Social movements, crises and social change

Geoffrey Pleyers[1]

The following text originates from the conference Social Change is Never Linear, organised by Emanuele Toscano at the Department of Human Sciences of the Guglielmo Marconi University of Rome on 8 September 2025. On that occasion, Geoffrey Pleyers – Research Director at the FNRS at the Catholic University of Louvain and President of the International Sociological Association (2023-2027) – presented the central theses of his recent work on social movements, crises and social change, offering a broad theoretical and comparative reflection. The present contribution is an adapted version edited by Emanuele Toscano, developed in close collaboration with the author on the basis of the transcript of the original talk, with the aim of rendering its argumentative substance in written form while preserving its discursive character[2].

Introduction

As a sociologist, I usually start my investigations with the questions I have, from some change or evolution that troubles or surprises me. Particularly when I witness similar cases or evolutions in society or social movements in different countries, and these changes do not fit in the analytical model that is commonly used by many actors, part of the literature and myself. The book "Social change is never linear[3]" and the analytical proposals I would like to present today mostly draw on research on the evolutions of social movements and major citizens' protests in Brazil and Chile. They reproduce a pattern we have seen at play in several other countries that witnessed mass citizen protests for democracy or for a deeper democratisation in the 2010's.

Like Emanuele Toscano and Daniele Di Nunzio, I belong to a generation of social movement scholars who started research with social movements with the alter-globalisation movements, with its international protests against the World Trade Organisation and the G8 and its extraordinary World Social Forums that gathered up to 170.000 people from 124 countries who claimed that "Another World is Possible". Twenty-five years later, we face an existential question. Do social movements matter? How do we explain that neither the World Social Forums process, nor the more decentralised but global wave of citizen movements in the 2010s managed to pave the way for a less unequal, greener and more democratic world? We witnessed the rise of social movements all over the world, and here we are, in the Trump era, with social

[1] FNRS Research Director at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. President of the International Sociological Association (ISA) (2023-2027). Former president of ISA Research Committee 47 "Social movements and social change".

[2] The full recording of the event is available at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/live/1DVeMl7qUlE?si=Zi4eVaiWskksCep3.

[3] Pleyers G. (2024). El cambio nunca es lineal. Movimientos sociales en tiempos polarizados, Buenos Aires: CLACSO. Available at: biblioteca-repositorio.clacso.edu.ar/bitstream/CLACSO/251093/1/El-cambio-nunca-es-lineal.pdf.

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media belonging to billionaires shaping political subjectivities, promoting hate and the far right and an increasing part of state leaders and citizens who dismiss science.

In 2011 and the following years, many of us believed we were witnessing a "third wave of democratisation". A global wave of citizen movements demanded democracy in authoritarian regimes and extending democracy in more democratic countries[4]. This included the Arab world, Spain, Turkey, Russia, Brazil, and, later, Hong Kong, Iran, and protests on all continents. Every two or three months, a mass protest erupted throughout the decade. 2019 was again a very dense year for social movements, with mass citizen protests in different continents, notably in Colombia, Chile, Sudan, and Iran. As many actors and sociologists, in 2011 and in the first years of the decade, I believed that we were moving towards a more democratic world, with a "new wave of democratisation", which was consistent with the promises of the post-Cold War period: liberal democracy – and markets – would progressively extend to every country on the planet.

In 2018, I published another book in Spanish[5] where the balance was much less optimistic. Social movements remain key actors in the transformation of society, I maintained, but this is also worth noting for far-right and reactionary movements, which were on the rise around the world. At that time, a consensus rose that more attention should be paid to these reactionary actors in social movement studies and in social sciences in general. However, even during the first Trump presidency (2017-2021), progressive movements and citizens' protests demanding more democracy kept bubbling up across the world, including in the US, notably with Black Lives Matter, which became a global wave of anti-racist movements. At that time, to put it bluntly and in an oversimplified way, the mood was still that, despite reactionary actors being on the rise and starting to win the national elections in some important countries with Modi in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Trump in the US, this may be a parenthesis. There are still strong forces to push for more democracy and a fairer, greener and more tolerant world, notably among young people. Today, the panorama looks much bleaker and darker.

However, it is a mistake to consider this phenomenon as completely new. In Italy, you know better than in any other European country that the trend of electing a corrupt and macho millionaire to the highest political office, in alliance with far-right parties and ideas. The book by Emanuele Toscano and Daniele di Nunzio on Casa Pound[6], published in 2011, showed that it was much more than an electoral issue. Reactionary movements were taking deep roots in the cultural and social world, even before the social and economic crises that followed the 2008 financial crisis. The political, social and cultural rise did not start in the mid-2010's or with Trump and Salvini.

[4] Glasius M, Pleyers G. (2013), *The moment of 2011: Democracy, social justice, dignity*, in "Development and change", vol. 44(3): 547–567.

[5] Pleyers G. (2018), *Movimientos sociales en el siglo XXI*, Buenos Aires: CLACSO.

[6] Di Nunzo D., Toscano E., (2011), *Dentro e Fuori CasaPound: Capire il Fascismo del Terzo Millennio.*

Over the past 10 years, a long series of books and articles have been dedicated to the "outcomes" of social movements. They analyse cases and specific areas of impact, for example, on political opinion, votes or social commitment of citizens who took an active part in a mobilisation wave. The literature shows that the impact of social movements is generally less direct and clear than expected, likewise for social change. Sociologists and historians show us it is a complex process. However, every time a crisis occurs, some intellectuals proclaim that the crisis is hard, but that it will eventually lead to a better world. Every time a mass citizen protest for democracy rises, and as protesters are still in the street, some analysts proclaim that the country has radically changed.

The point I want to make in the book "Social change is never linear" is that to address these broad questions, we need to accept bringing some complexity in our perspectives on social change and social movements, as well as to the concept of crisis and the connection between crisis and social change. *To understand social movements today, their impacts and their roles, we need to give up the illusion of a straightforward relationship between crisis and social change, as well as between the action of social movements, political change and social change*.

This book presents a series of analyses on social movements, their roles during the pandemic, an analysis of the nature and meanings of the 2019 uprising in Chile, the connection between subjectivation and commitment among young activists and a long chapter on progressive and reactionary religious movements in Brazil and the way they transformed social movements and politics in the country. Rather than presenting each of the chapters, I would like to draw on them to propose four theses on social movements and social change. I do not claim originality in making these proposals. Each of them will probably seem obvious. However, taken together, they articulate a framework that sheds light on some crucial dimensions of social movement today and contribute to avoiding over-simplification, illusions and shortcuts that have been featured in many texts on social movements and their impacts in the past few years. While these four proposals are easy to grasp and may seem obvious, they bring some complexity to the connection between social movements and social change.

1. *Social change is never linear*

The first thesis is the title of the book: *Social change is never linear*. It occurs through advances and setbacks. The relationship between social movements, political change and social change is complex and never straightforward. The transformation of society that social movements contribute to generating is mostly a long-term process. Social change takes place along complex paths along which actors – and many social scientists - pass through the euphoria of sharing indignation, dreams and solidarity with thousands of people in an occupied square, as much as through the disappointments of electoral processes that rarely reflect the depth of social and cultural change driven by social movements.

When mass citizen protests occur, and thousands of people go to the street to demand more democracy and organise on the square, we feel and often share their enthusiasm. It is not a problem to be enthusiastic about a movement; on the contrary, it is. We should not be jaded. When it comes to democracy, and the wish for a less unequal,

greener and fairer world, we share the values of the movement and our fellow citizens. However, when it comes to the analysis, and particularly about the impacts of social movements, we should be more cautious, tame this enthusiasm, and avoid early proclamation that a movement has radically transformed a country. We should remember that social change is never linear.

The case of Chile offers one of the clearer illustrations of this "non-linear" process. In 2011, the country was shaken by a huge student protest, which was then the largest protest since the return of democracy. Students were still on the street when a scholar published a book about the "collapse" of the Chilean economic and social model. The Pinochet dictatorship had imposed a very neoliberal social and economic model, which was pursued by the actors of the democratic transitions in the 1990s and 2000s, and the student protests brought it down.
The following years revealed a much more complex picture of what had changed in the country. The election of Michelle Bachelet, a left-wing politician, to a second mandate in 2013 opened the way for important reforms in higher education policy, including limits on profit in the sector, while falling short of significantly reducing the dominance of private actors. However, in 2017, six years after the mass student movement, the Chilean voters re-elected Sebastián Piñera, the neoliberal president and wealthiest person in the country. The main target of the student movement's criticism and the symbol of the model they wanted to change was re-elected for a second mandate as president, after a 4-year interim by a centre-left government. Many of the most enthusiastic commentators of the 2011 movement radically changed their opinion and claimed that social movements do not have much impact. Well, the outcome of the 2011 student movement was far from over. From 2017 to 2019, Chile witnessed a series of unprecedented social protests, against the private pension funds in 2017, a feminist movement in 2018, and the Chilean uprising in 2019[7]. The 2011 student movement is widely considered to be one of the main roots of these movements. The re-election of Pinera did not mean the end or the failure of a broad movement to challenge the Chilean social and economic model that rose in 2011. In 2019, millions of Chileans went on the streets to claim dignity and denounce a social and economic model dominated by the economic elite. Of course, some intellectuals wrote again that, this time, it was really the end of the neoliberal economic and social model, that neoliberalism would die in Chile. This major citizens' movement had a deep impact on the country, including on its political landscape. In 2021, the Chileans elected the youngest Chilean president, Gabriel Boric, who was a leader of a student federation during the 2011 movement. It gave rise to a wave of optimism for progressive actors and intellectuals, and to the election of a very progressive constitutional assembly, mostly composed of elected members who were not members of political parties. Was Chile set to bury its neoliberal social and economic model? A wide majority of citizens rejected the progressive proposal for a new constitution, and the following popular consultations and elections gave sound victories to the far-right parties, with an economic and social agenda to strengthen the neoliberal model[8].

[7] Henríquez K., Pleyers G. (eds) (2023), *Chile en movimientos*, Buenos Aires, CLACSO.
[8] Cortes A. (2022), *Chile, fin del mito: estallido, pandemia y ruptura constituyente*, Santiago, RIL.

The case of Chile and the complex legacy of the 2011 movements, including in fostering another wave of massive democratization movements, makes a clear case for the need to tame the initial enthusiasm and the illusion of a fast process of social change. The initial enthusiasm surrounding the prospect of rapid social change merits a degree of caution. Not only does such optimism misrepresent the ways in which social change unfolds, but it also obscures the necessity of situating transformations within longer temporal horizons, marked by reversals, interruptions, and unintended consequences. Processes of social change are rarely immediate and cumulative. A second reason to tame the initial enthusiasm of those who claim an immediate and radical social change is that excessive enthusiasm generally fuels subsequent disillusionment. Those who anticipate swift and far-reaching transformations as the direct outcome of mass mobilisations are often the first ones to interpret electoral setbacks or partial reforms as evidence of failure. Many of them switch from an over-enthusiastic support for social movements to the idea that protests or social movements are useless, and that activists should focus on the political arena. Conversely, a more processual understanding of social change invites a tempered reading of both enthusiasm and disappointment. Recognising that social transformations happen through steps forward and setbacks, and not always in the anticipated direction, allows us to resist narratives that prematurely declare the exhaustion or irrelevance of collective action. It also helps avoid reducing mass citizen mobilisations to mere illusions sustained by a minority of the population. Social change is never linear. It is a contingent and contested process, shaped by multiple actors, temporalities and debates.

2. *The illusion of salvatory crises*

The second thesis is that the idea that a crisis will eventually lead to a positive change ("salvatory crisis") is sociologically false and politically misleading. However large it is, a crisis does not generate by itself a specific social change. The nature and direction of this change depend on the actors and on their struggle to impose a dominant meaning to the crisis and *advance alternative political, social and economic proposals as a reply to it.*

Every time a major crisis occurs, a series of intellectuals and actors claim that the crisis is bad, but it will eventually generate a brighter, better, greener, and fairer world. They claim that the crisis will *oblige* the dominant actors to adapt their policy, take into account the arguments developed by progressive movements and intellectuals and adopt policies for a less unequal, more democratic and greener world that are presented as the only ones able to get out of the crisis. I do not contest the fact that there are connections between crises and social change. Still, these connections are far more complex, never straightforward, and these outcomes are notably shaped by the debates between actors about the meaning of the crisis.

When the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown policies paralysed the world, when no one knew how and when we would get out of the crisis, dozens of intellectuals wrote texts that a greener and less unequal world would come out of this period. Slavoj Žižek wrote that to get out of the pandemic, the world would need to implement a new form of communism, with the global organisations that can control and regulate the economy and a global healthcare network, shifting away from a world dominated by

markets and finance[9]. Dozens of other progressive intellectuals and social scientists wrote that this was "the real start of the 21st century", that COVID-19 would oblige corporations and the economy to become greener and less unequal, thanks to this crisis, and that it would foster private corporations to become greener and fairer with their workers. Well, here we are today, five years later. Where is the end of capitalism? Has the world become a fairer and greener world? Have the corporations become more friendly with their employees? All the opposite.
In May and June 2020, I wrote an article arguing against this naïve connection between the pandemic crisis and social change[10], and that the battle over the meanings of the pandemic and the political outcomes was beginning. Six years afterwards, it is clear that progressive actors and intellectuals lost this battle, and that it was by no means obvious that the pandemic would oblige economic actors to adopt different policies and behaviours.

The naïve idea that the crisis is what will eventually lead us to salvation is deeply rooted in Western culture, including in the conceptualisation of Christianity that draws on Greek philosophy to recast the death of Christ as the path to the salvation of humanity. Some Marxist interpretations follow a similar pattern. They expect the final crisis of capitalism, announced as imminent every time a major economic or financial crisis occurs since the mid-19th century, to lead to the proletariat dictatorship and eventually the abolition of classes. The other problematic point is that the crisis seems to be permanent in modernity, and this seems only to get worse. To put it bluntly, we may wonder when the world was not in crisis, when was this good and bright period of time, when modern thinkers did not consider their society as in crisis or undergoing a major historical transformation? I tend to follow Luhman, who considered that crisis is the way modern society sees itself[11]. In modernity, people and intellectuals see themselves and their society as being in crisis.
I do not contest the fact that there are connections between crises and social change, but these connections are far more complex, and the change may unfold in different directions. I developed this argument in the final chapter of the book dedicated to the alter-globalisation movement[12], drawing on an analysis of the actors' discourses in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. At that time, there was a wide consensus, from the global justice activists to right-wing political leaders: the cause of the crisis was that the financialization of the world had gone too far, and this had to be stopped. Gathered in Malmö, Sweden, for the European Social Forum in October 2018, the global justice activists repeated that their analyses of the economic and financial derivations were proven right by the financial crisis and that "Now, governments will have to take into account our arguments, stop neoliberal policies and put some clear limitations on finance". The then-president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, a right-wing politician, was on the same line when he claimed that "The ideology of the dictatorship

[9] Žižek S. (2020), *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, Cambridge, Polity.
[10] Pleyers G. (2020), *The Pandemic is a Battlefield. Social Movements in the COVID-19 Lockdown*, in "Journal of Civil Society", Vol. 16, 4. See also: Pleyers G. (2020), *La pandemia come campo di battaglia. Movimenti sociali durante il lockdown da COVID-19*, in "Sociologie", 1, 5-71.
[11] Luhman N. (1984), *The Self-Description of Society: Crisis Fashion and Sociological Theory*, in "International Journal of Comparative Sociology", XXV, p. 59-72.
[12] Pleyers G. (2010) Alter-Globalization. Becoming Actors in the Global Age, Polity Press, Cambridge.

of the market and public powerlessness has died with the financial crisis[13]". This wide consensus that the crisis would generate a fairer and more rational world did not result in the end of the domination of finance on the real economy. All the opposite, a few years later, the dominant discourse was that the crisis in Europe found its roots in overspending in the welfare state, which led to years of austerity policies dominating the agenda.

The repetition of the same scenario, crisis after crisis, leads to a clear lesson: *However large it is, the crisis in itself will not generate social change. The latter will depend on the capacity of social actors to bring out the questions posed by the historic situation and to advance alternative political visions and economic rationality*[14].

Gramsci should be mobilised as he stressed the importance of the struggle for ideological hegemony and its impact on setting the public and political debate. Drawing on him, I would stress that a major stake for social movements is the debate on the interpretation of the crises. The fact that the interpretation that prevails in public debates has no or limited connection with the economic analysis does not prevent it from becoming hegemonic. Since the theorem framed by Dorothy and William Thomas in 1928, sociologists stress the fact that "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences[15]": people's subjective interpretations of reality shape their behaviour, leading to real results, even if the initial belief is false.
My point is thus not to say that a crisis has no impact, but that the interpretation of the crisis is often more important than the crisis itself in generating a specific social change. The nature and direction of social change depend on the capacity of actors to impose an interpretation of the crisis in the political and public spaces.
The idea of a salvatory crisis is clearly misleading. The 2008 financial crisis proved the alter-globalisation activists right, but did not lead to the policy suggested by their analyses. This does not lead me to deny the agency of social movements. My point is that the interpretations of the crisis and the public debate to impose an interpretation of the crisis is a crucial space of agency for social movements. I am still convinced that Alain Touraine's proposal keeps its heuristic value: social movements produce society[16], or at least contribute to producing society. A crucial way they do it is by providing an alternative interpretation of the crises that shake modern societies.

3. *The meaning of social movements is a battlefield*

The third argument I would like to put forward is that *the debate on the interpretation of the protests and of the movement more broadly is a crucial stage on which much of the lasting impact of social movements rests*. So far, it has been widely overlooked by social movement scholars.

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[13] Sarkozy N. (2008), *Déclaration sur les mesures de soutien à l'économie face à la crise*, 23 Oct. www.elysee.fr/nicolas-sarkozy/2008/10/23/declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-republique-sur-les-mesures-de-soutien-a-leconomie-face-a-la-crise-economique-internationale-a-argonay-haute-savoie-le-23-octobre-2008

[14] Pleyers G. (2010), *Alter-Globalization*, Cambridge, Polity, 237.

[15] Thomas W.I., Thomas D.S (1928), *The child in America*, Knopf, New York, 1928, 572.

[16] Touraine A. (1973), *Production de la société*, Paris, Seuil.

When we study social movements, we tend to focus on their most vibrant moments, when protests are going on in the streets, and their immediate aftermath. Actually, the game is far from over when the protesters leave the street. Another major stage remains to be played for social movements: the public debate over the importance, interpretation and meanings of the protests.

Usually, these debates start as soon as massive protests rise. Public intellectuals, social scientists, activists, and journalists make meaning of the protests and debate about the importance and nature of the movement. The debate over the importance, interpretation and meanings of the movement largely outlasts its effervescent stage. Years after the actors left the streets, intellectuals and actors of various boards, progressive and conservative, continue to interpret the movement and the crisis it highlighted. Some reduce the mobilisation to a tiny minority; insist on the disorder it caused, and focus on the "vandals" who broke shop windows or confronted the police. Others maintain that the protests embodied a social movement that deeply shook society and questioned some of its core values. Whether attested empirically or not, these interpretations of the movements or of the wave of protests may have a wider social and political impact than the movement itself.

Let me illustrate this with two examples.
In July 2013, I was a visiting professor in Rio de Janeiro, when protests were unfolding across Brazil in the aftermath of citizen movements that millions took to the streets in June 2013. I witnessed these mobilisations first-hand. I observed the demonstrations and conducted interviews with participants. I can testify that this was an overwhelmingly progressive movement. Citizens were demanding better public services, better public transport, better public schools, and more state intervention to reduce inequalities, promote social justice and give better opportunities to low-income families.

Two years later, by 2015, these same protests had been recast in mainstream media and public discourses as popular protests against the left-wing government led by the Workers' Party, igniting hate discourses against Lula, then-President Dilma Rousseff and left-wing parties' militants. The 2013 protests addressed the government led by the Workers' Party, denounced a political culture and pointed to some limits of the political system. Still, it did so from a progressive perspective. In 2015, this meaning of the movement had been recast as the starting point of a cycle of mobilisations that would turn the country against the PT and contribute to the rise of right-wing and later far-right forces[17].
Through sustained efforts across mainstream media, social media, think tanks, workshops for "emerging leaders" organised on campuses, and public discourses, right-wing and far-right intellectuals, citizens active on social media and most of mainstream media recast the June 2013 protests as aligned with right-wing opposition to the government. As I said earlier, the fact that this interpretation did not accurately reflect the initial demands of the protesters does not matter. False interpretations can

[17] Bringel B., Pleyers G. (2019), *June 2013, five years later: polarization and reconfiguration of activism in Brazil*, in L.F. Miguel, *The Brazilian Left in the 21st Century*, London, Palgrave, 237-258.

have very real consequences. In this case, this reinterpretation of the movement arguably had a much deeper impact on Brazilian politics and society than the June 2013 protests themselves. It contributed to a broader political shift, including the rise of far-right mobilisations, the legally contested impeachment process against Dilma Rousseff, and, eventually, the victorious campaign of Jair Bolsonaro, who became president of Brazil in 2018. This reinterpretation of the June 2013 movement and the protests that followed in 2015 are not the only factors in these developments, but they played a significant role in reshaping the political landscape.

A similar dynamic of recasting the protesters' claim and the meaning of the movement has played out in Chile. The 2019 uprising was the largest citizens' mobilisation in the country in the post-dictatorship period. It brought millions of Chileans to the streets all over the country. The movement profoundly shook the Chilean society in its social, political and cultural dimensions. It challenged the neoliberal model[18] that has dominated Chile's politics and society since the mid-1970s. It questioned the public discourse that presented Chile as a wealthy "oasis" and showed the very unequal living conditions in a country where hard work is not enough to have access to minimal living conditions. It raised the fundamental question about what it meant to be Chilean in the twenty-first century[19], calling for a less unequal and less patriarchal society, with more respect for minorities and indigenous people, and offering a possibility to all citizens to "live in dignity" thanks to the earnings of their work.

Yet the rise of upheaval and uncertainty also creates opportunities for reactionary forces. The battle over the interpretation of the movement began during the heydays of the 2019 protests and square occupations. In Santiago and across the country, walls became sites of political expression: graffiti articulated the demands and aspirations of the movement. Yet, during the night, far-right young activists would come and overwrite these messages with slogans such as "Thank you to the police" or "Long live 1973", 1973 being the year of the coup d'état led by Pinochet. The struggle over meaning was literally inscribed on the walls of the city.

Over time, this battle of interpretations intensified. Although millions had participated in the 2019 protests, after the pandemic, the 2019 movement was reframed as a minority phenomenon, dominated by vandals who destroyed shops and urban furniture and violently confronted the police. The academia is, at the same time, a battlefield and a recipient for these evolving interpretations. I recall attending a political science congress in Chile where many presentations described the 2019 protests as involving both left-wing and right-wing mobilisations, comparing the claims of the two camps in 2019, as if there had been two comparable camps in 2019. Factually, the "counter protests" were far from numerous and seldom mobilised more than a few dozen protesters, while millions demonstrated for social change. Nonetheless, the narrative of a symmetrical confrontation between two sides has gained traction.

[18] Cortes A. (2022), *Chile, fin del mito: estallido, pandemia y ruptura constituyente*, Santiago, RIL.

[19] This argument is developed in the first chapter of the book "El cambio nunca es lineal" and in this text in English: Pleyers (2025), *The Chilean awakening in a global decade of social movements*, in Onodera H., Kaskinen M., Ranta E. (eds.), *Citizenship Utopias in the Global South*, London, Routledge, 68-83.

As in Brazil, this reflects the remarkable capacity of right-wing, and especially far-right, actors, think tanks and intellectuals to engage in shaping the public debate and recasting social movements and the crises that shake a society. Social movement scholars have widely overlooked the agency of these intellectuals, journalists and actors who have outplayed progressive actors in organising training for political parties and civil society organisations, write columns in leading newspapers and disseminate their vision of the movement and of the country on social media and mainstream media. Today, most Chileans have a negative opinion of the 2019 movement, even if, just a few years ago, it embodied the hope of a fairer country for millions of them.

The main point I would like to make today is to invite social movement scholars to pay more attention to this "aftermath" of social movements, when this battle for the interpretation of the movement takes place. This debate on the meaning of the movement often shapes the long-lasting impact of the movement or jeopardises its outreach and outcomes. It is a crucial moment when social, cultural, subjective and political transformations are produced. And in my opinion, it is an important stage of the development of a social movement. It should be analysed as such, as an important phase of a movement, rather than as "what happens after a movement".

4. *The Social Sciences in the Battle for Interpretation*

This brings me to my final point, which is at the same time theoretical and epistemological.

As social movement scholars, sociologists, anthropologists or political scientists, we are not external observers of these struggles over the interpretation of a movement. We are part of this process. When we analyse a movement and publish it, our analyses contribute to ongoing debates. Once published, our work can be taken up, mobilised, and reinterpreted by the actors, and feed the debate on the interpretation of the movement.

This is not specific to the study of social movements. Anthony Giddens insisted on the need to consider this "double hermeneutic" when we analyse social reality in the second modernity. He warned us that "the concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject-matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are. The 'findings' of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe." (Giddens, 1984, 20).

Actors are producers of knowledge. This is particularly true for activists who take part in social movements with the hope of transforming society. As sociologists or researchers in social sciences, we also produce knowledge, in different ways, with tools, concepts, interviews, surveys, and data. When we analyse a movement and propose our interpretation in a publication, we take part in a battle for the interpretation of the movements, and we should be aware of the role we may play. However, we are not responsible for every use that is made by actors who may mobilise our analyses and interpretations of the movement. We are not the only actors in this battle for the interpretation of the movement, but we are undeniably part of it. This final argument makes the argument made in the first section even more important: to tame the enthusiasm of those who announce a radical change in society as soon as a movement arises.

Conclusion

Social change is never linear. It doesn't happen as fast and is seldom as deep as the activists expect. And it is never a long, peaceful river, as reactionary actors and those who defend global capitalism are also producers of society and counter the progressive movements' claims, arguments and interpretations. We should also remind ourselves that social movements produce society in different ways, not only through effervescent protests.

Today, as we are crossing multiple planetary boundaries identified by scientists as critical thresholds to prevent runaway climate change and ecological collapse, and at a time when the effects of climate change are perceptible by virtually every living being, Donald Trump demonstrates that the dominant worldview guiding global governance does not need to rest on empirical facts and can blatantly deny climate change. His action and political force hinge on interpretation, on the capacity to impose a particular vision of reality and a specific economic rationality within public debate. The key question, then, is how far such a disconnection from hard facts about climate change, natural disaster, or real economy can persist, and which actors and social forces will emerge to contest this logic and effectively challenge this hegemonic worldview.

Analysing the democratic crisis, as well as the crisis of the social and economic model highlighted by progressive movements, remains a central task for social scientists. At the same time, we must avoid conflating our normative aspirations with the claims expressed in the movement, or any supposed direction or necessity of history. Our desire for a fairer society, at a time when global inequalities threaten democracy, and our conviction that urgent and decisive action is needed to address climate change, in the face of accelerating ecological collapse, are legitimate moral and political stances grounded in scientific evidence. Yet, the urgency and legitimacy of these aspirations do not, in themselves, bring about change. Social transformation emerges from complex interactions among actors operating at multiple levels, and the interpretation of contemporary crises and of social movements forms part of these struggles. Our analyses may contribute to these dynamics, but they do not govern them. We should therefore resist the temptation to assume that what we consider the justice of our values or the scientific basis of our analysis of the crisis ensures that the crises or the movement we observe will culminate in the kind of world we hope to see.