

# The Strange Disappearance of Capitalism from Social Movement Studies

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*Abstract:* The dynamics of capitalism provided a number of important causal mechanisms in the groundbreaking studies of social movements by English-speaking scholars during the 1970s. However, more recent scholarship on movements and political conflict has, with very few exceptions, largely ignored the enabling and constraining effects of capitalism. Ironically, during a period in which global capitalism became ever more powerful, it also became increasingly invisible to academic experts on popular movements. This strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies is a result, we speculate, of the declining influence of Marxism in the social sciences during the 1980s and 1990s, among other factors. The neglect of capitalism might also be explained (and justified) by the fact that the “new” social movements that many scholars have come to study in recent years are not centrally concerned with economic, labor, or work-place issues and thus have nothing or little to do with capitalism. We argue, on the contrary, that even those movements that do not represent classes or make primarily economic demands are still powerfully shaped by capitalism. We illustrate this claim by examining the gay and lesbian (or LGBT) movement, enumerating the main ways in which capitalism has facilitated, shaped, and constrained this “post-materialist” movement.

*Keywords:* social movements, capitalism, political economy, new social movements, LGBT movement

Over the last several decades, a perplexing development has occurred within the field of social movement studies. While capitalist relations of production have spread to nearly every corner of the globe, scholars who specialize in the study of social movements, at least in the English-speaking world, have increasingly tended to ignore the ways in which capitalist processes shape social movements. The first part of this paper analyzes 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, that are not centrally concerned with economic, labor, work-place or other “materialist” issues. If this is so, then perhaps the disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies should be judged a relatively benign development. We show, however, that the dynamics of capitalism have in fact mattered significantly, and in a variety of ways, for the LGBT movement. We conclude that movement scholars, including scholars of new social movements, need to pay—or, more accurately, *re-pay*—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 now seems largely forgotten, the dynamics of capitalism played an extremely important role in many if not most of the seminal, English-language studies of social movements written by social scientists during the 1970s. A series of important studies of movements and revolutions appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s that had the effect of radically reorienting the 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 emphasized 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 emphasize quite strongly the effects of capitalism on movements.

Among the more important such studies were Jeffery Paige's *Agrarian Revolution* (1975), Michael Schwartz's *Radical Protest and Social Structure* (1976), Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's *Poor People's Movements* (1977), Charles Tilly's "resolutely pro-Marxian" *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978: 48) (and many other of Tilly's writings from this period [e.g., Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975, Tilly 1982]), Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979) (see also Skocpol and Trimberger 1994 [1977-78]), and Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (1999 [1982]; see also Anderson-Sherman and McAdam 1982). 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 labor 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 (i.e., capital accumulation). The dynamics of capitalism that these authors emphasize include processes directly linked to capital accumulation, especially the proletarianization (or commodification) of labor, the commodification of productive forces generally, and the concentration and centralization 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, etc.) or institutions that capitalists may come to control (e.g., legislatures, courts, police, etc.) 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 class fractions; 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 (i.e., mediated by other processes) and are the result of both short- and long-term processes.

In McAdam's influential study of the U.S. 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" (McAdam 1982: 73). 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 organization" 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 elite and Marxist models of power in America” [1999 (1982): 38].)

The groundbreaking movement scholarship of the 1970s, we should note, not only emphasized 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 sign of the times, no doubt—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. (1977: 2)

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” (1979: 292).

More recent studies of social movements not only lack this anti-capitalist spirit, but they have also largely ignored, with very few exceptions (e.g., Sklair 1995, Buechler

2000, Clawson 2003, Schurman and Munro 2009), the enabling and constraining effects of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> The more 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 shape the possibilities for protest, sometimes over many years or even decades, by, for example, influencing 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.

Evidence for these claims may be found by examining (1) the leading journals in the field of social movement studies, (2) recent award-winning books and articles 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 U.S.) and *Social Movement Studies* (based in the U.K.). *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 is not necessarily a criticism of these journals; it undoubtedly reflects the changing theoretical orientations of movement scholars. We have no reason to believe that the editors of these

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1. We thus concur with Richard Flacks 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” (Flacks 2004: 139).

journals have tended systematically to reject work which emphasizes economic dynamics.)

This conclusion is based on our analysis of the content of both the article titles and abstracts of all abstracted articles that were published in both *Mobilization* following its founding in 1996 through 2007 (a period of 12 years) and in *Social Movement Studies* from its founding in 2002 through 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 article 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 article titles and 42 abstracts, and the concept of “frame” or “framing” appears in nine article 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 article title and one abstract. The words “class conflict” and “class struggle” again do not appear in a single article title or abstract. By contrast, the concept of “political opportunities” appears in three article titles and six abstracts, and the concept of “frame” or “framing” appears in three article 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 that 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-globalization 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 anticorporate activism that is not linked to the global justice movement also pay little scant attention to the dynamics of capitalism [e.g., Raeburn 2004, Soule 2009].)

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 contemporary scholars of social movements in the English-speaking world. A concern with political economy is also only barely evident in the books and articles that have been honored recently by the American Sociological Association’s section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements (CBSM). The section’s website (<http://www2.asanet.org/sectioncbsm/awards.html>) lists 17 books that received the section’s book prize from 1988 to 2009 (a prize was not awarded every year)

and 10 articles that received the section's best article prize from 2002 to 2009 (there were cowinners for some of these years)(see Appendix A). 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* (1995), which looks at class-based (and other) forms of mobilization during the period under study, and Rick Fantasia's *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers* (1988), a study of working-class consciousness in the contemporary U.S. 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* (2006); *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (2004); and Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow's *Contentious Politics* (2007).

Della Porta and Diani's (2006) textbook is least problematic from our point of view. (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 ("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 of "capitalism" per se (a word they very seldom use), but they do note how class conflicts—including strikes, protests by the

unemployed, etc.—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 globalization” has catalyzed protest in recent years. However, their concern with socioeconomic structures, social change, and class cleavages is largely confined to this single chapter. Indeed, they seem to 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” (della Porta and Diani 2006: 63). But this seems to assume that such resources, ideologies, and political contexts are substantially if not wholly detached from the dynamic structure and practices of capitalism, a view we would of course challenge.

Like the della Porta and Diani volume, only one chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2004) emphasizes capitalist dynamics, namely a chapter on the U.S. labor 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 700 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* (2007), a textbook based on ideas first developed in McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's *Dynamics of Contention* (2001). As mentioned, the earlier work of Tilly and McAdam did emphasize—indeed, often *strongly* emphasized—capitalist dynamics, including the collapse of agricultural production based on extra-economic coercion (McAdam) and the more general process of proletarianization (Tilly). In *Contentious Politics*, however, capitalism has disappeared completely. The book makes no mention whatsoever of capitalism, proletarianization, class conflict, or political economy generally. This is remarkable for a book explicitly designed to provide undergraduate and graduate students with the analytic tools and procedures they will need to understand social movements, revolutions, nationalist movements, transnational struggles, and “contentious politics” generally. Instead of situating these conflicts against the historical backdrop of capitalism and state-building, as Tilly once prescribed (e.g., Tilly 1978), *Contentious Politics* discusses (and formally defines) a number of abstract “mechanisms” and “processes” (i.e., combinations and sequences of mechanisms) 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 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. 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 [i.e., revolutions]” (Tilly 1978: 194). But the “reorganization of production” is not to be found among the mechanisms and processes emphasized 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 after the 1970s of Marxism in the social sciences, 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. Our aim here is not of course to criticize 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.<sup>2</sup> 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-

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2. One recent study (Brick 2006) argues that a “postcapitalist vision” of society, broadly defined, dissolved among U.S. social scientists during the 1970s and 1980s, a view congruent with our own.

style Communism—it also became increasingly invisible to scholars of popular movements. Even a recent volume on the “silences” in social movement theorizing (Aminzade et al. 2001) is silent about capitalism and political economy. For us, in any event, the key question is not so much *why* capitalism has disappeared from movement studies, but whether the analysis of movements has suffered as a result. We believe 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 labor movement) are not about class or “materialist” concerns and therefore have no discernible connection to capitalism—is empirically and analytically untenable. McAdam’s (1982) study of the U.S. civil rights movement, 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 [Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender]) 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 organized and self-conscious—may powerfully shape movement goals and strategies.
4. Finally, ideologies and cultural idioms closely linked to capitalist institutions and practices may strongly influence movement strategies and goals.

#### **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 [see Steinmetz (1994) for an overview].) Unlike “old” social movements—preeminently the labor 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” (e.g., Inglehart 1990; Fraser 1997).<sup>3</sup> 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” (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004: 273). 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. The LGBT movement is thus a particularly “hard” test case for our claim that the dynamics of capitalism should be brought back into social movement scholarship. But if such dynamics prove to be important for the LGBT movement, as we believe they are, then they may also be important for other new social movements.

Most recent scholarship on the LGBT movement *in the field of social-movement studies* focuses on issues of individual and collective-identity construction and pays little or no attention to issues of political economy or class (e.g., Armstrong 2002; Rimmerman 2008). 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 2 articles on LGBT movements between 2002 and

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3. Fraser (1997), to be sure, emphasizes 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.

2007 (about 3 percent of all articles published in that journal); again, neither of these articles was substantially concerned with the dynamics of capitalism.

As suggested above, however, we believe the dynamics of the capitalist economy have profoundly shaped the LGBT movement in at least four ways. First, capitalist development was a necessary condition for the initial emergence and subsequent elaboration of LGBT identities and solidarities (D’Emilio 1983; Adam 1987). Second, the balance of class forces in society has shaped the historical development and achievements of LGBT movements (Hunt 1999a). Third, the LGBT movement is differentially penetrated by class forces and is fractured along class lines (Krupat and McCreery 2001a; Hollibaugh and Singh 2001; Valocchi 1999). Finally, ideologies directly linked to capitalism—specifically, ideologies of the market and profitability—have clearly influenced the LGBT movement, often in surprising ways (Raeburn 2004). We will now elaborate each of these points in turn. In doing so, we necessarily draw mainly upon scholarship that either preceded or falls outside the contemporary field of movement studies.

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* (1983a), published in 1983, as well as an influential paper, “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (1983b), published the same year (just one year after the publication of McAdam’s influential study of the civil rights movement) (see also Adam 1987). 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.

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 labor. This process of “proletarianization” 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 (see also Therborn 2004). The urbanization that resulted from capitalist industrialization, furthermore, facilitated the formation of communities based on sexualities and lifestyles. The large, anonymous cities created by capitalist industrialization 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 summarizes 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 is individuals able to make a living

rather than livelihoods being dependent on family groupings. (Quoted in Wolf 2009.)

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 World War II 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 organization of the early homophile movement, were former Communist Party militants, whose organizing skills were honed in their fight against capitalism and who utilized their understanding of class consciousness and organization as a model for the homophile movement (D’Emilio 1983a; Barry 1987; Armstrong 2002). (Steve Valocchi [1999] 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 can also be connected to capitalism. This is because the “objective possibility” (see Weber 1949, Moore 1978) 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 labor force. As Virginia Woolf (2005 [1929]) noted in an earlier era, 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 (see also Klein 1984). The expansion of “free” wage labor, 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 we associate with full citizenship.

A second way in which capitalism has mattered for the LGBT movement concerns the impact of the balance of class forces in society on the movement’s efficacy at any given point in time. As the contributors to the Gerald Hunt volume, *Laboring for Rights* (1999a), demonstrate, the strength the organized labor movement—especially what Hunt terms “the extent of [its] historical commitment to ‘social unionism’” (1999b:7)—has been of crucial importance for LGBT movements over time, across a variety of national contexts, and at the sub- and transnational levels. The relative strength of organized labor movements has also indirectly affected LGBT movements due to the historical role labor movements have played in the development of welfare states in different national contexts (Esping-Anderson 1990). As our discussion of the debate over same-sex marriage in the U.S. demonstrates (see below), the character of welfare states have had an important influence on LGBT movements. (The Hunt volume points to an opportunity, as yet unexplored, to link LGBT politics to the “varieties of capitalism” literature [see Hall and Soskice 2001], which emphasizes cross-national variations in capitalist institutions and their consequences.)

David Rayside's (1999) contribution to the Hunt volume examines the contrasting trajectories of LGBT/labor relations in four European nations (France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Britain) as well as the influence of LGBT movements on several supranational institutions (the Council of Europe, the European Community, and the European Union). Rayside finds that the rights of LGBT populations have advanced the furthest in northern European nations, such as the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark, which are also, not coincidentally, countries where social-democratic or labor parties have been strongest. Rayside in fact 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" (1999: 230). Rayside also finds that individual union support for LGBT issues is often 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 instances.

The fight over same-sex marriage in the U.S. provides a nice illustration of this point. Although the issue is complex and certainly not reducible to political-economic factors, there is an important way in which material considerations are central to the struggle for (and against) same-sex marriage in the United States. This is because of the relative weakness of the U.S. welfare state compared to more social-democratic states in Europe and elsewhere (e.g., Esping-Andersen 1990). This weakness is, of course, closely tied to the relative weakness of the labor movement in the U.S. (including the absence of

a labor party) as compared to European social democracies. Because of this historic weakness of the U.S. welfare state, many of the benefits provided by the state in other national contexts are directly tied in the U.S. to employment—of oneself or of one’s *spouse* (Fantasia and Voss 2004). One of the most important benefits tied to employment is of course health care, 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” (2008: 119).

While there are of course many “non-material” factors to consider here, including the stigma and psychological costs of exclusion from a central cultural rite, analysts of same-sex marriage should not underestimate the importance of the economic benefits that attach to marriage in the United States. One recent study found that the price of being a gay couple in the U.S. can amount during a lifetime to over \$467,000, mainly due to exclusion from partners’ health-insurance, Social Security, and spousal IRA (Individual Retirement Account) benefits (Bernard and Lieber 2009). 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 health care coverage, inheritance rights, Social Security survivors’ benefits, and tax breaks” (Rimmerman 2008: 126). In any event, while there have been LGBT movements for same-sex marriage in a number of countries, the larger point is that the salience of this demand must be understood within specific political-economic contexts shaped by the balance of class forces in society.

Capitalism has also mattered for the LGBT movement insofar as class structure has unevenly penetrated and fractured the movement. Surprisingly, however, this connection has been almost totally ignored in recent accounts of the LGBT movement.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Armstrong's important and well-received recent study, *Forging Gay Identities* (2002), is illustrative. In fact, among recent scholars of the LGBT movement, Armstrong stands out in 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 Armstrong does frequently mention the word "class" in this chapter, it always appears alongside race and gender. Furthermore, 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 more attention in scholarship addressing the often contentious relationship between the LGBT and labor movements (Hunt 1999a; Krupat and McCreery 2001a)—a scholarship that has developed, not surprisingly in our view, outside the field of social movement studies. The contributors to Krupat and

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4. The lack of scholarly attention to the relationship between class and the LGBT movement is mirrored in the world of journalism as well, as a preliminary examination of media coverage of California's Proposition 8, banning same-sex marriage, makes clear. In seeking to understand why the measure passed in November 2008, journalists have pointed to race, religion, ideology, and party affiliation (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 16, 2008). Yet, despite numerous internet searches (of a politically-varied media sample), the authors have been unable to locate a single article which even *suggests* a connection to class. Given the well-documented correlations between class and the above-mentioned factors, this absence is quite striking.

McCreery's (2001a) edited volume, *Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance*, examine the ups and downs of this relationship in the U.S., moving from "labor's dark age" (Krupat 2001) to the historic 1997 founding of "Pride at Work," the AFL-CIO's first official constituency group devoted to LGBT members (Sweeney 2001). Krupat and McCreery rightly wonder whether it is possible "to conceive of a gay doctor and a lesbian police officer bound by a common class interest" (2001b: xvii). While Krupat and McCreery's initial response to this question is 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" (2001b: xvii)—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" (2001:73). Hollibaugh cites the example of how LGBT organizations dealt with Bill Clinton's so-called "Don't ask, don't tell" military policy:

Take the way the military issue was dealt with: 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. (2001:73-74)

As Hollibaugh points out, this is but one example of 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” (2001:74).

Valocchi (1999) is also centrally concerned with class divisions within the LGBT movement. His primary concern is to understand how a multiplicity of sexual practices and identities—varying by class, race, and gender—came to have a singular definition, based 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” (1999:212), which stemmed from changing meanings of “masculine” and “feminine” roles in the world of white-collar professionals. Valocchi emphasizes, however, that far from being “natural” or universal, this middle-class definition of homosexuality as same-sex object choice “coexisted with a variety of alternative definitions in working class and African-American urban communities” (1999:210). 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: 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 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” (1999:209). 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” (1999:209). 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” (1999:209).

As these examples makes 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 U.S. (Of course, the

fact that there exists a workplace movement within the larger LGBT movement suggests that “new” movements may in fact have important “materialist” concerns.) In her excellent analysis of the LGBT workplace movement in the U.S., *Changing Corporate America from Inside Out* (2004), Nicole Raeburn (2004) highlights several factors that make it more likely for large Fortune 500 corporations to adopt LGBT workplace benefits. 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” (2004: 250). In this “profit-centered account,” the explanation for why corporations extend benefits to LGBT employees rests on the “bottom line”—that is, the reason corporations adopt LGBT-friendly policies is 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” (Raeburn 2004: 252).

The significance of this finding goes beyond the LGBT workplace movement, touching on the relationship between capitalist ideology—specifically the idea of the “almighty market”—and social movements at large. As 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 therefore 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 mobilization.

### **Rethinking capitalism**

We have emphasized how the dynamics of capitalism matter for the LGBT (and other) social movements. Before concluding, however, we should note that the foregoing reflections suggest a need to reconceptualize what is meant by the idea of “capitalism”

itself. Typically, whether one employs a Marxian or Weberian framework, capitalism is treated as a purely *economic* system (Marx 1992 [1867]; Weber 2003 [1923]). But the concept of “political economy” underscores the need to examine the *political* role of the state within the economy, a role that has of course grown considerably over the past two centuries. Furthermore, our emphasis on the role that capitalist ideologies may play in shaping social movements forces us to move toward a more Gramscian or “sociological” understanding of capitalism, which encompasses the role played by *civil society* in advanced capitalist nations (Gramsci 1971; Burawoy 2003).

Introducing a more “society-centric” view of capitalism, in which issues of culture and ideology assume an important role, does not necessitate abandoning economic and political analysis. It does, however, suggest the need to reverse the direction of our causal arrow, investigating not only how capitalism shapes the LGBT and other social movements, but also the reverse, how the LGBT and other social movements shape capitalism as well—as Raeburn’s study powerfully demonstrates.

Although we cannot fully develop it here, this point is consistent with recent work on “social-movement unionism” in the United States and elsewhere, which suggests the need for labor to expand its political and ideological focus to include more “non-labor” issues, such as those relating to environmental racism, gender equity (not just in the workplace but beyond), LGBT issues relating to sexual orientation, and other matters of “community” concern (see, e.g., Seidman 1994, Clawson 2003). Taking a more sociological view of capitalism also suggests that the LGBT movement cannot restrict its focus to issues of sexuality, as the above-mentioned literature on the LGBT-labor alliance suggests.

In sum, movement scholars need to consider not only how political economy has shaped movements, but also how movements have shaped the political economy, including the politics of workplaces. The capitalist economy, after all, does not exist outside of or logically or temporally prior to gender or sexuality (or race or ethnic relations for that matter), which it then simply shapes to suits its needs. Rather, capitalist production is itself shaped and marked by gender and sexuality; it is gendered and sexualized (and racialized) in particular ways, albeit in ways that can be altered through collective action.

## **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. A number of very important causal processes—direct and indirect, short- and long-term—are now routinely ignored by movement scholars, and in fact movement studies have tended increasingly to focus on short-term and proximate causes of collective action. Greater attention to causal mechanisms associated with the dynamics of global capitalism will undoubtedly improve the quality of current social movement analysis.

Appendix A. Books and articles honored by the ASA's Collective Behavior and Social Movements section.

Book prize winners (1988-2009), 17 books:

2009: Maren Klawiter, *The Biopolitics of Breast Cancer: Changing Cultures of Disease and Activism*; 2008: Roger Karapin, *Protest Politics in Germany: Movements on the Left and Right Since the 1960s*; 2007: Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*; 2006: Gene Burns, *The Moral Veto: Framing Contraception, Abortion, and Cultural Pluralism in the United States*; 2005: Kenneth T. Andrews, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and Its Legacy*; 2004: Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht, *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States*; 2003: Francesca Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*; 2002: Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991*, and Dingxin Zhao, *The Power of Tienamin: State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement*; 2000: Rebecca Klatch, *A Generation Divided*; 1998: Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America*; 1996: Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain: 1754-1837*; 1994: Clark McPhail, *The Myth of the Madding Crowd*; 1992: Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965-1975*; 1990: Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers*; Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer*; 1988: John Lofland, *Protest: Studies of Collective Behavior and Social Movements*.

Article prize winners (2002-2009), 10 articles:

2009: Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Mary Bernstein, "Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements" *Sociological Theory* 26(1): 74-99; 2008: Caroline Lee, "Is There a Place for Private Conversation in Public Dialogue?" *American Journal of Sociology* 113:1 (July 2007): 41-96; 2007: Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, "Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth." *American Sociological Review* Volume 71 (October 2006): 724-751; 2006: Edwin Amenta, Neal Caren, and Sheera Joy Olasky, "Age for Leisure? Political Mediation and the Impact of the Pension Movement on U.S. Old-Age Policy," *American Sociological Review* 70:516-538; 2005: David S. Meyer and Debra Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity." *Social Forces* 82:1457-1492, and Daniel J. Myers and Beth Schaefer Caniglia, "All the Rioting That's Fit to Print: Selection Effects in National Newspaper Coverage of Civil Disorders, 1968-1969." *American Sociological Review* 59: 519-543; 2004: Paul Almeida, "Opportunity Organizations and Threat-Induced Contention: Protest Waves in Authoritarian Settings," *American Journal of Sociology* 109 (2): 345-400, and Steven Pfaff and Hyojoung Kim, "Exit-Voice Dynamics in Collective Action: An Analysis of Emigration and Protest in the East German Revolution," *American Journal of Sociology* 109 (2) 401-444; 2003: Bert Useem and Jack Goldstone. "Forging Social Order and Its Breakdown: Riot and Reform in U.S.

Prisons." *American Sociological Review* 67: 499-525; 2002: Steven Pfaff and Guobin Yang, "Political Commemorations and the Mobilization of Protest in 1989."

Source: CBSM section website (<http://www2.asanet.org/sectioncbsm/awards.html>).

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