

# Waves of protest and revolution: elements of a Marxist analysis

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## **Abstract**

Revolutionaries and scholars alike have noted the recurrence within capitalism of “waves” of large-scale social movement mobilisation and revolutionary situations, including the C18th Atlantic Revolutions, the Latin American wars of independence, the events of 1848 in Europe, the events of 1916-23 in Europe and North America, resistance to fascism in Europe and Asia, anti-colonial uprisings in postwar Asia and Africa, the events of 1968 across the northern hemisphere and the events of 1989 in the Soviet bloc and China. At present the overlap of a global “movement of movements” with the Latin American “pink tide”, the anti-war movement of 2003, anti-austerity and Occupy movements in the global North and the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa suggest that another such wave is underway. This paper attempts to understand the broad historical experience in ways that are relevant to the present and enable effective action.

It proposes an analysis of such waves as occurring within one or more regions of the capitalist world-system and involving an organic crisis of a particular regime of accumulation – entailing a growing popular capacity for action, the detachment of subaltern elements of the previously hegemonic coalition and a declining elite capacity to either offer significant concessions or to mobilise effective repression. By placing the analysis at this level it avoids the superficial requirement that such waves share a common popular actor or set of demands – what similarities exist in terms of leading popular actors and modes of organisation are to be explained by this broader situation (notably, the difficulties experienced by the existing regime of accumulation in accommodating given needs and social groups). It also makes it clear that a revolutionary *outcome* is by no means a given, nor is it a requirement for a “real” wave. However the historical experience has often been that even where a given regime was able to recover temporarily in the longer term a new set of hegemonic arrangements, incorporating some movement demands, has been necessary.

In relation to the present crisis, with its multiple popular actors, this analysis suggests particular attention to the weaknesses of neoliberalism in securing continued hegemony – and to demands, and popular institutions, which accentuate this. It notes in particular the *length* of this crisis, which is historically unusual and politically encouraging, as is the narrowness of neoliberal orthodoxy and the difficulties experienced in finding new modes of organisation to incorporate popular pressures. It concludes with some suggestions as to what movements can do in this situation.

## Summary presentation

This is unfortunately not a full paper but simply a sketch of the argument for the purposes of the advance conference proceedings, a step beyond thinking out loud but perhaps not a very distant one. It is sometimes commented that there is relatively little systematic research in this area: there are good reasons for this, in terms of the sheer amount of historical data involved and the inherently contested nature of most of the events involved. To do this subject full justice would probably require a very large, and long-term, funded research project. Of course one upside of this is that there may be less difference between a quick sketch and a conference paper than would otherwise be the case.

The argument proceeds in five stages:

- I) It is often asked whether recent movements around the world constitute a revolutionary wave. However few of these discussions draw deeply on the historical record of other such waves when considering the features of the present and as a result there are few real controls on the argument.
- II) It is therefore worth looking at past revolutionary waves to consider what separates them from other social movement waves; what their defining features are; and what can be said about elements that may not be visible in the moment such as periodicity or outcomes
- III) A theoretical step beyond this is to see what might be said from a Marxist point of view about the analysis of such waves and their historical significance.
- IV) Returning to the present, does the analysis of past waves suggest that we are now in such a wave (hint: yes) and – more interestingly – which contemporary experiences are part of that wave and what is characteristic about it by comparison with other historical waves?
- V) Given this, what should movements do? Or, more exactly, what should Marxists do within movements and what should movements that aim at substantial social change do?

## I) Introduction: discussing the present

Revolutionaries and scholars of social movements and revolution – but also less qualified commentators such as journalists, economists and IR specialists – have all discussed the question of whether contemporary events constitute a revolutionary wave. These concepts are more or less explicitly historical, in that they presuppose an understanding of what constitutes a revolution and what constitutes a wave, with some sense that such things *have* happened in the past, whether or not they are happening now. There is often also *some* overt reference to past experience (such as 1848 or 1989).

Different commentators take different elements of the present as their point of reference, usually without much reflection. Thus we may be asked to consider the events of the “Arab Spring” (from 2010 on), those of the Latin American “pink tide” (whether dated from the Zapatista uprising of 1994, the 1999 election of Hugo Chávez and the Argentinazo of 2000-1, the elections of Morales and Correa in 2006 and 2007 respectively, or some other point), European anti-austerity movements (from c. 2008 on, but sometimes projected back into the past as far as the European Marches of the Unemployed starting in 1997), the Occupy movement of 2011-12 (with varying geographical focuses), the anti-war movement of 2003, the “movement of movements” from 1999 on (particularly present in Latin America, western Europe and North America) and forms of armed “anti-imperialist resistance” which (depending on political sympathies) may

extend to include Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq or be extended to include some of the events of the “Arab Spring”. There are then also single-country events which are sometimes included when current: particularly salient examples include the Gezi Park movement in Turkey (2013-14), protests in Brazil (2013-14), the Naxalite insurgency in India since 2004, the extraordinary levels of protest in South Africa since at least 2004, and the similarly remarkable scale of protest in post-Tiananmen China, encompassing rural struggles over land and corruption, workplace struggles in the cities, ethnic conflict and other issues. The complexity of this (incomplete) list makes clear the need for some kind of empirical boundary as to what we are actually talking about.

Both elements of the concept “revolutionary wave” and its various synonyms have caused confusion. One is the concept of “wave”. A quick summary of the problem is to say that many commentators have very little idea of what an *actual* revolutionary wave has looked like, historically; hence they dismiss the possibility that such a thing is going on by observing that different actors are involved; that there are different and not always compatible demands; that levels of direct communication and coordination vary; and so on. What becomes clear in much of this is that the implicit model of what a wave looks like is drawn not so much from history as from advertising campaigns and astroturfing, where a single coordinating centre distributes logos and slogans globally. Even the relatively coordinated experiences of (say) the European revolutions of 1916 – 23 (where there was after all a communist international involved) or anti-fascist and anti-imperialist resistance in Europe and Asia in the 1940s (where superpowers were involved) do not meet this kind of standard, let alone less centralised events such as the Atlantic revolutions or those of 1989. Of course sometimes history is homogenised in memory, in a hall of mirrors where what we hope (or fear) to see in the present is projected into the past, in order to ratify its non-existence in the present; but this is unhelpful. So we do need to look at the actual historical experience to see what revolutionary waves looked like prior to the present.

The other element is the concept of revolution. This is perhaps particularly confused by the fact of looking at things *in media res*. Revolutionary-ness, after all, can be understood in terms of actual outcomes – do regimes fall and do societies remake states? – but we are not yet at the end of events in many cases, and experience shows that what seems like a stable settlement may readily crumble in a second round. Revolutionary-ness can also be assessed in terms of actors’ ideas, intentions and interests – but again experience shows both that people can become radicalised in the course of movements and revolutions and that revolutionary processes often expand to include groups which are not among those mobilised at the start<sup>1</sup>. Here too, a strong historical reference is the exception rather than the rule, and we are more typically presented with a present-day received memory of what a particular past revolution looked like.

In conclusion, the boundaries of the thing we are talking about (if it is a thing), its wave-ness or otherwise and its revolutionary-ness or otherwise are often determined in analysis on the basis of unexamined assumptions, producing what are often very circular arguments. If, then, we can clarify at least to some degree what past revolutionary waves have been like, we can develop some kind of conceptualisation which is sufficiently independent of the present to allow us to use it to *assess* the present and answer the question of what we are looking at.

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<sup>1</sup> Matters are confused further, of course, by the attempts of both local actors and western powers and media to present particular events as either genuine popular upsurges against a regime (Ukraine, Venezuela) or no such thing (Crimea, India) – and the multiple filters which mean that most “serious journalism” on these matters is produced by journalists who specialise in conventional politics, have just arrived on the spot, and in many cases do not speak the local language.

## II. Past revolutionary waves: what can we say?

There are, to put it mildly, divergent views on which revolutionary waves can be identified in the historical record. Wikipedia<sup>2</sup> proposes no fewer than 15 such waves since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, including one for 1830 combining the French July Revolution and the Belgian Revolution; the US Civil Rights Movement and one for 1979 including Nicaragua, Iran and the invasions of Cambodia (by Vietnam) and Afghanistan.

By contrast, Katsiaficas writes

Since the French and American revolutions, it is possible to identify only a handful of such periods of global eruptions: 1848-9, 1905-7, 1917-19, and 1967-70. In each of these periods, global upheavals were spontaneously generated. In a chain reaction of insurrections and revolts, new forms of power emerged in opposition to the established order, and new visions of the meaning of freedom were formulated in the actions of millions of people. Even when these movements were unsuccessful in seizing power, immense adjustments were necessitated both within and between nation-states, and the defeated movements offered revealing glimpses of the newly developed nature of society and the new kinds of class struggle which were to follow. (1987: 6)

In a comparably restrictive analysis, Arrighi et al. write

There have only been two *world* revolutions. One took place in 1848. The second took place in 1968. Both were historic failures. Both transformed the world. (1989: 97)

They do, however, proceed to add 1789 and 1917 as key dates. Their main criterion, as with Katsiaficas, is not simply one of events but one of the transformation of agency: in particular, these were turning points for antisystemic movements in terms of their relationship to the state<sup>3</sup>.

There is some parallel here with Tarrow's account of "cycles of contention" as moments in which

new weapons of social protest are often fashioned. The barricade construction moving beyond neighbourhoods in the French revolution of 1848, the factory councils in the Russian revolution of 1905, the sitdown strikes of the French Popular Front and the American New Deal, the "direct actions" of the 1968-72 period: in the uncertainty and exuberance of the early period of a cycle of mobilization, innovation accelerates and new forms of contention are developed and diffused. (1998: 145)

His definition of cycles includes

heightened conflict, broad sectoral and geographic diffusion, the expansion of the repertoire of contention, the appearance of new organizations and the empowerment of old ones, the creation of new 'master frames' linking the actions of disparate groups to one another, and intensified interaction between challengers and the state, lending to particular state responses a key pivoting role in determining which direction the cycle will take. (1998: 144)

Beck (n.d.), drawing on Tilly's data, identifies a substantially longer list for Europe alone, including the second Reformation of the 1560s, a cycle in the 1620s at the start of the Thirty Years' War, the Atlantic Revolutions, the Greek War of Independence, the revolutions of 1830, the revolutions of 1848, the Balkan crisis of 1875, the "democratic revolutions" of 1905-12, the revolutions towards the end of WWI, the rise of

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary\\_wave](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_wave)

<sup>3</sup> Or, as Katsiaficas anachronistically has it, the nation state.

fascism, anti-fascist resistance, and 1989 – 12 waves. His definition of a wave consists of “any two or more linked revolutionary situations occurring in two or more societies within a decade of each other” (n.d.: 33)

How should we make sense of all of this? We can agree with most of the authors above that what is at stake is revolutionary *situations*, however defined, rather than revolutionary *outcomes*. As Arrighi et al. note, 1848 and 1968 are classic examples of this: even to observe that few if any of these revolutions ever stood a chance of winning (something which can also be said of most of the revolutions at the end of WWI, and in some ways of the bulk of the European Resistance) is not to dispute that revolutionary situations existed in a wide range of contexts at these two points in time.

There are also some distinctions that need to be made with the categorisations above. One is to drop the evident pressure (which is not restricted to Wikipedia) to include events in a revolutionary wave as though it makes them more significant. To the best of my knowledge no-one has ever proposed that the Paris Commune, for example, formed part of a revolutionary wave. It was a purely French (or if one insists Franco-Prussian) event: this does not make it any the less significant. In other words we do not need to multiply waves indefinitely for the sake of privileging events which we find particularly sympathetic or significant. I would thus rule out (for example) the events of 1979 as constituting a “wave”. We have precisely two *revolutions* in this “wave”, Nicaragua and Iran, with no obvious links. Similarly, the events associated with the Greek, Cretan and Moldavian wars of independence – or with the 1830 revolutions in France and Belgium – may indeed be interconnected but hardly constitute a global wave; they are interlinked on a much more immediate, and local, scale.

Some form of “global-ness”, then, marks at least a shift in scale, where a wave of revolutions extends beyond a single polity or closely-linked set of polities (bearing in mind the world-systems injunction that we should not take individual state boundaries too seriously for analytic purposes). However, it is also clear – looking at any of the lists above – that few if any revolutionary waves have been fully global. Even the most extensive account of contemporary struggles would have to acknowledge that there are significant areas untouched by anything that could remotely be described as revolutionary; and the same is true for past waves.

What seems to make more sense is to identify such waves as including one or more *regions of the world-economy*, a definition that allows us to avoid getting trapped in definitional circles about the extent of such waves. If for 1968 we can agree that both western Europe and north America were affected, its identification as a revolutionary wave does not stand or fall on our assessment of whether events in Mexico, Czechoslovakia or Japan (or for that matter the slightly later fall of fascism in Iberia and Greece) were also revolutionary, or part of wider waves in those regions – although these questions remain important for the wider analysis. What is fundamentally being said is that the state form in a particular region of the world-economy was seriously shaken – successfully or otherwise – by movements from below.

On the other hand, I agree with Barker (1996; see also Barker and Dale 1999) that not all waves of contention (or social movement waves) are revolutionary ones. Barker (1996: 19) quotes figures of 2.2% and 1.8% of the population involved in early 1980s movements in West Germany and the Netherlands, by comparison with Polish Solidarity. The latter had perhaps 10 million members in 1981 or around 27% of the total population – comparable with participation in the 1968 general strike in France (20% of the entire population, two orders of magnitude larger than the 0.2% of the French population involved in movements in the early 1980s). These kinds of figures seem intuitively right: once we remember that these are proportions of the total population, not simply the adult population, and that many adults who were not

able to join a union or go on strike nevertheless either supported these specific activities or engaged in others, we are talking about at least a third of the society engaging in a direct confrontation with the authorities.

Clearly some qualitative assessment is also needed. In 1960, for example, blacks made up only 11% of the US population; later in the decade, Northern Irish Catholics made up perhaps 1% of the population of the UK. Today, indigenous populations at the centre of some Latin American movements are not necessarily larger than this: where a social order is also a racial or ethnic order, it can be sufficient for a strategic but oppressed minority to act with some cohesion for everything to change. More broadly, although Barker and I have argued (Barker et al. 2013) that we should not see revolutions and social movements as completely distinct, it is clear that not all movements develop into revolutionary situations of any kind.

### What revolutionary waves have we seen?

For convenience (and also because of my own limited expertise in the area and the limited interest of scholars of revolution in early modern events) I look only at events from the Atlantic Revolution on. This is not to discount the possibility of revolutions, or even revolutionary waves, in the early modern period (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000) or even the more complex question of what revolutions and revolutionary waves might look like in pre-capitalist class societies: it is to narrow the focus to recognisably comparable cases.

The following list thus looks at situations where, in one or more regions of the world-system, there have been roughly simultaneous revolutionary *situations* in multiple locations which were not simply part of a single set of arrangements of ethnicities and states (France and Belgium, Greece and Crete) but between which there were genuine links and connections of whatever kind (as against Nicaragua and Iran). Obviously exact periodisation is inherently controversial so the dates given here are simply by way of indication

- The Atlantic Revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (notably the American and French revolutions, the Haitian revolution, the Batavian revolution of 1795 and the 1798 uprising in Ireland).
- The early 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin American wars of independence – sometimes seen as a second wave of the Atlantic Revolutions.
- The failed liberal revolutions of the early 1820s in Spain, Portugal, Naples and Russia, together with the Greek wars of independence.
- The European revolutions of 1848.
- The democratic revolutions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (c. 1905-10), including the Mexican Revolution, the 1905 revolution in Russia, the revolution of the Young Turks, the establishment of the Portuguese republic, the constitutional revolution in Persia and the failed Argentinian revolution of 1905.
- The revolutionary period in Europe from 1916 – 1924, which saw the establishment of the Irish Free State, Weimar Germany and the USSR, the collapse of three empires and a wave of revolutionary situations among many other events.
- The anti-fascist resistance in Europe from c. 1943 and the Asian cycle which saw anti-colonial movements, resistance to Japanese occupation and forced decolonisation, handing power to a mixture of nationalist and socialist / communist movements.

- Other post-war anti-imperial struggles are highly complex and contested, but at least some anti-colonial struggles in Africa from the 1950s up to the end of apartheid, some aspects of post-war Arab nationalism and some guerrilla struggles in Latin America might be understood in terms of revolutionary waves.
- The revolutions of 1989, including events in Soviet Central Asia, the failed Chinese revolution of 1989 and events in Soviet client states elsewhere. “Colour revolutions” in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan are sometimes linked to this.
- Returning to the starting point, the global justice movement (whether starting in Chiapas in 1994 or in Seattle in 1999, including events across the Americas, in western Europe and south Africa, in Oceania and to an extent in India, and including the anti-war protests of 2003) moves via Latin American “pink tide” and west European movement continuity into the contemporary events of anti-austerity protest, “Arab Spring” and Occupy.

I think a few things are clear from this. Firstly, revolutionary waves can last a long time; or (as with the Atlantic Revolutions and Latin American wars of independence, the events of 1989 and “color revolutions” and the global justice movement and contemporary struggles) two-wave sequences are not unusual. Indeed it is not uncommon to link (for example) 1905 and 1917 in Russia, French revolutions from 1789 to 1871 or the “European civil war” from 1917 – 1945 as part of a wider sequence of struggles; the temporal boundaries of revolutionary waves are not clear-cut but we should not expect them all to be instant matters.

Secondly, not all revolutionary waves are dominated by revolutionary outcomes: it is really only where global powers have been defeated (as in the Latin American wars of independence, the aftermath of WWII or in 1989) that most subaltern challengers are successful.

Thirdly, ideological homogeneity is also not universal: if for some liberal-democratic-nationalist waves it is clearly present, for others (the events of 1916-24 in Europe, those of post-WWII Asia) it is anything other than the rule. The common criticism that because movements do not have a homogenous base, disagree among themselves about strategy and tactics, contain various political tendencies and work differently in different countries they are therefore somehow “not a movement” is one which could only really be levelled on the basis of a caricatured notion of movement. Thompson’s (1966) English working class was a complex and contested achievement of bringing together hugely diverse groups within a very loose cultural and political identity; as Barker (2013) has pointed out movements are necessarily fields of conflict as well as collaboration; while the historiography of 1968 no less than the Resistance or the Comintern (Daniele and Vacca, 1999; Pavone, 1991; Klimke, 2008) has shown just how diverse these movement waves – flattened in memory and representation – actually were.

Communication and collaboration, a shared sense of “we” and “they”, compatible strategies and analyses are all *achievements* of shared struggle: they do not precede it but are part and parcel of how people remake themselves in movement, as they articulate their local rationalities to one another, combine their militant particularisms into campaigns and articulate movement projects. Of course the fragile constructions of solidarity, cooperation and debate can become irretrievably ruptured, just as opposing forces may be capable of rallying and deploying effective resistance or reasserting their hegemony: hence homogeneity can no more be a starting-point for analysis than revolutionary success.

Finally, such waves (like revolutions themselves: Tilly 1996) are common enough that we should not see them as requiring unique explanations – indeed such explanations are often the province either of those who want to use them as legitimation for subsequent institution-building or of those who want to diminish

their implications for capitalist stability. *Revolutions happen* – not all the time; “normality” is defined precisely by a situation in which “business as usual” dominates – but they happen, and often enough they happen in waves. Whole regions of the world-economy succumb to such waves with a certain historical frequency: the period between the events of 1848 and the democratic revolutions from 1905 onwards is the longest quiet period in terms of waves<sup>4</sup>, and often they appear with a frequency closer to 20 years. Put another way, global power arrangements do not last more than a few decades without being significantly disrupted in at least one region, though of course this also means that any individual region may last rather longer without experiencing a revolutionary wave – and as yet we have said nothing about the implications for capitalism, or a particular mode of accumulation, as a whole.

My working definition is thus that we are dealing with a special kind of social movement wave, one which is characterised by presence across much of at least one region of the capitalist world-economy (often with outliers) and by revolutionary *situations* if not always *outcomes*. Over the past quarter-millennium of capitalist history, such waves occur every few decades and may often span considerable periods of time (or there may be multiple, linked waves). However we can say that neither *revolutionary outcomes* nor ideological homogeneity are necessary definitional elements.

Thus far the recent historical record. How can we make sense of this experience?

### III: A Marxist attempt at explaining revolutionary waves

The problem, then, appears as follows:

With some regularity (but not very frequently), capitalism seems to generate such revolutionary waves, which span at least one region of the world-system, often more but never (to date) all. An adequate explanation then has to be global, but one which takes account of the relationships between different parts of the world-system, whether this is understood in terms of the strength of popular agency, the weakness of elites, or otherwise. This does not mean, however, that the movements generated are identical across a whole region; just as regions are structured differently within the world-system, so too are states, provinces and even cities structured differently within a given region in terms of the particular configuration of forces from above and below.

As we have seen, levels of popular mobilisation increase by one or two orders of magnitude, including normally passive groups. Such waves are thus fundamental for restructuring popular agency, in that they reorganise the question of “who is active?” in social movements, political parties and so on – something which in routine times is normally more predictable; indeed, (*pace* Tarrow’s comment about such waves empowering old movements) relatively few movement organisations survive such waves in anything like the form in which they entered them. They do not remain confined to a single nation-state, but are diffused transnationally, with actors in other countries recognising themselves in earlier events elsewhere and taking advantage of what they hope will be a historical opportunity to make gains. The gains sought for typically include *both* the unfinished business of earlier waves (reflecting the re-mobilisation of the resigned and

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<sup>4</sup> Depending on how one interprets events between Asian national independence movements and 1989, this could be the second-longest such period, of perhaps 40 years’ duration.

explaining continuity between waves) *and* new kinds of issues (reflecting the participation of new social actors).

The large-scale mobilisation of the population means, almost by definition, that previous forms of hegemony are no longer working. Groups which have previously been resigned or had not yet become coherent political actors (re-)enter the political contest; some of those which had been unenthusiastic members of hegemonic coalitions detach themselves; and long-time opponents of the hegemonic order are able to make substantial alternatives visible to wide sectors of the population.

Sometimes these waves involve revolutionary situations or indeed outcomes as parliamentary democracies replace monarchies, nation states replace imperial rule, state socialism replaces capitalism and so on (most states in the world today are the product of one or another of these waves). Often states resort to coercion to put down such movements but the restoration of consent routinely involves the substantial reorganisation of hegemony with major concessions such as the extension of voting rights, a shift from dynastic to national-state structure or decolonisation, the construction or extension of welfare systems, the extension of rights to women or ethnic minorities, the opening up of the cultural space, etc.

On occasion, of course, such waves are defeated by the mobilisation of popular forces behind elites (European fascism from the 1920s to the 1940s is the most obvious example of this), or elites change the rules of the game (neoliberalism as a response to the movements of 1968). More commonly, however, popular forces make substantial gains because the maintenance of hegemony or the production of a new hegemony requires including them to some degree.

Thus these global waves of social movements have been among the major social forces in the history of recent centuries. Decolonisation – whether the US in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup>, Ireland in the 1920s or Asia after WWII – is one major outcome. Democracy – in the French Revolution, the European resistance to fascism or the events of 1989-90 – is another (Eley 20xx). Social justice has been a common theme, from the Haitian revolution via the European uprisings at the end of WWI to the Latin American pink tide. A democratisation of everyday life – in particular after 1968 – is another.

A range of explanations are possible for why such waves develop. A conventional left explanation might involve Kondratieff wave theory, positing a declining rate of profit and hence a political crisis for the ruling fraction of capital (Barker, 1996 shows that this does not hold); in a sense the argument made by Skocpol (1979) and taken up by Goldstone (1991) in relation to waves, which points to weakened institutions, often as a product of wars or other competition within the international state system, is a variant of this. Such arguments – highlighting the relative weakness of hegemonic relations within a particular region of the world-economy – have an obvious explanatory value for why such waves hit where and when they do.

Another set of arguments include Katsiaficas' (1987) "eros effect", combining contagion (or as we might now say networking) with deroutinisation (Koopmans, 2004) to explain the mobilisation of new groups within individual countries and the spread of contestation between countries. None of these arguments have been fully developed in relation to revolutionary waves, however, which remain in some ways one of those massive facts of world history that are hidden in plain sight and rarely discussed.

Drawing on my forthcoming book with Alf Nilsen (Cox and Nilsen 2014), I would like to propose the following analytic framework. Firstly, it is the capitalist world-system itself which creates the conditions for global popular agency (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000) through the interconnections it creates, whether the sailors

and migrants of the early modern Atlantic or the IT technicians and migrants of the twenty-first century. In capitalism, very large numbers of people experience themselves as to some degree connected to others at great distances, share some operative control of the means of communication, transport, coordination etc., and develop common identities (be they radical-democratic ideologies or the imagery of Che Guevara or Bob Marley). The potential for interconnected popular uprisings is constantly regenerated: this not only enables practical networking but also contagion effects, when movements in one place inspire others who identify with them. Hence what Alf and I call the movement process has a particularly strong potential to develop in capitalist society, not only locally but also transnationally.

Secondly, weakened accumulation strategies (Arrighi, 1994) or hegemonic alliances (Beck, 2011) in some or all of the countries in particular regions are key to movement waves. A variety of things can weaken such alliances: failure to continue producing economic gains for core actors, failure to keep subordinate members of the alliance onside, failure to maintain effective coercion over those not in the alliance or to integrate new social actors. Moments of possibility are thus generated which are made visible by a breach in one country or even just one city, leading to defections from the hegemonic alliance, not only from below but also from above (Lash and Urry, 1987). Hence an explanation of revolutionary waves is also an account of movements from above in crisis<sup>5</sup>.

Multiple outcomes are thus possible: in the early 2000s, predictions for the outcome of what was thought to be a terminal crisis of neoliberalism included not only the success of the global justice movement but the rise of a new, Chinese geopolitical hegemony; the success of transnational Islamic movements; or a new regulatory era; and none of these were entirely impossible at the time at least. It is perhaps a tautology to say that a genuinely long-running or major crisis indicates the long-term incapacity of the current regime of accumulation and its associated hegemonic alliance to continue, but this is a particularly significant tautology in terms of the analysis of the present situation.

At the outset of any new hegemonic arrangement relatively high gains can be generated for participating groups and concessions offered (not only because of whatever economic switch has been made but because the use of force, or the generation of a new alliance, offers the leading force in such arrangements an unexpected degree of freedom for a “honeymoon” period). However, as such arrangements continue, their benefits naturally decline (for some groups if not for all). Increasingly, actors who have previously participated within hegemonic arrangements (such as the US “middle class”) remain more or less loyal out of fear of an unknown alternative or because of the exit costs rather than because they are positively benefiting<sup>6</sup>.

Such groups are therefore likely to defect if there is any substantial internal rearrangement, with the result that the regime of accumulation becomes more and more rigid and less able to reorganise itself to deal with challengers (consider the failure of neoliberal elites to offer any plan B in response to the financial crisis). On occasion (as with the end of Keynesianism) it is elite actors who come to the conclusion that the long-term cost of remaining within is higher than the exit cost. The varying weights of such components, as of new actors entering the field or previously-resigned opponents gaining confidence, is not a foregone conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> It can be seen from the various waves considered that they take place *both* in core regions of the world-system *and* in peripheral regions, despite many arguments about the necessary primacy of one or the other.

<sup>6</sup> One important implication of this disaggregation of previously-stable hegemonic alliances is a decrease in the ability of elites to successfully deploy repression (Cox 2014). The recent events in the Ukraine – where Yanukovich’s use of lethal force in Kiev was followed by his unceremonious defenestration by members of his own party among others – are a heightened example of what is a fairly common state of affairs.

1917 in Russia and 1919 in Ireland, 1945 or 1989 in Europe, 1994 in South Africa or what may be happening in Greece today – these are not all identical processes which can be neatly dismissed with the same set of clichés.

Sooner or later, therefore, something will have to break; and this is one major reason why regimes of accumulation do not last very long (typically 30 – 50 years in recent European history, if we consider Keynesianism, fascism and state socialism; the figures for national developmentalism or for that matter the period of high imperial rule in the majority world are not all that different). A “passive revolution”, where a new faction within the dominant force reconstructs a new hegemonic alliance from above, is one possible outcome. Monarchies may be abandoned to preserve capitalism, or democracy may be abandoned in favour of fascism. Another is the arrival in power of an “alternative elite”, such as neoliberalism or for that matter conservative national independence movements. Other possibilities are more positive, and include the variety of revolutionary outcomes.

Such moments involve new social groups becoming political subjects, moving towards articulating their local rationalities as what Alf and I call militant particularisms and taking a conscious hand in collective political agency on their own behalf. However we categorise the present, one of the differences between (say) Ireland and Spain or Greece is that these groups are not active (yet) in Ireland; and one of the challenges activists face on a European scale is that they are only active in a few countries, while in others such mobilisation seems almost impossibly far away. Part of the difference here, of course, is the different modes of capitalism in operation in different European countries, and the different relationships between movement institutions such as trade unions and political parties with austerity politics.

Put another way, the key question is the extent to which popular actors move from being fundamentally passive – giving tacit acceptance to overall structures and passive support to particular institutions of interest representation – to becoming active in their own right (Cox, 2001). In this sense, Gramsci’s account of civil society as the secondary trenches behind the formalities of the state is illuminating: if, when people come to feel that enough is enough and something has to be done at the level of economic structure, state power or for that matter culture, they are happy to entrust the business of doing so to parties, unions and NGOs which specialise in this kind of mediation and reproduce the structures of passivity and constitutionality, that fact will in itself structure much of what follows. Of course, at times people come to realise this mistake, or follow more convincing practical offers that seem closer to their own experience.

When these groups do burst into the political sphere as active agents in their own right they have a double learning process. Partly they use a language inherited from above – today this might mean nationalism, football, constitutionalism, facebook, hostility to movements. Partly they struggle to find a suitable language to express what they know, on a practical level, about how to do things – the experience of survival in the modern workplace, the loose network of friends with shared interests scattered around a city, design and media skills, and all the discontents they are aware of but for which politics does not yet have a language. It is naturally challenging as well as exhilarating for activists who are not on their first engagement with politics to navigate this terrain. Such events bring out *part-time* activists, as well as people who had dropped out of politics for decades but now think it worthwhile re-engaging, and people who are finally finding a way to act on things they have felt for a long time (Davies and Flett, 2009). Not everyone involved in today’s protests is nineteen, though it is a good sign that so many are.

## IV: How do we understand the present wave, what are its boundaries and what is peculiar to it?

Alert readers will have gathered by now that I have no particular problem in including at least some contemporary movement experiences within this broad historical framework. Notably, we do not have to see revolutionary situations *everywhere* for a wave to exist (although some writers act as if there must be such a situation in their home country, or in the countries they are most interested in: it is entirely possible, however galling, to live through a whole revolutionary wave watching from the sidelines). Nor is there any reason to hold that they have to be homogenous in their actors, ideologies or methods: the historical record shows a great variety in levels of homogeneity, if that is not an oxymoron. The timescale involved can vary, but long waves – or a series of linked waves – are by no means unusual. Finally, revolutionary situations do not have to have revolutionary outcomes.

Positively, what constitutes the current wave? The Latin American cycle of struggles since the turn of the century is perhaps the most consistent “backbone”, and has seen what is by now a 15-year process of popular uprisings, movement-backed governments and other dramatic struggles. It is perfectly possible to agree that none of the new states are post-capitalist in any way (indeed, to be deeply disappointed by the experiences of a number of countries) and yet to argue that the change in power relations – as between movements and states, in relation to indigenous populations, in relation to US geopolitics and to some extent in relation to the international economic order – is at least as significant as that in many historical revolutionary waves.

Movements in western Europe have a similar degree of longevity, from the “movement of movements”, extended to include the anti-war movement of 2003 (which substantially undermined the Blair and Aznar governments), and acquiring new strength (and some difference in direction) with the Icelandic saucepan revolution and the struggles in Greece and Spain in particular. As previously noted, they have repeatedly forced the EU into suspensions of its own political rules in this second period. It is clear that these movements have never had the strength of Latin American movements, but they have been a consistent presence, with significant political effects and close links to Latin American events. South African struggles also show this combination of longevity, political weight and international links within a series of competing left networks.

North America (and Oceania?) have seen a different development, one in which 9/11 saw a fragmenting of the alliances of the global justice movement and in which Occupy in particular has seen a recomposition around themes of social equality. By contrast, the world’s two billion-people states, China and India, have both been experiencing a long cycle of popular protest which has shaken power relations locally without coming anywhere near doing so at a national level, and which has been substantially isolated internationally. We can understand these situations as manifestations of the hegemonic crisis of neoliberal capitalism, but they are fundamentally outliers – albeit important ones – in terms of this wave.

The events in the Arab world are different again: more recent, unambiguously revolutionary (albeit in a number of countries representing only attempts at political rather than social revolution), and reflecting not so much a crisis of neoliberal hegemony as a crisis of US geopolitical hegemony. In this, of course, they share something with the much deeper crisis represented by events in Latin America.

It will be seen that this is not a list of “everything that is happening”: it makes no attempt, for example, to classify events in Turkey, Brazil, Bulgaria or the Ukraine, for the simple reason that none of these constitute

regions of the world-system. They are important events, and no doubt influenced by events elsewhere; it is no disrespect to our comrades in these countries to reject the kind of instant punditry which seeks to derive a new theory of revolution or describe the new state of radical politics on the basis of the latest uprising – if for no other reason that these are not identical situations.

In fact one of the most obvious features of the current wave of movements, *pace* Paul Mason, is that they are not all the same – in terms of their actors, in terms of their ideologies, in terms of their tactics, even in terms of their modes of communication. This is unsurprising, given that we are dealing with events in a number of regions of the world-system, some of which go very deep indeed (and hence involve a very wide range of social actors) while others are “shallower” in these terms. They are also the objects of a series of long-running sibling rivalries between multiple lefts – Marxist, autonomist, anarchist, anti-imperialist, radical nationalist, indigenous, radical-democratic and so on – each of which has its own preferred language and tendency to identify with particular tactics and modes of organisation, and where different countries have different lefts (or more exactly arguments between different sets of left actors) making the running (leaving aside religious groups, the nationalist right and so on). Even in Latin America, there is huge diversity between countries in this respect and no simple account will work.

In terms of time boundaries, it will be seen that I am making a case for seeing this as a single wave, albeit not a simple one: things *happened* during this time, movements changed, states responded, crisis struck. Yet in city after city – and in our own networks – the actors involved are often the same ones: the same communities, workplaces, parties, networks, and indeed individuals. There are certainly developments in methods – from Indymedia to social media, from colour blocs to colour tides, or from jazz hands to general assemblies - but overall (whatever about the experience of individual countries or movements) there is no radical break between the struggles of the early 2000s and those we are in now.

This has, I want to suggest, *more* radical implications than are sometimes suggested by the proponents of the “everything is new” hypothesis. The historical record suggests that it is the *long* cycles of struggle – or the sequences of linked waves, if one prefers – that most clearly signal the weakness of a particular social, economic and political order and the growing self-confidence and determination of subaltern challengers. This is the case for the long cycle of liberal revolutions that began in the Atlantic, ended slavery in Haiti, saw national independence in Latin America, and in some ways continued through to 1848. It is the case for the “European civil war” that starts with the revolutions of 1916-24, proceeds through fascist reaction and the European resistance to the welfare state and state socialist arrangements of the postwar period. It describes the period of anti-colonial struggle, resistance to Japanese occupation and decolonisation in Asia. Formal democracy, welfare states and independence from empire are not nothing – although it is clear that they fall far short of what participants wanted. One question, then, has to be how we can achieve outcomes which are more in line with our own purposes.

## **V: What should movements do? What should Marxists do?**

If we do find ourselves fifteen years into a cycle of struggles against neoliberalism which can usefully be characterised as a revolutionary wave, but in terms drawn from the actual and rather ambiguous historical record, and where we ourselves may not be in anything remotely approaching a revolutionary situation, what should we do?

I should say that I am particularly interested in this from an Irish (and west European) point of view, where we have seen both significant levels of mobilisation at various points over the last five to ten years and sufficient levels of popular dissatisfaction as to force de facto suspensions of normal democratic operations: in both national referenda on EU matters and trade union ballots on austerity, when the “wrong answer” has been given voters have simply been sent back to do it again, under a barrage of thinly-veiled threats; we have seen parties elected on anti-austerity platforms become part of pro-austerity coalitions, as well as technical governments more or less imposed by the EU; and of course both bailout conditions and new EU budgetary rules have entailed removing large portions of economic decision-making from the reach of popular votes, in individual countries and across the EU as a whole – accentuating a feature already present in EU institutions from the ECB to the Lisbon Agenda. We have also, it should be noted, seen one actual change in constitutional arrangements from below, in Iceland (Júlíusson and Helgason 2013).

Inevitably perhaps what I can take from the discussions above by way of practical propositions is little more than a collection of fairly common observations – which is perhaps grounds for hope if they are also accurate. One reason for this is of course that the Marxist tradition – that of the founders, of the generation formed in the movements around 1919, of the Resistance generation and of that of 1968 – has been formed in dialogue with these waves, both intellectually and politically. This alone would justify keeping the Marxist tradition alive.

- 1) Not to give up hope. In particular, not to spend so much time staring at the suffering caused by neoliberalism and analysing its deep structure as to become convinced of its inevitable character.
- 2) There is of course a converse risk, best expressed by the phrase “one more push, comrades!” and consisting in the assumption that the time is always ripe. However it is fair to say that in the midst of revolutionary waves it is genuinely unclear to participants what is, and is not possible – as evidenced by the large number of revolutionary situations during such waves which do not have revolutionary outcomes in any sense. If we are in a revolutionary wave, then, we should try to stretch our sense of possibility at least somewhat. This is probably particularly true today given that the main danger in doing so is burnout rather than massacre, at least in the global North.
- 3) It is perhaps particularly important to state that revolutions are not simple win / lose situations. This is in part the sense of Arrighi et al’s highlighting of 1848 and 1968 as revolutionary situations which were lost in the immediate sense but nevertheless had substantial effects in terms of social change; a similar analysis can often (I am tempted to say usually) be said of revolutions at some level. Another way of stating this that even where a given regime was able to recover temporarily, in the longer term a new set of hegemonic arrangements, incorporating some movement demands and actors, has been necessary. This of course nuances the calculations about whether and when it is worth taking risks. At one level, the question is the extent to which a revolution can permanently disrupt a given set of power relationships; at another level, of course, the question is *which actors* are offered concessions, and to what extent we rate formal democracy, welfare, national independence etc. as valuable in themselves.
- 4) Absent an immediate revolutionary opportunity in our own context, it nevertheless makes sense in a revolutionary wave to do whatever we can to build popular capacity for revolution: in the sense of disseminating ideas, developing forms of communication and education, and building links of solidarity and cooperation, in particular across movements and communities. History has not been kind to the idea of *first* creating an organisation and *then* using it in a revolutionary context: at times (1914) such organisations have simply balked at taking action; at others (insurrectionary parties) they have succeeded in installing deeply authoritarian regimes; more commonly they have simply

been overtaken by events. Investing in movement and organisation in a less centralised sense is in this sense a strategy which is more likely to bear fruit.

- 5) For fairly obvious reasons, internationalism in all its various forms is an important way of learning from struggles elsewhere and avoiding having to do all our learning in the first person, with all the costs that entails. At times it can also open the possibility of effective solidarity in one or another direction and of enabling a broader part of the population to start from at least some of the gains of movements elsewhere.
- 6) Less directly derived from the reflections above: to fetishise any single mode of organising or tactic is a risky strategy – both because parties, unions, networks, community organising, radical media and everything else *change* their practical meaning over time, but also because the key fight may not be there – or not only there. This is obviously not an argument for not reflecting on organisation or tactics, or avoiding clear choices at specific points in time, but rather for subordinating those reflections and choices to a broader consideration of strategic principles around how power is organised in society. Put another way, a concept like “dual-power situation” is in the long run more useful than an emphasis on a particular type of party as the only way forward – though of course the learning road to the one may pass through commitment to the other for immediate purposes. Defining a whole tradition by loyalty to a particular site and mode of action is to risk a giant clout on the head from history. It is of course harder to clarify what our principles are in a broader sense that still has practical meaning – something which is perhaps a general problem of human action and certainly frequent in social movement organisations<sup>7</sup>.
- 7) A second indirect reflection is the need for an attentive eye to the *weaknesses* of likely opponents: the “cracks” (Holloway 2010) which may enable us to win. Here too fetishisation is a risk: university libraries are full of now-unread texts which discern the internal contradictions in this or that aspect of economics, state legitimacy, popular culture, international relations and so on without identifying these as aspects of a broader totality, or as historical products subject to change. The key level, of course, is that of the organisation of hegemony – “theoretical and directive leadership” – and it is here in particular that we should seek to find opportunities for disaggregating currently-hegemonic alliances and for detaching individual actors to our side as allies, or at least as neutrals.

As noted, these are in some senses fairly obvious<sup>8</sup> but there is no harm in stating them once in a while: since revolutionary situations arise so rarely in any individual lifetime, the risks and potential costs are high and the scope for learning in action are limited, the more that can be done by way of articulating what we believe to be useful lessons – and exposing our own limited understanding to the critique of others – the better.

Returning to the specifics of the current crisis, with its multiple popular actors, this analysis suggests particular attention to the weaknesses of neoliberalism in securing continued hegemony – and to demands, and popular institutions, which accentuate this. It notes in particular the *length* of this crisis, which is historically unusual and politically encouraging, as is the narrowness of neoliberal orthodoxy and the difficulties experienced in finding new modes of organisation to incorporate popular pressures. All of this suggests that there may indeed be scope for revolutionary movements to push for a path which is not simply

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the single most important principle is precisely the legitimacy - and possibility, under some circumstances - of revolutionary action. It is a real challenge to recognise this and hence become able to think about power and strategy in revolutionary situations seriously but also, as Biermann puts it, without “hardening” into a narrowly militarised or paranoid mode of thought and action.

<sup>8</sup> In Cox 2010 I describe a related series of propositions as being an activist ABC.

beyond *neoliberalism*, but beyond a new *capitalist* resolution of the crisis. Anyone familiar with our movements knows that we have a long way to go in this respect – but so too do the kinds of alternative elite contenders which might be expected to successfully impose a new kind of capitalism capable of containing our movements in the longer term.

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