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Social Movements in Times of Austerity
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Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis

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This book, as many, started with some questions: How does it come about that, while capitalist transformations so clearly nowadays effect massive waves of protests, little reflection in social movement studies is devoted to the social basis for contentious politics? Why, with few exceptions, have issues of class lost relevance in research on social movements? Why is literature on political cleavage more and more focused on elections, and detached from protest?

Looking for (first) answers to those questions, I could fortunately rely on some collective resources. In the stimulating environment of the Centre on Social Movement Studies (Cosmos) at the European University Institute, a growing interest developed, especially among young scholars, for a revisitation of Marxism and post-Marxism. The impression was that some of what I had read and discussed in the 1970s in order to understand the development of capitalism had become again fashionable in the 2010s, even if filtered through much new knowledge and new ways of thinking.

Also, during the last few years, I had collected some empirical data on anti-austerity protests (and protests in times of austerity), which I found useful when addressing my questions. These came from my research project on Mobilizing for Democracy, funded through an Advanced Scholar Grant from the European Research Council; the comparative analysis of anti-corruption sponsored by the European Commission, a research project on ‘subterranean politics’, coordinated by Mary Kaldor; and the collaborative project ‘Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation’ – based on surveys at
demonstrations and coordinated by Bert Klandermans and Stefaan Walgrave with funds from ESF and the Research Council of the European University Institute. For their collaboration in these research projects, I thank especially Massimiliano Andretta, Lorenzo Bosi, Lorenzo Mosca, Herbert Reiter and Louisa Parks.

I had the chance to reflect on this empirical evidence while preparing some keynote speeches between 2012 and 2014. As the University of Bergen invited me to give the Stein Rokkan Memorial Lecture, I took the chance to revisit the most Rokkanian concept – cleavage – mapping the introduction to this volume. When preparing the Södertörn Lecture, I looked then at theories and data on the social bases of recent protest, which became the basis for the second chapter. On the cultural dimension of social conflicts – the topic of Chapter 3 – I worked in preparation for a keynote speech at the general conference of the association of the Spanish Social Workers (Consejo del Trabajo Social), who are on the frontline in addressing the consequence of an ‘immoral capitalism’. As the Spanish political science association invited me to open their annual conference, I went back to the research on legitimacy crisis and democracy that I use in Chapter 4. For the opening lecture of the Finnish Sociological Association in Rovaniemi, I prepared the first draft of the chapter on democracy in social movements in times of austerity. I’m grateful to those friends who invited me and provided for these very stimulating occasions.

I am also indebted to the colleagues and friends who discussed various versions of those papers during lectures at the London School of Economics (Ralph Miliband Memorial Lecture), Goldsmiths, Oxford University, Cardiff University (Shapiro Memorial Lecture), University of Stockholm, University of Amsterdam (CES Presidential Round Table), University of Iceland (Opening Conference at the Nordic Sociological Association), Charles University in Prague, University of Bucharest, Central European University in Budapest, European University at Saint Petersburg, Max Plank Institute in Cologne, Viadrina University, University of Lypsia, University of Hamburg, University of Osnabruck, University of Konstanz, University of Mainz (ECPR Joint Sessions), Free University of Brussels, University of Lausanne (Conference on the Occasion of the Awarding of a PhD Honoris Causa), University of Istanbul (keynote at the World Conference of the European Communication and Education Research Association), UNED in Madrid, Autonomous University of Barcelona, University of Jyvaskyla, University of Rome III, University of Venice, University of Milan, Bordeaux University (ECPR General Conference) as well as the Humboldt University, Free University, Technical University and Social Science Centre in Berlin, the European University Institute and the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence.
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This investigation into the relations between capitalism and social movements is for me just the beginning of a long-term project that I am very glad to be able to continue at the new PhD and post-doctoral program in Political Science and Sociology at the ancient and prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence. I thank Fabio Beltram and Mario Citroni for their trust and support.

To Herbert Reiter, who, as usual, discussed with me, challenged me and supported me, this book is dedicated.
On 25 January 2011, four meeting points for protesters are set in four areas of Cairo, including working-class neighbourhoods. Before moving towards the city centres, the marchers travel through narrow residential streets, gathering participants on their way. Marches thus create physical occasions to join, then carry participants to their destination. As a protester puts it, ‘You’re taken to Tahrir by the demonstration itself as the head of the march guides it there’ (El Chazli 2012). Spontaneous demonstrations follow in the next two days, including confrontations with police. On 28 January, a Friday of Rage is called for, with various demonstrations starting from mosques and churches. While the police assail the protesters with substantial use of teargas, the protesters attack police headquarters as well as the headquarters of the regime party. After that, the camps set up by protesters in Tahrir Square attract more and more people.

On 15 May 2011, indignant citizens (whom the media called Indignados) start a permanent occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid, building a tent city for hundreds of protesters, but also other infrastructures for thousands of visitors. The mobilization quickly spreads to hundreds of Spanish cities all around the country. In fact, ‘the encampments rapidly evolve into “cities within cities”’, governed through popular assemblies and committees. The committees are
created around practical needs such as cooking, cleaning, communicating and carrying out actions. Decisions are made both by majority rule and consensus. The structure is horizontal, with rotating spokespersons in lieu of leaders. Tens of thousands of citizens are thus experimenting with participatory, direct and inclusive forms of democracy at odds with the dominant logic of political representation. Displaying a thorough mixture of utopianism and pragmatism, the new movement draws up a list of concrete demands, including the removal of corrupt politicians from electoral lists, while pursuing revolutionary goals such as giving ‘All power to the People’ (Postill 2012). A space is named after Tahir Square.

In the spring and summer of 2011, on the Spanish example, mobilization against austerity grows in Greece. Beginning on 25 May, the Syntagma Square in Athens becomes a central point for protest: for three days in a row, tens of thousands of people protest in front of the Parliament, following a call circulated on Facebook. The people’s assembly asserts that ‘any corrupt politician should either be sent home or to jail’, and ‘their democracy guarantees neither justice nor equality’. On 28 May, the first tents are set up on the Square, while the movement quickly spreads throughout the country. Highly choreographed protests are organized every day at 6pm, but there are also daily assemblies: those who want to speak are given a number, then there is a lottery, and those in possession of the drawn numbers are allowed to speak. The protest peaks with two general strikes on 28 and 29 June, with a convergence of the March in front of the Parliament, where new austerity measures are discussed; in the police charges that follow, 800 protesters are injured (Sergi and Vogiatzoglou 2013).

On 17 September 2011, about a thousand protesters march on Wall Street in New York City, settling in a camp in Zuccotti Park. Also there, ‘from these scattered nodes in a small emergent network, a thunderous protest network grew in a matter of weeks, aided by webs of communication technologies deployed by activists and supporters who seized the political opportunities surrounding a severe economic crisis. Soon the city encampments had spread around the United States’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 180). The Occupy Movement uses various platforms to promote the protest: from city or group websites (at least 251), to techno-development sites (about fifty open source and developers’ sites), Twitter (almost 900 accounts for a total of more than 11 million followers), Facebook (with almost 500 pages), Livestream (with 244 feeds), meetups (in 2,649 cities), Tumblr (30 accounts), as well as hubs intersecting platforms (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 182).

On 15 October 2011, a global day of action called for by the Spanish indignados, a hundred thousand protesters converge on Rome for a national march. One of the largest, the Roman event was,
however, one of the most problematic, as it was disrupted by violent protests and the lack of will or capacity by the police to protect the peaceful demonstrators. The memories are of the brutal policing of the protest against the G8 summits in Genoa in 2001. An important role in anti-austerity protests had been taken in the previous three years by the student movement. In 2011, however, no broad movement had emerged in Italy, in direct imitation of the 15M in Spain: the self-proclaimed ‘Italian indignados’ camping in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome remain few in number. The organization of the Italian mobilization of 15 October became a contentious issue among Italian social movements, with different political groups trying to gain symbolic strength and visibility as the organizers of the protest.

This book focuses on these major episodes of protests, which will be analysed as an illustration of opposition to austerity measures in the global North, but also of a crisis of political responsibility of the so-called advanced democracies. In recent years, several movements, including those mentioned above, have in fact protested against what they saw as a deterioration of democratic institutions. *Lo llaman democracia y no lo es – ‘They call it democracy, but it is not’ –* one could read on the poster carried by a member of the Spanish indignados, one of the social movements that have recently denounced the corruption of institutional politics, calling for ‘Democracia Real Ya’. Beginning with Iceland in 2008, and then forcefully in Egypt, Tunisia, Spain, Greece and Portugal, outrage was raised by the corruption of the political class, with protesters condemning bribes in a concrete sense, as well as the privileges granted to lobbies and the collusion of interests between public institutions and economic (often financial) powers. It was to this corruption – that is, the corruption of democracy – that much of the responsibility for the economic crisis, and the inability to manage it, was attributed. In the years to follow, most recently in Venezuela, Brazil, Russia, Bulgaria and Turkey, citizens took to the streets against what they perceived as a rampant and dangerous degeneration of the state governments, defined as a source of inequality and people’s suffering.

These protests have been seen as part of anti-austerity movements, mobilizing in the context of the crisis of neoliberalism. In analysing them, I build on the assumption that, in order to understand their main characteristics in terms of social basis, identity and organizational structures and strategies, we should look at the specific characteristics of the socio-economic, cultural and political context in which these protests developed. While this does not mean to deny that specific national contexts do play a very relevant role in influencing the timing and forms of the protest, I am interested in what follows to single out (some) similarities and to link them to some shifts in neoliberal capitalism and its effects.
on the society. From the theoretical point of view, the main challenge is to locate protests inside the linkages between the market and the state, capitalism and democracy.

In this introduction, I will first discuss the ‘strange disappearance’ of debates on capitalism from social movement studies, then bridge social movement studies with cleavage theory. I will close the chapter by presenting the research on which the volume is based, as well as its structure.

Bringing capitalism back into protest analysis?

Social movement studies have recently been criticized for having paid too little attention to long-term structural transformations. Strangely, some valuable exceptions notwithstanding, concerns for the social bases of protest even declined, as socioeconomic claims raised through protest remained stable or even increased. Forcefully, Gabriel Hetland and Jeff Goodwin (2013) have called attention to the strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies, pointing at how little note (especially US) scholars have taken of the sources of grievances and, in more general, of the influence of socioeconomic structural development over social movements.

Similarly, a review of studies in political sociology stressed how the narrowing of the focus on the process of collective mobilization has, since the 1980s, diverted attention from the relations between social structures and political participation, as well as collective identities (Walder 2009). In the same direction, Sidney Tarrow pointed at the need ‘to connect the long-term rhythms of social change from the classical tradition to the shorter-term dynamics of contentious politics’ (Tarrow 2012, 7). These claims did not remain isolated. In fact, recent collections have looked at Marxist approaches to social movements (Barker et al. 2013), or called for bringing capitalism, classes or political economy back into the analysis of recent mobilizations against austerity (Tejerina et al. 2013). Some first research on the 2011 protests points in fact at the grievances neoliberalism and its crisis spread in the Arab countries as well as in Southern Europe (della Porta 2014a). These studies have thus looked at cuts in public spending, as well as deterioration of public services and related growth in inequality and poverty, as sources for grievances, and therefore protests.

In all of these mobilizations, a new class – the social precariat, young, unemployed, or only part-time employed, with no protection, and often well educated – has been singled out as a main actor. Defined as a class-on-the-making, the precariat has been conceptualized by Guy Standing
as being composed of people ‘who have minimal trust relations with capitalism or the state, making it quite different from the salariat. And it has none of the social contract relationship of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare state’ (Standing 2011, 9). Precariat is characterized, that is, by a sum of insecurity on the labour market, on the job (as regulations on hiring and dismissals give little protection to workers), on the work (with weak provisions for accident and illness), on income (with very low pay), all these conditions having effects in terms of accumulation of anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation (Standing 2011, 10 ff.). As he noted, precariat ‘is not just a matter of having insecure employment, of being in jobs of limited duration and with minimal labour protection… it is being in a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity and few, if any, entitlements to the state and enterprise benefits that several generations of those who found themselves as belonging to the industrial proletariat or the salariat had come to expect as their due’ (Standing 2011, 24).

In order to analyse recent protests, it is indeed all the more relevant to bring attention to capitalist dynamics back into social movement research. Social movement studies emerged in fact from a critique of economist attempts to derive mobilization from structures: grievances or interests, they claimed, are always present but only occasionally mobilized. Moreover, rather than studying socioeconomic structure, attention focused on political opportunities, both the contingent availability of potential allies (their dispositions and strength) and more stable channels of access of political institutions (mainly functional and territorial divisions of power) (see della Porta and Diani 2006, ch. 7, for a review). The main assumption has been that the presence of mobilizable resources as well as the opening of political opportunities explains collective mobilization and its forms, as rational activists tend to invest in collective action when their effort seems worthwhile.

Broadly tested in cross-national (e.g. Kriesi et al. 1995; della Porta 1995) and cross-time (e.g. Tarrow 1989) perspectives, the main hypotheses of the political opportunity approach seems to hold: protest is, by and large, more frequent and less radical when stable and/or contingent channels of access to institutions by outsiders are open. In fact, even in the face of economic crises and structural weakness of the lower classes, scholars have cited open political opportunities to explain the emergence of protest and even its success (Tarrow 2011).

From several points of view, the recent anti-austerity mobilizations met some of the expectations of social movement scholars, but challenged others. As we will see, in line with expectations derived from
The political opportunity approach, those protests react not only to economic crisis (with high unemployment and high numbers of precarious workers) but also to a political situation in which institutions are (and are perceived to be) particularly closed towards citizens’ demands, at the same time unwilling and incapable of addressing them in an inclusive way.

Some of the hypotheses developed within social movement studies have however been criticized as too structuralist, and therefore unable to explain agency, a task which needs instead to move from a deterministic into a more processual approach. A first observation is that it is not political opportunities as exogenous structure, but rather the attribution of opportunities by activists that affects the propensity to mobilize (McAdam et al. 2001). In addition, not only opportunities but also threats can push towards mobilization (Goldstone and Tilly 2001).

From the theoretical point of view, we can observe, moreover, that these movements reacted to something more than a ‘threat’. Rather, they developed within and addressed social and political crises that social movement studies have not given enough attention in their theorization: not just contingent opportunities and threats, but what one could call, with Habermas (1976), a crisis of legitimacy. In contrast to those addressed by Habermas, this legitimacy crisis develops in a new social formation that is very different from the organized, state regulated, Fordist, advanced level of mature capitalism to which he referred. It is, I will suggest, a legitimacy crisis of/in a late neoliberal system which takes the form of a crisis of responsibility. This has an effect on some of the specific characteristics of anti-austerity protests, especially on their political claims, frames and organizational forms.

Changing political conditions are indeed related to some specific developments in capitalism, which are strictly tied to political processes. In order to understand today’s movements in times of socioeconomic challenges, we clearly need to bring capitalism back into the analysis. The main questions I want to address in this work are, therefore: Which form of capitalism do the mentioned movements face? and How is it brought back into the analysis? Capitalism can be defined – following the Oxford dictionaries – as ‘an economic and political system in which a country’s trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state’.1 In Wolfgang Streeck’s conceptualization, it is ‘a social order built on a promise of boundless collective progress – as measured by the size of its money economy – coming about as a side-product of independent maximization of individual utility, prosperity, and profit’ (2014, 53). If capitalism is, according to Marxism, one of a set of modes of production, defined on the basis of the relations between the owners of the conditions of production and the producers, then the
specific forms exploitation takes during the evolution of capitalism must be expected to have an effect on producers’ mobilization (Barker 2013).

Addressing the impact of capitalism on social movements would require, first of all, looking at the ways in which the debate about capitalism developed in other subfields of the social sciences, but also bridging those reflections with discussions of some open issues in social movement studies on concepts such as grievances, interests, classes and identities. This would imply taking into account three temporalities of capitalism: its long-term changes, the middle-term alternation of growth and crisis, and the short-term dynamics of specific critical junctures. In particular, I will focus on neoliberal capitalism, understood as a form of economic liberalism which emphasize free trade, open market and the role of the private sector versus the public one. Within this form, I will look at moments of expansion and decline, reflecting on their effects on social movements.

One should handle the challenge of bringing structures into focus, without losing the attention to mobilizing resources political mediation that has been an important contribution of social movement studies. We can start by observing that the reflection on capitalism had not totally disappeared from social movement studies. If there was indeed a general silence, there were important exceptions. Paradoxically, however, these very exceptions might have been among the reasons for declining attention to capitalism in the field of social movement studies, rather than pushing forward the reflection on the structural basis of conflicts.

A first exception to the capitalism-blind research on social movements has been the definition of collective action repertoires as driven by capitalism and state formation. In Tilly’s (1978) analysis, the shift from a local, paternalistic and ad-hoc repertoire of protest to one characterized by nationalization, professionalization, and modularity has been explained by the centralization of economic and political power at the national level. However, his attention was focused on these big historical transformations rather than on the evolution in capitalism or the swinging move between capitalist growth and crisis.

A second exception is research on new social movements, insofar as it paid attention to class development. This was done by concentrating, for example in Hanspeter Kriesi’s work (Kriesi et al. 1995), on the emergence of new middle classes as social bases for new social movements. In particular, sociocultural workers were described as the most likely to join new social movements given their prioritization of autonomy but also, given identification with their constituencies, their propensity towards an egalitarian distribution of resources (Kriesi 1998). Looking at big societal transformations, other literature on social movements was also attracted by the potential shift from material to immaterial (or
cultural) production to structure their emergence and characteristics (Touraine 1981; Melucci 1989). Fordism was therefore seen as bringing about a pacification of the class cleavage that left space for the emergence of a new type of claim, based not on socioeconomic grievances but on post-materialist values. Very relevant in singling out the characteristics of the emerging movements at the time, this stream of research nevertheless risked ‘freezing’ the image of new social movements as new middle-class phenomena.

A third exception is more recent research in European political science about specific forms of populism emerging as a result of a new division between the winners and the losers of globalization. When studies moved beyond Fordism and into the evolution of globalized capitalism, they put special attention on the rise of right-wing populism and its electoral expression. Kriesi and others (Kriesi et al. 2008; 2012) have thus described the emergence of a new cleavage between the winners and losers of globalization, with the latter often opposing its cultural dimension through xenophobic and anti-immigrant claims, converging in exclusive forms of nationalism. However, these analyses focused on the right-wing exclusivist reaction of the losers and are not yet fully extended to the type of culturally inclusive losers that mobilized against neoliberalism in 2011 and beyond (but see Hutter 2012; Hutter 2014).

A fourth exception is represented by research on anti-austerity mobilizations developed especially in the global South. Focusing on so-called anti-austerity riots, this work looked at the way in which the debt-crisis and subsequent IMF’s imposed conditionalities had brought about a shift from developmentalism – relying on state intervention – to neoliberalism, with its emphasis on cuts in welfare, which spread grievances and therefore mobilization (see, e.g. Walton and Seddon 1994). With some detachment from mainstream social movement studies, however, this literature did not refer much to the mechanisms intervening between discontent and protest that had driven much of social movement studies in the global North.

While all these streams in the social movement literature offer useful contributions, a full understanding of recent waves of protest would require us to go beyond mainstream social movement studies, attempting some cross-fertilization especially with the disciplinary fields of political economy and democratic theory. First, the research should take into account the shifting movements and countermovements between market liberalization and social protection that have characterized much of capitalist history (Polanyi 1957). Second, the analysis must be sensitive to the national variants of global economy: integration in a world economy does not in fact mean equal conditions – or even convergence – in all countries, but rather the division of the world into hegemonic
power and dependent economy (Wallerstein 1990). Additionally, capitalism is far from stable: crises of various types (inflation and stagnation, production and distribution) emerge frequently, changing the conditions for political participation as anti-systemic movements produce adaptation in capitalism (Arrighi et al. 1989). Kondratieff’s A-upturns with expanding profits (as the one from 1945 to 1970) are followed by his B downturns (Wallerstein 2010). While in expanding phases, capitalists might find it more convenient to make concessions to labour than to risk blocks in production, during recession the margins of negotiation shrinks. Finally, much research in political economy has focused attention on the existing varieties of capitalism, contrasting the liberal market economy (characterized by the prevalence of market relations) with the coordinated market economy (allowing for more consensual relations among enterprises and between the government and social partners) (Hall and Soskice 2001) – or, in more recent debates, on the varieties of capitalism that emerge even within a common neoliberal wave (Bohle and Greskovits 2013).

The effects of these changing conditions on the development of social movements, affecting both their strength and their characteristics, can be expected to be complex. While research on strikes had traditionally emphasized the structural strength of labour in moments of economic growth, protests also emerge in reaction to threats. The degree of inclusion and exclusion changes, together with the degree of social aggregation versus fragmentation of the excluded. Additionally, some main processes, singled out in social movement studies, effect the transformation of structures into action. First, a pivotal role is played by political opportunities – at least in part in an autonomous way from the economic ones: the New Deal, for instance, meant an opening of political opportunities in moments of socioeconomic crisis (Tarrow 2011). Reactions to grievances are also far from automatic as far as the conditions for mobilization are concerned: instead, they require the framing of responsibility through mechanisms of politicization and growth in generality (della Porta 2014a). Citizens must feel the effects of macroeconomic and political crises on their everyday lives – as the legitimacy crisis fuels a motivational crisis (Habermas 1976). Finally, mobilization resources must be available in order to start protesting, even if they often grow during the protest itself (della Porta 2014a). The transfer of interests into collective action is in fact constrained by internal competition as well as ruling ideas, which also effect the shift from economic into political action. So, the movements are fields of arguments, in which conservative and radical elements are mixed (Barker 2013).

Recognizing the role of agency, some debates have developed on the characteristics of those actors that challenge capitalism, in its various
forms. Social movements may in fact form in order to react to these threats, but they will have different characteristics as compared to those emerging in times of abundance. In Kerbo’s analysis (1982), movements of crisis are sparked by unemployment, food shortages, and dislocations, when everyday life is challenged during threatening political and social crises. Their participants are, at least in the early stages, mainly the victims of the requested changes, and protests tend to be more spontaneous, more often involving violent outbursts. Movements of affluence, in contrast, are to be found in relatively good times; they are often formed mainly by conscience members, and they are better organized and less likely to use violence (Kerbo 1982, 654). In general, while movements of affluence (and opportunities) are expected to be stronger, larger, longer-lasting, pragmatic, optimistic, and more often successful, movements of crisis (and threats) are expected to be weaker, smaller, shorter, radical, pessimistic, and more often unsuccessful (della Porta 2013b).

Opposing the stereotype of a conjure against free market, Karl Polanyi (1957) described those forces that resisted economic liberalism as disorganized. In contrast with this view of spontaneity, however, much research on the (organized) labour movement stresses instead its role in defence of the principle of social integration (for a synthesis, della Porta 2013a, ch. 2). Faced with economic crises, such as the great depression between the two wars, it was mobilization from below that pushed for a reversal of the dominant economic paradigm, from liberalism to interventionist Keynesianism.

According to the scholars of the so-called world-systems approach, it was indeed the task of anti-systemic movements to resist greedy capitalism, opposing the logic of the system. As Immanuel Wallerstein noted, ‘to be antisystemic is to argue that neither liberty nor equality is possible under the existing system and that both are possible only in a transformed world’ (Wallerstein 1990, 36). The concept of anti-systemic movements builds upon an analytic perspective about ‘the world-system of historical capitalism’ that gave rise to them, as ‘class and status consciousness were the two key concepts that justified these movements’ (Arrighi et al. 1989, 1).

While recognizing the role of some movements in challenging capitalist development, however, both Polanyi’s and the world-systems approach said little about the ways in which context shapes the emergence and forms of those movements. This is instead a central focus of social movement studies, which have stressed the role of resource mobilization in order to pass from structure to action. In fact, protests require, and at the same time produce, relational dynamics among social and political groups (della Porta 2014a). Against the assumption that protest emerged
spontaneously in the metropolis because of fast modernization and uprooting, research on crisis and protests in the global South has in fact addressed the need for resources of collective mobilization, pointing at the presence of organizational coalitions made of self-help groups, Christian based communities, human rights organizations, environmentalists, and so on (e.g. Walton 1998).

In addition, research on the recent wave of anti-austerity protests in the Northern part of the globe points also at the role of organizations, by looking at the genealogy of these movements in previous protest waves taking place at the national and transnational levels. Practices of direct democracy through general assemblies at acampadas aim at building broad movements, overcoming perceived sectorialization and fragmentation of the past. While innovative ideas flow from Cairo to New York, national developments in collective action also play a role. In particular, in the Arab Spring as well as among the indignados, the horizontal construction of coalitions is a reaction to the perceived problems of the organizational networking of previous movements – from labour to the Global Justice Movement (GJM) of the first half of the 2000s, especially once mobilization declined – but also of the failures of first attempts to react to the crisis in the second half of the 2000s. However, it also adopts and adapts some organizational innovations towards participatory and deliberative democratic models that had developed in previous movements (Polletta 2002; della Porta 2013a).

As I will argue in what follows, the concept of political cleavages can be usefully integrated in a relational vision of social movements, considered as actors in complex webs of interactions, in view of combining attention to structures and to agency.

Social movements and political cleavages

Linking capitalist transformations to citizens’ agency is a main theoretical challenge for social movement studies. As I will argue, the concept of cleavages, as main social conflicts which are culturally and politically structured (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; also Kriesi 1998), could help in investigating the relations between structural conditions and social movements. In general, social movements have played a very important role in the structuration and politicization of conflicts: the labour movement helped in ‘freezing’ the class cleavage, while new social movements have been said to emerge from growing (electoral and other) volatility. As attention to social movements rapidly increased in sociology and political science, attention to class instead declined steadily. This might help to explain the strange silence from social movement studies
on the social bases of conflicts. Its potential usefulness notwithstanding, we can agree that, with few exceptions, ‘cleavage theory occupies a central place in literature on conventional political participation, but is remarkably absent in literature on unconventional political participation’ (Damen 2013, 944). In fact, ‘current research on cleavage politics focuses almost exclusively on the electoral arena’ (Hutter 2014, ix).

No doubt, social movement studies developed, as mentioned, in a period of rejection of conceptions of the dominance of the economic sphere, with a shift to the autonomy of the political or the social domains. Considering grievances, strains, cleavages, and the like as always present, social movement studies concentrated on explaining the passage from structure to action, as the title of one of the first influential volumes in the field indicated (Klandermans et al. 1988). On the other side, research on cleavages – much influenced by Stein Rokkan (1999) – focused on their effects on electoral and party politics, disregarding the role of social movements. Moreover, while much of the social science literature on cleavages focuses on the class divide, when the latter is referred to in social movement studies it is instead to highlight its pacification. In fact, as mentioned, focusing on the environmental or women’s movements, research noted that these ‘new social movements’ indeed arose especially when and where the old cleavages had faded away, leaving spaces for new ones to emerge (e.g. Kriesi et al. 1995). Especially but not only in the United States, moreover, any concepts with a Marxist flavour tended to slip away from mainstream sociology and political science.

As I will argue in what follows, there is much to gain from bringing reflection on cleavages back into social movement studies. This is all the more true in a moment in which deteriorating socioeconomic conditions have brought classes back into focus. In order to attempt this bridging, I will first discuss the concept of cleavages, then briefly look at how it has occasionally entered social movement studies, developing an analysis of the ways in which reasoning in terms of cleavages can illuminate our vision of current conflicts in our societies.

As is well known, the concept of cleavages was used by Stein Rokkan to describe the main conflict lines in the development of European societies and politics. As he stated:

Two of these cleavages are direct products of what we might call the National Revolution: the conflicts between the central nation-building culture and the increasing resistance of the ethnically, linguistically or religiously distinct subject populations in the province and the periphery; the conflict between the centralizing, standardizing and mobilizing Nation-State and the historically established corporate privilege of the
Church. Two of them are products of *Industrial Revolution*: the conflict between the *landed interests* and the rising class of *industrial entrepreneurs*; the conflict between *owners and employers* on the one side and *tenants, labourers and workers* on the other. (Rokkan 1999, 284)

While Rokkan thus singled out the social groups on which the structuration of political conflicts developed, looking at the class cleavage in particular, Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Bartolini 2000) contributed to a conceptualization of cleavages as composed of three elements: (a) a sociostructural reference (referred to as ‘empirical’ element); (b) a cultural element, as informed by ‘the set of values and beliefs that provide a sense of identity and role to the empirical elements and reflects a self-awareness of the social group(s) involved’; and (c) an organizational/behavioural element, linked to a set of individual interactions, institutions, and organizations, such as political parties, that structures the cleavage (Bartolini 2000, 17).

The development of cleavages as a politicized divide is therefore a process composed of various twists and steps such as the generation of opposition due to different interests or *Weltanschauung*; the crystallization of opposition lines into a conflict; the rise of alliances of political entrepreneurs engaged in mobilizing support for some policies; the choice of mobilization strategy (community versus purpose specific) and the conflict arena (electoral versus protest). The cleavage itself emerges through processes of politicization, mobilization and democratization in the nation-state: it is, that is, transferred into politics (rather than repressed or depoliticized) by the action of party translators. Their work is all the more important in keeping emotional feelings of solidarity, as the latter tend to be reduced by social heterogeneity and differentiation, the separation of workplace from residence, the reduction of direct contacts with members of the group, and the development of impersonal contacts in the party (Bartolini 2000). The formation of a cleavage then tends to produce a closure of social relations.

Similarly, social movement studies have stressed the importance of certain group characteristics for their capacity to mobilize by the presence of both specific categorical traits and networks between those sharing such traits (Tilly 1978). In synthesis, ‘Collective action on the part of particular social groups is in fact facilitated when these groups are: (1) easily identifiable and differentiated in relation to other social groups; (2) endowed, thanks to social networks among their members, with a high level of internal cohesion and with a specific identity’ (della Porta and Diani 2006, 37). While the past strength of the class cleavage contributed to the development of a so-called mid-century compromise
between labour and capital, with the growth of welfare states and citizens’ rights, new cleavages seemed to emerge.

From the perspective of social movement studies, the link between socioeconomic structure, values and organizations can be seen as characterized by continuous feedback (see Figure 1.1). Within this perspective, I am interested in looking at how social cleavages develop as specific social conditions are linked to a set of values and beliefs that lead to normative choices. Social groups are in fact formed through processes of *structuration* into some special categories, and then of *identification* with specific normative systems. Organizational entrepreneurs develop new codes, often *politicizing* the conflict, by linking grievances and interests to broader visions of collective goods (and bads). The framing of the conflicts then contributes to *mobilizing* social groups (or keeping them mobilized) that aim at changing social structures.

As I will discuss in more depth in each chapter, the so-called processual turn in social movement studies moved attention from static variables to the causal mechanisms and processes connecting them (McAdam et al. 2001). In a similar vein, in my work on political violence (della Porta 2013e) and on democratization from below (della Porta 2014a), I suggested an approach which is, first, *relational*, as it locates social movements within broader fields that see the interactions of various actors, institutional and non-institutional. Not only the very conception of a cleavage is relational as it points at the reciprocity of the conditions of, e.g. capital and labour, but it also connects each conflict within broader fields involving multiple actors and institutions. My approach is, second,
constructivist, as it takes into account not only the external opportunities and constraints, but also the social elaboration of their experiential reality by the various actors participating in social and political conflicts. Collective identification plays, in particular, a fundamental role as it is around identities that advantages and disadvantages of each path of behaviour and/or situation are assessed. Cognitive mechanisms interact with affective ones in the consolidation of those identities. Third, my approach is dynamic, as it recognizes that social movement characteristics develop in intense moments of action, and aims at reconstructing the causal mechanisms that link the macro-system in which conflicts develop; the meso-system formed by the social movement organizations; and the micro-system of the symbolic interactions within the activist networks. Movement activities are not only instrumentally adapting to contextual challenges and existing resources, but they are also emergent as they contribute to transform those resources. Action in fact creates relations, rather than just reflecting them.

In this sense, I will consider capitalism as an important structuring agent, but not one that acts alone. In order to understand the complex interdependence of socioeconomic, cultural and political structures for today’s social movements, one has to reflect on the ways in which processes of identification, structuration, politicization and mobilization developed in different periods. As mentioned, the concept of cleavage has entered the analysis of social movements, with reference to the pacification of the old class cleavage and the emergence of a new one. Research on the class bases for new social movements singled out the new middle class, in particular the highly qualified workers in the sociocultural sector, as the empirical base of a new cleavage, endowed with post-materialist values and structured into sort of archipelagos (Kriesi 1993; Inglehart 1977).

If the new middle classes (especially the sociocultural profession) were considered as the sociostructural element of the cleavage, post-materialist values were identified as its cultural one. As Habermas observed long ago (1987, 392; cit. in Crossley 2002, 160), new conflicts ‘no longer flare up in domains of material reproduction; they are no longer channelled through parties and associations; and they can no longer be allayed through compensations. Rather, these new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization; they are carried out in sub-institutional – or at least extraparliamentary – forms of protest; and the underlying deficit reflects reification of communicatively structured domains of action that will not respond to the media of money or power.’

Finally, from the organizational point of view, new social movements emerged as networks of networks. Although new parties, such as the
Greens, were founded to represent emerging claims on environmental protection or gender rights, they never reached the structuring capacity of the socialist or the communist party families in the case of the class cleavage (Diani 1995).

Social movement studies have seen recent changes in the social structure as not particularly conducive to mobilization. In short, not only have processes such as de-industrialization and migration ‘weakened the structural preconditions that had facilitated the emergence of a class cleavage, particularly in the working-class model of collective action’ (della Porta and Diani 2006, 39), but those developments have also jeopardized citizens’ rights through poverty, unemployment, and job insecurity. In fact:

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), because they are employed in the hidden economy, or engaged in low-paid work. The sense of general instability has been further reinforced by the growth of individual mobility, principally horizontal: and thus more people tend to change jobs several times in the course of one’s life – whether out of choice or out of necessity. The multiplication of roles and of 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. (della Porta and Diani 2006, 39)

These weaknesses notwithstanding, strong waves of protest developed in the 1990s and 2000s, first in the global South and then on a worldwide scale, in what was called the Global Justice Movement. These protests had some characteristics that challenged the new social movement paradigm. First of all, from the social point of view, they mobilized coalitions of white- and blue-collar workers, unemployed and students, young and old generations. The need to keep together a heterogeneous social base – as well as the general failures of big ideologies to provide for successful alternative models of social and political organization – fuelled the development of pluralist and tolerant identities, praising internal diversity. This was reflected at the organizational level through the elaboration of a participatory and deliberative model of decision making (della Porta 2009a and 2009b).

Recent anti-austerity protests have to a certain extent further challenged expectations about a decline in collective mobilization. The concept of cleavage can indeed be useful to discuss the extent to which capitalist transformations, in particular neoliberalism and its crisis, have
contributed to the emergence of a new class (of losers of globalization, or precariat) or the re-emergence of old, formerly pacified, conflicts. As those protests indicated, there is indeed not only an increase, since the 1990s, of contention on socio-economic issues (Hutter 2014, 83, 101–2), but also an attempt to normatively construct some new identities of citizens, while also looking at traditional ones. Rhizomatic and extremely mistrustful of traditional representative democracy, these actors seem also in search for new organizational models, which they often define as direct democracy but whose effectiveness has not yet been proven.

In Table 1.1, I have synthesized the main images present in social movement studies of the main social movements in different phases of capitalist development. They are synthesized around the three dimensions of the cleavage I have singled out above.

I will discuss those issues in what follows, with chapters dedicated to each of the cleavage dimensions I singled out and looking at the mentioned processes of identification, structuration, politicization and mobilization. In particular, I will discuss the question of the potential for an emerging new cleavage that will link all different elements – or rather of less stringent connections between them.

The research

The volume focuses on the relations between structure and agency in today’s protests against austerity. In the following chapters, each of the three dimensions of cleavage – social, cultural and organizational – will be addressed in order to investigate the connections between social bases, identity and organization of emerging movements and relate them to the specific evolution of neoliberal capitalism.