



**HAL**  
open science

# Conceptualizing contexts or contextualizing concepts? On some issues of the modeling of relational spaces in the study of collective action

Johanna Siméant-Germanos

► **To cite this version:**

Johanna Siméant-Germanos. Conceptualizing contexts or contextualizing concepts? On some issues of the modeling of relational spaces in the study of collective action. *Social Movement Studies*, 2021, 20 (2), pp.139-154. 10.1080/14742837.2019.1629899 . hal-03822276

**HAL Id: hal-03822276**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03822276v1>**

Submitted on 14 Nov 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Conceptualizing contexts or contextualizing concepts? On some issues of the modeling of relational spaces in the study of collective action

Johanna Siméant-Germanos (École Normale Supérieure, Centre Maurice Halbwachs)

**Abstract:** The growing attention paid to the relational spaces of collective action is good news. It owes a lot to the legacy of interactionism, and allows a more accurate attention to the relevant contexts of protest, that cannot be subsumed only under big contexts such as political opportunity structure, economy, etc. One can however worry about the never ending succession of paradigms –more often acronyms – in the subfield of in social movement studies. “Context” issues are in fact linked to the very status of explanation in social sciences, and to the unequal nomological (or conversely more historical) ambitions of social sciences – a debate that is far from being settled. The article insists on this underlying epistemological debate, before splitting different aspects of what is at stake in the way relational contexts of collective action should be considered: relational understanding of strategies, link between mobilizations and transformations *in* and *between* social spaces, the role and types of differentiation of society. Here, the classical (but barely translated) work of Michel Dobry appears as particularly useful to pay attention to contexts considered at the same time through interactions and the differentiation of society. But far from pleading for a new magic bullet, the article intends to support a more historically contextualized approach of social movements, less interested by the establishment of laws than the understanding of the consequences on specific forms of social differentiations, the understanding of which being a good definition of what a relevant context of collective action might be.

**Keywords:** Context – historicization – interactionism – epistemology of social sciences - Dobry

**Correspondence Address:** Département de sciences sociales, École Normale Supérieure, PSL, 48 Bd Jourdan, 75014, Paris, FRANCE [johanna.simeant@ens.fr](mailto:johanna.simeant@ens.fr)

## Notes on Contributor

Johanna Siméant-Germanos is professor of political science. She has studied undocumented migrants mobilizations, hunger strikes, humanitarianism, activism in Mali. Her books include *La cause des sans-papiers* (1998), *Bodies in Protest* (with C. Traïni, AUP, 2016), *Le travail humanitaire* (with P. Dauvin, 2002), *Observing Protest from a Place. The World Social Forum in Dakar (2011)*, co-edited with M.-E. Pommerolle and I. Sommier (AUP, 2015). Her publications in English include *Review of International Political Economy*, *Humanity*, *Journal of Global Ethics*, *Journal of World System Research*.

## Conceptualizing contexts or contextualizing concepts? On some issues of the modeling of relational spaces in the study of collective action

If any good sociology should abandon the idea of an asocial individual, then thinking relationally is simply one of the bases of sociology. The recent return, in the sociology of social movements, to a serious attention for what could be coined as the relational context of collective action can therefore be considered as a way of reembedding social movement studies into general sociology. It can however be done in very different ways, not all of them being equally satisfying. This article would like here to precise on which epistemological bases this trend could avoid the rise and fall of so many concepts (and more often acronyms) that have popped up before being abandoned. It could also be a way of rediscovering not-that-recent ways of conceptualizing collective action that paid attention to these dimensions, in a manner that should be rediscovered.

This discussion has more generally to do with the way we think about context in social sciences, mostly through the idea that one single concept could capture what is relevant in contexts or could modelize any context, therefore sticking to a very nomological, or at least generalizing, conception of social sciences. Truly, social movements scholars seem to realize today the dangers of sub-specialization (and the risk to reinventing the wheel in subdomains), and to go back to general sociology. But going back to general sociology maybe means that some already available concepts can apply, case by case, to grasp what is at stake in the understanding of relational contexts of collective action.

This article will try to defend the idea that proposing a conceptual model of relational contexts *in general* is condemned to miss most of the reality we pretend to talk about. Does that mean that any endeavor of understanding the relational contexts of collective action should be abandoned? Certainly not, but as a craftsman knowing one's tools, we should know better what works for what. Some modelings of those relational contexts will be examined, and, drawing strongly on Michel Dobry's work (Dobry 1986, 2009a, 2009b), the central question of the (dis)connection between different relational contexts, whatever the name we give them, will be considered. The third part of the text will suggest some empirical results and interrogations that usefully have taken into account the issue of the relational settings of collective action – as a clue to resolve rather than an axiomatic to establish.

### 1. What is a concept good for, and what does it mean about contexts of collective action?

What good does a concept serve? It is certainly not to manage interpretive routines, or to become a buzzword, or to become an object of theoretical fetishism; rather it is meant to stimulate the sociological imagination and, within a Weberian perspective, to direct observation rather than force reality into a ready-made mold. As Max Weber (1949: 80) wrote:

“Laws are important and valuable in the exact natural sciences, in the measure that those sciences are universally valid. For the knowledge of historical phenomena in

their concreteness, the most general laws, because they are most devoid of content, are also the least valuable. The more comprehensive the validity, -or scope- of a term, the more it leads us away from the richness of reality since in order to include the common elements of the largest possible number of phenomena, it must necessarily be as abstract as possible and hence devoid of content. In the cultural sciences, the knowledge of the universal or general is never valuable in itself”.

Archeologists do not always know, when they find fragments in their surveys, what these fragments are part of. They can have some hopes, but have first to inscribe traces in relevant contexts. Does this strangely shaped stone belong to the architecture or craft of an antique subculture, or is it just a sign of the presence of a very ordinary geological stratum? Is this broken human bone a sign of a specific funeral ritual, or can it teach me if people of the times were suffering from serious malnutrition? Archeologists can have very precise expectations but they wouldn't stick to one conception of the context that can explain what they have found in any setting and about any historical periods: and it might be that in one situation they would prefer a set of explanations that would not work in another one. This does not mean that archeologists are not scientists. Taking the example of archeology, a discipline that has even more than social sciences used experimental science tools (dendrograms and Carbon 14 for example), should remind that that the ultimate goal of human and social sciences is not always to establish generalities or laws - whether we understand them as general stable causalities or as “constant relations between things”. Rather, and in particular in social sciences, it has to do with contextualizing and understanding correctly the historical events that we face. Some academic concept battles seem sometimes far too directed towards the routines of publishing or perishing rather than providing thick (and meaningful) descriptions, as if the less academics had time to do fieldwork, the more they felt obliged to state big ideas about big processes.

How do these general considerations apply to contexts, and specifically to relational contexts of collective action? To address the tricky term of context, one should recall what is meant when saying that context, whatever it may be, *matters*: it underlines that something relevant for the explanation, for the correct understanding of an event or a process, should be taken into account (unless it would not be mentioned). A context is about causal relations, or rather weberian affinities, maybe not seen before, and to which attention should be paid. Depending on paradigm shifts in social sciences, contexts can therefore include economic transformations, demography, social classes, opening of political opportunity structures, ecological transformations or religious beliefs, the structure of society, etc. And those contexts might affect<sup>1</sup> not only the occurrence of mobilizations but also their maintenance, process, end, outcomes etc.

The centrality, in social movement studies, of the notion of political opportunity structure (POS, see Tilly, 1978; McAdam, 1982, Tarrow, 1989; 1998), of the political process model, and then of the contentious politics approach, is obvious (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001 ; Tilly, Tarrow, 2007). One of its interests is to be both processual and potentially contextual, as it takes into account the political environment of social movements, and in particular the way the state and its characteristics (in terms of division of elites, capacity to impulse public policies, repressive dimension...) impacts mobilizations. The re-embedding of social movements in their political environment had however a price, clearly observable in some uses of the paradigm as it was followed by diverse authors: the routinisation of the modelisation of contexts, in particular of the notion of POS – and of conceptions of the state and public policies that were maybe too rough

---

<sup>1</sup> Or not, but in this case they should be considered more as a décor, a scene, a setting, than a context.

and structural to be fully convincing (see for instance Kitschelt, 1986). McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow were aware of the problem, and of the reproach of the structuralist biases of a model that was deemed either to miss a part of the relevant political context, or to be condemned to *ad hocism* by an unending addition to parameters to the model. In particular, the notion of POS risked of being tautological as it was deducted after a social movement happened and would have needed a systematic control of social movements not happening in a similar POS. The attention paid to mechanisms was useful as a guide for observation, but did not guaranty that they worked the same way and with the same effects in different contexts. However, again, everything depends on the use of the model: used in a “law like” way, to mold an *a priori* model of contexts, it could only be disappointing. Used as a guide for observation, it was fruitful to question what in the political environment could be relevant: for instance when Tarrow insisted on the structuration of transnational social movements, even critical ones, by the coral reef of international organizations (Tarrow, 2001).

Against this conceptualization, considered as too structural, a first reaction was to insist on emotions and culture (Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta, 2001); another one was to go back, but differently, to the question of contexts. Here takes place this movement willing to go back to modelings of the social world that not only evoke political and state contexts but more specifically relational contexts (Fligstein, McAdam, 2012 ; Jasper, Duyvendak, 2015), under the idea of strategic action fields or arenas in particular. This move expresses the need to take into account the relational settings of mobilizations and more generally of the social world. This endeavor appears as an exciting one, not if we consider it as the quest for the holy grail of the new concept, but rather as a good operator of contextualization of a certain number of questions that have to do with how actors strategize and mobilize, and do it in relation with other actors.

## **2. What is at stake in the attention paid to relational contexts of collective action?**

Field (Bourdieu, 1990, 1993b; Fliegstein, 2001), social movement space (Mathieu, 2012), multi organizational field (Curtis, Zurcher, 1973), organizational field (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983), strategic action field (Fligstein, McAdam, 2012), arena (Jasper, Duyvendak, 2015), sector (Dobry, 1986), and why not figuration (Elias, 1978)... of course not all of these concepts are new. But in the renewed effervescence about contexts of collective action, three central topics are at stake. All of them raise the issue of the link between social differentiation and collective action:

- a relational understanding of strategies,
- the link between mobilizations (their advent and development) and transformations *in* and *between* social spaces (the last ones being by definition relational),
- and the fact that some mobilizations know such developments that they can create new social spaces.

Let us develop those three points before examining how different concepts address unequally what is at stake in those three dimensions.

Paying attention to the relational spaces of collective action has to do first with how people deploy tactics and strategies (when they do have some), but in a way that would avoid a desocialized conception of those anticipations: the point is not here to adopt a kind of rational choice theory in the study of mobilizations, but rather to understand what tactics and strategies owe to their embedment in specific social spaces and relations. Surely the strategic interactionist

perspective on collective action is not new, but it helps to understand tactical interactions in protest, or for instance the fact that the rising participation of protesters in a movement changes the anticipated cost of getting involved. The legacy does not only stem from strategic interactionism: Anthony Oberschall did nothing different when explaining, in his classic book, that one of the strong explanations of individual participation in a collective movement was the change, in time, of the risk/reward ratio of protest (Oberschall, 1973: 163). However, although Oberschall did propose a rather sociologically grounded conception of the structure of groups (classifying collectivities along vertical and horizontal dimensions of their integration, and considering the links between collectivities), he did not that much connect the hypothesis with the way individuals make their choices, apart from stating that the denser the group structure, the stronger the social control on individuals and hence the narrower the scope of choices allowed to individuals (Oberschall, 1973:176). This attention to the size of groups was, after all, an illustration of some developments already done by Olson, whose free rider dilemma concerned big latent groups, as social control in small groups overcame in general the free rider problem (Olson 1965). Oberschall's perspective is still a rich endeavor to link mobilization and the structure of groups, both inside and between groups. But what is probably missing in his model is to explain the hierarchies and diversity inside groups, as social control does not have the same effect on all group members depending for example on their former socialization, their position in the group or the differential costs of repression according to one's individual resources (in case of a penal repression, etc.). We know for sure that the intensity of relations in the group can explain the commitment and the persistence in costly moral action (McAdam, 1986), and how the restitution of the relations in which people are taken very often explains behaviors that would have otherwise been deemed irrational. This question of participation inside a specific space is not only interindividual, and it has to be considered also between organizations (very often on the mode: "we cannot not participate because they do" – or in the contrary: "if x participates, we will not").

A second central issue with paying attention to the relational context of collective action has to do with what social change and the possibility (or not) of social movements owes to transformations *in* and *between* relational spaces, without limiting the observation to the political space (contrary to the former notion of political opportunity structure, by construction centered on the state). Transformations *in* spaces first: surely the relations, in a specific professional space for example (one can draw here on Bourdieu's description of the logics of a field, see for instance Bourdieu, 1993b), between insiders monopolizing the access to the praised resources of that space, or the legitimate definition of what is at stake in this space, and newcomers aspiring to establish their position or to propose an alternative definition of what is at stake, is a classic aspect of numerous conflicts. But one of the most difficult issues for the study of collective action has probably to do with the dynamics of relations *between* different spaces of relations.

This question has a lot to do with the hypothesis of connection between different social spaces (a connection that occurs in crises, revolutions, etc.). But this is probably not the only lens through which the topic should be considered. In the contrary (and again this might resonate with some hypothesis developed by Oberschall), it is sometimes rather the segmentation (in the sense for a collectivity of being isolated from other groups and not having access to power) that will be more predictive of a mobilization. More recently, and with a different theoretical apparatus, Violaine Roussel (2002) wondered why French judges dared increasingly, in what could be considered as an administrative mobilization, to incriminate politicians for corruption since the 90s in France, after years of relative indifference to the topic. She shows that one of the main reasons for this

change has to do with the growing distance of the group of judges compared to politicians: it is precisely because judges were less close than before to politicians, that they were not anymore the dignitaries who had dinner with local elites, that it began more possible to treat politicians like any other accused person. Here, the transformation of the judges group since the 1970, and its relation to other groups, is one of the central explanations of this professional mobilization. In this line, some authors adequately propose balanced interpretations of the way elite shape some mobilizations even if they do not have direct relations to social movement actors. This is the demonstration that Tim Bartley develops about how foundations shape environmental activism : drawing on DiMaggio and Powell's conceptualization on organizational fields and institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983), Bartley shows that the issue is not only about channeling or cherry picking organizations, but rather the fact that foundations shape social movements by building a new "organizational field"—that is, a socially constructed arena of self-referencing, mutually dependent organizations (Bartley, 2007).

A third aspect seems central in the return to a relational conceptualization of the context of collective action: some mobilizations know such developments that they can create new social spaces with their own logics. This is central in the discussion between Fligstein and McAdam on one side, and Jasper & Duyvendak on the other (Fligstein, McAdam, 2015 ; Jasper, Duyvendak, 2015) – although the distinction between forming a new field and a new actor maybe does not matter that much in the sense that any collective actor might be a space of relations and tension. What is the gain of this perspective? Probably to keep in mind that intentionality and voluntarism are not the central keys for the understanding of mobilizations, and that, when a mobilization occurs, whatever its history and reasons, whatever the objective and subjective reasons that made it happen, whatever the intentions, a new game takes place and spreads, with its own logics and its own constraints. Here the parallel with war, as analyzed by Clausewitz (1989), is obvious and has been noticed by Dobry (2007) : when war is here, whatever the history of the reasons of war, whatever the objective and subjective reasons that made it happen, whatever the intentions, a new game takes place and spreads, with its own logics and its own constraints.

This logic of a new game, generating specific commitments, is something any social movement scholars has noticed, and that I have particularly observed in my own work on hunger strikes of undocumented migrants (Siméant, 1998): because getting into a hunger strike means abandoning a job, even illegal, or a housing, moving backwards becomes very difficult, having appeared publicly makes also possible but suddenly dangerous to be deported to one's country of origin, and the physical site of the hunger strike becomes a space of control between hunger strikers, with a hunger strike sometimes following its own logic. Similarly, what the historian Timothy Tackett shows about the way the deputies of the Tiers-Etat became revolutionaries and finally voted for the death of the king has a lot to do with how they were caught in Parisian life, under the pressure of events, the influence of more radical revolutionaries, etc. Using the correspondence of the deputies, Tackett shows that those men had rather moderate ideas before the revolutionary process, and that nothing could let expect that they would become revolutionaries voting for the death of the king: here, taking into account the relational dynamics of what happened in Paris, in assemblies and meetings, helps to understand the way they learned and acquired new skills and transformed their positions. This raises of course the issue to which mobilizations become, or not, self-referential spaces, with new issues at stake (Tackett, 1997).

Facing those issues, is it that necessary to choose between concepts, to consider that the time of SIP (Strategic Interaction Perspective, Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015) has now come and that we

should forget POS, that “field” (Bourdieu, 1993b) is better than “space of social movements” (Mathieu, 2012) or “Arena” and “SAF” (Strategic Action Field, Fligstein, McAdam, 2012)? Maybe this searching for the new magic bullet is not the most exciting task of social sciences, and one could wish academics dared more often to pronounce this simple sentence, that Charles Tilly and Robert Goodin (2011) significantly used in their title when writing about contextual political analysis: “it depends”.

Surely Bourdieu’s theory of fields works better for more institutionalized situations than what happens with social movements. But in institutional situations the concept of field helps to map contentious social spaces where people, unequally equipped with capitals themselves unequally relevant to the field, fight for the legitimate definition of the field – and more generally fight about what is at stake in the fight. And the fact that not everyone commits oneself into a mobilization is not contradictory with the struggles over the definition of the legitimate aims of the mobilization. One of the advantages of the theory of fields is also to be linked to a theory of practice, a theory of the objectivation of social spaces, a theory of the gaps that can be observed between reified history and embodied history, a major agent of change (Bourdieu, 1980). Maybe the subtlest demonstration of Bourdieu here are to be found also in *Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1990) or *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu, 2000) rather than the vulgarized Bourdieu for beginners that can be found in *Sociology in question* for instance (Bourdieu, 1993a).

However not all the spaces of collective action are institutionalized in a way that makes the notion of field useful. SAF or arenas offer a strategic and less institutionalized point of view, and go back to the important legacy of strategic interactionism (Schelling, 1960). Seizing moves and changes in a contextualized mode is probably one of the central issues for social sciences. This does not however mean, contrary to what Fligstein and McAdam state, that strategic action fields would be the “basic structural building block of modern political/organizational life in the economy, civil society, and the state” (Fligstein, McAdam, 2015: 3). However is there any social science demonstration stating that “x is a basic structural block of social life” that would be acceptable? Similarly, their idea that such fields have for grounds the human desire to belong and have shared identities and meanings appears problematic by its functionalism. That, of course, should not prevent to consider relational contexts: but here some concepts can be attractive by their very economy: figuration, as defined by Norbert Elias (Elias 1978), is a concept open enough to include a small scale interactional game (for instance a march) as well as the link between very distant persons that would imply a mobilization (for instance a pension fund in the US, a factory in France and trade unionists going on strike because of the closing of the factory)<sup>2</sup>.

Then, what might be one of the exciting tasks is less to pick up one concept rather than another one, but to precise what questions can be raised on relational contexts, and how to deepen them.

### **3. PRECISING SOME OTHER CLUES TO RESOLVE RATHER THAN LOOKING FOR AN AXIOMATIC: FOUR DIRECTIONS**

Social sciences might have to do something with asking questions rather than establishing laws or causal generalities. Elias nicely reminded that sociology’s task is to see relations where one did not see any before. What if the definition of the relevant relational context of collective action was an element of the clue to resolve rather than the axiomatic to establish? I will propose here a few ideas – and also a few caveats – in four directions.

---

<sup>2</sup> For an example of a mobilization of that kind (Collectif du 9 août, 2017).



The first direction, the most obvious and evident, relies heavily on the legacy of strategic interactionism<sup>3</sup>. It has to do with the attention given to the way protesters anticipate their moves and the other's moves (in terms of risk or opening of possibilities) and how those interactions and anticipations affect the process of collective action. Timothy Tackett's work is a good illustration of this orientation – as is Oberschall's. This interpretation is not a revamping of game theory. Such a perspective gives also all its importance to *how* protesters anticipate the repressive action of authorities (and how authorities themselves, although not unified, anticipate protesters' moves). Frédéric Vairel in his work on protest in contemporary Morocco (Vairel, 2008)<sup>4</sup>, takes seriously the constraints faced by protesters, and the seemingly aborted and unsuccessful movements. Using Michel Dobry's work (Dobry, 1988 and 1990), his research bears on the self-limited forms of collective action. What is holding one's moves and avoiding slippage and blunders? What does it tell about the strong control of the political sphere by state power<sup>5</sup>? Many works on protesting in coercive situation would allow understanding how seemingly moderate and civil society & NGO-like forms of expression appear as the only playable card, and should not always be considered under the label of depoliticization. Such an attention to the anticipations of protesters and other actors needs however, in order not to reproduce a form of rational choice theory, to take into account the socialized embedment of strategies (when people strategize); or the forms of social links that will help to neglect, forget or accept the costs of commitment (as did Doug McAdam in *Freedom Summer*). And the attention paid to those anticipations also implies a rule of method which is to, as much as possible, try to write histories of protests as if we did not know their outcomes, in order to better understand how anticipations change and evolve in the course of collective action, how, also, “successful” and “unsuccessful” mobilizations can have a lot in common.

A second aspect raised by the topic of the renewed debate on the relational contexts of collective action has to do with relations (and not only struggles) inside social movements organizations and between: this topic, once raised through the idea of multiorganizational fields (Curtis, Zurcher, 1973), more recently by Lilian Mathieu and his notion of “space of social movements” (Mathieu, 2012), or by Jim Jaspers and Jan Willem Duyvendak's focus on arenas and players (Jasper, Duyvendak, 2015), is useful as it implies not only concurrence but also cooperation, distinction, imitation, etc. One of its difficulties is probably that taking into account cooperation and distinction between relatively institutionalized organizations (for instance between an anticapitalistic organization, a peace organization or a foundation) is a different thing when it comes to the fluidity or what is at stake in the short term and between less institutionalized organizations. Put it simply, the problem is not only to pay attention to those relations but to understand how they are socially structured, because the way they are varies.

It is however useful to consider relations between the actors of social movements, particularly through an organizational lens, as it works as a frame (Clemens, 1996) and tells a lot about identity issues. Such a perspective also has to be taken into account to seize how money and other resources circulate: here, recent developments on the role of foundations in the funding of social movements illustrate neatly what is at stake about some aspects of relational contexts of social movements (Bartley, 2007 ; Morena, 2016). Paying attention to those relations, and to their

---

<sup>3</sup> My own work on hunger strikes owes a lot to Thomas Schelling's perspective (Siméant, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> See also his work with Joel Beinin on Middle East and North Africa (Beinin, Vairel, 2013)

<sup>5</sup> That are not exclusive of others –the question of the relation between protesters and the state, through police forces in particular, is not developed here but is one of the most developed and exciting paths of the 20 last years in the sociology of collective action (Earl, 2003 ; Della Porta, Fillieule, 2004)

socialization role, also accounts for the acquisition of some of the social skills mentioned par Fligstein<sup>6</sup>, and that are relevant to collective action. Again, however, some very classic works on the dilemmas of movements should not be forgotten: i.e. the iron law of oligarchy, and what it tells about the division of labor, even in the organizations most willing to serve their constituencies. The division of labor is at the same time dependent of the kind of social relations in a movement, but can deepen, worsen or transform those relations.

The internationalization question makes even more complex the issue of identifying the relational space of collective action, as, in particular, it amplifies the division of labor<sup>7</sup>. In her work on anti-debt movements, H el ene Baillot (2017) shows the division in the Jubilee network between American activists based in Washington, keener to try to convince members of the Congress with “realistic” arguments, and south-based activists, feeling excluded and using rather law than economy as knowledge inside their mobilizations. Here, the division of labor inside the network worsens the tensions and miscomprehensions between American activists, British activists, and activists from the global south. In my own work on participants to Africans to the world social forums (Sim eant, Pommerolle, 2011 ; Sim eant, Pommerolle, Sommier, 2015), I have shown that examining African participation in the WSF suggests two important aspects that need to be taken into account in the study of transnational activism. The first is the necessity to examine concrete and material conditions and their relational dimension, and the second is that social movements must not be considered unified actors – a point importantly reminded by Fligstein and Jasper. They should be seen as spaces of struggle and tensions around the right to legitimate speech, and in this case, legitimate speech for Africa. Internationalization complicates this reality already experienced by social movements within national frameworks. These two aspects, although analytically distinct, are not separable. Dealing in detail with the concrete, very material conditions of transnational protest (a “sociology of the plane ticket”) shows where the tensions, alliances and also lines of domination occur in the spaces of transnational protest. Without being only a reflection of it, certain ideological confrontations are a way of translating, in protest language, realities which correspond to antagonisms of social position, on a national or an international scale. The material and symbolic study of the WSF underlines how far the reality of this protest event is from the egalitarian image of a global civil society. But it also shows how it is possible for newcomers, outsiders or dominated actors, to challenge these unequal relationships through the use of symbols and discourses linked to cultural legitimacy and the possibility of building an “us”.

A third point might help to consider different concepts devoted to the understanding of the relational dimension of social life. This issue is not only to examine different fields or arenas of sectors, but to understand their articulation (or not) and in particular what mobilizations have to do with the structuration of the social world in autonomous or semi-autonomous spheres, whatever the name we give them. I will rely heavily here on Michel Dobry’s seminal opus, *Sociologie des crises politiques* (*Sociology of political crises*)<sup>8</sup>, published in 1986, translated in

---

<sup>6</sup> Here Fligstein combines a rather neo institutionalist approach to the interactionist notion of social skill that helps consider the way capitals are used or not (Fligstein, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> I do not develop here a further point about the link between anticipations of protesters and the international, which has to do with how the perceptions of the protesters can be affected by international signals, be they political changes in a neighboring or similar country, or perception of the fact that a superpower will intervene to protect the oppressive government protesters are struggling against. Those examples can be telling about what happened in Egypt in 2011 for instance.

<sup>8</sup> All translations in English from the author.

Polish and Spanish but not in English)<sup>9</sup>. French sociology of collective action is probably a domain that has drawn extensively on Dobry's work. There is a temporal conjunction between *Sociologie des crises politiques*, his article on February 1934's riots (Dobry, 1989) and a chapter on students mobilizations in 1986 (Dobry, 1990), his work on eastern Europe mobilizations, that would be in general considered through the sociology of transitions, and the renewal and importation of France of the sociology of mobilizations during the 1990s. The reason for that is not only that crises studied by Dobry are, as the subtitle of his book recalled, multisector mobilizations corresponding to big historical cases (Feb. 1934, 1947, May 68, or December 1986). It is not only that he reexamined the sociology of revolutions and rebellions. *Sociologie des crises politiques* quickly became a powerful tool for the analysis of the dynamics of collective action, be it for considering short time sequences, to avoid any retrodiction by reasoning at the beginning of history and not at the end, to render protagonists' perceptions, to understand how a mobilization takes off, etc... What Dobry's work allows is to take seriously actors strategies and tactics (when they have some, i.e. not always), in a way that would not mean a decontextualized conceptions of strategies<sup>10</sup>. An attention paid to the social embedment of tactics and strategies, to social sectorization and desectorization: the legacy of Dobry to the French sociology of mobilizations is huge.

Dobry's work is directly connected to the issue of the relational contexts of collective action. This perception of the differentiation of society is in Dobry's opus a way of paying attention to the link between contexts and tactics<sup>11</sup>. Also, he recalls that the dispersion of mobilizations is one of their central aspects: "*mobilizations do not necessarily occur (...) around identic issues, goals or strategic perspectives for all the mobilized actors and social segments.*" (Dobry, 1986: 31).

As the subtitle of his book indicates (*The dynamic of multisectorial mobilizations*), Dobry analyses a specific categories of mobilizations, crises, that are defined by him as multisectorial.

"what is at stake is to consider crises, in the same time, as mobilizations and as transformations of states – the passing to critical states – of social systems. (...) we will call complex social systems those that are differentiated in autonomous social spheres, strongly institutionalized and characterized by specific social logics ; sectors the autonomous social spheres (...), multisector mobilizations those mobilizations localized in several of these spheres simultaneously ; and limited mobilizations those which have only one of them as a site, (...) fluid political conditions the particular class of critical conditions corresponding to transformations of states of complex systems when those systems are subject to multisector mobilizations." (Dobry, 1986 : 39-40).

Dobry proposes an analysis of crises linked to the level to which societies know structural differentiation. How are those sectors identified? First, in ordinary conditions, those sectors (the economy, the military, justice, etc.) frame, contain, inform the actors' calculations, therefore making them rather predictable. Second those sectors bear the mark of impersonal and

<sup>9</sup> Some aspects are developed in the following articles, his critical production on democratic transitions is more available in English (Dobry, 1992, 2000, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> Dobry also contributed to import in France Thomas Schelling's work, and more generally strategic interactionism, keeping in mind that their most interesting part was not their formal dimension, but rather their attention to the tactical interdependence of actors.

<sup>11</sup> "*what would be firstly examined in actors' mobilizations would be the relations they have to their "structural" contexts (...). We will consider those contexts as variables, sensitive precisely to mobilizations that can be inscribed inside them.*" (Dobry, 1986 : 16).

constraining social relations, that provide webs of meaning, nurturing the perceptions and actions of the members of those sectors; third those sectors are autonomous, an autonomy that can be attested by law, rules, a specific language and temporality. This does not mean however that this autonomy produces the fragmentation of complex societies, since it is reflected by practices and pragmatic principles (such as noninterference between sectors, the fact of overlooking problematic practices in another sector, etc.) that contributes to the consolidation of the whole. The dynamic specific to fluid conditions occurs with the alteration of these proprieties and leads to a dispersion of calculations, a desobjectivation of social relations, and a breakup of collusive transactions<sup>12</sup> (one of the main venue for huge processes of delegitimation).

Dobry, a careful reader of Bourdieu, tries here to find an alternative to Bourdieu's theory of fields, and in particular to the most systematic aspect of Bourdieu theory: the idea of a homology between fields<sup>13</sup>. Also a reader of Niklas Luhman (1982), Dobry had in common with Bourdieu the ambition of seizing the differentiation in complex societies and to propose a theory of crises and mobilizations. But contrary to Bourdieu, he intended to abandon the idea that all social spheres work the same way and in the same direction, and allowed himself to pay attention to a specific category of mobilization: those which are multi-sector. Therefore, a part of his theorization helps to seize the tactical activity that actors develop towards other social spheres in order to know if mobilizations "take off", or instead if the authorities (e.g. by divide and rule strategies) succeed in sectorizing or resectorizing activities (for instance avoiding that a student mobilization succeeds in appealing to factory workers, etc).

Dobry proposes one of the most useful conceptualizations of social differentiation and relational spaces of collective actions - crises being just one case among others cases of mobilizations, but case that involves the issue of inter- as well as intra- sectorial relations.

A last point could derive from what Dobry does in integrating both a very structural description of society and an attention to strategic interactionism. In the recent come back to interactionism in the analysis of social movements, one should be careful not to confuse interactions and relations: the relational context of collective action cannot be reduced to its interactional context. If an interactionist perspective about the social world is of great importance, a too narrow focus on interactions misses a part of the relational texture of the social world. And some social movements might gain to be considered through what they say of relations between social groups (whether one might want to use a Bourdieu inspired approach or not). Take for instance Gusfield's classic work<sup>14</sup> on symbolic crusade: what Gusfield shows is that one of the central issues of temperance movements where for WASPs (in particular WASP women) to insist on the preeminence of their moral and social status toward newcomers, in particular Irish, Italian and Polish immigrants (Gusfield, 1963). Here, this is rather the dynamic of relations between social groups that matters even if a part of this dynamic might appear in interactions. Likewise, different works on animal defence (Jasper, Nelkin, 1992 ; Traïni, 2011) have insisted on the distinction logics that are expressed through the denunciation of the fact that some groups more than others

---

<sup>12</sup> Collusive transactions are according to Dobry a horizontal way of producing legitimacy by not interfering in another sector – obtaining the same for one's activity in one's own sector. Many scandals typically happen through the breaking of collusive transactions, when one does not anymore close eyes on the activities in another sector.

<sup>13</sup> The idea of homology between fields is that being for instance dominated in one field will have as a consequence to occupy similar positions in other fields – a point that has been particularly discussed among sociologists inspired by Bourdieu.

<sup>14</sup> Although it has probably suffered from its association with collective behavior theories from which RMT tried to get rid of.

would tend to be cruel with animals. Here we need to articulate relational and interactionist dimension because they do not overlap. To seize and articulate those dimensions, monographs and verifying hypotheses of a structural nature are thus not incompatible. The field-work carried out by Stephane Beaud and Michel Pialoux on the workers of the Peugeot factories in the Montbéliard region, one of the principal working-class regions in France, is emblematic of the crisis of working-class unionism. Wondering why “the group of activists at the factory is no longer reproducing itself”, they describe the discouragement of the senior activists of the 1970s and their reticence with regard to the young generations’ trade-union practices. Younger workers, often taken on as substitutes and considering themselves “birds of passage”, are not very sensitive to the political training that older delegates try to accomplish with them. The authors present the phenomena both with respect to the mutations undergone by the plant (just-in-time production, massive presence of electronics, growing number of interim workers . . .), and to the changes affecting local society, which in turn were determined by general political and economic evolutions. The access of workers’ children to secondary school, or even for some of them, to higher education in the 1990s, if it is often a source of disappointment because of the disparity between hopes and the objective chances of finding qualified and stable employment, has destroyed the “anti-school culture” on which part of the factory-shop culture rested and, above all, totally destroyed the value of menial labor. Not being able to identify with that group, the younger generation experience working in the factory like a parenthesis and a Calvary. Young workers and workers’ sons no longer identify with the working-class culture that grew out of a sense of belonging to a community opposed to foremen and managers, the very culture still represented by the delegates, who are therefore trapped in it. From there on in, the entire system of circular compensations, such as the esteem of the comrades in the shop, which also propped up the delegates’ dedication and allowed them to persevere despite the professional cost of their commitment, falls through (Beaud, Pialoux, 2001). The microsocial logics of a lasting commitment cannot be separated from the great transformations: could there be a better illustration of how to articulate interactions and structural relations between groups and generations in a specific setting?

\* \*  
\*

Good news: the best of the interactionist heritage has come back to the sociology of social movements. Bad news: maybe we, social movement scholars, should stop running after the new magic bullet. That sociology is, on the epistemological plan, not discernible from history, as another major collaborator of Bourdieu reminds in a classic of the epistemology of social sciences (Passeron, 2013), may not obtain the agreement of the whole community of social sciences. It is however what a part of social scientists holds for true – and this means that their practice of research is as legitimate as any other as long as there is a consistency between their epistemology and their research practice. Let not this be understood as the idea that things are always too specific to generalize, or rather too specific to propose abstractions. The extraction from the context of some characteristics that transcend the historically particular is of course necessary (this is the back and forth movement of research between fieldwork and theory), but this abstraction has more to do with idealtypical concepts whose interest is to seize the distance (and then the specific) between the ideal type and reality, than with the fact of generalizing about processes and contexts. Concepts obtained by abstraction are therefore useful as long as they allow understanding correctly specific historical events, to think heuristically about relations not

seen before: generalizing through comparison “in order to specify”, says Jean-François Bayart (2008) following Paul Veyne (1976, 1992). It also means that whatever our epistemological position as social science scholars, we could agree, not only to disagree, but also to go back to discovering new situations and new contexts, and hence sometimes new concepts, as the transformations of research affects the possibilities of time needed for books based on dense fieldworks. This is, after all, a relevant context of social movement studies that might also be scrutinized.

### References:

- Ancelovici, M. (2017) ‘Bourdieu Meets McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly: Toward a Field Theory of Contentious Politics’, *Workshop “Field, Arena and Space - Workshop on the Context of Collective Action”*, Montreal: UQAM & McGill University.
- Baillot, H. (2017). « *Nous ne devons rien, nous ne paierons rien* ». *Jubilee 2000 et la redéfinition du mode de problématisation de la dette des pays pauvres* (PhD). Paris: Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne.
- Bartley, T. (2007). How Foundations Shape Social Movements: The Construction of an Organizational Field and the Rise of Forest Certification. *Social Problems*, 54(3), 229-255.
- Bayart, J.-F. (2008). Comparer en France, Petit essai d’autobiographie disciplinaire. *Politix*, 83, 205–232.
- Beaud, S., & Pialoux, M. (2001). *Retour sur la condition ouvrière. Enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbéliard*. Paris: Fayard.
- Beinin, J., & Vairel, F. (eds.). (2013). *Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1980). Le mort saisit le vif. Les relations entre l’histoire réifiée et l’histoire incorporée. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 32(1), 3-14.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford : Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993a). *Sociology in question*. London: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993b). *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian meditations*. Stanford : Stanford University Press.
- Clausewitz, C. von. (1989). *On war*. Princeton: Princeton University Press [1832].
- Clemens, E. S. (1996). Organizational form as frame: Collective identity and political strategy in the American labor movement, 1880–1920. In D. McAdam, J. D. McCarthy, & M. N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (p. 205-226). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collectif du 9 août (ed.). (2017). *Quand ils ont fermé l’usine: lutter contre la délocalisation dans une économie globalisée*. Marseille: Agone.
- Curtis, R., & Zurcher, L. (1973). Stable resources of protest movements: the multi-organisational field. *Social Forces*, 52, 53-61.
- Della Porta, D., & Fillieule, O. (2004). Policing Social Protest. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (p. 217-241). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- DiMaggio, P. & Powell, W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147-160.
- Dobry, M. (1986). *Sociologie des crises politiques: la dynamique des mobilisations multisectorielles*. Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques.

- Dobry, M. (1988). La fragilité d'un mouvement auto-limité. Un entretien avec Michel Dobry. *Politix*, 1 (1), 35-40.
- Dobry, M. (1989). Février 1934 et la découverte de l' "allergie" de la société française à la Révolution fasciste. *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 30 (3-4), 511-533.
- Dobry, M. (1990). Calcul, concurrence et gestion du sens. Quelques réflexions à propos des manifestations étudiantes de novembre-décembre 1986. In P. Favre (ed.), *La manifestation* (p. 357-386). Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- Dobry, M. (1992). Problems and Illusions in the Study of Transitions to Democracy. *Sisyphus. Social Studies*, 9(2), 29-34.
- Dobry, M. (2005). February 1934 and the Discovery of French Society's Allergy to the 'Fascist Revolution'. In B. Jenkins (ed.), *France in the Era of Fascism: Essays on the French Authoritarian Right* (p. 185-213). Oxford: Berghahn.
- Dobry, M. (2006). Hitler, Charisma and Structure: Reflections on Historical Methodology. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 7(2), 157-171.
- Dobry, M. (2007). Ce dont sont faites les logiques de situation. In P. Favre, O. Fillieule, & F. Jobard (eds.), *L'atelier du politiste. Théories, actions, représentations* (p. 119-148). Paris: La Découverte.
- Dobry, M. (2009a). Critical Processes and Political Fluidity: a Theoretical Appraisal. *International Political Anthropology*, 2(1), 73-88.
- Dobry, M. (2009b). Situational Analysis: Some Proposals for a Non-Popperian Programme. In M. Cherkaoui & P. Hamilton (ed.), *Raymond Boudon. A Life in Sociology. Essays in Honour of Raymond Boudon* (p. 299-315). Oxford: The Bardwell Press.
- Dobry, M. (2011). Desperately seeking 'generic fascism': some discordant thoughts on the academic recycling of indigenous categories. In A. Costa Pinto (Éd.), *The Nature of Fascism* (p. 53-84). London: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Dobry, M. (Éd.). (2000). *Democratic and Capitalist transitions in Eastern Europe. Lessons for the Social Sciences*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Earl, J. (2003). Tanks, Tear Gas, and Taxes: Toward a Theory of Movement Repression. *Sociological Theory*, 21(1), 44-68.
- Elias, N. (1978). *What is Sociology?* London: Hutchinson.
- Fligstein, N. (2001). Social Skill and the Theory of Fields. *Sociological Theory*, 19(2), 105-125.
- Fligstein, N., & McAdam, D. (2015). *A theory of fields*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goodwin, J., Jasper, J., Polletta, F. (2001). *Passionate Politics. Emotions and Social Movements*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gusfield, J. R. (1986). *Symbolic crusade: status politics and the American temperance movement*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Jasper, J. M., & Duyvendak, J. W. (ed.). (2015). *Players and arenas: the interactive dynamics of protest*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Jasper, J. M., & Nelkin, D. (1992). *The animal rights crusade: the growth of a moral protest*. New York: Free Press.
- Kitschelt, H. (1986). Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies. *British Journal of Political Science*, 16(1), 57-85.
- Luhmann, N. (1982). *The differentiation of society*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mathieu, L. (2012). *L'espace des mouvements sociaux*. Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Éditions du croquant.
- McAdam, D. (1982). *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- McAdam, D. (1986). Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92 (1), 64-90.
- McAdam, D. (1990). *Freedom summer*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- McAdam, D., Tarrow, S. & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Morena, E. (2016). *The Price of Climate Action: Philanthropic Foundations in the International Climate Debate*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action: public goods and the theory of groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Passeron, J.-C. (2013). *Sociological reasoning: a non-Popperian space of argumentation*. Oxford: The Bardwell Press.
- Roussel, V. (2002). *Affaires de juges: les magistrats dans les scandales politiques en France*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Schelling, T. (1960). *The strategy of conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Siméant, J., Pommerolle, M.-E. and Sommier, I. (2015). *Observing protest from a place. The World Social Forum in Dakar (2011)*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Siméant, J. & Pommerolle, M.-E. (2011). African Voices and activists at the WSF in Nairobi – the uncertain Ways of Transnational African Activism., in Smith, J., Byrd, S. C., and Reese, E. (eds) *The Handbook of World Social Forum Activism*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 227–247.
- Siméant, J. & Traïni, C. (2016). *Bodies in Protest. Hunger strikes and Angry music*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Siméant, J. (1998). *La cause des sans-papiers*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- Siméant, J. (2009). *La grève de la faim*. Paris : Presses de Sciences Po.
- Tackett, T. (1997). *Becoming a revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tarrow, (S.). (2001). “Transnational Politics: Contention and Institutions in International Politics”. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4, 1-20.
- Tarrow, S. (1989). *Democracy and disorder: protest and politics in Italy, 1965-1975*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tilly, C. & Goodin, R. E. (2011). Overview of Contextual Political Analysis it Depends. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*. doi: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604456.013.0022](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604456.013.0022).
- Tilly, C. (1978). *From mobilization to revolution*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Tilly, C., Tarrow, S. (2007). *Contentious Politics*. Boulder : Paradigm Publishers.
- Traïni, C. (2011). *La cause animale (1820-1980): essai de sociologie historique*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Vairel, F. (2008). Morocco: from Mobilizations to Reconciliation? *Mediterranean Politics*, 13(229), 229-241.
- Veyne, P. (1976). *L'inventaire des différences: leçon inaugurale au Collège de France*. Paris: Seuil.
- Veyne, P. (1992). *Bread and circuses: historical sociology and political pluralism*. London: Penguin.
- Weber, M. (1949). “Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy. In *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Glencoe: the Free Press.