READING NEOLIBERALISM AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT FROM ABOVE[1]

Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen

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In this article we explore the relationship between Marxist theory and social movements, in particular how this relationship works in the specific historical period that we call the twilight of neoliberalism.

Canonical social movement theory operates with a deeply reductive conceptualisation of social movements as a particular institutional level of an essentially fixed political order, separate and different from political parties, trade unions, and revolutionary transformations. Such theories also have a limited capacity to say anything of strategic substance about the struggles of the day (Barker and Cox 2011). By contrast, Marxism should have great potential as a movement-relevant theory (Bevington and Dixon 2005): it is, after all, a body of theory that has been developed from and in dialogue with the struggles of social movements that have been central to the making of the modern world. Paradoxically, however, Marxist writing lacks a theory specifically oriented towards explaining the emergence, character, and development of social movements (Barker et al. 2013).

We have sought to address these concerns by drawing on a wide range of scholarship within the Marxist tradition to formulate an understanding of movements that departs fundamentally from the central assumptions of the established canon within social movement theory. Our point of departure is Marx's conception of human nature as defined by praxis–the conscious deployment of practical capacities to satisfy needs–and the consequent understanding of social structures and historical processes as originating in conflicts over how praxis is to be organised and structured. From this starting point, we read movements as simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of praxis, and thus at the very heart of the making and unmaking of the structures and processes that underpin *both* social order *and* social change.

We thus attempt to formulate a theoretical approach that speaks to the knowledge interests of activists involved in building oppositional political projects capable of bringing about progressive social change. In doing so, we seek to reclaim Marxism as "movement theory" (Cox 2014)–that is, the kind of knowledge produced by activists as they confront difficult questions about the nature of the issues they mobilise around, the opposition that they face from above, the relations that connect their own struggles with others, and how to achieve the kind of changes that they want to see. This does not posit Marxism as the *only* theory which can speak to activist knowledge interests; it attempts to demonstrate what can be done with one of the many forms of "frozen" movement theory within critical sociological inquiry. Others too–from feminism and postcolonialism to queer theory and critical race theory–deserve exploration in terms of their implicit movement theories.

I. A Marxist theory of social movements

Conventional social movement studies, under the twin pressures of US positivism and EU funding processes, has become deeply ahistorical, taking the existence of "social movements" as a fixed institutional level (implicitly of political systems) as a given and then seeking to relate this to other spheres understood as fundamentally separate. In periods like the present, where we see solidarity economy in Greece[2] transform into policy struggle at the European level, Spanish autonomists convert themselves into a political party[3] and Irish working-class communities challenge state power[4], this perspective is intellectually feeble and politically unhelpful. Instead we take seriously movements' intention of *moving*, becoming other than they currently are–which represents a challenge for positivist research but is a long-standing historical experience which Marxism, among other theories, reflects on. More widely still, a key Marxist concern is the historical question of how to account for the existence of particular fields or institutional spheres in their current form, the relationships and conflicts between them and the processes which reshape these historically- and locally-specific arrangements.

We start from a broad reflection on praxis – the material, collective, skilled and hence also developmental ways in which human beings meet their needs and make their worlds – in particular an exploration of its conflictual aspects. We look firstly at those forms of collective agency which are by definition the most widespread and effective in normal periods, what we call "social movements from above". More specifically, forms of collective human agency that can draw on central positions of *power* (particularly within the state), a key role in *economic* direction (particularly in the organisation of paid and unpaid work) and high *cultural* prestige quite naturally draw on these resources, are shaped by these relationships, and are connected to specific social interests. This is the broad field – of alliances between elite groups around particular projects for the direction of society as a whole, and of the consent or coercion of various subaltern groups – that Gramsci (1971) discusses under the term hegemony.

Other forms of collective agency – "social movements from below" – do not have the same kinds of resources available to them and are shaped by this, in historically specific ways: the agency of the power*less*, the exploited and the culturally stigmatized quite naturally operates differently, although in a wide variety of historically specific ways. One key aspect shaping such movements is how far they are the object of attempted *coercion* by hegemonic forces or how far such forces seek their *consent* by selectively meeting the needs involved, attempting a subordinate incorporation of their organisations, etc.

These are not historically-fixed relationships: any given hegemonic alliance is built on the collapse of a previous one, following a period of organic crisis in which the earlier mode of hegemony has become unsustainable. Such crises often see substantial challenges to earlier arrangements from both above and below, seeking to reorganise power, wealth and culture in their own interests under a new hegemonic alliance. The fields which emerge, and their particular character, can be understood as representing truce lines from previous struggles. In normal periods conflict within

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/23/greece-solidarity-movement-cooperatives-syriza
[3] https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cristina-flesher-fominaya/%E2%80%9Cspain-is-different%E2%80%9D-podemos-and-15m
[4] http://anarchism.pageabode.com/andrewnflood/origins-development-water-charges-ireland

these fields takes a lower-level character, not seeking to transform or abolish the fields; crises are precisely those moments in which significant social forces effectively place particular institutional and structural arrangements in question, whether from above or below.

Because of the conflicts through which such arrangements are arrived at, any homogenising account of a given social formation is at best partial. The different "worlds of welfare capitalism", "paths to neoliberalism", "cleavage structures", "movement landscapes" etc. are the local outcomes of struggles which are partly contingent. We need to see both the broad (in fact global) social relationships which structure the big picture, and the concrete way in which these relationships intersect in different times and places, producing different outcomes and allowing local actors to respond to their particular situation within the wider context. This is a political analysis, paying particular attention to how the specific shapes of the social world are the outcome and object of power struggles, but also recognising the contingency and agency involved and hence the potential for things to be otherwise.

Turning to social movements from below, we define these in ways that do not simply eternalise the specific institutional arrangements of a given time or place (as when Cold War social movement theory assumes a categorical distinction between low-level resistance, popular culture, labour struggles, community organising, religion and ethnicity, political parties, and revolutionary periods). We start from the given social relationships within which people find themselves and to which they respond in trying to meet their needs; these responses can become patterned as *local rationalities*. When (as often) such rationalities find themselves in conflict with structures of social power, representing opposing interests and holding cultural authority, they can articulate themselves as what Williams (1989: 249) calls *militant particularisms*. At times such particularisms can come to recognise themselves in one another and develop into *campaigns* around a particular issue or a particular set of interests. Infrequently, but dramatically, such campaigns may come together around a *social movement project*, a substantial challenge to hegemony around a different vision of how society should be structured. At times, such projects can provoke *organic crises* as they disrupt hegemonic alliances.

This perspective is developmental (rather than assuming that a given "movement", or movements as such, are permanently fixed in a particular form) and organised in terms of potential. It is not that the process *must* move from one step to another – most do not, and movements from above often seek to roll this process back, to demobilise. But it is crucial analytically, in any longer perspective, and politically, to recognise that where movements *currently* are is not always the limit of what is *possible* . Writing about Irish movements in 2014, we could articulate the *potential* for a new wave of movements developing outside existing institutions, but the massive water charges struggle had not yet taken place. Here a sociology defined by naturalising current institutional contexts serves us poorly.

II. Neoliberalism as a social movement from above

We now turn to exploring how different phases of capitalist development derive their distinct political economies from cycles of struggle between movements from above and below in the context of systematic crises. Our goal is a politically enabling reading of accumulation strategies and state forms as contested and contingent, rather than systematic givens. Elsewhere (Cox and Nilsen

2014) we have outlined a long view of how capitalism has been shaped by such cycles of struggle; here we focus on neoliberalism as a social movement from above, currently in a crisis which we refer to as its twilight period.

The neoliberal project originates in the collapse of the state-centred form of capitalist development that was hegemonic across the North-South axis from the post-war years until the early 1970s, and which was shaped in very fundamental ways by reforms that had been won by the social movements of working classes and colonised peoples in the first half of the twentieth century. This unravelling took the form of a crisis that was simultaneously economic and political: the economies of the global North stagnated while those of the global South witnessed the accumulation of vast debts, and elites across the North-South axis were confronted by new waves of labour militancy and radical popular movements that destabilised their hegemonic positions. In our analysis, neoliberalism is best understood as a collective response to this situation, predicated on restoring the power of capital over labour by reversing many of the victories won by movements from below, and in doing so disembedding capitalist accumulation from the institutionalised regulations that had circumscribed commodification in the post-war years.

How do we understand this response in terms of collective agency from above? Firstly, the emergence of what Jones (2012) refers to as "the intellectual infrastructure of neoliberalism" is of crucial importance. This process, initiated in the interwar period, revolved around the building of a transatlantic network of think-tanks that created and synthesized a neoliberal policy agenda as an alternative to the postwar Keynesian orthodoxy. The making and operations of this network—including the Mont Pelerin Society, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Centre for Policy Studies—were in turn closely linked to a second key process, the rise of a significant fraction of corporate capital that sought to break with the regulatory regimes of postwar capitalism and their grounding in the nation state. During the 1960s and 1970s, this fraction—which we refer to as transnational capital—became increasingly organised and increasingly systematic in its advocacy of neoliberal policy prescriptions. Thirdly, the political breakthrough of the neoliberal project in the global North[5] was ensured by the construction of links between think-tanks, transnational capital and forces in British and American politics that promulgated new policy regimes fusing sociocultural conservatism with a market-oriented critique of Keynesian economics.

While the breakthrough of the neoliberal project in the global North was heralded by Reagan and Thatcher's electoral victories, its global extension was achieved through the response of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF to the outbreak of a crippling debt crisis in the global South[6] in the early 1980s. Expressing how neoliberal ideas had come to define these institutions' policy agenda, the crisis was met with Structural Adjustment Programmes that enforced thoroughgoing restructuring through financial austerity and economic liberalisation. This process, however, was not one in which Northern institutions simply imposed a policy agenda on Southern states. It was equally driven by the agency of elite groups in the global South who sought to break with the state-led developmentalism that had prevailed across Asia, Africa and Latin America since the post-war years. Indeed, the authoritarian regimes installed in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s

provided a vital arena for dress rehearsals foreshadowing the neoliberal turn that followed in subsequent decades[7].

The 1990s witnessed some key changes in the form of the neoliberal project, as the New Right gave way to New Labour and "poverty reduction" came to substitute for structural adjustment, in a turn which emphasized technocratic institution-building to secure the long-term consolidation of the project's key achievement—the disembedding of the market[8] and the restoration of the power of capital over labour.

The political economy of neoliberalism

If we take a step back and consider neoliberalism as a whole, these achievements are inscribed in its political economy. In terms of economic restructuring, the neoliberal project was oriented towards restoring profitability for corporate capital, achieved by breaking the power of organised capital and reversing the processes of decommodification that characterised state-centred capitalism (in various ways and degrees) after 1945. The power of organised labour was undermined through the construction of a new geography of production: the large-scale relocation of manufacturing from North to South enabled capital both to break free from the compromises that had been struck with working-class movements in the post-war era, and to benefit from massive pools of cheap labour in Asia and Latin America in particular. Decommodification has been reversed through a range of practices that Harvey (2009) calls "accumulation by dispossession" – basically, the conversion of public goods and services, elements of the social wage, and common property resources into capital through state-orchestrated processes of privatisation and financialisation.

Judged in terms of its ability to restore profitability, the neoliberal project has been a success: in contrast to 1970s stagnation, the neoliberal decades have witnessed profits at 60 to 75 per cent of the record levels of the 1950s and 1960s. However, the restoration of profits went hand in hand with an ever-growing gap between productivity and wages. As production has been reorganised in the North and the exploitation of cheap labour in the South has increased, the wealth created by the global working classes has accrued largely to capital. The manifestation of this lop-sided trajectory can be found in the staggering inequality that characterises the world economy: according to recent estimates[9], the richest 1 per cent of the world's population will control more than 50 per cent of global wealth by 2016. In the OECD countries, inequalities increased steadily between 1978 and 2007[10], a trend exacerbated by economic crisis over the following years. And in the emerging markets in the global South – such as India, China, and South Africa– economic growth has coincided with dramatic increases in inequality between ascendant elites and the mass of the population (UNDP 2013).

As a movement from above, the neoliberal project has been concerned with first seizing and then transforming the state in some very important respects. This is evident in how the modus operandi of the state has involved both facilitating the disembedding of accumulation across space and governing social insecurity through workfare and punitive containment. The disembedding of accumulation is propelled by the introduction of policies geared towards securing property rights, liberalising national investment regimes, granting access to transnational capital, imposing fiscal

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[7] http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/12/05/chiles-neoliberal-flip-flop/
[8] http://www.onthecommons.org/why-karl-polanyi-still-matters
[9] http://www.oxfam.org/en/research/wealth-having-it-all-and-wanting-more
[10] http://www.oxfam.org/en/research/wealth-having-it-all-and-wanting-more

restraint, and creating flexible labour markets. Significantly, much of this activity is closely related through imposition of binding constraints on macro-economic policy-making through agreements administered by international financial institutions and transnational inter-governmental bodies.

The new forms of social insecurity thrown up by neoliberal restructuring are increasingly governed through workfare regimes seeking to regulate an ever-growing population of unemployed and underemployed in relation to precarious labour markets by making access to benefits and assistance conditional upon participation in work-enforcing programmes. While workfare can be understood as a way of imposing market discipline on individual bodies and everyday routines, the increasing orientation towards social control is also visible in the growing scope and intensity of punishment[11]. This is most pronounced in the US, where the racial and social profile of a prison population that has grown by some 450 per cent since the early 1980s mirrors – as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) shows in her seminal study *Golden Gulag* – that of the country's working or workless poor. Punitive containment has also made inroads in Europe via transnational policy networks, and is particularly evident in the aggressive policing of the border zones between North and South – most brutally in the current refugee crisis. In the global South, the trend is manifest in the increasingly militarised policing of the urban environments that house the region's vast informal working classes.

The current crisis

It was the same accumulation strategies that were central to the restoration of class power authored by the neoliberal project which fomented the collapse in world financial markets, and the subsequent debt crises and recessions for which austerity is touted as a solution.

The current crisis—both in its economic origins and its social consequences—has done much to erode the legitimacy of a central ideological trope of the neoliberal project: the claim that individuals who act as entrepreneurial financial subjects will maximise their well-being through prudent marketplace investments. This has eroded support for neoliberalism, especially perhaps among middle classes who banked on promises of material benefits and social mobility (Foster 2008). In this context, the widespread application of austerity is not necessarily a sign of strength on the part of economic and political elites. Rather, it signals that movements from below encounter elites who have little flexibility, and thus prefer coercion to making concessions in return for consent.

Alongisde this is the entwining of the crisis of neoliberalism with the unravelling of US hegemony in the world-system (Wallerstein 2003). This encompasses not only the waning of American economic supremacy since the 1970s, but also the erosion of support for the War on Terror, the new-found capacity of Latin American states to distance themselves from US tutelage, and the difficulty in recruiting support for military interventions in Georgia, Syria or Ukraine, showing clear tendencies towards the weakening of Washington's geopolitical clout.

This is the twilight of neoliberalism: a moment when political and economic elites are incapable of solving fundamental contradictions through new hegemonic projects. This is also the terrain upon which movements from below mobilise to make their own history after the twilight of neoliberalism fades to black. Elites are no longer able to rule as they have been accustomed, and ordinary people are no longer willing to go on being governed as they have been. So how can we understand the current situation?

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[11] https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/lo%C3%AFc-wacquant/punitive-regulation-of-poverty-in-neoliberal-age

III. A global movement wave

Since the turn of the millennium we have seen a global wave of movements from below, with most continuity in Latin America and western Europe. South America in particular saw the breakdown of the US' historical regional hegemony and of neoliberal orthodoxy, with a complex range of relationships between states and popular movements indicating that there is more than one possible way forward. In Europe, this continuity runs from the "movement of movements" around the turn of the millennium through the largest global protests ever on February 15, 2003 (where western Europe was the numerical centre of gravity), into anti-austerity resistance from the onset of the financial crisis, the indignad@s and Occupy of the early 2010s and on to today. As in Latin America, there is substantial movement continuity (Flesher Fominaya 2015), but less political impact.

Elsewhere the two highpoints of popular mobilisation (centred around the years 2000 and 2011) observable in Europe are more sharply separated, as in the US and Australia where post-9/11 repression brought about a clear break in the movement (Humphrys 2013), or in the Arab world where large-scale mobilisation primarily refers to the second of these peaks, but with some development from the earlier movement against the US' war in Iraq. Finally, India and China have long-standing and large-scale social movements but relatively fragmented and isolated, less able to come together around a social movement project. This "uneven and combined development of social movement mobilisation" mirrors previous historical experience. Organic crises are felt most sharply in regions where hegemony is most problematic and where movements can develop most fully. Thus the current European manifestation of the crisis is worth a closer look.

Understanding the European crisis

In (primarily western) Europe we have experienced a long stalemate where popular mobilisations on a scale that in other decades might have constituted an irresistible force have met the immovable object of neoliberal policy. Yet, also unlike previous experiences, the massive challenge to state power and legitimacy made by such mobilisations has *not* been effectively repressed; despite the shootings of protestors at Gothenburg and the killing of Carlo Giuliani in Genoa in 2001, western European states cannot muster sufficient consent for lethal repression (Cox 2014b).

This is another manifestation of the crisis of neoliberal hegemony –as is the immense difficulty experienced by those elites who are aware of the crisis in articulating a different way forward, seen over the long tug-of-war between the EU and Greece. Underlying the tensions within EU institutions between the hardline approach and voices of doubt was declining popular and elite support for neoliberalism. Like previous accumulation strategies, neoliberalism has a limited shelf-life, given not least by the declining returns to participants in the hegemonic alliance - and thus their increasing tendency to weigh up the costs of exit as against those of continued loyalty. Under these circumstances, elites understandably attempt to ride out the crisis without rearrangements that might change these calculations for participants, producing a "fierce but brittle" hegemony. This crisis is most clearly manifested on the periphery (Iceland, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland), taking right-wing nationalist forms in some core and Eastern countries (UK, Germany, Poland, Hungary): however there are significant exceptions, such as Nuit Debout in France.

Keeping austerity going

As has been widely noted, the intra-EU conflict officially represented as between nation-states is better understood as a conflict *within* those countries; orthodox neoliberal governments are determined to avoid anything which might boost support for local anti-austerity movements, even if it might benefit their own economies in strictly policy terms. The Greeks could not be seen to win the confrontation with the EU – lest others get ideas.

There is also, however, a question of the direction of the EU as a whole, particularly visible in the first days after the Greek election. In this context, hardliners took the perspective of a purely technical, financial logic in which there is no alternative to the continued operation of institutional arrangements that enshrine neoliberalism as a mode of rule – not simply individual bailout arrangements, but packages like the Six Pack and the Fiscal Compact which apply to all or most member states.

Doubting voices, at times represented by France, were more concerned about the conditions for continuing consent to EU policy, both in the socio-economic sense in which (for example) Barroso commented in 2013 that Europe is approaching the limits of political sustainability of austerity policies[12] and in the more narrowly political sense in which legitimate rule has increasingly been suspended, not only through EU-wide agreements and Troika bailout conditions, but also through the re-running of referenda, the installation of technical governments, the corruption of governments elected on anti-austerity mandates and Portugal's "soft coup".

It is not clear that this particular circle can be squared: if Europeans (and not only Spanish and Irish) believed that alternatives to austerity politics might win, this could have unleashed a tidal wave of popular radicalism far beyond the moderate demands of the Greek negotiating position. Conversely, the failure to make concessions (Schäuble's insistence that the results of elections do not matter) risks a substantial erosion of consent in a Europe whose elites increasingly lack popular support. The solidarity call for support for Greece from leading German and Austrian trade unionists[13] highlighted this. As we wrote in mid-2015, "if popular political agency is dormant in much of Europe (resigned to the continuation of things as they are or unwilling to step outside of existing arrangements), this cannot be taken for granted as the proponents of a purely technical neoliberalism imposed by institutional force would like." The Brexit debate and the rise of AfD underline this in particularly destructive ways.

European movements from below

It is important, however, to keep our attention on the vast iceberg of popular movements, not simply on the party elements that poke above the surface of the water. If Gramsci imagined the political party as a Modern Prince, for many present-day commentators it is a Prince Charming, an easy solution to complex problems that can be arrived at within a safely-bounded perspective. The Latin American experience has not been so simple: if we have seen a series of left governments propelled into power by popular movements, some implementing quite dramatic changes, the relationships between governing parties and movements have been complex, with issues of clientelism and co-option as well as outright repression alongside more positive experiences of radical states nurturing popular decision-making capacity.

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[12] http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/barroso-says-austerity-in-europe-has-reached-its-limits-a-896019.html
[13] http://links.org.au/node/4280

In fact, it is not the party situation that aligns Greece (where Syriza has a long and relatively "classical" left genealogy) with Spain (where Podemos is a recent creation from a historically anti-institutional left milieu) and Ireland (where electoral contenders include three Trotskyist organisations, Sinn Féin dabbling in left populism, an ex-Labour Party formation and various independent leftists). It is that these manifestations within the political system reflect a significant breakdown of neoliberal hegemony within society and a massive movement upsurge.

In Ireland, after several years of traditionalist and ineffectual resistance to austerity measures, the collapse of the Trotskyist-led campaign against household charges opened a space for direct resistance to the installation of water meters in working-class estates with long histories of community activism (see also the struggle for public water in Italy[14]). This movement spread like wildfire to traditionally conservative parts of the country, provoking a crisis of state power: in the effective prevention of metering in many areas, the removal of installed meters, a non-payment campaign including well over half the population, some of the largest protests in living memory, the defection of several unions from Labour Party hegemony and the recent near-failure to form any government because of the issue.

Party politics struggles to contain or represent such movements – not least because the neoliberal movement from above sought to enshrine its power by removing so much of what matters for popular movements from the sphere of democratic decision-making.

Going beyond the limits

Efforts are being made at national and EU level to bring movements together around resistance to austerity. The kinds of forces gathered around things like Blockupy, Altersummit or DiEM25 can hardly be seen as a social movement project in our terms, but they do rest on fifteen years of a European "movement of movements", close collaboration in other fields such as climate justice and anti-war activism, and a widespread realisation that the issues at stake are pan-European. The *potential* for something broader is there, and how far movements from below can respond to this and recognise themselves in each other and against neo-liberalism will be determining for Europe's future direction. In particular, the question is whether the crisis of democratic legitimacy on Europe's southern and western fringe – ongoing since the Icelandic saucepan revolution of 2008 (Júlíusson and Helgason 2013) – can find a resonance with deeper tensions inside core European states.

How does this regional crisis relate to the global picture? As noted above global waves of movement mobilisation are always deeply uneven: the hegemonic strength of a particular accumulation strategy, and popular capacity to develop a wider social movement project combining a broad movement alliance with a challenge to that accumulation strategy, vary dramatically between different regions as well as within them, and cannot neatly be read off from structural indicators.

In our view, whether neoliberalism is ending is not the main question now. Such hegemonic projects have always had relatively short shelf-lives of a few decades, induced by their declining ability to meet the interests of the key members of the alliances underpinning them. The real question is how much damage neoliberalism will do in its prolonged death agonies; and, even more importantly, what (or more sociologically, who) will replace it and how.

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[14] http://ppesydney.net/the-struggle-for-public-water-in-italy/

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