

Marxism and Social Movements

Edited by

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



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Social Movement Studies and Its Discontents

The Strange Disappearance of Capitalism from Social Movement Studies

Gabriel Hetland and Jeff Goodwin¹

Introduction

Over the last several decades, a perplexing development has occurred within the field of social movement studies. While capitalism has spread to nearly every corner of the globe, scholars who specialise in the study of social movements, especially in the United States, have increasingly ignored the ways in which capitalism shapes social movements. The first part of this paper analyses this strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies during the past few decades. We suggest that analyses of social movements have suffered from this theoretical neglect in a number of identifiable ways. In the second part of the paper, we support this claim by examining a 'hard' case for our thesis, namely, the gay and lesbian (or LGBT) movement. The dynamics of capitalism are presumably *least* relevant for 'new social movements,' including the LGBT movement, which are not centrally concerned with economic, labour, workplace or other 'materialist' issues. If this is so, then perhaps the disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies is a relatively benign development. We show, however, that the dynamics of capitalism have, in fact, mattered significantly, and in a variety of ways, to the LGBT movement. We conclude that movement scholars, including scholars of new social movements,

1. Both authors contributed equally to this chapter, and are listed in reverse alphabetical order.

need to pay – or, more accurately, *repay* – greater attention to the dynamics of capitalism. It is time to bring capitalism back into social movement studies.

The rise and fall of capitalism in social movement studies

Although it is now largely forgotten, the dynamics of capitalism played an extremely important role in many, if not most, of the seminal North-American studies of social movements written by social scientists during the 1970s. A series of important studies of movements and revolutions appeared in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which had the effect of radically reorienting the academic study of movements and political conflict. The field moved away from primarily psychological and social-psychological treatments of political protest – studies that often cast a very negative light on protest – to more sympathetic analyses that emphasised the importance of resources, power, solidarities, and opportunities for movements. Movements were no longer viewed as irrational outbursts, but as eminently rational forms of politics by other means. But all this is now common wisdom among movement scholars. What has been forgotten is that these same studies tended to emphasise quite strongly the effects of capitalism on movements.

Among the more important such studies were Jeffery Paige's *Agrarian Revolution*,² Michael Schwartz's *Radical Protest and Social Structure*,³ Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's *Poor People's Movements*,⁴ Charles Tilly's 'resolutely pro-Marxian' *From Mobilization to Revolution*,⁵ Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions*,⁶ and Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*.⁷ The dynamics of capitalism figure prominently in all of these studies, sometimes constraining and sometimes inciting or enabling collective action. By capitalism, these authors generally mean a mode of production in which a class that owns the means of production (capitalists) employs a class that must sell its labour power in exchange for a wage or salary (workers), and in which market competition among capitalists leads to a constant reinvestment of part of the surplus (or profits) in the production process (that is, capital accumulation). The dynamics of capitalism that these authors emphasise include processes directly linked to capital accumulation, especially the proletarianisation

2. Paige 1975.

3. Schwartz 1988.

4. Piven and Cloward 1977.

5. Tilly 1978, p. 48. See also many of Tilly's other writings from this period, such as Tilly, Tilly and Tilly 1975; Tilly 1982.

6. Skocpol 1979. See also Skocpol and Trimberger 1994.

7. McAdam 1999. See also Anderson-Sherman and McAdam 1982.

(or commodification) of labour, the commodification of productive forces generally, and the concentration and centralisation of capital.

The authors of these groundbreaking works believed that capitalism was crucial for understanding movements because of a variety of important causal mechanisms. Capitalist institutions (factories, railroads, banks, and so on) or institutions that capitalists may come to control (such as legislatures, courts and police) are often the source or target of popular grievances, especially (but not only) during times of economic crisis; these institutions, moreover, shape collective identities and solidarities – and not just *class* solidarities – in particular ways; they also distribute power and resources unevenly to different social classes and fractions of classes; they both facilitate and inhibit specific group-alliances based on common or divergent interests; class divisions, furthermore, often penetrate and fracture particular movements; and ideologies and cultural assumptions linked to capitalism powerfully shape movement strategies and demands. The effects of capitalism on collective action, for these authors, are both direct and indirect (that is, mediated by other processes) and are the result of both short- and long-term processes.

In McAdam's influential study of the US Civil Rights movement, to take one well-known example, the disintegration of the Southern cotton sharecropping economy, which was based on 'extra-economic' coercion, and the concomitant movement of African Americans into urban-based waged jobs, is portrayed as a necessary precondition for the emergence of that movement. McAdam writes, 'If one had to identify the factor most responsible for undermining the political conditions that, at the turn of the [twentieth] century, had relegated blacks to a position of political impotence, it would have to be the gradual collapse of cotton as the backbone of the southern economy'.⁸ The collapse of the South's cotton economy, in McAdam's account, facilitated the emergence of the Civil Rights movement mainly indirectly, through its effects on politics and on the 'indigenous organisation' and beliefs of African Americans. Note, moreover, that this economic process was crucially important for the very possibility of the Civil Rights movement, even though this movement was not itself a *class*-based insurgency making primarily economic demands; rather, the movement was a cross-class coalition – linking working- and middle-class African Americans as well as sympathetic whites – whose primary demands (at least until the movement fractured in the late 1960s) were desegregation and voting rights. (McAdam explicitly noted, incidentally, that his 'political-process' perspective on movements 'combines aspects of both the élite and Marxist models of power in America'.)⁹

8. McAdam 1999, p. 73.

9. McAdam 1999, p. 38.

The groundbreaking movement scholarship of the 1970s, we should note, not only emphasised the causal importance of capitalism for collective action but also tended to view capitalism, ultimately, as a major – and perhaps *the* major – constraint on human freedom. A number of these studies have an unmistakably anti-capitalist tone, a normative quality that is quite rare in contemporary scholarship on movements. To take just two examples, Piven and Cloward begin their study of ‘poor people’s movements’ with a critique of the ‘mystifying’ quality of capitalist democracy:

Power is rooted in the control of coercive force and in control of the means of production. However, in capitalist societies this reality is not legitimated by rendering the powerful divine, but by obscuring their existence... [through] electoral-representative institutions [that] proclaim the franchise, not force and wealth, as the basis for the accumulation of power.¹⁰

And Skocpol concludes her important comparative study of revolutions by suggesting that ‘Marx’s call for working-class-based socialism remains valid for advanced societies; nothing in the last hundred years of world history has undercut the compelling potential, indeed necessity, of that call’.¹¹

More recent studies of social movements have not only lacked this anti-capitalist spirit, but also largely ignored, with very few exceptions,¹² the enabling and constraining effects of capitalism. We concur, in particular, with Richard Flacks’s observation that ‘One of Marx’s central analytic strategies... is missing from contemporary theories [of social movements] – namely, his effort to embed power relations in an analysis of the political economy as a whole’.¹³ Recent scholarship tends to overlook not only the direct and proximate effects of capitalist institutions on collective action, but also the ways in which capitalist dynamics indirectly influence the possibilities for protest, sometimes over many years or even decades, by, for example, shaping political institutions, political alliances, social ties, and cultural idioms. Instead, recent scholarship tends to focus on *short-term* shifts in ‘cultural framings,’ social networks, and especially ‘political opportunities,’ rarely examining the deeper causes of such shifts; in fact, most movement scholars now treat this last set of factors as independent variables, neglecting the ways in which they may be powerfully shaped by capitalism.

We find evidence for these claims by examining (1) the leading journals in the field of social movement studies, (2) recent award-winning books and articles

10. Piven and Cloward 1977, p. 2.

11. Skocpol 1979, p. 292.

12. Such as Sklair 1995; Buechler 2000; Clawson 2003; and Schurman and Munro 2009.

13. Flacks 2004, p. 139.

in the field, and (3) current textbooks and handbooks on social movements. Let us begin by considering the content of the two main English-language journals dedicated to the analysis of social movements, namely, *Mobilization* (which is based in the USA) and *Social Movement Studies* (based in the UK). *Mobilization* began publication in 1996 and *Social Movement Studies* in 2002. By the 1990s, the evidence indicates, a concern with capitalism had virtually disappeared from the field. Indeed, the reader of these journals is struck by the almost complete absence of economic analysis in their pages.

This conclusion is based on our content analysis of both the titles and abstracts of all articles published in *Mobilization* from its founding in 1996 up to 2007 (a period of 12 years) and in *Social Movement Studies* from its founding in 2002 up to 2007 (a period of six years). The results of this analysis are striking. For *Mobilization*, in a total of 183 article titles and abstracts, the word ‘capitalism’ appears exactly once – in an abstract – and even the more neutral word ‘economy’ appears in only one title and two abstracts. The words ‘class conflict’ and ‘class struggle’ do not appear in a single article title or abstract. By contrast, the concept of ‘political opportunities’ appears in 11 titles and 42 abstracts, and the concept of ‘frame’ or ‘framing’ appears in nine titles and 24 abstracts.

The results are quite similar for *Social Movement Studies*. In a total of 71 article titles and abstracts, the word ‘capitalism’ appears in one article title and three abstracts, and the word ‘economy’ appears in one title and one abstract. Again, the words ‘class conflict’ and ‘class struggle’ do not appear in a single title or abstract. By contrast, the concept of ‘political opportunities’ appears in three titles and six abstracts, and the concept of ‘frame’ or ‘framing’ appears in three titles and 10 abstracts. Our impression is that the articles in *Social Movement Studies* are somewhat more theoretically diverse than those in *Mobilization* (there is less conventional ‘political opportunity’ and ‘frame’ analysis in the former), but this theoretical diversity does not include political economy perspectives.

These results are all the more striking given that the publishing histories of *Mobilization* and *Social Movement Studies* largely coincide with the history of the so-called global justice movement (also called the anti- or alter-globalisation movement), a movement with strong anti-capitalist, or at least anti-corporate, demands. This movement has not been overlooked by these journals, but the treatment of it in their pages, oddly, does not reflect a strong interest in linking it with the dynamics of global capitalism. Thirteen articles on the global justice movement were published in *Mobilization* between 1996 and 2007 (7 percent of all articles published in the journal), but only three can be said to evince a political economy perspective. Nine articles on the global justice movement were published in *Social Movement Studies* between 2002 and 2007 (nearly 13 percent of all articles published in that journal), but only two reflect a

substantial concern with capitalism or political economy. (Other recent studies of anti-corporate activism that is not linked to the global-justice movement also pay scant attention to the dynamics of capitalism.)¹⁴

Of course, this type of content analysis is a rather crude method for measuring the substantive content of a journal, but we believe it quite accurately reflects the marked inattention to the dynamics of capitalism – whether at the local, national, or global (or ‘world-systemic’) level – among English-speaking and especially US scholars in the field of social movement studies. A concern with political economy is also only barely evident in the books and articles that have been honoured recently by the American Sociological Association’s section on ‘Collective Behavior and Social Movements’ (CBSM). The section’s website¹⁵ lists 19 books that received the section’s book prize from 1988 to 2010 (a prize was not awarded every year) and 11 articles that received the section’s best-article prize from 2002 to 2009 (there were co-winners for some of these years). In our review of this literature, we found that only two of the prize-winning books and none of the articles treated the dynamics of capitalism as particularly important for purposes of explanation. The two books are Charles Tilly’s *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1754–1837*,¹⁶ which looks at class-based (and other) forms of mobilisation during the period under study, and Rick Fantasia’s *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers*,¹⁷ a study of working-class consciousness in the contemporary United States. In the rest of this literature, capitalism is, at best, a minor theme, if it is mentioned at all.

Finally, capitalism is also scarcely evident in current textbooks and handbooks on social movements. Here, we will focus on just three examples, albeit prominent ones: Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani’s *Social Movements: An Introduction*,¹⁸ *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi,¹⁹ and Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow’s *Contentious Politics*.²⁰

Della Porta and Diani’s textbook is least problematic, from our point of view.²¹ (We wonder if this is not related to the fact that the authors are from Italy, whose academic and political cultures are rather different than those in the Anglo-American world.) Their volume includes an interesting chapter entitled ‘Social Changes and Social Movements’, in which economic factors and processes are shown to be important for movements. The authors do not discuss the dynamics

14. For example Raeburn 2004; Soule 2009.

15. See <http://www2.asanet.org/sectioncbsm/awards.html>.

16. Tilly 1995.

17. Fantasia 1988.

18. Della Porta and Diani 2006.

19. Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2004.

20. Tilly and Tarrow 2007.

21. Della Porta and Diani 2006.

of ‘capitalism’ *as such* (a word they very seldom use), but they do note how class conflicts – including strikes, protests by the unemployed, and so on – as well as movements of the ‘new middle class’ are rooted in the changing ‘social structure’ of ‘industrial societies’. The authors also note how ‘economic globalisation’ has catalysed protest in recent years. However, their concern with socio-economic structures, social change, and class cleavages is almost entirely confined to this single chapter. Indeed, they justify this with the claim that ‘collective action does not spring automatically from structural tensions’, and so the bulk of their book is ‘dedicated to the mechanisms which contribute to an explanation of the shift from structure to action’ – mechanisms having to do with ‘the availability of organizational resources, the ability of movement leaders to produce appropriate ideological representations, and the presence of a favorable political context’.²² But this assumes that such resources, ideologies, and contexts are substantially if not wholly detached from the dynamic structure and practices of capitalism, a view that we would, of course, challenge.

Like the Della Porta and Diani volume, only one chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* emphasises capitalist dynamics,²³ namely a chapter on the US labour movement by Rick Fantasia and Judith Stepan-Norris. The other 28 chapters of this large volume barely mention capitalism or economic processes at all. (A partial exception is the chapter on transnational movements by Jackie Smith, which briefly discusses the ‘world capitalist economy’.) The index reveals only a handful of references in the volume’s seven hundred pages to capitalism, ‘economics’, or corporations. ‘Class struggle’ and ‘class conflict’ are referenced exactly once. And Gary Marx is referenced more frequently than Karl Marx.

However, the apotheosis of the disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies may well be Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow’s *Contentious Politics*,²⁴ a textbook based on ideas first developed in McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly’s *Dynamics of Contention*.²⁵ As mentioned, the earlier work of Tilly and McAdam did emphasise – indeed, often *strongly* emphasised – capitalist dynamics, including the collapse of agricultural production based on extra-economic coercion (McAdam) and the more general process of proletarianisation (Tilly). In *Contentious Politics*, however, capitalism has disappeared completely. The book makes no mention whatsoever of capitalism, proletarianisation, class conflict, or political economy generally. This is remarkable for a book explicitly designed to provide undergraduate and graduate students with the analytical tools and procedures they will need to understand social movements, revolutions, nationalist movements,

22. Della Porta and Diani 2006, p. 63.

23. Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2004.

24. Tilly and Tarrow 2007.

25. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001.

transnational struggles, and ‘contentious politics’ generally. Instead of situating these conflicts against the historical backdrop of capitalism and state building, as Tilly once prescribed, *Contentious Politics* discusses (and formally defines) a number of very general ‘mechanisms’ and ‘processes’ that allegedly illuminate a wide range of concrete episodes of political conflict. The authors make some effort to link these mechanisms and processes to state structures and ‘routine’ politics, but they say nothing about how these mechanisms and processes might relate to the dynamics of the capitalist economy. One can only infer that either no such relations exist or they are not worthy of attention, and that students today need not bother to learn about the institutions and trajectories of capitalist economies in order to understand social movements, revolutions, or political conflict more generally. By contrast, in *From Mobilization to Revolution*, published in 1978, Tilly wrote: ‘Over the long run, the reorganization of production creates the chief historical actors, the major constellations of interests, the basic threats to those interests, and principal conditions for transfers of power [that is, revolutions]’.²⁶ But the ‘reorganization of production’ is not to be found among the mechanisms and processes emphasised by Tilly and Tarrow thirty years later.

What happened? What might account for this strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies? Here, we can only speculate, but we would argue that this transformation is the result of several linked factors, including the waning of Marxism in the social sciences after the 1970s, the so-called ‘cultural turn’ in academia, and a growing emphasis on micro- and meso-level analysis – including framing and network analysis – in social movement studies proper. (It is also possible that some scholars in the USA have avoided the conceptual vocabulary, if not the concerns, of Marxist political economy for fear of not being published or tenured.) Our aim, here, is not to criticise cultural, framing, or network analysis, but simply to point out that these have effectively – and *unnecessarily* – ‘crowded out’ a concern with political economy in the field. As a result, a number of promising causal mechanisms linked to the dynamics of capitalism are no longer even considered worthy of attention by movement-scholars.

These claims about the factors behind the disappearance of capitalism from movement studies are speculative, based on observations of changing academic tendencies over the past few decades. It is, in fact, very difficult to determine precisely why academic fashions and styles change over time, sometimes quite dramatically over just a few years. But the results are clear and ironic: During an era in which global capitalism became ever more powerful – an era when capitalism triumphed over Soviet-style Communism – it also became increasingly

26. Tilly 1978, p. 194.

invisible to scholars of popular movements, especially in the United States. Even a recent volume on the 'silences' in social movement theorising is silent about capitalism and political economy.²⁷ For us, however, the key question is not *why* capitalism has disappeared from movement studies, but whether the analysis of movements has suffered as a result. We believe that it has.

How does capitalism matter?

We have already suggested some of the ways in which capitalism might shape social movements, including non-class-based movements. We thus believe that the common justification for the neglect of political economy by movement-scholars – namely, that most social movements (perhaps *all* of them, other than the labour movement) are not about class or 'materialist' concerns and thus have no discernible connection to capitalism – is empirically and analytically untenable. McAdam's study of the US Civil Rights movement,²⁸ quoted above, clearly demonstrates that ethnic (or 'racial') and other non-class-based movements may be powerfully shaped by political-economic factors. To support this claim further, we examine below a movement that seemingly has nothing, or very little, to do with issues of class, work, or political economy, namely, the gay and lesbian (or LGBT) movement. Our reading of the literature on this and other movements suggests that the dynamics of capitalism and political-economic factors potentially matter for *all* movements in at least four specific ways:

1. Capitalist dynamics alternately inhibit or facilitate the formation of new *collective identities and solidarities*, including both class- and non-class identities. In this way, capitalism shapes the very conditions of existence of many social movements.
2. The balance of class forces in a society powerfully shapes the way movements evolve over time and *what they can win* for their constituents.
3. Class divisions generated by capitalism may unevenly penetrate and fracture movements. The balance of class forces *within* movements – sometimes more and sometimes less organised and self-conscious – may powerfully shape *movement goals and strategies*.
4. Finally, ideologies and cultural idioms closely linked to capitalist institutions and practices may also strongly influence movement strategies and goals.

27. Aminzade et al. 2001.

28. McAdam 1999.

A 'hard' case study: the LGBT movement

The rise of 'new social movements' over the last several decades may explain the declining attention given to capitalism and political economy within contemporary social movement studies. (Although during the 1980s, several European scholars sought to explain 'new social movements' precisely in terms of the changing configuration of capitalism.)²⁹ Unlike 'old' social movements – pre-eminently the labour movement – in which issues of material deprivation and inequality are considered central, new social movements are typically seen as revolving around 'non-material' or 'post-materialist' issues, including lifestyles, identities, and 'recognition'.³⁰

As Taylor and Van Dyke note, 'The core thesis of [New Social Movement theory] is that that new social movements, such as the women's, peace, gay and lesbian, environmental, animal rights, disability rights, mental health, antiglobalization movements, and even the New Christian Right and contemporary hate movements, are unique in that they are less concerned with economic redistribution and policy changes than with issues of the quality of life, personal growth and autonomy, and identity and self-affirmation'.³¹ The LGBT movement, which we use as a shorthand expression for the family of movements focused on issues of sexual orientation, is thus a paradigmatic example of a new social movement. As such, the LGBT movement is a particularly 'hard' test case for our claim that the dynamics of capitalism should be brought back into social movement scholarship.

Not surprisingly, most recent scholarship on the LGBT movement in the field of social movement studies pays little attention to issues of political economy and class, instead focusing on issues of individual and collective identity-construction and emotion.³² Between 1996 and 2007, the journal *Mobilization* published four articles that focused centrally on LGBT movements (2 percent of all articles published in the journal); not surprisingly, none evinced an economic or political economy perspective. The journal *Social Movement Studies* published two articles on LGBT movements between 2002 and 2007 (about 3 percent of all articles published in that journal); again, neither of these articles was substantially concerned with the dynamics of capitalism. Nor were the two articles on the LGBT movement that have been recognised by the ASA's CBSM section.³³ (No study of the LGBT movement has yet won the section's book prize.)

29. See Steinmetz 1994 for an overview.

30. For example Inglehard 1990; Fraser 1997. Fraser, to be sure, emphasises the need to combine a focus on recognition with one on redistribution. Her work thus attempts to bridge the divide between 'old' and 'new' social movements.

31. Taylor and Van Dyke 2004, p. 273.

32. Such as Armstrong 2002; Rimmerman 2008; and Gould 2009.

33. Armstrong and Crage 2006; Taylor et al. 2009.

As suggested above, however, we believe that the dynamics of the capitalist economy have profoundly shaped the LGBT movement – although to sustain this claim, we must necessarily turn to scholarship that either predates or falls outside the contemporary field of movement studies. To begin with, capitalist development was a necessary condition for the initial emergence and subsequent elaboration of LGBT identities and solidarities. Although it may defy current wisdom, the idea that there is an important – indeed, fundamental – relationship between capitalist development and the emergence of LGBT identities is hardly original. This idea was, in fact, one of the starting points for John D’Emilio’s pioneering book on gay and lesbian history, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, as well as an influential paper, ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’, published the same year.³⁴ The fact that D’Emilio wrote during a period in which political economy and class analysis still occupied a relatively important, if declining, place within social movement studies and social science generally is probably not coincidental. D’Emilio’s book and paper appeared just a year after the publication of McAdam’s influential study of the Civil Rights movement.

According to D’Emilio, the initial emergence of a collective and publicly visible gay and lesbian identity in the United States was dependent – just as for the African-American Civil Rights movement – upon the expansion of wage labour. This process of ‘proletarianisation’ diminished the economic importance of the family unit, thereby undermining the material basis for ‘traditional’ heteronormative sexual relations and creating at least the possibility for more fluid sexual practices and identities.³⁵ Moreover, the urbanisation that resulted from capitalist industrialisation facilitated the formation of communities based on sexualities and lifestyles. The large, anonymous cities created by capitalist industrialisation made possible the emergence of hidden, ‘underground’ gay and lesbian subcultures, typically centered around commercial bars, clubs, and other establishments. In a recent interview, D’Emilio summarises his argument in ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’:

The thrust of the argument... was that the shift from kinship forms of production to individual wage labor opened a social and economic space that allowed individuals to live, to survive, outside a reproductive household. Same-sex desire could congeal into a personal identity and a way of life. The opportunity for that to happen was distributed differently depending on one’s relation to capitalist modes of production. In the U.S., that meant men more than women, whites more than Blacks, the native-born more than immigrants, and the middle class more than the working class. But the heart of it

34. D’Emilio 1983a; 1983b; see also Adam 1987.

35. See also Therborn 2004.

is individuals able to make a living rather than livelihoods being dependent on family groupings.³⁶

Capitalist development was central not only to the initial emergence of gay and lesbian solidarities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also to the subsequent development of such identities over the course of the twentieth century. As D'Emilio notes, the economic and demographic changes brought about by the Second World War played an especially important role in the expansion of a postwar gay identity in the 1940s and the subsequent rise of the so-called 'homophile' movement in the 1950s. The initial leaders of the Mattachine Society, the central organisation of the early homophile movement, were former Communist Party militants, whose organising skills had been honed in their fight against capitalism and who utilised their understanding of class consciousness and organisation as a model for the homophile movement.³⁷ Steve Valocchi³⁸ is equally emphatic about the connections between the dynamics of capitalist development and the consolidation of a 'class-inflected' gay and lesbian identity in the middle of the twentieth century (a point we elaborate in our discussion of how class divisions have shaped the LGBT movement).

The reconfiguration of a new lesbian collective identity in the 1970s is also connected to capitalism. This is because the 'objective possibility'³⁹ of lesbianism as a historically and sociologically significant phenomenon, like the rise of 'second-wave' feminism (with which it is closely connected), was predicated upon long-term shifts in the capitalist economy, especially women's increasing participation in the labour force. As Virginia Woolf noted in an earlier era,⁴⁰ the ability of women to achieve their full intellectual – and, we might add, sexual – development is dependent upon their ability to achieve economic independence from men.⁴¹ The expansion of 'free' wage labour, in short, was a necessary precondition for the development of powerful movements for civil rights and political influence not only by African Americans (and women), but also by gay men and lesbians. In a sense, these movements thereby completed earlier democratic or 'bourgeois' revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that only partially extended the civil, political, and social rights that we associate with full citizenship.

A second way in which capitalism has been of significance for the LGBT movement concerns the impact of the balance of class forces in society on the

36. Quoted in Wolf 2009.

37. D'Emilio 1983a; Adam 1987; Armstrong 2002.

38. Valocchi 1999.

39. Weber 1949.

40. Woolf 2005.

41. See also Klein 1984.

movement's efficacy at any given point in time. As the contributors to Gerald Hunt's volume *Laboring for Rights* demonstrate,⁴² the strength of the organised labour movement – especially what Hunt terms 'the extent of [its] historical commitment to "social unionism"'⁴³ – has been of crucial importance for LGBT movements both over time and across a variety of national contexts (and at the sub- and transnational levels). The relative strength of organised labour movements has also indirectly affected LGBT movements due to the historical role labour movements have played in the development of welfare states in different national contexts.⁴⁴ As our discussion of the debate over same-sex marriage in the USA demonstrates (see below), the national characteristics of welfare states have had an important influence on LGBT movements. (Hunt's volume points to an opportunity, as yet unexplored, to link LGBT politics to the 'varieties-of-capitalism' literature,⁴⁵ which emphasises cross-national variations in capitalist institutions and their consequences.)

David Rayside's⁴⁶ contribution to Hunt's volume examines the contrasting trajectories of LGBT movements and labour relations in four European nations (France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Britain) as well as the influence of LGBT movements on several transnational institutions (the Council of Europe, the European Community, and the European Union). Rayside finds that the rights of LGBT populations have advanced furthest in northern-European nations, such as the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark, which are also, not coincidentally, the countries where social democratic parties have been strongest. Indeed, Rayside draws an explicit connection between political economy and LGBT rights, arguing that 'Those countries in which most progress has been made toward equality for gays and lesbians (in northern Europe) are also countries with the most advanced labor-relations systems'.⁴⁷

A glance at the countries in which same-sex marriage was first legalised (see Table 1) provides further evidence of a link between social democracy and LGBT rights. Of the seven countries in which same-sex marriage was legal as of 2009, four are strongly social democratic (the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, and Sweden) and the other three all have at least fairly strong labour movements (Spain,⁴⁸ Canada, and South Africa).

All this raises the question of what might account for the evident connection between social democracy and LGBT rights. While it is beyond the scope of this

42. Hunt 1999a.

43. Hunt 1999b, p. 7.

44. Such as Esping-Andersen 1990.

45. See Hall and Soskice 2001.

46. Rayside 1999.

47. Rayside 1999, p. 230.

48. Spain's law recognising gay marriage was enacted by a Socialist government.

Table 1. *Countries in which same-sex marriage was first legalised*

Netherlands (2001)
Belgium (2003)
Spain (2005)
Canada (2005)
South Africa (2006)
Norway (2009)
Sweden (2009)

paper to provide a complete answer to this question, it seems likely the support for LGBT rights in strongly social-democratic countries may have something to do with the levels of social solidarity in these countries. Göran Therborn⁴⁹ suggests as much, in citing the ‘secular pluralism’ prevalent in northern Europe as a chief factor favoring the greater acceptance of same-sex marriage in the region. A second factor worth considering is the inclusive nature of the state in social-democratic nations. This possibility is supported by Rayside’s analysis of the way in which the Dutch state – which, he argues, ‘reflects a general pattern of interest-group inclusion in elaborate consultative exercises designed to arrive at consensus’⁵⁰ – helped to promote LGBT rights, by (eventually) incorporating rather than repressing the country’s main gay and lesbian organisation, the *Cultuur en Ontspannings Centrum* (COC).

A final factor worth examining relates to the transition from industrial to post-industrial politics. According to Therborn,⁵¹ this shift – from a class-based politics focused on *necessity* to a post-class-based politics focused on *choice* – accounts for the emergence of sexuality and other ‘choice’-based issues in Swedish politics from the 1980s onwards. Rayside’s examination of how ‘shifts in the balance of union membership away from the industrial working class have opened up unions to social causes’,⁵² prompting a greater willingness on the part of Dutch unions to embrace LGBT issues, provides further support for this view. Rayside finds that individual union support for LGBT issues is usually greatest when unions 1) have a historically weak relationship with the state and 2) are confronted with significant membership losses and demographic shifts. This demonstrates the importance of paying close attention to the specific ways in which issues of class and sexuality intersect in particular countries at particular times.

49. Therborn 2004, p. 223.

50. Rayside 1999, p. 212.

51. Therborn 1992, p. 104.

52. Rayside 1999, p. 213.

The fight over same-sex marriage in the USA provides a nice illustration of this point. Although the issue is complex and, certainly, not reducible to political-economic factors, there is an important sense in which material considerations are central to the struggle for same-sex marriage in the United States. Especially important, in this regard, is the relative weakness of the US welfare state as compared to more social-democratic states in Europe and elsewhere.⁵³ This weakness – as is well known – is, in turn, closely tied to the weakness of the labour movement in the United States, a result of the absence of a labour party and comparatively low union density. Accordingly, in the United States, many of the social benefits provided by the state in other national contexts are, instead, directly tied to employment – of oneself or of one's spouse.⁵⁴ One of the most important benefits tied to employment is, of course, healthcare, and as Rimmerman points out in his discussion of same-sex marriage, 'Health insurance is a major issue for everyone in a country that provides health care as a privilege rather than as a right'.⁵⁵

While there are, of course, many non-economic factors to consider, here, including the stigma and psychological costs of exclusion from a central cultural rite, the economic benefits attached to marriage in the United States should not be underestimated. One recent study found that the price of being a gay couple in the United States can amount, across one's lifetime, to over \$467,000, mainly due to exclusion from one's partner's health-insurance, Social Security, and spousal Individual Retirement Account benefits.⁵⁶ This has undoubtedly provided a powerful impetus for the LGBT movement to take up the demand for marriage rights. Indeed, this point is also not lost upon *opponents* of marriage rights for gays and lesbians, who argue that 'by embracing same-sex marriage, lesbian and gay movements are endorsing the real economic privileges associated with marriage as an institution in the United States, such as healthcare coverage, inheritance rights, Social Security survivors' benefits, and tax breaks'.⁵⁷ In short, the salience of LGBT campaigns for same-sex marriage is shaped, in significant part, by specific political-economic contexts that reflect something of the balance of class forces in a given society.

Capitalism has also been of significance for LGBT movements insofar as class relations have unevenly penetrated and fractured these movements. Surprisingly, however, this process has been almost totally ignored in recent accounts of the LGBT movement in the United States. Elizabeth Armstrong's important and

53. For example Esping-Andersen 1990.

54. Fantasia and Voss 2004.

55. Rimmerman 2008, p. 119.

56. Bernard and Lieber 2009.

57. Rimmerman 2008, p. 126.

well-received study, *Forging Gay Identities*,⁵⁸ is illustrative. In fact, among recent scholars of the LGBT movement, Armstrong stands out for at least acknowledging the importance of class for the movement, titling one of her chapters, 'Exclusions: Gender, Race, and Class in the Gay Identity Movement, 1981–1994'. It is, therefore, quite telling (and more than a little ironic) that Armstrong's own analysis, in this chapter, ends up reproducing one of the very 'exclusions' she set out to highlight, namely, that of class. The lack of substantive attention to class stands in marked contrast to the chapter's detailed treatment of gender and race. While race and gender are each discussed in separate sections of the chapter, the importance of class for the movement is never independently examined.

The question of class has received much more attention in scholarship addressing the often contentious relationship between the LGBT and labour movements⁵⁹ – a scholarship that has developed outside and independently of the field of social movement studies.⁶⁰ The contributors to Krupat and McCreery's edited volume, *Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance*,⁶¹ examined the ups and downs of this relationship in the United States moving from 'labor's dark age'⁶² to the historic 1997 founding of 'Pride at Work,' the AFL-CIO's first official constituency group devoted to LGBT members.⁶³ Krupat and McCreery rightly wondered whether it is possible 'to conceive of a gay doctor and a lesbian police officer bound by a common class interest'.⁶⁴ Their initial response to this question was in the affirmative, based on the fact that in 'the thirty-nine states where employers may legally fire workers simply because they are known or thought to be gay, these workers would be equally vulnerable, despite traditional class distinctions such as disparities in income and education'.⁶⁵ But other contributors to the same volume point to the continuing fact of class divisions within the LGBT movement.

For instance, Amber Hollibaugh, in conversation with Nikhil Pal Singh, argues that 'social movements that are advocacy movements – the queer movements, the sexuality movements, the HIV movements – have come to reflect more and more fundamentally the class of the people who dominate them'.⁶⁶ Hollibaugh

58. Armstrong 2002.

59. Hunt 1999a, Krupat and McCreery 2001a.

60. We can only note in passing that social movement studies and labour studies have developed separately in the United States. The ASA has separate sections on 'Collective Behavior and Social Movements' and 'Labor and Labor Movements'.

61. Krupat and McCreery 2001a.

62. Krupat 2001.

63. Sweeney 2001.

64. Krupat and McCreery 2001b, p. xvii.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Hollibaugh and Singh 2001, p. 73.

cites the example of how LGBT organisations dealt with President Clinton's so-called 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy toward gays in the armed forces:

The queer organizations in conflict with Clinton's 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy said the policy discriminated against guys at West Point. They didn't ask, 'Who are the majority of gay people in the military?' The majority are poor women and men of color who joined the army or navy or air force because they had no job options where they were. Policy on gays in the military is most felt by the foot soldier, by the guy who is a faggot who flies a helicopter or a dyke who drives an army supply truck. Not having those people represented as the driving force behind an agenda for gay rights in the military reflected the class politics of these movements and the economics that fueled those campaigns.⁶⁷

As Hollibaugh points out, this is but one example of the many ways in which class divides the LGBT movement: 'Much of the gay movement, in my experience, has been willing to forego substantive discussion about anything of concern to anyone but a privileged and small part of homosexuality in this culture. The politics of these gay movements are determined by the economic position of those who own the movement'.⁶⁸

Valocchi⁶⁹ is also centrally concerned with class divisions within the LGBT movement. He seeks to understand how a multiplicity of sexual practices and identities – varying by class, race, and gender – were reduced to a singular definition of homosexuality, one based solely on same-sex object choice. According to Valocchi, there are two reasons why this occurred – both of which have to do with class. First, defining homo- and heterosexuality as based exclusively upon sexual object choice helped middle-class gays *and* straights to alleviate their 'gender-related anxieties about work and family',⁷⁰ which stemmed from the changing meanings of 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles in the world of non-manual, white-collar work. Valocchi emphasises, however, that far from being 'natural' or universal, this middle-class definition of homosexuality as same-sex object-choice initially 'coexisted with a variety of alternative definitions in working class and African-American urban communities'.⁷¹ In order to understand how the middle-class definition of homosexuality came to prevail over alternative definitions, it is necessary to examine the actions of a second group of actors: 'progressive' middle-class reformers.

According to Valocchi, the actions of these reformers, along with the 'reform-minded capitalists' with whom they collaborated, must be understood within

67. Hollibaugh and Singh 2001, pp. 73–4.

68. Hollibaugh and Singh 2001, p. 74.

69. Valocchi 1999.

70. Valocchi 1999, p. 212.

71. Valocchi 1999, p. 210.

the context of the shift from ‘competitive’ to ‘reform’ capitalism in the early decades of the twentieth century – reinforcing the importance of situating the LGBT movement within its larger political-economic context. Valocchi writes: ‘As market relations drastically altered the landscape of virtually every social institution, they created a host of social problems; at least that is how a reform-minded middle-class came to see issues of immigration, race, crime, labor conflict, and sexual difference’.⁷²

These ‘social problems’ – along with the pressing need to ‘maintain . . . conditions of profitable capital accumulation in an increasingly unstable economic world’ – gave rise to the project of ‘building a more secure capitalism in the United States’.⁷³ As Valocchi notes, ‘This was a project that involved interventions not only in the economic realm but in the social and cultural realms as well . . . In the arena of sexuality, it was a project whereby a professional middle class harnessed the economic power of capitalists to the political power of the state to create a collective gay identity that stressed same-sex desire and the hetero/homo binary’.⁷⁴

Valocchi explains that there was a two-step process involved in this. First, middle-class men in white-collar positions experienced growing anxieties about their participation in ‘feminine’ (that is, non-manual) work. Policing the boundary between hetero- and homosexuality was a way for these anxiety-ridden men to reassert their masculinity. This led to a more rigid definition of homosexuality in terms of same-sex object choice. This definition was then enforced in order to unify a range of ‘deviant’ sexual practices, subsuming different groups under the rubric of ‘homosexuals’. While Valocchi suggests that this new definition may not have sat comfortably with certain groups, it was increasingly embraced by middle-class ‘homosexual’ activists who were seeking acceptance as a non-threatening ‘minority’ group.

As these examples make clear, the politics of the LGBT movement – including its goals, strategies, and discourse – cannot be understood without attention to the class composition – and class ideologies – of its members and leaders.

We turn, finally, to a brief discussion of the pervasive and, for us, insidious role of capitalist ideology in the LGBT ‘workplace’ movement in the United States. (The fact that a workplace movement *exists* within the larger LGBT movement suggests that ‘new social movements’, despite some definitions of that term, may, in fact, have important ‘materialist’ concerns.) In her excellent analysis of the LGBT workplace movement in the United States, entitled *Changing Corporate*

72. Valocchi 1999, p. 209.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

America from Inside Out: Lesbian and Gay Workplace Rights,⁷⁵ Nicole Raeburn highlights several factors that make it more likely for large Fortune 500 corporations to adopt LGBT workplace benefits, including non-discrimination policies and health insurance for domestic partners. These factors include changes in the external political environment, isomorphic pressure from competing companies, and internal pressure from LGBT activist networks operating within a given firm. Raeburn sees this last factor as the most important of all (although she notes that isomorphic pressure within a given industry may increase in importance over time).

Despite the crucial importance of social movement activism in the struggle for LGBT workplace rights, Raeburn also finds that in public accounts of the extension of workplace rights to LGBT employees – accounts by corporate executives, the media, and *even by LGBT employee-activists themselves* – the importance of employee activism tends to be downplayed, if not completely ignored. Instead, the extension of benefits and workplace rights to LGBT employees is most often explained through what Raeburn calls an ‘ideology of profits’.⁷⁶ In this ‘profit-centered account,’ the explanation for why corporations extend benefits to LGBT employees rests on the ‘bottom line’ – that is, corporations adopt LGBT-friendly policies not because of social movements, but because it is profitable to do so.

The ‘ideology of profits’ has become a powerful tool, consciously used by LGBT activists in their struggle to win workplace rights. The problem with this profit-centric story is not simply that it is empirically wrong, but that it may, in fact, make the *future* conquest of LGBT workplace rights more difficult by convincing LGBT employees that social movement activism is not (or is no longer) important. As Raeburn notes:

profit-centered explanations of equitable-benefits adoption treat the process of policy change too narrowly . . . In such tellings of the story, there appear to be no ‘live and in the flesh’ change agents at all, just the amorphous market and its competitive pressures spurring companies to play follow-the-leader.

The problem is that, ‘Left with this impression, many gay and lesbian workers in yet-to-adopt companies may decide that mobilizing for equitable benefits is unnecessary’.⁷⁷

The significance of this finding goes beyond the LGBT workplace movement, touching on the relationship between capitalist ideology – including ideas associated with ‘market fundamentalism’⁷⁸ – and social movements generally. As

75. Raeburn 2004.

76. Raeburn 2004, p. 250.

77. Raeburn 2004, p. 252.

78. For example, Soros 1998.

Raeburn demonstrates, in contexts like the contemporary United States, where market ideology is pervasive, the efficacy of social movement activists can come to depend upon their ability to successfully frame movement success in market-friendly terms. In such contexts, movement efficacy is thus dependent upon a denial of the very existence of movements. This process, in turn, further strengthens the perverse power of market ideology, while simultaneously decreasing the likelihood of future social movement mobilisation.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis of the LGBT movement suggests that even ‘new social movements’ that are neither class-based nor centrally concerned with economic or ‘materialist’ issues may be powerfully shaped by capitalism in a number of distinct ways. Our more general conclusion is that the academic field of social movement studies has paid a heavy *and unnecessary* theoretical price for its recent neglect of capitalism and political economy. We have identified a number of very important causal processes – direct and indirect, short- and long-term – which are now routinely ignored by movement scholars, who have tended, in recent years, to focus exclusively on the short-term and proximate causes of collective action, especially changing political opportunities and strategic framing by movement leaders. Greater attention to causal mechanisms associated with the dynamics of global capitalism will undoubtedly improve the quality of much current social movement analysis – including the analysis of changing political opportunities and strategic framing. In sum, it is time to bring capitalism back into social movement studies.