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# Comment on Loris Caruso/1. Beyond the Emergence of Social Movements and Political Opportunity Structures. Studying the Consequences of Protests on Public Policies

(doi: 10.2383/82472)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2015

Ente di afferenza:

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## Comment on Loris Caruso/1

### Beyond the Emergence of Social Movements and Political Opportunity Structures. Studying the Consequences of Protests on Public Policies

by Thomas Aguilera

doi: 10.2383/82472

#### 1. Introduction

In his paper, Loris Caruso studies the relationships between collective protests and political systems by challenging the Political Process theories that consider the Political Opportunity Structures (POS) and the institutional order of a system as the causal factors of the emergence of social movements. The paper allies a challenging theoretical review of the existing works with a detailed analysis of empirical data collected by the author in Italy, on four different fieldworks, at the end of the 2000s. The case of the campaign against the construction of the “*Dal Molin*” military base in Vicenza is detailed and is put at the center of the paper.<sup>1</sup> Three other cases are presented in order to confront the results: the mobilization against the High Speed Railway TAV in Val di Susa, the mobilization against the Bridge of Messina between Sicily and Calabria, and the mobilization against the realization of the MUOS military base in Sicily.

The author starts from a paradox that challenges the idea that political parties are intermediaries between civil societies and political elites. On the one hand, Italian political parties, either left-wing or right-wing, above all at the national level, have always been in favor of large-scale infrastructure projects over the last fifteen years. On the other hand, the author tells us that hundreds of projects are yearly contested

<sup>1</sup> The author carried out participant observation and 11 semi-structured interviews with activists from three main social movement organizations. He also analyzed a quantitative database based on press reports (May 2015 and July 2009) and he studied websites.

in Italy by local mobilizations [Caruso 2015, 1]. Thus, two main issues are at the core of the paper. First, there is the issue of political representation. To which extent are organizations, from the civil society as from political parties, able to aggregate interests and to represent social groups? Do political parties still play the role of intermediaries? Second, there is the issue of the effects of social movements on local and national policies. To which extent local collective mobilizations are able to stop infrastructure projects and/or to influence national political debates?

The paper brings four main insights to the existing literature on social movements.

1) First, the comparison allows the author to conclude on the irrelevance of POS models to explain the emergence and the outcomes of social movements.

2) Second, he innovates in the field of social movements studies by introducing a multilevel governance analysis. Social movements do not always deal with the state about national policies, but are rather involved in complex networks that implicate national governments and their cabinets, non-elected bureaucracies, parliaments, regional and municipal authorities, political parties, but also private actors, NGOs or local associations. Moreover, the paper studies local mobilizations and this choice brings us to consider the territorial dimension of social movements.

3) Third, by investigating the effects of social movements on infrastructure projects, the paper does not only focus on the conditions of emergence and the cycles of mobilizations as many social movements students have done.

4) In terms of methodology, he uses the comparison as a fruitful heuristic tool in order to control different variables and to go beyond narratives on case studies.

However, if all these insights are real, crucial and innovative, some of them are only partially empirically exploited. In this comment-essay, I suggest underlying these insights by confronting them to my own research from which I also bring critiques that could improve our analysis of the relationships between social movements and political institutions. I conclude that Caruso's paper is certainly a point of departure for new ambitious researches about the effects of social movements on public policies.

## **2. An Empirical and Theoretical Critique of the Political Process Theories**

As the author points out in the first part of his paper [Caruso 2015, 2], the political process theories [Eisinger 1973; Kitschelt 1986; McAdam *et al.* 2001] have been criticized since their formulation. They focus on structural factors and thus un-

dermine the dynamic and very variable configurations in which protests and political authorities can relate [Fillieule and Mathieu 2009; Dupuy and Halpern 2009]. Political institutions are almost seen as iron cages that only impose constraints on social actors [Goodwin and Jasper 1999] while they can also be supportive of protestors who can build alliances, with political elites or bureaucrats [Kriesi 1995; Amenta 2006]. Finally, they mostly focus on state political opportunity structures and totally neglect the multilevel governance issue, the territorial dimensions and the differences between policy sectors [Dupuy and Halpern 2009].

Beyond these theoretical criticisms, some evidences invalidate what we could have expected from POS hypothesis. The political process theories would state that, on the one hand, closing POS makes movements impossible or weak, and, on the other hand, that open POS make movements stronger and more effective.

On the contrary, one of the most striking results of Caruso's study is that closing POS provoke more intense mobilization [Caruso 2015, 6]. In three of his cases (*No Dal Molin* Vicenza, *No TAV* Val di Susa, *No MUOS*), the POS was closed at the beginning of the conflicts, both at the national and the local level. However, the mobilization emerged and became strong despite the lack of allies at the national level (few supports from the local radical left-wing parties) and the support of the national government to the projects. The "polarization" between explicit "Yes front" and "No campaigns" makes the conflict more visible and increases the chance to put it on the media and governmental agenda [*Ibidem*, 5]. When the decision is finally taken and the green light is given to projects, movements become even stronger because the people feel a closer threat and start organizing permanent mobilizations.

This result confirms other works led in other fieldworks [Goldstone 2004]. For instance, Miguel Martínez has shown that the penalization of squatting by Law in 1996 in Spain has provoked a strong growth of the squatting movement in Barcelona. He explains this dynamic as a reaction of activists to their legal criminalization and as the result of the recruitment of new activists within non-activists sympathizers who were scandalized by the attitude of the Socialist Government (PSOE), the Parliament and the Police [Martínez 2014]. In the case of Madrid, I observed that this "multiplier effect" had been delayed for few years compared to Barcelona. I explained this phenomenon by showing that the penalization of squatting weakened the movement in a short-term but without killing it. On the contrary, the movement was reshaped around new issues, new strategies and became more open to the neighborhood. It brought more legitimacy and the movement rose again during the 2000 until the post-15 M when it reached its apotheoses [Aguilera 2015]. These two examples follow Caruso's argument: closer POS and more repression can activate more activists and strengthen social protests. As Caruso rightly states, the impermeability of elites and

the absence of allies “allow the interpretation of the conflict as a struggle between the elites and ordinary citizens united beyond ideological difference” [Caruso 2015, 11]. When the POS closes a lot, the conflict is simplified and dichotomized. It is easier to clearly identify friends and enemies, to claim what is good against what is bad for the citizens. This simplification of the “diagnostic” of the issue and the “prognostic” of claims [Cress and Snow 2000] attracts more activists and makes the movement more durable.

Moreover, closing POS can implicate the feeling that political elites, parties and policy-makers do not listen to the citizens and thus provoke a feeling of injustice. In this context, activists can more easily turn to new modes of action, more radical and illegal, and denounce the illegitimacy of the entire democratic system seen as corrupted, blind and deaf. In the *Dal Molin* case, Caruso shows that the approval of the project by the Senate and the rejection of the local referendum by the national government provoked a transformation of the repertoire and activists began to use direct action (blocking the construction site, occupation of the airport, clashes with the police). Again, the collective feeling that policies and institutions are illegitimate opens more possibilities for direct action and illegalisms that become legitimate actions. In this process of escalation, the activists see direct action as the only way to attract attention and the aversion to risk decreases.

### **3. The Effects of Opening POS and Institutionalization-Cooptation Processes on Social Movements**

Against the second hypothesis that open POS facilitates the emergence of movements, Caruso shows that it can also provoke more divisions within a movement [Caruso 2015, 6]. Activists have to take a side. Do they accept the support of elites and parties that participate to the government they are criticizing? Is there any risk of institutionalization of the movement and cooptation of leaders? Indeed, making alliances with formal political actors implicates the risk of moderating the movement [Kriesi *et al.* 1995], changing its identity [Castells 1977], or even killing it [Piven and Cloward 1979]. On the contrary, others have shown that the institutionalization of movement can reduce the radicalism and thus attract new activists that were previously afraid by direct action [Tarrow 1994].

In their studies about the squatting movements in the United-States, the Netherlands and Spain, Hans Pruijt and Miguel Martínez asked two crucial questions [Pruijt 2003; Martínez 2014].

1) Is institutionalization inevitable? They argue that squatters are never isolated and, at a time or another, they have to deal with political authorities.

2) To which extent does institutionalization change the movement? The authors have complexified the original works from Piven and colleagues. There are different forms of institutionalization<sup>2</sup> that produce different effects on the movements. When terminal institutionalization is associated with repression by authorities, there is assimilation and the movement disappears, as it was the case in Berlin where squatters have accepted to participate to urban planning while the police was massively evicting [Holm and Kuhn 2010]. But this case is rare because at the city scale the internal divisions about the issue of legalization are too strong.

The second outcome, the most common, is flexible institutionalization. In London, during the 1960s, the squatters got licenses but the movement is still alive [Lowe 1986; Dee 2013]. In Paris and Amsterdam, the municipalities have legalized cultural squats to make city centers more attractive while evicting the most undesirable squatters [Aguilera 2012; Uitermark 2004]. But other groups of squatters still refuse to negotiate with authorities and thus avoid terminal institutionalization.

The third outcome is cooptation. It is rare but exists. For instance, in Paris, I observed some cases of cooptation within the cultural squatting movement and the housing movement. Some activists are now officials and local, national or even European representatives, while others work for NGOs [Aguilera 2015]. In Barcelona, the recently elected mayor was the spokeswoman of the housing movement that used squatting as a main mode of action (PAH). In Italy, activists from the social center Leoncavallo played the game of political parties and elections [Membretti 2007]. In these cities, squatting movements are still alive.

These distinctions allow to show that institutionalization or cooptation do not directly and necessarily lead to the death of a movement. As all post-fordist social movements, squatting movements are diverse, conflictive and very fragmented [Uitermark 2004]. Social movements are not monoliths and if some groups accept to deal with authorities and find allies, others would refuse and keep the radicalism for the whole movement, avoiding the total loss of identity. This fragmentation explains why the movement still persists despite institutionalization. In the case of the squatting movement in Paris and Madrid, I have shown that this diversity of attitudes can strengthen the movements at the metropolitan scale because squatters circulate and transfer resources. Against the Marxist and classist view of social protest, we could

<sup>2</sup> *Flexible* institutionalization occurs “when conventional tactics complement disruptive ones.” *Terminal* institutionalization “implies that, in the repertoire of action, convention replaces disruption.” *Cooptation* occurs when squatters, usually the less radical or the leaders, are absorbed into leadership [Prujt 2004, 136]. See also Martínez [2014, 654].

argue that the more a movement is diverse, the more it can produce effects on policies [Aguilera 2015].

In the *No Dal Molin* case, the movement is divided between a moderate group (Coordination of city committees) and a more radical group (Observatory, where social centers participate) [Caruso 2015, 3-4]. Even if they converged, the diversity of modes of action have allowed the movement to produce diverse attacks against the project, on the electoral side, in the street, on the construction site, between demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, occupations and strikes.

At the end, outcomes of institutionalization depend on the context and particularly on the types of relationships between political actors and protestors, on the scale of action and the policy sectors. Caruso addresses some of these factors but put aside others.

#### **4. Multilevel Governance, Alliances and Political Representation**

In Caruso's cases, protestors have been very suspicious towards alliances with political parties and elites. The relationships between protestors and political parties are particularly ambiguous. If there is an alignment of national political parties in favor of the infrastructure projects, in all cases, protestors were briefly but shyly supported by local radical left parties, union trades and sometimes by mayors. This distinction between national and local parties introduces more complexities in the POS models that usually consider public authorities as a national black block. Yet, local POS and national POS are not exactly the same and can be contradictory. Besides, sometimes, it is impossible to explain mobilizations' outcomes without showing that local authorities exploit some infrastructure projects to set up conflicts with national authorities. Local parties or authorities can find interests in supporting protests against state projects. They can try to take back a leadership within a conflictive governance and to gain votes when elections come. For instance, in the case of the squatting movement in Paris, the city council supports some groups of squatters (with the media or through legalizations) in order to criticize the national housing policies and ask for more resources [Aguilera 2015].

However, Caruso also shows that this support is partial and usually comes after the movements grow and become visible at the national level. For the author, it comes too late, when the national POS is definitively closed. He also shows that these local supports adopt ambiguous attitudes and often change their positions. In front of this, protestors finally rejected their supports and refused them during demonstrations. Formal political organizations and parties almost became enemies.

Caruso's study brings us to nuance the role political parties play in explaining the emergence and the effects of social movements while they were considered as a key factor in the second half of the Twentieth century [Caruso 2015, 15]. The partisan cleavage (left-wing/ right-wing) is no longer so relevant in politics and social conflicts. However, this so-called "representation crisis" have pushed activists to develop their own forms of representation. One of the conclusions of Caruso is that social movement organizations tried to substitute political parties more than opposing them. In front of the lack of political representation, protestors tried to develop autonomous organizations in order to play the electoral game [*ibidem*, 13]. The emergence of alternative south European parties like Podemos or Syriza could be explained by the process of substitution and "hybridation between the party-form and the movement-form" [*ibidem*, 16].

Nevertheless, the following question is whether these organizations, and social movement organizations in general, also play an important role of representation or whether they reproduce gap between local and national interests, between political elites and ordinary people. As we already mentioned, social movements are heterogeneous and look like "performances" rather than organizations with a unique objective [Tilly 1999]. There is a multiplicity of interests and claims that go beyond the simple opposition to a local project. Thus, the formalization into a formal representative entity that claims substituting to political parties cannot take into account all this diversity and obviously puts aside activists who refuse the democratic system as a whole and the silent resisters.

## 5. The Issue of Comparison: Scales, Sectors and Policy Sequences

Loris Caruso goes further by concluding that social movements first take place and consolidate at the local level before the issue is put on the national agenda [Caruso 2015, 15]. Certainly, the territorial dimension of social movements is clear and has been demonstrated elsewhere [Castells 1983; Tilly 2000]. However, one could reply this argument is almost tautological because the author is working on movements opposing local projects. Caruso's choice to compare four local movements against infrastructure projects is both an advantage and a problem. It serves the accumulation of knowledge about one type of conflict and limits the variables in order to identify easily the mechanisms of emergence and effects of social movements. But this is also a problem in the sense that we do not control the variable "local dimension." In order to improve the model, it could be fruitful to compare with other types of mobilizations that do not deal with infrastructure projects.



This choice is also problematic because it hides the sectorial effect. The type of policy protestors are dealing with is clearly correlated to the probability of impacts of challengers on policies [Dupuy and Halpern 2009]. Marco Giugni distinguishes low-profile issues (environmental for instance) and high-profile issues (defense and war) [Giugni 2004]. Social movements have more chance to influence the former than the latter that are at the core of the state function. Social movements do not produce the same effects whether they struggle against cultural, housing, social, territorial, defense policies because each sector has its own logic. Each policy sector has its own POS. In my own research on squatting, I have shown that counter-cultural squatters produce more impacts on cultural policies, than housing movement squatters produce effects on housing policies [Aguilera 2014].

We also have to distinguish the policy sequences that are supposed to be affected by protests [Schumaker 1975]. Social movements produce more effects on the agenda and the conception of policies than on the implementation [Amenta 2006]. Protests can affect local or national debates, but it does not mean that they produce effect on the implementation and change living conditions of people and policy outcomes [Lipsky 1970]. Usually, policy-makers accept to change the surface and the discourses but not necessarily the instruments. These are “symbolic” policies [Edelman 1985].

In order to understand the effects of social movements on the implementation, we need to change the way we address the issue of effects of challengers on policies. Indeed, most of the studies consider social movements as reactive forces, i.e. they oppose precise projects [McAdam and Boudet 2012], decisions or dispositive and just impact agendas [Baumgartner and Mahoney 2005]. In Caruso’s paper, we try to assess whether movements are able to stop the realization of specific and local projects. But we do not know whether the movements have deeper effects on the way projects will be finally realized, on other types of policies, maybe in a long-term period. We do not consider the “collective benefits” that would affect social movements members, but also the inhabitants of the cities, even beyond the localities [Amenta 2006]. Social movements are not only reactive forces, they also propose ideas and diffuse political innovations. Yet, Caruso explains that the “most deep-rooted and long-lasting local mobilizations have also exerted a considerable influence on the national political debate, on the relationships within the governing coalitions and the left-wing parties” [Caruso 2015, 1]. He also mentions that the stabilization of the struggle on the long run contributes to organize a “general lifestyle” and an alternative economy that go beyond the protest against the infrastructure projects [*ibidem*, 9]. But he does not have time in this paper to develop the idea.

We also lack developments about the circulation of activists and experiences in order to understand the link between all these movements that are independent, and the link with the previous movements. Interactions between movements are often put aside while it can help explaining their emergence and outcomes [Martínez and García 2014].

Last but not least, studying relationships between social movements and policy-makers requires specific methodological dispositive. Indeed, we must investigate both sides, i.e. doing ethnography and interviews both with activists and policy-makers, both in demonstrations and administrations. However, Caruso only did ethnography and 11 interviews with activists, despite the fact that political parties are at the core of the reflection.

Loris Caruso convinces us of the irrelevance of political process theories in explaining the emergence and the effects of social movements. He empirically invalidates its main hypothesis and identifies new factors through a brilliant comparative study. Finally, more than proposing a convincing model and opening new theoretical doors, he sheds light on the contemporary political changes in Europe.

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## **Comment on Loris Caruso/1**

Beyond the Emergence of Social Movements and Political Opportunity Structures.

Studying the Consequences of Protests on Public Policies

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**Abstract:** This short essay comments Loris Caruso's paper, puts his insights in perspective with other empirical works and brings new theoretical and methodological elements that could help to go further in the analysis of the relationships between social movements, public authorities and political parties. Caruso rightly challenges the Political Process theories by presenting empirical evidence from fieldworks in Italy in the 2000s, formulates a brilliant theoretical critic of these models and suggests innovative hypotheses and results that resonate with the literatures about the institutionalization of social movements and about the effects of social movements on public policies. I conclude on the crucial need to consider more seriously the issue of multilevel governance and on the need to compare diverse policy fields as well as different types of protests and issues.

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*Keywords: Social Movements; Political Process Theory; Effects on Policies; Institutionalization; Governance; Comparison.*

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