

## **Social movement thinking beyond the core: theories and research in post-colonial and post- socialist societies**

**Laurence Cox, Alf Nilsen, Geoffrey Pleyers**

### **Decolonize this?**

After three long years as a Cambridge English student, the thing that is most memorable about my degree and the thing that has caused me the most frustration is just how unbearably white the curriculum is. Myself and countless others have written at length about the ways in which a white curriculum is nothing more than the maintenance of structural and epistemological power. Decolonising the curriculum is a process – a process that requires thought and consideration. It means rethinking what we learn and how we learn it; critically analysing whose voices are given priority in our education and for what reason. It is not an easy process and why should it be?

So began an open letter, written by Cambridge student Lola Olufemi, which reflected on what it would entail to move beyond scholarly and literary canons defined by Eurocentric frames. Her critique echoes an ongoing churning that has animated campus activism across the North-South axis for several years now.

In South Africa, where parts of this editorial are being written, university campuses were sites of turmoil in 2015 and 2016, as students mobilized against tuition fees and around the demand for a decolonized curriculum. At the University of Cape Town, students successfully fought for a statue of Cecil Rhodes to be dismantled. As critical scholars at the university has noted, students articulated a substantial challenge to “the hurtful milieu they live and study in – replete not just with colonial era statues and symbols but also with pedagogical and conversational modes that regard black students as deficient, necessarily lagging in the civilizational race, and with course content that tells their history and describes their African present as above all a site of failure and lack” (Chaturvedi 2015).

Among the central demands of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, as it became known, was the implementation of “a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern. By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure - through addressing not only content, but languages and methodologies of education and learning – and only examining western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience.”

Significantly, Black and Minority Ethnic students in Britain have articulated similar demands. At the University College of London, the initiative #WhyIsMyCurriculumSoWhite? focused attention on the fact that “BME students find themselves unrepresented, their histories and cultures completely

ignored in the academic field because for many years white writing and history has been given a higher standing, and universities continue to perpetuate this idea of certain sources holding academic privilege” (Hussain 2015). Oxford University witnessed the upshot of its own Rhodes Must Fall movement. The activists wanted to rid the university campus of colonial iconography, but also advanced a wider agenda by arguing that it is essential to change “the Eurocentric curriculum to remedy the highly selective narrative of traditional academia – which frames the West as sole producers of universal knowledge – by integrating subjugated and local epistemologies. This will create a more intellectually rigorous, complete academy” (see also Roy and Nilsen 2016).

### **The Eurocentrism debate**

Student movements for decolonized curricula have run parallel with academic debates over the Eurocentric knowledge structures that shape and inform work in the social sciences and the humanities. In recent years, scholars such as Gurminder Bhambra, Raewyn Connell, Sujata Patel, Julian Go, Ari Sitas, Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano, Achille Mbembe and Syed Farid Alatas have invested significant efforts and energy in both delineating how Eurocentrism works to obscure the global relations and connection that undergird modernity and conceiving of alternative paradigms and approaches that can bring these connections and relations squarely into view.

Struggles over knowledge production, then, traverse the boundaries between activism and the academy. This is nothing new – whereas struggles to bring marginal voices to the core of knowledge production, to paraphrase W. E. B. Du Bois, have always unfolded in the university, they are not strictly of it. The close relationship between feminist theory and the women’s movement is one example of this, and that between anti-imperialism and postcolonial theory another. In other words, the recognition of movement theory – that is, theory that is grounded in the lived experience of subaltern groups and their collective action to transform current structures of power – as valid knowledge never comes about without a fight (Nilsen 2017).

In the postcolonial world that makes up the majority of our planet, these discussions are often a couple of generations further on than in the universities of their ex-colonial masters. In then-dominant fields such as history and literature, anti-colonial intellectuals had articulated ways of reading their own history which did not place the forward march of Euro-American society and knowledge at the centre, and did not position their own societies as previously barbarous and now passive recipients of western enlightenment. As these alternative readings became new orthodoxies in independent states, they too were challenged, for their own often triumphalist, ethnocentric and state-centred narratives, for their willingness to become instruments of new kinds of power and for their marginalisation of subaltern voices.

This much is familiar to students of Indian literature or Irish history, but remains new and surprising in much of the western academy. As globalisation

and the pressure to publish in international, English-language journals have intensified, the limited intellectual independence gained by postcolonial academies has often been undermined by a new orientation of knowledge towards that which is acceptable in the US and UK in particular, the states which dominated the present and previous world-systems (Arrighi 2010).

Consider, for example, three interventions in 2017 around the need to reform the discipline of economics. Leading academics and policy experts published “33 theses for an economics reformation”<sup>1</sup>. This call is best understood as a belated response to the activists of the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics, although it fails to acknowledge the latter<sup>2</sup>. Feminist economists rightly challenged the theses’ failure to engage with gender<sup>3</sup>. None of these three interventions, however, mentioned the global dimension: today’s divided world, the processes of imperialism, colonialism and slavery, and the ways in which global inequalities are maintained or deepened today are absent from these considerations.

Similarly, the call by scholars of non-western philosophy to take non-western traditions of thought seriously has met with so little resonance in that discipline that scholars of Asian philosophy Jay Garfield and Bryan Van Norden recently proposed, to some bafflement from their colleagues, “that any department that regularly offers courses only on Western philosophy should rename itself ‘Department of European and American Philosophy’<sup>4</sup>.” The Cuban philosopher Raúl Fonet Betancourt’s call for an “intercultural philosophy”, meanwhile, aims at promoting an open and comprehensive dialogue with critical and emancipatory traditions and thoughts of other cultures, in personal and collective approaches that fully integrates the epistemic diversity “that has been excluded from the academic world” (Fonet Betancourt 2004). It mobilizes an international and interdisciplinary research network across Europe and Latin America.

We can thus reasonably raise the question of how far social science as currently conceived is specifically western in origin, structure and / or method. Scholars have increasingly been asking after the possibility of a “sociology of the global South”: if so, is a “social movement studies of the global South” (Bringel and Dominguez 2015) possible? How can we “think globally” (Wieviorka et al. 2015)? Or, with Sousa Santos (2006), should we rather be thinking in terms of “ecologies of knowledge” that connect different forms of movements’ own

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newweather.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/33-Theses-for-an-Economics-Reformation.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.isipe.net/open-letter/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/dec/19/delving-deeper-into-an-economics-reformation>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/opinion/if-philosophy-wont-diversify-lets-call-it-what-it-really-is.html>

theorising, different languages of communities in struggle and different kinds of emancipatory research?

### **Sociological Eurocentrism**

So what is sociological Eurocentrism, and why is it a problem? In 1978 the Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said published *Orientalism*, a powerful challenge to the western tradition of essentialising other societies, in particular in cultural representation. Eric Wolf, in his seminal book *Europe and the People Without History*, argues that this approach is shared by western social sciences, which have become accustomed to thinking that “there exists an entity called the West, and that one can think of this West as a society and civilization independent of and in opposition to other societies and civilizations” (Wolf 1982: 5). According to Wolf, this way of thinking is related to an underlying assumption that societies and civilizations can be conceived of as “internally homogenous and externally distinctive and bounded objects” (Wolf 1982: 6). Sociology, he argued, had become particularly wedded to the idea of the charmed circle of the nation-state as the container of social relations, institutions, and processes (see Roy and Nilsen 2016).

As a result, modernity tends to be understood as a way of organizing society that emerged from a historical rupture that was unique to the West, while the non-Western world is relegated to a realm of traditional otherness. Colonialism is written out of the story of the making of modernity, and so are the key contributions that the non-Western world made to what was a quintessentially historical process (Bhambra 2007). Moreover, as Raewyn Connell (2007) has pointed out, sociological theories that claim to be universally valid and relevant skirt engagement with colonialism as a historical process and experience when analyses of social relations, societal institutions and structural change are articulated.

The same pattern characterizes sociological theories of globalization: a system of theoretical categories created in the West is focused on the global South and filled with data. The global South is consequently reduced to being a passive object of social science – not an active site of innovative knowledge production (Roy and Nilsen 2016). Ultimately, this yields a series of conceptual blind spots that make genuine understanding of what Bhambra (2014) has referred to as an “always-already global age” extremely difficult and which most certainly fail to provide analytical tools that can address the realities faced by subaltern groups and popular classes in the majority world today (Patel 2010; Sitas 2014).

### **... and social movement studies?**

Canonical social movement studies reflect many of these tendencies – in particular, perhaps, the claim made by Latin American intellectuals which was at the core of dependency theory in the 1970s (see for example Marini 1992): social scientists attempt to understand the reality and challenges of Latin

America applying concepts and categories forged in the West, which do not correspond to the continent's reality but remain prevalent and shape policies as much as academic knowledge across Latin America. More recently, Connell's indictment of the westernness of the theoretical categories that animate and inform analysis shows how little has changed: "The common logic is that a system of categories is created by metropolitan intellectuals and read outwards to societies in the periphery, where the categories are filled in empirically." (Connell 2007: 66).

Prevailing paradigms in the field can generally be traced to North America. In particular, the dominant trajectory from resource mobilization, political process, and framing theory to contentious politics unfolded in the context of the US, in the construction of a canon which remains dominant internationally. This tradition's origin myths were first framed in the US 1960s and 1970s, but conventional PhDs in "social movement studies" still reproduce the same *terra nullius* assumptions of the founders: that nobody (or nobody who mattered) really existed outside their own world, and nothing significant had been thought or written about social movements outside this world, often defined purely in terms of the US academy.

As two of us have observed elsewhere (Barker et al. 2014), one would not know from most such accounts that Marxist and other forms of activist thought had developed their own analyses of social movements far before the putative "virgin birth" of social movement studies as a "scientific" discipline. In the 1980s, largely for legitimation purposes, a spurious "European tradition" defined in terms of new social movements was constructed on the basis of a misleading reading of a handful of texts (Cox and Flesher Fominaya 2013), a token acknowledgement which simultaneously erased Europe's far more extensive and often more strongly movement-linked traditions in languages other than English.

While this now generically Northern theory has been extended to studies of collective action in the global South – for example, Chinese popular resistance has been analyzed in terms of political opportunities and cultural framings (O'Brien and Li 2006) and in the Indian and Latin American contexts, waves of mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s have been interpreted as signalling the rise of new social movements (Omvedt 1993) – it is very difficult (but not entirely impossible) to identify conceptual and analytical currents flowing from South to North within this form of social movement studies. (Exceptions that prove the rule include "buen vivir" and positionality, discussed below.)

This begs two questions: firstly, whether northern theories are at all capable of grasping the particular form and dynamics of social movements in the global South; after all, it is not hard to observe how the history of colonialism, independence struggles and post-colonial state formation shapes characteristic "social movement landscapes" (Cox 2016) which are distinct from those assumed in northern theory. Secondly, whether the marginalisation of southern paradigms amounts to a lost opportunity to push theoretical and analytical boundaries in the study of social movements. Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 19)

have recently argued that, precisely because of their adverse incorporation into the world system, it is in societies and among populations in the global South that the consequences of modernity are most advanced. And as a result of this, the knowledge produced in these societies to understand these consequences are rich in insights that can illuminate nascent processes of change in the global North.

### **Social movement studies and its discontents**

“Social movement studies”, as an academic entity with (some) power, resources and legitimacy, now has its institutional centre of gravity in the US, Canada and western Europe, and the same is true for pretty much all the thinkers who are routinely cited in general “social movements” textbooks. Similarly, some of the most “powerful” (insofar as the term has any meaning) theories used *within* social movements also have roots in these societies and are shaped by their specific historical experiences. These specificities, however, are often not recognised or discussed, including in those contexts elsewhere in the world where academics or activists are importing such theories as ways of thinking about local (and global) realities.

Tomas MacSheoin’s (2016) article in *Interface* 8/1, and the article by Poulson, Caswell and Gray (2014) in *Social Movement Studies* 13/2 (see also the 2014 response by Graeme Hayes), have discussed the question of how far social movement studies, in their academic form, are a product or reflection of specifically northern / western approaches (primarily as opposed to those of the global South). *Interface* vol. 5 no. 1 (May 2013) was dedicated to anticolonial and postcolonial movements (see Choudry et al. 2013). Elsewhere, Agnes Gagyi (2015) has recently asked how adequate the subdiscipline is to post-socialist experiences (cf. Piotrowski 2015, Císař 2016), while *Interface* had a special issue on movements in post/socialisms (vol. 7 no. 2, November 2015; see Navrátil et al. 2015).

As noted, there are other histories of academic social movement studies. Several substantial schools of European writing which have not been translated into English have been “invisibilized” (rendered invisible) by the growing global domination of English. Some of these, however, have a very fruitful relationship with Latin American scholarship, as for example the work of Alain Touraine. There is a strong Latin American scholarship on social movements in both Spanish and Portuguese, crossing national borders but rarely noticed in the Anglophone world and other contexts relying on English as an academic language. Conversely, the extensive Indian literature in English on social movements is rarely exported far beyond the country’s borders.

Beyond these again, as we shall see, the framing of the subject as “social movement studies” is itself a historically and culturally specific way of organising knowledge in this area (Cox 2017). Even within the western academy, the study of social movements is equally undertaken within social history, the study of revolutions, feminism, resistance studies and literature (to name but a

few), while movements' own indigenous traditions cast the matter differently again. As we move beyond the west altogether, this diversity and multiplicity increases.

*Terra nullius* thinking in this area, in other words, served the purposes of developing an intellectual monoculture within a tightly bounded zone (reliant, to extend the metaphor, on the brutal use of intellectual pesticides to exclude alien modes of thinking), and identifying this with “science” *tout court*, but this has always been a small subset of the much wider ecologies of thought existing in a bigger world.

Our own work has increasingly explored these questions: for example, Geoffrey has been organising discussions around this theme within the International Sociological Association's research committee 47 “Social Movements and Social Classes” and in his dialogues with researchers from the Global South (Bringel and Pleyers 2015); Alf has been working on the question of sociologies of the global South in his research on India (Nilsen 2016); while Laurence has been working on understanding social movements in Ireland as a post-colonial society now increasingly located within the “West” (Cox 2016), and on religion as a mode of anti-colonial organisation in turn-of-the-century Asia (Cox 2013).

Such questions have several dimensions. They include the distinctive empirical experiences of social movements and revolutions in different regions of the world; the varied roles of academics and intellectuals in different societies; the diverse kinds of relationships between academics and movements; the complex trajectories of particular disciplines; linguistic barriers and the new globalisation of academic work mentioned above.

### **Other ways of thinking movements**

There are, then, *other* histories of thinking about what might be called social movements, both academic and activist, which are typically excluded in western scholars' accounts of the development of “social movement studies”. Indeed it is a true indictment of the provincialism of this approach that it situates the origins of systematic thought on social movements within a particular lineage of US scholars – as though writers in states whose very existence is the product of social movements and revolutions do not reflect on those experiences.

Often these other reflections do not use the term, or only in a very general way and for external purposes. Of course there are also locally-specific forms of apparently Northwestern thought which are radically different in practice from their originators, whether that fact is celebrated or obscured. Southern Marxisms and feminisms, for example, often bear little resemblance to dominant forms of these approaches in the global North, even when they seek academic legitimacy by citing Northern authorities.

But there are also both activist and academic traditions of thinking about movements which have fundamentally different histories. Articulating these is a way of challenging the intellectual power relations that automatically place

Northwestern thought at the centre, and contributes to the creation of a genuinely global dialogue about social movement experiences and learning.

In much of the core, social movement studies are understood as relatively marginal to the central concerns of the social sciences. However, in much of the postcolonial world, many of the intellectuals and academics have at times had particular concerns with social movements and revolutions – arguably in far deeper ways than in the West, given the impact of anti-colonial movements and the centrality of postcolonial movement struggles in many societies, but also in terms of expectations of intellectuals around social change. In postcolonial societies from Ireland to India<sup>5</sup>, it is in history and literature that many of the key debates about popular struggles have taken place. Social movement studies' limited engagement with these fields is its own loss – a gap often made up by postcolonial theorising.

In movement thinking too, since the development of articulate forms of activist theory in then-colonial contexts, the anti-imperial and anti-capitalist revolutions which shook much of the twentieth century, and later waves of movements and revolutions against the newly-independent states (and those of Latin America, officially independent since the 19<sup>th</sup> century), Southern voices have become increasingly central to global dialogues. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ghadar movement (Ramnath 2011) and the Baku “Congress of the Peoples of the East” via the Bandung Conference of 1955 to the Zapatistas and the World Social Forum, movement thinking from beyond the core has increasingly set the agenda – and regularly had more to show for its efforts than many movements in the global North.

Actors, intellectuals, ideas, experiences and epistemologies from the South provide insights into their own reality, but also challenges for democracy and possible emancipation paths in the global North. How can research on and analysis of social movements go beyond the various borders noted here, and fully include sociologists from all regions of the world?

At the broadest level, then, this issue asks how people talk and think about collective action and social change on a global level (both as activists and as academics). There can be no single answer to this question: the majority world is itself deeply divided in this respect. Latin America, Asia and Africa have very different histories of movement thought and thought about movements, with massive internal differentiation. In Africa, for example, as between the relatively well-resourced study and politically significant study of social movements in South Africa, research on collective action in North Africa, often in closer

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<sup>5</sup> Internal colonisation was an important part of European state formation. In the Irish case, this involved an initial 12<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Norman conquest; 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century population expulsions and settlements (“plantations”); and a 19<sup>th</sup> century reduction to provider of migrant labour and raw materials. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century war of independence, based in rural guerrilla actions, was noted by Gramsci and by anti-colonial activists across the British Empire. See Cox 2016 on how the resultant social movement landscape has been theorised. There is an extensive literature on the relationship between Ireland and India in particular; see e.g. O'Connor and Foley 2006; O'Malley 2009.



dialogue with work on the Middle East, and the resource-limited situation of work in sub-Saharan Africa; in Asia, it is enough to contrast India and China to see the scale of the problem.

This special issue also explores social movements research in the post-socialist world, itself equally complex but where East and Central European scholars in particular have increasingly “answered back” to west-centric approaches. Finally, it also addresses “Europe’s internal colonies”, particularly in relation to Ireland, one of the few west European colonies to have achieved independence, but also indirectly through discussion of Antonio Gramsci, a migrant from colonised southern Italy to the industrial (and deeply racist) North<sup>6</sup>.

### **Latin America: social and epistemic struggles**

In Latin America, the rise of the “decolonial perspective” is one of the most striking illustration of the fact that most major debates in social sciences started among social movements before progressively penetrating the academic world (Cox and Nilsen 2014).

1992 became the year of the affirmation of indigenous people as social, political and cultural actors across the continent. While state leaders planned to celebrate “500 years of the discovery of America” by Christopher Columbus, indigenous movements rose up all over the continents to make 1992 the commemoration of 500 years of resistance to the conquest, bringing down statues of “conquistadores”. They reasserted their aspiration to live under their own values and their opposition to the modern, individualist and capitalist society. As stated by Luis Maca, the leader of the Ecuadorian national confederation of indigenous people (CONAIE<sup>7</sup>), “our struggle is political and epistemic”. This self-assertion built on two decades of increasing indigenous struggle and networking in the Americas, North and South.

The spread of postcolonial perspectives were eased by the existence of intellectuals of previous generations that had developed a perspective on emancipation based on Latin American values and cultures rather than on Western values and concept of progress, such as Mariátegui in the 1930s. Since the 1950s, interaction with local indigenous and peasant communities had also led to the strengthening of a progressive trend in the local Catholic Church that was later known as “liberation theology” (Gutiérrez 1971). This proposes seeing the world through the eyes of the poor, considering them as actors of the transformation of society. Their emancipation is often expected to pass north through modernization and assimilation to the Western culture, but should

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<sup>6</sup> Gramsci’s 1926 “On the Southern Question”, left unfinished on his arrest by Mussolini’s police, is a powerful analysis of the relationship between the two. Welsh cultural theorist Raymond Williams’ work (e.g. 2003) similarly explores the political and cultural dimensions of such internal colonisation.

<sup>7</sup> Confederación Nacional de los Indígenas del Ecuador.

rather be based in the values of their community and their cosmovision (worldview).

Deeply rooted in and inspired by practical experience among indigenous communities, liberation theology has spread across Latin America and contributed to the rise of a range of movements throughout the continent, including the Zapatista movement in Mexico. The Zapatistas, influential since the late 1990s in inspiring struggles around the world, drew from indigenous experiences of resistance, the organising traditions of liberation theology and third-world Maoism, and the specific history of the Mexican left between nationalist and peasant revolution and Marxism.

Progressive intellectuals, such as Enrique Dussel in Mexico, took part in the movement of liberation theology and closely followed the rise of the new wave of indigenous, popular and ecological movements. Dussel's *Philosophy of Liberation* (1996) proposes rethinking emancipation in ways which are not only different but opposed to modernity. With Anibal Quijano and Walter Dignolo, he argues that the conquest of the Americas is not a project to expand modernity but its foundational moment. These authors stress the oppressive side of modernity, which has its roots in the oppression imposed by the colonialization process. This perspective continues and radicalizes the "theories of dependence" which questioned the modernization and "developmentalist" project and challenges the very concept of development (Escobar 1995) that used to be the cornerstone of modernization projects.

### **Radical criticism, alternatives and intercultural encounters**

The renewal of critical perspectives "from the Global South" combines two dimensions: a radical criticism of the dominant (colonial, modern and capitalist) epistemic perspective, including the claims of universality of the Eurocentric emancipation theories, and a focus on alternative perspectives and practices from/in the Global South.

A third component of this renewal of the critical perspective should not be missed: an invitation to an open, intercultural dialogue that takes into account the positionalities of the actors and that draws on the plurality of alternatives, cosmovisions and emancipatory practices. After developing a radical and very convincing criticism of the colonial dimension of modernity and of current times, the leading critical African intellectual Achille Mbembe concludes his major essay *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) with an epilogue entitled "There is only one world".

He insists on the connectedness of humanity and on the need to develop a new cosmopolitan perspective: "the great challenge of our times is the progressive emergence of a planetary consciousness". "Whether we want it or not, we are tight and these ties will only straight in the times to come". "Our aim is thus to rebuild common histories, not only histories of the global South". On this point too, social movements have paved the way. The World Social Forum was created

to open spaces for a dialogue among activists from all continents based on the assumption of the multiplicity of alternatives to neoliberal policies.

These three dimensions of the renewal of emancipatory perspectives (the critical assessment of coloniality and modernity, the alternative proposal and the open dialogue) should not be understood as successive stages: they need to be combined at every step of theoretical and practical projects.

## **Epistemic justice**

The new wave of movements since the 1990s increasingly breaks down the division between socio-economic and cultural claims. The defence of alternative cosmovisions is a complementary side of the claim for social justice.

Epistemology, forms of knowledge and cosmovisions are thus part of the battlegrounds and of any emancipation project. As synthesized by Sousa Santos, “There is no social justice without epistemological justice”. To defend the cosmovisions (worldview) that have been “invisibilized” and denied by the modernization process is a major part of indigenous people’s and emancipatory movements.

These often challenge dominant and modern forms of knowledge pointing to asymmetries, power relations and dependencies in the relations between cultures and peoples. It shows how modernity built itself and keeps reproducing itself through coloniality and how Western subjectivity (which Bolívar Echeverría calls *blanquitud*, “whiteness”, and Achille Mbembe “black reason”) has constructed itself in a relation of domination over the “others”.

Such struggles for epistemic justice combine the three critical operations stated above. First, they aim at unveiling power and domination within what is presented as “objective knowledge” or the official perspective of history. In the global South as in the North, radical historians unveil a different account of history, unveiling the agency of popular actors and movements and the perspective of the victim of domination and colonialism that are “invisibilize” in modern and colonial perspectives.

The second operation is to shed light on and analyse alternative forms of knowledge (Sousa Santos 2013) and their potential contribution to solving both local and global problems and to provide elements to rethink emancipation outside and often against modern ways of thinking. Thirdly, however, epistemic justice is not reached by replacing the domination of another knowledge but the co-existence and articulation of diverse forms of knowledge. The aim is to replace Western universalism by “pluriversalism”. Likewise, there is not a uniform counter-project to neoliberalism but a multitude of alternatives. Consideration of plurality is an integral part of the process and is seen as a direct challenge to the very idea of a single path to emancipation and happiness.

## A long-standing global dialogue

In the Indian context, the futility of thinking in terms of absolute epistemological divides between North and South becomes evident if we consider the Subaltern Studies project. As is well known, this project was conceived as an attempt to overcome the deep-seated elitism of the historiography that informed prevailing approaches to the Indian freedom struggle. According to Ranajit Guha (1982), the project's founding father, this elitism was manifest, above all, in a tendency to marginalize the involvement of subaltern groups in the independence struggle and to portray it as a passive response to mobilization from above.

The Subaltern Studies project sought to challenge this elitism by studying the active resistance of subaltern groups to oppression and exploitation under British rule. In opposition to elitist perspectives, Guha asserted the existence of a "politics of the people" constituting an autonomous domain, parallel to and isolated from the elites' mental world and sphere of influence, which found expression in the countless uprisings and protest movements that developed among the small peasants and indigenous populations of the Indian village and among India's dawning urban proletariat in the course of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century (Guha 1982: 4). And these movements came to constitute the main empirical subject of the many volumes produced by the Subaltern Studies project (see Nilsen 2017: chapter 1).

However, the project cannot be credibly portrayed as a purely Indian or South Asian initiative. First of all, several of the scholars who initially propelled the project were of British and other western backgrounds, and many of the Indian scholars who were integral to Subaltern Studies were and still are part of an elite group of Southern academics who, as Arif Dirlik (1994: 329) has put it, "have arrived in First World academe".

Secondly and more significantly, the Subaltern Studies project was initially based theoretically on the intersection between British Marxist historiography, Gramsci's perspectives on hegemony and popular resistance and the study of peasant movements in the colonial world (see Ludden 2003; Chaturvedi 2000). The goal of writing "history from below" was drawn from the British Marxist historians' analysis of the bourgeois revolution in England and the transition to industrial capitalism.<sup>8</sup> The assumption that subaltern political consciousness and repertoires of action constituted an "autonomous domain" was taken from Gramsci's programme (1998: 52) for the study of what he called "subaltern classes".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> E. P. Thompson, who was elected president of the Indian History Congress in the late 1970s, was perhaps particularly important in this respect; see Chandavarkar (2000) and Sarkar (2000) for commentaries.

<sup>9</sup> But as David Ludden (2003: 15) notes, Guha used the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* rather than Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* to define 'subaltern' in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*. This hints at the series' unresolved and unclear relationship to Gramsci's theories on hegemony and resistance (see Green 2002; Nilsen 2017: chapter 1).

Finally, the fact that Subaltern Studies largely concentrated on political protest among small peasants in the Indian village is tied to the re-orientation then taking place in the study of the role of peasant movements within anti-imperialist struggles: contemporary revolutionary transformations in China, Cuba and Vietnam forced new analyses and debates on the political significance of the peasantry within the historical development of capitalism and its global expansion (Wolf 1969; Scott 1976; Alavi 1965; Hobsbawm 1973). None of this is meant to belittle the significance of Subaltern Studies as an advance in the study of popular resistance to colonial rule, and more generally as an innovative approach to the study of collective action from below. It is, however, an example of how the epistemologies that guide such advances refuse easy compartmentalization into Northern and Southern silos.

This is of course also true in terms of conceptual currents that flow from South to North. Consider, for example, the idea of social movement unionism. As Karl von Holdt (2002: 284) has pointed out, Southern labour scholars introduced the concept “in an effort to understand the militant, mobilized industrial unions emerging in the newly industrializing countries ... in the 1980s” (see also Lambert and Webster 1988; Lambert 1990).

This effort, in turn, was rooted in the perception that metropolitan industrial sociology, with its focus on institutionalized trade unions, was inadequate to the task of understanding organizing and mobilizing strategies that emerged in authoritarian contexts in the global South, which were embedded in wider community and political alliances, and committed to both “internal democratic practices as well as to the broader democratic and socialist transformation of authoritarian societies ... (von Holdt 2002: 285).

However, the concept was soon taken up by northern labour scholars – for example, Kim Moody (1997), Peter Waterman (2001), and Fantasia and Voss (2004) – in an attempt to both criticize the atrophy of established forms of unionism in the American context and to grapple with new organizing and mobilizing initiatives that were emerging, often propelled by immigrant and minority workers (see also Milkman 2006; Voss and Bloemrad 2011; Milkman and Voss 2014). This is not to deny the very real fact of persistent Northern dominance in the academy – and also in the more progressive and radical parts of the academy – but again to caution against a simple counterposing of Northern and Southern epistemologies as watertight compartments or incommensurable opposites.

### **Majority world Marxisms**

This last point is true for Marxism more generally, as for feminism (or indeed for liberation theology as a form of Latin American Catholicism). Since the Russian Revolution of 1917, the leading force in global Marxism has been a once-peasant state on the fringes of Europe with its own contradictory history in relation to anti-colonial nationalisms (an issue discussed by Irish Marxist James Connolly in the same period). The Soviet Union, and its peculiar readings of

Marxism, became central to many of the left nationalisms that would win out in the post-WWII wave of independence struggles, leading in short order to the formation of Maoism as a distinctly “Third World” Marxism. More broadly, in this period, the revolutionary edge of Marxism was increasingly understood – in the majority world where these struggles were burning ones, as in the west – as one to be found in Asia and in Latin America.

The net effect, whatever the rhetoric, was the development of a wide variety of often mutually-hostile majority world Marxisms; nowhere was this more visible than in India where some communist parties held power, while others fought a guerrilla war against the Indian state. Still today, indigenous Maoism is officially seen as one of the main threats to the latter.

This history, perhaps, reminds us that the later Marx paid particular attention to the colonised world, in Europe and beyond: to India, Indonesia and Poland, to Ireland and the struggle against slavery in the US, to non-western and pre-capitalist societies (Anderson 2010). This perspective is, perhaps, less surprising when we cease to think of Marx as a bearded 19<sup>th</sup>-century German (an image favoured by US sociologists seeking to legitimate their own discipline as suitably authoritative), and think of him as a political refugee in a Europe marked by anti-semitism and struggles over the future and meaning of being Jewish as well as by struggles against imperialism within Europe (Poland, Italy, Ireland) and beyond.

The example of revolutionary Marxism as a theory mostly used in the majority world makes visible a situation which is characteristic of majority world movement thinking more generally: it may speak minority world languages, literally and metaphorically, but it speaks its own form of these languages, with its own centre of gravity and to wrestle with challenges arising in its own context. Similar relationships exist for anarchism or autonomism, feminism or ecological thought, anti-colonialism and nationalism.

To list these is, of course, at the same time to pose a problem. If “movements-become-state” are particularly visible in the majority world, this also means that nationalism and Marxism as ideologies of power, co-opting theories formed in struggle to serve the interests of new state elites, are also particularly powerful; so that the challenge for movement thought in such contexts is often to *distinguish* itself from how the powerful use the same words to mean something different. This is of course similar to the situation of liberation theologians in Latin America, deploying their own dialect of Catholicism against hierarchies often deeply complicit with the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. These days, the same problems are emerging for indigenous movements in states such as Bolivia and Ecuador which use indigeneity and ecology as part of their rhetoric for an international audience and to maintain their local power bases.

### **Souths in the North, Norths in the South**

As noted above, we cannot think imperialism and colonialism as histories which neatly separate two parts of the world. European states were launched on a

process of empire-building and colonisation within Europe well before 1492, a process which continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and indeed past the rise of subaltern nationalisms and the transformation of empires into nation-states; the experience of Ireland, Poland or southern Italy are good examples of the complexities involved, including what happened as such societies became part of the “First World” in various ways. This imperial past was paralleled in a number of majority-world empires; in contexts such as China and Burma the relationships between dominant and peripheral ethnicities survived the colonial period, albeit in transformed ways.

The process of external colonisation produced long-standing settler states with often irreducible indigenous populations pushed into marginal contexts, a situation shared with many states in the majority world where farmers had squeezed hunter-gatherers or dominant ethnic groups had displaced indigenous populations and where such conflicts remain important today (not least, the struggles of Indian *Adivasi* populations). Latin American societies, where settler populations became dominant but lost the privileged position still held by settler states in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, have a particular history in this respect; South Africa’s future is, perhaps, still to be decided. The struggles of indigenous and nomadic populations also remain significant in a number of European countries today.

Slavery constructed different types of diaspora across the Americas in particular, while empire’s chickens came home to roost in Europe’s once-imperial homelands in the form of labour migration after WWII, and more recently new types of refugee movements across the global North. Finally, the one socialist revolution of the early post-WWI period to succeed – the Soviet Union – took place in a peripheral state, itself a multi-ethnic empire with an ongoing colonisation project in its eastern regions. After WWII, the spread of the Soviet model to East and Central European states which had in most cases been subordinate to the German, Austro-Hungarian, Turkish and Russian empires produced a new type of unequal relationship – replaced after 1989 by a newly unequal relationship with western economic and political interests.

Empire and colonialism, slavery and diaspora, ethnic and racial domination and the oppression of indigenous and nomad populations, then, are relationships writ large across the world. If they mark out a global South and global North, they also mark out a “South within the North” and a “North within the South”, or more exactly many different Souths within Northern states, and a variety of Norths within Southern ones.

Our solidarities mark out moments of recognition, as with international support for Palestinian struggle against the settler state; they also mark out moments of choice, where in the South or in the North we choose to speak and act from a recognition of these realities of oppression, exploitation and cultural stigmatisation. Other choices are also possible, as today’s racist upsurge across the post-imperial North reveals – and the rise of racism in East and Central Europe, in South Africa or in Myanmar among other places.

## **Epistemologies of the South: absences and emergences**

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) has attempted to summarize some of the main epistemological proposals of this wide set of critical thoughts in what he calls the "epistemologies of the South". The concept highlights the contributions of actors and intellectuals from the Global South and invites us to see the world from the cosmovisions of indigenous movements, peasants, oppressed and rebels, notably based on the contributions of "subaltern studies" with their origins in India, and decolonial and postcolonial thought developed by Latin American intellectuals and rooted in struggles of the continent.

In this perspective, rethinking social justice and emancipation is a task which is not limited to the South of the planet, but which concerns all regions of the world. This "South" in the proposed epistemology does not refer to a geographical entity. It is rather a metaphor for a way of seeing and thinking the world "from below", from and with the oppressed, combining practical and cognitive resistances. While populations of the Global South have been particularly affected by capitalism and colonialism, this "South" also exists in the North, among excluded, silenced and marginalized populations, such as undocumented migrants, ethnic and religious minorities, victims of sexism, homophobia and racism (Sousa Santos 2014; EZLN 1996: 243). Conversely, oligarchies in the southern countries that take advantage of the dominant order and reinforce it.

### **A sociology of absence**

Sousa Santos proposes a concrete implementation of "epistemologies of the South" in an approach combining two complementary perspectives: the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences. The *sociology of absences* is based on premises that "what does not exist (or is invisible) is actively produced as non-existent (or invisible)" (Sousa Santos, 2014). It aims at "making visible" the actors that have been "made invisible" by mainstream perspectives and modernization processes. To reintegrate these actors, these alternatives and these perspectives, leads to a very different vision of the history and struggles (Zinn, 2005). The idea of epistemologies of the South is a powerful heuristic tool for re-reading the history and timeliness of the emancipation practices put in place by social actors and movements. Social movements, resistances and alternatives then appear to be much more numerous, more diverse and more central than in what is presented in the sociology of social movements mostly focused on institutional visions of politics, and state-centred perspectives of emancipation centred.

### **A sociology of emergence**

The other side of the "epistemologies of the South" is a sociology of emergences which aims to identify and analyse existing experiences that embody concrete alternatives to the dominant colonial and capitalist society. For Sousa Santos,



the alternative to the dominant society will not happen after the rupture of a "big revolution" – after all, many states in the South have already had one or several of these – but it is plural and already exists in a multiplicity of experimentations and prefigurative practices which are at once utopian and realistic (Laville 2011; Pleyers 2010).

Without denying their limits or the existence of internal contradictions and although they are constantly being watched for by marginalization or recovery, such alternatives nevertheless indicate that "another world is possible", to use the slogan of the World Social Forum. These practical experiences are valued both because they embody the ability to act and transform the world of social actors but also because, however small they are, they must be considered as alternatives to hegemony and constitute therefore a political stake.

The epistemologies of the South, in this formulation, echo the decolonial perspective and point to the fact that today's major problems find their roots in modernity but that "there are not sufficient modern solutions". If so, we need to think emancipation and life in a different framework, looking at and diffusing existing solutions such as those implemented by peasant and indigenous movements that have inspired ecologists around the world.

Sousa Santos' reflections draw in large part from the history of the World Social Forum, which in turn reflects the histories of a range of well-developed forms of social movement thinking: the conversations between French and Latin American movement intellectuals that underlay the Forum, the conversations between peasant movements that underlay Via Campesina, the conversations between movements, parties and intellectuals that made it possible for the Forum to be housed in Brazil, and so on. Such reflections could be paralleled from other sources: for example, the Zapatistas as a learning moment bringing together the urban left and Mexico's unfinished revolution, long-standing indigenous resistance, Maoism and liberation theology – and pointing forwards to Peoples' Global Action and the alterglobalisation movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

As movements, and associated academic milieux, enter into dialogue with one another across geographical distance, political differences and different issues or social bases, such questions naturally arise, and have long existed both formally and informally within the various "internationals" of social movements. Thus the "sociology of absences" has similarities with the "history from below" long practiced by Marxist and feminist researchers, oral historians and students of subaltern movements. The "sociology of emergences" connects closely to the question of *potential* and *social transformation* as a central aspect of social movements. And so on.

### **What do these perspectives change in substance?**

On the widest scale, these perspectives should help us think differently about what social change consists of. They hold out the possibility of connecting more systematically the study of social movements, the study of forms of everyday life

and the study of revolutions<sup>10</sup>: for example, to say that in the majority world social movements have frequently given rise to revolutions, but also to new forms of everyday life shaped by the overthrow of colonialism. These are not, in the final analysis, separate terms; even though to think them together is challenging<sup>11</sup>.

In Burma, for example, the Buddhist revival of the later 19<sup>th</sup> and earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century offered emerging urban and educated groups during the colonial period a new way of articulating themselves (Turner 2014). The Burmese struggle for independence thus also became the process whereby, paralleling European ethno-nationalisms, these new formations produced an ethno-religious domination over Burma's many other ethnicities and religious diversity. Contemporary anti-Muslim pogroms are the most visible face of the wider remaking of everyday culture through religious movements and ultimately state-formation processes.

It is, perhaps, the relative stability of many states in the global North, and the relative strength of their institutional boundaries, that lead to "positivist" definitions of social movement studies as a neatly-bounded subfield, separate from revolutions, affecting the state only through legislative change, and relating "externally" to other aspects of society which are also understood as separate and fundamentally distinct areas of life.

The revolutions that shaped the foundations of the British, French and US states – and the social movements that reshaped them again – are easily overlooked in favour of a more institutional definition of reality within which movements are not expected to have such an effect. Similar operations are often performed, with a slightly greater mental effort, in European states whose twentieth century experience was one of repeated reshaping by revolutions and warfare. Even in the majority world, scholars can readily fall for such globally dominant perspectives: in any university, they offer a distancing from politically awkward struggles of the present, simplify workloads and increase the chance of publication in prestigious locations.

### **Social movements in the global South, 1918-2018**

We would argue, not only from the perspective of our political engagement but as scholars who take our intellectual tasks seriously, that this approach goes beyond oversimplification and produces a serious misunderstanding of what movements are and how they work.

The social movements which are unfolding in the global South today are best understood as the latest stage in a century-long trajectory of waves of popular

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<sup>10</sup> In very different ways, scholars as different as James Scott (1990), John Holloway (2010) and Bayat (2010) have attempted to make these connections with a focus on the majority-world experience and outside the framework of conventional social movement studies.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. the *Interface* special issue (vol. 4 no. 1, May 2012) on the "Arab Spring"; Shihade et al. 2012.

mobilization. The broad-brush sketch below shows the inadequacy of any theorisation of social movements which separates them from the revolutions and state-formation processes which they repeatedly fed into, or from the structures of inequality and everyday life which they constantly challenged and remade (see also Nilsen 2015, 2017). As we shall also see, movement waves in the North and the South are coeval and imbricated in each other; it is not possible, on any serious scale, to understand our own local histories in isolation.

### **Anticolonial nationalism**

Between the two World Wars (1918-1940) the politics of anticolonial nationalism in Asia and Africa transformed in important ways. Initially, demands for national self-determination had been raised by elite groups who “made little attempt to mobilize the mass of the population into the nationalist struggle” (Silver and Slater 1999: 200). In the wake of the revolutionary upheavals in Mexico and Russia, this changed as nationalist leaders began to mobilize peasants and workers in large-scale popular movements, and increasingly linked their political projects between countries and regions (Motta and Nilsen 2011b; Prashad 2007). With a broader scope of mobilization, the substantive content of anticolonialism was also altered: the imperative of national liberation was connected to ideals of social justice and an end to poverty. Anticolonial movements, then, began to assert not just “the liberty and equality of peoples”, but also “liberty and equality among the people” (Wallerstein 1990: 31).

As colonial gave way to national independence for the Third World in the post-war era, anticolonial nationalism changed once again – from a collective oppositional project to a nation-building project in which *development* emerged as the central ambition of newly independent states (Desai 2004; Patel and McMichael 2004). The postcolonial development project was constructed around strategies of “national capitalist development” (Desai 2004: 171) that sought to modernize agriculture and industry through the initiatives and leadership of the developmental state (see Kiely 2007: 49-57).

To secure a social basis for the postcolonial development project, the erstwhile leaders of anticolonial movements forged a network of horizontal alliances between dominant agrarian and industrial interests, and vertical alliances between these dominant groups and the subaltern groups that had previously rallied to the cause of anticolonial nationalism (Walton and Seddon 1995). Within such “developmentalist alliances” (Cardoso and Faletto 1979) industrial and agrarian elites held on to their property rights and privileged access to the levers of political power, while subaltern groups were given somewhat better access to expanded public employment and public services and a minimal “social wage guarantee” through different types of subsidized consumption (Walton and Seddon 1995).

This was a configuration of compromises and concessions that won the consent of subaltern groups to elite-led nation-building projects. However, the

unraveling of these projects signaled the emergence of a new long wave of popular resistance that can be referred to as postcolonial social movements.

### **Postcolonial social movements**

In 1968, the world erupted in a global revolt that “cut across the tripartite division of the world system at the time – the West, the Communist bloc, and the Third World” (Wallerstein 2006: 6). The Southern moment of this global revolt was profoundly complex, as subaltern groups and popular classes joined together in movements that confronted *both* the contradictions of the postcolonial development project *and* the continued subordination of Third World countries in the capitalist world system (Watts 2001; Berger 2004; Prashad 2007).

A very important aspect of the 1968 revolt in the global South was the emergence of movements from below that targeted “the nationalism and institutionalized elite politics ... of the first generation of independent third-world states” (Watts 2001: 172). For example, in India – one of the leading “first-generation Bandung regimes” (Berger 2004: 11) – the late 1960s saw the outbreak of guerilla warfare against the state as the Naxalite movement emerged in West Bengal to mobilize landless peasants against the semi-feudal rule of landed elites and the power of a state that was deemed to be a bridgehead of neo-imperial power in the country (see Banerjee 1984, Roy 2012).

In spite of brutal repression, the Naxalites marked a political watershed in postcolonial India: in its aftermath followed a wide range of new social movements that mobilized groups such as *Adivasis*, women, *Dalits*, and informal sector workers that had often been at the very margins of the postcolonial development project. This mobilization happened outside the domain of electoral politics, and challenged the ways in which this project centralized political power in an elite-dominated state apparatus, advanced a form of development that had dispossessed marginal peasants and subsistence producers, and failed to curtail the gendered and caste-based violence to which women and *Dalits* were still subjected (see Omvedt 1993).

The Indian trajectory is only one of many examples from across the global South of how the late 1960s and the decade of the 1970s was an era in which subaltern groups struggled to develop new forms of collective action that could enable them to challenge their adverse position in the postcolonial development project. Despite the fact that these movements were often met with coercion from above – most egregiously in the form of the state terrorism unleashed by Latin American dictatorships with U.S. backing during the 1970s – their critiques of dispossession and disenfranchisement still resonate in the politics of more recent popular mobilizations across the three regions of the South (see Nilsen 2010).

Another key facet of the Southern revolt of 1968 is the emergence of what Mark Berger (2004: 19) has called “second-generation Bandung regimes” and the radicalization of Third Worldism that resulted from this development. The term

itself refers to an arc of regimes that stretches from Ahmed Ben Bella's Algeria (1962-65) to Sandinista rule in Nicaragua (1979-90). Other significant examples of this new generation of Third World regimes would be Chile under Salvador Allende (1970-73), Samora Machel's Mozambique (1975-86), and Jamaica under Michael Manley (1972-80). What these regimes shared was "a more radical, more unambiguously socialist, Third Worldism" than the first-generation Bandung regimes (Berger 2004: 19-23). Many of these regimes had emerged through protracted and particularly violent struggles against colonial domination – Algeria and Mozambique being cases in point in this regard.

The emergence of these regimes was closely related to the radicalization of the Third World project that had first crystallized at the Afro-Asian people's conference in Bandung in 1955. The first expression of this was the Tricontinental Conference that brought together national leaders and the representatives of liberation movements from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East (see Prashad 2007: chapter 8).

The conference was characterized by the militancy of the second-generation regimes, something that became clear not only in the increased support for armed struggle as an anti-imperialist strategy against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Vietnam, but also in the various ways that these regimes "attempted to radicalize state-mediated national development efforts in various ways in the name of socialism and national liberation" (Berger 2004: 21).

Resurgent Third Worldism was also evident on the global arena in the form of the call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) that was put before the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1974, in which the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) called for a fundamental restructuring of the international economy in order to make it possible for the countries of the global South to break free from their subordinate position in the world system (see Prashad 2012: 24-34).

The resurgence of a radicalized Third Worldism eventually foundered – partly because of the intransigence of the global North, partly because of the erosion of internal solidarity among the states of the global South, and partly due to the onset of the international debt crisis in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, the indictment that the second-generation Bandung regimes raised against persistent unequal power relations in the global political economy in many important ways foreshadowed the critiques of neoliberal inequality that has been articulated more recently by social movements across the global South.

### **Neoliberalism and resistance**

During the 1970s, regimes all over the global South attempted to ward off economic stagnation by borrowing large sums of money from an international banking system that was flooded with excess dollars. Whereas these loans allowed Southern states to offset stagnation in the short term, this was nevertheless a strategy that created significant long-term vulnerabilities. This became obvious when the U.S. Federal Reserve implemented a significant hike

in interest rates in 1979 as part of a strategy to lift the country out of recession. The combination of higher interest rates and a downturn in demand and terms of trade for products from the global South in world markets made debt-servicing impossible. And as credit in global financial markets dried up, further borrowing was out of the question (see McMichael 2004).

The response to the international debt crisis came in the form of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) administered by the IMF and the World Bank. In exchange for fresh loans and debt rescheduling, countries in the global South had to implement a number of reforms geared towards a profound alteration of their political economies: currencies were devaluated; public expenditure was downsized; prices and commodity markets were deregulated; public sector companies and utilities were privatized and sold off, often to foreign investors (Walton and Seddon 1995). In short, the outbreak of the international debt crisis opened the doors to neoliberal restructuring in the global South and with it, the unraveling of the postcolonial development project (Kiely 2007).

Neoliberal restructuring through SAPs “eroded national economic management, and, by extension, the social contract that development states had with their citizens” (McMichael 2004: 140). The postcolonial development project had been based on an alliance of social forces where the consent of subaltern groups was secured by granting access to public sector employment and various forms of subsidized consumption that came to constitute a social wage guarantee for these groups. With the neoliberal turn, states in the global South withdrew from these arrangements, and – as is evidenced by the escalation of poverty and declining trends in social development that plagued Latin America and Africa in particular in the 1980s and early 1990s – this withdrawal had a deeply adverse impact on subaltern livelihoods and living standards (see George 1991).

The response from below came in the form of a popular resistance that has been called “IMF riots” or “austerity protests” – that is, “large-scale collective actions including political demonstrations, general strikes, and riots, which are animated by grievances over state policies of economic liberalization implemented in response to the debt crisis and market reforms urged by international agencies” (Walton and Seddon 1995: 39). Almost 150 cases of austerity protests occurred across the global South from the middle of the 1970s to the early 1990s. These protests brought together the urban poor, the working classes, and sometimes also parts of the middle classes in opposition to the distributional consequences of SAPs (Walton and Seddon 1995: 39-44).

At the heart of popular resistance to neoliberalism was a “moral economy of the urban poor” that had crystallized in and through the postcolonial development project (Walton and Seddon 1994: 48). Subaltern groups had come to see the social wage guarantees that postcolonial states had provided as a legitimate right that was owed to them in return for their active or passive consent to the elite-led postcolonial development project (Walton and Seddon 1994: 48). As a result, when states, as part of the implementation of SAPs, phased out price subsidies and public services and cut back on public sector employment, the urban poor perceived this as a violation of their rightful expectations:

“Protestors demanded that the state meet its responsibilities to the people who, during the decades of patron-client politics, had upheld their end of the bargain.” (Walton and Seddon 1994: 50)

The politics of the IMF riots were essentially defensive. In contrast to the new social movements of the 1970s, which took aim at the centralization of political power in the developmental state, austerity protests attempted to uphold some aspects of the state-society relations of the postcolonial development project that accommodated the needs and interests of subaltern groups (Motta and Nilsen 2011b: 14). However, we should not conclude that popular resistance to neoliberal restructuring was simply a backward-looking form of protest. Rather, what austerity protests in fact articulated was an embryonic opposition to the forms of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2005) that have been at the heart of the neoliberal project and central to the systematic transfer of social wealth “from the mass of the population towards the upper classes [and] from vulnerable to richer countries” (Harvey 2007: 34). In doing this, austerity protests came to play a vital role in giving shape to the counterhegemonic projects of the social movements that are currently asserting radical claims from below in the global South.

### **Social movements in the contemporary global South**

If the unraveling of the postcolonial development project from the late 1960s onwards opened up a space in which novel resistances could be articulated, the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 2000s witnessed the consolidation across much of the global South of social movements that fuse and develop key aspects of these resistances in new oppositional projects. One of the most significant examples of this development was the outbreak of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico in 1994. The political project of the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* was multi-layered in that it fused a rejection of the political economy of developmentalism – a political economy in which indigenous peoples in Mexico had been dispossessed in the name of national progress – with opposition to the structural inequalities – both national and global – that are intrinsic to neoliberal globalization (see Harvey 1998; Collier 2005; Morton 2011: Chapter 7). Such twin indictments of both developmentalism and neoliberalism are not unique to the Zapatistas – they have figured centrally, for example, in resistance to dispossession in India’s Narmada Valley (Nilsen 2010) and in the popular protests that have recently shaken the Arab world (Dabashi 2012; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014). There are three particularly important manifestations of this tendency in contemporary social movements in the global South.

First of all, current mobilization from below in the global South have continued to criticize the exclusionary and centralizing tendencies of political decision-making in postcolonial states. Furthermore, many movements have worked consistently to develop strategies that can give rise to more participatory forms of politics – for example, by enabling subaltern communities to take control of

local political arenas, whether through urban neighborhood assemblies or by participating in local electoral processes – or by championing for various forms of devolution of political power. Beyond the national level, social movements from the global South have been extremely vocal in articulating a critique of the plutocracy that reigns in transnational institutions like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the G8.

Secondly, resistance to dispossession has increasingly emerged as a key issue in the politics of social movements in the global South, both in rural contexts where natural resources are increasingly subject to commodification and in urban locales where financial crises have wreaked havoc on industrial manufacturing. However, rather than mobilizing for a return of the developmental state, social movements have begun to develop alternative forms of community-based collective ownership – for example, when the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* in Brazil organize agricultural production through democratic cooperatives or the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados* in Argentina occupy disbanded factories and operate them through systems of workers' management.

Thirdly, the hierarchies of political and economic power that structure the capitalist world system are still a target of critique in and through the collective agency of Southern social movements. This is particularly manifest in the way that the politics of these social movements link the exigencies of localized struggles to the dynamics of global power structures and mobilize to achieve progressive changes across spatial scales. For example, the emergence of networks of transnational agrarian movements have been integral in linking the disparate struggles of rural communities across the South in opposition to a global “corporate food regime” and in defense of the notion of “food sovereignty” as an alternative to neoliberal agricultural policies.

### **Rethinking social movement studies**

This lively reality is often sold rather short by the often rather circumscribed concerns of mainstream “social movement studies”. That research on movements is strongly grounded in one’s own particular local reality is entirely appropriate and healthy; what is problematic is when the wider world, beyond that reality, is understood only through the terms offered by a provincialism which is not recognised as such. “Science” is not defined by conformity to the concerns of one’s disciplinary colleagues locally, let alone by imagining that they constitute the totality of the relevant conversation. Whether from an activist or academic perspective, taking the pursuit of understanding and transformation seriously means thinking on a wider scale as a matter of course.

As our involvement in editing this issue testifies, attention to the epistemologies of the South is not an issue limited to intellectuals from the global South but a general proposal to rethink emancipation, social movements and social sciences. It deeply challenges the dominant theories and perspectives that have been built by scholars and case studies in the Global North. Critical sociologists



may, for example, question the very concept of social movements (Garza 2016, Holloway 2015) as based on a Western concept and analyses, proposing instead analyses in terms of “resistance” or “rebels”. The challenge is then not to replace one set of words by another – after all, “resistance” is best known in the social sciences through Foucault, and “rebels” are only such from the viewpoint of an empire – but to use this to draw attention to how we think, from what standpoint and for what purposes.

For researchers from the North, the colonial/postcolonial perspective is an invitation to acknowledge our “positionality” (Dussel 1996) as researchers situated and trained in dominant countries and to more modesty when it comes to universalize one’s research results and concepts of emancipation. This requires acknowledging the limitation of one’s own knowledge and forms of knowing and to open oneself to the encounter with different forms of knowledge. An “intercultural exchange” (Fornet Betancourt 1994) requires a personal attitude and a will to expose oneself to the risk (and the hope) “of losing some of one’s certainty and to learning from the other” (Mbembe 2017b).

This is made harder by the constraints imposed on everyone by language: not only the limited number of languages which any individual can effectively learn (although social scientists who are only able to work in one language are particularly restricted – a problem most common in core states), but also the politics and economics of translation, and of globally dominant languages, meaning that it is a particular challenge to develop communication which is *not* shaped by the particular prestige of English and the question of which theorists and researchers are translated, and distributed, via English (Cox 2017).

All of these questions are central to *Interface*’s original mission of supporting and encouraging dialogue between reflection on social movements from different parts of the world and the different languages (theoretical, political, disciplinary, intellectual, cultural) in which movements think about themselves and research is framed, something embodied in our unique organisational structure. We are happy to see that MacSheoin’s (2016) article shows that our approach bears some fruit, in terms of a wider global focus than other social movement journals – while recognising that there is still a huge way to go. If rough parity between articles on movements in core societies and those on movements in the global South probably mirrors to some extent the global distribution of academic researchers and resources, it does not in any way mirror the far greater strengths of *movement* theorists in the global South, and we need to find more effective ways of including these in our dialogue.

One key reason why *Interface* equally encourages dialogue between different intellectual and political traditions as well as between different disciplines is similarly the very different significance of these different ways of thinking in different national and regional contexts. This is of course also true for thinking *from and for* movements, which arguably plays out very differently in countries where empires have been overthrown within living memory, or for that matter those which are experiencing a reaction either against the socialist experience or against the hopes raised by the movements of 1989.

## **In this issue**

This special issue brings together contributions which articulate particular approaches to social movement research, movement-based theories and histories of thinking about these subjects which are rooted in the post-colonial and post-Soviet experiences, in the context and cultures of the global South and that in other ways decentre taken-for-granted assumptions and institutional power relationships about the production of social movement theory.

In writing the call for this issue, we had broad ambitions: we were interested in everything from indigenous thought via religious forms of mobilisation to the particularities of movement theorising in China or in East and Central Europe. Intellectually we were aware of discussions ranging from Indian subaltern studies, research on the Black Atlantic, Latin American feminisms to South African radical thought and more.

We were hoping for papers which challenge mainstream forms of social movement theory (whether resource mobilisation, political opportunity structure, new social movements, frame theory, dynamics of contention, strategy-framework etc.) from the perspective of movement experiences in the global South. We also sought papers highlighting types of struggle which go beyond the themes of nationally- or core-defined politics, such as work on anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles, indigenous and peasant movements, mass-based left and ethnic movements, campaigns against free trade deals etc.

We were particularly interested in theoretical discussions (eg around sociologies from the global South, Michel Wieviorka's *Penser global* project etc.) and social movement thinking processes (e.g. the World Social Forum discussion processes; Sen and Waterman 2008, Sen and Saini 2005) expressing a consciously global aspiration based in the global South. We wondered how far it might be possible to invite or include existing political and academic debates and discussions which are primarily focussed within a single country or region of the world into a wider debate, in *Interface* or elsewhere.

Finally, at the broadest level, we felt it important that the call did not require authors to subscribe to a particular analysis but instead invited conscious reflection on how far terms and distinctions like global South / global North, postcolonial, core / periphery etc. are helpful in understanding the movements they are studying.

## **The right to housing beyond the West**

This issue's themed articles were preceded, in our last issue (vol 9 no 1), by a special section on "The right to housing in theory and practice: going beyond the West". Guest-edited by Katia Valenzuela-Fuentes, Dominika Polanska and Anne Kaun and coming out of an activist-academic conference, this section included Joanna Kostka and Katarzyna Czarnota's "Modes of knowledge production in the study of radical urban movements" (on Poland); Bálint Missetics' "Homelessness, citizenship and need interpretation: reflections on organising

with homeless people in Hungary”; Ana Vilenica’s “Contemporary housing activism in Serbia: provisional mapping” (with Ana Džokić and Marc Neelan / Who Builds the City); Marta Solanas Domínguez’ “FUCVAM: cooperativismo de vivienda, de los barrios in Montevideo a una alternativa contrahegemónica en otros Sures”; Klemen Ploštajner’s “Society of homeowners and possible cooperative future: case of Slovenia”; Andrea Aureli and Pierpaolo Mudu’s “Squatting: reappropriating democracy from the state” (on Italy); and an activist panel discussion “Housing activism: beyond the West” with the Committee of Defence of Tenants’ Rights (Poland), The City is for All (Hungary), Office of Housing Rights in Dikmen Vadisi (Turkey) and the Popular Organisation of Independent Left “Francisco Villa” (Mexico).

### **This issue’s themed articles**

The thematic section of this issue begins with a contribution from Simin Fadaee. Departing from Northern social movements, she takes a systematic approach to study social movements in the Global South. She meticulously articulates Southern movements around four themes starting with the evolution of anti-colonial and post-colonial resistance, to movements that originated from a variety of political structures/regimes, to political action responding to state-civilsociety relations and finally to multiple forms of interactions through democratization, identity and difference, and material informal and formal structures of politics.

In her article, Agnes Gagyí maintains a dialogue between core and non-core conceptualizations and perspectives of movements. The author suggests that political actions burgeoned historically and through the contemporary neo-liberalization of “democratic capitalism” in Eastern Europe. Pepijn van Eeden offers a comparative study of Romanian and Polish politicization of ecological issues under state socialism and during the early revolutionary transformations to post-socialism. Covering different time periods, van Eeden raises key questions as to how we theorize political ecology.

Dina Kiwan’s article offers an empirical analysis of people’s protests, popularly *thrash protests*, in Beirut, Lebanon in 2015/6. She expands on a range of protest mechanisms to capture the dichotomous relationships between rationality of protests and emotionality of protestors, while challenging the West’s universalized constructions of citizenship and knowledge production on movements. In her contribution, Erin Fitz-Henry analyzes the neglected potential of transnational philosophical thought, political possibilities and contemporary colonialisms, drawing from her field surveys with Peruvian and Ecuadorian activists at an environmental rights tribunal.

Tanja D. Hendriks explores Makola Market, Accra (Ghana) which has been historically significant for the development of trade and commerce since pre-colonial times. Hendriks conducts a detailed ethnography of informal workers’ approaches to collective action, often overlooked by (inter)national trade union interventions. Lastly, Tomás MacSheoin’s piece notes how agrarian movements

around land issues contradict conventional nationalist accounts of Irish resistance to English imperialism. His article offers the first systematic overview of such movements, both historically and thematically, from the mid-eighteenth century to the twentieth and a remarkable way of reading Irish history.

Taken together, these pieces represent significant alternatives to conventional approaches which read social movements in the global South, the post-socialist world and other non-core contexts in the light of theories developed in and for the core.

### **General articles**

In this issue's general section, Leah M. Fusco and Angela V. Carter document the practices of a successful anti-fracking campaign in the western regions of Newfoundland and Labrador and identify lessons for organizers in rural locations facing similar challenges around oil and gas expansion. Sophia L. Borgias and Yvonne A. Braun explore the transformation of a local anti-dam protest into a national and global social justice movement. They show how resistance to the *HidroAysén* mega dam project evolved from a small community-oriented struggle against development in a remote part of Patagonia to a largest nation-wide movement which has received considerable international attention.

In their article, Signe Thydal and Christian Franklin Svensson talk about the challenges and possibilities of Firefund.net, a crowdfunding Danish organization that provides resources for direct action movements. They explore the difficulties of an effective self-organising initiative and of operating in a juridical grey zone. Iván Carretero-Navarro and Eva Espinar-Ruiz's Catalan-language article stands at the juncture between capital and labor. The authors draw on a sample from three leading Spanish newspapers to analyze media coverage of labour strikes, showing how the media often negatively represents the impacts of strikes on consumers, strikers and the general population as negative. The article identifies important practical lessons of strikes and strategies of labor/social movements.

Drawing on participant observations and in-depth interviews, John Foran, Summer Gray and Corrie Grosse's article analyzes the orientation, discourse, vision and political action of climate activists around the UN climate summit in Warsaw, using the concept of "political cultures of opposition and creation". Drawing on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Bert Lewis's seasonal piece takes a distinctive approach to ghost stories as images and inspiration for acts of labour protests, which can influence tactics of *becoming-ghost* and suggest mechanisms to deal with existing workplace struggles.

## Reviews

This issue includes a bumper crop of reviews. We start with Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (by Carolyn Elerding); Chris Robé's *Breaking the Spell: a History of Anarchist Filmmakers, Videotape Guerrillas, and Digital Ninjas* (by Beth Gaglia); Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (by Shannon Walsh); Robbie Shilliam's *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (by Lewis B.H. Eliot); Ingeborg Gaarde's *Peasants Negotiating a Global Policy Space: La Via Campesina in the Committee on World Food Security* (by Maria Vasile).

We then have two review essays, one by Andrew Kettler on Wesley Lowery's *They Can't Kill us All: the Story of Black Lives Matter*, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor's *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* and Christopher J. Lebron's *The Making of Black Lives Matter: a Brief History of an Idea*; followed by Andy Mather's review essay on Jodi Dean's *Crowds and Party*, Donatella della Porta et al.'s *Movement Parties against Austerity* and Richard Seymour's *Corbyn: the Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics*.

Finally we have reviews of Dylan Taylor's *Social Movements and Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (by Laurence Cox), Harald Bauder's *Migration Borders Freedom* (by Sutapa Chattopadhyay), Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest: India's War on Bastar* (also by Sutapa Chattopadhyay), Kristian Laslett's *State Crime on the Margins of Empire: Rio Tinto, the War on Bougainville and Resistance to Mining* (by Alexander Dunlap) and Adam Greenfield's *Radical Technologies: the Design of Everyday Life* (by Harry Warne).

## Welcoming new editors

Finally, in this issue we are delighted to welcome a number of new editors to *Interface*, extraordinary researchers and activists who have already brought a lot to the journal. Sutapa Chattopadhyay joins the editorial group for international / transnationally organised / migrant movements. Elisabet Rasch joins the Spanish-speaking Latin American group. Brecht de Smet, Helge Hiram Jensen and Melanie Kryst join the west European group. We are very grateful for their energy and enthusiasm for the project.

## Future issues and calls for papers

Our next issue (vol. 10 no. 1, May/June 2018, submissions closed) is an open (unthemed) issue. The following issue (vol. 10 no. 2, Nov / Dec 2018, deadline May 1 2018) is on "Political parties, trade unions and social movements: emancipatory reconfigurations of popular organisation." This is an extension for the call originally given for vol. 10 no. 1, due to the death of Peter Waterman, who was collaborating with us on that issue. Both themed and unthemed articles should go to the relevant regional editors: see

<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/editorial-contact/>

## About the authors

Laurence Cox is a long-time critic of the “terra nullius” approach of US-centric social movement studies, and co-founded *Interface* in part to develop a broader and more serious approach grounded in dialogue between the world’s different intellectual traditions of theorising social movements. His own work attempts to understand Ireland’s peculiar postcolonial movement situation; Europe’s complex, diverse and often revolutionary movements; global traditions of Marxist thought about social movements; and anti-colonial religious movements in Buddhist Asia. His next books are *Why Social Movements Matter* (Rowman and Littlefield 2018) and *Revolution in the Air* (Pluto 2018, with Salar Mohandesi and Bjarke Risager).

Alf Nilsen is associate professor at the Department of Global Development and Planning at the University of Agder and Research Associate at the Society, Work and Development Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand. His books include *Social Movements and the State in India*, *New Subaltern Politics* and *Social Movements in the Global South*.

Geoffrey Pleyers is a FNRS researcher and professor of sociology at the Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium and the current president of the Research Committee 47 “Social movements” of the International Sociological Association. He coordinates the program “Social movements in the global age” at the Collège d’Etudes Mondiales, in Paris, and regularly teaches in universities in Latin America. He is the author of *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age* (Cambridge, Polity, 2010), the editor of *México en movimientos* (with M. Garza, Porrúa, Mexico City, 2017), *Protestas e indignación global* (with B. Bringel, CLACSO, Buenos Aires, 2017) and of the platform “Open Movements: for a global and public sociology” ([www.opendemocracy.net/openmovements](http://www.opendemocracy.net/openmovements)).

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