Conclusion

Place-Based Movements and Macro Transformations

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The chapters in this volume have detailed a great variety of situations. As far as the empirical translation of the crisis into concrete manifestations of discontent is concerned, we could insist on the fact that each society and its protests are unique. Instead, we seek general trends and patterns. How, then, should we move from empirical details to future research paths worth exploring? We propose two basic elements. First, we stress the influence of capitalism on protests in conditions of austerity. Is there a clear link between the current crisis of capitalism and the emergence of new families of protest? To what extent are there material foundations to such protests? How has the economic crisis concretely affected different struggles? What do we need to do analytically to develop this line of inquiry? Second, the contemporary crisis of representative democracy has its counterpart in the space of protest, as some contributors of this volume have shown. How have profound changes in the relationship between, on the one hand, individuals and groups and, on the other hand, formal politics structured today’s protest movements?

Bringing Capitalism Back In: Not a Mechanical Effect but an Important Factor

As mentioned in our introduction to this volume, many things converged to link the financial crisis that began in 2008 with the resurgence of protest. First, temporality: most of the protests studied in this book occurred in the wake of the economic collapse of 2008. Second, discourse: the protesters denounced recent transformations in capitalist economies, including both the process of financialization and the deepening of inequalities. Activists in North America and Europe have struggled against the stagnation or decline of low and medium wages, sharp increases in unemployment – in Spain, for example, the unemployment rate was about 20 per cent when the Indignados emerged – and the extravagant explosion of high incomes in the financial sector. The protests they organized contributed to a repolarization of the debate around globalization and the distribution of wealth. For 30
years, sociologists had announced the end of social classes and of their role as the main organizing principle of identities, interests, and collective action (Pakulski and Waters 1996). Yet, the post-2010 mobilizations call for a reconsideration of the centrality of class and capitalism in social movement studies (cf. Hetland and Goodwin 2013; Della Porta 2015). Such a reconsideration should not entail sweeping and generalizing claims, for it is clear that the current global financial crisis has not produced the same effects everywhere, even if poverty and inequality did increase in all the countries under scrutiny in this book.

To address the role of capitalism, we follow two lines of inquiry. First, in order to claim that the protests have had a material basis, we need to distinguish the victims of the crisis from the people who actually mobilized and ask: Who was hurt by the crisis and how? And who were the protestors sociologically speaking? Second, we propose different paths to research the dynamics and diversity of capitalism as well as the dynamics and diversity of protests.

Searching for the Material Basis of Protest: Complex Inequality Regimes

In chapter 1, Ross showed that one of the most striking differences between the US and Europe concerns the question of who has been hurt by the crisis. In the US, it was much less a middle-class affair than it was in Europe, and this was especially true for the youth in Europe, who faced a level of unemployment never reached before. Although young educated adults were at the core of North American Occupy movements, the absence of work prospects, including for the most educated segment, has been much more a European than a North American problem. For example, in 2011, the youth unemployment rate in Greece and Spain was around 45 per cent! It is also clear that those most hurt by the crisis are not always the ones who protest (see Rüdig and Karyotis 2014). Here, we need to distinguish between those actively involved in the protests and those who support them, sometimes in massive numbers, as in Israel, Greece, and Spain. In chapter 4, Perugorría, Shalev, and Tejerina convincingly show that protesters enjoyed broader support in Israel than in Spain, but not because of economic factors. In Israel, protest was a widespread middle-class affair in which other ideological divisions were minimized for the sake of future generations. In Spain, the left-right cleavage was more important, with those actively supporting the protests coming mainly from the left side of the political spectrum.
It is clear from this book that there are substantial sociological differences between activists depending on the location of protest. The ‘material bases’ of mobilization are not the same everywhere. One possible path for future research is to explore the articulation between class and generations. Rosenhek and Shalev (2013) point out that beyond the factor of downward social mobility – which lies at the heart of conflicts in Spain, Greece, and Israel – there is also the labor market exclusion and bleak prospects that youths face. This context was illustrated, for example, by the Occupy slogan ‘Searching for a future’ and two slogans of the Spanish group ‘Juventud sin Futuro’ (Youth Without Future), ‘You won’t have a house of your own in your fucking life!’ (¡No tendrás casa en la puta vida!) and ‘Without a house, without a job, without a pension, without fear’ (Sin casa, sin curro, sin pensión, sin miedo). In order to test such claims, we need to avoid selecting on the dependent variable and also include ‘negative’ cases, that is, cases where there was little or no mobilization. For example, in chapter 11, Chabanet and Lacheret contend that the lack of resonance of Occupy’s discourse and the de facto exclusion of marginalized populations – such as immigrant youths living in poor suburbs – from the movement were a central factor accounting for the weak mobilization in France.

Another dimension worth investigating, from a political economy perspective, is the increasing role of socioeconomic inequalities in mobilization. The mobilizing potential of perceived and experienced inequalities varies across countries and over time. In the United States, some studies have shown that the level of acceptance of inequalities is higher than in Northern and Continental Europe, because Americans believe more in the possibility of upward social mobility even though the country actually has a lower level of social mobility than France (Dubet 2011). The literature also frequently discusses the middle-class decline that accompanies dramatic increases in inequalities. How do such macro-structural patterns interact with a trend toward the individualization of inequality, and how does that affect potential mobilizations?

Furthermore, although the Occupy slogan “We are the 99%” contributed to bringing income inequality back into the public debate, it also fostered a rather simplistic representation of contemporary inequality and domination (Ancelovici 2012). In particular, it avoided the internal differentiation of the 99% (Juris et al. 2013). In chapter 8, Smith argues that Occupy participants in the United States were less equipped than global justice activists elsewhere to help diffuse and take over mobilization in a diversity of contexts, especially among the poorest, and were less able to consider the cumulative effects of class, race, and gender issues. Given the
widespread recognition that class intersects with ethnicity and gender, discussions of inequality need to move beyond one-dimensional and linear understandings of stratification and look at how intersectionality conditions contemporary mobilizations and protests. In this respect, the concept of complex inequality regime, put forward by scholars such as Acker (2006) or Dubet (2011), could turn out to be a useful analytical tool.

To sum up, contemporary anti-austerity protests suggest that we need to pay more attention to socioeconomic factors. We should not, however, insert them in a ‘simple’ class-against-class narrative; we need to take into account multiple dimensions and sources of domination. Moreover, the material bases of mobilization do not necessarily reflect existing socioeconomic conditions. They are also shaped by institutional and discursive factors that can play an important role in determining interests and the categories of people who will take to the streets. As Kousis argues in chapter 6, these material bases are connected to, and articulated by, particular organizations like trade unions. And as Nez shows in chapter 5, they derive their meaning partly from the space and historical narratives in which they are inscribed. The constructed character of the material bases of mobilization suggests that the latter could vary cross-nationally, depending on particular varieties of capitalism and welfare regime.

Varieties of Capitalism and Varieties of Protest

The main argument of the varieties of capitalism (VOC) approach is that the global political economy does not create uniform domestic capitalist economies. There is no convergence of national models around a set of universal best practices. Instead, diverse national institutions lead to different ways of producing goods and services, and to particular configurations of the labor market (Hall and Soskice 2001; Hancké et al. 2007). From the VOC perspective, we can hypothesize that distinct institutional contexts generate distinct forms of contentious politics (Ancelovici 2002: 455; Bair and Palpacuer 2012). In other words, varieties of capitalism could imply varieties of protest.

This volume does not propose a clear-cut answer to the question of whether there is a correlation between certain types of capitalism and certain types of protest. Much more research needs to be done before reaching such a conclusion. Furthermore, the literature on varieties of capitalism has not demonstrated yet that national institutions have led to significantly different ways of dealing with the 2008 global financial crisis. As Heyes, Lewis, and Clark show:
While the specific content of policies differs between countries, efforts to reduce workers’ rights are currently occurring across all varieties of capitalism, thus calling into question the prediction of VOC analysis that responses to ‘exogenous shocks’ will differ between varieties in fundamental respects. (2012: 16)

These authors also show that major changes in the balance of power between unions and employers have occurred almost everywhere and that the mobilization capacities of unions have declined since the 1990s. In spite of different national institutions, all advanced economies have experienced the development of the financial sector at the expense of the productive one. Therefore, some forms of convergence seem to be taking place, and it does not seem possible to establish significant correlations between the ideal-typical varieties of capitalism identified by Hall and Soskice (2011) – that is, either liberal (USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) or coordinated (Germany, Austria, France, etc.)1 – and types of protest. Moreover, within a single country, the level of protest can vary dramatically over time independently of the socioeconomic context.

Several paths for future research can nonetheless be derived from the chapters in this volume. The contrast between Israel and other cases is striking in this respect. It is clear, from Perugorría, Shalev, and Tejerina’s chapter, that the type of capitalism developed in Israel over the last two decades has favored the emergence of mass protest. For the first time since World War II, educated youths have lower expectations of well-being than their parents had. This development can be traced to the political choices of successive governments in sectors like housing or education. Here state intervention – or more precisely, state retrenchment from earlier commitments – has affected both the scope and nature of the protesters’ grievances.

In Greece, the economic crisis was much more severe than in Israel. The elimination of many social policies pushed hundreds of thousands of Greeks into poverty and precariousness and undermined the very existence of national collective solidarity. The welfare regime in place has progressively ceased to offer reasonable protection to low-paid workers, unemployed people, and poor students. The particular combination of a given variety of capitalism and welfare regime is likely to determine who is most negatively affected and how. In France, those most in need are the ones outside the

1 Other authors have complexified Hall and Soskice’s typology and introduced other varieties. For example, Schmidt (2002) talks about three types of capitalism whereas Amable (2003) talks about five types.
labor market for long periods of time and who rely on social assistance for survival. However, the economic crisis, if it is any consolation, did not make them more worse off than they already were, and this social category has not really taken to the streets so far. Those more likely to engage in protests are the people who are employed and relatively well protected by institutional arrangements (Giraud and Lechevalier 2012). Following this logic, it seems reasonable to consider some recent mobilizations as the result of changes in the employment regime and its underlying institutional arrangements.

In the introduction to this volume, we chose to narrow our focus to a comparison of ‘anti-austerity’ protests defined as contentious collective actions opposing austerity policies (cuts in education, housing, health care, pensions, government jobs, and services, etc.) implemented by governments under pressure from financial markets and/or supranational institutions in connection with deficit and debt problems (Walton and Ragin 1990: 882). The brief discussion above indicates that not only will the degree of austerity vary across countries, so will the particular way in which austerity is experienced as well as the meaning of anti-austerity protests. Put differently, the political significance and impact of austerity policies partly derive from the institutional context in which they are inscribed.

Back to Democracy: From Representative Democracy to ‘Do-It-Yourself’ Politics?

In chapter 3, Kriesi’s contribution exposes the complex links between street politics and partisan changes in a context of austerity. He argues that in the US, the main changes have occurred at the level of party politics, in particular because of the growing influence of the Tea Party, while in Greece and Spain, protests translate into a growing distrust of socialist parties, a decrease of participation in elections, and demands for profound changes in the system of representation. Nonetheless, the victory of Syriza in Greece in the legislative election of 25 January 2015 and the success of Podemos in Spain in the European election of 25 May 2014, the Andalusian parliamentary election of 22 March 2015, the 13 other regional parliamentary elections of 24 May 2015, and the national legislative election of 20 December 2015, show that discontent has found an expression in party politics in southern European countries as well.² These electoral results directly

² In the 25 January 2015 legislative election, Syriza received 36.3 per cent of the vote and 149 out of 300 seats. Short of an absolute majority, it then formed a coalition government. In the 25 May
challenge bipartism in Spain. In the 2014 European elections, the PP and the PSOE each lost 2.5 million votes. The collapse of bipartism is even more pronounced in regional elections. Although the PP and the PSOE often kept leading positions, they have now been forced to strike deals and make alliances with other smaller parties like Podemos and Cuidadanos. They did not manage to obtain an absolute majority in any single region while they had won 8 regions out of 13 in 2011. So far, however, the most severe downfall has taken place at the municipal level, where the PP and the PSOE not only lost the lead but were even removed from power in several cities. The most noticeable and symbolic ones, in this respect, were the victories of ‘popular unity’ candidacies in the two largest cities of Spain: Barcelona and Madrid. The 2015 national legislative election has confirmed the end of bipartism in Spain: the PP and the PSOE, far from achieving an absolute majority, have each lost more than 5 million votes compared to the previous 2011 results, while Podemos has increased by 4 millions the votes it obtained since the 2014 European elections.

For Oikonomakis and Roos in chapter 9, the strongest shared element of recent protests is the fight for ‘real democracy’, largely inspired by left libertarian and anarchist currents and characterized by self-representation, direct participation, and leaderless activism. From their standpoint, this search for ‘real democracy’ questions the participation in the formal system of representative democracy, which is seen as less and less able to mediate the interests and claims of the population. Such a critique of representative democracy is not new. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, many social movements advocated participatory democracy and put forward what some authors called an ‘anti-politics’ stance (see for example Berger 1979; Maeckelbergh 2011). More recently, in the mid-1990s, the Zapatistas in Mexico celebrated and practiced horizontal and decentralized grassroots modes of local government (Baschet 2014). We find similar discourses and practices in the global justice movement (Maeckelbergh 2012) and in the neighborhood assemblies that emerged in the wake of the economic crisis of 2001 in Argentina (Sitrin 2012).

2014 European elections, Podemos won 8 per cent of the vote and 5 out of 54 seats allocated to Spain in the European Parliament. In the 22 March 2015 Andalusian parliamentary elections, Podemos obtained 14.8 per cent of the vote and 15 out of 109 seats. In the 24 May 2015 regional elections, the results of Podemos varied between 7.99 per cent in Extremadure and 20.51 per cent in Aragón. Finally, in the 2015 national legislative election, Podemos reached 20.7 per cent of the vote and gained 69 out of 350 seats, becoming the third national political party in Spain, after the PSOE (22 per cent) and the PP (28.7 per cent).
Some authors contend that contemporary anti-austerity protests are directly and structurally related to “a perceived situation of political disempowerment and opacity in the democratic process (…): people realized that representative institutions were no longer serving the public good, but the interest of a few else, generally, business and economic elites” (Cini and Drapalova 2014: 5). For these authors, the denunciation of collusion between economic and political elites by Spanish activists and their search for a ‘real democracy’ can be read as a direct consequence of this ‘institutional corruption’. But the crisis of representative democracy does not mechanically translate into protests and new movements. The emergence and possibility of mobilizations for a ‘real democracy’ are not only related to economic structures and democratic ‘deficits’ but also to cultural evolutions endogenous to social movements. For example, in the 1990s Lichterman (1996) analyzed the development of a new style of activism in the US that he called ‘personal politics’. More concerned with changes inside social movements and organizations, this style of activism refers to a kind of ‘do-it-yourself politics’ (Dufour, Bherer and Rothmayr, 2015).

Such research, which is more sensitive to endogenous factors, also suggests that structural changes are not enough for protest to take place. The ‘negative’ cases of Ireland and France in this volume clearly show that additional factors must be present, as many social movement scholars have demonstrated, for anti-austerity protests in the vein of Occupy to emerge. In chapter 10, Desbos and Royall argue that in Ireland some dimensions of Occupy, such as the refusal to build alliances with other organizations (unions, political parties) despite a low level of participation, limited the potential for the development of a wider movement. In chapter 11, Chabanet and Lacheret contend that in France there were political opportunities, but the segmentation of the space of protest and the relegation of unemployed youth in relatively isolated poor suburbs did not create a favorable context for mobilization.

We began this volume by proposing to problematize contemporary protests rather than assume that synchronicity necessarily entailed that a new ‘wave of protest’, as defined by Koopmans (2004), was taking place. In chapter 6, Kousis answered this question by considering mid-term campaigns (two years) in Greece and their expression in different cities and showing that place (as a location of struggles) played a crucial role. Place not only defines a socio-political context but can also imply space for experimentation. Thus, in chapter 10, Desbos and Royall explained how in Ireland, Occupy activities developed as experiments for a fringe of young activists who had not planned a long-term strategy or campaign. Similarly,
in chapter 7, Ancelovici treated the occupation as a socio-political and material space. He analyzed how Occupy Montreal activists constantly improvised and gradually redefined their preferences over horizontalism and the general assembly as they addressed problems related to the specific tasks in which they were involved in the camp. In chapter 9, Oikonomakis and Roos focused on the intersection of global diffusion patterns and local characteristics, and proposed the concept of ‘resonance’ to understand both local potentialities and outside stimulation. It follows that contemporary protests have both a global and a very local dimension. Finally, in chapter 8, Smith situated Occupy movements in the same cycle of protest as the global justice movement, underlining the distinctive modes of organizing and activism of the two movements.

All in all, we can tentatively conclude that a new family of protest has emerged, related to macro-structural and institutional transformations, such as the erosion of trade union power and political parties, the development of a powerful financial elite, and rising inequalities. These protests can be distinguished from others on the basis of particular discourses and practices stressing horizontalism and ‘do-it-yourself politics’ as well as the way in which they are inscribed in local places and networks. This family of protest opposes austerity, but does so in way that differs from traditional labor movements and the global justice movement. It is thus a good instance of bounded innovation, at the crossroads of past struggles and transnational diffusion.

Bibliography


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