Fall 2009 an interdisciplinary team of roughly 20 scholars from six different countries set out to collect data on street demonstrations. At the time of this writing almost 70 demonstrations are covered and nearly 15,000 demonstrators surveyed, while we expect to cover some 10 demonstrations more. The team grew as well. We are now more than 30; the original involved six countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, the U.K., Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland) were complemented by Italy, Mexico and Czech Republic. This special issue is a first report on the findings generated by what can rightly be denoted the largest comparative study ever of participants in collective action.

Street demonstrations have become more and more common throughout the world. Almost daily our newspapers report on street demonstrations taking place in some city somewhere. The research project entitled Caught in the act of protest: Contextualizing Contestation (CCC)\(^1\) aims to increase our understanding of the dynamics of street demonstrations. Politics and societies have changed substantially during the last few decades (e.g. Van Stekelenburg, Roggeband, & Klandermans, 2013). Increasingly, supranational political institutions have gained prominence and their impact on people’s daily lives has grown. At the same time, in many societies, a new social fabric seems to evolve. Loosely coupled networks have become a prime mode of structuring society, accelerated by Internet, social media, and cell phones. In this new political and societal context it remains poorly understood how people mobilize for change, and who takes to the streets and why.

Studies of protest behavior tend to focus on single protest events or alternatively to employ general population surveys. Either type of study inevitably takes contextual variation out.

\(^1\) ‘Contextualizing Contestation’ is a project by Bert Klandermans, Stefaan Walgrave, Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg and Joris Verhulst, granted by the European Science Foundation under grant number 08-ECRP-001 and funded by the national science foundations of The Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Sweden, Spain, the U.K. and Switzerland. Recently, Mexico and the Czech Republic joined the project.
Consequently, fundamental questions about how context influences contestation remain unanswered. Questions such as who are the protest participants, why do they participate, and how are they mobilized lack comparative, evidence-based answers. The composition of the demonstrating crowd, the motivation of the participants, and the mobilization techniques that brought them to the streets are contingent on contextual variation, but void of systematic comparison we can only guess what the influence of the context may be.

Tilly (2008) has argued that like most contentious performances street demonstrations obey the rules of strong repertoires. That is to say, participants in street demonstrations enact available scripts within which they innovate, but mostly in small ways. As a consequence, street demonstrations are the same and different every time they occur. Street demonstrations vary on a continuum from ritual parades to violent protest events. In this issue we will compare May-Day parades and Climate Change demonstrations. Although May-Day parades have a highly ritualistic character, they do vary in the political undertone they convey. Climate change demonstrations on the other hand are oscillating between ritual manifestations and more contentious events.

About the papers

The various papers in this special issue give a nice impression of the comparisons that can be made with the CCC-dataset: different movements within the same country, the same movement in different countries, and movement by country comparisons of various dependent variable. We begin, however, with two more general papers. Jacquelien van Stekelenburg et al. provide a detailed description of the project's theoretical and methodological framework, while Olivier Fillieule's paper is a theoretical elaboration of street demonstrations as societal phenomenon. The remaining papers are empirical papers exploiting the comparative opportunities of the data. Saunders et al. compare first time and sustained participation in May-Day and Climate Change demonstrations in seven countries. They assess the role of biographical and structural availability and psychological and political engagement. Walgrave et al. explore whether participants are aware of the transnational
character of the demonstration they are taking part in and whether they identify with participants in other countries. They propose a typology of patterns of identification and identify determinants of the various patterns. Blocq et al. compare the management of emotions by members of differentially embedded movement organizations. It appears that more embedded organizations less likely evoke anger. Peterson et al. compare the reasons why people take part in May-Day demonstrations. They distinguish demonstrations in terms of their ‘oppositionality’ and ‘officiality’ and propose that also May-Day demonstrations vary on the oppositionality-officiality scale and try to explain why this is the case. Nina Eggert and Marco Giugni raise the question of whether the ‘new’ vs ‘old’ dimension in distinguishing social movements is still valid. They argue that depending on the salience of the ‘old’ class-cleavage the ‘old’ vs ‘new’ distinction is still relevant. Comparing May Day and Climate Change demonstrations in Sweden and Belgium they test their hypotheses. Finally, Della Porta and Reiter compare three demonstrations for workers’ rights in Italy. Two more traditional demonstrations a May Day parade and a march in the context of a general strike and an alternative May Day demonstration ‘Euromayday’ organized by a ‘new’ labor movement. They describe the different political attitudes of the participants.

References