At the end of the 1960s, the influence of critical and/or Marxist currents in social science grew. But even economics, spontaneously allied with the forces of money as it is, was not spared. Within prestigious academic institutions, famous theoreticians challenged the very foundations of the Western bourgeois and imperialist societies. In the United States – worse still, at Harvard – a group of left-wing economists, combining undisputed technical competence and a constant concern for links with social movements, formed itself into an explicitly subversive intellectual current, claiming the title of ‘radical’. Since then, the ‘American radicals’ have achieved the remarkable feat of creating a critical current at the very heart of the citadel of triumphant neoliberalism. The durability and fertility of this current cannot be understood unless we recognise that it is the vector both of a theoretical-scientific project and a political-organisational project. The latter has no doubt altered over time, but remains explicit in the approach of its authors – contrary to orthodox economists, who the deck themselves out in the attire of pure science in order to justify the existing order and proclaim it the best possible world.
A political-organisational project

It was in 1968 – the date is scarcely a coincidence – that the ‘American radicals’ founded the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE), an ‘interdisciplinary association devoted to the study, development, and application of radical political economic analysis to social problems’. The group asserted that it presents a continuing left critique of the capitalist system and all forms of exploitation and oppression while helping to construct a progressive social policy and create socialist alternatives.\(^1\)

The anchorage of the radical current in the social movements and the critique of the capitalist system is not only a historical fact: it is also a wholly deliberate theoretical orientation. As three of the current’s distinguished figures explain:

Our approach…differs fundamentally from that of many American Keynesians and European right social democrats who are inclined to provide advice to progressive governments on reforming their capitalist economies. In contrast to such a ‘top-down’ approach to social change, we are advocating a strategy that is designed to serve as an *instrument for mobilization* – to promote the formation of a popular coalition upon which any program for progressive change must stand for a serious chance of realization…. In this task a coherent alternative economic program is an indispensable tool. If this kind of organizing begins to take root, we further believe that a unified democratic movement pursuing and advancing an egalitarian and democratic growth strategy would eventually begin to challenge the rules of the capitalist game.\(^2\)

Even if (as we shall see) the political perspectives have changed, we can characterise this type of relationship between intellectuals and social movements as ‘organic’ in the Gramscian sense of the term. The *Review of Radical Political Economics* continues to publish regular articles on gender issues and discrimination of every variety, on the trade-union movement and the class struggle in the United States and elsewhere, on the political economy of imperialism.

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\(^1\) This quotation is drawn from the text introducing the URPE, which still features in the issues of the association’s quarterly journal, the *Review of Radical Political Economics* (RRPE).