Political Economy and Social Movement Studies: The class basis of protests

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The project aim at deepening reflections on the class bases of protests in contemporary social movements. I will in particular write a short volume for a major English press building upon theoretical frames I have constructed and empirical data I have collected during research on antiausterity protests (della Porta 2015; della Porta 2017; della Porta, Andretta, Fernandes, O’Connor, Romanos and Vogiazoglou 2017; della Porta, Andretta, Fernandes, Romanos and Vogiazoglou 2018), ethnonationalist mobilizations (della Porta and Portos in preparation), the student movement (della Porta, Cini and Guzman forthcoming) and new forms of labour conflicts (della Porta 2017) as well as movement parties (della Porta, Fernandez, Kouki and Mosca 2017) and referendums from below (della Porta, O’Connor, Portos and Subirats 2017). The manuscript (for which both Polity and Verso) expressed an interest aims at reaching a broad audience. In what follows, I will present the main theoretical assumptions of this work.

Why the old toolkit doesn’t work: an introduction

The austerity policies implemented during the financial crisis which from the U.S. spread to Europe around 2008 have triggered an intense wave of protest, against cuts in public expenditures that added up to privatization of public services and the deregulation of financial and labour markets. Intensifying especially in 2011 in the so called ‘Occupy movement’, contention have diffused globally in the following years, involving also countries which, as Brazil or Turkey, had been considered on the winning side of neoliberal developments (della Porta 2015, 2017a). Differently from the previous wave of protests against neoliberalism at the turn of the millennium, especially the Global Justice Movement, the anti-austerity protests developed however mainly at domestic level, following the different timing, intensity and dynamics of the financial crisis. In fact, anti-austerity protests had very different strength and forms in the different countries with varying capacity to mobilize the heterogeneous social groups that had been hit from neoliberalism and its crisis. In particular, while protest was limited in the countries in which the financial crisis – and consequent Great Recession – had hit relatively less, it grew especially when and where the social crisis, that followed austerity policies, was deeper. Also in the latter countries, however, discontent was expressed in different forms, in some cases through electoral channels, with the growth of right-wing populism, in others taking the streets and even ending up in the development of strong electoral challenges on the Left. The constellation of protests varied in particular, between more traditional mobilization through trade unions and new forms of Occupy-type protests (della Porta 2017b).

As it is often the case, this new wave of protest has revitalized social movement studies, giving new relevance to contentious politics, but also brought about some challenges for interpreting protests that did not neatly fit within existing theoretical models.
Social movement studies have developed a useful kit of concepts and theories, well adapted to understand social movements in core capitalist countries in the peak of the growth of the welfare state. This is, however, insufficient for making sense of the global contentious politics in the year 2000s. First and foremost, research on social movements has been based on the assumption that protest increases when political opportunities are more open or, at least, opening up—especially, when allies emerge in the political system. In 2011, however, strong mobilizations challenged much closed opportunities as austerity policies were used to address the financial crisis and illiberal politics (from neoconservatism to repression of opposition) spread even at the core of capitalism. The political opportunities were certainly unwelcoming for these protests, with traditional allies often turned into opponents. Rather, it was the protest itself that triggered electoral turbulence and turmoils in the party systems. Already research on Latin America had singled out the support by center-left parties for neoliberal policies as the most relevant explanation for the emergence of radical alternatives (Roberts 2015). Similarly in Europe, Greece or Spain, where anti-austerity protests have developed the most, the targets were precisely the social democratic parties in government, but political opportunities for the rise of radical left parties, addressing movement’s claims, emerged in action (della Porta et al 2017). As the diminishing of the workers as social base of reference for socialist and communist parties had been mentioned to explain their decline, the analysis of the transformations of the party system as triggered by anti-austerity protests require some reflections on the social bases which is actually mobilizing on the left.

The second factor usually considered as important for explaining social movement growth is the existence of mobilizing structures. The assumption is indeed that contentious politics need dense networks of relations that allow for block recruitment. In partial contrast with these expectations, the movements that developed since 2011 could not use much of the resources previously available for social movement structures as these had been targeted, and in part destroyed by the very development of the neoliberalism. Structures such as unions and NGOs, civil society and social movement organizations during the last few years were indeed weakened and have lost support, material resources and also symbolic recognition face to retrenchment of welfare state as well as the political illiberalism that accompanied economic neoliberalism (della Porta 2017). As Juris (2012) put it, recent movements have been triggered more by a logic of aggregation of individuals than by one of organizational networking. Also in this case, research should address the ways in which socio-economic transformations affect the organizational dynamics in class politics.

Third, social movement studies stated that framing is important for the development of collective identities that are often built upon previously existing solidarities. But in the evolution of the liquid modernity—that, as Baumann (2007) had noted had traded security for freedom, leaving the individuals isolated from the traditional sources of solidarity—solidarity framing has little resonance and identification processes are weak. In addition to those general dynamics, there are specific cultural characteristics of social groups that are exposed to larger risks in neoliberal systems that seem to jeopardise collective action. Those who mobilized in Puerta del Sol, Syntagma Square or Gezi Park were moreover to a large extent social groups that were endowed with few resources to build collective identities: not only they were quite heterogeneous but they were also perceived and perceived themselves as losers of the neoliberal developments. Among them were in fact the precarious workers, the unemployed or, even worst, those who, after the crash of the banking system, could not repay their debt and were consider
as even criminal, lacking resources of a material type but especially of the symbolic resources which are necessary in order to build collective identities. What in economic sociology has been called private Keynesianism (Crouch 2009) has pushed people to make debt they cannot repay with serious effects on individual self-consideration. How the encounters in the squares and the streets helped empowering these groups, towards the creation of common identities, is also a question that requires thinking about the linkages between macro-social transformations and the evolution of the individualistic identities, with their emphasis on personal responsibilities, that neoliberalism contributed to spread (Ross 1991).

Given the above mentioned shortcomings of the main social movement theories in explaining mobilizations during the Great Recession, assumptions about the role of political opportunities, resource mobilization and framing processes need to be updated, adding in particular a focus on the socio-economic conditions for protests (Flacks 2004; see also the special issue introduction). In this direction, this article aims at connecting the literature on social movements with (especially Marxist) contributions to the political economy of the neoliberal crisis in order to address questions about the class basis of recent anti-austerity protests. In fact, while as scholars have lamented the ‘strange disappearance’ of capitalism from social movement studies (Hertland and Goodwin 2013), the bridging of social movement studies with political economy approach is still rare—and all the more so are attempts at singling out the Marxist contribution to social movements and social movement analysis (Barker, Cox, Krinsky and Nielsen 2013). Far from reviewing all Marxist approaches to social movements, I will rather focused on a limited number of influential works in order to illuminate some aspects about the social base of the anti-austerity protests I have studied. In this perspective, I will critically reviewed some recent contributions on the different temporality of capitalism in order to single out new tool-kits which could help in the analysis of the structural conditions for protests. As far as capitalist temporalities are concerned, I surveyed analysis which have addressed long terms transformations in societal structures (looking at the specificities of neoliberal capitalism), middle-term cyclical dynamics (looking at free market and accumulation by dispossession) as well as short waves of alternance of expansions and restrictions in the business cycles (looking at the concept of movements of the crisis).

In what follows I will therefore focus, without pretense of completeness, on the potential of some most influential contributions within Marxist and post-Marxist approaches to relevant capitalist transformations in order to understand some main characteristics of the class basis of anti-austerity protests. This I will do by focusing on reflections on what I will define as different temporalities in capitalist transformations. Far from aiming at developing a coherent theory of structural conditions for protests in the neoliberal times, I shall rather critically review some aspects of these contributions which I find most promising in order to illuminate some evidences about contentious politics in times of late neoliberalism.

If we look at the Marxist, neo-Marxist, or post-Marxists approaches to the ways in which capitalism has transformed itself, in particular when addressing its own crises, we are pointed at the need to consider many temporalities, which have been also addressed, in the past, in some streams of research on social movements. In particular, I will look below at the long-term evolution of capitalist formations, medium terms socio-economic cycles as well as short waves of alternance of growth and decline.
On the big transformations in capitalist formations

Especially in Europe, social movement scholars have focused long ago on some big transformations in the societal systems, theorizing especially about so-called new social movements. In particular, the works of scholars like Alberto Melucci (1996) and Alain Touraine (1987) have certainly been useful in singling out some of the challenges for social movements in what came to be known as programmed (or post-industrial society) societies.

In Alain Touraine’s model, programmed societies followed the previously dominant agrarian, mercantile and industrial social formations, each of which was characterized by specific class conflicts. The programmed society—which he focused upon in its research on new social movements—is characterized by the “production of symbolic goods which model or transform our representation of human nature and the external world” (Touraine 1987). As the control of information constitutes the principal source of social power, conflicts are expected to move from the workplace to areas such as research and development, the elaboration of information, biomedical and technical sciences, the mass media. The central actors in social conflict are therefore no longer classes linked to industrial production but rather groups that fight on opposing views about the use and destination of cognitive and symbolic resources.

In a similar vein, Alberto Melucci (1996) addressed contemporary societies as highly differentiated systems, in which the investment in the creation of individual autonomous centres of action enters into tension with the need for closer integration, with increasing control over the very motives for human action. In his view, new social movements try to oppose the intrusion of the state and the market into social life, reclaiming the individual’s identity, and the right to determine his or her private and affective life, against the omnipresent and comprehensive manipulation of the system. Unlike the workers’ movement, new social movements do not, in Melucci’s view, limit themselves to seeking material gain, but rather challenge the widespread notions of politics and of society themselves. These new actors, rather than asking for an increase in state intervention, resist the expansion of political-administrative intervention in daily life and defend personal autonomy.

In this perspective, empirical research addressed in fact the spreading of cleavages outside of the factories, the forging of new collective identities, the resistance to the hierarchical work of society and the market. The working class had been a central actor in the conflicts of the industrial society given not only its size, but also structural factors such as the characteristic of the Fordist large factory, with workers performing similar tasks, as well as their concentration in urban areas, both conditions facilitating dense networks in which a class identity could develop (Thompson 1963; Fantasia 1988; Tilly 1978). While the mix of Fordism and Keynesianism that had characterized the specific capitalist formation were still dominant (at least in the part of the world that “mainstream” research on social movements tended to address), changes in the organization of industrial work with new automated technologies, decentralization of production, the growth of informal economy, as urban restructuring weakened the very bases of the industrial conflict. These transformations had repercussion in terms of social structure with trends including the decline of the importance of the industrial sector face to the expansion of administrative and service occupations both in the

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1 See the special issue introduction on the meaning of “mainstream” social movement studies (especially footnote 1).
private and in the public sectors (Castells 1996), but also the increase in unemployment, poverty and migrations.

Considering the class cleavage as pacified, some social movement scholars pointed at the post-industrial and post-materialist character of the new movements they focused upon (e.g., Kriesi et al 1996). With a clear focus on so-called Western democracies, they addressed in fact the ways in which these long term transformations influenced social movement emerging forms. As della Porta and Diani summarized:

“These processes have weakened the structural preconditions which had facilitated the emergence of a class cleavage, particularly in the working-class model of collective action. Overall, the size of social groups which lack full access to citizenship and its entitlements has grown, whether because they are migrants (legal or illegal), marginals, in the strict sense of the term, or because they are employed in the hidden economy, or engaged in low-paid work. … The multiplication of roles and professions and of the related stratifications, and the (re)emergence of ethnicity or gender-based lines of fragmentation within socio-economic groups have made it more difficult to identify specific social categories. The greater frequency of job changes and the weaker links with territorial communities has also made relationships among those who once shared the same structural condition more unstable and fragmentary. Work seems to be gradually losing its collective nature, a process … It is more difficult to deduct actors’ interests from their structural position, and to organize their protection on that basis” (della Porta and Diani 2016).

These theorizations were somehow useful to illuminate some characteristics of contentious politics in a specific area of the world in the peculiar moment of expansion of the welfare state (Therborn 2013). They were however considered as partial in singling out as some characteristics that had accompanied the onset of different ‘old’ movements (such as their focus on identity building) as typical for conflicts in the new formation (Calhoun 1993). Moreover, they need adaptation on the specific characteristics of the neoliberal models in order to explain nowadays protests in the most different parts of the world (della Porta 2015). While initially defined as a moderate version of liberalism, which—as in the theorization of the Vienna school in the beginning of the XX century—recognized the need for state regulation, since the experiments with free market in Pinochet’s Chile, neoliberalism came to indicate policies characterized by privatization, deregulation and market liberalization (eventually cum-austerity) (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009), actively promoted by transnational think tanks (Bockman 2007). As Harvey (2005, 2) wrote, “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices”. Before neoliberalism, embedded liberalism saw Keynesian state intervention used in order to overcome periodic crises through fiscal and monetary policies. In this period, “A social and moral economy (sometimes supported by a strong sense of national identity) was fostered through the activities of an interventionist state. The state in effect became a force field that internalized class relations. Working-class institutions such as labour unions and political parties of the left had a very real influence within the state apparatus” (ibid., 11). Neoliberalism is seen as a new model that overcome the embedded liberalism, characterized by social and political constraints and a regulatory environment (Harvey
2005, 2). With different emphasis in different area of policies and in different countries, privatization, deregulation and liberalization have characterized the neoliberal relations between the state and the market.

Social movements of the years 2000s develop within a world system which is dominated by neoliberalism. The specific model of the programmed society which was addressed by the new social movement scholars no longer seems to describe the contemporary neoliberal development in capitalism (leaving aside the focus it had on a specific part of the world), there are however some lessons from the ways in which they looked at the interaction between societal general models and social movements that is worth keeping in mind.

First and foremost, in social movement studies criticism of the Marxist approaches went beyond the observation of a declining role of the labour movements—which was considered as either pacified or defeated—criticizing its structuralist foundations. In fact, “The deterministic element of the Marxist tradition—the conviction that the evolution of social and political conflicts was conditioned largely by the level of development of productive forces and by the dynamic of class relations—was rejected, as was the tendency, particularly strong among orthodox Marxists, to deny the multiplicity of concerns and conflicts within real movements, and to construct, in preference, outlandish images of movements as homogeneous actors with a high level of strategic ability” (della Porta and Diani 2006).

Importantly, class struggle is seen as relational fields as the historicity of each societal formation is defined by the intertwining of a system of knowledge, a type of accumulation and a cultural model—that different types of society can be identified, along with the social classes which accompany them. The definition of class goes therefore beyond the position in the world of production: their action is, in fact, the ‘behaviour of an actor guided by cultural orientations and set within social relations defined by an unequal connection with the social control of these orientations’ (Touraine 1981, 61). Social movements are a driving force in societal developments, so much so that, “The sociology of social movements cannot be separated from a representation of society as a system of social forces competing for control of a cultural field”. The functioning of each society reflects the struggle between two antagonistic actors that fight over the control of the type of transforming action which a society exercises upon itself (Touraine 1977, 95-6). Rather, emerging ruling classes and popular classes are expected to replace capitalists and working class as central actors of a new conflict.

While New Social Movement scholars were talking of a different moment in capitalist development, they usefully drew attention to the structural determinants of conflicts but at the same time also highlighting the importance of agency. In the emerging society, variously defined as ‘post-industrial’, ‘post-Fordist’, ‘technocratic’ or ‘programmed’, the (still valid) assumption is that “Social movements are not a marginal rejection of order, they are the central forces fighting one against the other to control the production of society by itself and the action of classes for the shaping of historicity” (Touraine 1981, 29). In this sense, they argue against a structuralist interpretation of Marxism, that Neo- or Post-Marxist approaches have contributed in part to overcome (see the special issue introduction), without however investing much in the specific development of identities and subjectivities.

Revisiting this literature pushes forward the reflection on the extent to which neoliberalism transformed the characteristics of the programmed society those scholars
had addressed. In particular, we might expect that some elements pointed at by the new social movement approaches—such as the importance of knowledge control face to the decline of material ownership of the means of production, or the rejection of a hierarchical conception of the public in the welfare states towards instead a definition of the commons—remain still relevant in nowadays mobilization. Not by chance, recent Marxist analyses of social movements in neoliberal times broadly refer to Melucci and Touraine, in their revisitation of Gramsci’s visions of counter-hegemonic actors applied to anti-austerity movements in various parts of the globe (see Cox and Nielsen 2014).

In particular, they stress that knowledge emerges indeed as particularly important in the development of discourses of resistance around the recognition of radical needs that have the start with the overcoming of dominant common sense (Barker and Cox 2002). What existing Marxist approaches tend instead to overlook is the ways in which political opportunities mediate the socio-economic effects as well as the processes of resource mobilization, which is what social movement studies have mainly focused upon. Research on anti-austerity protests indicate instead that both Marxist analysis of structural conditions and social movement studies’ attention to the mobilization of resources and opportunities must be combined in order to understand the extent and forms of expression of discontent with neoliberalism. The effects of the transformations in the relations between economy and the state with the development of neoliberal policies are indeed visible in the social bases of contentious politics in recent times. Not only are conflicts on socio-economic issues of increasing relevance (Hutter 2014), but the anti-austerity protests also see the mobilization of variable coalitions of social groups which have been hit by capitalism restructuring (della Porta 2015). While some research had indicated that the social bases of (left-wing) protest shifted from the industrial working class for the labour movement to the new middle classes for new social movements, anti-austerity protests brought attention back to the mobilization of those who were suffering most from neoliberal globalization. Sometimes called the ‘multitude’ or ‘precariat’, those who protested against austerity represented coalitions of various classes and social groups that perceived themselves as the losers of neoliberal development and its crisis.

Precariousness was certainly a social and cultural condition for many movement activists. Overwhelmingly present in protests has been a generation (which in Portugal defines itself as ‘without a future’) that is characterized by high levels of unemployment and under-employment – that is, employment in positions that are underpaid and unprotected. Unemployed and precariously employed young people took the lead in the Arab Spring as well as in Southern Europe. These young people are not those who have traditionally been described as losers of globalization: they are rather the well-educated and the mobile, once described as those potentially more capable to adapt to global markets.

Along with them, we found other social groups that have lost the most from the neoliberal attacks to social and civil rights: from public employees to retired individuals—those once considered as the best-protected social groups and that have instead seen their rights continuously reduced—becoming, to a greater or lesser extent, precarious themselves in terms of their life conditions, including the loss of fundamental rights such as healthcare, housing, education that will be indeed core claims in anti-austerity protests. Similarly, blue-collar workers of the small but also large factories, shut down or at least in danger of such, have participated in the wave of protest. With high levels of participation by young people and well-educated citizens, the demonstrations brought into the street a sort of (inverted) ‘2/3’ society of those most
hit by austerity policies. Traditional workers participated, but so did retired people, unemployed, and precarious workers (although these were more present in other types of protests). Therefore, the protests brought together coalitions of citizens with different socio-biographic backgrounds, but united by their feeling of having been unjustly treated.

Building upon these reflections, the project will address transformations in the social bases and protest logics in contemporary social movements.

Bibliography


