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## CAPITALISM IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS STUDIES: A DEFINITIONAL PROBLEM

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DELLA PORTA, Donatella, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*, Polity Press, 2015.

The emergence and increased importance of social movements in a very wide geography after the outbreak of the global financial crisis is remarkable, not only for the academic community that has for a long time tried to theorize this sort of political grouping and strategy, but also for the common citizen who, perhaps more than those belonging to academia, can actually see these movements as a potential platform of engagement in political action. The instances abound: the Occupy movement in the USA; the whole Arab Spring; Podemos in Spain; Syriza in Greece; and even more recently the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party in the UK. Naturally, the social analyst would rightly be suspicious of these widespread dynamics being only coincidental with the crisis of contemporary capitalism that is still unfolding and whose end is necessarily uncertain. It is on this suspicion that Professor Della Porta focused in the book here under review.

The exercise is laudable and was for a long time lacking. As a matter of fact, and as the author repeats often, social movements scholars have consistently left out from their research considerations about the role of the system of production. Bringing important fundamentals from social theory and political economy to her main field of studies, Professor Della Porta aims at providing a panoramic look at what have been the recent changes both *in* social movements and *brought by* social movements. The scope of the empirical analysis is large, particularly given the wide range of cases that are brought to the analysis—in fact, there was no “case selection”, for virtually all instances of emergence of social movements in the last few years are included in the study.

Yet, in this “exploratory” book, as the author describes it in her concluding remarks (indeed, one cannot help wondering what is the meaning or purpose of such qualification—how is a work in social analysis not “exploratory?”), there seems to be a permanent tension in the actual definition of the problem. The insertion of “capitalism” in the analysis of social movements can be manifold, and lack of precision can bring about confusion. In fact, at the start of the book one gets (perhaps wrongly) the impression that Professor Della Porta’s aim is to insert capitalism as a *structure* in the analysis of social movement’s *agency*. However, for most of the book it seems that capitalism is taken just as the structure against which social movements act. There is an important difference between the two that is deserving elaboration.

To place capitalism as a relevant structure in which social movements operate would imply a deeply relational ontology able to provide an analysis as to how social movements are shaped by the capitalist system of production and related phenomena. This would lead to a broad analysis necessarily involving *classes* (the plural is relevant, as will be discussed below), their relations, but also the state and its place and role in the whole dynamics. The different temporalities of which Professor Della Porta writes about throughout the book would here be particularly significant, for not only would capitalism be relevant as context but also as *variable* in the most precise sense of the term. Such a research effort would certainly be complex; however, it would be the necessary enquiry if the aim is to actually bring capitalism into the study of social movements.

What ends up being done in the book is an analysis of how social movements see capitalism (as “immoral”, “cynical”, etc.) and how they react against it through rhetoric and action. This would crucially be a part in the sort of research effort described above, but outside of it—and as a basis for analysis—is necessarily limited and potentially misleading. For in the end “capitalism” could be a simple conceptual heuristic for a number of contingencies that are faced in the particular context of crisis (unemployment, demise of social rights, increased inequality), and not an actual determinant of how social movements are shaped and put in place. (In fact, one could even wonder whether social movements are, in themselves, epiphenomenal to capitalism. A certainly non-trivial problem for social analysis in the field would be that of the potential causal relation between the capitalist system of production and the very emergence of this type of political action.)

This leads us to what is perhaps the crucial point of this review, that is, that capitalism is undertheorized and thus ill-defined in the book, especially given its ambitious goals. Certainly, the works of Wolfgang Streeck and Colin Crouch would have to necessarily be

considered in an analysis of contemporary capitalism and its relation to democracy. But borrowing from them almost is an acritical way and adding an Oxford dictionary definition is hardly enough for the stated analytical purposes. Especially when there is a broad literature that hinges precisely on the relational character of the system of production, the shape of the political system and the strategies of political action. The works of Nicos Poulantzas, for instance, are not once mentioned and his theoretical frameworks are never used. Gramsci is referred to, but not systematically. And contemporary authors whose works also attempt to make sense of these relations (even if with different emphases), such as Bob Jessop (cf. 2008) or Colin Hay (cf. 2007) are simply absent. This is not, to be sure, some sort of scholastic critique. Citing these authors would not be a necessary step for a study of this kind. Nevertheless, it seems clear that in their works Professor Della Porta would quite probably be able to find elements to build a more suited analytical lens. In particular, a short book written by Poulantzas in 1975 titled “La Crise des Dictatures”, which focused on the transitions to democracy in Portugal, Spain and Greece, would be of particular pertinence. Though it could hardly be inserted in the “social movements” literature, this work attempts (one could say with a certain degree of success) at placing the mobilization for democracy in relation with the state apparatus, the particular forms of capitalism that the different countries face, and also their place in the world economy, something to which Professor Della Porta also gives some importance<sup>1</sup>.

This work of Nicos Poulantzas allows a bridge to one other aspect in “Social Movements in Times of Austerity” that deserves attention. In fact, even though he was dealing with three countries whose similarities are pronounced, and which are even today depicted as a cluster of countries in many types of analysis, from the welfare state literature to the recent works on the Eurozone crisis, Poulantzas was careful to look at the important differences. The similarities were somehow acknowledged in the fact that they were the three treated in the same oeuvre—the difficult, empirical step was to see in what exactly they were particular and how those particularities made a difference. In a way, Professor Della Porta’s book does the opposite. Although there is a quick reference to the work of Hall and Soskice on Varieties of Capitalism (2001), all the cases are somehow treated equally in the analysis. It is quite difficult to accept that the same phenomenon is actually taking place in Spain, in Egypt, and in the USA. Certainly, all these countries (and many others) were hit by the global

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<sup>1</sup> It is also in this work that Poulantzas provides one of the most succinct yet accurate explanations of his broad state theory, presenting the state not as a Weberian *entity* or as a Marxist *thing*, but rather as a *relation* (“l’État est un rapport”).

financial crisis. Moreover, it would not be completely absurd to assume that the material hardship that citizens of all these countries faced would make them more leaning towards mobilization and will to change. Yet, the similarities do not go much further. For instance, the motto “lo llaman democracia y no lo es” (“they call it democracy, but it is not”) makes perfect sense to aggregate much of the protest in southern Europe. But who exactly was calling Mubarak’s regime a democracy?

This would not be a problem if this was an actually comparative analysis, but for the most of the book it is not. Professor Della Porta is aware of the need for this comparative lens. In her own words,

“[W]hile I pointed at the fact that the same global crisis took very different forms in different countries, much more systematic comparison are [sic] needed between the core and the periphery of capitalism as well as within them. If I suggested to look at anti-austerity movements in Latin America and research about them as a source of inspiration to understand recent anti-austerity movements at the core of the capitalist system and at the Arab Spring as, at least in part, moved by similar claims, the different dynamics in the different peripheries should be comparatively addressed. The example of Latin America also pointed at the interactions between markets and politics, capitalist evolution and state evolution (...). Also at the world-systems core, on which the reflection on variety of capitalism focused, research is needed to compare social movements within coordinated versus market-oriented forms of capitalism in their evolution within the great recession of neo-liberalism.” (p. 223)

This very well organized research agenda could not be more accurate and attention to these aspects as well as others would have made “Social Movements in Times of Austerity” a landmark not only in social movements studies, but also in the old and difficult endeavour of understanding capitalist dynamics. However, and though in the concluding section the reader gets the sense that Professor Della Porta is well aware of most of the limitations of the book, one can hardly understand this difficult paradox: the author is conscious of what a research of this kind needs (e.g., the relation between structure and agency, the role of temporality, the complexity of the system of production), but knowingly fails to take them into systematic consideration. The degree of success in doing *that* must be the key criterion of assessment of this book, for tackling *that* problem was the goal set at the start.

Nevertheless, there is one partial goal that is very well achieved, and that is the characterization of rise of a class that, in many respects, has been the main driver of contentious politics in the last few years: the “precarariat”. Indeed, to understand contemporary politics and the social movements that ensued from the global financial crisis, one has to understand how a large cohort is nowadays placed in capitalism. This is a generation of generally educated young people that were raised under the belief that the pursuit of good education would be an almost guaranteed entry into the labour market, but ended up facing unemployment and underemployment. Most of them have little career prospects, even though they are generally highly qualified, not only in having high degrees of education, but also because they know more languages, travelled perhaps more than their parents and grandparents, and through new technologies of communication have a tendency towards a bigger awareness of world issues. This depiction, in fact this aggregation around the old-fashioned term “class” is one of the keystones of Professor Della Porta’s book. Furthermore, the analysis of its relation with old labour movements brings the reader back to a framework of social coalitions and political struggle that has been generally absent from mainstream political analysis. All that must be saluted. Lacking, though, is the place of these classes in a system of classes. Because if one adopts a framework of class struggle (and by looking at the political action of one class, that is exactly what one is doing), it is of absolute necessity to understand the rest of the class system. In particular, the role of capital. That reflection is generally absent.

Apart from these aspects, “Social Movements in Times of Austerity” provides an important empirical overview of what these movements—from Occupy to the makers of the Arab Spring—have represented in their respective polities for the past years. A lot has changed and taking stock of that change is imperative. Who would imagine some 5 years ago that the Spanish election would have arrived at such stalemate, with new parties born out of social movements changing the whole game? Who would have thought that Syriza could actually form government twice? And more drastically, who would have thought that the Middle East and North Africa would go through the absolutely dramatic changes that have unfolded recently? Looking at all of this is certainly a noteworthy research effort for which Professor Della Porta must be praised. In fact, given her previous work on this sort of empirical analysis, one would expect nothing but a good depiction of these events.

In sum, this review, more than a typical broad assessment of the book, which would end up being somehow banal, has attempted at an actual contribution to the research effort to which the author dedicated herself. The book did not, unfortunately, succeed at a systematic

insertion of capitalism in the analysis of social movements. It did not even provide actual tools to do it. However, it provides a very important empirical analysis of a wide range of cases and has the value of being, to say the least, an important conversation starter between two subfields of political analysis and political sociology that have been generally estranged. The aim of Professor Della Porta should actually be pursued by a number of other scholars who keep a complete disregard for economic dynamics in political analysis beyond simple variables such as GDP growth or inflation. Understanding the interaction between the polity and the economy, and this seems to be more and more realized (or re-realized) by political analysts, requires going beyond simple data; it requires a look at the social relations built around material interests. It requires the old terminology of capitalism (even if in “varieties”), class, and conflict. Otherwise, political analysis will fail to have the role it might have in our complex, changing world.

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