A case for a Marxist revival?

This book starts from a paradox.

On the one hand, Marxism is a body of theory that developed from and was crafted for social movements. The work of Marx and Engels represents a distillation of the experiences, debates, theories and conflicts faced by the popular movements of the nineteenth century, that sought in turn to contribute to those movements’ further development. Subsequent developments of Marxist theory in the twentieth century were intimately linked to the development of oppositional political projects across the globe, ranging from revolutionary struggles against imperialist wars and capitalism itself, to anti-colonial movements and the emergence of new forms of popular assertion in the post-WWII era.

On the other hand, if the main figures of ‘classical Marxism’ all used the term ‘movement’, none seems to have developed any explicit theorisation of the term. Moreover, while Marxists have produced ground-breaking studies of specific movements, they have apparently not produced an explicit ‘theory of movements’ – that is, a theory which specifically explains the emergence, character and development of social movements. Nor have they explored how the concept of ‘movement’ might be interwoven with other foundational concepts in Marxist theory like class struggle, hegemony and revolution or human species being, alienation and praxis.
There is, in short, a distinct lack of work – scholarly or activist – devoted to thinking through what an integrated Marxist theory of social movements might look like, and what its impact on Marxist theory itself might be. This situation is compounded by the fact that mainstream social movement theory – whether it emerges from American or European academia – consistently avoids debate with Marxist perspectives, although they constitute by some margin the largest alternative body of research on popular movements. Instead, what can only be described as caricatures or straw-man versions of Marxist theory are as widespread in scholarship as in some forms of anti-Marxist activism.

This is, we believe, detrimental for those scholars who are interested in pursuing what Bevington and Dixon have called ‘movement-relevant research’¹ – research that is attuned to and addresses the knowledge interests of activists, as opposed to merely scholastic dissections of the character and dynamics of collective action – and especially for activists concerned with the progressive development of their oppositional political projects. The present time is increasingly starting to look like one of those decisive moments in history when ‘a chain reaction of insurrections and revolts’ give rise to ‘new forms of power . . . in opposition to the established order, and new visions of the meaning of freedom [are] formulated in the actions of millions of people’.²

For the current conjuncture is saturated with protest, with massive demonstrations and sometimes armed conflict erupting across North Africa and the Middle East, Europe and Latin America, with significant echoes elsewhere. It seems appropriate, therefore, to ask whether there are significant connections between these eruptions of popular protest. Large numbers of those actively participating, from Cairo to Athens, from New York to Santiago, think there are. And the connections they draw concern a combination of austerity, rising inequality, dispossession of rights and entitlements and a democratic deficit which enables the imposition of all these by tiny élites, against a background of the world economy’s biggest crisis since the 1930s.

There is, in short, ‘a system’ against which so many of today’s protests are pitched, even if they are not articulated solely, or even at all, in the language of ‘class’. Yet, there seems to be little recognition of this in contemporary literature on social movements. Indeed, as Gabriel Hetland and Jeff Goodwin document in their contribution to this volume, the very term ‘capitalism’ has largely disappeared from contemporary social movement theory. Does this mean that social movement scholars must always treat these struggles as discrete and disconnected instances of protest? Or should we, perhaps, try to understand these protests as a ‘wave’ or an upswing in a ‘cycle of contention’, and to trace the