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Globalization and its Countermovement: Marxian Contention or Polanyian Resistance?

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Abstract

This article surveys the scholarship on the countermovement against the diffusion of capitalism and market economy in the Global South. We identify two streams of analysis in the literature. On the one hand, scholars observe contentious politics instances where the spread of capitalist production relations enables the associational capacity and bargaining power of social classes. On the other hand, there are voluminous studies on contentious politics in the Global South where groups such as peasants, shopkeepers, and urban poor resist the intensification of the market economy. We use Beverly Silver's distinction between Marx-type and Polanyi-type protests, which focuses on how globalization makes and unmakes social groups, to unpack the heterogeneity of the impacts and experiences of globalization. We argue that although Silver's distinction is of great analytical value, there are strong warrants for separating the effects of the market economy from capitalism in studying contentious politics against globalization. Such an analytical strategy (1) expands the scope of the distinction between Marxian and Polanyian contention to social groups other than the working class; and, (2) emphasizes that the roots of these struggles lie in the interconnected diffusion of capitalism and market economy.

Keywords: globalization, contentious politics, counter movement, Marx and Polanyi-type protests

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There is a growing body of literature that interprets collective mobilizations spurred by globalization as a countermovement against the diffusion of capitalism and market economy (Almeida 2007; Bandelj, Shorette and Sowers 2011; Burawoy 2010; Evans 2008; Gemici 2013; Levien 2012; Munck 2004, 2007; Silver 2003; Silver and Zhang 2009; Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout 2008). Two different and seemingly contradicting streams of analysis can be identified in this literature. On the one hand, scholars identify contentious politics instances where the spread of capitalist production relations enables the associational capacity and bargaining power of social classes (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Brooks 2007; Friedman 2014; McCallum 2013; Pangsapa 2007; Zhang 2015). The *making* of new collective actors, who seek to gain rights and decommodify labor, is at the root of this type of contentious politics. On the other hand, there are voluminous studies on contentious politics instances where the intensification of the market economy is met with protests by groups such as peasants, students, and urban poor. These are social groups who are *unmade* by economic globalization and neoliberal reforms (Almeida 2007; Auyero 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Auyero and Moran 2007; Bandelj, Shorette and Sowers 2011; Epstein 2003; Evans 2000; Gemici 2013; Hammond 1999, 2009; Munck 2007; Nair 2011). In this article, we survey the two streams of scholarship on the countermovement against the global integration of capitalist markets by using Beverly Silver's distinction between Marx-type and Polanyi-type protests (2003).

Silver (2003, pp. 19–23), focusing on how globalization *makes* and *unmakes* social groups, classifies the countermovement against capitalism and market into Marx-type and Polanyi-type protests. She builds her classification of protests on the basis of social transformations that alter the class structure of societies as well as bargaining and associational power of the working class. For instance, the emergence and intensification of capitalist production strengthen working classes by enabling higher “workplace bargaining power and associational power” (2003, p. 19), two terms she borrowed from Erik Olin Wright (2000). In contrast, social transformations that unmake working classes have to do with the death and decay of existing industries as

market reforms such as privatization and industrial restructuring lead to the abandonment of “established social compacts” (2003, p. 20).

While we find much merit in Silver’s classification, three interrelated conceptual and empirical problems limit the usefulness of her distinction between Marx and Polanyi-type contention. First, although social protests across the world involve groups other than the working classes, Silver’s distinction emphasizes the struggles by the working class. This would not constitute a shortcoming, if the causes identified by Silver did not play a role in contention by other social groups such as peasants and artisans. However, as we show below through our survey, that is not the case. Second, Silver considers the effects of capitalism and market economy jointly in her distinction between Marx and Polanyi-type protests. Drawing directly on Polanyi’s own work and contemporary interpretations of Polanyi (Block and Somers 2014; Burawoy 2010; Dale 2010; Polanyi 1968, 2001), we believe there are strong warrants for separating the effects of the market economy from capitalism. As Polanyi (2001, pp. 71–73) observes, the perils of the market economy are closely related to the price-supply-demand mechanism, commodity fiction, and the rapid transformation of social relations following the rise of the market economy (Gemici 2008, 2015). It is true that capitalism is, at the last instance, at the root of these perils. However, the institutionalization of market exchange poses distinct perils to the social fabric. Finally, while Silver’s own usage avoids the classification of protests through the type of claims and demands (progressive demands of rights versus backlash requests for the restoration of old social compacts), there is a conceptual risk of associating Marx-type contention with progressive demands and Polanyi-type contention with backward-looking resistance. Our survey shows that the type of demands should be considered an analytically separate issue, because both Marx and Polanyi-type protests may involve progressive as well as backlash demands.

Accordingly, the main motivation of this article is to survey the scholarly literature on the countermovement against the spread of capitalism and market by extending the application of Silver’s distinction to social groups other than the working class. Through this survey, we show how Silver’s classificatory scheme helps unpacking the heterogeneity of the impacts and experiences of globalization that lay beneath the

seemingly similar instances of contentious politics. Because the study of contentious politics against the spread of capitalism and market economy is a large field of study with contributions from diverse disciplines, we supplement our own knowledge of the literature with a systematic search of scholarly publications between 2000 and 2015. To that purpose, we ran additive keyword searches in Cambridge Sociological Abstracts for multiple terms including protest, resistance, mobilization, neoliberalism, capitalism, and market, which produced more than 3,000 publications relevant to our survey. In this survey, we rely on a careful selection of influential and illustrative studies from this large sample. We rely on this selection to illustrate the analytical value of the distinction between Marxian and Polanyian contention in understanding the contemporary countermovement against capitalism and market.

The Making of the New Working Class and Marxian Contention

Much as globalization has led to the disintegration of classes such as workers in state-owned enterprises, small farmers and shopkeepers, intensification of capitalism has created the structural conditions for the creation of new groups such as informal, flexible and migrant workers. We identify three such social groups that have been the focus of analysis for globalization scholars: female workers in global production networks, rural migrants, and automobile sector workers. What unites these groups of workers is that unlike the workforce of the previous era with a social contract with the state, they have limited set of social rights. In addition, these workers do not have wage or job security. Hence these groups are marginalized, despite their indispensable role in global production. Furthermore, the ability of these workers to form unions and mount collective protests is highly circumscribed by the state and global capital. Their voices demanding rights and protection from the labor market are heard through fragmented unrest, as in the case of migrant workers, or through transnational alliances and coalitions.

Global manufacturing firms have become a significant employer of women as the workforce in developing countries since the 1980s (Caraway 2007; Freeman 2000; Munck 2002). Female workers face stringent discipline and have few social rights (Lee 1998; Lynch 2007; Ngai 2005; Salzinger 2003). Their ability to form formal unions have

been limited because of the dictates of the multinational capital that have often colluded with the local states to prevent such formations. Despite such obstacles, these workers have been highly contentious and have engaged in covert and overt forms of resistance (Brooks 2007; Pangsapa 2007). They have made use of transnational consumer campaigns and advocacy networks to make their claims, effectively triggering a “boomerang” pattern of influence, where the employers and states are forced to respond (Collins 2009; Keck and Sikkink 1998). These transnational campaigns have a broader scope than conventional labor movements. They involve workers, social movements organizations, NGOs, and student organizations with networks that span national borders. As such, these campaigns have managed to form transnational coalitions leading to global justice movements (Chowdhry and Beeman 2001; Esbenschade 2009; Lipschutz 2004; Seidman 2007; Wells 2009).

Migrants who are forced out of rural areas by pro-market reforms and looking for work in urban centers constitute another social group made by the intensification of capitalist production relations across national borders. Rural to urban migration has been a persistent feature of intensification of capitalism in developing countries (Dudwick 2011). On this issue, the existing scholarship features a persistent focus on China, where such migration patterns reached the unprecedented magnitudes of 50 million people in the mid-1990s and more than 100 million in the 2000s (Gaetano and Jacka 2013; Perry and Selden 2003; Solinger 1999). These migrants constitute the majority of the global economy’s industrial workforce. Despite significant obstacles, they manage to demand better conditions of work and greater rights—demands that often result in violent disruptions and legal activism (Friedman and Lee 2010; Lee 2007). Another crucial case in the literature is India. Here, protests by migrant workers are largely atomized despite initiatives by trade unions to increase organizational capacity and associational power of migrant workers (Hensman 2013).

Protests and strike activity by one particular group of migrant workers in China, skilled workers in the automobile sector, are important in understanding both the potential and limitations of Marxian contention in the manufacturing sector. Automobile workers’ unrest has been the motor of broader political transformation and social change in authoritarian contexts such as South Korea, Brazil and South Africa

(Adler and Webster 1995; Humphrey 1993; Koo 2001; Seidman 1994). As Wright (2000) observes, the ability to stop the entire production process by halting production, which incurs significant losses, lies at the root of automobile workers' workplace bargaining power. Silver (2003) and Silver and Zhang (2009) argue that significant labor unrest and increased workplace bargaining power should be expected where large-scale automobile production emerges or relocates. Recent cases such as the Nanhai Honda workers' strike corroborate this argument (Butollo and Brink 2012; Friedman 2014, Zhang 2015). These strike activities point out that the bargaining power of workers in the manufacturing sector increases and labor militancy is on the rise in China. However, it should be observed that such militancy occurs, for the most part, at the firm level. Neoliberal governance, state oppression, and the dominant flexible production regime limit workers' ability to go beyond "atomized" resistance and insurgency at the firm level.

Polanyian Contention Against the Destructive Effects of the Market Economy

Polanyian contention arises from the diffusion of market exchange and the increasing preponderance of the market economy in the Global South. Our survey of the literature highlights three distinct clusters of protest activity in various parts of the world. First, we examine collective mobilization against land grabs and the appropriation of resources that are vital to the livelihood of local communities and various social groups such as peasants. Second, we survey political contention by unemployed workers, shopkeepers, and urban poor who are directly affected by market reforms such as privatization, austerity measures, and structural adjustment programs. Third, we show how food riots—a form of protest that is often associated with pre-modern economies—make a forceful comeback as the integration of global food markets jeopardizes food security for various local communities and social groups. For each one of these clusters, we show how globalization, market reforms, and the diffusion of market exchange *unmake* existing social groups, either by dissolving their existing means of livelihood or by endangering access to common resources vital to their livelihood.

The most common form of contentious politics in the Global South against the spread of market economy is protests against natural resource appropriation, land grabs, and environmental damage. The defining feature of these instances of contentious politics is the penetration of the market economy into social, cultural, and political relations that shape the use of natural resources. The increasing preponderance of the market economy implies either the encroachment of natural resources or environmental damage that limit the use of these very resources. The cases around the world include resistance against mining and oil exploration by MNCs (Alier 2000; Byambajav 2015; Coleman 2013; Doyle 2002; Holden and Jacobson 2008; Konak 2008; Özen and Özen 2009; Sanabria 2000), land grabs (Almeida and Sanchez 2000; Bernstein 2005; Borras and Franco 2013; Levien 2012; Margulis, McKeon and Borras 2013; McMichael 2008; Moyo and Yeros 2005; Nielsen and Nilsen 2015; Petras 2008; Sarkar and Chowdhury 2009; So 2007; Vergara-Camus 2009; Walker 2006; Welch 2006), large dams (Osman 2000; Sharma 2009), agribusiness practices (Caceres 2015; Edelman 1999; Harvey 2001), privatization of resources such as water (Spronk 2007), and commercial projects such as theme parks (Bapat 2000; Davis and Rosan 2004). Together, the case studies and meta-studies we cover in our survey indicate an astonishing geographical distribution, covering almost every part of the Global South. Thus, we find struggles against mining in Mongolia (Byambajav 2015), resistance against agro-chemical and pharmaceutical companies in Mexico (Harvey 2001), collective mobilization against large dams in India (Osman 2000), and protests against the encroachment of land in Africa (Bernstein 2005; Moyo 2011). These cases are textbook examples of what Polanyi calls the commodity fiction (2001, pp. 71–72), where resources, objects, and social relations get integrated into the market economy without considering the impact of such commodification for the social fabric. The fictitious commodities created in this rapid process of social transformation take a particularly perilous character when they are essential to the sustenance and social reproduction of various communities and social groups. Land grabs, where the natural resource in question is often the most important determinant of subsistence and an integral element of a community's lifestyle, constitute poignant examples of the market economy's perils.

The previous cluster of Polanyi-type contentious politics involves resistance against the spread of the market economy originating from how the commodity fiction extends to natural resources vital to livelihood. As opposed to such instances of contentious politics, collective mobilization by unemployed workers, urban poor in the informal economy, and shopkeepers stems from the destruction of existing social compacts by the implementation of structural adjustment programs, austerity measures, and neoliberal reforms. Thus, we find workers losing employment and work security through the imposition of market-oriented labor contract in China (Friedman 2013; Lee 2002), privatizations and drastic cutbacks of benefits in Latin America (Almeida 2007; Petras 2002; Vilas 2006), structural adjustment programs in Egypt (Paczynska 2006), and pro-market reforms in Bangladesh (Nuruzzaman 2006). Furthermore, this process of *unmaking* is not limited to working classes. For instance, Gemici (2013) shows how an IMF-backed structural adjustment program eliminated the traditional support of the state for shopkeepers in Turkey. Such policies advance sub-contracting and informalization of work. Hence, these policies have a direct role in creating the urban poor strata in the informal economy. Urban poor are partially integrated into capitalist production system, but they depend on the market economy for their basic material needs. Although market-oriented reforms have a direct negative impact on the organizational capacity of unemployed workers, shopkeepers, and urban poor, the cases we examine show that successful collective mobilization against market reforms occurs quite regularly. Moreover, these instances of contentious politics rely on a broad coalition of social groups such as the ones observed in Argentina after the collapse of neoliberal reforms in 2001 (Vilas 2006).

Food riots illustrate another peril of the market economy that Polanyi discusses in great detail, the contradictions between the social fabric at a particular locality and the global markets (2001). As Polanyi argues, the integration of different local markets into one big market exposes communities and social groups to price fluctuations that are divorced from the requirements of social reproduction in a local context (2001). The recent wave of food riots should be examined in the light of this Polanyian theoretical lens. The integration of the global food supply chain in recent decades creates conditions similar to the ones that lay at the origins of classical food riots (Stovall and Friedlander

1995; Taylor 1996; Thompson 1971, 1991). While the global food production is sufficient for global consumption, social groups in different parts of the world are subject to food scarcity and prices that are too high compared to their incomes (Bello and Baviera 2009; Magdoff and Tokar 2009; Patel and McMichael 2009). This profound contradiction took a particularly acute character in the aftermath of the 2007–08 financial meltdown; as a result, there were protests against high food prices in more than thirty countries across the world (Bush 2010; Schneider 2008). In addition to sporadic food riots, the perils brought by the integration of global food markets catalyze movements that focus on food sovereignty and the localization of food systems (Ayres and Bosia 2011; Boyer 2010).

A False Dichotomy: Progressive versus Backward-Looking Contentious Politics

While the distinction between Marxian and Polanyian contention illuminates the heterogeneous forms of resistance against the spread of capitalism and markets, it also evokes a contrast between progressive and backward-looking contentious politics. The dichotomy between forward-looking collective action and backlash protests rarely derives from an explicit theoretical articulation. Rather, it is a corollary of the assumptions implicit in the classification scheme. Although Silver's own work does not rely on such a problematic dichotomy, the image of backward-looking protests is common in the scholarly literature, particularly in studies that use the notion of moral economy (Arnold 2001; Booth 1994; Genovese 1973; Kurtz 2000; Stovall and Friedlander 1995; Thompson 1971, 1991). The central features of backward-looking protest is locality, low degree of staying power, and the absence of autonomous set of demands and collective mobilization objectives, as Tilly shows in his historical work on old and new repertoires of contentious politics (Tilly 1982, 1983, 1995b). While the characterization of Polanyian contention as backward-looking has merits in the study of protests in pre-capitalist agrarian economies (Scott 1976, 2000), it is increasingly anachronistic in a world where capitalism and market have extensive reach.

The case of emergent working classes in China provide a poignant example to the problem at hand. As Silver and Zhang argue (2009), the deepening commodification of

labor in China in the last three decades has created the structural conditions conducive to significant increases in labor's bargaining power. Despite major barriers to collective mobilization, such commodification of labor is at the root of vast labor unrest in China. Yet, various scholars make a compelling case regarding the fragmented, cellular, and apolitical nature of labor unrest in China (Burawoy 2010; Friedman and Lee 2010; Lee 2007). Silver and Zhang (2009, pp. 175–76) suggest that “it is a mistake to underestimate the potential impact” of labor unrest in China, even if it remains fragmented and seemingly apolitical. Following the work of Piven and Cloward (1984; 1979, 2005), these authors contend that seemingly apolitical and spontaneous unrest can lead to political change simply because this type of contentious politics mounts an effective threat to the established political order. As students of localized protests in the Global South, which are contentious politics instances with scarce organizational resources, we fully agree. However, it should be observed that such disruptions from below share many characteristics with the old repertoires of pre-capitalist societies (Calhoun 1982; Hobsbawm 1952, 1965; Prothero 1979; Rudé 1981; Tilly 1995a). Furthermore, as Burawoy (2010) remarks, these instances of unrest are limited precisely because they face major barriers to accumulating associational power and mounting autonomous demands.

Contemporary struggles in the Global South for environmental protection illustrate the other side of the problem. These contentious politics instances have their organizational bases in social groups unmade by globalization; often, peasants attached to a particular locality play significant roles in such collective action (Byambajav 2015; Caceres 2015; Konak 2008; Özen and Özen 2009). Yet, as Longhofer and Schofer (2010) show in a major cross-national study, these struggles with parochial bases interact in significant ways with global norms, transnational knowledge flows, organizational models, and world polity. As a result, what begins as local resistances against the market economy can become the nucleus for movements with considerable staying power and autonomous demands, as cases such as the Bergama struggle in Turkey and *La Vía Campesina* illustrate (Desmarais 2008; Özen and Özen 2009).

The above findings are not entirely surprising in a world where political repression and flexible production regimes fragment Marxian contention, and where global norms

and culture exercise strong effects on Polanyian contention. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that Marxian contention empowered by increasing bargaining power will revolve around demands that reach beyond the pressing issues of a particular workplace. Furthermore, there are many instances of Polanyian contention that reach beyond particular localities and that rely on autonomous set of goals and objectives. Under such conditions, the appropriate research strategy is to examine both the geographical reach and the demands of Marxian and Polanyian contention as analytically separate issues.

Conclusion

Globalization generates a heterogeneity of impacts and experiences, evident even among seemingly identical instances of contention against it. Our survey of the voluminous literature on the topic shows that Silver's distinction between Marxian and Polanyian contention has considerable value in understanding the heterogeneous patterns of contention in the Global South. In particular, this distinction focuses analytical attention on how globalization simultaneously makes and unmakes social groups in the Global South. As Marx argues, capitalism is a radically transformative process that alters the social structure of societies by incorporating social groups to the capitalist production process while upending the place of some others (Marx 1976, 2000; Sweezy 1962). As Polanyi argues, this process develops in tandem with the rise of the market economy (2001). While the diffusion of capitalism both makes and unmakes working classes, it is not the only social process that does so. The spread of the market economy also plays a role in the processes of creating and destroying social groups. Social classes and groups made and unmade by the diffusion of capitalism and market economy are not passive actors; they themselves shape globalization processes through collective mobilization. In this article, we survey works by a wide variety of scholars on how these instances of contentious politics take two forms: contention against the commodification of labor and against the preponderance of market exchange.

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