Chapter 18

Protesting in a Cultural Frame:
How Social Media was used by Portuguese “Geração à Rasca” Activists and the M12M Movement

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ABSTRACT

ICTs and particularly the Internet are changing national and international politics. International organizations, activists, and even national governments are now extending their organizational resources and apparatuses to the digital virtual worlds, thus expanding the horizons of politics to new levels and challenges. In this chapter, the author concentrates on a surprising and unprecedented initiative that took place in Portugal in March 12th, 2011, the “Geração à Rasca” protests, as well as on the March 12th Movement (M12M), the social movement that followed it. More precisely, the chapter examines how Internet-enabled technologies, like social media, were used as tactics for political organization and mobilization, and how several political cultures were activated. In a country where non-conventional politics was limited to unions and to well-demarcated interests, those two initiatives inaugurated a new era of political participation and democratic opposition. For the first time, 4 young graduates, who never participated in politics before, were able to mobilize more than 500,000 people in several cities of the country, while adapting their messages to the particular political cultures of their “natural” constituencies, the young unemployed or underpaid seasonal workers, to the overall population, dissatisfied with the economic performance of successive governments, and to the more radical groups still committed to the political cultures of the 1974 Carnations Revolution. Besides those tactical and discursive uses, political and economic contexts, contingent events, and the support of symbolic elites were also important factors in both initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

The way social media and the Internet are used by protesters and activists is largely dependent on national and local cultural contexts (for a defense of this argument, although not dealing, explicitly, with political cultures, see Kallinikos, 2004 and Anduiza, Jensen & Jorba, 2012). These can influence significantly how actors perceive and use ICTs and how these tools are related to
their political objectives and outcomes. In this essay, the author intends to examine how Web 2.0 technologies, like Facebook and YouTube, were used by Portuguese activists of the “Geração à Rasca” protests and their following initiative, the March 12th Movement (M12M), concentrating specifically, on how these uses and messages were related to Portuguese online practices and political cultures, respectively. To achieve these goals, we use relevant literature on the emergence and dynamics of social movements and recent insights on digital activism and related issues concerning the relationships between people and technology.

On March 12th, 2011, Portugal saw two things that were completely unknown and even surprising in the light of its recent political history. The first was that the massive protests that erupted in the country’s major cities, and that enrolled more than 500,000 people from all ages, backgrounds and status, were not mobilized by unions, political parties, or traditional social movements, but by four young university graduates (Alexandre de Sousa Carvalho, António Frazão, João Labrincha e Paula Gil) that were friends, never did politics before, and were just demanding more jobs and better working conditions for their generation and for precarious workers like them (“Precários”) (see Neilson & Rossiter, 2005, and Mattoni, 2012 for definitions of precarious work and job precariousness). The second important lesson was that these protests were not organized and coordinated through traditional offline organizations or grassroots movements, but by the Internet and some of its Web 2.0 technologies, in particular social media tools like Facebook and YouTube.

How this could happen in a country where nonconventional politics were almost reserved to unions and to corporative interests was, indeed, puzzling, as it was puzzling why it happened in 2011 and not before. Although there will be always room for all types of explanations, it can hardly be denied that the Internet and social media played a crucial role in the protests, a so crucial role that we can even doubt they could happen without them. On the other hand, part of the success of the “Geração à Rasca” protests can be attributed to the fact that the activists used social media not to impose their political or technological cultures, but molded their tactics, actions and messages to the political cultures and media practices that were at hand. If this was particularly evident in the case of the March 12th protests, it cannot be denied also in respect to the movement that was created after the protests, on April 18th, 2011, by the same group of young graduates.

Yet, for social media and ICTs to be useful, and for political cultures to be activated for participation and protest, some more favoring conditions are needed. The truth is that after almost forty years of democracy, more and more citizens had become dissatisfied, not to say profoundly affected, by Portuguese strictly representative and elitist democracy. Between 1976 and 2011, electoral abstentionism was predominantly on the rise, while partidocracy had a strong hand on public policy, jobs, and almost every aspect of Portuguese society. The outcomes of these self-centered and exclusivist politics, together with the international financial crisis that began in 2008, were not only unrealistic and insufficient public policies, news of corruption and mismanagement, together with the estrangement of the population, but generalized social and economic problems, like rampant unemployment and flagrant democratic deficits. So, by 2011, the lack of jobs and working precariousness had become a problem that affected not just the youth and the “Precários”, but a national issue that appealed to many bystander audiences, like different classes, professions and ages, from liberal and civil employees, to white and blue collar workers, or from post-Revolutionary generations to those that were born before 1974 but were unemployed or losing ground to adverse economic conditions.

One way to “purge” the regime and claim for a more transparent, participatory and accountable democracy was, obviously, going back to its revolutionary origins - the emotional context and the political cultures of the 1974 Carnations Revolution. As so, trying to know why and how...