, advocacy, electoral campaigning, petitioning, and strikes, to demonstrations, blockades, sabotage, hackerism, rioting, and armed attacks, to name only a few. Or transformation can be captured by identifying shifts in the general characteristics of collective action on a continuum of conventional versus non-conventional, contained versus transgressive, non-violent versus violent, etcetera. Although the available means are infinite, collective actors have limited resources and multiple constrains (exogenous and endogenous) shaping their selection of tactics and forms of action. They draw on a limited set of "inherited forms" – a "repertoire" of collective action (Tilly 1978) formed during previous episodes of political struggles, which is then used and transformed by adapting it to new conflicts, opponents, and political arenas. Transformations in forms of collective action, therefore, can take place in different temporalities. Short-term change can occur suddenly, resulting from particular transformative events or innovation during intense episodes of mobilization. But forms of collective action can also transform more gradually, due to long-term external changes in cultural and political contexts, technologies, and repertoires of action. Forms of collective action are often associated with certain types of collective actors as an expression of identity (actor-centred read-

ings), but at certain stages collective actors might decide to adopt forms of collective action that are not aligned with their identities, as collective conflicts might escalate and require the use of violent forms of action even from usually non-violent actors or because different practices might travel across countries, shaping different readings.

Continuity and transformation in the forms of collective socio-political conflict, finally, can be analyzed with respect to the configuration of actors involved (and the structure of the polity, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 11), the spaces and arenas of conflict (the bundles of rules and resources that facilitate and constrain certain types of interaction; Jasper and Duyvendak 2015), but also concerning the scale of contention and the nature of the cleavages and "stakes" of the conflict. The latter, obviously, is closely related with actors' goals and forms of action, as the shift from electoral conflict to social mobilization to revolutionary struggle is partly defined by the changing scope of collective actors' objectives (from making limited claims to overthrowing the political order). In other words, while change can occur non-simultaneously and in a contradictory manner, forms of collective actors, types of collective action, and forms of collective conflict are closely intertwined.

4. METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS TO STUDY CONTINUITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

The contributions in this special issue provide substantial analyses of dynamic phenomena of collective action, but they also reflect on methodologies and types of data: how can we observe continuity and transformation in dynamic processes? In the field of social movement studies, protest event analysis probably has become the most established methodology to explore shifts in forms of protest and other forms of collective action (Hutter 2014). But this approach only provides a partial and limited understanding of the dynamics of this phenomenon (Tilly 2008) – and the constant transformations of collective action, collective conflicts, and collective actors. As the following studies show, several qualitative methodologies and research strategies seem particularly helpful to advance this understanding: interviews (including life-history interviews) and ethnographic fieldwork, content analysis, or historical case-studies. They stress an ontology where processes rather than categories are the primary focus of attention What makes them particularly suited to the study of processes is that they capture time, unfolding events, duration and narratives. Stories recounted by participants, through which they make sense of the unfolding

processes as they experienced them, are valuable also with respect to the way they construct the temporality of processes: suspense, heightened times, critical junctures, and sudden turning points (Fillieule 2019). In addition, the shared definitions of a situation – accessible via interviews, fieldwork, and observations – allows us to form an understanding of how participants conceive the conflict, in which they engage, as well as the collective actors that they have joined and the context they are experiencing. Processual research, thus, focuses empirically on catching politics in flux through retrospective analysis of data, possibly collected with different techniques, but also through methods capable of observing the unfolding of process at different stages. The challenge, thereby, is not only to capture processual dynamics by tracing sequence, contingency, and change over time. This research program also has an inherent comparative component: How can we capture differences in various dimensions of collective action within the same episode, between t1 and t2? But also: how can we compare different episodes or processes of collective action? While we do not deny that developing a comparative framework based on well-known mechanism-process models that seek to identify causal regularities can be helpful (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001), our aim here is, first of all, to chart patterns and pathways of continuity and transformation in ways that recognize the fluid, evolving, and unexpectedly multi-faceted nature of phenomena of collective action, which are shaped by agency, contingency, and conjuncture as well as the specific historical and social context in which they unfold. This not just to tell idiosyncratic stories, but to provide analytical contributions capable of abstracting from the particular to the general.

5. PERSPECTIVES ON CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATION

Takeshi Wada, Yoojin Koo and Yoshiyuki Aoki, in their article for this special issue, rely on a massive political event database (the 10 Million International Dyadic Events) to investigate whether collective actors' selection of the forms of collective action depends on their repertoires of contention or on the institutional regime characteristics. They find that what they call «tactical familiarity» (building on Charles Tilly's work) as well as continuities with previously used practices to have a major impact on collective actors' decision making and the forms of collective action that they adopt.

The following article by Mans Lundstedt, which draws empirically on the attacks on migrant accommo-

dation centres in Sweden between 2012 and 2017 and builds on a critical discussion on temporality in processual approaches, deals in particular with the question of how forms of political violence can emerge in the absence of escalating conflicts. The author describes «the privatization of protest» as a type of path that does not emerge out of an immediate phase of social movement mobilization, but long after demobilization. He finds a set of mechanisms in the aftermath of local protest campaigns (frames, emotions, opportunities and relations) that can be traced back to the initial phase of protest and explain the emergence of violence.

David Slater and Patricia Steinhoff analyze a dozen ethnographic accounts of contemporary social movement groups engaged in collective action between the 1990s and 2021, and offer an article on the transformations in Japanese social movements since the period of the New Left. Drawing on social movements and memory studies, the authors underline that the transformation in this case is enacted by the contemporary collective actors themselves, which seek to distance their positions and identities from earlier collective actors of the late 1960s and early 1970s, because they feel that the negative perception of past activism might jeopardize their own struggles and delegitimize them.

Alessandra LoPiccolo analyses the use by different collective actors in Spain, between 2011 and 2021, of civic monitoring practices aiming at exposing power abuses and demand transparency in democratic systems. Using semi-structured interviews, documents and secondary sources, she adopts a Situational Analysis-approach to investigate hybridization processes within the civic field. A field that is not uniform, but ranges from cooptation to surveillance depending on the variance between collective actors (such as national and international NGOs, social movement organizations, alternative media, civic platforms, and other grassroots actors).

In her article, Carla Mannino examines how non-institutional actors shaped the nationalist conflict of self-determination in Scotland and Catalonia. Using a processual approach, Mannino traces how non-institutional actors between the 1980s and 2000s were agents capable of fostering transformative events which became catalysts for change in the organizational structures and cultural resources within the nationalist conflicts in both empirical cases. By developing a path dependent argument that underlines continuities and transformations, Mannino is able to link these mobilizations to the most recent contemporary episodes of contention in Scotland and Catalonia.

In her article, Stella Christou investigates the process of transformation of forms of action from differen-

tiation to convergence, within the Greek healthcare arena between 1983 and 2015. The author presents how collective actors combined direct tactics of healthcare and/or pharmaceutical provision with indirect protest tactics against the austerity regime in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2010, affecting political change in the country. This transformation led to the politicisation of issues regarding health and care to such an extent that SYRIZA drafted its healthcare agenda based on the movement's demands and promoted a healthcare reform in 2015.

Federica Stagni's article investigates how the composition of collective actors within a protest campaign transforms over time. She investigates this dynamic by looking specifically at the empirical case of protests in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem between 2000 and 2021, using protest event analysis and qualitative social network analysis to trace the evolution of these protests. Stagni's article introduces the concept of "backstaging mechanism" to point to the possibility that a section of a movement might step aside, leaving the stage to other groups of activists, when this helps the broader movement to increase their influence.

Maria Nicola Stragapede in her article focuses on post-movement life of Tunisian women who have left the country in the aftermath of their participation in the 2010-2011 revolution. Drawing on life history interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023, Stragapede is able to reconstruct the trajectories of these women and underlines continuities in their political activism, despite the shifts in the form of activism and the transformation of their political, spatial, and intimate context.

In the last article of this special issue, Lia Duran Mogollon discusses continuity in activism as a dynamic process shaped by different factors at the micro- meso- and macro- levels. She proposes two ideal-typical trajectories, the experimental and the linear, which she grounds in patterns of growth, expansion, and change, as narrated by the respondents. Empirically this article is based on nine biographical interviews with young activists (between 18 and 35 years old) conducted in Cologne between 2018 and 2020.

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