Chapter 9
Context, Frame, Opportunity, and Resource:
Contemporary Portuguese Anti-Austerity Social Movements With a View to Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media have become an important tool in our interactions and networks. Studies around social movements focused on these platforms' potential for becoming a new public sphere given their nature and features. However, an address of their influence on social engagement can't overshadow they're used by social actors themselves as part of a greater social frame. In this light, a qualitative characterization of Facebook's role on Portuguese anti austerity social movements "Geracao a Rasca" and "Que se lixe a troika!" is presented through discourse analysis of the testimony of several of their founding members. While it may be unquestionable Facebook had an important role in these movements, it wasn't the only tool used or the most relevant: face-to-face and direct mobile phone interaction were essential tools for this end, along with traditional media whose gaze the movements capitalized on for reach. Thus, the question in this chapter is whether these technologies represent a new way for us to communicate, or constitute an additional forum for that end?

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the explosion of the US housing bubble translated into sovereign debt crises in several European countries, including Portugal. In an attempt to alleviate its effects, the government of the Portuguese Republic adopted a series of austerity measures under the supervision of the ECB, the IMF, and the European Commission. As a result, a wave of informal political participation in line with a new participatory paradigm swept the country, benefiting from an increasing use of virtual social networks.

Grasping some of the advantages these platforms offer, a part of the Portuguese civil society used Facebook to articulate protest actions, but to fully understand their nature it is necessary to go deeper into its characteristics, more specifically how the use of these platforms allows the creation, development, and sustainability of forms of political participation.

Based on the greater holism and depth qualitative methodologies have to offer, namely discourse meaning interpretation (Allwood, 2012) and the revealing of otherwise unnoticed motivations (Santos Silva and Pinto, 1986), collecting of "first-hand" data (Balsiger and Lambelet, 2014) was pursued through five scripted semi-structured interviews (Manzini, 1990) between May 16, 2018, and June 29, 2018. This option allows establishing a thread without jeopardizing the freedom to address issues arising from the interviews or surrendering the circumvention of incomplete answers. Using convenience sampling through an approach to privileged contacts, and a "snowball" type sample, four male and one female founding members of two anti-austerity movements were interviewed, namely the "Que se lixe a Troika!" (two) and the "Generation a Rasca" (three), aged 34 to 35, all with higher education qualifications.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationship between the social network Facebook and the Portuguese anti-austerity movements 'Que se lixe a troika' and 'Geração a Rasca' to understand the use and role of this network in their mobilization and organization in two simultaneous directions: on the one hand, movements as the product of their context; on the other hand, movements as a response to opportunities.

BACKGROUND

In the last quarter of the century western societies have undergone considerable transformations, not only on the cultural and technological level but also on the role of their respective executive bodies: the welfare state was gradually replaced by neoliberal policies, favoring the market over society, the consumer over the citizen, and a more apolitical citizen over citizenship (Turner, 2013) – what many name post-democracy, a rupture between social and political spheres (Siapera, 2017).

A strengthening relationship of the political sphere with the markets and institutions such as the ECB or the IMF contributed to a restriction of governmental power. Despite electoral rotation, post-democracies become paradoxical: formal aspects are maintained, but further democratization is compromised (Crouch, 2004). However, it would be wrong to consider political participation as necessarily diminishing: instead, these phenomena represent a shift in political attention, and the emergence of new models of political participation (Van de Donk et al., 2004).

Political competition remains dominated by governments and elites, a result of the professionalization of political action and close representation of economic interests. Citizens are 'invited' to rest reduced to a passive role, choosing political representatives through "clues" transmitted by elites via political communication and marketing (Colin, 2004). Such conceptions are, however, hardly new: Pareto (1935)

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