

# A NEW SOCIOLOGY FOR NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

## EARLY DRAFT

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We are here in Buenos Aires to discuss social justice and democratization. These are especially pertinent themes in this continent, which for so many years was ruled by military dictatorship. The transition to democracy, fought for bravely by so many, including sociologists, has been a major and indisputable advance. But democracy has not fulfilled all its promises, not least because the fall of political dictatorship was followed by another dictatorship, the dictatorship of the market. In its wake came wave upon wave of injustice, inequality and once more Latin Americans, sociologists among them, have been at the forefront in the battle for a deeper democracy. We see this in the schemes of participatory budgeting that spread from Brazil to Venezuela, in the piquetero movement and factory occupations that spread from Argentina, in the ethnic democracy of Bolivia and in the student movements that spread from Chile. There has been a relentless struggle to counter market injustice with new forms of participatory democracy.

### *New Social Movements*

This Latin American history of the last 30 years is now being replayed across the world. Sparked by the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazziza in Tunis, we have witnessed uprisings spread across the region, from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain. These are revolutionary in that no one imagined them possible. Still, they drew on a popular imagination. And yet, of course, they have not brought the happy outcomes that they promised. All eyes have been fixed on Egypt, where the uprising has been hijacked by the military, obscuring the limited successes in Tunisia and Libya. Difficult though it has been to overthrow dictatorship, the real problems only begin after the overthrow, problems that Latin America has been facing for three decades.

Inspired by these movements, the indignados of Southern Europe have stood up to the regimes of austerity, orchestrating remarkable protests in Spain, in Greece, and, to a lesser extent, in Portugal, where it all began, and in Italy. These protests have not disappeared as the EU withdrew from the brink of bankruptcy – profligate banks call on the state or the EU to pull

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<sup>1</sup> This paper derives immediately from a talk of the same title given at the Forum of the International Sociological Association in Buenos Aires, August 1. Many of the ideas in this paper were developed in dialogue with graduate students in the sociology department at Berkeley -- Marcel Paret, Adam Reich, Mike Levien, and Alex Barnard. They also originate in an imaginary conversation between Gramsci and Polanyi that has stretched over the last decade, conducted most recently with my friends and colleagues in South Africa – especially, Jackie Cock, Eddie Webster and Karl von Holdt.

them out of bankruptcy, and the state obliges, but at enormous cost of increased unemployment and insecurity.

The Occupy Movement made this explicit. Lodged in public spaces it targeted the 1% that runs the world economy. It started in Wall Street, the home of finance capital, spread across the US, back to Europe, to Latin America and beyond. What we have witnessed in the US is an Obama Regime unable or unwilling to confront Wall Street, held to ransom by the large banks which were bailed out. We can call this socialism for the financial oligarchy.

Finance capital operates in different forms across the world. Notably in India it has behind many of the collusive arrangements with the Indian state to form Special Economic Zones for real estate speculation, and the development of IT industry, always at the expensive of the dispossessed peasantry that has fought back and in many cases paralyzed their development. The real story of China today is not so much the migrant labor system that is the basis of the superexploitation of workers, but the conquest and appropriation of land for the urbanization of rural areas on the basis of finance. Again protests, perhaps less known, are spreading across rural China. Once more these sorts of struggles are familiar to the continent of Latin America.

Finally, we must pay attention to the student movement, most spectacularly emanating from Chile, that struggles against the marketization of education at all levels. Here, in this most unequal of societies, students are the vanguard of a society throttled by accumulating private debt. We see similar student struggles in England, facing soaring fees, but also burgeoning across Europe as financialization and regulation spreads into countries that have historically had strong public education. We are here in Argentina, the heartland of public university, the legacy of Cordoba Revolution of 1918 which brought open public education to all: open admissions, no fees and democratic election of administrators. It still holds today if not elsewhere in Latin America where student movements are strong.

So what do these struggles have in common?

First, they have in common what differentiates them. They all have a national specificity, whether it be a struggle against dictatorship or against austerity or the privatization of education. Yet they are also globally connected whether through social media or traveling ambassadors. Movements have become an inspiration to each other even if their proximate and underlying causes are different.

Second, they derive from a common inspiration, the idea that electoral democracy has been hijacked by capitalism, or more specifically finance capital. Governments are beholden to finance capital which effectively paralyzes democracy – capitalist in content and democratic in form. In Zygmunt Bauman's terms there is a separation of power and politics, so that power is concentrated in the hands of capital and state, while politics are the crumbs left for the people.

Third, the movements reject formal democracy to adopt direct democracy, sometimes called prefigurative politics, that involve horizontal connections rather than vertical struggles. The General Assemblies of participatory democracy have been the cellular foundation of all

these movements. The challenge, then, is to bring unity and broader vision to these autonomous, and often separatist struggles.

Fourth, while much has been made of virtual connections, they make concrete real space ever more necessary. To be effective virtual communications requires its complement – the assembly points of public space, Zuccotti Park in New York, Catalunya Square in Barcelona, Tahrir Square in Cairo, etc. These assembly points were crucial to establish dense and creative communities, the planning of new and novel actions. Social media is an auxiliary tool of communication.

Finally and fifth, the occupation of public spaces has made the social movements vulnerable to a severe repressive backlash from police, often militarized. This repression corresponds to the destruction of the public more generally and the valorization of the private, but it has prompted a continuing cat and mouse game between movements and police. These movements will not go away. They are to use Bauman's terminology what we might call liquid protest that disappears here only to reappear elsewhere. We have to look at them as part of a connected global movement, connected by social media that provide the vehicle for continual reorganization and flexibility. Against this only fear of coercion can work, but fear has been replaced by despair and anger.

We need to understand these movements with a new global sociology. We need to understand these social movements in their global as well as national context, that is we need a new sociology *of* movements. But, second, such a sociology should advance a unifying vision *for* these movements, a vision they so badly need. Finally, third, sociology now finds itself inside rather than outside society, we have no alternative but to take sides. If we don't we not only become irrelevant, but we will be overtaken by events and disappear. Third-wave marketization is undermining the conditions of our work just as it is destroying society, and we need to build the connection before it is too late -- sociology becomes a social movement.

### ***Sociology of Social Movements***

The study of social movements in the US has been dominated by the concern to explain their very existence – their conditions of possibility. Social movement theory seeks the general conditions of their existence. From the Emile Durkheim to Neil Smelser, collective behavior was viewed as a symptom of some underlying strain of modernization, an irrational response to social change and the anomie it produced. From Karl Marx to E.P. Thompson, collective Action was viewed as a form of politics in which class formation was a response to the very real suffering of labor classes. Ted Gurr and others argued it was not absolute suffering but relative deprivation that led to collective action. Others then said there was no shortage of felt grievances, so that was not sufficient explanation for collective action. Charles Tilly focused on the importance of resources, on the capacity for rather than the interest in collective action. Resources turned relative deprivation onto collective mobilization. Doug McAdam elaborated this model by including two further factors – political opportunities that recognized the importance of context and cognitive liberation that emphasized the subjective moment of consciousness. Following them we get further elaboration by David Snow and others, pointing to the importance of the “framing” used to mobilize actors, the appeal to their lived experience.

Others have added other factors in an endless multiple regression, designed to explain the dummy variable – the presence or absence of collective action.

What is striking is that none of these “factors” fit the new social movements: resources are scarce and are constituted by the collective actors; second, it is the absence of political opportunities that drives these movement; third, while framing as a strategic device to increase support is not central to their activities. But this leads to something more deeply problematic about these versions of social movement theory. They seek general claims valid across all time and space, and thereby conceal their roots in a specific context from which they derive their models, namely social movements in the US, and in particular the 1960s civil rights movement which shaped a generation of sociologists. The projection of generality conceals its particularity. Indeed, the very striving for a general theory of social movements is a very American idea, expressive of American individualism that makes social movements appear anomalous or even irrational.

Just as Tilly said the world is teeming with grievances, so now we can see the world is teeming with social movements. The problem is not their existence but their persistence and to understand that we need to explore their origins and their context. We need to turn to the society from which they emanate; we need to (re)turn to theories of collective action that were rooted in the wider society. Thus, Alain Touraine and his collaborators insisted on rooting “new social movements” of the 1960s and 1970s in a “new society,” namely post-industrial society, giving movements the possibility of fabricating their own worlds, these were movements that transcended the pursuit of material interests characteristic of the old social movements (specifically the labor movement). The “new” social movements of today have to grapple not with post-industrialism but with the devastation of society wrought by market fundamentalism, which affects the whole planet and not just particular societies, although always inflected through a national sieve. To understand the connection between today’s social movements and unregulated marketization I propose to turn to Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation*.

Written in 1944, *The Great Transformation* can be considered a revision of *The Communist Manifesto* written almost exactly a century earlier, explaining the continued existence of capitalism without denying its problematic character. Polanyi argues that the experience of commodification is more profound and immediate than the experience of exploitation, which as Marx himself argued was hidden from those who were supposed to rebel against it. In effect Polanyi takes Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, namely that market exchange obscures its ties to production, more seriously than Marx who thinks such experiences will be dissolved in class struggle. For Polanyi, the cause of resistance lies with the market rather than production. The expansion of the unregulated market threatens to destroy society which reacts in self-defense, what he calls the counter-movement against the market.

One of the virtues of Polanyi’s writings, like Marx’s, is that they link the micro-experience of people to the world systemic movements of capitalism through a series of mediating levels. The lynchpin of the connection lies in the idea of the fictitious commodity – a factor of production which when subject to unregulated exchange loses its use value. For Polanyi

labor is but one such fictitious commodity, the others are land and money. Today these factors of production are subject to an unprecedented commodification that Polanyi never anticipated.

When labor is subject to unregulated exchange, i.e. when it is commodified, when it is hired and fired at will with no protection, when the wage falls below the cost of the reproduction of labor power and when the laborer cannot develop the tacit skills necessary for any production, so the use value of labor also falls. In this situation the issue is not exploitation but commodification. Indeed, the problem today is the loss of the guarantee of exploitation, and the rise of the precariousness of jobs, not just at the more menial level but climbing up the skill hierarchy. Precarity is entangled in all of the movements – from the Arab Uprisings to the Indignados, the Occupy Movement and the Student movements.

One of the conditions for the commodification of labor is dispossession from access to alternative means of subsistence than wage labor, that is to the destruction of all those supports, including minimum wage legislation, unemployment compensation, and pensions but also access to land. Just as the separation of labor from land provides for the commodification of labor so it also provides for the commodification of land, which according to Polanyi also threatens the viability of the human species. Polanyi did not have a great deal to say about the commodification of land but it clearly figures prominently in so many of the struggles in the Global South from the landless movements in Latin America to the struggles against Special Economic Zones in India and the protests against land speculators in China. Throughout the world the mining of natural resources has generated protest from communities whose livelihoods are threatened. It takes place within cities, too, through such processes as gentrification and the attempt to build the world city, both of which involve the expulsion of the marginal from their homes.

In today's world we have to extend the commodification of land to the commodification of nature more broadly, the commodification of water that generated waters wars in countries as far apart as South Africa and Bolivia, and the commodification of the right to pollute the atmosphere through carbon trading. There are multiple social movements that oppose the commodification of nature as the cause of environmental degradation rather than its solution.

Polanyi regarded money as a third fictitious commodity. For Polanyi money is what makes market exchange possible, but when it itself becomes the object of exchange, when the attempt is to make money from money then its use value as a medium of exchange is undermined. He was especially concerned with the fluctuating exchange rates between currencies that in the 1920s created such havoc that businesses went out of business simply because the environment in which they operated was so uncertain. Monetary exchange has to be regulated. Today, we see that money is indeed used to make more money, finance capital continues to speculate on currencies, banks become lenders whether it be through micro-finance, whether it be to nation states, whether it be student loans or mortgages or credit cards – debt is multiplying which ultimately brings about bubbles and inevitably their popping. The creation of debt only intensifies precarity which surely lies behind the Occupy Movement that sees the world regulated by finance capital with the 1% making gains on the backs of the 99%.

There is a fourth factor of production that Polanyi did not consider and that is knowledge. It, too, is a fictitious commodity so that when knowledge is produced only for the market then it becomes privatized and distorted. We see this at work in the university where knowledge production and dissemination becomes distorted when the researcher is bound up in the enterprise, e.g. pharmaceuticals, he or she serves, when knowledge is transmitted to students conceived of as consumers, when knowledge is evaluated for its impact. The idea of working within research programs thrashing out contradictions and anomalies is compromised.<sup>2</sup> Here lies the danger of subjecting the university to the market as is increasingly the case as it is forced to become self-financing. The protests emanating from the university, be they from students or faculty often revolve around the commodification of the production and dissemination of knowledge.

Contemporary social movements can be best understood through the lens of these four fictitious commodities – the protests revolve around dispossession and its result commodification. Any given movement may have ostensible goals in the political realm, but the driving force behind them is the experience of being bound up in the articulation of these different commodifications. There is no one-to-one relation between social movement and a given fictitious commodity, but each one is the product of the relation among them. For the last 40 years we have been experiencing accelerated dispossession followed by commodification, hence the intensification of protests, but these protests do not yet add up to a Polanyian counter-movement. For that, there needs to be a greater self-consciousness and vision among the participants – a sociology for social movements.

### ***Sociology for Social Movements***

Touraine's theory of social movements was also a theory for social movements, recasting sociological theory so as to shed light on the distinctiveness of contemporary movements as making their own history and then placing the sociologist alongside and in dialogue with those movements rather than outside society. This reflected a period – post-industrialism – in which there was still confidence in human agency to direct history whether through the state or civil society. There was an underlying optimism that the wild horse of capitalism could somehow be tamed and directed to human ends. That has all disappeared. We are now living in an era in which markets run amok, devastating all that stands in their way. A sociology for social movements must begin by understanding this period of unconstrained marketization.

We need, therefore, to situate Polanyi's fictitious commodities within a wider framework of the history of capitalism. The essence of *The Great Transformation* lies in an argument about the dangers of the expansion of the market, namely that it leads to a reaction from society that can be of a progressive (Social Democracy, New Deal) but also of a reactionary character – fascism and Stalinism. Thus, Polanyi has one long expansion of the market, starting at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup>. century, destroying society along the way, leading to a defense of society, secured

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<sup>2</sup> Information, however, is not a fictitious commodity as it does not lose its use value when it is bought and sold.

through a counter-movement from states to regulate the market following the economic crisis of the 1930s – states that include regimes of Social Democracy and New Deal as well as Fascism and Stalinism. He couldn't imagine humanity would dare to undertake another round of market fundamentalism. Yet, that is just what happened, starting in the middle 1970s, developing on a global scale, leaving few spaces of the planet unaffected. The rising concern with globalization expresses the global reach of markets.

But it is important to understand that this is not the first wave of marketization. Indeed, examining Polanyi's own writing suggests it is not the second but the third wave. Where he saw a singular wave spreading over a century and a half, we can now see two – one that advanced in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was turned back by the labor movement in the second half and a second wave that advanced after WWI and was reversed by state regulation in the 1930s through to the 1970s which inaugurated a third wave of marketization that has yet to be contained. These waves of marketization become deeper over time as their scale increases, but they also involve different combinations of the fictitious commodities. The counter-movement to first-wave marketization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by the struggle to decommodify labor. In England (about which Polanyi writes) this assumed the form of the factory movement, cooperatives, Owenism, trade union formation and the political party of labor. The local struggles, spread, melded together and compelled changes in state policy.

The success of labor led to a crisis of capitalism, resolved through imperialist strategies and World War I which was followed by an offensive from capital, leading to the *recommodification* of labor. The assault of the market spread to the loosening of constraints on international trade through currencies pegged to the gold standard that, in turn, led to uncontrollable inflation and the renewal of class struggles. The upshot was a variety of regimes that sought to regulate markets through the extension of markets extending social rights as well as specifically labor rights.

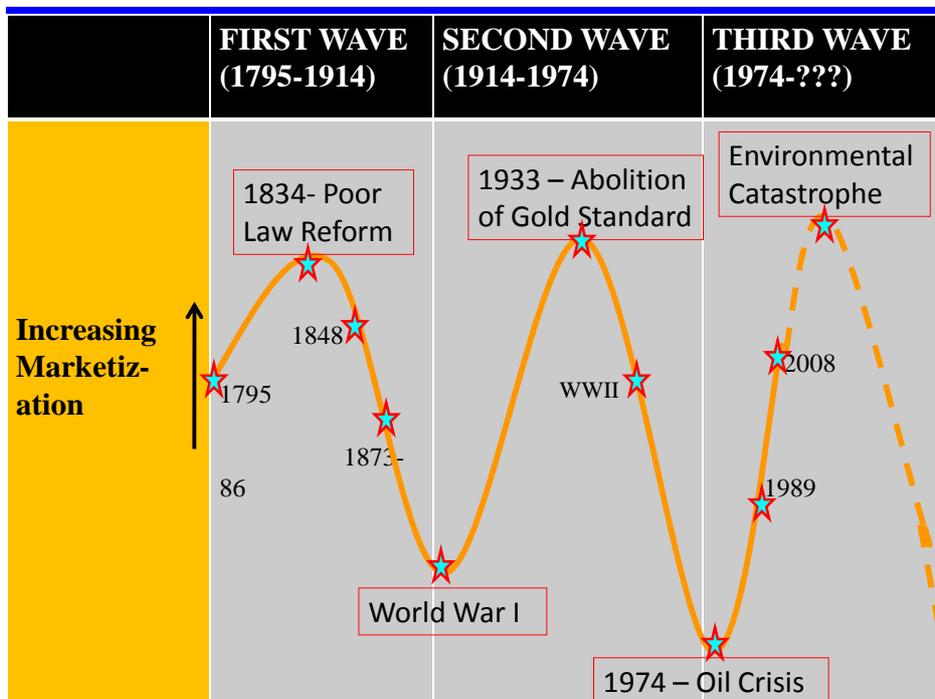
These regimes whether social democratic, fascist, or Soviet lasted until the middle 1970s at which time they faced a renewed and mounting assault from capital not only against the protections labor had won for itself but also against state regulation of finance. Indeed, we can see how the offensive against labor across the planet, but especially in the North, led to a crisis of overproduction that could not be resolved by state intervention in an era of marketization. Instead, the solution came in the form of the financialization of the economy, the creation of new moneys that could be extended to individuals (credit cards, student loans, and above all sub-prime mortgages), but also to enterprises and countries generating unprecedented levels of debt. The bubble burst when the dominated classes, in particular, could no longer pay off their mounting debt. Once unleashed finance capital funded all sorts of new markets in minerals, in water, and in the air, creating the environmental catastrophe that now faces the planet. The solution to create new markets in the rights to pollute and destroy the atmosphere – the so-called carbon markets – is not a solution at all but a way of deepening the ecological crisis faced by the planet.

Third-wave marketization has gone far deeper than second-wave marketization in the commodification of labor, nature and money. Moreover, to turn something into a commodity,

requires first that it be disembedded from its moorings in the social and political context. Labor had to be dispossessed from its supports in the state, peasants have had to be dispossessed from access to their land, people had to be dispossessed of access to their own body (so that their organs can be sold). This dispossession requires, in short, the escalation of violence perpetrated by states on behalf of capital, and direct deployment of violence by capital. Violence is at the heart of third-wave marketization in a way that Polanyi never anticipated.

Moreover, Polanyi did not and could not have anticipated a fourth fictitious commodity – knowledge. Today what used to be a public good – knowledge produced in the university – has become a private good. The production and dissemination of knowledge in the university has been commodified as a result of the forcible withdrawal of public funding. With important exception in such countries as Brazil, India and China, the university has had to become self-financing which it does by selling the knowledge it produces to industry (the growth of the collaboration of bio-medical sciences and pharmaceuticals), by seeking collaborative ventures in the exploration of new sources of energy between universities and capital, by searching for funding from donors and alumni, and above all by an exponential increase in student fees. The major universities around the world are being expelled from their accountability to local and national interests by world ranking systems that make them accountable to arbitrary set of benchmarks, tied to the character of the richest universities in the US. This program of rationalization works hand in hand with the commodification of the production and dissemination of knowledge which in turn is fed back into new strategies for the commodification of labor, nature and finance.

### Three Waves of marketization and their Counter-Movements



The question now is whether the expansion of the market will generate its own counter-movement. It certainly generates multiple reactive movements, but when and how they will add up to a counter-movement is an entirely different matter. For that we need to develop a sociology that establishes their inter-connection – a sociology built on the relation between capitalist accumulation and market expansion. What I have offered here are the building blocks of such a theory – the specificity of third-wave marketization as the underlying cause of social movements, third-wave marketization understood as the articulation of four fictitious commodities – labor, nature, finance and knowledge.

### ***Sociology as a Social Movement***

In underlining the fourth fictitious commodity – knowledge – I am pointing to the transformation of the conditions of production of knowledge. What relative autonomy the university possesses is rapidly evaporating in the face of its commercialization. We can no longer pretend to stand outside society, making it an external object of examination. Academics are irrevocably inside society and we, therefore, have to decide on whose side we are. Those disciplines that are best able to exploit market opportunities are the ones to benefit – the bio-medical sciences, engineering, law and business schools – and they become the more powerful influences within the university at the potential cost of the social sciences and humanities.

The social sciences, however, do not form a homogeneous block. Ironically, economics has created the ideological justification of market fundamentalism – the very force that is destroying the university and economics with it. Political science, concerned with political order, now aspires to be an extension of economics, reflecting the increasingly collusive relation between markets (and especially finance capital) and nation states. Of course, there are dissidents within both fields, and they play an important role, but the dominant tendency is the endorsement of market fundamentalism through the embrace of utilitarianism. Sociology, too, has not escaped efforts to turn it into a branch of economics, but the anti-utilitarian tradition within sociology, starting from Marx, Weber and Durkheim all the way to Parsons, Bourdieu, feminism, and postcolonial theory are so well entrenched that rational actor theory has made few inroads into the discipline.

Nor is this surprising as sociology was born with civil society, an arena of institutions, organizations and movements that are neither part of the state nor the economy. We should be careful not to romanticize civil society as some coherent, solidary whole as though it were free of exclusions, dominations, and fragmentations. It is Janus faced – it can aid the expansion of the market and state, but it can also obstruct or, at least, contain their expansion. This is where sociology is situated – its distinctive standpoint is civil society -- examining the economy and state from the perspective of their consequences for civil society as well the ways in which civil society supports the economy and the state. Like civil society sociology looks two ways. On the one side it examines the social conditions of the existence of markets and states. On the other side, along with such neighboring disciplines as anthropology and geography, it can also take a critical stand against the unregulated expansion of the state-market nexus.

In the context of the rationalization and commercialization of the university, sociology is the one discipline whose standpoint, viz. civil society, behooves it to cultivate a community of critical discourse about the very nature of the modern university, but also conduct a conversation with publics beyond the university, making it accountable to those publics without losing its commitment to its scientific research programs. As the membrane separating the university from society becomes ever thinner failure to counter-balance the instrumentalization of the university will end with the destruction of the university as we know it. It is in this sense that we must think of sociology as a social movement as well as scientific discipline, calling a critical engagement with the world around. To sustain this dual and contradictory role the discipline must develop its own mechanisms for internal dialogue, mechanism that appear at the local level within the university, at a national level but most importantly at a global level.

Sociology began as an engagement with local issues, and in its early theoretical formulations it wrongly projected the local as the universal. Such was the error of the Chicago School which thought that universal laws could be derived from the study of one city. With the entry of classical sociology in Europe and its professionalization in the US, the nation became the unit of analysis. So much of US sociology, which continues to dominate the world, projects the research conducted in the US as having universal validity. Today, we have to achieve a global reach and we must be wary of creating another false universality, and rather seek to build up that global sociology from below through a dialogue among local and national sociologies. Building such a global sociology requires the development of a global infrastructure that fosters dialogue and outreach, that produces a third-wave sociology to meet the theoretical and practical challenges of third-wave marketization, and to halt the Third World War that is being waged on communities across the planet.