

Journal of
Economics and Political Economy

www.kspjournals.org

Volume 2

December 2015

Issue 4

Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back Into Protest Analysis*, Polity, 2015, 216 pp, \$69, Hardcover

By Lorenzo CINI [†]

Abstract. Over the last few years, there has been a certain degree of agreement among social movement scholars on the fact that the dominant analytical frameworks of social movement theory were not fully able to explain the recent wave of protests, triggered by the economic crisis. Following this concern, some authors have started a debate about how to modify and refine these frameworks in order to better account for the current dynamics of mobilization. This type of reflection is precisely at the centre of the analysis of a book recently published by Polity Press (2015: pp. 249), titled *Social Movements in Times of Austerity. Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis*, where the author, Donatella della Porta, one of the most prominent scholars of this field, takes a clear position in such debate by singling out some of the main limitations, which have negatively affected the developments of the theorizations of social movements over the past decades. In discussing these limitations, della Porta proposes some original remedies and solutions in terms of theories and themes to be introduced and investigated in the current agenda of social movement research.

Keywords. Political economy, Social movement studies, Neoliberalism, Economic crisis, Protests.

JEL. F50, F60.

Book Review

The global economic crisis started in 2008 in the US has significantly affected the lives of the populations of many countries, as depicted by the statistical data of several research institutes showing the rise of social inequality, poverty, and unemployment. In other words, the crisis has considerably worsened the socio-economic conditions of many people, undermining their “pre-crisis” standard of life. In sociological terms, the crisis of 2008 can be defined as a “critical juncture,” namely a crucial event capable of modifying social processes, relations, structures, and views in an irreversible way. Analogously, this event has represented a decisive turning point also in the world of social sciences, as several scholars of various disciplines have felt the need to critically rethink some of their main research hypotheses, discuss and refine their concepts and theoretical frameworks, and even dismiss some parts of their previous approaches. In short, the crisis has urged several social scientists to reflect upon the validity and resilience of their “pre-crisis” approaches and models. This has been the case also of a specific subfield of political sociology, namely the field of social movement

[†] European University Institute, Florence, Italy.

☎ . 0039 349 5031280

✉ . lorenzo.cini@eui.eu

Journal of Economics and Political Economy

studies. Over the last few years, there has been a certain degree of agreement among social movement scholars on the fact that the dominant analytical frameworks of social movement theory were not fully able to explain the recent wave of protests, triggered by the economic crisis. Following this concern, some authors have started a debate about how to modify and refine these frameworks in order to better account for the current dynamics of mobilization. This type of reflection is precisely at the centre of the analysis of a book recently published by Polity Press (2015: pp. 249), titled *Social Movements in Times of Austerity. Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis*, where the author, Donatella della Porta, one of the most prominent scholars of this field, takes a clear position in such debate by singling out some of the main limitations, which have negatively affected the developments of the theorizations of social movements over the past decades. In discussing these limitations, della Porta proposes some original remedies and solutions in terms of theories and themes to be introduced and investigated in the current agenda of social movement research.

According to the author, the main pitfall of the recent studies of social movements has been the little attention that they have devoted to the long-term structural transformations of capitalist society. More specifically, social movement scholars have rarely taken into consideration in their models of explanation the effect of socio-economic changes in the rise, variety, and decline of protest cycles. If such a “silence” does not seem to affect the comprehension of dynamics of mobilization in times of economic stability, the situation looks different when these dynamics take place in times of instability, as in the case of the recent global crisis. In the latter case, one can expect that the influence of socio-economic structures plays a big role in the emergence, pace, and downturn of mobilizations. This is precisely the thesis of the book’s author, when she claims that in order to understand the protests of 2011, one needs to bring back the attention to the transformations occurred in the socio-economic structures of capitalism. These protests seem, indeed, “to reflect the pauperization of the lower classes as well as the proletarianization of the middle classes, with the growth of the excluded in some countries to about two-thirds of the population” (p. 35). According to della Porta, the paradigmatic shift in the form of capitalism from Fordism to Neoliberalism, occurred over the last three decades, has been decisive in setting in motion these processes. The rise of the latter form of capitalism has been accompanied by the implementation of neoliberal policies across the world, that is, of political measures aimed at undermining the social protections and rights of the welfare State to foster the capitalist recovery after years of victorious struggles by the labour movement. To some extent, these policies mark both the general defeat of this movement and the advent of neoliberal capitalism as a new model of society on a global scale.

In light of these changes, the time seems ripe—this sounds as the underlying advice of the author for the readers and the community of scholars—to broaden the traditional scope of social movement analysis to other disciplines, such as political economy, able to explore in a better way the transformation processes of social and economic structures on regular basis. In other words, the reception of some aspects of political economy may turn out to be very helpful to grasp the variety and timing of the recent wave of protests, arose in distinct regions of the world with different temporalities in opposition to the austerity measures and, more broadly, to the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. In short, della Porta contends that the analysis of capitalism and its transformations is crucial in explaining the way in which these protests have developed and have varied across time and space (pp. 5-8). More notably, her book identifies two elements from political economy research that social movement studies should incorporate to improve their understanding of

Journal of Economics and Political Economy

“social movements in times of austerity.” These aspects are, first, the discovery of the never-ending transformative motion of capitalism, permanently prompted by the “dynamic interactions among different actors,” and, second, the discovery that the specific characteristics of this motion “vary in different geopolitical areas and within different varieties of relations between the state and the market” (p. 35).

As for the transformative motion of capitalism, research in political economy has stressed out the presence of three temporalities featuring capitalist development. There is (1) a long-term temporality, which refers to the macro-structural transformations underlying the passage between the general forms of capitalism. Here, della Porta adopts explicitly the concept of “great transformation,” forged by Karl Polanyi (1957), to account for the shifting movements and counter-movements between market liberalization and social protection, characterizing the history of capitalism as a whole. There is also (2) a middle-term temporality, consisting of cyclical movements of growth and crisis within specific forms of capitalism. Here, the focus is on the dynamics of economic growth and crisis pertaining to a particular capitalist form. Finally, there is (3) a short-term and contingent temporality, occurring within these dynamics. Each period of crisis and growth manifests its own peculiarities in terms of actors, interests, and political intervention. Social movement research should pay attention to all the three temporalities of capitalism, especially when analysing mobilizations triggered by some changes in the socio-economic structures. In exploring the protests of 2011, one should look at the long-term temporality, depicted by the passage from Fordism (social protection) to Neoliberalism (free market), at the middle-term temporality, distinguishing between movements in times of crisis and growth, and finally at the short-term temporality, understood as the role played by various actors in provoking a specific mobilization.

As far as the diversity of capitalist development across the globe is concerned, political economy helps to understand that capitalist transformations vary in the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery of the world economic system. Even within the countries of those macro-areas, capitalism has emerged and developed differently, varying in the extent of marketization of their societal relations. As the recent crisis has taken a very different shape in different countries, a much more systematic comparison of these countries turns out to be needed in order to analyse their differences in terms of protest activities. Accordingly, the different dynamics of capitalist development should also be addressed spatially, by investigating the interactions between market and politics both in the core and the periphery of capitalism, as well as within them. In relation to the core capitalist regions (Europe and North America), for instance, social movement research should compare the mobilizations between countries with different types of welfare system (in political economist terminology: “coordinated versus market-oriented forms of capitalism”) during the current crisis of neoliberalism to identify the kind of socio-institutional context, favouring or inhibiting the rise of mobilizations.

The most fascinating aspect of *Social Movements in Times of Austerity* is, therefore, the successful adaptation of aspects of theoretical innovation into a solid empirical research. In other words, the author does not limit herself to introduce an innovative theoretical framework, but points immediately at assessing the validity of this framework by carrying out a convincing empirical analysis of the recent wave of anti-austerity protests. In the empirical part of the book (chapters 2/5), della Porta looks, indeed, at these protests, by incorporating the two aforementioned dimensions, drawn from political economy research. In analysing them, she accounts for all the three temporalities of capitalism. The long-term temporality is employed to explain the transformation that the shift from Fordism to neoliberalism has produced on the ways of mobilizing. Unlike the “Fordist

struggles” for more social rights, the recent mobilizations have primarily fought against the commodification process of neoliberal capitalism. By adopting Polanyi’s perspective (1957), della Porta considers the protests of 2011 as part of a rising counter-movement in support of a new wave of social protection and, thus, in resistance to the dominant movement for free market. She also adopts a middle-term temporality by comparing the protests of “the rampant years of neoliberalism,” namely, the mobilizations of the “Global Justice Movement” (GJM), arisen in the early 2000s to oppose the global effects of this economy, with the protests of 2011, expression of its crisis, by identifying similarities and differences in terms of repertoire of action, frames, and claims. Finally, by embracing a short-term perspective, della Porta explores the magnitude and variety of forms that the recent protests have taken on in their opposition to the austerity measures across various regional contexts and within them.

This latter temporality is connected to the second dimension of capitalism investigated by political economy research, namely, its spatial variation, which is also included and explored in the empirical analysis of the book. Neoliberalism emerged first, and in all its full potential, in the peripheries of the world economy in the early 1970s to spread across the semi-peripheries and the core capitalist countries in the following decades. According to della Porta, its diversity and intensity of diffusion across the various parts of the world system has heavily affected the intensity of the protest activities of 2011. While the protests of some peripheries and semi-peripheries were as so disruptive and massive as to lead to significant political ruptures (e.g. “Arab Spring”), the mobilizations, which took place in the core capitalist system, were generally moderate and uninfluential. Yet, even within the same areas of the world system, the intensity of the protest activities has significantly varied over the course of the past years. Taking, for instance, into account the mobilizations within the core capitalist countries, the empirical analysis of the book shows that their intensity has varied, depending on the type of socio-institutional context in which they took place. In countries where the welfare state was still strong, such as Germany, and, thus, the effects of the crisis were buffered by this system, the protests turned out to be less massive and disruptive. By contrast, in countries where the system of social protection was historically weaker, such as Spain and Greece, and, therefore, the impact of the crisis was greater, the protests developed in a more intensive and massive way.

By and large, the introduction of political economy in social movement research turns out to constitute a very important step to locate and explain the different temporality and spatiality of protests and mobilizations, especially those emerging from the transformations in the socio-economic structure. As shown, while studies of political economy address the structural characteristics of capitalist development, social movement research has rarely explored these characteristics. In other words, political economy can offer a significant contribution to the study of social movements, in accounting for the structural determinants at the basis of mobilizations. However, the contribution of this discipline is not sufficient to fully grasp the dynamics of emergence, duration, and decline of social movements, even in times of crisis and austerity. Della Porta warns, in fact, the reader on the risk of economic determinism that the emphasis on political economy could bring about: mobilizations are not the direct result of structural changes in the socio-economic context. The way in which these changes generate mobilizations needs to be more carefully explained, introducing other analytical dimensions and other, less structural, aspects of society.

This is precisely the task of social movement studies, whose primary objective is to study the “passage from structure to action” (p. 12). Social movement scholars consider the political system and their institutions, the actors’ cultural

understandings and frames, the movement organizational activities as mediating factors, linking the transformations in the socio-economic structure to mobilizations and protests. Socio-economic changes are always mediated by these factors, whose specific configuration at a certain time shapes the path and pace of the protest activities of a certain socio-economic context. In other words, and this is the second important insight from *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*, the political economist explanations of protests make only sense when incorporating and integrating in their analysis the more dynamic and processual understanding of social movement research. Social movement studies, indeed, look at the dynamic way in which structural positions “nurture the development of a social group [...] through a reference to concepts such as grievances, cleavages, and historicity” (p. 40).

More notably, according to della Porta, social movement theory can help to better account for the recent wave of anti-austerity protests by recuperating a classical concept of political sociology, namely, the concept of political cleavage, which has been traditionally used in research on institutional politics, such as party politics and electoral behaviour. Cleavages are the main conflict lines structuring modern society, its politics, and its dynamics of transformation. Their recovery and adoption in the analysis of current protests might allow a better understanding of the ways in which the changes in some structural conditions affect the rise of social protests. In short, the concept of cleavage can result very helpful in linking the current capitalist transformations to people’s agency, that is, to link capitalism to protests by avoiding the economic determinism of the political economist approaches. This analytical operation can be better carried out—and this represents the third precious contribution of *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*—by adopting the conceptualization of cleavages, developed by Bartolini & Mair (1990). They conceptualize cleavages as composed of three specific elements: a) their social basis, namely, the socio-economic characteristics underlying such a division; b) their cultural element, that is, the political identities associated with these characteristics; and finally c) their organizational/behavioural element, meaning, the organizational form through which such identities are expressed.

Della Porta explores the recent wave of protests in light of these three dimensions from a historical and spatial perspective. More specifically, she accounts for the social basis, the identification processes, and, the organizational forms of 2011 protests along the three capitalist temporalities singled out by political economy research. As for the social basis, the author investigates the socio-economic characteristics of 2011 protesters across the different areas of the world economy and within them (short-term temporality); she compares these characteristics with those of the GJM, the “rampant years of neoliberal capitalism” (middle-term temporality), and with those of the movements under Fordism (long-term temporality). The comparative and historical analysis of the social basis of protesters seems to highlight a widespread precarization of social positions, leading to the formation of broad cross-generational and cross-class mobilizations in 2011, as result of the shift from Fordism to neoliberalism (chapter 2). As far as the identity formation process is concerned, the author explores the way in which this social fragmentation has influenced the identification process of these protests (chapter 3). While the labour movement with its homogeneous identity had demanded a social redistribution of economic wealth, the recent protests, expression of a more fluid and “liquid society” (Bauman, 2000), fought against the immorality of neoliberal economy and the political corruption of representative democracy. Refusing and accusing the whole political class of being colluded with the economic and financial elites, the 2011 protesters conveyed their support for a more moral conception of capitalism and a direct form of democracy (chapter 4).

Journal of Economics and Political Economy

As for the organizational dimension, della Porta looks at the innovations emerging from the organizational dynamics of these protests (chapter 5). Reflecting the transformations in their social basis and political identities, the analysis underlines “an increasing detachment from institutional politics” of the 2011 protests (p. 163). In particular, comparing their organizational form with those of the GJM during the rampant years of neoliberalism, the study stresses some key organizational differences between the two waves of protest, mirroring the socio-economic and political changes of the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. While the “forum,” the organizational innovation of the GJM, was “aimed at building political alternatives” with leftist parties and trade unions, the “horizontal” and “leaderless” squares of the “acampadas,” the organizational novelty of 2011, epitomized a prefigurative form of mobilization, meaning, the construction of a direct model of democracy alternative to representative politics.

By and large, this book represents an important novelty in the field of social movement studies, of which such a community of scholars felt strongly the need. The successful attempt to combine an innovative theoretical framework with a rich and detailed empirical analysis of the recent (and less recent) global waves of protest pushes forward a significant renewal in the analytical toolkit of this discipline and an expansion of its research themes in a hitherto unexplored direction. The most fascinating and precious aspect of *Social Movements in Times of Austerity* is the author’s ability to successfully bridge social movement studies to political economy by valuing and combining the points of strength of both disciplines with an original and refined analytical approach. If political economy pushes towards a broadening of attention towards the interaction of politics and the market by bringing the socio-economic structures of capitalism back in social movement research, the latter allows adopting a more dynamic understanding of these structures by exploring the ways in which actors embedded into specific social positions trigger processes of identification and politicization. In short, “social movements in times of austerity” and, more broadly, protests prompted by changes in the socio-economic structures of capitalism can be fully understood and explained, only if one integrates and merges into a shared analytical framework social movement research with political economist approaches. We should pave the way to the expansion of this new research field. In other words, the time is ripe for the young and less young scholar of the community of social movement studies to start this work. This seems to be the last and most important message stemming from this book.

References

- Bartolini, S., & Mair, P. (1990). *The Political Mobilization of the European Left 1860-1980: The Class Cleavage*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Bauman, S. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*, Polity: Cambridge.
- Polanyi, K. (1957). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Beacon Press: Chicago.



Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>).

