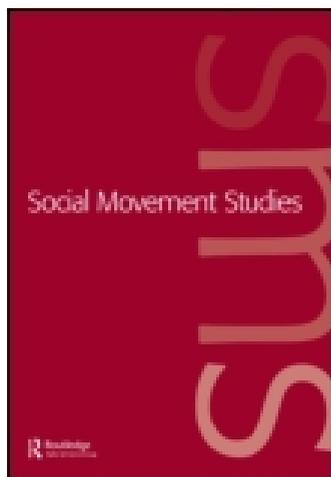


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Marxism and Social Movements and Social Movements in Latin America, Neoliberalism and Popular Resistance

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REVIEW ESSAY

Marxism and Social Movements (Historical Materialism Book Series Volume 46)

Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky, & Alf Gunvald Nilsen

Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2013, vii + 473 pp., index, \$167/€129, ISBN 9789004211759 (hardback)

Social Movements in Latin America, Neoliberalism and Popular Resistance

James Petras & Henry Veltmeyer

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, xi + 274 pp., index, \$100, ISBN 9780230104112 (hardback); \$29, ISBN 9781137300119 (paperback)

In 2011, the great recession that had already shaken global capitalism ignited a world-wide wave of protest. The compelling need to understand both the causes of the economic crisis and its relationship to this global wave of popular insurgency has sparked a revived interest in Marxism, not just among activists, but also among younger social movement scholars frustrated with what Buechler describes as a ‘mainstream social movement analysis [that] has been devoid of the critique that animates the social movements it studies’ (2000, p. xii).

Marxism and Social Movements is a significant expression of that revival and a demonstration of what it has to offer. The volume brings together 18 chapters by 20 social movement scholars from 7 countries working in 8 disciplines. It is divided into three parts. The first part addresses the broad theoretical questions, both critiquing mainstream academic social movement theory and interrogating what a Marxist theory of social movements might entail. The second part examines through specific concrete analyses how movements actually work, exploring the political questions that confront movement participants, and arguing for a dialectical understanding of how movements develop. The last part is a bit of a catch all, gathering together both broadly comparative historical studies and several chapters focused on more recent movements against neoliberalism. While the last two parts include several very good pieces that illustrate the power of Marxism as a framework for analyzing a wide range of contemporary and historical movements, it is the Introduction and the chapters gathered in first part that should command the attention of the field as whole.

The Poverty of Mainstream Social Movement Theory

Taken together, the collectively authored Introduction to the volume, Gabriel Hetland and Jeff Goodwin’s ‘The strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies’ and John Krinsky’s ‘Marxism and the politics of possibility: beyond academic boundaries’ present a wide-ranging and compelling critique of contemporary social movement theory and the consequences of its refusal to engage Marxism.

The Introduction presents a capsule history of Marxism as a theory deeply rooted in the development of movements themselves before addressing what it correctly describes as the caricatures of Marxism that appear frequently in the social movement literature. Citing representative passages from the works of Melucci, Boggs, and Tarrow, the editors show how Marxism is frequently equated with a crude sort of economic determinism in which class interests explain everything and explicitly class-based movements are the only ones that matter. The problem, the editors note, is that

actual Marxism consistently disappoints these caricatures. To be sure, Marxism *does* place the labour of producing our world at the centre of its theory of history, but this does not necessarily involve the narrow, producer-focused theoretical focus imputed to it by others. For human “production” is not merely “material”, the making of *things*, but equally the production (or “construction”) of social relations and symbolic forms, and indeed the self-making of the very producers themselves. (p. 18)

Hetland and Goodwin’s chapter is arguably the least explicitly Marxist contribution to the volume. As a critique of the failure of social movement studies to take seriously how social movements are shaped by capitalism, however, it is devastating. Hetland and Goodwin argue persuasively that ‘the dynamics of capitalism figured prominently in many, if not most, of the seminal North American studies of social movements written by social scientists during the 1970s’ (p. 84) but that since then references to capitalism, class struggle, or even ‘the economy’ have all but evaporated in social movement studies. They demonstrate this through a content analysis of the two leading academic journals on social movements, *Social Movement Studies* and *Mobilization* as well as award-winning academic books and current textbooks and handbooks in the field. Even in the published works dealing directly with the global justice movement that erupted in the late 1990s, they note that capitalism and political economy only figure in a small fraction.

This analysis, however, is only a prelude to a fascinating discussion of how the exclusion of the dynamics of capitalism from social movement studies seriously compromises not only the study of explicitly anti-capitalist or class-based movements, but also our understanding of non-class-based movements. Taking the ‘hard case’ of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender movement, Hetland and Goodwin offer compelling support for the view that capitalism shapes the conditions of existence of all movements: that class divisions, the balance of class forces, both within society as a whole as well as within movements, and the ‘ideologies and cultural idioms closely linked to capitalist institutions and practices’ shape movement goals and strategies and what they are actually able to win.

Krinsky’s chapter addresses the persistent failure of mainstream academic social movement theory to usefully answer the questions that social movement activists generally regard as most important. Krinsky links this failure with the prevailing ideal of value-free social science among social movement scholars and contrasts it with Marxism’s commitment to social theory engaged with the actual processes of changing the world. As the editors argued in the Introduction to the volume,

Marxism holds a particular strength as a movement theory. While feminist, ecological, and anarchist thought all share its movement origins, none holds the

same ability to connect the critique of structure with a strategic analysis of social movements both as they are and as they could be – to find within the limitations of the world as it is the potential to create a new world in the teeth of powerful opposition and structural constraints. (p. 15)

Krinsky discusses this approach in terms of what he identifies as five major features: ‘totality, contradiction, immanence, coherence and praxis,’ treating each in turn. Drawing on the work of Volosinov and Bakhtin, Krinsky offers a rich account of how Marxism can overcome the fragmented and one-sided ways that academic social movement theory has dealt with the issues of organization, political dynamics, and cultural work that preoccupy so many movement activists.

The chief problem with the different critiques of mainstream social movement theory here is that they do not go far enough. What is missing is a thorough critique of the generally unspoken ideological assumptions that underpin ostensibly value-free social scientific research in general and mainstream social movement theory in particular, as well as the institutional and political processes that reproduce those assumptions. There is a harkening back in these pieces to a time in the 1970s when academic social movement theorists were more inclined to engage Marxism but there is little analysis of the substance of this engagement, the circumstances that produced it, or the causes of the disengagement that followed.

We cannot really understand either the fragmented character of academic social movement theory or its persistent irrelevance to movement actors without first discussing the critical role of the university in the reproduction of capitalist ideology in general and of anticommunism in particular. Similarly we cannot understand the course of development of academic social movement theory over the past half century without first locating it within the developing dynamics of the capitalist system itself. The crisis that occurred in the Collective Behavior approach and the place of Marxism in the initial development of the Resource Mobilization, Political Process, and New Social Movement approaches cannot be properly understood outside of a larger analysis of the profound political, economic, and ideological crises that confronted the capitalist world system in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the global neoliberal offensive that enabled the system to overcome those crises.

Like many other academic fields in the 1970s, social movement studies engaged Marxism because it was compelled to do so by the movements themselves. It was Marxist-led popular insurgencies in Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere; the Cultural Revolution in China; the Black Panther Party in the USA; and the resurgent militancy of sections of the industrial working class around the world that captured the imaginations of so many students and young scholars and simply made it impossible for the field to ignore or dismiss Marxism as it had previously. But if the field was forced for a period to take Marxism, or at least some versions of it, into account, that did not mean that it was therefore somehow no longer entangled in the reproduction of capitalist ideology. On the contrary, I would argue, it was precisely through this (brief and limited) engagement with Marxism that the field adapted to the new circumstances and demands of capitalism in its neoliberal phase.

If the categorization of protest and insurgency as pathological within the Collective Behavior approach corresponded with a particular historical configuration of political and social control mechanisms (from social work to strategic hamlets), the critical failure of

that configuration to effectively contain the social explosion of the late 1960s necessitated the elaboration of a new body of theory that was both more narrowly focused on the phenomena of protest in advanced capitalist countries and tailored to the ongoing institutionalization and management of movement activity (from non-profits to negotiated arrest scenarios). A proper Marxist critique of the Resource Mobilization/Political Process/Dynamics of Contention and New Social Movement paradigms thus needs to do more than identify their silences and limitations. It also needs to consider how those approaches do or do not comport with the new configuration of control mechanisms developed in the aftermath of the 1960s and now understood as critical components of the neoliberal order.

A Marxist Theory of Social Movements

The most important contributions to this collection are Colin Barker's 'Class struggle and social movements' and Alf Gunvald Nilsen and Laurence Cox's 'What would a marxist theory of social movements look like?' Taken together, these two pieces lay the foundations for a Marxist theory of social movements that other scholars can profitably build on.

Barker undertakes a systematic examination of what it means to think about social movements within a larger analysis of a capitalist society characterized by constant class struggle. Barker's argument is not that the 'immediate conflicts between capitalists and workers over matters like wages, hours or working conditions [...] enjoy some kind of primacy over all other questions' (p. 51), but rather that society itself is a product of constant and ongoing class struggle and that the causes, dynamics, and consequences of all the different kinds of movements that occur within this society are therefore all profoundly bound up with the fundamental question of whether it will continue to be ruled by the small minority class that owns the means of production or by the majority class whose labor produces the wealth of society. 'Movements,' he explains, 'are *mediated* expressions of class struggle' (p. 47) but the different mediations occur within a larger social totality defined by capitalism as a system.

It is this Marxist notion of the totality that arguably poses the greatest challenge to mainstream social movement theory. Echoing themes developed in a later chapter, '*Eppur Si Muove*: thinking "the social movement"' by Laurence Cox, Barker discusses the nineteenth-century usage of 'the social movement' to designate a whole constellation of struggles – on the part of women, workers, peasants, oppressed nationalities and anyone else contesting 'the social question.' He contrasts this usage with the plural notion of 'social movements' that are 'many, disconnected from each other, and thus capable of being studied in isolation from each other' that is preferred in contemporary academic social movement studies.

If Barker tells us what Marxism already has to offer social movement studies, Nilsen and Cox sketch out what a further elaboration of those insights into a more comprehensive theory of social movements might mean.

This chapter is exhilarating. It offers a compelling processual account of the relationship between local and everyday struggles under capitalism and the (potential) development of larger, sometimes global, 'counter-hegemonic projects' that explicitly aim at its overthrow or supercession. It also proposes a broader definition of the term "'social movement"' to include the collective action of dominant social groups.' It is the

development of this notion of ‘social movements from above’ (p. 66) that is most provocative and illustrative of how Marxism’s attention to processes of class struggle within a larger systemic framework illuminates critical questions that should concern social movement scholars.

The structures of capitalist society are not static, but are rather subject to constant processes of change arising from the ongoing contention between dominant and subaltern groups. The collective mobilization of different groups around different projects on the basis of conflicting interests and understandings are central to these processes of change and this is true whether they come from below or above. Thus, for example, neoliberalism, as much as any of the various collective expressions of resistance to it, needs to also be understood as a social movement.

Another important element of the framework developed by Nilsen and Cox is their view of ‘social structures and social formations as the sediment of movement struggles, and as a kind of truce line continually probed for weaknesses and repudiated as soon as this seems worthwhile’ (p. 66). The notion of apparently stable social structures as ‘truce lines’ in a continuous global class struggle, and of particular movements as essentially skirmishes and battles that erupt along those lines, and sometimes breach them, has important theoretical implications that reach well beyond the more narrowly defined subfield of social movement studies. Nilsen and Cox have initiated here a powerful theoretical reconception of the whole field of social movement studies that no working scholar in the field can ignore. It is a serious challenge not only to the dominant paradigms within social movement studies but more importantly to the subordinate status of social movement theory within the social sciences as a whole.

A question that Nilsen and Cox do not take up, but that is strongly suggested by their conceptualization of movements coming from both ‘above’ and ‘below’ is how we understand those complex situations that emerge when the truce lines are powerfully breached, old social structures are toppled, dominant groups are expelled from at least some positions of power, and subalterns are actually able to exercise at least a measure of power not just from below but now also from above, in other words when social revolutions succeed, however, partially. How should we conceptualize the often intense struggles that occur within post-revolutionary states, or even within labor unions or political parties in capitalist countries that were themselves conquests of earlier movements?

Here, we encounter probably the most significant weakness, not just in Nilsen and Cox’s chapter, but in the collection as a whole: the facile use of the designation of ‘Stalinism’ to dismiss as unworthy of further serious theoretical consideration the massive Marxist-led revolutionary movements in the global south, that repeatedly overran the truce lines of the world capitalist order and consequently dominated the history of the twentieth century. Inconvenient fact that it may be, most of those movements had their roots not in the dissident currents of Trotskyism and Western Marxism that inform the contributions to this volume, but in the communist parties of the Soviet-led Third International.

The theoretical differences both between and within these movements, however, were at least as great as the variety of circumstances and configurations of class forces that they confronted. One need not deny the real long-term damage done by Stalin to the intellectual life of those parties to understand that lumping together Mao Ze Dong and Deng Xiao Ping, Althusser and Cornforth, Guevara and Brezhnev as ‘Stalinists’ obscures much more than it illuminates.

Marx did not anticipate it, but the global center of revolutionary gravity shifted in the twentieth century from the industrialized countries of Europe to the then primarily agrarian colonized and semi-colonized countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The unexpected emergence and victories of Marxist-led rural and largely peasant insurgencies challenged Marxist orthodoxies, not the least of which was the privileging of the industrial proletariat as the principle agent of socialist revolution. The confrontation with the cultural legacies of colonialism and feudalism also raised questions that Marxism as it had developed in Europe was ill-equipped to answer. The attempts on the part of both movement leaders and sympathetic scholars in the global south to grapple with these challenges in turn produced a rich, varied, and intensely contested body of theoretical writing. One searches this volume in vain, however, for engagement with the thinking of Mariategui, Mao, Fanon, Guevara, Freire, Cabral, Amin or many other important Marxist thinkers from the global south.

The enormity of the resulting blindspot is perhaps most apparent in Marc Blecher's 'Class formation and the labour movement in revolutionary China' which seeks to account for the 'proletarian movement's political robustness as well as its inability to achieve hegemony' (p. 148) within the Chinese Revolution. Blecher argues that the Chinese working class was only able to 'organize on the regional or national scale in the early and mid-1920s and the late 1940s, when the Communist Party was able to provide organisation, coordination and leadership for working class revolutionary politics' (p. 147) and gives a capsule account of the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in organizing strikes and other forms of labor insurgency. He never even considers, however, the possibility that the CCP itself was, whether in whole or in part, itself an organizational expression of the revolutionary aspirations of the Chinese proletariat. Nor does he ever discuss a central question posed by the Chinese Revolution, namely the implications of the forcefully demonstrated revolutionary potential of the Chinese peasantry for earlier Marxist notions of proletarian hegemony grounded in the experiences of the European workers' movement.

This and a constellation of related questions were the subject of heated debates and struggles not just within the CCP, but within the whole international communist movement in the decades that followed the Chinese Revolution. As Corrigan, Ramsay, and Sayer (1978) argued, the unanticipated course of the Chinese Revolution was a challenge to the whole Bolshevik problematic rooted in the Russian experience and shared by Stalinists and anti-Stalinist Marxists alike. The significance of this challenge for a Marxist theory of social movements is evident in the comparative historical studies of revolution by Moore (1966), Wolf (1969), and Paige (1975) as well as in the understanding of the dynamics of 'anti-systemic movements' developed by world systems theorists (Amin, Arrighi, Frank, & Wallerstein, 1989; Arrighi, Hopkins, & Wallerstein, 1989) but is regrettably ignored in this volume.

While the individual chapters of *Marxism and Social Movements* offer tantalizing glimpses of Marxism's explanatory power, Petras and Veltmeyer's *Social Movements in Latin America* illustrates what a more in depth Marxist treatment has to offer. In notable contrast to more mainstream contemporary studies of social movements, Petras and Veltmeyer devote the first three chapters of their study to an examination of the political economic transformations that Latin America has passed through since the early 1980s, before proceeding in the rest of the book to an examination of how popular movements have responded to these transformed circumstances. This

characteristically Marxist insistence on locating social movements within the framework of a historically constituted and continuously developing social totality gives us a much richer picture of the class and other forces at work in the emergence and development of particular movements. The degradation of the economic conditions and political situations of urban and rural laborers in the 1980s and 1990s is not simply presented as the result of the operation of impersonal market forces, but also of a global and strategic offensive on the part of U.S. capital and its elite allies in Latin America. Even when the movements do not identify themselves in explicitly class terms, Petras and Veltmeyer show how they necessarily operate on a terrain powerfully shaped by class struggle.

Also in contrast with most academic social movement scholarship, Petras and Veltmeyer understand their work as a contribution to strategic debates within movements on how best to accomplish their objectives. They are attentive to how competing theoretical perspectives, usually advanced on supposedly scholarly grounds, end out serving specific class agendas. They are thus especially critical of New Social Movement theories (which have been more influential among Latin American scholars than mainstream North American social movement theory), but which they see as overly critical of the pursuit of state power by social movement actors and ideologically implicated in the domination or displacement of popular movements by NGOs that are economically dependent on and ideologically aligned with international capital.

For Petras and Veltmeyer, the question of the relationship between social movements and the state is central. What contemporary Latin American cases illustrate in ways that most European and North American ones simply cannot is how completely the dominant perspectives in European and North American social movement studies presume not just the permanence of capitalism as a social system, but also the impossibility of the popular classes ever exercising political power except as pressure groups on state structures that are expected to remain permanently in the hands of elites. The critical role of social movements in the revolutionary processes presently taking place in Venezuela and Bolivia in particular, simply overflow the conceptual frameworks of mainstream academic social movement theory and demonstrate powerfully the urgent need for the Marxist theory of social movements that *Marxism and Social Movements* hopes to inspire.

Both of these books are important contributions to the development of a Marxist theory of social movements. While Petras and Veltmeyer's book will likely be primarily of interest to Latin Americanists, it is a valuable model of what a thorough Marxist study of contemporary social movements should look like. It would make a fine primary text in any undergraduate or graduate course on Latin American social movements. *Marxism and Social Movements* belongs on the shelf of every social movement scholar. It is a major challenge to the dominant approaches in social movement studies that cannot be ignored. While most of the chapters are more suitable for use in graduate courses, several, especially those by Barker, Nilsen, and Cox, have a place in undergraduate courses on social movements.

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