



Introduction to special sub-section: Student activism in global perspective: Issues, dynamics and interactions

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The relationship between students and activism has long interested sociologists, especially since the wave of social unrest of 1968 (Barker, 2008). However, the works that have looked at the topic can hardly be identified as a coherent, clearly identifiable strand of the literature. Furthermore, scholarly attention has fluctuated over time, with researchers reacting to the course of events and especially to the waves of student protests. Attention waned after the 1970s as governments proposed higher education reforms that succeeded in pacifying campuses, especially in Europe and the US (Daalder and Shils, 1982); and has risen again over the last decade or so as students seem to have made a comeback (Altbach and Klemencic, 2014). I suggest that the relevance of student protests for sociological thinking can be summarized around three main issues: (a) the potential political role of students in national politics; (b) the role of the university, and more broadly of educational institutions, in the economy and society; and (c) the political socialization of young people and its consequences. Furthermore, these issues overlap to a certain degree with the three main approaches adopted by scholars of student protests: social movements, sociology of education, and sociology of generations/youth. These issues and approaches are not mutually exclusive, but should rather be seen as sets that overlap with each other, creating subsets.

Most of the scholarly work that attempted to analyse the rise of students over the 1960s and 1970s was about students as actors in national politics. This ‘first wave of student movements literature’ was more interested in *interpreting* major cases of student unrest in light of the transformations of the economy and society at the time, than in *explaining* differences across cases. Leading intellectual figures such as Habermas, Touraine and Lipset paid attention to these protests. In Europe and North America, these were seen as a rebellion against bureaucracy and the old structures of hierarchy within universities and beyond them. The young protestors in the streets of Berkeley, Prague and Paris, members of a generation born and raised during the prosperous 30 years, challenged the postwar order. They voiced a critique of the political arrangements, the cultural conventions and the requirements of the programmed society, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Yet, in other parts of the world, students were key actors within larger movements that demanded

the end of colonial rule and foreign intervention, or that sought to boost national sovereignty over commodities and resources. Nationalistic movements, ranging from the post-war national liberation movements of the Third World to the liberal elites of the 19th century in Latin America, assigned universities pivotal roles in state-building. As universities assumed public roles in the moral guidance and education of the nation, students would see themselves as vanguards of modernization projects.

For those who came after this 'first wave', such as Tarrow, McAdam and della Porta, *explaining variation* took precedence over *interpreting historical significance*. Overall, these works have seen student movements as political entities capable of intervening in national politics and/or having nationwide, long-lasting effects on political systems.

Another strand of scholarship takes inspiration in the work of Habermas (1971), who first noticed that student protests were also an expression of the shifting role of universities in advanced capitalist societies. Universities were unprepared not only for the rapid increase in enrolment that started after the Second World War, but also for the increased pressure from the economy to put knowledge at its service, thus depriving universities of the autonomy they had enjoyed so far. As post-industrial societies rely on the capacity of knowledge to create value, i.e. what we call today R&D&I (research, development and innovation), universities have not escaped the systemic pressures. Cognitive capitalism scholars (Roggero, 2011) thus coincide with Habermas that students react to defend the autonomy of knowledge (intellectual, immaterial work) from neoliberal capitalism. In a similar vein, some scholars have analysed the impacts of soaring university fees and indebtedness, austerity policies and the managerial turn in university governance, finding that the marketization of higher education was behind recent cases of student revolt both in advanced and developing economies.

Another strand starts from the work of Philip G Altbach (for an extensive review of his work see Luescher, 2015), a pioneer in the study of student activism. More aligned with a tradition of sociology of education, and of higher education studies, scholars in this current are interested in the forms of student government and their changes, the roles of student associations in university governance, the effects of globalization and internationalization of higher education for students (not only activism) and, overall, in the adaptation of higher education systems to the various and contradicting demands of the societies in which these are embedded (see, for example, Klemenčič and Park, 2018).

Finally, campus activism has been seen as a major, decisive phase in the political socialization of young people. Young people are more willing to participate in politics, in particular due to generation or cohort effects. The work of sociologist Karl Mannheim is a major scholarly influence here (Mannheim, 1952). In the transition between adolescence and adulthood, student milieus can be particularly relevant beyond the role played by biographical availability and the resources provided by campuses – such as free time and high concentration of like-minded people. Sociologists have long assumed that there is a direct, linear relationship between education and political participation; yet recent studies point to more complex dynamics. Overall, scholarly work here seems to be more aligned with the fields of the sociology of youth, generations and youth subcultures.

Scholarly work on student activism and protests is well embedded in the sociological discipline, yet its contributions are spread among various sociological fields. Student activism(s) does not seem to constitute a field of enquiry in itself; and can

rather be seen as an issue that cuts across various fields and subfields, as well as disciplines (such as political science, history and anthropology). The articles included in this special sub-section of *Current Sociology* represent very well the heterogeneity described. While the four articles here can be located within the social movements' tradition, they also represent examples of hybridization. Türkoğlu attempts to bridge the literature on coalitions with that on the outcomes of social movements, and looks at an overlooked phenomenon, namely the alliances between trade unions and student unions. Hensby aims at explaining the contradiction between the construction of durable social movements and the spectacularization of political events. Cini shows how South African students influenced policymaking in this country. Finally, Guzmán-Concha and Ancelovici focus on the mechanisms that explain the massiveness of the student protests in Chile and Quebec at the beginning of this decade. The articles in this special sub-section demonstrate that we can expect a process of further hybridization, for example between political economy and social movement literatures, as well as from fields traditionally more connected to political science (such as the literature on interest groups, or industrial relations) and youth activism.

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