

# Engaging for Social Change

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Even though social change is a “buzzword” in contemporary academia, it is also one of the age-old problems though elusive one in spite of the fact that rather sophisticated theoretical and scientific models have been around for quite some time to explain it and enact it. For example, sociology of the nineteenth century specifically aimed at ending unavoidable tensions and conflicts that follow social change. Ever since the early days of Comte (1853) and Durkheim (1893) the greatest epistemological hope for many sociologists has been to find some way to deploy scientific methodology and statistical analysis which will achieve prediction, thus rendering social processes controllable and ultimately providing a practical way to direct social development. And yet, as we all know, this grand project of sociological prediction never came to fruition. Moreover, social scientist became somewhat notorious for their inability to predict social change; there was no relevant and systematic “theoretical foreshadowing” of October

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Revolution, or, for that matter, the fall of the Berlin Wall;<sup>4</sup> and, more recently, economists have failed to warn us about when are different kinds of economic bursting bubbles, as well as what are social and political ramifications of this sort of “great historical events.”<sup>5</sup>

But nevertheless, interest for social change goes even further with such claims that all sociology is about change (Sztompka 1993) or, if not all, than surely large portion of sociology (e.g., Bauman 2003; Latour 2005; Giddens et al. 2011).

Things are even more complicated bearing in mind that modern social science and humanities must find way to deal with the fact that the sheer pace and scale of social change associated with what we call today globalization sets up entirely new type of challenges to the traditional views and theories on social change. As Christopher Chase Dunn and Salvatore J. Babones (2006) argue Durkheim, Marx (Smelser 1973) and Weber (1905) all grappled with social problems arising from the then unprecedented social changes occurring in the nineteenth-century Europe, but today’s rapid, large-scale social changes are creating problems that classical thinkers could never have imagined. Most of distinctly contemporary events (e.g. the advancements in information technology, global terrorism and the never-ending asymmetric wars which aim to combat it, the scale and complexity of environmental problems, financialization of capitalism, new social movements) are hybrid in their character. These events fluidly cross conceptual boundaries between,

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4 But is this really true? Could we also not think about colonialism and imperialism in terms of “social change”. Such an attitude would complicate the very notion. However, we will not dwell on this issue here but recommend to read Walter Mignolo and his 2005 *The Idea of Latin America* and 2003 *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*.

5 This is perhaps why Robert Nisbet in his *Social Change and history* (1985) famously claimed that, although we are here simplifying his main thesis, there is no way to theoretically understand outside the confines of history, that is to say only *post hoc*.

global and local, public and private, structure and agency and blur the clear-cut distinctions. And it is precisely this shift from inherent duality to their relation, which causes problems for old theoretical models of social change, producing demand for a new, more contextually sensitive kind of social theory of social change.

Furthermore, increased levels of social differentiation caused by globalization have made contingency of reproduction of social system considerably more pervasive, thus, making the notion of crisis inseparable from social change. Having in mind the increased precarization of labour, vulnerability of marginalized populations, the crises of legitimacy of governments and parliamentary democracies, it seems that crisis is the way in which we live our lives, experience our genders, races, and classes be it on the local, national or global scale. Wendy Brown's joyful proclamation in her 2010 book *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* that the erosion of nation-states opens up a space to imagine a different horizon and future surely makes sense. Nonetheless, the waning of sovereignty has also resulted in reactive and conservative responses in form of new right-wing populisms, nationalisms and withdrawals into the celebration of traditional values: families and individuals across the world, but mainly in Latin and North America as well as Eastern Europe. If there is a consensus it is one in which we are faced with the deficit of democracy, increasing level of citizen's apathy and concern about the growing politico-social uncertainty. The underside of this crisis is the ceaseless affective production of irrational fears, hatred toward the Other, angers, and often times, destructive aggressions and unprecedented violence performed by the State.

However, it is urgent to safeguard Brown's optimism. No matter how difficult it may seem to think of it as an opening, the notion of crisis today is also a chance, a possibility that

mobilizes our wavering desires for a world to be changed and transformed. Crisis, after all, are there to be solved, negotiated, transformed into a more equal, dignified and free world. Therefore, crisis is also a call to rethink the relation between social structure and human agency. The opening that crisis engenders point to the simple fact that there can be no social change without engagement. Such a strong thesis lies at heart of this volume.

In attempt to avoid rigid conceptual frameworks which are, as we already stressed, ill-suited for the (post)modern ubiquity of crises, this volume adopts a different strategy and intends to provide tools with which to analyze the change from a more contextual, case-specific perspective. The main productive heuristic tool we offer here for thinking, analysis and practice is the phenomena of *engagement for social change*. We see engagement as a spectrum of ways in which the citizens of a given society reflect on the norms and rules of social action (legally institutionalized, culturally dominant or specific to certain spheres of social action: professional, private or economic), which constitute the structure of their institutional reality, and ways in which they act, on the basis of this reflection, either in order to change parts of this institutional reality, or in order to reinforce them. Not all norms are “bad”. Therefore, engagement is any collective practice characterized by reflection on the existing social norms and rules, and consequently acting upon or against their change. Change and engagement become inseparable and irreducible and it is this relation we want to bring into light with this collection.

Why engagement and why today? Bearing in mind the above-mentioned insights, it is difficult to gauge *why* social change happens and *who* makes the change. Engagement proves to be heuristically fruitful notion since it has the potential to answer, albeit obliquely, to those two questions.

Change does not happen by itself. Actors are needed who reflect and act in such a way as to make change possible. Furthermore, *engagement for social change* obliges us to think across spatial and temporal axis. It refers spatially since it refuses to delimit in advance what is and what is not engagement. Engagement is a matter of process that changes the notion of space itself. On the other hand, engagement today is crucial since, as we have mentioned above, the production of negative affects tends to lead to paralysis where any form of acting is deemed, from the start, as unsuccessful.

To be engaged, as Adriana Zaharijević argues in an 2017 edited volume *Engagement: Introduction to Engagement Studies*, “means to be drawn to something, dedicated – to a cause that involves attention and demands our commitment; to be involved – contractually obliged to do so something” (Zaharijević 2017: 18). Engagement calls for action and acting, it bypasses the paralysis and despite difficulties it opens up the possibility of social change. The notion of engagement has the potential to disturb our common beliefs and values that we take for granted since its intrinsic quality is that engagement is always directed toward desirable change of norms, beliefs, and habits that we deem unchangeable, obsolete, invisible or irrelevant.

Something *urges* us to engage and change. Contributions gathered in this volume point to the challenges of thinking in terms of the umbrella syntagm: engagement for social change. While we are sympathetic to the current research on social change, these articles take a step back and dwell on the difficulties of desirable social change. The main question leading this volume is what is the condition of possibility of engagement for social change today? What new forms of engagement are visible and created in our global world? What kind of language, grammar and analysis do we

need in order to argue for social change that will lead to a better, equal and freer world *for all*? What are the obstacles and barriers actors face when engaging Others? The goal of these articles is precisely to capture that something that forces us to engage for change.

Even though articles presented here come from different intellectual traditions, they share a commitment to interdisciplinary research and cultivation of pluralism, heterogeneity, and the notion of equality and justice that guide desire for social change and seek to democratize democratization. The vision of social change and the reason for engagement come from the dissatisfaction with the current state of crises. Desire is to bring about the change in norms, habits, and beliefs within the public sphere. And yet, all articles are dubious about the notion of public sphere, today, when it seems to be eroded or filled with the lack of adequate information. While relying on the traditional concepts of deliberative democracy, articles in this volume somewhat challenge deliberation by supplementing it with different sets of concepts and relations between them. What happens when public sphere is populated with hegemonic forms of power that seek to occlude the “right” information? How do we engage to make the public sphere more just and open to others? How public is online engagement? Does it intervene in the public at all? If the underlying premise is that the call for engagement comes from the injustices committed in the local context, than these articles reflect on how to create knowledge, practices, and environment suited for such an endeavor.

Francesca Forle’s article is an invitation to think engagement through a joint action. While reflecting on the question what makes for sufficient conditions for an action to be actually joint, her article introduces a possible tool that

would reduce the uncertainty of joint actions. Forle advocates for *rythmos*, an organized structure of perceptual reality that allows us to recognize the horizon of the action. The notion refers to a dimension of action that stands between rhythm coordination and emotional attunement that has the potential of eliminating or reducing the uncertain outcomes of engagement. Such a dimension takes into account the role of emotions and affect, at the pre-reflective and non-personal level, pointing to the sense of belonging to the group and the possibility of gauging if the action will be successful or not. Following the importance of affect, Sotira Ismini Gounari's provocative article seeks to take into account a different approach to desirable social change. She moves away from engagement based on rational deliberation, construction of political identities and notion of free will. While offering the thought of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guatarri, the author proposes to focus on the passion and affect as the condition of possibility of engagement. Refusing to align affect with irrationality, she suggests that passion of being affected by the other and agency as the capacity for interconnection is what defines progressive social change. She proposes that thought around social change would profit from a philosophy of difference, immanence and affect that problematizes the idea that change can be the result of strong, unchanging identities and that it is causally linked to relatively stable rational and intentional political actors. Continuing along the lines of passion and affect, Mónica Cano's article seeks to relate the notion of engagement with the theoretical insights provided by Judith Butler's notion of performativity and vulnerability through the analysis of new forms of engagement in the digital #metoo movement. From a feminist perspective, Cano argues that the condition of possibility of engagement for social change lies in the double-edged dimension of vulnerability. On the one hand, women expose their common

vulnerability by giving testimonies and making visible the sexual violence that they experience, but on the other hand, women risk further harm and unpredictability of the effect of engagement. Even though vulnerability and precarity do not guarantee social change, Cano argues, without it, the #metoo movement would not shed light on the problem and normalization of sexual violence.

The question of technology is becoming more important when we consider the potentials for engagement. Not only it has the capacity to mobilize large groups of people, the temporal aspect cannot be ignored. It is fast. As Jelisaveta Petrovic's case study suggests, in the case of a call for an urgent action, the digitalization of urban movements has the potential to engage others quickly and effectively. As reaction to the urban megaproject "Belgrade Waterfort", the grassroots reactions have shown that change sometimes is performed as a reaction to the unjust actions by the government. Tamar Katriel's article places the question of engagement for social change in the realm of practices of knowledge production as grounded in experiential knowledge in two activists movement from Israel. His understanding of the condition of possibility involves bringing to the wider public the notions of testimonies that seek greater transparency, promotion of public discussions and demands for accountability of the government. Implicitly, Katriel suggests that such practices of gathering new information through the testimonies are more adequate than deliberation since they point to the excluded subjects who do not have access to the public sphere. While moving away but not abandoning deliberation, the author suggests that activists' knowledge seeks to expose to the public the factual information that is ignored by the government and encourage citizens to act in accordance to the new knowledge they have gained. Such engagement seeks



to create a sort of counter-public sphere where citizens will be actively engaged in reflection and possible action. Igor Stipić case study on the movements of students in Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina offers a similar case study to the Katriel's while placing the engagement along creative acts of students who built a classroom not based on antagonism. The students' refusal to be segregated by nationality and creation a counter discourse to the official state hegemony paves a way to embracing difference and plurality in classroom. The new notion of "being together while different" breaks with the homogenizing principle of the ethno-nationalism prevalent in BIH since the war. Even though such a change might be considered a small scale one, it is significant since schools are still prevalent forms of socialization where change of habits and beliefs takes place.

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The articles gathered in this volume, as a whole and as examples, seek to provoke a thought on the senses, possibilities and limits of engagement for social change. As this piece suggests, these articles are introductory and invitation for further thinking. Nonetheless, as such, the volume points to the complexity and urge for engagement for social change. As such, it can also be considered as gateway for acting that will only benefit from the problems, challenges and successes we face today in the midst of the millennial crises. The choice is on us: we either create new tools or we desperately dwell on the impossibility to capture and understand social change.

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