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# Activist Trajectories Across Places and Regimes

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**Abstract**

This article focuses on individual and group activist trajectories in Portugal during and after the 1974 revolution. Paying special attention to the role of places in the mobilization process, the goal is to bridge social movement and revolution literature. I will initially provide a synthesis of how places and activist trajectories are addressed in the study of contention. Then I introduce some examples connecting reflections on activist trajectories with the spatial dimension of places. Finally, the article, revisiting some findings of my own long-term research on activist trajectories across regimes, tries to point out some axes of dialogue between social movement and revolution theories, through the lens of activist trajectories across regimes and places.

**Keywords**

activist trajectories, places, revolution, Portugal

## Introduction: The Power Falls Into the Street

On the dawn of 25 April 1974, I happened to be at the home of a great childhood friend of mine, and by chance we turned the radio on, around 4 o' clock in the morning. We almost didn't believe what we were hearing: the first broadcast by the Armed Forces Movements (MFA)! At the beginning, we had doubts about the authors of the message . . . slowly, our doubts dissolved . . . we followed the announcements eagerly and anxiously. It was really true: the dictatorship was being taken down! And that day, the 25th of April, became the happiest day of my life! . . . Later that day, I personally watched, close to the Carmo headquarters, in a general euphoria, in the midst of the large "unit of people" gathered there, the rendition of Marcelo Caetano. And rejoiced![1]

On the 25th of April 1974, a crowd accompanied the MFA, led by famous captain Salgueiro Maia, to *Largo do Carmo* (Carmo Square), where they surrounded the

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Lisbon headquarters of the National Republican Guard[2] situated there. In those barracks, Prime Minister Marcelo Caetano (who had succeeded António Salazar in 1968) had sought refuge since early morning, as soon as he was informed about the military operations initiated to put an end to the dictatorship.

Those operations began with a small group of army units arriving in Lisbon. The officers asked people to stay home, but thousands went out onto the streets to support the rebel forces. By the end of the day, Caetano ceded power to a temporary government, saying that way, "power would not fall to the street" (Palacios Cerezales, 2003b). But in the end, power did fall to the street: citizens' refusal to stay home helped transform what was meant to be a coup into a full-scale revolution (Accornero, Carvalho, & Ramos Pinto, 2023). The previous excerpt well reflects the perceptions and emotions of those who participated in those events. It also shows the uncertainty, doubts and dilemmas characterizing activists' decisions in such intense times, the results are not predetermined. In this context, the citizens' decision to reclaim public places—despite the order of the MFA—was a crucial element in the shift of ongoing political events. In this way, the Carmo Square concretely materializes the end of the dictatorship, culminating in Caetano's resignation.

In the following days, Lisbon became a revolutionary city. Thousands of Portuguese occupied its streets and squares in huge demonstrations; headed toward train stations and the airport to welcome political exiles from France, Belgium, or Switzerland; surrounded political prisons, waiting for the liberation of their relatives, friends, and comrades, some of whom had been detained for more than 10 years. On the 2nd of May, dozens of families started squatting empty municipal buildings in construction in Lisbon's peripheral neighborhood of Boavista, in a movement which soon became one of the most powerful and emblematic of the revolution (Ramos Pinto, 2013).

Soon after, the revolutionary process diffused to Porto and minor cities, as well as to rural towns and areas, particularly in the south, where peasants started occupying latifundia, reclaiming a radical agrarian reform. Reactionary counter-movements also took place—particularly in the north—attacking public places containing progressive groups, for instance, invading and destroying the headquarters of leftist organizations and parties, and organizing law-and-order demonstrations (Fernandes, 2024; Palacios Cerezales, 2003a).

Life trajectories of people—activist and not—had been deeply affected by the dictatorship, in many ways, such as through censorship, the omnipresence of political police and "civil" collaborators, dramatic restrictions of cultural and social activities and educational contents, corporative urban planning and economic regulation, and preventive and reactive repression. Repression included a drastic control of urban places, and often their closure (which frequently happened to university campuses). Rather than demobilizing opponents, this often ended up displacing the engagement, for instance, toward exile and clandestinity. Aside from granting the survival and continuity of political trajectories (individual and collective) from dictatorship to the revolution, the spatial shifting of the engagement contributed to reconfiguring places and geographies of political socialization, and to building new political arenas for engagement, as well as to enlarging existing ones.

With the goal of bridging social movement and revolution literatures, I examine these trajectories across time, regimes, and places. Trajectories, in fact, allow us to concretely follow the different phases of political change (the end of dictatorships, the revolutionary moments, the construction of new regimes), and their multiple levels (micro, meso-, and macro). Mostly adopted for the study of social movements, the focus on trajectories has been less common in analyses of revolutions, particularly because of scholars' predominant interest in macro-processes. An important exception is the rich analysis developed by Viterna (2013) on the biographies of women who participated in the context of civil war in El Salvador. Even if she does not explicitly adopt an activist trajectories approach, her work provides illuminating insights to understand the complex interplay between the micro level of activists' lives, values, and choices; the role of the organizations in which they are engaged, and the role of political change. On her side, Donatella della Porta pays great attention to the role of actors in shaping eventful protests and revolutionary transformations. She emphasizes how these intense moments of mobilization act as "critical junctures" that have long-lasting effects on activists' lives, memories, political perceptions, relations, and emotions (Della Porta, 2016). Recent studies of the Arab Spring's revolutions, for their part, have addressed activists' trajectories, but without particular attention to the role of places in them (apart from the places of activists' displacement, such as exile).

Places are a crucial aspect of mobilization and of trajectories, in and beyond revolutions. Places evoke feelings and foster connections, encouraging or hindering collective efforts (Auyero, 2006; Angelovski, 2014). Places influence everyday life and social interactions, influencing the spatial habits and social connections at the bases of protest (Gould, 1991; Nicholls, 2009; Routledge, 1997; Sewell, 2011; Zhao, 1998). In addition, examining contention as place-made and place-making may help to bridge the enduring gap between structural and agentic perspectives in social movement and revolution research (Goodwin & Jasper, 2011; Tilly, 2000). In fact, places embody structures, and at the same time, people mold places through their passages, interactions, and activities. In this sense, places have some characteristics of arenas (Jasper, 2015).

In what follows, I initially synthesize how place and activist trajectories are addressed in the study of contention. Then I introduce examples connecting reflections on activist trajectories with the spatial dimension of places, before revisiting findings from my own long-term research on activist trajectories across regimes. I will point out some axes of dialogue between social movement and revolution theories, through the lenses of activist trajectories across regimes and places.

The reflection developed in this article is based on empirical material collected through different sources and methods, such as a protest event analysis for the years between 1956 and 1974 (see footnote no. 2), archival research, and interviews.[3]

## Studying Places and Activist Trajectories in and Beyond Revolutions

Difficult to define, place can be understood as the intersection between three dimensions: where it is geographically, what it's made of physically, and what meaning and

value people give to it (Gieryn, 2000, p. 465). Moreover, sociologists and geographers say that places are important because they make people feel emotions and form connections, which can either encourage or demotivate group actions (Auyero, 2006; Angelovski, 2014). They also look at how the built environment influences everyday life and how people interact, leading to regular routines and relationships that can end up in protests (Nicholls, 2009; Routledge, 1997; Sewell, 2011; Zhao, 1998). Studies also show how places can be central to movements, especially when activists try to take control from authorities (Beissinger, 2022; El Chazli, 2012), challenge the usual rules that govern daily life (Bantigny, 2022), or create new areas where they can build alternatives (Creasap, 2022) and gain power (Miller & Martin, 2003; Sikkink, 2005). In short, geographers, urban planners, and social movement experts have shown how places and protests are connected in a two-way relationship. We now know that the processes that drive protests, like forming identities, creating messages, building partnerships, or choosing tactics, are shaped by the physical environment. At the same time, protests can change places by altering their meaning, purpose, and physical features (Emperador Badimon and Accornero, forthcoming; Leitner et al., 2008; Martin & Miller, 2003).

With some important exceptions (among others, see Bosi and Malthaner in this special issue; Fillieule & Neveu, 2019; Rihoux & Kernalegenn, 2018), places have not been central in studies of activist trajectories, which have been mostly interested in time. Longitudinal studies of the activists' trajectories consider the different phases of "joining, commitment, disengagement and post-movement lives" (Bosi, 2018, p. 3). Similar studies are crucial to understand the relationship between micro, meso-, and macro levels of mobilization and to address how the intersection between these levels influences political processes and social change (Accornero, 2019a, 2019b; Fillieule, 2010). In this sense, Olivier Fillieule underlines the relevance of a "microsociological and processual approach which systematically links the individual and the study of situations to broader contextual factors and social order rules and norms" (Fillieule, 2010: 3). He argues that "in this perspective, not only are individuals and society interdependent but they also mutually construct each other" (Fillieule, 2010: 3). In my work on emotions and remembering processes of Portuguese activists after the revolution, I underline that "the close interconnection between macro dynamics (such as institutional change) and micro aspects of engagement and disengagement dynamics also give form to the specific interpretations and emotions associated with activism, its perceptions and memory" (2019a).

All these reflections pay, in different ways, their tribute to an interactionist understanding of mobilization processes: "Action is understood in a processual manner, as the result of the interaction between an individual history and a structural context. The concept also emphasizes the role of the various actors who interact around the trajectory" (Joshua, 2007, p. 40). Studying activist trajectories of Portuguese opposers to dictatorship, I (Accornero 2016, 2019a, 2019b) adopted an interactionist approach, following Jasper's advice to give "equal and symmetric weight to protestors and to the other players whom they engage, and by focusing equally on players and the arenas in which they interact" (Jasper, 2015, p. 9). Trajectories are also crucial to understand the

perception and motivation that affect engagement and disengagement of activists, in and beyond authoritarian contexts (Khalil & Van Stekelenburg, 2024).

If trajectories have not been central in "traditional" revolution literature, a new generation of studies has appeared adopting this perspective, particularly by scholars analyzing the Arab Spring. In these cases, the focus on trajectories and micro and meso-dynamics has also been seen as an opportunity to bridge mobilization theories developed in and on the Global North with approaches more attentive to political socialization processes in the Global South. Opening a view on hidden forms of politics and engagement, as well as on the unexpected interactions allowed by them, activist trajectories' analytical framework seems in fact particularly suitable for this. It is no coincidence, in fact, that many of these works establish a dialogue with mobilization scholarship that pays attention to the Global South (both in the case of northern authors such as James Scott or Michel de Certeau, and southern scholars such as Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi). It is the case, among others, of works by Selim (2021, 2023) on the trajectories of activists who participated in the Syrian revolution and after exiled in Berlin and Oslo; by Hassabo (2017) on Egyptian Activists across different regimes; or by Stragapede (2024, 2025) on the trajectories of Tunisian activists between different political contexts, the revolution, and exile.

In all these works, places are deeply present, but somehow untheorized, in spite of their relevance. What follows, I will thus "revisit" places and relations between places in the analyses of the trajectories of mobilization in and beyond the Portuguese revolution.

## The Paradoxical Effect of Authoritarian Places' Constraining on Activist Trajectories

The drastic reduction of places available for people meeting—political or not—is one of the main characteristics of any authoritarian regime. At the same time, private places were not exempt from similar control: political meetings in private houses could be violently repressed, while houses of real or suspected opposers were frequently inspected, as well as those of their relatives, friends, and potential supporters. Moreover, during the Estado Novo—as in many other authoritarian contexts –specific places, such as political prisons and concentration camps, were built to segregate activists and other opposers.

The impact of this place's control on the activist trajectories was dramatic, but it rarely ended up in demobilizing people and networks. Activist trajectories, individual and organizational, were in fact often simply "displaced," but not eradicated. Clandestinity and exile were possibly the most emblematic and visible forms of "displacement" impacting individual trajectories. The physical spread of protest in different cities' areas was, on its own, a significant example of a shift in collective mobilization trajectories. It also implied the inclusion of protest claims connected with those new areas where protest spread, which shows how places influence protest in many different ways.

The Estado Novo's shutting of universities and their structures at the end of the 1960s can provide a valuable illustration of these dynamics. For instance, in 1969, the physical and administrative closure of Coimbra University's academic association eliminated the only legal place of student participation and representation of Coimbra University. Research on students' activist trajectories not only shows that mobilized students did not cease to be engaged, but that, as in other cases, this repressive strategy had the only effect of displacing activism and provoking a move in individual and group trajectories, allowing new and unexpected interactions, particularly in the context of students' residences. Similarly, in Lisbon, universities and their structures were repeatedly closed down and occupied by police during the early '70s. This strategy had some serious side effects in terms of mobilization. In the first place, the closing of the university, affecting not only the "subversive" but all students, provoked a reaction among those who had proved indifferent to the other demands of the movement. On the other side, it was easy for students who could not access the premises of their own universities to use the facilities of other faculties or other institutions to hold meetings.

Repression also passes through the anticipated military recruitment of subversive students since 1969. Because of the colonial war, almost all young Portuguese men were required to serve in the army for 2 to 4 years. However, students normally had the right to defer this obligation. In 1969, because of growing students' mobilization, the government suspended this right and made deferment for study purposes dependent on student conduct, so that only well-behaved students could benefit from it. The consequence was that almost all student leaders had to interrupt their studies to fulfill their military obligations. Even in this case, the repressive action did not achieve its intended goal. While the drafting of student activists helped cool down academic places (campuses, university neighborhoods, and residences), it created a dangerous situation within the armed forces, especially at the military training schools where the rebel students were sent. At the time of the drafting of student leaders of the 1969 Coimbra academic crisis, the political police noticed, in fact, an increase in agitation (desertions, theft of military material, and the distribution of subversive propaganda). These subversive actions within the armed forces by students serving in the military continued until the overthrow of the regime (Accornero, 2016).

Finally, the harshest way to persecute subversive students was undoubtedly arrest. However, even in this case, punishment rarely had the effect of eradicating mobilization. Imprisoned opposers had the opportunity to come into contact with other activists in the context of political prisons. This situation often ended up in consolidating solidarities and networks of members of the same or similar groups; strengthening the boundaries between and conflicts among different groups (for instance, new-left groups and communists); or reshaping the political field with shifts from one group to another, redefinition of groups' boundaries, creation of new groups, or merging of existing ones. In other words, a large part of what would have been the leftist political arena during and after the revolution forged its identities in the context of political prisons (Accornero, 2013; Cardina, 2016), as well as in exile and in clandestinity. Moreover, political prisoners often had the opportunity to come into contact with common "criminals," and this contributed to the politicization of these latter ones. On the

26th of April 1974, when political prisoners were allowed to leave the prisons, a generation of political elite was ready to enter the political arena under a deep transformation and set the new rules of the emerging political regime. Something similar happened in the case of those activists who left clandestinity—and not all did, at least immediately—and who returned from exile.

## Activist Trajectories Redefining Places of Contention in Revolutionary Processes

As the previous examples show, the trajectories of Portuguese activists and groups were shaped by the regime and its control of places, but they also impacted them. It is also thanks to these trajectories that, when on April 25, 1974, a coup led by antiwar military officers thrust the dictatorial regime from power, unsanctioned protests played a central role in the proceedings that followed. Some specific moments were emblematic of this shift. At the beginning of May 1974, a few days after the beginning of the revolution, hundreds of empty municipal apartments in Lisbon's neighborhood of Boavista were occupied by Portuguese families organized in commissions (*Comissões de Moradores*), initiating one of the strongest and most significant movements of the Portuguese revolution.

Historian Pedro Ramos Pinto refers to the following story related to this episode:

> [A] few days after the coup, a group of local women decided to go and talk to some students from the nearby Law Faculty (a well-known center of student opposition to the regime) to enlist their help in organizing a neighborhood assembly. . . . The women went to the Law Faculty perhaps inspired by the fact that the Police were always chasing the students, and the students always fighting back, with the lockouts at the universities—which were frequent occurrences before 25 April—and [confrontations with the Police] in front of the canteen or the Santa Maria Hospital. Many of the women worked in the hospital, others in the canteen, which is to say they had contact with the students. Then, after 25 April, there you go! They stepped forward![4]

As previously mentioned, pushing actors outside their usual places, the authoritarian repression had often paradoxical consequences. In this specific case, it allowed the interaction among actors radically different from each other, the students and the women working in the hospital, which in other conditions possibly would have never met (and particularly in a society so deeply socially and economically divided as the Portuguese one during the dictatorship). Places' contiguity was crucial for this encounter, and it provided the background necessary for the transmission of political competencies (for instance, organizing and managing meetings and assemblies) from the students to the women, which could be taken advantage of in the revolutionary context.

To understand the importance of this competence, it is worthy to remember that students were the only actors who, during the regime, could experience and practice some democratic action, such as free voting. In fact, being corporate bodies—with strong elitist features—student associations were the only tolerated self-managed

places under the regime, with an effective and independent instrument of representation, whereas nothing even vaguely similar existed for other social categories, especially the workers. When dictatorships end, by reform of rupture, most people do not have any democratic political experience. In the case of very long regimes—as the Portuguese one, which lasted almost 50 years—most adults had never participated in a meeting, an assembly, a political discussion or a simple exchange of political opinions, let alone in a demonstration or occupation. If we consider organizing or managing some of these actions, people with such expertise were evidently even less. It is not enough to remove constraints for mobilization to happen, and when the Portuguese regime was overthrown by the military coup, these previous interactions, often unplanned and simply allowed by places' contingency, were crucial to create the activist infrastructure of the revolution.

The sudden expansion and multiplication of the places of contention brought about by the revolution took place in the wake of and in continuity with a longer process, made up of thousands of similar individual and group trajectories of activism. In fact, many of the movements that emerged during the final phases of the regime merged with those born immediately after the revolution, and places played a crucial role in guaranteeing this continuity. For instance, since 1973, students had started protesting in the poorest areas of Lisbon, denouncing the living conditions in the shanty towns that had grown there since the early Sixties under the pressure of rural immigration. They particularly denounced the slowness and inefficacy in building and attributing public municipal housing. It is the case of the area of Boavista, where several student actions prefigured the first housing occupations in that neighborhood undertaken a few days after the coup d'etat. The politicization of this place—becoming emblematic during the revolution as a symbol of urban squatting movement and right to the city until now (—is clearly linked to this spatial shift of the student mobilization, from the university campuses to other areas of the city). At the same time, the encounters between students and women working at Santa Maria hospital, an unexpected consequence of police repression which obliged students to escape from the *Cidade Universitária* and find refuge in the hospital, contributed to building the basis for such shift.

## Activists' Trajectories in and Beyond Revolution: A Final Reflection

It may seem reductive to focus on the micro and meso- dimension of activist trajectories across regimes and places to analyze macro and impactful processes such as revolutionary situations (and their preconditions and consequences), but this perspective can actually offer a privileged point of view to link many dimensions of social and political change, which are often addressed separately. In fact, activist trajectories are situated at the crossroad between micro, meso-, and macro levels and their study provides a unique access for the understanding of these levels and their interdependence, as well as of the interactions among players, arenas, and political processes. Moreover, trajectories develop across time, so that their study is consistent with a processual and interactive approach. They also cross places, and this contributes to understanding

how activism and its environment mold each other, in and beyond revolutions. Attention to the places those trajectories pass through brings an added analytical value. For example, Gieryn's dimensions of places—geographical location, physical nature, and social significance—can help to explain the various mechanisms that come into play in shaping life trajectories. The example of political prisons is emblematic: geographically, they are places of forced concentration, where activists from different organizations and areas are brought together in a single location, giving rise to encounters that would otherwise not have happened. From a material perspective, detention, shared cells, forced cohabitation, and the elimination of external exchanges create conditions of intense and prolonged interaction that accelerate political socialization. Symbolically, prisons can hold specific significance within the movement. In the case of opponents of Portugal's Estado Novo, having been imprisoned was a sign of political commitment that shaped their role in the public arena after the revolution. Political detentions led to ideological consolidation and the formation of a left-wing political camp. Understanding how places produced different political outcomes and how the spatial property of each place helps to explain these differences is, therefore, a promising way to examine activists' trajectories through regimes.

In this way, activist trajectories approach, including an attention to places, can thus potentially contribute to revolution theories in many ways. Trajectories cross different arenas which often overlap, and these arenas are also composed of physical places. The arenas and the places of activism—as all arenas and all places—are always hybrid, as we can see if we follow the trajectories of people who passes through them and contribute to their configuration. A hospital can be a political forum where people train their participatory skills, a prison a "free-space" where political socialization is forged, a barrack, a center of conspiracy. A political cell or a clandestine house can host former and future state elites, while incumbent authoritarian political elites can end up, in revolutionary times, in that same cell. This perspective may thus contribute to blurring the boundaries between state and non-state actors and arenas, understanding how the shift in the identity of actors and places happens concretely during the revolutionary process. In this way, it can complement and balance state-centered revolution theories (among others, Goodwin, 2001).

Dialogue can also be fruitful with revolutionary theories attentive to the spatial dimension (Beissinger, 2022). For instance, following activist individual and group trajectories can illuminate differences and continuities between revolutionary processes in rural and urban areas. Attention to trajectories may possibly introduce some nuances in the understanding of these two apparently opposed contexts. This is the case, for example, of Lisbon's urban peripheries, where most rural immigrants relocated since the beginning of the 1960s, and where most urban squatting movements appeared during the revolution.

Activist trajectories' analyses may also help introduce an attention to the role of emotions in revolutionary processes and in their place-making dimensions, as well as a deeper understanding of long-term impacts of revolutionary moments in politics and society (Fishman, 2019). In this sense, they may be a good starting point for a growing dialogue between social movement and revolution theories, particularly meeting the

advice of scholars who advocate for a more dynamic and inclusive approach to studying revolutions, also open to the reception of innovative insights that a new wave of empirical studies has been producing (Beck & Ritter, 2021). This can also bring more attention and dialogue with epistemologies and understandings built in the Global South, and with approaches sensitive to forms and mechanisms of politics and engagement that often escape from our northern lenses and paradigms (Accornero & Ramos Pinto, 2022).

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## Notes

1. Interview with André, Portuguese former anti-fascist activist (Lisbon, 16 July 2015, fictitious names).
2. Among these sources: all the number of the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* between 1956 and 1984; specific archives in the Portuguese *Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais Torre do* Tombo (IAN/TT), such as the archive of the Internal Administration (1956–1974), and the archive of the political police PIDE (different sub-sections and particularly political prisoners files, 1956–1874).
3. People I interviewed were part of the Portuguese student movement that opposed the Estado Novo regime. They engaged between 1967 and 1974, at the end of the regime, just before the April 25th coup that started the revolutionary period. Some of these former students had a more intense form of activism, living in hiding for months or even years, sometimes in illegal conditions abroad. To reach former student activists who had never been interviewed before, I created a list of all the students who were arrested by the political police between 1967 and 1974. Then, I searched the internet to reach out to them. Out of the 488 students arrested during this time, I was able to collect the trajectories of 26 people, which is about one in every 22 students.
4. Ramos Pinto, 2013, 91–92.

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