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Editorial

Peter Gardner and Luisa Rossini

Many important methodological questions remain open in the study of social movements. Methodological questions are also intimately tied to researchers' position in relation to the research, including what the research aims to achieve, what impact it is expected to have, and for whose benefit it is being undertaken (Cox et al., 2024). The study of social movements has long included activists seeking answers to questions of praxis, broadly supportive scholars acting as critical friends, social theoreticians aiming to understand the nature of societal change, and those unsympathetic or directly opposed to the movements they study, as well as a host of other positionalities.

Setting out a core problematic facing contemporary social movement research, David Meyer (2021: 139-140) has discussed the 'tension in negotiating a balance between rigor and reality': 'We want rigor without reductionism; we want to describe the world around us, but to situate that description in a larger understanding of patterns'. For many of us, our work is underpinned by a desire for our findings to be practically useful for social movements. Those who have presented our research to the movements we study know well the importance of marrying social scientific rigour and the need for our work to speak to the realities experienced by social movement actors themselves. The contributions in this special issue take aim at capturing complexity, widening the frame, and engaging in rigorous research. Live methodological questions in the field include: What roles do positionality, embodiment, and emotion play in data collection and analysis? How do we best manage and conceptualise the forms of boundary-crossing involved in scholar-activism? How do we most effectively capture the reality of the phenomenon we wish to study, and which events, information, and participants ought to be included in our datasets? This special issue provides productive interventions on each of these pertinent questions.

This special issue emerged out of the Social Movements Research Network pre-conference to the 30th International Conference of Europeanists Conference, held in 2024 at Sciences Po Lyon and Université Lyon 2 in Lyon, France. Focused on the methodological, ethical, and political challenges involved in researching social movements, this pre-conference featured a range of important methodological interventions. To try to capture something of the breadth of these interventions, this special issue was designed as a series of short papers, each sitting around half of the size of a standard research article found in *Contention*. As a result, the papers included in this special issue are punchy and concise, while still providing important contributions to the field.

One of the most prominent themes in this special issue is positionality. Feminist and related methodologies have long understood embodiment, emotion, and position in relation to the population researched to be crucial factors in the production of knowledge (Haraway 1988; England 1994; Hein 2004; Saldaña, 2018; Lustick, 2021); however, such understandings have been less clearly taken up by social movement scholars. Building on this scholarship, Hande Dönmez calls for a more situated, emotionally-attuned political inquiry, where emotion is crucial to the analysis, and where discomfort, grief, and anger are understood as interpretive and analytical tools with which to better understand the phenomena we study. In a similar vein, Katharina Fritsch's paper, 'Being moved by (research on) protest repression and states of emergency: An emotional and performative account', discusses the role of emotionality and positionality when analysing protest criminalisation and repression. Emotion has been found to play an important role in mediating activist responses to political repression (Davies-Rommetveit et al., 2026). Drawing on an analysis of protest policing and states of exception in France, Fritsch demonstrates how political repression creates a politics of fear that impacts both the activist community and activist-scholars.

The special issue's focus on positionality continues with two pieces on scholar-activism. In 'Precarious Knowledge: Struggles at the Intersection of Academia and Activism in Times of Repression', Federica Stagni discusses an epistemic question in activist-scholarship: how negotiating the boundary between engaging as an activist on one hand and as a researcher embedded within academic institutions impacts the process of meaning-making. Understanding positionality not just as a matter of individual identity, but as a relational and collective process that alters over time, Stagni argues that the 'demanding and unstable' work of managing this boundary is not a problem to resolve

but a constitutive element of the process of knowledge production. In the paper that follows, Kyle Matthews, Karen Nairn and Sophie Bond also discuss how new knowledge and understanding emerge out of the friction of being both activist and scholar. This piece, entitled “‘Getting in Trouble’ as a Scholar-Activist: Crossing the line in police-activist negotiations”, explores moments where activist-scholars’ data collection decisions come into conflict with the preferences and perspectives of fellow activists. Drawing on Childers’ (2011) concept of ‘getting in trouble’, they argue that sustained critical reflective engagement is necessary when activist-scholars’ methodologies clash with activist outlooks, and that these can be moments of development for both ethical practices and knowledge production.

A fifth paper, ‘Fragmented and polarized civil society claims: how to study opposing social movements?’ by Anna A Zhelnina, considers how positionality affects the way researchers conceptualise the field of movements. Social movement theory has traditionally framed opposition among social movements in terms of movements and counter-movements (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). With civil society across many societies becoming increasingly fragmented and polarised, Zhelnina contends that the movement-counter-movement framework oversimplifies what is more often a highly complex set of conflicts and configurations among movements. The combination of an oversimplified field and the positionality of the researcher has methodological and analytical implications, reconfiguring both what the researcher observes and what they fail to observe.

The two papers that follow focus on methodologies surrounding participant inclusion and exclusion in youth activist research. These papers consider two rather different youth demographics, with Rubén Díez García considering young right-wing actors and Andrew Macdonald examining youth climate activists. Díez García argues that research examining non-progressive youth actors has a tendency to fall back on monolithic characterisations of this demographic, risking introducing bias and oversimplification into the analysis. The tendency to associate ideologically conservative or classical liberal youth with the political radical and extreme right misses the complexity and multiplicity of these actors and, as a result, tends to exclude softer forms of conservative youth activism. Drawing on European Social Survey data, Díez García argues for expanding and complicating the picture of who counts in the study of this demographic. In the paper that follows, Macdonald explores the role played by digital methods in the life of a research project, where participant recruitment and data collection

had been forced online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He discusses how this transformation led to the inclusion of quieter activists and, as a result, a rather different set of understandings about the nature and breadth of youth climate activism as a phenomenon. Both of these papers attest to the need for careful consideration over questions of who is counted, who is invited to participate, and the effect these methodological decisions have on the analysis.

The final paper, by Gomer Betancor Nuez, Miguel A. Martínez, and Roberto Sánchez Gómez, offers a novel direction in the longitudinal study of protest over time. A longstanding issue in protest event analysis (PEA) is its susceptibility to bias through its reliance on media reporting of protest events (Carvalho, 2024). As a result, PEA tends to miss much of the more granular information and events of interest to the movements themselves (Carvalho and Accornero, 2025). In their intervention, Betancor Nuez, Martínez, and Sánchez Gómez propose a mixed-source longitudinal research design that integrates traditional media-based PEA with movement-aligned qualitative data with a view to better capture the latent phases and internal meso-level processes of social movements. They argue that this methodological innovation allows researchers to create datasets that include the kinds of protest-related events of importance to social movements themselves that are otherwise lost in traditional protest event counts.

Overall, the special issue calls for close attention to a variety of live questions in the study of social movements. Our hope is that these papers will not only be productive for those engaging with the specific questions they discuss and problematise, but that they will spark further discussion and debate on how best to undertake the building of knowledge in the study of social movements and public protest.

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