

Capitalism and Social Movements

FEDERICO M. ROSSI

CONICET – Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Argentina

Capitalism and social movements dynamics are intimately related, but they are also under-theorized in social movement studies. Even though many social movement struggles around the world are directly or indirectly related to a socioeconomic issue (labor rights, land reform, redistribution, social policies, disincorporation, etc.), extensive analysis of the political economy of movements has been largely ignored by North Atlantic social movement scholars (Hetland and Goodwin 2013). This oversight is particularly concerning considering that the claims of movements generally include calls for alternative politico-economic models and for social justice, broadly conceived. The reason why capitalism was hidden in social movement research seems to be a product of the extreme North-centric construction of theories during a period of apparent pacification of distributive claims in that part of the world. The gradual and mild reemergence of economics as a relevant dimension in the North Atlantic literature has been a result of the 2008 economic crisis in the United States and Europe that led to the call “to bring attention to capitalist dynamics back into social movement research” (della Porta 2015, 5). Recent European studies have reassessed the related concepts of grievances and relative deprivation, gradually reconnected political and economic crises, and cleavages and economic claims (Hutter 2014; Giugni and Grasso 2015; Kriesi 2015; Caruso and Cini 2020; Portos 2021, among many others). However, this path of the North Atlantic literature was not followed in the rest of the world, where most social conflicts happen. Moreover, this construction of the field disregarding capitalism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America never happened (Walton 1989; Collier and Collier 1991; Cooper 1996; Alexander 2010; Agarwala 2013; Rossi 2017; Wolff and Weiper-Fenner 2019, among many others). So, bringing back capitalism was never needed. Thus, beyond the growing interest in the North and the sustained interest in the South, the discussion about capitalism and social movements is still not organized as a political economy of social movements.

Recoupling capitalism and social movements

Capitalism is a relational process constituted by temporal, spatial, and phenomenological dimensions. We need to recouple these dimensions of capitalism and social movements in dynamic terms to bring together a political economy of social movements superseding the functionalist notion of grievance construction and mobilization.

Concerning temporality, three notions of time are relevant: “a long-term one signaling the transformations of forms of capitalism; a middle-term one singling out moments of growth and crisis; and a short-term, contingent one” (della Porta 2015, 62). This dimension of temporality captures sequence, synchronicity, recursiveness, and timing. The dynamics social movements face are different when confronted with an already organized model of development (*stage of stabilization*) and a period of accelerated transition between models of development (*stage of*

The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements, Second Edition. Edited by David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Doug McAdam, and Bert Klandermans.

© 2023 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Published 2023 by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9780470674871.wbepm532

destabilization) (Rossi 2022). This is also a strategic concern for movements, as it implies a collective selection of strategies.

Concerning spatiality, as world-system theory argues, capitalism is interrelated in a spatial hierarchy with differences in the core, semi-periphery, and periphery. In this regard, the geographic location of the dynamics analyzed are both linked to a political regime and a political system that articulate conflicts, as well as the formation, objectives, and strategies of social movements. The geographic and phenomenological distance of citizens from the state (Davis 1999), the degrees of corporatism and territorialism that organize cleavages (Rossi 2019), the location in the global chain of production (Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein 1989), the predominant type of accumulation (Harvey 2005), the degree and type of commodification of land and people (Polanyi 1957) and the territorial hierarchies that impersonalize relationships (Sack 1986), among others, all co-constitute capitalism and social movements.

Capitalism is as much a setting as the target of social movement struggles. So, it is not external to the actions of actors. Capitalism is the terrain where disputes take place and the disputed relation itself, dealing movements with capitalism as a dynamic that has no more envisioned horizon than the one is being built across time. Capitalism is embedded in social relations and hence social movements have other experiences that emanate from social and economic spheres other than the ones subjected to capitalist dynamics. Capitalist dynamics are, thus, simultaneously lived as experiences (stock of legacies) and expectations (prefiguration) that help develop repertoires of strategies (Rossi 2017, 38). Concerning experiences, strategic action is predicated on actors' participation in a historical accumulation of events and intentional learning processes that build a stock of legacies – the sedimentation of what is lived and perceived to be lived as well as what is intentionally learned (Rossi 2017, 42). Concerning expectations, because movements do not only resist or react to socioeconomic consequences of models of development, but they also defend or promote ideas and ideals, there are also prefigurative or verbalized alternative economic models in dispute. A prefigurative strategy can be a vanguardist dirigiste (Gorz 1968, 52) or a grassroots spontaneist tactic that develops a strategy in its combination of means and ends (Boggs 1977/1978, 100). In any case, the strategy is built through the concretization of action (Yates 2015).

In brief, capitalism is experience and expectation and, thus, a matter of conflicts. For instance, the main struggle for time in capitalist history is the one for weekly rest days, for an eight-hour workday, paid holidays, lunchtime, breaks during work shifts, and days off for different reasons. This is the struggle for the decommodification of part of the labor process. However, this struggle for regaining control of our human clock from certain capitalist dynamics has had uneven success beyond the North Atlantic world. Comparative historical analyses of the macro, meso, and micro spatiotemporal dynamics is needed to understand each path (Markoff 2015).

The three spatiotemporal dynamics of capitalism

I propose to analytically divide capitalism into three main spatiotemporal dynamics: macro, meso, and micro. These three levels correspond to the different combinations of the temporal, spatial, and phenomenological dimensions I have just explained. Social movements are co-constitutive of these dynamics and are constituted by them as much as they play with and within them.

Macro-dynamics are the slower, wider, and more transformative dimensions of capitalism. In relational terms, they are more stable but not structures, they are rather denser vectors in the relations analyzed in a temporality that is not necessarily synched with the meso- and micro-dynamics. Tilly's (1986) analysis of changes in the repertoires of contention resulting from the emergence of capitalism and state formation in Europe is the most refined example of macro-dynamics applied to protest studies. However, we still need to explore the role played by the aims and expectations of the actors in their long-term calculations and intergenerational chains of actions and perceptions to reconnect macro-dynamics to social movement strategies (Aminzade 1992), identifying periods of gradual sedimentation of practices and others of acceleration of time.

An illustration of the macro-dynamics of capitalism is the geopolitics of dependency relations. This in part explains some grievances and counter-reactions to long-term and denser capitalist dynamics. "Especially important is change in hegemon, since that affects the way the system operates due to the structural characteristics of the hegemonic economy and political system and the rules it enforces on others" (Stallings 2020, 27). For many social movements, the neocolonial dependency on Britain and France in Africa, the post-World Wars domination of the United States in Latin America, and Japanese and Chinese colonialism and domination in Asia, influence many struggles to the degree of defining the anti-imperialist responses and the centrality of Left nationalism and national-populism as mobilizers to oppose the hegemon's actors and their allies.

This takes us to capitalism as meso-dynamics. These are incorporation waves, cycles of accumulation, models of development as well as the prefigurative and oblivious construction of ideas, practices, and ideologies for or against social change. With this I mean that we need to see when social movements help change or stabilize capitalism and the stock of legacies that reconnect or disconnect struggles. This is both disruptive and functional to capitalism as it can only survive if not all social relations are market-driven (Polanyi 1957). Examples of these contradictory results are social economy, co-operatives, degrowth, *Buen Vivir*, and radical environmentalism promoted by social movements of the Left (Escobar 2017).

The meso-dynamics are the ones that offer the utmost potential for a political economy of social movements because they introduce a temporality to the dynamics of capitalism that can allow for identifying how social movements build reformist or revolutionary transformational targets with the intended and unintended results of struggles for social change. The macro-dynamics of capitalism are relinked to the meso ones in the sedimentation of practices, lived experiences that construct common senses, perceptions and expectations, and the institutional background that sustain models of development.

At the meso-level it is very useful to connect social movement studies to certain crucial debates in political economy: distributive coalitions and interest intermediation arrangements. Concerning coalitions, power resource theory focuses on the characteristics of welfare or developmental states, explaining it as a function of the role played by the Left in alliance with the middle classes (Huber and Stephens 2012). For Esping-Andersen (1990), multidimensional distributive conflicts are organized by specific class coalitions that favor tax-benefit legal systems, generating three types of welfare capitalism: social democratic, liberal, and conservative. He argues that each tax-benefit system is associated with different social divisions and conflicts: public versus private sectors in the social democratic; poor versus middle classes in the liberal; and outsiders versus insiders in the conservative type.

The analysis of different interest intermediation arrangements, such as neocorporatism (Schmitter 1974) and neopluralism (Oxhorn 1998) allows for understanding the type of

incorporation and role in decision-making processes of social movements (Rossi 2017). Even though initially focused on unions (the most formal sector of labor movements), since the massive disincorporation of the popular sectors with neoliberal reforms and authoritarian regimes there has been an expansion of the analysis of territorially based cleavages (Rossi 2019) and interest intermediation arrangements beyond labor (Silva 2018). Here, again, social movements play a crucial role as they are part of the set of actors that help connect or disconnect economic and political crises (Kriesi 2015). We can see this through reformist movements (Giugni and Grasso 2015), as well as revolutionary movements (Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein 1989).

If decentered from its North Atlantic mainstream narrative that “viewed social movements developing in a relatively linear pattern with the expansion of nation-states, parliamentary democracies, urbanization, industrialization” (Almeida 2019, 147), the central social movement dynamic for each capitalist model of development is the contentious construction of the “social question” and the struggles of movements for the expansion of the sociopolitical arena. This struggle is linked to the pattern of inequality (modified, reinforced, or inherited), the degree of commodification of social relations, and the type of societal stratification produced by each model of development (Rossi 2022). How the “social question” is expressed and articulated is linked to who the main mobilized actors are and what interest intermediation arrangements are associated with each model of development to legitimate the mobilized actors. These interest intermediation arrangements are an institutional result of the “social question” in the quest to pacify the disruption produced by the organized victims of a model of development (Rossi 2017, 11–13).

Even though contention takes various forms, in political economy terms, each model of development is linked to a dominant form of oppositional collective action (Almeida 2019, 157–158). When protests organize into movements, this collective action is also linked to revolutionary and reformist proposals for the transformation of the path of development. Moreover, coalitions (and winners and losers) are co-constitutive of the models of development, and the political responses of the losers (or victims) of each model are important to understand the paths within and across models. These contentious responses are sustained on inherited infrastructure from previous models of development (Almeida 2014), constituting material and symbolic resources for building a stock of legacies and prefigure alternatives that (dis)favor certain strategies (Rossi 2017).

While useful to integrate these kinds of contributions from political economy, there are two risks that should be avoided: first is the tendency to treat capitalism as a set of static conditions; second is deriving the orientation of action from a function in the economy. Interest intermediation arrangements are best analyzed as sedimented institutional practices that work temporarily within a model of development. Relationally, models of development are always under construction, discussion, and reconstruction, so they are intrinsically a subject of contentious dynamics.

Finally, micro-dynamics are the ones social movement scholarship provides with a breadth of agency-driven flavor. However apparent it may seem, a short temporality with multiplicity of contemporary actors who verbalize, explore, and act in reasonable terms is not per se the dynamic where social movements are most relevant. Historically speaking, social movements pass through phases of meso-oriented action and others of micro-oriented action. If a micro-oriented socioeconomic action dominates in a given period, it does not mean that it is a historical constant that can be taken as an analytic condition.

When studying social movements and capitalist dynamics we can choose to construct analytic sequences and historiographic periods across one spatiotemporal dynamic or reconnect them. Beyond zooming in and out, a political economy of social movements that avoids functionalist analysis requires inserting the dynamics examined into chains of historical events and situating the phenomenology of social movement experiences within, against, and in favor of capitalism.

SEE ALSO: Coalitions; Political Economy and Social Movements; Prefigurative Politics; Relational Arenas of Social Movement Activism; Repertoires of Strategies; Social Class and Social Movements; Socioterritorial Movements; Strategy; Tactics; Temporality and Social Movements; World-system and Social Movements

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Agarwala, R. (2013). *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Alexander, P. (2010). Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests – a preliminary analysis. *Review of African Political Economy* 37 (123): 25–40.
- Almeida, P. (2014). *Mobilizing Democracy: Globalization and Citizen Protest*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Almeida, P. (2019). *Social Movements: The Structure of Collective Mobilization*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Aminzade, R. (1992). Historical sociology and time. *Sociological Methods & Research* 20 (4): 456–480.
- Arrighi, G., Hopkins, T., and Wallerstein, I. (1989). *Antisystemic Movements*. London: Verso.
- Boggs, C. (1977/1978). Marxism, prefigurative communism, and the problem of workers' control. *Radical America* 11/12 (6/1): 99–122.
- Caruso, L. and Cini, L. (2020). Rethinking the link between structure and collective action: Capitalism, politics, and the theory of social movements. *Critical Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520911434>.
- Collier, R.B. and Collier, D. (1991). *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cooper, F. (1996). *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, D.E. (1999). The power of distance: Re-theorizing social movements in Latin America. *Theory and Society* 28: 585–638.
- della Porta, D. (2015). *Social Movements in Times of Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Escobar, A. (2017). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Giugni, M. and Grasso, M.T. (eds.) (2015). *Austerity and Protest: Popular Contention in Times of Economic Crisis*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Gorz, A. (1968). The way forward. *New Left Review* 52 (1): 47–66.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hetland, G. and Goodwin, J. (2013). The strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies. In: *Marxism and Social Movements* (ed. C. Barker, L. Cox, J. Krinsky, and A.G. Nilsen), 83–102. Chicago: Haymarket.
- Huber, E. and Stephens, J.D. (2012). *Democracy and the Left: Social Policy and Inequality in Latin America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hutter, S. (2014). *Protesting Culture and Economics in Western Europe: New Cleavages in Left and Right Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Kriesi, H. (2015). Political mobilization in time of crises: The relationship between economic and political crises. In: *Austerity and Protest: Popular Contention in Times of Economic Crisis* (ed. M. Giugni and M.T. Grasso), 19–33. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Markoff, J. (2015). Historical analysis and social movements research. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (ed. D. della Porta and M. Diani), 68–85. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Oxhorn, P. (1998). Is the century of corporatism over? Neoliberalism and the rise of neopluralism. In: *What Kind of Democracy? What Kind of Market? Latin America in the Age of Neoliberalism* (ed. P. Oxhorn and G. Ducatenzeiler), 195–217. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Polanyi, K. (1957). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Portos, M. (2021). *Grievances and Public Protests: Political Mobilisation in Spain in the Age of Austerity*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rossi, F.M. (2017). *The Poor's Struggle for Political Incorporation: The Piquetero Movement in Argentina*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rossi, F.M. (2019). Conceptualising and tracing the increased territorialisation of politics: Insights from Argentina. *Third World Quarterly* 40 (4): 815–837.
- Rossi, F.M. (2022). Social movements and capitalist models of development in Latin America. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Social Movements* (ed. F.M. Rossi). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sack, R.D. (1986). *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitter, P.C. (1974). Still the century of corporatism? *The Review of Politics* 36: 85–131.
- Silva, E. (2018). Conclusion: Reflections on the second wave of popular incorporation for a post-neoliberal era. In: *Reshaping the Political Arena in Latin America: From Resisting Neoliberalism to the Second Incorporation* (ed. E. Silva and F.M. Rossi), 309–324. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Stallings, B. (2020). *Dependency in the Twenty-first Century? The Political Economy of China–Latin America Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, C. (1986). *The Contentious French*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Walton, J. (1989). Debt, protest, and the state in Latin America. In: *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements* (ed. S. Eckstein), 299–328. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wolff, J. and Weipert-Fenner, I. (eds.) (2019). *Socioeconomic Protests in MENA and Latin America: Egypt and Tunisia in Interregional Comparison*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yates, L. (2015). Rethinking prefiguration: Alternatives, micropolitics and goals in social movements. *Social Movement Studies* 14 (1): 1–21.