CHAPTER

12 Marxist Approaches to the Study of Political Participation 🔓

Laurence Cox, Alf G. Nilsen

Abstract

This chapter discusses the contributions of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and later Marxists to understanding political participation. It argues that Marxism is fundamentally historical, so that rather than assuming a fixed and general institutional situation across states and periods, the Marxist contribution can best be expressed as empirical questions about popular participation in specific contexts. The expectation is one of popular attempts to assert participation in decision-making, with institutional forms shaped by the outcome of such struggles between social movements from below and the agency of the powerful. This argument is illustrated with examples from the struggle for democracy in Europe since the nineteenth century, the changing nature of political participation in postcolonial India, "the world's largest democracy," and popular politics in the age of austerity.

Keywords: Marx, Marxism, political participation, democracy, social movements, India, Europe, austerity.

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"Marxism" is a complex and contested term. Karl Marx and his lifelong collaborator, Friedrich Engels— political refugees, radical journalists, socialist organizers, and theorists—did not produce a systematic body of *writing*: much of their work was political or philosophical polemic, written to order, unfinished or even contained in correspondence, and scholars routinely prefer, as this chapter does, to discuss what is generally recognized (with whatever nuances) as the broad coherence of their underlying theoretical positions, scattered across many different kinds of text. "Marxism" is then the later attempt to articulate and systematize these positions in various ways, by activists and academics in different times and places.

Moreover, one of these key tenets is the historically conditioned character of social and political relationships; universalizing and eternalizing statements about institutional specifics are therefore typically rejected. All of this makes for a challenging, but as this chapter aims to show immensely versatile, body of thought, which developed in dialogue with popular attempts to assert power through democratic

revolutions and labor organizing, anti-colonial struggles and socialist internationalism, and many another social movement since (Barker et al. 2014).

In Marx's day, thought about politics, economics, and culture typically operated in separate theoretical spaces. A key feature of his work is to seek to relocate all of these within what we would now call society, and to refuse analyses which seek to present them as self-sufficient or isolated:

> In the social production of their life, human beings enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.
>
> The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not human beings' consciousness that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. ↳
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> … a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which human beings become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. (*1859 Preface* 1859)

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Yet even as Marx refuses to consider "the political" in isolation from the whole society and the whole human being, political participation—or rather the potential for participation, the barriers in its way and people's struggles to overcome these barriers—can be said to be the central theme of his work from the young Marx's concern with the nature of human agency (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1844), to his final notes exploring the workings of non-class-based societies (*Ethnological Notebooks*, 1973), and from his exploration of how capitalist relationships present the illusion of freedom masking the iron constraints of exploitation (*Capital vol I*, 1867), to his writings on the revolutions of his day (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852, *The Civil War in France*, 1871).

Hence the Marxist concern with political participation—as with so many Marxist contributions—cuts across and through many of the conventional disciplinary and institutional forms within which routine intellectual work seeks to understand it and political routines seek to channel it. This is at once the value and the challenge of Marxist approaches: they do not sit comfortably within other frameworks, and cannot easily be cherrypicked to provide neatly bounded contributions—but they are extraordinarily powerful in placing center-stage the people and problems that fade to the margins of other approaches.

This historical and relational approach means that Marxist contributions on political participation (and much else) can be best formulated as *questions*: simultaneously theoretical questions about the construction of a specific social formation, and empirical questions about how popular involvement in collective decision-making attempts to express itself within that formation (Barker 2021). Rather than dogmatic propositions, Marxism thus offers a sharp tool to cut deeply, from immediate appearances to underlying relationships.

A first question is then: participation in what? A perspective which starts from noting that formal states of any kind characterize only a short fragment of the human record, and that states which derive legitimacy from participation (however fictitiously) only mark a small section within that fragment, will not assume that participation in the polity is a normal condition, or necessarily a normative endpoint—as against, say, the "withering away" of the state which Marx and Engels foresaw after private control over everyday life was overcome (*Anti-Dühring*, Engels 1878). Instead, Marxism starts from the presupposition that human

beings are irreducibly social, so that its notion of participation is ultimately shaped by this, rather than by the official structures of actually existing states or the normative claims of democratic theory.

We can then ask: How, in a particular (historically conditioned) kind of society, do people participate in their shared life, how are they barred from doing so, and what new forms of participation emerge from their struggles around this? There can be very different answers to this. To note this complexity, and to explore what practical definitions and forms of participation eventually won out either as official forms of politics or as enduring challenges to this definition, is a useful antidote to eternalizing particular institutional forms, or taking particular political ideologies as a starting point.

This example points us towards a second dimension of the Marxist analysis of participation: it is grounded in a complex sense of human needs as historical and developmental, and as representing a contested diversity, both within the individual but also across society. At any given time in a particular class society, we can expect to find struggles for participation centered around the immediate relationships of people's daily work and lives, and so ask, "Who decides in the workplace or the family, the neighborhood or the religious community?" We will also find struggles that are more consciously about the wider relationships of a city (ancient Rome or industrial Manchester), a country (France in 1789 or the USA in 2022) or the world (the revolutionary waves of 1848, 1916–23, 1968, or 2011, for example).

This is not, obviously, an elitist stagism of the kind Brecht satirized as "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann die Moral" [first comes feeding, then morality]. Marxists are equally interested in uncovering the much more local interests that educated groups may dress up in the high-flying language of abstract politics, and in disentangling the ways in which the poor and oppressed, from their vantage-point outside certain kinds of illusions, attempt both to grasp and to change the society they live in. Furthermore, much of the practice of Marxist politics consists in things like challenging attempts to reduce the diversity of needs expressed in labor struggles to easily manageable demands around wages alone; or in seeking to infuse abstract languages of democracy or ecology with the practical content of social justice.

Thirdly, the Marxist interest in participation treats the fit between institutions and human needs as inherently problematic—at least within class societies. It asks, obviously, how the forms of bourgeois democracy frustrate the expression of popular needs for "real democracy," as the global movement wave of 2011 put it—and the many ways, not all of them obvious to outside observers, with which people seek to change this situation and assert power from below: "All forms of the state have democracy for their truth, and for that reason are false to the extent that they are not democracy" (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, 1843*).

It also asks how new forms of political power garner consent through particular kinds of participation— peasant support for Napoleon III's plebiscites and flag-waving, for example—and attempt to repress others (Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris which did not, in the end, prevent the Commune of 1871).

All of this, of course, makes Marxism a powerful tool for enquiring about *what is going on* in times of change like the present, when we see new spaces of conflict (around lockdowns or social media), changing polities (with the rise of new authoritarianisms reversing the 50-year trend towards liberal democracies), new kinds of actor (from schoolchildren's strikes to QAnon adherents), and—for now—uncertain outcomes. Social change has also forced the discussion of established institutions to include questions such as the relationship between social class and the vote for particular parties, or the conflictual relationships of workplace power, so that many non-Marxist approaches have had to take these on board (e.g. Giugni and Grasso 2019), even when badly mishandling them at times (treating educational level as a proxy for class position, for example). But Marxism's wider perspective on participation—as *social* and not merely political, as *historical* rather than taking local institutional forms for granted, as *developmental* and as *contested*— remains an unparalleled tool for reflection.

This chapter traces Marxist thought on political participation from Marx and Engels' time to the present, as it has developed alongside popular struggles for real participation in collective decision-making—and the changing shapes of post-*ancien régime* polities that have attempted to repress, contain, or even enable it.

The Development of Marxist Thinking about Participation

Marx and Engels, like many subsequent Marxist authors, were not writing in a world dominated by stable liberal parliamentary democracies with unchallenged institutional frameworks. In the chaos and contradictions of Marx's Europe, Lenin's Russia, Luxemburg's Poland and Germany, or Gramsci's Italy, we find far less stably structured political institutions than postwar sociology and political science tended to assume. When Marxism was read through this latter prism, the hope was often to find neat correlations operating at specific organizational levels, and Marxism's contributions were fragmented across what were seen as different "levels," structured by the agency of capital, the state, and dominant cultural forms (Miliband 1982).

Marxist thought on political participation, however, starts from a different place. While the Romantic tradition led Marx and Engels to start by asking how the majority of people could become active political subjects and what the most significant barriers to that were, as democrats in the radical nineteenth-century sense (aiming for rule by the whole of the people rather than by aristocracy or a limited middle-class franchise) they became centrally concerned with the question of how popular power could be achieved and sustained—but recognizing that these struggles regularly produced institutional compromises which conditioned popular political participation in the future.

Thus, what gives the Marxist tradition of reflection on political participation coherence is its insistence on the question of "How do people participate in actually existing politics?" in a wide variety of contexts and in many forms, from voting to revolutions and from social movements to Bonapartist populism, as well as the question, "How could this situation be transformed?" As political activists, Marx and Engels were typically discussing the immediate specificities of particular institutional arrangements (the French state facing revolution, the British struggle over the length of the working day, the US Civil War), and later activists and scholars have had to extrapolate from these when thinking about other times and places.

Both in the radical-Romantic question of the barriers to full (political) subjectivity and in the radical-democratic question of the potential for popular power, Marxist perspectives are programmatically relational, asking about how human beings who are exploited and oppressed by others can come together to challenge and remake the overall social structures (economic, political, cultural) which connect them.

The Development of Marxist Thought on Political Participation

The fundamental thought here is that while social relations construct social positions—worker and capitalist, peasant and landlord, etc.—around the exploitation of labor power, labor power also consists of *people*. As Lebowitz (2003) underlines, there is then also a "political economy of labour," the necessary construction from below of relationships of solidarity, often on a very micro-level—family, neighborhood, town—or around specifics—the union, the consumer cooperative, the social club.

These, and the forms of thought that articulate self-organization from below, constitute the slow articulation of the proletariat (those who own nothing but their labor power) as a *subject*, from a "class in itself" into a "class for itself," or in other terms some development of collective class consciousness (Mann 1973) and varying levels of struggle, from workplace "custom and practice" all the way up to revolution (Cox 2013). Marx discusses this dimension of political participation in the related concepts of development

of class consciousness and class struggle: "Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers ..." (*The Communist Manifesto,* Marx and Engels 1848).

At "higher levels" we then see more general attempts to articulate an understanding of society and a strategy to change it (the political party, the trade union federation, the radical newspaper) and various kinds of uprising—the English Chartists (Thompson 1984) and Irish Fenians (Anderson 2010), the Paris Commune (Ross 2016) and Atlantic slave revolts (Høgsbjerg 2013). This is what gives force to the central principle of Marx's politics, one which distances him fundamentally from Weberians: "The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves ... the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule ..." (*Rules of the First International*, 1864).

Only towards the very end of Marx's life, with the growing power of the German Social Democratic Party in particular, did it become possible to imagine a temporarily stable relationship between an organized proletariat and a state which allowed it some limited space for self-expression, albeit conditioned by repression and the limited power of the Reichstag. Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) attempted to engage with this new situation. We have inherited a fossilized relationship between "Marxists" and "anarchists" organized around the opposition between Marx's position as it appeared during the reorganization of states from the 1860s to the 1880s, and one which refused any engagement with the formal structures of the capitalist state (Kinna et al. 2013).

Nevertheless, on Marx's death in 1883 only four countries in the world had universal (and then only male) suffrage; Europe remained dominated by dynastic empires (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Russia); and the rest of the world was still being swallowed up by those empires and others (Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Denmark), only some of which were even nominally democratic at home.

This contradiction—the restricted nature of bourgeois democracy (limited parliamentary powers; middle-class suffrage; women excluded); the continuing power of feudal relationships and established religion; imperial relations within Europe and beyond—came to a head in WWI. The votes for war in later 1914, which saw social-democratic parties across the continent support a war they had rightly denounced just a few months before as sending their members to die for kings and capitalists, did not mark the end of social democracy (which continued as a policy of limited redistribution within a capitalist and nationalist framework until such parties adopted neoliberal policies from the 1980s), but it did become impossible after this point to seriously believe that strategy did not matter.

World War I was in part brought to an end by the mutinies and desertions of workers and peasants in their new, lethal workplaces, as well as by strike waves, land occupations, and ultimately, revolutions, from India (Ramnath 2011) via Ireland to Russia and elsewhere. For a brief moment in 1919 it seemed as though this wave might win across the European continent, with soviets (councils of workers, peasants, soldiers, or sailors) in or close to power ↳ in many different countries; but the wave was largely defeated as the old ruling classes made alliances with new right-wing organizations (Mussolini's *fasci di combattimento*, later the Nazi Party, and so on).

Traditional reaction had aimed ultimately to restore an *ancien régime* in which ordinary people were simply not political subjects; the long nineteenth-century's democratic, nationalist, workers', peasants', and women's struggles had made this impossible—and the Romanovs were perhaps the last to attempt a purely reactionary strategy. Bonapartism represented the first right-wing recognition that the genie could not be put back in the lamp, and that nationalist and other forms of participation under ruling-class leadership were needed "in order for everything to remain the same" (Leopardi 2018). Fascism generalized this, using

the organizational structures of mass popular participation pioneered by nineteenth-century working-class, feminist, and peasant mobilizations, but eviscerating their democratic (popular rule) component—and for rolling back the revolutionary wave of 1916–1923 it became a common strategy across the continent, in a "European civil war" (Pavone 2014) which reached its high point at Stalingrad in 1942, being thereafter progressively defeated by the state that came out of 1917, the bourgeois democratic states of the West, and popular resistance struggles of many kinds.

This situation—revolution followed by reaction, and the need to grasp the social relationships underlying the visible politics—is one which the founding generation of the Third International (those who opposed World War I and later supported the Russian Revolution) shared with the young Marx and Engels, whose humanist moment had encountered the defeats of 1848 and the "dull compulsion of economic necessity" (*Capital* vol. I, ch. 28: 1867), a movement reflected in part in the changing emphases of their writing and the increasing emphasis on the processes of capitalist economics.

Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) reflects this change in its own chapters (written across the arc of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and its defeat), from the emphasis on the logic of how "class for itself" develops to a closer attention to the conservative power of reification. Antonio Gramsci similarly moved from the energy of the "Revolution against *Capital*" (Gramsci 1917) and the work of the Turin communist fraction in the two red years (1919–1920), via the disastrous split from the Socialist Party at Livorno in 1921 which left the communists a marginal force and failed to bring most working-class organizations with them, through the struggle against fascism up to his own incarceration in 1926 and the decade of the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971).

The latter contain—among many other things—an account of the *potential* development of class-for-itself as "good sense," in conflict with a "common sense" (the mixture of official ideologies as represented in everyday culture) coming both from forms of traditional intellectual activity—not so much Great Ideas as the everyday work of the priest, doctor, or lawyer in handling distress and grievances—and the organic intellectual activity of managers, time-and-motion men, and the like. A crucial insight here is the *everyday*, apparently non-political power relations which then structure the direction of people's individual and collective agency.

Rosa Luxemburg and V. I. Lenin also consider this question of popular consciousness, but more from the point of view of the development of empirical institutions of popular power—whether the mass strike (Luxemburg 1906) or the various and hugely influential answers that Lenin gave to this question. From Kautsky, and the conditions of clandestine organizing within the Tsarist police state, Lenin argued that the
p. 205 working class could only ↳ achieve a certain degree of "trade union consciousness" by its own efforts, and needed the input of dissident bourgeois intellectuals; his contribution here was in particular to theorize and organize the Bolsheviks as the first real cadre party, marrying the organizing practice of early nineteenth-century conspiratorial insurrectionalism with the mass politics of the late nineteenth-century workers' movement. Nonetheless—as in *State and Revolution* (1917) and his willingness to learn from the Soviet experience—the upsurge in popular activism which he and Luxemburg experienced, rather than the defeat that Lukács and Gramsci faced, led him to emphasize the mistakes of the people over the wisest central committee, the key role of the development of popular consciousness as important in itself. As so often in Marxism, this contrasts *formal* political participation (the central committee of a party supposedly representing workers and peasants, or for that matter parliamentary democracy) with *substantive* participation.

From different directions, Gramsci, Luxemburg, the Irish revolutionary organizer James Connolly, and Lenin all engaged with the burning issue of dynastic empires and their (European) colonies. Gramsci had abandoned the Sardinian nationalism of his youth. Luxemburg, as a Polish-born Jewish woman who was not only a member of successive German parties but co-founded the Polish and Lithuanian social

democratic party, was hostile to Polish nationalism. However Connolly (1910), a Scottish-born diaspora Irish Catholic, interpreted Ireland through the perspective of the equation between Catholicism and the nation forged by Daniel O'Connell. Lenin's critique of imperialism (and the rather different practice of the Bolsheviks in power) attempted to articulate possibilities for the even more complex Russian situation.

In post-Versailles Europe, and then in Asia and Africa, these questions came to be central, notably as revolutions after WWII were dominated by majority world struggles against European empires in which communists and socialists were often central, where inspiration was often sought from the Marxist tradition which many leading cadres had been trained in (often as diaspora students in Europe), and where alliances with the Soviet Union or, later, China might be on offer. All of this led to various forms of statist Marxism whose concern was very much (following Mao's example) to forge articulations between the party as an alternative elite geared towards national development, urban working-class struggles, and above all peasant and anti-colonial movements. This tradition of thought—and a number of the states which originated from this process, notably China, Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba—are still with us today, in the majority world in particular.

As C. Wright Mills' book (1963) neatly captures, this was the dominant global meaning of Marxism in the post-war period, progressively replacing any interest in *independent* working-class action and thought with the concern to *mobilize* working-class activism behind a line that was "overdetermined" by the context of decolonization and Cold War. As the disappointments of the new regimes started to become clear around the world, new forms of Marxism developed—particularly, but not only, in western Europe, where there was some space between the power structures of orthodox Communisms in power and the vicious repression to which all left organizing was exposed in the wider western sphere of influence, from Latin American dictatorships via apartheid South Africa to the Indonesian massacre of 1965. The conditions for the development of thought also involve some degree of physical survival; the torture chamber, the gulag, and the mass grave are key moments of *intellectual* history.

Much dissident Marxism of this period (Jacoby 1981), such as the Frankfurt School figures, reflected these difficult conditions for popular political participation either with cultural and ↳ psychological theories explaining its absence (e.g. Marcuse 1964) or with a humanist celebration of individual freedom (e.g. Fromm 1961). However, the radical-democratic uprisings of the long 1968, in Prague as much as in Paris, in Mexico and Northern Ireland as much as in the old metropolitan centers (Mohandesi et al. 2018), and in new waves of radicalism responding to the discontents of independent nation-states in the Global South, gave rise to a new flourishing of Marxist thought on political participation, once again at a greater distance from the black holes of state power.

These "New Left" Marxisms paid particular attention to the self-organization of new actors—students, Blacks, migrant workers, women—and to the articulation of popular consciousness against the stifling cultural conformity of both the McCarthyite and Soviet 1950s. Although this is historically tied up with the conceptualization of multiple "new social movements"—which were not captured by the gravitational pull of state power in the way that workers', peasants', and nationalist ones had become—in some ways it also represented a return to the "real movement of society" of Marx and Engels' nineteenth century, which had also been marked by an incredible diversity of movements and uprisings, combining many issues and actors.

This period also saw a revival of interest in revolutions as a form of popular self-articulation and self-organization, not simply an organizational bid for state power (in this of course reflecting the uprisings of 1968: Piotrowski 2020), and a new scholarly interest in understanding the empirical realities of popular struggles with all their complexities and cultural specificities. Marxists like E. P. Thompson (1963), Christopher Hill (1972) or Raymond Williams (1985) fit in here; while in India the tradition of subaltern

studies is one of the most productive attempts to understand the "real movement of society" of which independence was only one dimension (Nilsen and Roy 2015).

Along with these direct connections ran and runs a wide variety of Marxisms and post-Marxisms which are less geared to the empirical analysis of contemporary movements but nonetheless relevant to understanding popular political participation. These include autonomism (Wright 2002; Holloway 2002; Dinerstein 2015), socialist feminism and social reproduction theory (Wainwright 2009; Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2019), cultural studies (Hall and Jefferson 1975), popular education (Freire 1972), neo-Gramscianism (Morton 2007; Bieler and Morton 2018), ecological Marxism (Moore 2015; Moore and Patel 2018), and black Marxism (Robinson 2000; Taylor 2016).

This flourishing of theoretical approaches is testament to the continuing power of Marxist thought in this area—and of course to the continuing creativity and effectiveness of ordinary people's attempts to shape the world they live in.

Overarching Questions in the Marxist Analysis of Political Participation

In all of this we can identify some consistent questions in the Marxist analysis of popular political participation. The first is how workplace relationships, exploitation and oppression, and social inequality restrict participation and the wider struggle of the majority to become and remain subjects in the public world, capable of shaping their own conditions of existence. A second is to explore the development of

p. 207   popular power in different contexts and at ↳ many levels—from everyday forms of popular culture and identity via the construction of social movements and institutions such as unions and parties to moments of mass mobilization and revolution.

A third is how this process of struggling for democracy in the state, economy, and culture—together with responses of repression and co-optation from above and the actions of other political actors—leads to the shaping and reshaping of political institutions and political culture. A final question is how the resulting architecture of formal institutions and informal ways of being in turn shapes the possibilities for popular political participation in any given time and place.

From a Marxist point of view, then, the challenge is to not take the institutional specifics of Western Europe and North America between, say, 1945 and 1989 as defining the "politics" within which people "participate" to greater or lesser degrees or towards which specific initiatives or innovations should be targeted. It is rather to see that situation, as others, as a set of truce lines between power from above and multiple struggles from below, truce lines which shape popular struggles to participate in the shaping of one's own life—but which are also challenged and occasionally remade by such struggles (Cox and Nilsen 2014). This becomes evident if we start from a different history.

India, the "world's largest democracy," contains nearly one-fifth of everyone alive and has a larger population than Western Europe and the US/Canada combined. Like most states on the planet, it became independent from European empires within living memory. This post-colonial experience, the much greater political instability common outside of the postwar West, and its current authoritarian turn (again part of a wider phenomenon), make India a useful case to think about political participation in more globally relevant ways. The following brief survey of the trajectories of popular organizing and mobilizing in India from the 1920s to the present show us how important it is to gain distance from Western-centric assumptions about political participation. It also gives us the opportunity to show how Marxist perspectives on political participation work in an extended example.

Struggles for Political Participation in India

Nowhere else in the world do voters go to the polls in such large numbers as in India, and, significantly, India's poor exercise the right to vote more eagerly and in greater proportion than the country's middle classes and elites. However, voting in elections is only one of a great variety of ways that the country's popular classes and subaltern citizens participate in political life. In fact, if we consider how India has developed as a modern nation-state from the late colonial era until the present, the picture that emerges is one in which popular movements have repeatedly contested, negotiated, and changed both significant relations of social power—for example, power relations based on class, caste, and gender—and state–society relations. In doing so, these movements have also changed both the form of political participation, and the terms on which political participation actually takes place—as Marxists have always insisted they do.

Let us consider, first of all, the trajectory of India's freedom movement from 1920 onwards. As with many other anticolonial movements, modern Indian nationalism began as an elite pursuit. The Indian National Congress (Congress) which was formed in 1885 to lobby for reforms in the colonial state apparatus consisted largely of middle-class professionals, and ↳ pursued a moderate strategy of advocacy. This began to change with Gandhi's ascendancy as its leader. In Gandhi's view, India's rural masses had to be at the core of the struggle for freedom. Consequently, Congress was reorganized to enable participation from beyond the narrow confines of the urban educated and professional classes. According to Chandra et al. (2000: 14), this strategy made it possible for Congress to position itself at the helm of "a mass movement which mobilized the people to the widest possible extent."

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However, the popular classes that made their way into the Congress organization did not simply file in passively behind leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru. On the contrary, they very often interpreted ideas of independence and freedom in ways that were far more radical than what the Congress leadership propagated—and, crucially, they also acted on these interpretations in militant and sometimes violent ways. Consequently, each of the nation-wide mobilizations that took place between the early 1920s and the early 1940s—the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement—were marked by forms of popular collective action that challenged existing forms of class and caste power more fundamentally than what the Congress leadership was prepared to go along with. In this sense, India's freedom movement was itself an arena for struggle over the forms and terms of political participation. On the one hand, the leaders of Congress wanted what has been referred to as "controlled mass participation" (Sarkar 1983: 180). On the other hand, popular classes often participated in the freedom struggle in order to turn their worlds upside down—for instance, by overthrowing exploitative and oppressive forms of landlordism—by any means necessary, including violence. If we read these dynamics from a Marxist point of view, what emerges is a dual struggle against constraints on political participation—one against the institutionalization of white supremacy in colonial rule and the other against the bourgeois politics of the nationalist leadership.

Ultimately, the Congress leadership succeeded in curbing popular radicalism through a combination of demobilization and coercion. Indeed, as independence was drawing closer and Congress became a government-in-waiting and eventually a movement-become-state, subaltern collective action was increasingly smashed by the coercive force of the state—with the crushing of the Telangana uprising in the early 1950s being a case in point (see Purushotham 2019). Consequently, while the country's popular classes had, in many ways, set a new standard for political participation during the freedom movement, the first twenty years of India's independent nationhood (1947–1967) was marked by a truce line, defined, on the one hand, by the hegemonic position of the Congress in electoral politics, and, on the other hand, by the disintegration of subaltern social movements that ceded their capacity for collective action to "the strong hand of the Nehruvian state" (Ray and Katzenstein 2005: 14). Congress hegemony was based on its ability to secure the support of dominant landowning castes in the countryside, who in turn commanded the vote

banks that the Congress relied upon in the electoral arena. The political participation of popular classes, in other words, was circumscribed and controlled—at least for some time (see Frankel 2004). In fact, the workings of Congress hegemony can be understood as a bulwark against the transformative potential of popular struggles for participation from below, which pushed against the confines of bourgeois politics during the nationalist movement.

However, in the late 1960s, this truce line began to unravel. The hegemonic power of Congress was waning, and the eruption of the Naxalite revolt in West Bengal in 1967—a guerrilla insurgency headed by the Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist—signaled the end of subaltern acquiescence and the beginning of a decade in which India would ↳ witness the rise of new social movements which organized groups that had been excluded, and that mobilized around issues that had been neglected, both by the hegemonic Congress Party and by the parliamentary left parties. Among the most significant movements of the 1970s were the Chipko movement that championed the livelihoods of forest-dwelling communities in Uttarakhand, the Kerala Fishworkers' Forum that organized poor fisherfolk in Kerala against the destruction of their livelihoods by mechanized trawling, and the Shramik Sangathana that mobilized Bhil Adivasis in western India around issues of agricultural wages, land control, and forest rights. The 1970s also witnessed the emergence of a new wave of feminist mobilization in India. In part this mobilization took the form of women articulating gendered concerns within the context of new social movements, but even more significantly it revolved around the emergence of an autonomous women's movement—that is, a movement of women's groups that were independent of social movements and political parties—that politicized issues such as violence against women, religious fundamentalism, and communalism, and women's economic marginalization.

These social movements articulated radical critiques of the exclusionary nature of India's postcolonial democracy as well as visions for a more participatory politics and socially just development, and were a political force to be reckoned with throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Parallel with these developments, Dalits and lower-caste groups organized their own political parties and began to vote independently of the mediation of dominant landowning castes. One of the key pivots of India's new lower-caste movement—a movement that has been referred to as a "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot 2003)—has been the issue of expanded reservations of government jobs and educational opportunities for Dalits and lower-caste groups. One of the signal achievements in this regard was the introduction of job reservations for lower-caste groups (the so-called Other Backward Classes) by the National Front government—a movement-supported government—in 1990.

In this process, Congress hegemony was sundered, and new truce lines were drawn as political institutions and political culture in India were reshaped in many ways. However, as much as the rise of new social movements and the crystallization of new lower-caste movements and parties propelled a deepening of Indian democracy by bringing new groups and issues into the domain of political participation, the decade of the 1990s was ultimately shaped by India's turn to neoliberal economic policies and the rise of Hindu nationalism as a national political force. Several of the social movements that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s entered into phases of abeyance, fragmentation, and stagnation—and some, for example the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), confronted serious defeats. Some movements— India's feminist movement being a case in point—increasingly turned to the NGO format to sustain their activity, and concentrated on advocacy for legal reforms as a way to achieve progressive social change. Whereas professionalized advocacy has been able to win some such reforms, there is little doubt that NGOization and advocacy have less disruptive power, and therefore also less anti-systemic transformative potential, than the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

None of this is to say that the challenge of subaltern collective action has been permanently domesticated in India. On the contrary, Indian popular politics continues to be reinvigorated by new conflicts. The first two decades of the twenty-first century, for example, saw the proliferation of protest against the dispossession

of rural communities—India's land wars—as a result of Special Economic Zones and mining. Similarly, the 2010s witnessed the emergence of new and innovative forms of feminist and queer activism that once again began to shift the parameters of political participation in India. And while electoral politics in the country has come to be dominated by the authoritarian populism of Narendra Modi and the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party since 2014, those who find themselves at the receiving end of the governing party's blend of religious majoritarianism and neoliberalism are fighting back. The introduction of anti-Muslim citizenship laws in late 2019, for example, was resisted through massive nationwide protests that were only disbanded after the imposition of a national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, at the time of writing, Indian farmers are engaged in a militant, long-term protest to roll back market-oriented reforms. Both struggles underline the Marxist theme of the persistent power of popular classes to challenge and change the forms and terms of political participation, even in the face of an authoritarian onslaught.

Conclusion: Popular Political Participation since the Crash

As already noted, Marxism's historical focus means that it *expects* the nature and meaning of popular participation to continue changing. This chapter, therefore, concludes with some considerations on political participation in what might be called late neoliberalism, since the 2007–2008 economic crash. Neoliberalism was already entering its twilight in terms of the ability to satisfy the various members of its alliance before the crash (Cox and Nilsen 2014). Since then, the shift to austerity politics, an accumulation strategy which has only seriously been displaced by the massive state interventions required by Covid-19, meant its declining reliance on prior forms of political participation and a need to construct new forms of right-wing opinion politics and crony capitalism. These inherently unstable combinations were necessarily short term, tied to the increasingly short perspectives of Western capital in particular. This background makes it possible to start considering the nature of popular participation in the 2010s and forward into the post-virus context.

We can start with the Euro-American world, where the presumption of stable forms of political participation once had most purchase. At present this includes some 22.6 percent of the world's population —if we stretch a point and include not just "the West" but post-Soviet East and Central Europe and Latin America, regions which share some political languages and traditions with Western Europe, the US, and Canada, but whose actual history of popular participation is radically different.

In this world, recent decades have seen a crumbling of once-high levels of institutionalized participation in "mainstream" politics, with the Pasokification of the center left and the rise of right-wing opinion politics largely organized through the media, shading into an overtly racist and violent far right. *Popular* participation in politics has struggled to find a new home after the collapse of unions, social democratic parties, and (in countries like France or Italy) mass communist parties. Both electoralist and horizontal strategies to overcome this have reached an impasse, which has appeared like the encounter of an irresistible force with an immovable object: at times very large levels of popular mobilization (electorally or on the streets) failed to significantly shift the structures of neoliberalism, despite (importantly) decisively undermining its popular legitimacy. This was also true for those countries where left-led governments took power, whether in Greece or in the "pink tide" of Brazil, Argentina, or Chile. All of these societies saw large-scale popular involvement on the streets but separated from reformist governments, which were effectively defeated.

The deeper problem of both electoralism and horizontalism of the Occupy or *indignad@s* kind in most cases, however, has been their relatively shallow roots, born of a primacy of the political which has been celebrated in voluntarist ways but failed to engage with the challenge that Barker (1995) discussed of how to throw off

the "muck of ages" (the social relationships and cultural forms of capitalist hegemony) or that of articulating Lebowitz' (2003) "political economy of labor." Consistent with this analysis, the most sustained forms of challenge to neoliberalism have not been those which have aimed for quick mobilization and rapid headlines but those which have either been grounded in existing popular institutions—notably Indigenous self-organization in the Andes but also the bringing together of a "movement of movements" in the early 2000s—and those where near-revolutionary conditions have allowed for extensive and rapid forms of popular self-organization, such as the Argentinian uprising of 2001 or the *mareas* of the Spanish 15M movement.

Elsewhere, in the space marked by this "twilight of neoliberalism" (Cox and Nilsen 2014), we have seen a flourishing of (largely unstable) experimentations with violent or authoritarian, far-right or racist governments: Trump and Brexit, Bolsonaro and Orbán, France and Poland. The question of popular participation remains a crucial problem in these regions, rather than something which has been adequately resolved. The strengths of a Marxist analysis in this context include its refusal to develop a grand theory of the new shape of world politics on the basis, for example, of a highly-visible but local and fragile experiment like Trump—and its insistence rather on historicizing the problem. In this view, the current crisis is marked by a crisis of hegemony, producing a search from above for new forms of popular consent for neoliberalism within the core—but also by the declining capacity of popular movements to articulate themselves effectively in institutional ways.

By contrast, popular politics in most of Asia and Africa (76.8% of our species) has *never* worked as traditional models implied: not under colonialism, not in the independence struggles of the mid-twentieth century, and not subsequently. In fact, what is most visible is the *different* trajectories taken in each of these periods, as movements became states, successfully channeling some popular movements and keeping others to the margins—and then, under neoliberalism, increasingly marginalizing once core peasant or working-class supporters. We have already discussed the numerically crucial Indian case, paralleled perhaps by Turkey: in both countries long-standing and well-organized forms of right-wing religious politics have come to power that can only be sustained by a constant search for enemies and (despite their mass base) continuous erosion of even the appearance of democracy. By contrast, the Chinese state—one of the few survivors of the collapse of the "second world" in 1989–1990 thanks to successful repression—remains extraordinarily powerful, able to survive multiple peripheral conflicts (Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, India) and to keep the constant bubbling-up of labor and rural unrest fragmented and local. Myanmar—where the 2021 coup is ongoing as we write—raises the question of how long this strategy is viable in any weaker state.

In South Africa, a different scenario again plays out. Despite claims for a "revolt of the poors," most community protest remains loyal to (while making contentious claims on) the ANC. As in India or Ireland in the post-independence decades, political participation largely takes place within and around the structures of a movement-become-state. The ↳ marginalization of the radical shack-dwellers of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the dissident labor energies that were gunned down in Marikana, and the remarkable moment of Rhodes Must Fall all mark possible alternatives that are as yet too weak to threaten continuing ANC hegemony, not least within the pandemic: lockdown measures massively impacted informal livelihoods in townships and shantytowns, with unemployment reaching 34 percent.

Part of what this whistlestop tour suggests is the continuing problem of the nation-state as the space in which popular hopes have historically been vested—whether in the once national-developmentalist South, the post-Soviet context, or western post-Fordist states. Neoliberalism is increasingly incapable of mobilizing participation behind anything other than far-right banners of various kinds; center-left electoralisms can neither change the structure nor find effective avenues for mass participation; and the scope for articulating "movement of movements" alternatives seems to have declined since the turn of the century.

Put another way, if Hardt and Negri (2000) were wrong to argue that the nation-state had ceased to be the central location of politics, nonetheless its declining economic and cultural power, and its declining relevance for organizing popular participation, constitutes what Gramsci (1971) would identify as an organic rather than simply conjunctural crisis. The impasse just sketched—where "radical reformist" electoralisms cannot transform neoliberalism, and horizontal mobilizations cannot overthrow it—forces us to think about the limits of conventional forms of political participation.

In this particular context, two sets of experiences seem particularly significant. On the world-historical stage, the Zapatista revolution in Chiapas and the women's revolution in Rojava have punched massively above the weight of the small, poor, and historically oppressed populations involved, particularly given the forces arrayed against them—a fact clearly tied to their capacity to engage a sustained level of popular mobilization absent from most struggles around the world, but reminiscent of earlier decades of revolutionary upheaval. Their rejection of the goal of independent statehood, rooting in multi-ethnic populations, and centering of a dramatic change in gender relations in the everyday lives of the poor are surely a key part of this story, and have to be seen as telling us something significant about the nature of power in the twenty-first century.

So too with Indigenous movements around the world, which again punch well above their weight in opposing fossil fuel and other forms of extractivism and accumulation by dispossession. Again, their non-state nature—along with the centrality of defending a way of life partly anchored outside the sphere of capitalist production rather than simply negotiating distributional issues within that sphere—seems important in understanding their effectiveness.

To say this is not to celebrate these or to condemn other experiences: it is in any case unlikely that many readers of these pages will be in any position to emulate them. Rather, what Marxist analysis encourages us to do is to pay close attention to them precisely as *changing* forms of popular participation—at the same time as paying attention to the *declining* effectiveness of other such forms.

More generally, in a world of reviving authoritarianisms, postcolonial and post socialist states, right-wing populisms and contested international forms of governance, Marxist analyses encourage us to move away from idealizing a golden age or perfect ideal of democracy and instead encourage us to ask how particular, historically specific forms enable or constrain popular political subjectivity and the exercise of popular power—and how the ebb ↳ and flow of social movements, new authoritarianisms, and corporate governance in turn shape those forms.

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The basic question remains, as it was for Marx and Engels, to identify the changing ways in which the poor, the powerless, and those at the bottom of hierarchies of race, gender, and so on attempt to gain some control over the social conditions that shape their lives; how the wealthy, powerful, and privileged attempt to repress, channel, or co-opt these struggles, and how this process is shaping not just the forms of the twenty-first century state but those of power more generally.

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