SPECIAL SECTION: THE SPATIALITY OF PROTEST

Introduction

Theorizing the Spatiality of Protest

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Since the 1990s, there has been a raft of case studies inquiring into the relation between space and protest in the field that has come to be known as social movement studies or social movement theory, whether it be resource in protesters' tactical repertoires, a terrain that sets policing strategies, or an actant that influences movement-building. So why produce a special section on "the spatiality of protest" now? The first reason lies in what William Sewell observed almost 20 years ago, which is that "most studies bring in spatial considerations only episodically, when they seem important either for adequate description of contentious political events or for explaining why particular events occurred or unfolded as they did" (2001: 51). Despite efforts from within the field to push social movement studies further around the spatial turn (e.g., Martin and Miller 2003; Wilton and Cranford 2002), it appears as though little *theoretical* work about the spatiality of protest has been generated in the past 15 years.¹ Within the field of social movement studies, the core concepts of opportunity structures, resources, and frames are far from "spatialized." Curiously, the seemingly marginal theoretical interest in space is set against the fact that recent methodological and conceptual advances in social movement studies call for what is essentially a scalar analysis of protest (Nulman and Schlembach 2018).

The second reason has to do with how space has been conceived of in the field of social movement studies. Rather than an analytical lens through which to study contestation, the field's latent functionalist epistemological presumptions (see Steinmetz 2005) sometimes reduce aspects of space to either a resource for achieving particular movement goals or to the mere physical site of contestation. The relation of space and protest, however subtle, seems to often be one of causal mechanisms—where space impacts the trajectory and outcome of protest.

It is against this backdrop that we situate our special section on the “spatiality of protest”—which is the result of the eponymous panel we organized at the 2018 Zentrumstage Conference, “Space in Peace and Conflict,” in Marburg, Germany. In thinking through “spatialities of,” we try to point to the “relationality of” spatiality as both an illuminating heuristic device and a compelling object of analysis. Here, the social and the spatial are mutually constitutive, as individuals and collectivities are simultaneously producers of and produced by spaces. Our effort is not to merely present further case studies that either apply spatial theorizations or provide empirical data on the “use” of space. Instead, this special section is our attempt at theorizing on the spatiality of space starting from empirical data and extant theoretical work alike.

Four core questions guide this special section: in what ways can we conceive of spatialities as heuristics to further our understanding of social movement and protest dynamics? What are the tactical and strategic qualities of space-making practices? How do authorities condition possibilities of spatiality in an effort to discipline and control contestation? And in what ways are emancipatory processes of resistance and contention spatialized?

We explore these themes through four articles. Dimitris Soudias’s article “Spatializing Radical Political Imaginaries: Neoliberalism, Crisis, and Transformative Experience in the Syntagma Square Occupation in Greece” investigates why participants of the Athenian antiausterity encampment point to the transformative character of their experience. Starting his theorizing from the relationality of crises, subjectivity, and spatiality in Syntagma, he claims the transformative quality of participation experience has to do with the spatialized radical political imaginary of the occupation.

In “The Role of Spatial Organization in Resurrection City and Other Protest Camps,” Fabian Frenzel attempts to bridge social movement studies with the field of organization studies. Thus, his article contributes to existing debates around space and organizations by generating research questions from which scholars in the field of social movement studies can start new theorizing.

Tareq Sydiq’s contribution, “Asymmetries of Spatial Contestations: Controlling Protest Spaces and Coalition-Building during the Iranian December 2017 Protests,” looks at the role that locality and spatial conditions play for coalition-building. Sydiq argues that both protesters and the government impact the process of coalition-building through practices of space-making.

Finally, Jillian Schwedler delves into the materiality of space by discussing how protests are affected by changes of the built environment.

In her article, “Material Obstacles to Protest in the Urban Built Environment: Insights from Jordan,” Schwedler demonstrates the way such changes are orchestrated by national and city governments.

The contributions of this special section draw from case studies in Amman, Athens, Tehran, and Washington, DC, and analyze them using various (inter-)disciplinary lenses such as political sociology, conflict studies, organization studies, political economy, Middle East studies, and political science. What ties them together is the underlying argument that spatiality not only situates practices of protests, but can help make sense of the emergence and conditions under which protests occur. Thus it is our humble hope that our special section presents what we may call “prototheoretical engagements” with the relationship between spatiality and protests to highlight the importance of keeping this research agenda alive.

Note

1. Katrina Navickas (2015) is a notable and recent exception; her monograph focuses on the particularities of place rather than on the abstractions of space.

References

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