

Book Review: From Silence to Protest: International Perspectives on Weakly Resourced Groups

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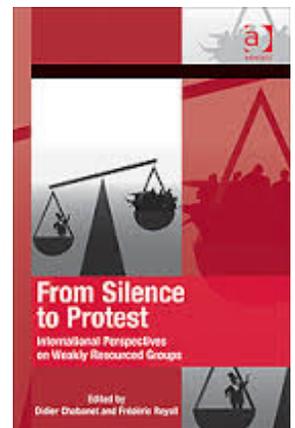
*Ali Farah finds the key strength of **From Silence to Protest** is it shifts attention*

towards aspects that are overlooked in social movement studies, like its consideration of “invisible” forms of activism.

From Silence to Protest: International Perspectives on Weakly Resourced Groups. Edited by Didier Chabanet and Frédéric Royall. Ashgate. 2014.

In recent decades, social movement scholars have been paying closer attention to the increasing diversification in the emergence, development, and outcomes of political contention, resulting in a proliferation of academic works that seek to transcend existing boundaries and rethink the three major paradigms in the field, namely resource mobilization, opportunity structures, and frame analysis. This edited volume is part of such an endeavour, though whilst the various essays do adopt an original take on these paradigms, they would have benefited from considering more deeply the international context of political contention.

Silence to Protest – the outcome of a workshop that sought to test the validity of current mainstream approaches to the study of protest – aims to take on two of the suggestions proposed by the three leading figures in contentious politics in *Dynamics of Contention* (2001). It simultaneously attempts to consider and rethink contemporary models and concepts in the study of protest, and examine their applicability to different regional contexts. To test their strengths and weaknesses, the essays deal specifically with what the editors refer to as “weakly resourced groups”, though the nature of the disadvantages vary considerably. For instance, whereas some authors deal with economically or financially weak groups, others focus instead on those who are more socially disadvantaged.



In fact, this manuscript includes a wide range of actors: urban rioters in France and Great Britain; small-scale farmers in France; precarious workers in Italy and Greece; unemployed individuals in Germany, Ireland and Morocco; the Roma in Italy and Finland; Muslims in European countries; collectives in Cuba; landless workers in Brazil; and transnational activists in Africa. To this can be added the brief insights on political mobilization by marginalised groups and individuals in Russia, Iran, Egypt, and China, that are detailed in the last chapter. In sum, there is more variation in the type of actors than in the geographical localities of contention, for the focus is predominantly on European countries. Thus, despite the editors' recognition that some regions, such as Europe, have traditionally enjoyed more analytical focus, the volume overall reproduces this bias. As sub-fields in contentious politics such as social movement studies still suffer from a lack of engagement with political contention in East Asia, more focus on this region would have been a useful addition. Notwithstanding this lacuna, the manuscript follows a logical structure, with chapters ordered according to similarity in terms of actors or political context. As such, studies that deal with farmers and precarious workers, the unemployed, and ethnic minorities are clustered together, as are studies that consider mobilization in an authoritarian milieu. Another strength of this book is that some chapters adopt a cross-national comparative perspective, allowing the readers to appreciate how different contexts affect similar challengers.



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Yet, the most useful contribution of this volume remains its attention to neglected dimensions in social movement studies, notably local level mobilization, non-conventional forms of protest, and overlooked actors. Chapter Nine argues that the methodological focus on nationwide street protest by the unemployed gives a misleading picture of the frequency and forms of mobilization of this group. Using the case of unemployed activists in constituencies in Germany, the author shows that political protest by this type of challenger is more frequent and continuous than might be assumed. In addition to shifting the level of analysis to the local level, there are further calls for examining less mediated forms of resistance to capture the many ways in which weakly resourced groups might express political opposition. Similarly, Chapter Twelve draws attention to the ways in which repressive political environments dilute the political character of resistance. Drawing on the case of various types of collectives in Cuba since the end of the Cold War, this demonstrates that the high cost of collective action made the cultural sphere a more suitable platform to voice opposition and express dissatisfaction, especially in light of the improved freedom of speech in this area. Thus, cultural opportunities may be more significant for challengers in authoritarian regimes. This insight challenges the well-established political opportunity perspective, with its emphasis on structural types of opportunities. Another key contribution can be found in Chapter Two that – in addition to highlighting the need to take a more local level perspective – contends that although the political goals of (urban) rioters are not clear, their violent behaviour need not be dismissed as an irrational outburst, but instead should be understood in a political way. This is because riots should be conceptualised as a repertoire of contention that some disadvantaged groups use to convey a particular political message. To analyse this phenomenon, the author suggests amongst others, to go back to relative deprivation perspectives, which have been side-lined by scholars since their heyday a few decades ago.

However, a key downside of this edited volume is that it tends to restrict the analysis to the state. A few chapters do consider the supra-national context (e.g. Chapters Three and Six). However, this is not considered adequately in chapters where such an approach would have been especially relevant. For instance, though Chapter Eight compares activism surrounding the Roma in Finland and Italy, ultimately opportunities for mobilization are mainly assessed within the context of the national citizenship regime, with only brief references to the European context. National discursive and political opportunities are also emphasised in relation to activism by Muslims in six European countries (Chapter Seven), though given the external influences on domestic mobilization, it would have been interesting to consider how opportunities and threats at the European level affect the dynamics of local political contention. This restriction to the national context to discuss discursive and/or political opportunities recurs elsewhere (e.g. Chapters Ten and Eleven). Granted some authors might prefer to focus on specific or local level opportunities, one cannot separate local level processes from their broader international context. In sum, this collection would have benefited from adopting a more internationalist take on the framing, resource mobilization and (political) opportunity frameworks.

To conclude, the key strength of this edited volume is that it shifts attention towards aspects that are overlooked in social movement studies. Its consideration of “invisible” forms of activism is particularly useful, for the scholarship in this field is guilty of adopting a narrow understanding of political mobilization by emphasising more visible and mediatised expressions of political resistance. As such, students and researchers in contentious politics would find it particularly refreshing. However, it would have benefited from having more variety in terms of the geographical scope of the studies and considered international influences in more detail.

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