

# Social Class and Social Movements

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## Introduction

Social class has traditionally been one of the fundamental bases for social mobilization. Whether it was slaves revolting against their masters, peasants rising up against their lords, or workers battling capitalists, class hierarchies have often provided both the reason for protesting, as well as the group identities around which people mobilized.

Likewise, for scholars interested in understanding processes of social change, class concepts have provided the crucial analytical building blocks for understanding social conflict and change. This was certainly the case for the founders of sociology, such as Marx, Weber, and Du Bois, even Durkheim, and this persisted for much of the twentieth century.

This seemed to change in the latter part of the twentieth century. In industrialized countries, movements emerged around seemingly non-class issues, including peace, environmental destruction, and oppression based on race, gender, sexual identity, physical ability, and more. In the developing world, decolonization was the order of the day, making race and nation the key dividing lines.

Observing these changes, some argued that postwar economic growth had made class divisions less socially and politically relevant (Bell 1973; Clark and Lipset 1991; Nisbet 1959). Instead, they argued, individuals organized to address “post-materialist” concerns, based on lifestyle and identity-based issues (Inglehart and Rabier 1986).

Around the same time as class came under scrutiny, other groups of researchers sought to develop more sociological understandings of social mobilization in the “post-material” world. Dissatisfied with existing theories that viewed protest as a form of deviance, they sought instead to understand it as a form of politics by other means (Oberschall 1973). They analyzed social mobilization by looking at actors’

strategic interests, the structural environment surrounding them, their access to resources, and their ability to define issues and agendas, as opposed to delving into psychology (Benford and Snow 2000; McAdam 1982; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tarrow 1994). To the extent that they continued to focus on psychological aspects of mobilization, it was to understand the role of emotions and collective identities in fostering and sustaining social movements (della Porta and Diani 2006; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2009; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Rather than being a symptom of social pathology, social movements were now understood as a source of meaning and social cohesion, as well as a mechanism for social change.

This analytical shift entailed a disciplinary shift from the sociology of deviance toward political sociology. Social movement theory sought to carve out a distinctive niche for itself within political sociology, focused on the “contentious politics” of protest, demands, and disruption, rather than the “normal politics” of legislation, negotiation, and administration.

Reinterpreting social mobilization as contentious action informed by strategy, structure, resources, and meaning-making allowed social movement theory to develop sophisticated analytical tools to understand why and under what conditions movements do (or do not) emerge, why and how they win or lose (and how wins and losses are defined), why and under what conditions people do (or do not) resort to contentious politics to express grievances, and other core questions of social mobilization.

In line with scholarship that was rethinking the relevance of social class more generally, this new sociology of social movements also saw a shift in the role of class as a basis for grievances and social mobilization, as well as the type of class most likely to engage in contentious politics. Whereas the “old social movements,” such as labor unions and socialist parties largely organized around economic issues and had their base in the working class, the “new social movements” (NSMs) being studied focused on post-materialist concerns of individual autonomy, and were often rooted in a “new middle class” of “social and cultural specialists.” They argued that the political class divide had shifted: rather than the traditional opposition between the working class and the bourgeoisie, social conflict now cut across the new middle class, opposing the social-cultural professionals to the technocrats-managers (Buechler 1995; Kriesi 1989; Kriesi et al. 1995). Meanwhile, the study of the modern, more bureaucratized incarnations of “old social movements” was largely left to scholars of “normal politics” and separate groups of labor sociologists.

However, the division between “old” and “new” social movements has not gone unchallenged. Some pointed out that the issues around which “old” and “new” social movements organized were more similar than NSM theorists claimed (Calhoun 1993). Others challenged the old/new counter-position in the Global North, arguing that the working class – including the “precariat” – remains a key actor in social mobilization, and economic grievances remain key drivers of social protest, even in a supposedly post-material age (della Porta 2015). Corroborating this, we present data showing that protest over class grievances, in the form of strikes, was a major part of overall social protest at the time that NSM theories developed. Meanwhile, drawing from movements around the world, scholars have shown that class divisions remained a powerful source of grievances and base for mobilizing identities,

even as they intertwine with gender, nation, race, and other cleavages (Chun 2009; della Porta 2015; Eggert and Guigni 2012). The recent surge in mobilization around economic issues in the twenty-first century, including Occupy movements, austerity protests, strikes, and the growth of worker centers and labor NGOs, appears to be bringing class conflict and economic grievances back into the analytical spotlight. While workers' organizations dominate these class movements, scholars also note that, at times, elites also lead movements around their class interests (Martin 2013).

This chapter explores the complex relationship between social class and social mobilization. Starting with a historical account of how the two concepts have been intertwined, we then discuss how the concepts changed as theories of social mobilization became more systematized. We then examine more recent shifts in understanding the relation between social class and social mobilization, and conclude with an assessment of key questions and unresolved debates around the study of social class and social movements.

### **Class Grievances and Class Identities**

If Marx and Engels' (1969) polemical assertion that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" was overblown, it was not so by much. Human settlement around agricultural production allowed for surplus accumulation, which in turn led to conflicts over the distribution of that surplus. As societies became more complex, these conflicts become more organized (Morehart and de Lucia 2015; Weber 2013). In this, class divisions have long been key drivers of social conflict and social mobilization. This has happened on two levels. Hierarchies and inequalities based on class divisions have provided both a basis for grievances, as well as the basis for collective identities, around which people have mobilized for social change.

As a basis for grievances, it is important to recognize that although class divisions have a core economic component, they have not been limited to economic relations. Rather, they have intersected with and been reinforced by other systems of hierarchy and division. For example, agrarian slave societies created economic divisions between exploited, surplus-producing slaves and an exploiting, non-productive ruling class. But the economic division was reinforced by various traditions, beliefs, and rituals that justified the unequal class relation between slave and master/citizen. Similarly, under feudalism, peasants generated surpluses for their lords, creating a relation of economic exploitation, but this economic class division was buttressed by political hierarchies and religious ideas, which justified the existing social hierarchy (Anderson 1974; Mann 1986).

A key aspect of the transition from feudalism to capitalism involved challenging the ideologies justifying existing social class hierarchies. Class conflicts in this period were also anti-aristocratic and/or anti-clerical, often favoring a new idea of "the nation" (Mann 1993). The formal legal, political, and social inequalities of feudalism were replaced by formal legal, political, and social equality for all citizens of democratic nation-states under capitalism (Marshall and Bottomore 1992; Marx and Engels 1969; Wood 2002). What remained, albeit in radically different form, were unequal economic relations of exploitation, combined with informal but no

less real social inequalities based on race, gender, language, ethnicity, region, and more, along with continued formal inequalities based on criteria such as citizenship. The contradiction between formal legal and political equality and economic exploitation and inequality generated conflicts that sparked titanic social mobilizations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hobsbawm 1989; Mann 1993). The political problem was compounded by the social and economic problem, simply referred to as “the labor problem,” of coercing and convincing former peasants, artisans, apprentices, and small merchants to accept the discipline and authority of the industrial workplace (Bendix 1974; Braverman 1998). Simultaneously, the rise of democracy and capitalism in Europe was accompanied by the intensification of colonialism and slavery in the Americas, Africa, and much of Asia, creating social divisions that continue to generate grievances and social mobilization to this day (Cooper 2009; Hobsbawm 1989; Migdal 1974).

The discussion thus far has only addressed how class divisions have provided a material basis for grievances. But as social movement theory shows, grievances alone are insufficient for social mobilization (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Grievances must be defined, and visions of how those grievances might be addressed must be articulated for social mobilization to happen (Piven and Cloward 1977). Key to this process is the formation of frames and collective identities. These define the issues and actors involved and shape the arena of conflict (Benford and Snow 2000; Eidlin 2014; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Here again, class identities have historically served as a powerful mobilizing force. While we know very little as to their motivations and organizing tactics, we do know that not all slaves in Antiquity passively accepted their lot. Some organized slave armies to revolt against their masters, and worries about such revolts preoccupied ruling elites (Peterson 2013; Urbainczyk 2008). Similarly, feudal historical records are full of references to rebellions by peasants, artisans, laborers, small merchants, and others (Cohn 2009; Hilton 2004). Central to their organizing were what we would now recognize as class identities, which they defined both solidaristically, as exploited groups, and oppositionally, against their landlords and masters.

As capitalism revolutionized production and upended social relations, it also gave birth to new identities and axes of conflict. Layers of feudal-era merchants, masters, landlords, and artisans became the manufacturing and financial bourgeoisie under capitalism, while groups of former peasants, merchants, and artisans found common identities as part of a “working class” based on their common experiences of workplace exploitation. But this was in no way an automatic process. As discussed below, the “problem of class formation” has remained a thorny issue of debate.

### **Theorizing Class and Social Change**

While class has long served as a basis for social mobilization, the relation between the two has been a point of scholarly contention. The founders of sociology all understood class as a central concept for analyzing social organization. This was clearest for Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1969), although Weber’s theory also included a narrower conception of class as determined by “market position,” which was mediated by status distinctions based on social hierarchies, as well

as distinctions of rank within political orders (Weber 1978). Du Bois was deeply influenced by Marx, which led him to focus on the class dimensions of US racial and political conflict (Du Bois 1896, 1935). Even Durkheim, generally not considered a theorist of class, analyzed how work-based groups structure social relations (Durkheim 1984).

The founders differed, however, in how they conceptualized the role that class played in social organization. Marx, and later Du Bois, focused on the conflictual relationship between exploiting and exploited classes, theorizing that this conflict served as a core driver of social transformation. For his part, Weber studied the relationships of domination that resulted from different distributions of power based on market position, social honor, and political rank, but did not offer an account as to why or how those distributions might change. Against Marx's conflictual view of class, Durkheim saw occupation-based "corporate groups" as key mechanisms for ensuring social cohesion in increasingly complex societies.

It was primarily Marx, then, who sketched the initial outlines of a theory relating social class and social change. He identified the working class as the key revolutionary subject, the collective actor which, by virtue of its structural position within capitalist production, was both best equipped to bring about the change necessary for a more equitable society and stood to gain the most from such a transformation.

A central concern for Marx was the process that led to the formation of new classes as social actors. He theorized that the organization of economic production created not only relations of exploitation, but social bonds among groups of individuals that gave rise to classes in an objective sense. He called this class "in itself." But he recognized that the existence of classes in this objective sense did not guarantee that classes in a subjective sense – class "for itself" – would follow. However, he did not specify the conditions under which class "for itself" could emerge out of class "in itself" (Marx 1973).

It was not clear at the time just how problematic this translation between class position and class identity was. Amidst the social ferment of the nineteenth century, it appeared that members of the working class would naturally recognize their common bond and organize as a class to fight their capitalist enemy. Across Europe and North America, millions of workers united to form trade unions, political parties, and other mutual associations based on a common class identity (Hobsbawm 1989; Kautsky 1910).

However, against nineteenth-century socialists' predictions of capitalism's impending demise, capitalism proved quite resilient. And against theories that workers would naturally bond with each other based on a common working-class identity, workers instead often divided along competing national, religious, craft, or racial lines. By the early twentieth century, the disjuncture between the objective and subjective dimensions of class was obvious: class unity was not automatic, nor was its translation into the political sphere. The question of how to create a unified and mobilized class subject – what became known as the "problem of class formation" – became a central problem for Marxism (Bernstein 1911; Gramsci 1972, 1978; Kautsky 1910; Lenin 1961; Luxemburg 1971; Michels 1915; Sorel 1999).

Out of these early twentieth-century debates emerged some of the key questions at the heart of continued attempts to understand the relation between social class,

collective identity, and social mobilization. Even if analysts agreed that the working class was the key revolutionary subject – itself a major point of contention – what exactly did it mean to be part of something called “the working class”? How and why did people come to identify as members of such a group?

The answer for some was ideas and organization. Ideas could provide an interpretive framework linking material conditions and collective identity, and organization could translate ideas into action. This led these theorists to focus on the central role of parties and intellectuals in mobilizing political identities, particularly those based on class (Gramsci 1978; Lenin 1961).

### **From Classes to Masses**

The crises and conflicts of the early twentieth century culminated in the carnage of World War II. In its aftermath, as Europe and North America transitioned to a postwar economy, class relations began to shift as well. In Western Europe and North America, militant labor unions and socialist parties were replaced by institutionalized and officially recognized bureaucratic organizations, who often engaged in highly formalized “corporatist” bargaining among “peak associations” of labor and employer federations (Hall and Soskice 2001; Schmitter 1974). Many spoke of a supposed “settlement” between labor and capital, wherein each side acknowledged its counterpart’s legitimacy, and engaged in regulated, carefully circumscribed collective bargaining (Nissen 1990; Thelen 1994). In Eastern Europe, unions and parties were either crushed or incorporated into bureaucratic Stalinist states (Windmuller 1971).

Around the world, the political and military constraints of the Cold War profoundly shaped relations between parties, unions, and states, and limited the range of acceptable political discourse. Decolonization movements exploded across the Third World. Many of these explicitly organized along class lines, based on Marxist understandings of exploitation. These movements were caught up in the geopolitical struggle between the USA and the USSR over “spheres of influence” (Westad 2005). In “the West,” class-based mobilization was inextricably linked to the specter of Communism, leading to intra-class conflict in many countries between socialists and communists and their affiliated parties and labor unions over questions of loyalty and militancy. In “the East,” class mobilization became integrated into state ideology, stifling rank-and-file activity. These conflicts constrained union militancy and created pressure for unions to become “responsible” social bargaining partners – although some steadfastly resisted these pressures. As a result, with some notable exceptions, few major parties or labor unions in the West or East resembled anything close to contentious social movement organizations (Cherny, Issel, and Taylor 2004; Kaldor 1990; Sturmthal 1983).

This organizational shift, driven in part by unprecedented postwar economic growth, led some to contend that class was no longer as politically relevant as it once was (Dahrendorf 1959; Nisbet 1959). Class divisions would be managed in the workplace through a system of “industrial pluralism,” while political demands would be channeled into a “democratic class struggle” between competing parties (Kerr et al. 1960; Lipset 1963).<sup>1</sup>

As economic growth and well-managed bureaucracies softened class divisions and reduced their political relevance, these theorists argued, class differences were being replaced by more individualized differences based on consumption and lifestyle choices (Bell 1960; Inglehart and Rabier 1986; Riesman, Denney, and Glazer 1950).

Although class conflict was largely contained according to these theorists, they recognized that other social conflicts remained. Some worried that industrial pluralism, while weakening class divisions, risked creating a more alienated, atomized “mass society,” increasingly disconnected from bureaucratic elites, be they in business, labor, politics, or the military (Marcuse 2002; Mills 1959). Even those who challenged such dire assessments contended that tendencies towards social “massification” and alienation posed significant challenges to pluralist democracy (Kornhauser 1959).

Operating within such a framework, there was little room for considering social mobilization based on class, or any other identity for that matter, as a *political* phenomenon. Pluralism and bureaucracy supposedly allowed for the expression and processing of political demands through the appropriate channels. Any protest or mobilization outside that framework could only be understood either as a symptom of social strain or systemic disequilibrium. It was more a problem of social psychology than of politics (Gurr 1970; Smelser 2011).

This framework left social analysts ill-equipped to explain the social upheavals that convulsed much of Europe and North America in the 1960s. The mass movements for civil rights, against military intervention and nuclear weapons, and more that challenged the political, social, and economic status quo did not fit existing categories of social protest. The protesters clearly felt that the “appropriate channels” for handling political grievances were insufficient, but they could not be dismissed as social deviants. Moreover, counter to what some theories of collective behavior held, the participants were not merely engaged in forms of collective therapy. Rather, they were making demands on – and changing – the political system (see McAdam 1982, for a critique).

### **Social Movement Theory and the Retreat from Class**

It is in this context that contemporary social movement theory began to emerge. Rather than understand social mobilization as a psychological problem, some saw it as an extension of “normal” politics (Oberschall 1973; von Eschen, Pinard, and Kirk 1971). From this initial insight came the concepts that now form the core of social movement theory: political process, resource mobilization, framing, and collective identity (Benford and Snow 2000; McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Without delving into the theories, what is crucial to understand is the historical and intellectual context in which they took shape. Although social movement theory is meant to be abstract and generalizable, it is also very much the product of a particular time and place: the United States and parts of Western Europe in the late 1970s and 1980s. The pioneers of social movement theory were working in the aftermath of the largest social upheaval of their lifetimes: the movements of the 1960s.

Additionally, the discipline of sociology itself was changing. A new generation of scholars shaped by, and often active in, the movements of the 1960s swelled the ranks of sociology graduate programs in the 1970s, injecting the discipline with a leftward political bent and a suspicion of traditional institutions of power (Buechler 2011; McAdam 2008). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the key early pieces in the social movements literature examined the movements in which this new generation of sociologists had been active (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McAdam 1982, 1988, 1995; Morris 1984).

This context shaped not only the empirical content, but the theoretical conception of what constituted a social movement. And that conception was one that largely excluded class-based movements. For the 1960s New Left, particularly in the USA, there was a stark divide between the social movements in which they were active and traditional vehicles of class-based mobilization. Purged of their left wing and fully incorporated into the Cold War liberal consensus, the once-contentious unions of the pre-war era now seemed like stodgy, bureaucratic behemoths, more tied into the power structure against which the New Left was rebelling than part of their movement (Cherny et al. 2004; Eidlin 2018; Gitlin 1987). While some unions supported aspects of the civil rights movement (Honey 2007; Jones 2013), the New Left's experience of "Big Labor" was framed much more by pro-war hawk and AFL-CIO President George Meany, or the overhyped but symbolically important "hard hats" attacking antiwar protesters (Lewis 2013).

As such, labor and the working class were largely left out of the empirical scope of social movement scholarship. Just as New Leftists distinguished themselves from the class-based politics of the "Old Left," so too did social movement scholars distinguish between "old" and "new" social movements. In this typology, "old" movements were those, like unions, based in the working class and organized around economic issues, while "new" movements were those based among strata of the "new middle class," and organized around "post-materialist" issues of identity, environment, and individual rights (Buechler 1995; Kriesi 1989; Offe 1985).

This empirical separation between labor and social movement studies was occurring at the same time as social theorists were hypothesizing about the "death of class" as a socially and politically relevant category (Bell 1973; Clark, Lipset, and Rempel 1993; Gorz 1982; Pakulski and Waters 1996). Frustration with what were perceived as overly reductionist class-based models of social action led to academic "turns" towards exploring the roles of culture and institutions in creating meaning and guiding individual and group behavior (Bonnell and Hunt 1999; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). While some continued to argue for the relevance of class (Evans 2000; Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1993; Wright 1997), the general trend in social science was away from class. Social movement theory was not immune to this trend, as discussion of class and capitalism faded from view (Hetland and Goodwin 2012).

### **Counting Contention: From Protests to Strikes**

Despite this academic turn, in practice, workers and workers' organizations continued to inform social mobilization. We present two figures to better understand



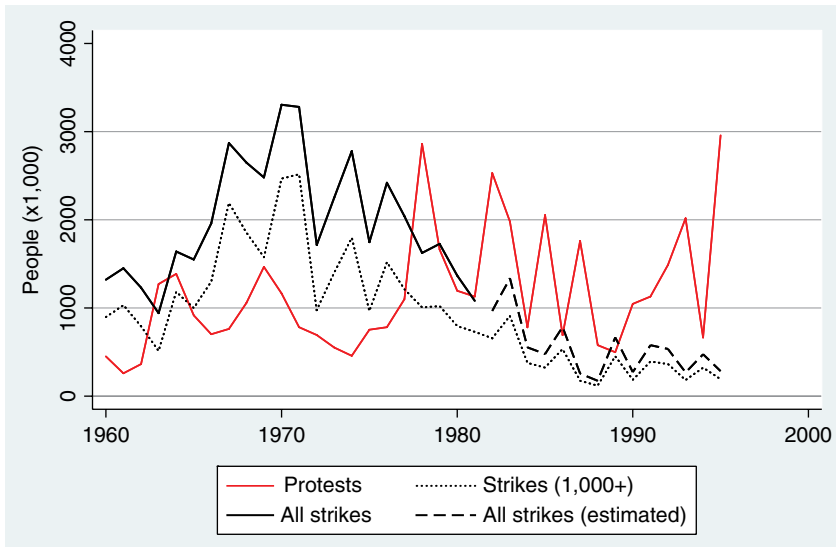


Figure 29.1 Numbers of people involved in protests and strikes, 1960–1995.

“old” and “new” social movements in the United States at the time that social movement theory was developing.

Figure 29.1 compares the participation levels of people involved with strikes and “protests,” which include all forms of public collective action except for strikes. This approach builds on Biggs (2015), who finds that strikes account for a large portion of contentious activity in Great Britain. Protest data comes from the *Dynamics of Collective Action* dataset, which uses newspaper accounts to report the number of protest events and participants from 1960 to 1995.<sup>2</sup>

Protest events exclude strikes, but do include events that are union-led and focus on work issues, such as protesting layoffs.<sup>3</sup> Strike data comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), which records workers involved in large strikes and lockouts, classified as over 1000 people lasting over 8 hours. Prior to 1981, the BLS also reported smaller strikes. Including these strikes increases the average yearly strike size by 32%. We approximate participation after 1981 by adding 32% to the large strike measure.

Figure 29.1 shows that for most of the 1960s and 1970s, strikes accounted for more participation than all other protests combined. In 1971, for instance, over 3 million workers went on strike – roughly triple the amount of people who participated in other forms of protests. By the 1980s, a hostile political and legal climate, combined with union decline, had eroded strike participation both in the USA and Europe (Biggs 2015; Richards 2013).

Class mobilization, however, is not limited to strikes. Workers’ organizations politicize members, develop leaders, and build cross-movement coalitions, which spills over into broader movement activism, including activism considered to be in the realm of new movements (Kerrissey and Schofer 2013; Terriquez 2011; Vachon and Brecher 2016).

To illustrate union members’ engagement in “other” protest activities, we use the *Roper Social and Political Trends Data*. This survey asks nearly 6,000 people whether

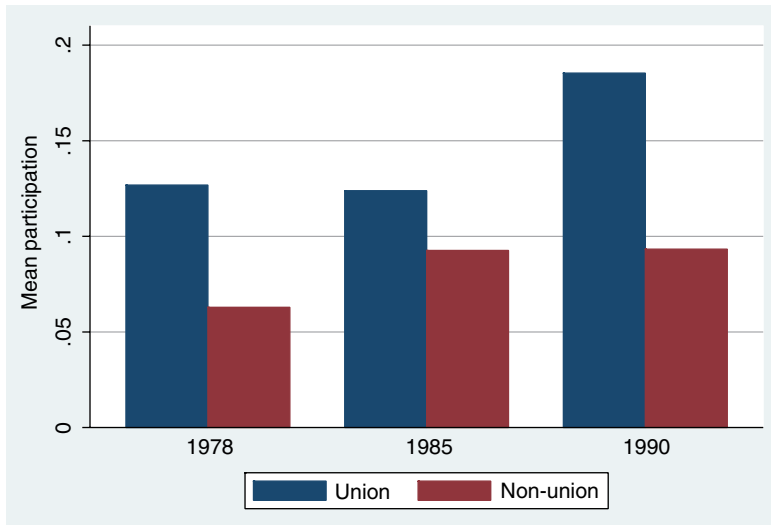


Figure 29.2 Participation in union and non-union protests.

they had participated in a “protest march or sit-in,” excluding strikes. Figure 29.2 shows that union members were far more likely to have participated than non-union members.

We can draw two lessons from these figures. First, strikes accounted for a major portion of contentious activity in the late twentieth century in the USA. The strike data suggest that class continued to generate social mobilization, even at the height of the “new” social movements. When strikes are included as a form of contentious politics, it becomes clear that class remained a primary axis of contention. Second, drawing from Figure 29.2, we observe that union members were more likely than average to protest in non-strike marches and sit-ins. Social movement scholars have often focused on the mobilization of the “new middle class” and post-materialist concerns (Kriesi 1989). These figures, however, suggest that class mobilization (in the form of strikes) and protest by working-class actors (in the form of union members) were also major drivers of contentious activity and worthy of scholarly attention.

### The “Death of Class” and Labor Movement Scholarship

In spite of their powerful mobilizing role, by the end of the twentieth century, unions were in crisis, particularly in industrialized nations, which experienced plummeting strike rates and union density (Richards 2013). To some, these trends reaffirmed the notion that class no longer served as an important catalyst. As the twentieth century came to a close, however, the “death of class” thesis seemed premature. Moves within the US labor movement suggested possible revitalization: reform candidate John Sweeney won the AFL-CIO presidency in 1995 and began focusing on organizing; for the first time, the AFL-CIO took a public stance against a war; and new campaigns including janitors, students against sweatshops, and worker centers redefined

the labor movement. Labor scholars began to discuss the (re-)emergence of what some called “social movement” unionism, which stood in contrast to the “business” unionism of the mid- and late-twentieth century (Fraser and Freeman 1997; Milkman and Voss 2004).

In this context, scholars increasingly turned their attention to class-based movements. For instance, in 2000, US labor sociologists formed the “Labor and Labor Movements” section of the American Sociological Association (ASA). With their own specialty journals and ASA section, labor scholarship developed, largely in parallel to social movement scholarship. Its primary questions have focused on the causes and consequences of union growth and decline, as well as *how* workers have organized collectively in different political, economic, and national contexts around the world (e.g. Agarwala 2013; Anner 2011; Chun 2009; McCallum 2013; Silver 2003; Zhang 2014).

Underlying this scholarship is the argument that class-based continues to be an empirically and theoretically important axis of social mobilization. It challenges the “death of class” thesis in two ways. First, scholars contend that class movements continue to be a primary source of social mobilization, but not always in the same place and form (Evans 2010; Silver 2003). Classes are continuously “made, unmade, and remade” (Silver 2013). This makes it important to analyze class movements with a global and long-term perspective, and to focus not only on traditional labor unions (Agarwala 2013; Milkman and Ott 2014).

Second, others note that the decline in union density in many industrialized nations is not from lack of interest. Rather, workers’ movements have been at the losing end of decades-long struggles between capital and labor, which have shaped unions’ strength, tactics, and politics (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 2002; Dixon 2010; Dixon and Martin 2012; Fantasia and Stepan-Norris 2004). This decline in unions has spurred a large literature that examines macro outcomes of workers’ movements, including the distribution of resources, politics, and working conditions (Brady 2009; Harris and Scully 2015; Jacobs and Myers 2014; Kerrissey 2015; Kerrissey and Schuhrke 2016; Kristal 2010; Rosenfeld 2014; Western and Rosenfeld 2011).

Some of these movements for class interests involve mobilization led by elites. Demonstrating that class movements erupt not only from workers and their organizations, Martin (2013) reminds us that “rich people’s movements” aim to shape policies to consolidate wealth at the top. Others trace the formation of business associations and how they collectively work to maintain power (e.g. Griffin, Wallace, and Rubin 1986).

In recent years, there has been a sharp uptick in mobilization over class grievances, including anti-austerity protests, occupy movements, struggles to increase minimum wages, and high-profile strikes. While traditional unions have played a role in these struggles, other organizational forms have often led these movements, including worker centers, labor NGOs, and left political parties. For example, in the USA, there has been an explosive rise of community-based worker centers, from only a handful in the 1990s to hundreds today (Fine 2006; Milkman and Ott 2014). These worker centers have focused on workers who have been left largely unorganized by unions – immigrants and precarious workers – and use strategies to leverage power that do not focus on collective bargaining. This uptick

in labor activity has drawn in a new generation of scholars, many of whom draw on intersectional understandings of oppression, especially how worker exploitation is deeply intertwined with race, gender, sexual identity, and nationality.

### **Bridging Labor Scholarship and Social Movement Theory**

Although labor and social movement scholarship developed largely in their own academic silos, this separation is beginning to break down. Increasingly, social movement scholars are conceptualizing labor struggles as part of the social movement field. For instance, Amenta and colleagues (2009) analyzed newspaper coverage of all social movements over the twentieth century, including labor struggles. Their findings underscore the prominent role of working-class movements: labor struggles account for over a third of all articles – far more than any other social movement.

At the same time, the recent surge in class movements – from Occupy to anti-austerity protests – has attracted the attention of social movement scholars. della Porta (2015) argues that “mainstream” social movement studies do not adequately explain these recent protest waves, which are dominated by the “losers” of globalization. She calls for bringing “capitalism back into protest analysis” and for a conceptualization of class cleavage and protest that includes the precariat – the unemployed, the underemployed, and those who have lost social and civil rights.

Scholars of class movements are also increasingly drawing on theories developed in the social movement literature. Applying social movement theories to class movements has tested and expanded the scope of social movement theories, while deepening our understanding of class movements (Almeida 2008; Ganz 2000). This synthesis has been particularly fruitful in analyses of two realms: counter-movements and political structures.

Social movement scholars insist that movements cannot be understood without analyzing movement opposition and threat. Unions’ weak position in the contemporary era offers an important venue for analyzing such dynamics. A small but vibrant scholarship explores how opposition and threat shape legislation, union strategy, and new membership (Dixon 2010; Martin and Dixon 2010).

Scholars of class movements, particularly in the Global South, have also used theories of political opportunities both to explain labor movement outcomes and to expand the empirical and theoretical scope of social movement theory. Examining less democratic contexts, this scholarship informs key social movement theories that were developed by analyzing movements of the comparatively more democratic Global North. Almeida (2008), for instance, examines the relationship between authoritarian regimes and protest in El Salvador. He finds when authoritarian regimes allow for some liberalization, oppositional groups (such as unions) are better able to organize. When the state subsequently increases repression, these groups radicalize and form the basis of oppositional movements. Similarly, Anner’s (2011) comparative study of Central and South America traces how political conditions shape unions’ strategies. In addition, a series of case studies examine how class mobilization shapes political structures, particularly democratization, decolonization, and policies of redistribution (Buhlungu and Tshoedi 2013; Collier and Mahoney 1997; Huber and Stevens 2012; Kraus 2007).

In its current form, however, social movement theory is unable to fully capture the dynamics of working-class movements. Social movement scholars have rooted their analyses in theories of identity, politics, resources, framing, and the like. Workers, however, differ from many other groups of social movement actors because of their structural position within capitalist production and their potential ability to stop production. A central question among labor scholars is how structural power influences which workers organize, the strategies unions pursue, and the outcomes of labor struggles (Brookes 2013; Chun 2009; Kimeldorf 2013; Silver 2003; Wright 2000). These types of questions are not easily addressed by existing social movement theories, indicating a continued chasm between the literatures.

### Conclusion

Social movement theory developed at a time when “new” social upheavals had recently rocked the United States. These movements of the 1960s and 1970s were “new” in that they focused primarily on issues of identity, ethics, and lifestyle, including movements around civil rights, peace, feminism, and the environment. In contrast, “old” social movements revolved around class and economic issues – divisions that had patterned much of the social mobilization driving the founding of sociology a century prior. In the same historical moment that social movement theory was developing, the purge of left-wing unions and union leaders, along with the rise of the so-called “social contract,” meant that unions had become more bureaucratized and conservative – a far cry from the other movements of the day. Unions were also at the start of their decades-long drop in density. Reacting to these trends, some speculated that the “death of class” was imminent, and asked whether class was still relevant to understanding social and political organization. In this context, social movement theorists embraced analyses of “new” social movements, which, at the time, were understood to be driven by the “new middle class.”

Separate from this research, labor sociologists continued their interest in class movements. Far from acceding to the death of class argument, labor scholars emphasized class divisions, examining how workers’ movements shape and are shaped by the broader social, political, and economic context. This line of scholarship has located workers not only as central to strikes, but also as important contributors to a range of protest activities and social movements (Isaac and Christiansen 2002; Kerrissey and Schofer 2013; Norris 2002; Terriquez 2011; Vachon and Brecher 2016).

Although scholars of labor and social movements focused on similar questions of political identity, mobilization, and political structures, the two literatures developed separately. However, we see signs that these lines of scholarship are in increasing conversation with each other. Notably, recent scholarship conceptualizes labor struggles as part of the broader social movement field (Amenta et al. 2009) and class grievances as a driving force behind the wave of contemporary protest (della Porta 2015). In addition, a stream of research has applied social movement theories to better understand the relationship between class mobilization, counter-movements, and political structures. In so doing, this research expands the empirical and theoretical scope of social movement theory. However, divisions still remain, particularly

around how workers' structural position within capitalist production might shape mobilization, strategies, and outcomes.

Looking ahead, we contend that the conceptual distinction between "old" and "new" movements has run its course. Arguing that this separation was always troubled, Calhoun (1993) traces how in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, old movements (unions) were steeped with characteristics of "new" movements. We argue that this is just as true today, with working-class organizations fighting for a range of material and non-material issues. While our focus in this chapter has been on where the bulk of class-based social movement activities are located – workers' movements – it is also important to remember that, at times, elites also engage in social mobilization to pursue their interests (Martin 2013).

Figures 29.1 and 29.2 showing strike and protest participation suggest that excluding tactics of "old" movements – strikes – dramatically alters our understanding of protest trends over time. Additionally, working-class organizations remain central sites of mobilization, not only for strikes, but also for the politicization, leadership development, and networks that lead people to broader social movement activity. To better understand social mobilization, we should both recognize strikes and other forms of class-based mobilization as part of the larger field of contentious politics.

### Notes

- 1 In the case of the Eastern Bloc, the solution was to subsume class conflict under a state apparatus that decreed the existence of a classless society.
- 2 See <http://web.stanford.edu/group/collectiveaction>
- 3 About half of the newspaper events report qualitative descriptions of event size. The dataset categorizes these descriptions into six sizes. We take the average of each range (e.g. if the gathering was coded as between 50 and 99 people, we designate it as 75; for the upper category of 10 000 or more participants, we estimate 15 000 people). Analyses of outliers led us to identify two coding errors in 1981, which we omit.

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