

Movements in Post/Socialisms

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The 20th century saw the establishment of, and experimentation within, socialist states across the globe. These efforts were variously praised, critiqued, condemned and their ‘socialist’ nature disputed. This issue aims to ask about the movements that have come in the wake of the collapse and transformation of these diverse regimes, i.e. in the period and space of post-socialisms. At the same time it introduces different discourses on collective action that are widespread here.

A quarter of century ago, a massive wave of political protest shook state socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and Asia. In many countries these events paved the way for far-reaching societal transformation, embedding Western-style hyper-capitalist economies and representative democracy. In some locations the existing regimes succeeded in taming the efforts around economic and political liberalisation, in other locations they did not. Social movements were central in these processes and followed different paths: they led the transformative events and became part of new elites/regimes/states; they drew back to the realm of civil society after they initiated regime change; they resisted efforts for regime change; and they were repressed and demobilised when the regime succeeded in maintaining the status quo.

Not only did movements participate in and resist ‘eventful protests’ in 1989/1990, but they were also influenced by these events in the following decades. Again, different trajectories were observed in different locations. Eastern Europe has soon become populated by “post-communist” governmentalities combining anti-utopian ideologies, open anti-communism aiming to discredit the political Left and restricted visions of civil society and citizen participation. These effectively paralysed attempts for transgressive critique of the newly established political-economic order.

There were several conditions that enabled this. First, formerly repressed dissident cultures that came to the forefront after 1989/1990 and new political elites brought out and authorised the development of conceptions of democracy, political participation and civil society that were often fundamentally ethical in character, averse to the state and institutionalized politics and suspicious towards any form of popular collective action, pre-1989 mass organizations or progressive political critique (Ost 1990; Celichowski 2004).

Second, the spread of ‘development aid’ for ‘underdeveloped’ post-communist civil societies — provided by the United States, the European Union and various private foundations — contributed to the NGO-isation of civil society organisations and the import and emulation of new forms and agendas of activism. This ‘new’ or ‘proper’ civil society activism - often duplicating the liberal agenda and the NGO successors to the Western European movements of the 1980s - started to gain political relevance at the expense of grassroots, radical and other dissident movements (Aksartova 2006; Jacobsson 2012).

This development has resulted in an increasing gap between citizens and civil society organisations in many Eastern European societies, and contributed to the massive rise of new channels of popular discontent that began to be driven by xenophobic, nationalist or conservative actors. Alienation between ‘good’ civil society organizations and citizens who were losing ground during the processes of political, economic and cultural transformations has become apparent in the sphere of politics and civic advocacy, paralleling some of Sen’s arguments about ‘incivil’ and ‘uncivil’ society (2007).

On the other hand, and despite the massive patience of the citizens during times of major socioeconomic transitions (Greskovits 1998), some of the recent economic and political upheavals have led to a certain politicization of the established civic sphere and provoked at least episodic grassroots solidarity mobilisations – from rather isolated global justice activism and anti-war movement, to labour protests against the austerity measures during the Great Recession. At the same time, new types of grassroots urban activism aiming at building social and political ties from below started to pop up (Jacobsson 2015).

Although all can be called post-socialist societies, some very different trajectories of political activism and protest may be identified in Eastern Europe today - not only because of different cultural settings, societal discourses or politics of memory (e.g. Ishchenko 2011; Gagyí 2013), but also because of the constellation of their political conflicts and elites that represent them (e.g. Císař and Navrátil 2015), or more generally because of different political layouts which generate different interactions between economic and political crises (Kriesi 2015). As in Western Europe, different countries have very different ‘social movement landscapes’ (Cox 2016).

For Chinese state socialism, the year 1989 was similarly of historical significance, mirroring changes in the Soviet Union. After Mao’s death in 1976, the Communist Party leadership had already transitioned away from state socialism in the 1980s, tentatively carrying out de-collectivisation of both rural and urban economies and opening up some political space for the growth of “civil society” and social and political movements. Formerly repressed as well as a new generation of intellectuals began to more forcefully voice political critiques, and social organisations increasingly more autonomous and independent of the state also slowly emerged.

It was with this sense of democratic aspiration that the mostly young protesters took to the street in 1989 against the lack of political reform. Led by college students but participated by millions of workers and urban residents in multiple cities across China, the short-lived movement nevertheless posed a critical challenge to the ruling Communist Party, and remained the most organised and sustained movement from below in post-socialist China (Calhoun 1994). The repression that followed not only paved the way for more market reforms but also further led to further constraining of the already limited political space for any movement from below.

Since the 1990s, the Communist Party has presided over the deepening of China's capitalist economy albeit with a significant degree of state control, and maintained a tight political grip over society and politically excluded any organised opposition. This strategy has been successful in forestalling significant challenges in the 1990s. Yet the capitalist transition has produced sharper social inequality, heightened labour exploitation, brutal land dispossession and rapid environmental degradation, all of which have engendered diverse forms of activism and social movement.

In particular, the rural land grab and abuse of power in China's vast countryside has led to the "rightful" resistance by peasants (O'Brian and Li, 2006). The exploitation of rural migrant workers in Chinese factories and construction sites alike has led to an insurgent labour movement with thousands of strikes and protest each year (Friedman 2014). More recently, episodic environmental mass street protests against chemical plants and incinerators has given hope to an environmental movement amid serious environmental deterioration. However, the repressive conditions in which China's social movements have to operate have forced them to adopt a clandestine organising model. As a result, these social movements have been highly localised, cellular and informally organised.

Apart from the specific regions where the events of 1989 took place, their effects spread well beyond. The fall of the Eastern bloc both directly and indirectly affected western intellectual landscapes: while most West European communist parties had declared independence from Moscow following the events of 1968 in particular, and subsequent movements were predominantly 'New Left' in orientation, the Soviet model had remained significant for the French and Greek parties in particular, while the old orthodoxy retained significance in some trade union and intellectual contexts. Conversely, anti-communism as a tool of power lost credibility, to be replaced by a search for new threats. Different kinds of impact were felt in majority world countries, from India to South Africa, where pro-Moscow, and in some cases pro-Beijing, parties remained powerful realities in some movement contexts (and in some cases in power).

A wide range of consequences can be seen in Latin America, where Cuban state socialism found itself faced with the transformation of their former Eastern bloc allies as well as with internal movements to transform the national political economy — including the repression of those movements. As we go to press, the related 'Bolivarian process' of socialist reform implemented by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in alliance with mass social and political movements is in crisis.

Elsewhere in Latin America, 'pink tide' governments have drawn on traditions long distinct from both Soviet-style and Chinese models of socialism, whether those of Argentina, Brazil and Chile or the more radical Ecuadorian and Bolivian approaches. Many have called this the socialism of the 21st century, while others - including movement participants - have criticised such regimes as authoritarian or 'neo-extractivist'. Finally, the now 21-year-old Zapatista uprising represents an approach whose self-definition - 'below and to the left' - is intended above all to mark them off from any form of *state* socialism.

On a wider scale still, the experience of social movements those once-socialist countries born in revolution or where social movements had a key role in the making of the state - 'movements-become-state' (Cox and Nilsen 2014) - has important parallels (and overlaps) with the anti-colonial experience. In much of the majority world, states born out of national independence struggles (some of course overtly socialist) have often been at best partially successful in fulfilling their national-developmental goals. The experience of state instrumentalisation of the memory of popular struggle, the conversion of movement organisations into part of the new framework of power - but also the desire to defend the legacy of independence - shapes the forms available to new generations of activists, in a generational arc stretching from Ireland via India to South Africa (see *Interface* 6/1 on 'anticolonial and postcolonial movements').

Returning to movements in post/socialisms, this issue forms part of an increasing development of research and theory in, on and from social movements in post/socialist contexts. Such work has a long history, reaching back to work from and on the movements that took power in those countries and the sociology of revolutions; research on unofficial workers' movements under socialism, and on the dissident movements of the postwar years; and critical reflections on and from the movements of 1989. As this potted history suggests, such work has often been deeply politicised, in many different ways.

Today too, research on movements in post/socialisms is often a highly political space. It is not only in China and Vietnam that such research is deeply suspect, or in the authoritarian circumstances of Russia and some Central Asian states. In Eastern Europe, the situation sketched out above means that social movements research is a fragile flower, with many East European researchers based outside their home countries. Western liberal and geopolitical agendas play a role too, in presenting a very particular model of movement as normative. Despite this, recent years are seeing if not a flowering of movement research then certainly a new generation of researchers: often closer to today's progressive movements than to the circumstances of 1989; more distant from national power politics than their predecessors but more aware of those dynamics than their colleagues in the one-time 'First World'; involved in global conversations but insisting on the need to understand national and regional specificities in their own terms. This special issue is a small contribution to this ongoing development.

In this issue

The three themed pieces in this issue all basically reflect on three important weak spots of contemporary post-socialist movement landscapes: these are a lack of radical imagination and knowledge, the pacification of protest cultures after regime change, and the de-politicization of new economic inequalities.

Gagy's article deals with the relationship between social movements, knowledge and political contexts in contemporary CEE. She argues that post-

socialist societies often fail to understand their situation apart from an imposed, westernized or essentializing understanding. Therefore, Gagyí continues, they are not able to nurture and give rise to the kind of activism that would reflect and raise particular local grievances as part and product of a "real" history, not of ancient, biased or artificial dichotomies.

Szulecki, Borewicz and Waluszko in their article reconstruct the emergence of environmental issues within the Polish opposition during the socialist regime, describe its strategies, and highlight the main protest activities. The emphasis here is especially on the anti-nuclear mobilization against the Żarnowiec power plant. Through this the authors attempt to show why the decline of the broad environmental movement coalition was so sharp after its mostly spectacular moments of mobilization and why it seems to have left such a weak legacy after the fall of socialism. Co-author and activist Tomasz Borewicz died just after this article's completion, and the article is dedicated to his memory.

Uhlerová focuses on the analysis of trade unions and their position in post-socialist Slovakia. More specifically the article offers an excursion into the development and reconstruction of the relations and strategies of trade unions towards the sphere of institutionalized politics and established political actors. The article demonstrates the reasons and consequences of "political neutrality" and the weakness of post-socialist trade unions and brings in important insights into the weaknesses of contemporary labour movements in CEE countries.

The non-themed section opens with three pieces around the organisation of movement power. Andrea Rigón's critique of the "tyranny of structurelessness" in the World Social Forum, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at the 2007 Nairobi Forum. Rigón argues that WSF claims to consensual and horizontal methodologies cover power inequalities and oppressive practices, and calls for a more democratic form of politics. Alessandra Renzi's article on info-capitalism and resistance explores the inter-relation between activist communication practices and modes of collective action on the one hand and the information infrastructures they rely on. She argues that coding, network structures and movements are entwined in ways that shape and constrain collective activism, and that activists should treat technology as a powerful agent rather than a neutral tool in this respect. Sandra Smeltzer and Daniel Paré's article explores how the "embodied politics" of Malaysia's pro-democracy Bersih movement has challenged the state's electoral authoritarianism. Drawing on qualitative interviews with key actors, they find that the movements' presence in public space, despite official attempts at delegitimation, has been effective in encouraging wider political participation.

We follow this with two articles on the relationship between movements and researchers. Valeria Pecorelli's thought-provoking article explores the challenges she faced as an engaged academic researching Ya Basta's Casaloca social centre in Milan. Working her way towards an appropriate methodology, negotiating her dual role as activist and researcher and reflecting on emotions and activism, the piece highlights how the personal is political and vice versa. Alissa Starodub's article asks about the epistemological and methodological

challenges of speaking from within autonomous social movements. She calls for an epistemological rebellion on the borderline between “nomad science” and “royal science” (Deleuze and Guattari) and taking the “homeplaces” of resistance as a focus for processes of relational knowledge creation.

Three pieces discuss key problems in movement strategy and ethics. Peter Waterman’s comments on the life of Third International communist organiser and communicator Willi Münzenberg highlights both the ways in which subsequent movements have largely gone beyond the manipulative notion of politics he embodied – but also the need to watch for the “little Willi” in us. Brian Martin’s action note explores the challenges faced by activists challenging the double standards of the powerful, listing five ways in which the powerful try to minimise outrage about their actions and possible movement responses. Beyond this, accentuating the double standard may be helpful: movement violence, for example, may be entirely justified but avoiding it might well be more effective in highlighting state violence. Claudia Saba’s article, finally, asks why global Palestine activism outside the Fatah - Hamas framework has largely avoided critique of the latter’s armed resistance strategy, drawing on her research on Palestine advocacy groups and their statements around Israel’s 2014 war on Gaza. She argues that the international movement with and by Palestinians could play a more constructive role in reviving political discussions around strategy.

Lastly, this issue has a wide-ranging selection of reviews. Chris Gunderson reviews Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen’s *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism* and Lesley Wood reviews Chris Dixon’s *Another Politics: Talking Across Today’s Transformative Movements*. We have reviews by Annette Behrens of Theresa O’Keefe’s *Feminist Identity Development and Activism in Revolutionary Movements* and by Bob Eastman of Betsy Leondar-Wright’s *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures*. Gino Canella reviews Todd Wolfson’s *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left* while Nick Sciallo reviews Steve Martinot’s, *The Need to Abolish the Prison System: An Ethical Indictment*. Finally, Tomás MacSheoin reviews Temitope Oriola’s *Criminal resistance: the politics of kidnapping oil workers*.

Welcome to new editors

In this issue of *Interface* we welcome three new editors. For China, Hong Kong and Taiwan Kevin Lin has kindly agreed to join us; Bjarke Skærlund Risager has joined Mandisi Majavu as reviews editor; and David Landy joins Peter Waterman and Laurence Cox for international / transnational movements. We look forward to working with them and to deepening our connections with movements and researchers through them.

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