

# **Liberal and Marxist Social Movement Theories: A Structuralist and Critical Realist Approach.**

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## *Abstract*

In this article, I respond to the work of Barker and of Nilsen and Cox in their edited volume *Marxism and Social Movements* on the differences between liberal and Marxist social movement theories and go on to distinguish between what I have called humanist and structuralist Marxist theories. On the differences between liberal and Marxist theories, and while largely agreeing with the authors, I seek to develop a more precise understanding of these differences as their different purposes in explaining and changing the world, by their different views of the roles of social movements under capitalism, by their emphases on ecological, economic and political levels of the social formation, and by their different historical perspectives. On humanist and structuralist Marxist theories, I specifically distance myself from Barker's infamous statement that structuralist Marxism has "contributed nothing to Marxism as a theory of emancipation" and attempt to explain the contributions of Althusser and of structuralist Marxism to our understandings of the conditions under which people make history. I thus distinguish between humanist and structuralist Marxist theories by their different understandings of the complexities of social formations, by their different views of the importance of human agencies, by their different understandings of organic crises, by their different views of social stabilities and of the frequency of revolutions and by their different views of the roles of ideas and of social interactions in bringing about social transformations. I conclude by explaining the consequences of these differences for debates and for deliberative democracies in social movements.

## *Introduction: Marxism and Social Movements*

The publication in 2013 of the edited collection by Barker et al. (2013) has given a new perspective from which to look at social movement theories and to identify a more precise role for them. Most writings on such approaches as complexity and Actor-Network Theories have been concerned with social interaction whereas Barker and his colleagues have helped me to take up a more structuralist position concerned with the types of social structures within which this social interaction takes place. I will thus now go on to look at some purposes and traditions of social movement studies and to explain the contributions of Marxism and of ecologism. I will then go on to contrast my approach with that of Barker et al. by explaining the contributions of Althusser and of structuralist Marxism to our understandings of the conditions under which people make history. From this point of view, I am distinguishing between liberal, humanist Marxist and structuralist Marxist positions and taking up a structuralist Marxist position.

A very good friend of mine who grew up in South Africa under Apartheid recently explained to me that the sociology she studied there made no mention of Marx and was based on the types of sociology courses taught in the United States. I hadn't entirely realised until now, but the classification scheme of the Library of the United States Congress takes all materials concerned with Marxism out of the main collections and stores them in a separate section, thus taking a view of Marxism, not only in Apartheid South Africa but in a supposedly liberal democracy such as the United States, as some sort of sociology of a lunatic fringe, of little more than historical or esoteric interest.

It is in the type of context that I want to look at the traditions and purposes of social movement theories. Thus, Barker et al (2013: 03-07) identify North American and European traditions. The first of these is concerned with collective behaviour, resource mobilisation and political process theories, and the second with so-called new social movements theories. I will now identify some of the differences between these theories and Marxist theories, such as those advocated by these authors.

First, these liberal theories are concerned to explain the world rather than to change it. Thus, Barker et al. (2013) begin their article by picking up on Bevington and Dixon's (2005) well-known call for movement-relevant theories, and Nilsen and Cox (2013), in the same volume, put their fingers on the reason for this irrelevance of much liberal social theory to the actual social movements being studied, that "their purpose is not to change the world, but to explain, celebrate or condemn" (p.64). But the question must be one of why social movement research sponsored by neo-liberal universities and Research Councils should be relevant to the types of social movements considered by so many neo-liberal organisations to consist of nothing more than bunches of anarchists and extremists. Thus, I've always been very interested in the fact that the work of Della Porta and Rucht (2013) on *Meeting Democracies* was sponsored by the European Commission, in the purpose of the Commission in commissioning it, and in why so many of the research participants were happy to co-operate with it. Of course, some writers, such as Barker et al., not to mention myself, are interested in developing theories to change the world, but, unfortunately, in a neo-liberal academic environment, we represent not a mainstream tradition of social movement theory but rather a relatively autonomous minority engaging in a hegemonic struggle with this mainstream academic environment.

Second, they are confused about clear definitions of social movements. Here, Nilsen and Cox (2013: 65-66) continue by recognising that social movements are often thought of a "type of extra-parliamentary political activity, characterised by certain specific institutional and organisational features", and go on to propose an alternative definition as a "process in which a specific social group develops a collective project of skilled activities centred on a rationality which tries to maintain or to change a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities", suggesting that this can include movements of social elites, or what they call movements from above. Quite honestly, I do not find this particularly helpful, and I feel a need to continue an emphasis on extra-parliamentary political activities or on organisations acting outside established political institutions. Nilsen and Cox go on to consider the access of movements from above to these institutions to a point where this access makes them qualitatively different to movements from below, and where these two types of movements consist of two different structures. For me, as a structuralist, things are similar because they have the same structures,

and what Nilsen and Cox call movements from above can thus be considered elite hegemonic projects, leaving the idea of a social movement for what they call movements from below.

I am more concerned, however, about the approaches of liberal social movement theories to what Nilsen and Cox (2013: 79-81), following Touraine's well-known usage, call historicities. Nilsen and Cox (2013: 73-79) see social movements as consisting of a series of stages of local rationalities, militant particularisms, campaigns, and social movement projects challenging a social totality. The last of these stages corresponds to what new social movement theorists such as Touraine call historicities, where a whole social structure, such as a mode of production, is called into question. Nilsen and Cox continue by identifying the anti-capitalist movements of the last 20 years, such as Occupy! as classic examples of such social movement projects and my interest in social movements really dates from coming across a movement which set out to challenge capitalism in general. The understanding of social movements of North American theoretical traditions such as political process theories is, however, not this, but rather the first three of Nilsen and Cox's stages and what they call the contentious politics of pressure groups working within a pluralist liberal democracy to bring about changes within an existing social structure, and I have already explained elsewhere what I see as the failure of political process theorists such as Tarrow (2012) to adequately understand Touraine's categories of historicities.

Third, they are conducted almost entirely at the political level. Thus, Tilly's (2013) history of social movements contains nine main arguments which he revisits throughout the book. To summarise, these are that social movements are relatively autonomous of other levels of the social formation and could disappear under other social formations; that social movements consist of an articulation of several struggles; that social movements have three main purposes of programmes, identities and standings, that different purposes are dominant at different times; that social movements diversify into different settings; that social movements diversify over times, spaces, political settings and patterns of interaction and communication, that liberal democracies promote social movements through their promotion of a civil society and of a public sphere; that social movements promote popular, as opposed to institutional sovereignties; and that social movements thrive on spontaneities and political entrepreneurs.

This is all very interesting, but only after we understand that Tilly's theories are best seen as a complement, rather than as an alternative, to those of Marxists such as Nilsen and Cox. Tilly is not concerned to change the world but to persuade his audience that social movements are not just bunches of anarchists and extremists but may play a useful role in promoting a liberal democracy and in stabilising a capitalist social structure or social formation. These political process theories may be relatively autonomous of an economic level, but, for Tilly, this is not the problem; rather, the problem is to explain social stability rather than social change. Thus, this type of liberal social movement theory has to be understood as existing within a context of Marxist theories, which explain large-scale social changes, in explaining the stabilities of the social formations which have been produced by the large-scale changes, and Tilly's theories can be most usefully compared not with those of Nilsen and Cox but rather with those of Poulantzas in what Jessop (1985) called a regional theory of the political level of the social formation.

Fourth, they lack an adequate historical perspective. Tilly sees social movements as having existed since 1768 and concludes his list of arguments with an observation that they may not last forever, although he does not seem to understand why they might disappear. The

interesting thing here is that, whereas I have put this at the start of my summary, Tilly puts it at the end of his list, suggesting that it is a somewhat theoretical and unlikely possibility and that there is no serious threat to the existing social formation. For Tilly, there is no crisis of climate change or of mass poverty, inequality or homelessness and the present social formation appears set to continue. For Marxists, however, human societies have always been punctuated by occasional but large-scale and far-reaching changes, such as those from feudalism to capitalism or from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism. What is perhaps less subject to change, possibly as a relatively autonomous political practice, is the formation of social movements since long before 1768, from slave revolts in ancient societies to peasants' revolts in medieval England to the global justice movements of the present time. Not only this, but environmental historians also such as Frank and Gills (1996) have identified periods of dominance of empires over 5,000 years and ecological sociologists and critical animal theorists, no doubt too modest for me to mention by name here, have identified in the history of the Earth, periods of dominance of specific species, such as the anthropocene or period of human dominance, subject to specific sets of ecological conditions. Thus, whereas liberal social movement theories explain the stability of specific social formations, Marxist and ecological theories complement them by explaining large-scale social changes, and the conditions under these may take place in the future.

#### *Social Movement Studies: Humanist & Structuralist Marxism.*

I will now explain some of the differences between what I might call the humanist Marxist theories advocated by authors such as Nilsen and Cox and based on the works of writers such as Gramsci and of Marxist historians such as E.P. Thompson, and those advocated by me and based on the works of writers such as Althusser and Poulantzas.

First, humanist Marxism is based on a caricature of structuralist Marxism. Thus, Barker et al. (2013:11) quite rightly point out that, these days, many neo-liberal and post-modernist universities construct a stereotype of Marxism as being concerned entirely with structures, economic determinism, and hierarchies. Unfortunately, however, they go on to construct a similar stereotype of the structuralist Marxism of writers such as Althusser as being one of these economic determinist and hierarchical Marxist theories and as having "contributed nothing to Marxism as a theory of emancipation". Let me see what I can do with this.

The veteran interpreter of Althusser, Ted Benton, has, in a recent introductory article (Benton, 2008: 201-203), done much to clarify this confusion about structuralist Marxism. It appears that, long before the coming of globalisation, countries such as France very often operated with their own intellectual traditions and that Althusser took his inspirations do not from earlier Marxists, such as Gramsci, but rather from earlier French writers, in particular the philosophers of science Georges Canguilhem and Gaston Bachelard and the psychologist Jacques Lacan. Thus, Althusser's writings on structures and on ideological state apparatuses are to be understood not as criticisms of, but rather as alternatives to, those of Gramsci, and what he was trying to do was to explain how the writings of philosophers such as Bachelard could be applied to the social sciences, and how the levels of the social formation were, on the one hand, related to each other, but were, on the other hand, relatively autonomous of each other. Unfortunately, and unlike Gramsci, Althusser never really developed a theory of how these structures were going to be overcome, and this is what seems to have led to these misunderstandings of

Althusser as not just a structuralist but as a functionalist, and the writings of Gramsci, although earlier, have, from this point of view, to be seen a development of those of Althusser, rather than the other way round.

In his earlier writings on Althusser, Benton (1984: 35-82) explains some basic concepts of structuralist Marxism. These can be understood as movements away from economic determinism, such as practices and levels of social formations, relationships between these levels or structural causalities, modes of production and social formations and states as systems of repressive and ideological state apparatuses, and concessions to economic determinism, such as determinations in the last instance and determinant and dominant levels of social formations. Benton (1984: 111-172) goes on to bring to life the application by other writers of these concepts to contribute to Marxism as a theory of emancipation by analysing areas of specific social formations, such as processes of industrialisation in southern economies, the roles of women in domestic labour and relatively autonomous political and ideological struggles in the state apparatuses. In his consideration of these struggles, Benton makes much of the work of Nicos Poulantzas, whose theoretical inspirations, as his leading interpreter Bob Jessop (1985: 313-335) explains, included the French philosophy of Althusser and the Italian politics of Gramsci. Thus, once we understand Althusser's ignorance of Gramsci, we can understand the crucial contributions of Poulantzas in integrating these two traditions and in contributing to Marxism as a theory of emancipation.

Second, humanist Marxism over-emphasises the importance of social interaction or agency. Thus, as Barker et al. (2013: 13) put it, "Against the caricatured structuralism so often adopted in academic discourse, Marxism's emphasis falls on agency, on people making their own history". Indeed, in the economic and political conditions under which Marx lived, of the British industrial revolution and of the French revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was plenty of agency going on, and it was thus not unreasonable for him to suppose that a further proletarian revolution could take place fairly quickly, but, in more stable times, we have to explain social stabilities and not just social changes. Also, there are plenty of theories of human agency, not least free-market and neo-liberal economics, which reduce societies to the agencies of individuals competing in a market, and what Marxists have to do here is to explain how these markets produce inequalities and impose constraints and limits on the agencies of individuals.

Third, humanist and structuralist Marxism have very different understandings of social change and of organic crises. Thus, Nilsen and Cox (2013: 79-81), following Gramsci, see an organic crisis as a position of equilibrium between opposing dominant and subordinate social forces, whose outcome could be determined by a relatively marginal and random occurrence. But the integration by Poulantzas of the theories of Gramsci and of Althusser lead to things being a bit more complex than this. Thus, Jessop (1985: 92-93) explains that, for Poulantzas, an organic crisis of a social formation involves a crisis at each relatively autonomous level of any given concrete social formation.

Fourth, if humanist Marxism is concerned with people making history under conditions not of their own choosing, structuralist Marxism is concerned with what exactly these conditions are, and with how they are overcome. Thus, Marxism can be distinguished from interactionism not by being just concerned with agencies but

rather by being concerned with agencies within a given set of specific structural constraints, and whereas historians such as E.P. Thompson were concerned with the agencies of human subjects under the conditions imposed by industrialisation, structuralist Marxism is more concerned with identifying precisely what these conditions are and with identifying more precisely how people make history within them.

Thus, in identifying levels of social formations, we are identifying social structures which are difficult to change, but Althusser is not suggesting that they cannot be changed, but rather emphasising how occasional and difficult these changes are. The idea of a structural causality is to get away from economic determinism by suggesting not that the political and ideological levels are somehow caused by the economic level, but rather that the economic level imposes constraints on the practices of the political and ideological levels, but this still leaves plenty of room for autonomous practices or agencies at each of these levels, as evidenced by the studies of the political level by Poulantzas, and indeed by Tilly, and of the ideological level by post-modernists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001).

The specific levels of the social formation identified by Althusser may appear somewhat arbitrary, but they are at least based on the works of Marx, or, as Benton's close colleague Ian Craib (1984/1992: 130) puts it: "There is no *a priori* reason why the list of practices should not extend indefinitely; Althusser has himself added artistic practices to the list. However, these three are particularly important because they provide the basis of the analysis of society. The basis for arguing that there are three levels is that Marx said so. I do not want to dispute this; it seems to me quite a useful way of looking at the world."

I have to say that I entirely agree with Craib here. Thus, Nilsen and Cox (2013: 66-71), in their consideration of the practices of social movements from above and however inadvertently, immediately apply these categories in identifying directive roles in economic organisation, differential access to the state and moulding everyday routines and common sense. For me, I could not help noticing years ago, when I was still learning about Althusser, how Bob Jessop et al. (1989) used these categories in their analysis of what their publishers liked to call Thatcherism. Finally, and perhaps most famously, David Held et al. (1999) in their well-known introduction to globalisation, see it as consisting of economics, politics and cultures.

If there is no *a priori* reason why the list should not extend indefinitely, I will make some attempt to extend it. Thus, the critical realist philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1979/1998) compares the social sciences not to natural sciences such as physics but rather to those such as astronomy, geology and meteorology, in achieving progress through occasional but drastic, far reaching and revolutionary changes, such as those caused by such things as earthquakes and implosions of black holes. This helps us to see whole social formations as relatively autonomous of stable natural environments, and, more immediately with coming of climate change, to see any economic growth as relatively autonomous of a specific set of ecological conditions. Thus, whereas ecology movements were once seen vaguely seen as one of the new social movements at the ideological level and whereas the economic level was once seen as being determinant in the last instance, these movements can now be seen as a level of the social formation underpinning the whole structure, of which the economic level is now relatively autonomous. Thus, in recent times, a variety of economic practices has emerged to recognise this relative autonomy. Dryzek (2005/2013) has summarised these as consisting of free-market environmentalism, ecological modernisation and sustainable development, and other writers,

such as O'Neill (2011), Lawn (2006) and Lawn and Clarke (2010) have suggested more radical and ecological, as opposed to environmental, economic practices such as steady-state economies, use values, basic incomes, and ecological systems of international relations such as optimal currency areas and contracting threshold hypotheses, and, if these are not theories of emancipation, I do not know which ones are.

At the other end of the scale, I will extend the list to include practices of social interaction. Here, the critical realist philosopher Derek Layder (1993) has developed a series of levels at which research may be conducted, and an example of the study of these practices could be the theories of communicative action of Habermas (1984/2004). But, for me, the most rigorous methods of studying social interaction have been those of ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkel (1967/1984) and Sacks (1992) perhaps most accessibly explained by Silverman (1985, 2011). From this point of view, interactionist practices could prove decisive in determining outcomes for entire social formations. To take up Althusser's ideas of determinant and dominant levels of social formations, in times of social stability, the economic or political level is likely to be dominant. Thus, in a transition from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism, there could be considered to have been what Althusser called a displacement of dominance from the political to the economic level, as decisions about investments in employment or housing were largely transferred from the public to the private sector. But, in times of organic crisis, where these levels are fiercely contested by roughly equivalent forces, there is a displacement of dominance to the interactionist level, where relatively marginal events can have wide-ranging consequences for entire social formations. Thus, to take a historical example, I'm reliably informed that, before the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, the Stanley family defected to the Lancastrian side, thus bringing a swift and sudden end to a period of organic crisis in the Wars of the Roses. To take a more modern example, at the present time, the votes of few members of Parliament could determine the future of the British social formation in the world economy either as a member or as a non-member of the European Union. From this point of view, it's interesting to understand that the historical periods studied by historians such as Thompson or Hobsbawm, those of the organic crisis of the British industrial revolution, would have seen a displacement of dominance to the interactionist levels and would have been a halcyon period for agency, as a variety of displaced and rising social groups and classes, such as landowners, industrial capitalists, displaced peasants and agricultural workers, fought it out for a place in a new industrial society.

Other structuralist Marxist theories have, since the relative stabilisation of capitalism in the latter part of Marx's life, set out to explain this stability, usually by identifying stages of, or periodising, capitalism on the basis of technologies as in long-wave theories, of systems of competition as in state monopoly capitalism theories or of systems of state intervention as in regulation theories (Harris, 1988). These theories, which again seek to understand the conditions under which people make history, are nonetheless theories of emancipation. Thus, regulation theory, which distinguishes between Keynesianism and neo-liberalism, can be used to identify displacements of dominance between different levels of the social formation and thus to guide the actions and strategies of social movements seeking to oppose specific systems of regulation.

All this leads me to consider the system theories of the biologists Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi (2014), which have become increasingly influential in recent times among social movement participants. Here, whereas Marx, living in a time of immense social change,

struggle taking its inspiration from the works of writers such as Jacques Derrida (Laclau, 1990) on constitutive outsides, Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) on assembling discourses and Mouffe (2000) on the inevitability of antagonisms. Much of this ideological struggle would consist in developing a public awareness of ecological alternatives to neo-liberalism, such as steady-state economies, basic incomes and contracting threshold hypotheses, but would also involve such things as developing an awareness of the role of tax havens in the world economy, an awareness of a variety of mental health conditions and an ecological understanding of the coronavirus crisis of 2020.

### *Some Examples: Social Movement Theories and Ecological Movements*

To make all this clearer, I will attempt to distinguish here between the types of social movements which might interest liberal, and humanist and structuralist Marxist writers. Years ago in the 1960s, an ecological social movement started to emerge, which led to the coming of relatively modest organisations, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. These were a part of a respectable global public sphere, who governments felt they could negotiate with, and who were not demonised as extremists or as ecological terrorists and, as such, they were of interest to liberal social movement theorists. Theorists like me vaguely considered them to be a part of the ideological level of the social formation, along with the other so-called new social movements, such as racial equality movements, women's movements and LGBT movements and disability movements.

But these theorists, especially those influenced by structuralist Marxism, started to understand that ecology movements were not based on the identities of specific social groups, but on ecological developments which were becoming increasingly difficult to dispute, that economic growth could only continue at an unacceptable cost to the environment, and that the place in the social formation for these movements was at a more basic ecological level, underpinning the whole structure. These movements, such as the various protests the building of new roads and of railway lines such as HS2, the anti-fracking movements, and the more general Extinction Rebellion movement have called into question the entire capitalist social formation, have been attacked by government as extremists and ecological terrorists, and are of thus of interest to both humanist and structuralist Marxists. Several of these movements have been concerned with a political struggle against road construction companies and fracking companies, as if we were still living in the finely balanced conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No doubt this is of some value, since, as so many of the protestors so often remind me, without the anti-fracking protests, there would be a lot more fracking going on, but it is at considerable personal cost to their mental well-being, as a handful of committed activists constantly put themselves at risk of arrest and imprisonment, but these activists are the heroes of humanist Marxism, with their commitment to activism and to human agency.

Thus, what I am trying to do in this volume, is to create a space for an ideological, rather than political, struggle, in order to develop an alliance with the wider population in favour of steady-state economies, basic incomes and co-operative relationships with non-human species. This type of struggle, based on structuralist Marxism, recognises the relative stability of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century societies, and the occasional nature of social changes, creates a broad-based alliance for social change, and, perhaps most crucially, attempts to safeguard the democratic



nature of any post-capitalist social order. This is the type of social movement of interest to structuralist Marxists and, if you're reading this, please come along with me.

### *Conclusions: Liberal, Humanist & Structuralist Theories*

From this point of view, I can identify some specific roles for liberal and for humanist and structuralist Marxist social movement theories. Thus, liberal theories provide us with a detailed understanding of the specifically political practices of social movements acting outside established political institutions but within a specific social formation. Humanist Marxist theories provide us with an understanding of wider ecological, economic, and political struggles but in times of social and political instability and of organic crisis. Finally, structuralist Marxist theories provide us with a theoretical framework of levels of the social formation with which to understand the activities of social movements as a set of relatively autonomous practices involved in a variety of ecological, economic, political, ideological, and interactionist struggles in times of relative social stability. My contribution in this volume is to develop an understanding of the specifically ideological and interactionist practices of social movement organisations seeking to bring about a transformation in capitalist and neo-liberal social formations in the relatively socially stable conditions of the 2020s.

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