

The Strange Disappearance of Capitalism from Social Movement Studies

By Jeff Goodwin (Department of Sociology, New York University, jg9@nyu.edu) and Gabriel Hetland (Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, ghetland@berkeley.edu)

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. 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. Ironically, during a period in which global capitalism became ever more powerful, it also became increasingly invisible to scholars of popular movements. 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, however, 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 (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

The first part of this paper analyzes the strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies in the English-speaking world during the past two 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 and economic factors. 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 social movements and revolutions appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s that had the effect of radically reorienting the study of social 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 capitalist dynamics on movements.

Among the more important such studies were 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]). The dynamics of capitalism figure prominently in all of these studies, sometimes constraining and sometimes inciting or enabling collective action.¹

The authors of these groundbreaking works believed that capitalism was crucial for understanding movements due to a variety of important causal mechanisms: Capitalist institutions (factories, railroads, banks, etc.) or capitalist-controlled institutions (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 interests; class divisions, furthermore, often penetrate and fracture particular movements; and ideologies linked to capitalism powerfully shape movement strategies and demands. The effects of capitalism on collective action, for these authors, are both direct and indirect and 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

1. During the 1980s, moreover, several European scholars sought to explain “new social movements” in terms of the changing configuration of capitalism. See Steinmetz (1994) for an overview.

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 cognitions 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), the enabling and constraining effects of capitalism. The more recent scholarship tends to ignore 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.

Evidence for these claims may be found by examining 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 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 the word “economy” appears in 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 economic or 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.

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. This inattention to capitalism is also 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, *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 no such relations exist, or perhaps 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.² But the results are clear and ironic: During an era in which global capitalism became ever more powerful—an era when capitalism triumphed over Soviet-style Communism—it also became increasingly 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 believe, then, 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

3. 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.

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 and 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. Economic contexts may powerfully shape 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. 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). 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. 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 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 political-economic context within which particular LGBT movements operate—at the local, national, and global levels—has shaped their historical development and achievements (Hunt 1999). Third, the LGBT movement is differentially penetrated by class forces and is fractured along class lines (Krupat and McCreery 2001). Finally, ideologies directly linked to capitalism—specifically, ideologies of the market and profitability—have clearly shaped the LGBT movement, often in surprising ways (Raeburn 2004). We will now elaborate each of these points in turn, necessarily drawing mainly upon scholarship that either preceded or falls outside of 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).

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 ways in which historically specific political-economic contexts (or what might be termed the *character* of capitalism in different times and places) have shaped the varied trajectories of LGBT movements. For example, as the contributors to the Gerald Hunt volume, *Laboring for Rights* (1999), demonstrate, class has been of crucial importance for LGBT movements across a variety of national contexts, as well as at the sub- and transnational levels. Moreover, the precise ways in which class matters is crucially shaped by the larger political-economic context. (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 in unions which (1) have a historically weaker relationship with the state and (2) are confronted with significant membership losses and demographic shifts.

Economic context also matters for the fight over same-sex marriage, a fact that must be kept in mind in order to understand the peculiarity and specificity of the U.S. case. Although the issue of same-sex marriage is quite complex and certainly not reducible to economic factors, there is an important way in which economic considerations are central to the issue 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). Because of this historic weakness, many of the benefits provided by the state in other national contexts are directly tied in the United States to employment—of oneself or, and this is the crucial point, 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).

There are of course many “non-material” factors to consider here, but analysts of same-sex marriage should not underestimate the importance of the economic benefits that attach to marriage in the United States. 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.

Political economy 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.³ 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

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.

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 importance of class for the LGBT movement may be better appreciated by considering the movement’s often contentious relationship with the labor movement (Hunt 1999; Krupat and McCreery 2001a). The contributors to Krupat and 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).⁴ In fact, multiclass movements such as the LGBT and other new social movements will inevitably have difficult relationships with any movement or organization that represents a single class, be it the labor movement or a business association, if we assume that the movement leadership

5. As noted, the collection of essays in Hunt’s (1999) volume, which explore cross-national variation in the relationship between labor and the LGBT movement in North America, Europe, Australia and South Africa, force us to move beyond general assertions that “class matters” for the LGBT movement and to instead focus on the concrete and varied ways in which it matters in particular geographical and historical contexts.

faithfully represents the interests of its constituents. In any event, the politics of the LGBT movement simply 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.

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