

In conversation with **Cristina Flesher Fominaya**
author of *Social Movement and Globalization: How protests, occupations and
uprisings are changing the world*

Available from Palgrave Macmillan:

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=513046>

Interview by Andrea Teti

AT: Causation & Role of ICTs - ICTs have been frequently cited in both the press and in scholarship as central to the latest global wave of protests, from the Arab Uprisings to Occupy. Particularly in the Arab context (and in the Iranian case of 2009), this centrality becomes causality. What would you say is the role of ICTs in the post-crisis protest wave? Are you a 'cyber-optimist' or a 'cyber-pessimist'? Activism or slacktivism?

CFF: Those are big questions so I have a long answer! [Laughs]. What I do in the book is show that cyber-pessimism and cyber-optimism are both quite sterile ways of approaching the relation between ICTs and protest, or ICTs and social movements. Digital media and new information technologies have radically transformed so many aspects of our daily lives, it would be crazy to think that they would not have transformed social movements. Especially since, as I note in my book, many of these technologies were developed by activists in the Free Software and Open Source Movements. So, yes, ICTs have radically transformed some aspects of social movements. On the other hand, unfortunately, much of the early literature especially really overstated the extent to which ICTs had affected social movements and often fell into a sort of technological determinism, which, as a sociologist, I reject! So the interesting question isn't to ask *whether* ICTs have transformed these relations, but *how*. This is the approach I take in the book.

One of the things I wanted to do in this book -within the discussion of the recent global wave of protest -was to take on the issue of the so-called Twitter or Facebook revolution, as those terms were used to characterize Arab Spring. As a social movement scholar my gut and experience told me that those claims were really overblown, and my immediate reaction was "Don't believe the hype!" I also found it annoying to single out the Arab Uprisings in this way—it smacked of orientalism! As if to say, oh we have given these poor Arabs this wonderful technology, which they have used to demand (Western) democracy! I mean why make such a fuss about Twitter and Facebook in the Arab cases but not in other mass mobilizations in the wave, where, if anything, the influence of Twitter and Facebook should have been much greater due to higher penetration rates in the population overall. But of course

as an academic, I actually need to investigate those claims empirically (laughs). So I sat down and read through the considerable amount of literature on this relationship that had been published at the time of writing. Clearly ICTs played an important role, and one of the things I learned from this research, was that relatively low penetration rates do not a priori minimize the impact of ICTs precisely because ICT use is embedded into social networks that extend far beyond cyberspace.

One of the biggest problems currently in the literature on ICT's and social movements is that there is a strong tendency in many studies to study online behavior in isolation from off-line behavior, but we know that in reality social movements (and all of us in fact) exist in a hybrid media ecology where on and off-line media interact and what happens online affects what happens off-line and vice versa. So, specifically in relation to Arab Spring, in the book I talk about the role of cyberactivists and political bloggers in generating oppositional political cultures, and how tech-savvy youth generated cultures of resistance. This highlights the agency of political actors who use the virtual sphere to generate resistance. I also discuss the role of ICTs in enabling citizens and journalists to produce and disseminate political content, and the interaction between mass mainstream media outlets and alternative digital media. Looking at these kinds of relationships enables us to analyze ICTs in a way that focuses on social relations and interaction effects, rather than just focusing on the technology itself and its “affordances” (such as lower “costs”). It treats ICTs as a tool for political change that is inserted into the complex dynamics of social movements, and takes account of things like levels of repression, access to technology by the population and so on.

Unfortunately, far too much work on ICTs and activism or social movements either treats online behavior in isolation or else takes a very technology centred approach rather than a sociological approach to the uses of technology. It isn't that online participation and the technological design and affordances are not important, it is just that they tell only one part of the story. One of the things that really interests me in my own work, and which is still really understudied in the literature, is how ICTs affect the social relations between activists, how, for example, they impact processes of social cohesion and collective identity formation in groups, or how they can distort collective decision making processes or magnify power dynamics in face-to-face relations.

At the same time it is important to recognize that ICTs are not static, they evolve and that evolution affects the dynamics of social movements too: the case study I discuss in the book of the emergence and decline of Indymedia is a perfect example of this. At the time of its birth Indymedia was pretty much the only game in town, it broke new ground and challenged the dominance of mainstream news in important ways. With the advent of hand held self publishing tools and the rise of the blog, the need for Indymedia declined. Yet its decline has been accompanied by a rise in activist use of and dependence on corporate media platforms with an attendant loss in anonymity, privacy, and protection from surveillance.

AT: *So, activism or slacktivism?*

CFF: Activism, of course! [Laughs] There are some authors who suggest that signing petitions online, for example, is a form of social movement or should be studied as such. To me this is a tactic and cannot be conflated with a social movement. Do online petitions and other forms of so-called slacktivism have their place? Of course they do, and I think they can be very important—They can pressure governments to overturn certain decisions or laws if successful. Amnesty International does this sort of campaign very well. But Amnesty International is not a social movement, it is an NGO, and if it only relied on online petitions to do its job, well it would not be a very effective organization.

This raises another question: is any online petition worthy of our attention as social movement scholars? I recently read a book on "cyber activism" that included "actions" like protesting against the cancellation of the TV show. Unless that petition evolves into a mass movement linking it to broader demands for social and political change (say, framing it within a broader demand for more culture on TV or linking that to freedom of expression or censorship issues) then I'm sorry, but I do not consider that to fall into the purview of social movement scholarship. It doesn't fall into *the definition of social movements* with which I open the book. Which is not to say I have a narrow political view of social movements by any means, on the contrary. As you have seen, I devote a significant amount of space in the book to cultural resistance, for example, which I think is crucial and again understudied in the field despite a real "cultural turn" in the field, which has enriched social movement studies. The nexus ICT/cultural resistance is also fascinating, as the examples of video mash ups, memes and ICT enabled culture jamming in the book show.

The relationship between ICTs and social movements is not only limited to communication strategies, tactics and cyber activism. The web itself is the site of important conflicts which take place on and off-line over such things as privacy issues, freedom of expression, surveillance, open access, repression by the state in cyberspace, wiki leaks, etc. All of this show the web itself to be a site of tremendous conflict. The web is a very strange place in which certain social relations off-line are reproduced but also magnified in cyberspace. For example, numerous studies is shown that women are subjected to much more trolling, negative comments, hateful comments etc. online than men. This trend is further exacerbated by race. So gender and racial dynamics play out on the Internet in ways that mirror but also distort social relations in society as a whole, in that women, for example, are subjected to vitriol online that few would experience face to face to the same degree. There have been some fascinating experiments online, where Tweeters or bloggers swap gender or race or both for a period of time to experience what happens when they continue to tweet or blog in the exact same way as before but with a different avatar. What happens is deeply revealing and disturbing! New forms of gendered cyber violence, cyber bullying and cyber stalking are creating new social pathologies, which need to be studied and addressed.

Coming back to the issue of social movements, I think too little attention is paid in social movement scholarship on ICTs to studies done *outside* the realm of social movement studies per se. Yet my own work has shown that gender biases in participation online, for example, also have effects on social movement groups and participation, even when the groups in question are explicitly against sexism. The cross disciplinary approach that I take the book more broadly is also reflected in the way that I approach the relationship between ICT's and social movements, and paying careful attention to culture is also crucial if we take globalization processes seriously, because, technological design itself produces cultural effects and culture affects how people use technology, as Lovink has shown in cross national comparative discussions on blogging, for example. Lovink in fact provides us with a really short answer to your question: "Social movements do not emerge out of technology". [Laughs]. I am reading his book now, "Networks without a cause", it is really interesting.

AT: Ø Waves/Causes of protest - Is it possible to link the post-financial crisis protest movements in Europe and North America with the Arab Uprisings? In the latter case, the 'financial crisis' doesn't seem to have played a role either in material mechanisms or in the iconography of the Uprisings (e.g. no singling out of financial institutions). [cf. Masterframe 1: political roots of financial crisis + Masterframe 2: financial actors (and political) accountable to population]

CFF: I think there are two questions here that need to be teased out from each other. The first is the extent to which the financial crisis *per se* can be seen to have directly influenced the Arab Spring. As I argue in the book, the relation is much less direct than in the anti-austerity protests in Europe or in OWS, and certainly debatable. In Tunisia and Egypt, it is questionable that the global crisis acted as a trigger event, or that protests were directly responding to the global crisis, although the dramatic increase in food and energy prices in the second half of 2012, which some claim as an important factor in the level of support for protests, may have had an impact, since this directly affected many people in North Africa living very near the poverty line. But the food riots that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in 2007–08 (and were brutally repressed in many cases) were actually as much about injustice, inequality and political repression as about food prices *per se*. Instead, the socio-economic polarization in both countries predates the post-2008 crisis and is, instead, more strongly correlated with the neoliberal reforms carried out in both countries since the late 1990s. But the demand for accountability from the political class for economic injustices is clear I think. In Tunis, the sense of repudiation of the regime was very tied to the awareness of the links between political corruption and the economic mafias in President Ben Ali's brutal regime. The economic mafias operated as a corrupt patronage system that demanded bribes for even basic services such as water or sewage.

The second question is very different: is it possible to link the European and North

American protests? Here the answer for me is a clear yes, for a number of reasons. First, is the *influence* of Arab Spring as an inspiration to what happened later in Europe and the US. The occupation of Tahrir was hugely iconic and motivational to many activists, and that is empirically sustained. To give just one example, the original Adbsuter call to Occupy Wall Street asked “Are you ready for a Tahrir Moment?”. One precursor to OWS, the Walkerville encampment in Wisconsin (set up by public workers against Governor Walker’s proposed bill that would strip them of collective bargaining rights) saw Egyptians sending them pizzas! So transnational diffusion was clear between the protests in the wave. But there are other connections. The fundamental demands around democracy and economic justice that are the strong nexus between all these protests is very clear, even if the contexts and even the meanings people attribute to terms like “democracy” might vary quite a bit. There are very important connections in master frames across protests, and I discuss this at some length. One of the theoretical contributions I make in the book is to distinguish between a global wave of protest and a global movement. These protests are connected in a global wave, but do not constitute a global movement in the way that the Global Justice Movement did. For a much more detailed and nuanced answer to this question, read the book! [Laughs].

Ø *Orientalism*: In the case of the Arab Uprisings, many Anglo-American commentators have claimed Gene Sharp’s work on non-violent protest has been central in making the current protest wave a) more peaceful and b) *therefore* more effective than past precedents. This commentary has made much of April 6th’s relations with Otpor, which in turn was both funded by the US and influenced by Sharp’s writing.

A priori I would not credit such a linear causal mechanism. Movements and movement outcomes are never monocausal, but rather dynamic complex processes in which many contextual and endogenous factors play a role. In my experience, a single influence may be important or even necessary but not sufficient. If we take a completely different example, the US civil rights movement, of course the importance of (Ghandian) non-violent civil disobedience was huge, but cannot explain the effectiveness of the movement on its own. Instead you need to look at all the networks that were mobilized, alliances, the grassroots work in the churches and neighborhoods, what was happening within the elites in Washington, etc. The same is true in the Arab Uprisings. Besides, the outcomes in the Arab Uprisings were very variable. Also, the idea that these uprisings were “more peaceful” smacks a bit of orientalism, as if Arabs were intrinsically bloodthirsty or violent. More peaceful than what? The vast majority of social movements are peaceful. Most people know that even if they are peaceful the risk of repression is often great, certainly in the authoritarian and militarized regimes you find in many Arab states.

In Egypt, for example, an oppositional political culture and numerous labour, street politics and associational protests had taken place over the preceding decades, despite strong repression. I think this type of ongoing resistance is more important than a

single text that a certain number of people might have read. Which does not mean that certain texts cannot be very influential.

AT: Ø Violence: What is the role of violence in the contemporary wave of protest movements (in fact and in the politics of their representation)?

That is a huge question and frankly, we could sit here all day discussing it. First, we need to define what we mean by violence, itself a huge debate within scholarship and within movements. To take a somewhat frivolous example, is the act of throwing eggs at Icelandic politicians violence? Or to take a more serious debate, can we really compare the violence of protesters defacing a bank with the violence that the banking system enacts when it evicts people from their homes for non-payment due to unemployment in the wake of a global crisis perpetrated by those banks in the first place? I think the discussion of the black bloc that I present in the book in the chapter on the Global Justice Movement at the very least forces us to think about the way we focus on violence against property over violence against people in contemporary capitalist society.

Violence manifests itself in myriad ways, some obvious such as the killing of protesters in Egypt. Other forms of violence are less readily identified as affecting the dynamics of protest by some observers. For example, in the book I talk about the violence against women in Tahrir, which I think is a crucial form of violence that matters when analyzing Arab Spring, because it is tied into gender politics in Egypt, and the socially accepted forms of violence that are explicitly reinforced by the state (through the virginity tests, for example). The demands women and men were making for changes in the treatment, rights and status of women are really important I think, but are overshadowed by a focus on democracy and economic injustice understood in the abstract. So gender violence too is entwined with the protests.

Much less visible forms of violence were also manifest in other contexts. For example, in 15-M women in the Puerta del Sol had a hard time sleeping there overnight, and were subjected to unwanted sexual attention. This became a topic of discussion and debate. And as the camp began to disintegrate over time, participants came face to face with the reality of quotidian street violence in urban areas, knife fights among substance abusers and so on. This also forced people to think through the reality of violence in the lives of marginalized people living on the streets and forced activists to reflect on what it means to occupy public space when it is not a choice. Activists in Occupy Dame Street in Dublin faced the same sorts of issues, whereas in Windsor Canada, homeless people made important connections with the occupiers, there was a sort of reciprocal politicization that happened and a community building process as a result of the occupation.

Second, the effects of violent tactics on the part of protesters and the effects of repression by the part of the state are again hotly debated and poorly understood. The reason is that there is no discernable pattern that is consistent across cases. Sometimes

repression will quash a movement, other times it will ignite mass resistance, sometimes delegitimize regimes to the point of collapse. The great variation in outcomes across the Arab uprisings show that repression and violence interact with a whole host of other factors to produce unpredictable effects.

Third, mass media representation often focuses exclusively on violence, which is a very effective way to avoid actually talking about the real issues that motivated the protests in the first place. The recent marches of dignity in Spain are a good example. Hundreds of thousands of people from all over Spain marched for days to the capital, and were almost completely ignored by the mainstream media. Millions then were on the streets once they all arrived in Madrid¹. It was a remarkable demonstration of collective repudiation of austerity by any standards. Yet the only thing that got covered by mass media was some confrontations with the police at the very end, which many argue were provoked by the police in the first place. Unfortunately this is typical. People argue endlessly about the need to control those few violent protesters—as if you can control what happens in a mass protest situation anyway! Sure you can try, but at the end of the day, people have different views on this and in a situation of police attack, a few will fight back. A very few probably also think it is cool to get into fights with the police, but given the protesters are unarmed and the police are in riot gear and have rubber bullets, truncheons and so on, not too many people will willingly go for this approach! Some social movement coverage also indulges in what is known as “riot porn”, which is a form of representation that privileges images of physical conflict with police, burning trash containers and so on. There have been studies showing that this produces adrenaline rushes (even watching it) and that people relive their experiences and so on. Certainly documenting police brutality etc. is very important, but the whole riot porn thing I have very mixed feelings about. I think it reproduces a lot of pathologies, rather than advancing movement goals often times.

Finally, I will just mention an unintended consequence of protest in this wave, which is the increased criminalization of protests and the shutting down of space for freedom of expression. In Spain, for example, there has been a whole legal apparatus mobilized against social movements, and this too is part of the “effect of 15-M”, while not being 15-M’s fault in any way of course. Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and other organizations have raised the alarm about this issue. In my analysis I tie this in with the broader violence of austerity measures and the fundamental stripping of basic rights from the population that are represented by them. Not only are the rights to housing, jobs, education, healthcare etc. cut, but in order to push this through in a context of mass resistance, the right to freedom of expression, freedom of association, the very basic right to protest itself are all restricted, and social movements are criminalized. The current reform of the Spanish

¹ <http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cristina-flesher-fominaya/spain%E2%80%99s-marches-of-dignity-22m-2014-not-antipolitics>

penal code is a perfect example of this². Fraud is decriminalized (penalties are lessened), yet peaceful protest is characterized as “attempts against authority” and results in disproportionate fines (up to 600,000 Euros) and prison if you cannot pay. That about says it all doesn’t it? Greenpeace Spain has a brilliant app where you can go online and plan your protest and then see what fine you would get under the law. I think that legal repression is also a crucial part of the discussion on “violence” in this contemporary wave.

*Bio: Cristina Flesher Fominaya has an MA and PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, and a BA *summa cum laude* in International Relations from the University of Minnesota. She is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) at the University of Aberdeen. She has won numerous international awards, including the National Science Foundation Fellowship, the German Marshall Fellowship and the Marie Curie IEF Fellowship. She has been researching and participating in European social movements since the early 1990s. From September 2013 she is Senior Marie Curie Fellow at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth conducting a two year research project on anti-austerity mobilizations in Ireland and Spain. She is a founding editor of *Interface Journal*, an editor of *Social Movement Studies*, and is founding co-chair of the *Council for European Studies Research Network on European Social Movements*. She is a fellow at the *European Centre for International Affairs (ECIA)* and an expert member of the *Centre for Global Security and Governance*, University of Aberdeen.*

² <http://austerityprotests.wordpress.com/2014/06/05/the-state-strikes-back-the-criminalization-of-15-m-and-social-movements-in-spain/>