

**Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015,
248 pages, ISBN-13: 9780745688589 (hbk)**

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The global economic crisis had major social and political impact on European societies. The political consequences of the crisis mainly stem from rising unemployment, the freezing or cuts of public sector pay, declining purchasing power, pessimism about future developments and perceptions of bad governance. In this context, a new wave of protest has spread across Europe as a reaction to the austerity measures adopted during the economic crisis. Governments' inability to deal with the crisis has generated in many places anxiety, which then turned into popular anger. People who have been hard hit by the crisis placed most of the blame with incumbent governments and condemned the corruption and lack of political responsibility of the political class in general.

In *Social Movements in Times Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis*, Donatella della Porta focuses on the major episodes of contention that emerged during the economic crisis, and which illustrate opposition to austerity measures. However, as della Porta demonstrates in this book, recent waves of protest in the global North reflect not only opposition to austerity measures, but also a more fundamental crisis of neoliberal capitalism and democracy. As the author points out, public outrage was raised by the corruption and deterioration of political institutions seen as captured by big business interests and unresponsive to citizens' needs and demands. People attributed much of the responsibility for the economic crisis and the inability to manage it to political corruption that was essentially perceived as a corruption of democracy.

The book is structured into six chapters. In terms of research design, the book builds on the assumption that in order to understand the main characteristics anti-austerity movements in terms of their social basis, identity and organizational

structures and strategies, one should look at the specific features of the socio-economic, cultural and political context in which these protests developed (p. 3). As della Porta acknowledges, this book aims to highlight (some) similarities in the national contexts and connect them to shifts in neoliberal capitalism and its effects on society (pp. 3-4). In other words, this means that shifts in neoliberal capitalism and its effects on society *should be similar* in different nations in order to explain/generate *similarities in protest episodes*, all other things being different. Then the implications is that this study seems to employ a *most-different cases* research design according to which the author should analyze different countries (that have different economical, cultural, social, and political national contexts) in which similar shifts in neoliberal capitalism occurred during the crisis and link these similar shifts to similarities in protest episodes from these countries. A most-different cases research design could be useful either to control for/exclude the effect of national context when analyzing the relationship between similarities in shifts in capitalism and protest episodes or to show that this relationship holds in different contexts. However, as della Porta mentions, the main theoretical challenge of this study is to locate protests inside the linkages between market and state, between capitalism and democracy (p. 4). That means the author will need to factor in national context in the analysis of protest episodes. Yet, economic conditions vary from country to country and this has implication for social movement protests. If so, it is questionable how factoring in national contexts will explain similarities in the new wave of anti-austerity protests over the world.

The first chapter of the book introduces the debate about bringing capitalism back into protest studies. Della Porta shows that most social movement studies have generally paid little attention to the sources of grievances and the effects of socioeconomic structural developments over the social movements. Citing previous research, the author points at the grievances spread by neoliberalism and its crisis in the Arab world and South Europe. Della Porta identifies the sources of these grievances (and protest) in the austerity policies (cuts in public spending and deterioration of public services) and in the growth in inequality and poverty. According to della Porta, a new class that emerged as the main actor of these protests: *the social precariat* composed of young, unemployed, or only part-time employed and often well educated people. *Precariat* is characterized by a sum of insecurities on the labor market: job (regulations on hiring and dismissal give little protection to workers); work (weak provision for

accidents or illness), and income (low pay). All these conditions have effects in terms of accumulation of anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation (p. 5). The authors discuss political cleavages, that are the main lines of social conflicts which are culturally and politically structured, and points out how cleavage theory could help investigating the relationship between structural conditions and social movements.

The second chapter looks at the social bases of the political cleavages Global Justice Movements (GJM) with anti-austerity movements. The chapter starts with a discussion on the dynamics of capitalism and emphasizes the characteristics of late neoliberalism in which the social movements analyzed in this book are embedded. The author points that while GJM mobilized mainly middle class participants, anti-austerity movements mobilized more diverse categories of people: workers in full employment, as well as the unemployed. Thus anti-austerity protest are characterized by large coalitions of various social actors: students, precarious workers, industrial workers and public employees.

Chapter 3 focuses on the cultural elements of the cleavages, highlighting the collective identities developing in neoliberalism and its crisis. As della Porta notes, after identifying a socio-structural basis, a next step towards the creation of a cleavage is an identification process, with the acquisition of some specific norms and world-views (p. 68). Due to the high diversity of social actors, the challenge of anti-austerity movements is to build all-inclusive identities with reference to broader categories such as the people, the citizens, the *indignados*, or the 99%, which are resisting the immorality of neoliberalism (p.96).

Chapter 4 links the economic crisis of neoliberalism to a crisis of responsibility, as an additional dimension of the socio-political context in which the movement develops. As della Porta highlights, the crisis of responsibility, driven by the choice of free market over social protection, had an effect in terms of sudden drops in trust in political institutions, which punctuated a long-term decline (p. 153). The anti-austerity protests have stigmatized the corruption of the institutions of representative democracy, which are claimed to be unable to represent the citizens (p. 154). This crisis of responsibility is essentially a crisis of legitimacy which challenges traditional conceptions of representative democracy.

Chapter 5 discusses the changing conceptions of democracy that participants in social movements have and practice in their organizational forms. Della Porta stresses that movement activists develop their conception of democracy, introducing innovation that then travel across countries and from one

movement generation to the next (p. 2007). For instance, the author cites previous research showing that, in the *acampadas*, the principle of deliberative and participatory democracy, inherited from previous movements – were adapted to the characteristics of a movement of “common people” rather than activists, that privileged persons over associations (p. 208).

The concluding chapter (6) summarizes the main findings and discusses their implications for the broader fields of social movement studies, theories of political economy, and democratic theory. The author points out not only the capacity of anti-austerity movements to raise awareness among public opinion, but also to socialize to democratic politics large numbers of citizens, by prefiguring different participatory and deliberative forms of democracy.

This book will substantially improve our understanding of recent waves of anti-austerity protests. On theoretical grounds, this study fills an important gap in the literature by connecting political economy theories with social movement studies and democratic theory. Thus, the book sets a rich and important research agenda for further interdisciplinary studies of protest. It also provides a useful and inspiring source of information for political activists across the world.