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# A Response to Comments. The Structural Mobilization Factors and the "Populist Cleavage": Searching Connections between Social Change, Economy and Politics

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## A Response to Comments

### The Structural Mobilization Factors and the “Populist Cleavage”: Searching Connections between Social Change, Economy and Politics

*by* Loris Caruso

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I greatly thank Thomas Aguilera, Mark Davidson, Fabio de Nardis and Tommaso Vitale for their comments. They all have highlighted some limits of the article as well as possible directions for future progresses in research. They have done this in the most stimulating way, addressing the core of the issues we are discussing about. I really thank them for this.

I'll focus my replay on the main theoretical issues on which their comments are centered: the role of the structure of political opportunities on the emergence of movements; the sociology of social movements in the current scenario (Aguilera); the crisis of representation and the political dimension (Davidson and de Nardis); the relationship between structure and political action (Vitale).

#### **1. The Political Opportunity Structure**

In this debate, we all agree on the fact that the political opportunity structure (POS) can no longer be considered a decisive theoretical tool to explain the *emergence* of social movements. This assertion is supported by ample evidence [Goldstone 2004; Martínez 2014; Cress and Snow 2000]. Moreover, the conclusion of my article was that the closure of POS has become an incentive to the emergence of mass protest, if other mobilization factors are effective. As for local protest, in the article I have pinpointed the following factors as alternatives to POS:

1) a perception of unlawful conduct by institutions, and the consequent opportunity to represent and act out the contention as a dichotomy opposing the “common people,” or “the citizens,” and the élites, where both sides are viewed as compact totalities;

2) the fact that a conflict becomes visible and central to a specific social context, what can be also amplified by its presence in broader arenas such as the national political agenda;

3) a polarization between a “Yes” front and a “No” front, between a movement and a counter-coalition;

4) collective feelings and emotions of fear and threat caused by the contested policy or policies;

5) the fact that the conflict offers an opportunity to strengthen social ties in a specific social context, establishing new forms of socialization and new solidarities – this opportunity constitutes a major incentive for participation, especially in anomic societal contexts;

6) the protesters’ ability to frame the conflict and its actors in a way that broadens the social bases of the protest without reference to strictly ideological reasons;

7) the point of contention is related to a particular policy (or policies), enabling an “Us vs. Them” discourse. The object of the conflict must clearly separate two sets of interests, attributable to precise social actors, pitted against each other. The risks, the threats, and the opposition to the interests of specific social groups that a political decision causes must be clearly perceivable, socializable and diffused. The rivals, too, have to be recognizable, visible and imputable. If they are also aggressive, stigmatizing and not at all interested in dialogue with the social groups that a policy affects, this constitutes a further mobilization factor.

The ability of these seven mobilization factors, in contemporary society, to transform potential contention on a given policy (or policies) into a mass protest rests on political phenomena and changes, that correlatively show that POS theory is ineffective in the current context. The phenomena and changes I am referring to are mainly those on which Aguilera, Davidson, De Nardis and Vitale have focused their comments:

a) *De-politicization*, which De Nardis describes as having three main dimensions: 1) Breakage of the State’s monopoly on political decisions, that is, the displacement of decision-making powers from national to supranational arenas and from public to private actors; 2) The subordination of political decisions to meta-decisions made by non-representative institutions, where the latter constrict the scope of specific political decisions and prevent partisan politics from significantly affecting them;

and 3) The (consequent) “technicization” of politics, where it is purported that decisions are reached by means of the best available “technical” tools and are thus objectively or “technically” better ways of achieving fixed, “neutral” goals;

*b)* Mainly as a consequence of *a)*, the general *discrediting of partisan politics* itself, and the reduction of political parties and traditional political cleavages to mere shadows representing inexistent realities (at least in the collective perception);

*c)* *A crisis of authority and legitimacy* of the whole political dimension, as it is (and is perceived as) being broadly absorbed into the economic and media spheres.

It is within this context that, bearing in mind the seven conditions I have listed, the cleavage between “the people” and “the élites” becomes the cleavage currently providing the foundation for mass protest. This kind of foundation makes POS ineffective. We can define it as *the populist cleavage*, the polarization between a “common people” represented as internally compact and a non-people (the élites), equally compact; indeed, this is the only definition of populism on which different or antithetical theoretical approaches on populism converge [Kriesi 2015; Urbinati 2014; Stanley 2008]. What is claimed in protests representing themselves through this cleavage (and the local movements are doubtless among these) is precisely what Davidson calls “politics” in Ranciere’s sense – as the societal dimension where the principles and the fundamental norms of society are disputed. What is claimed is the return of politics as what is removed in processes of de-politicization: identity, representation, partisanship, protection, the sense of belonging, the construction of social ties, and the building of collective solidarities.

The actors of protests attribute to themselves a substitute and alternative legitimacy to that of public institutions and official political actors. They challenge their rivals’ right to speak in the name of the general interest, legality and democracy. Moreover, a strong and unshakable anti-party attitude is often pervasive among them, an attitude that can be included within the broader anti-organizational (and proto-anarchist) type of attitude, involving all kinds of structured organizations such as unions, associations, interest groups and even intra-movement organizations (that is, any kind of internal representation and delegation structure). We are not talking only about local movements. Such attitudes are very widespread in the main contemporary social movements, as it is shown by researches and studies on the main most recent movements – such as the *Indignados* [Antentas 2015; Calvo 2013; Flesher Fominaya and Cox 2013a; Errejon 2015], *Occupy* [Halvorsen 2012; Howard and Pratt-Boyden 2013], and the ones defending public and common goods [Carrozza and Fantini 2016; Caruso 2013; Caruso *et al.* 2010].

It is for this reason that the collective actor referred to in these movements is generally “the citizen.” The citizen and the common people – productive, honest,

industrious – are the mass-characterised self-description that permits hurling an accusation of illegitimacy. This kind of self-representation is fundamental to opening up participation to non-politicized citizens. The protest goes public, in the sense that it tries to match collective action with common sense: from the point of view of collective representations, it is the protest that moves towards the “common people” and daily life, not the contrary. In the collective actions that succeed in gaining a mass dimension, the social movement and civic organizations that mobilise at the beginning intentionally adopt this rhetorical and cultural approach, even when they are deeply connoted on an ideological plane.

The POS theory is outdated with respect to these changes, both in politics and in collective action, for the reasons I have discussed in the article and that commenters agree with. Yet these changes relate to the whole *structural mobilization factors* paradigm [McAdam 2005]. It includes, as well as POS, the Resource mobilization theory, studies on pre-existing social networks as a mobilization factor, and some elements of rational action theory.

## 2. The Structural Mobilization Factors Paradigm

The research on social movements is still focused on the structure of political opportunities perceived by collective actors who mobilize; on *the resources* that certain protest *entrepreneurs* are able to mobilize, and on which kind of capital (political, cultural, social, symbolic) they are based on; on the *social networks* in which individuals are integrated and the way in which those networks favour their participation in movements; on the individual *costs* and *benefits* of participation in movements, and the role of movement organizations in distributing *selected incentives* that lower the costs of participation and raise the costs of non-participation.

Two major characteristics of contemporary social movements question this paradigm. These characteristics are communitarianism and immediacy.

I intend communitarianism in the metaphorical sense. The metaphor of community has a meaning in relation to the self-representation that is prevalent among the mobilized actors. To many of their components – and in particular among the least-organized activists – what is most valued out of protests is their semblance as a communitarian, non-partisan totality, a manifestation of an organic social group. The mobilized actors represent themselves as *totalities*: the *inhabitants* of a region or a land who oppose an infrastructural project, as in the case of local movements; the *citizens* who oppose the privatization or reduction of public services, and public or common goods (instruction, health, public water, etc.); the *young people* who protest

for the lack of job and live opportunities or oppose university reforms. The most extended totalities in these last year has been defined by *Occupy* and the *Indignados* – “We are the 99%.” – and before by the Global Justice Movement – “You are G8, We are 6 bilions” [della Porta 2007].

Who is the social actor that makes up this “totality?” As we have seen, the citizen – and in some cases, also more extensively, the human being – is the figure most frequently evoked by the most recent mobilizations. It is a figure with a scarcely political, cultural or social connotation. The citizen does not mobilize to pursue a general transformation of society from a specific political or interests-based point of view; the citizen takes action as a generic citizen, in the name of the whole citizenship, “the people,” the social majority. For this reason, the organizers of mobilizations always ask political parties and unions to have a less visible role and to not display their symbols during actions and demonstrations. They are a part, while the movement and the citizens (or the people) are a whole totality, in which the parts have to be reabsorbed. This is the case of local movements, as we have seen in the article. But this is also the case of *Occupy* and *Indignados* movements [Peterson *et al.* 2015; Langman 2013; Hughes 2011; Castaneda 2012; Errejon 2015], as well as movements defending public and common goods as the Spanish *Mareas* [Lobera 2015; Calvo and Alvarez 2015; Antentas 2015; Pastor 2013], the Italian public water movement [Carrozza and Fantini 2016; Caruso 2013] and student movements [Caruso 2013; Caruso et al 2010].

The most intriguing aspect of this attitude is that it spreads in a historic moment in which the role of specific identities and demands is paramount in collective action. Demands and claims are often specific or sectorial, but they are promoted by an extensively general “figure of the Actor,” as Touraine would have called it: the citizen.

The second essential characteristic of contemporary movements can be defined as immediacy. The participation appears motivated, primarily, by the concrete object on which a conflict is based on. The object and the field of conflict must directly impact the daily life of the protestors. The action tends to assume the features of emergency, urgency, and necessity, or fear, tied to specific social and political issues. Within the protest, every structured political entity is treated similarly to parties. A certain distrust towards them is widespread, as they are considered to be more steered to self-reproduction than to the movement’s common interests. The movement is a whole, organizations are just a part. The part – partiality itself – is delegitimized vis-à-vis the whole. Organizations and “protest entrepreneurs,” to gain legitimacy, must be perceived as adherent to the specific, concrete issue(s) on which the action relies, and to what “common citizens,” inhabitants of a certain territory, members of a specific social group, workers of a determined factory or group of factories

[Caruso 2015], consider immediately common, that is, what is considered common independently of any form of political, ideological, cultural, or organizational mediation.

What fails is the possibility of detachment between who organizes and who is organized. This does not mean that the relationship between the mass of common activists, movement organizations and “protest entrepreneurs” becomes irrelevant. I’m not suggesting a return to the opposition between spontaneity and organization. Movements are not spontaneous, organizations and networks always matter with them [Flesher Fominaya 2015]. But the relationship between organization and participation has undergone a deeply transformation since the time the resource mobilization theory was formulated. Movements create more organizations than the ones that form the coalitions that start the protest. To mobilize a wide spectrum of actors, and to gain legitimacy within the collective action, these organizations must show adherence to a specific social context, its “life system” and its common sense, communicating that they are subordinating their part to the interests of the whole movement. If they don’t adopt such a behaviour, they are not able to mobilize something wider than organized minorities, or they don’t gain legitimacy within the protest, being consequently surpassed or substituted by new, more legitimated social movement organizations, constituted during the conflict and for the conflict [Caruso 2010]. Pre-existing organizations almost have to “disappear” in the protest. Currently, movements create organizations, leaderships, capitals and – symbolical, cultural, political, material – resources, much more than mobilizing existing resources and capitals.

As well as POS, RMT and the paradigm of structural mobilization factors (SMF) are updated to interpret these recent and ongoing changes in social movements. Just as POS theory was formulated in the golden age of representative democracy and in the period of greatest ascent of the mass-integration party, the SMF paradigm was elaborated in a historical period (the Seventies and the early Eighties) in which the legitimacy, social diffusion and strength of these resources, capital and mobilization potentials – political and social organizations, collective solidarity and sense of belonging, collective identities, shared political cultures – were greater than now and shaped differently.

The ambition of current movements is more to rebuild politics than to insert themselves in the existing political equilibriums by taking advantage of their instability. The traditional structural mobilization factors have become socially scarce, and movements have to (and aim to) rebuild resources and “capitals” more than mobilizing the (scarcely) existing ones. All the movements that have recently achieved a mass dimension – the *Indignados*, local movements, movements fighting for common

goods and public goods, such as the Italian public water movement – are movements in which mobilization is started through an existing but quite limited “organizational density,” and organizations, identities, social ties, collective solidarities, self-representations and frames have been built, for the most, during mobilization [Alvarez *et al.* 2011; Fominaya and Cox 2013b; Halvorsen 2012; Perugorria and Tejerina 2013].

However, my critique of the SMF paradigm doesn’t go in the same direction that has been prevailing until now, which is along the structure-vs-contingency line. I concur completely with Vitale’s comment on this topic: the problem is not that the SMF paradigm underestimates contingent and situated factors. The problem is that it is no longer effective. And it is not effective, in my opinion, because, paradoxically, it lacks structural analysis. Applying POS, RMT or network analysis to movements, the problem is not that they are too structuralist, but rather not structuralist enough. It is a paradigm that does not account for structural changes in politics, economy, social relationships and social stratification. To understand movements, these changes must be considered, their reciprocal connections must be understood, and their influence on collective action and the forms of political action must be investigated.

I therefore take up Vitale’s suggestions. We need to search again for macro-sociological and structural explanations and relate them to specific, situated, contextual dynamics. “Structure,” capitalism and socio-economic dimensions have to be reintroduced in the analysis of social movements and political action. This is the direction in which recent and important contributions to social movement studies are moving [Barker *et al.* 2013; della Porta 2015; Hetland and Goodwin 2013; Peterson *et al.* 2015; Vitale 2012].

What may we mean by “structure?” Vitale and De Nardis offer very important sparks, the former proposing “to study and test hypothesis related to the political effects of social structures” and “looking at structural contexts of opportunities,” and the latter affirming that social movements always have to be investigated by connecting them with the dominant cultures, the structure of social relationships, the role of the media and the evolution of technological systems.

I think that Gramsci’s [1975] definition of structure as “the totality of social relationships” is still fertile. Structure as a social totality, as the whole of connections between economy, politics and culture, and as the consequences that these connections have on social relationships and collective representations. In what ways are economy, politics and culture connected to each other? In which processes and mechanisms do they mainly converge? How do such convergences (and/or divergences) contribute to determine “structural contexts of opportunities” for social movements and political action?



### 3. Ambivalences in the Social System, Movements and Party-Movements

We must search connections: convergences, divergences and ambivalences between social subsystems and within them. We must search if any unitary process emerges, if isomorphic mechanisms arise in different social spheres.

In the current scenario, the major and decisive convergence and social isomorphisms between subsystems is concentrated on the *ambivalence* between two poles of social change: the regressive-authoritarian pole and the participative-mobilizing pole. This ambivalence is the field on which the major “opportunity structures” for collective action are constituted. These two poles shape ambivalences in the dynamics of social change, because they are at the same time correlated within the same phenomena and opposed to each other. I’ll try to summarize the main lines on which this ambivalence develops in politics, economy and the media, starting from the first.

#### 3.1. *Oligarchy, Mobilization and Participation in Contemporary Politics*

The ambivalence in the political dimension has been underlined in Aguilera’s, De Nardis’s, Davidson’s, and Vitale’s comments. Politics becomes more vertical, hierarchical, oligarchic. It excludes – or, as Davidson says, it forcludes – the intervention and the influence by social actors that are different from the great economic players. It greatly reduces the possibility that political parties act as mediators between society and politics. It distances and protects the political decision from the democratic dialectic, because the latter always brings the risk that the “big numbers” that constitute the majority of citizens – or even the lower classes – can influence decisions.

Often these processes are called “crisis of representation.” Curtly and linearly, De Nardis affirms that the central topic is here the transfer of sovereignty from politics to the market. The latter, moreover – as regards the power to influence political decision – is limited to the great industrial and financial firms, that is to the oligarchical pole of monopolies and oligopolies. As Braudel [1988] and Arrighi [1996] asserted, in fact, it is always useful to keep in mind that “the market” and capitalism are not the same thing. Braudel and Arrighi defined capitalism as “the counter-market,” that is, the opposite of the market. Capitalism is market + State, capital + political protection of property, and political limitation of economic competition [Reich 2015].

A crisis of representation is real, but it is a one-sided crisis: a lack of representation of the popular classes and, to a lesser extent, of middle classes. The interests of higher classes, entrepreneurs, private firms, banks, rentiers and financiers are well

represented in public institutions. More than “crisis,” it may be best to simply talk about a victory, a political victory of the higher classes over the lower ones and over the social and political organizations that aim – or aimed – to defend their interests and represent them.

Similarly, there is one-sided de-politicization: the de-politicization of the lower classes’ interests and of the socio-economic issues linked to inequality and to the social distribution of power and resources. Other issues and topics always are on the scene, feeding the political show. To de-politicize is the maximum political act.

Likewise, there is not really “crisis of ideology.” There is (in Europe, although not in other regions such as Latin America) a crisis of the ideologies that have lost the ideological war over the last thirty years – Marxism, socialism, social-democracy and all the emancipative ideologies. There is certainly no crisis among the liberal, neo-liberal, nationalist, racist and authoritarian ideologies. The élites, in different forms, manage these ideologies, even by using some of them to appear as anti-élites. The hegemonic ideologies always tend to represent themselves as non-ideologies or anti-ideologies, the dominant politics as de-politicized neutral and technical mechanisms, the political representation of a limited part of society as non-partisan defence of the general interest. Changing the actors who lead representative politics and win the partisan politics and the ideological disputes, changes the form that representation, partisanship and ideology assume, but don’t eliminate them. Currently, they assume an indirect form: ideology is affirmed through anti-ideological rhetoric; partisan politics through anti-partisan discourses and meta-decisions represented as merely technical; representation of precise social interest through rhetoric on the general interest and the organicistic representation of society as un-differentiated whole body.

This is therefore the first pole, the regressive-oligarchical one, of the current political transformation: it is a divide between the rulers and the ruled (intentionally created by the former); a departure of public agency from its recipients, as well as from responsiveness and accountability; a de-politicization of socio-economic issues and processes; an apparent neutralization and technicization of politics; a commitment to private forces of entire spheres of the government and of social reproduction; an imperviousness of institution to collective mobilization and to the needs of lower classes; the diffusion of an anti-partisan, anti-ideological and anti-representative rhetoric.

The second pole, the second direction of current political change, is on the face of it the opposite of the first. As Davidson points out in his comment, it consists in a pervasive rhetoric of participation, horizontality, post-bureaucratism, post-hierarchy, an end of intermediations, politics seen as peer cooperation among institutions and social actors. It is rhetoric, but also a series of top-down institution-

al practices: arenas of deliberation, governance, consensus-based decision-making, community development [Rotschild 2015; Mastropaolo 2012]. Within this rhetoric, governance is described as empowerment of social actors, as a set of participatory tools, community horizontalism and peer cooperation that is opposed to bureaucratic verticalism and hierarchical nature of the government. It is described as “Big Society.” Civil society is exalted against parties. Parties flex outward, searching outside of themselves and outside of the political realm to substantiate their legitimacy (in the market, the media, in civil society and social movements). They compete in representing themselves as movements instead of as parties; they try to include as much non-political personnel as possible in their candidacies. They also apply participative tools to their internal decision-making processes. Since the 1990s, a significant number of European parties have offered more inroads to their members, granting them decision-making powers in selecting party leaders, candidates and even some policies in the platforms. At the same time, this general outreach to the membership base has marginalized the influence of party activists and middle level *élites*, thereby enabling the central party leadership to free itself of dissent from those who are most actively involved in the party and limit internal pluralism [Ignazi 2004].

What kind of connections is there between these two poles, the regressive-oligarchic and the participative-mobilizing one? On one hand, there is complementarity. The oligarchic, market-driven rebuilding of politics needs participative and mobilizing rhetoric and practices in order to achieve two main results. The first is legitimacy. At a historical juncture where, as we have said, the lower and even middle classes are not represented or sub-represented, it is necessary to portray “the people” as being actively involved in democracy. Formal democracy always has to resort to at least representing some sort of deep-rooted popular sovereignty. Thus, what is avoided in practice is exalted in rhetoric; the more it is avoided, the more it is exalted. Contemporary political actors and systems represent themselves as not only democratic, but hyper-democratic, that is, as more democratic than representative democracy systems. Second, the rhetoric of dis-intermediated, egalitarian and horizontal participation of social actors in politics is functionally and usefully mobilized to weaken institutional mediations, the role of legislative assemblies, politics intended as negotiation between representatives of different social interests, the idea of partisanship itself, the actors and forms of organization around which post-war representative systems were built.

The rhetoric of dis-intermediation is also a means to tear apart the structure of firmly organized forms of social and political action, and to substitute visible and formalized mediation structures and actors (which are equipped with internally established norms, codes and procedures that must legitimate decision-making) with

less visible, less formalized or non-formalized, private, and market-driven forms of mediation, such as online platforms, private firms and media outlets. These latter forms represent themselves as dis-intermediation, while at the same time they enable non-responsive, non-accountable, one-sided decision-making by the élites and the political leaders, delineating a kind of indirect government within a context of “total (de-structured) mobilization.” As we will recall, Michels asserted that *organization* (and, consequently, mediation) is the only means that lower classes have to try to gain some social and political power [Mudge and Chen 2014]. The dismantling of structured organization has to be interpreted in this way as well. We have seen, in the previous section, how much this anti-organization rhetoric also affects social movements.

However, between the two poles is not merely a complementary relationship. There is also ambivalence. The participative-mobilizing rhetoric and practices do constitute a field of opportunity for protest, collective action and political mobilization. It offers a structure of symbolic opportunities and, to a certain extent, a set of tools, habits, routines and skills that can be employed politically and translated into contentious politics. Furthermore, the top-down dynamics of the participative-mobilizing pole constantly raises unfulfilled social expectations. Collective action can grow on the mechanism of the unfulfilled promise. While a society self-represents itself according to a determined rhetoric and ideology, at the same time showing that it has all the means to realize this rhetoric, it contradicts its rhetoric and ideology, or reserves its concrete actuation to a very limited part of society. But the idea that a participative and mobilized society is possible is established to a great extent by the powers themselves that movements oppose.

Movements can even politicize elements of the regressive-oligarchic pole. Even de-politicization and anti-partisan rhetoric can be partially assumed by movements and overturned against the actors who spread this rhetoric, by changing their marking and meaning. The de-politicized, non-partisan, anti-party, and anti-organization rhetoric can be overturned and translated into a “We, the people” which is, as we have previously seen, a major source of self-identification of contemporary movements. “We, the people” – a people that, similar to the one that top-down participation processes perform, is at the same time compact, scarcely differentiated and constituted of single *individuals* – is the collective actor that symbolically emerges through opposition to all bureaucratic organizations, accused of stifling and diverting spontaneous popular self-expression.

At the same time, participative rhetoric and practices by parties, institutions and private firms, have taken up much of the movements’ rhetoric and practices since the 1960s. The rhetoric of egalitarian cooperation, horizontality, post-bureaucratism is movement rhetoric. Innovation in power systems also takes advantage of movements

action and discourses. I can think of no other concept than *dialectics* to define this double correlation between movements and social institutions.

### 3.2. *Oligarchy, Mobilization and Participation in the Economic and Media Sphere*

An analogous set of ambivalences is observable on the economic side. On one hand is the regressive-oligarchic pole. Growing inequality. The stoppage – and reversion – of social mobility. The reproduction of dominant groups as closed castes. The economic pre-eminence of the great financial actors. Competition between firms centred on reducing the salaries, benefits, job stability and social rights of workers, and on reducing the firms' own social and fiscal burdens. The generalized obstruction, by firms and governments, of union organization and unions' bargaining power. The authoritarian organization of firms into organicistic communities where any conflict between different sections or actors must be preventively impeded. The constant replacement of the workforce – previously the manual component, and subsequently the intellectual component – with machines, software, digital devices, algorithms, et cetera, and the structural effects of this process on unemployment [Collins 2013].

The second pole – the second direction of ongoing socio-economic change – is seemingly the opposite of the first. Just like in the political dimension, rhetoric spreads about peer cooperation, horizontal organization, post-bureaucratism, post-hierarchy, an end to intermediation. It is mainly referred to what has been alternatively called digital capitalism, network capitalism, the knowledge-based economy or cognitive capitalism, that is to the more innovative sectors of the economy such as ITC, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and in general to the application of science, knowledge and information to economic production. This rhetoric, however, is often more widely referred to all the main production processes in advanced economies. Practices of peer cooperation, dis-intermediation and flat organization are also defined as “sharing economy,” “peer production” and “wikinomics” [Bauwens 2009; Tapscott and Williams 2006; Formenti 2011]. These definitions are used not only with reference to specific production methods, organizations or productions, but to the current vector of economic development in general. On this phenomena, populist rhetoric spreads, as can be well exemplified by assertions like this: “*We the people* is no longer just a political expression; it is also an effective description of the power that today is held by ordinary people – we employees, consumers, contributors, community members – the power to innovate and create value on the global stage”

[Tapscott and Williams 2006, 10]. According to Tapscott & Williams [*ibidem*], the knowledge-based economy, that they call *wikinomics*, is a *revolution* centred around the growing participation of social groups and individuals in the value chain. The information technology needed to cooperate, create value and compete on the market are available to all. This context enables the continuous formation of new collaboration projects among peers featuring autonomous organizational arrangements; these collaborative projects produce goods and services that can compete with large firms. This kind of arguments and representations on the current economic development has been called “managerial populism.”

The plethora of studies, research and evidence that have been conducted and gathered about current production models in digital capitalism, the knowledge-based economy, the sharing economy, or peer production [Bauwens 2009; Formenti 2011 and 2013; Fuchs 2010 and 2012; Yeow 2014; Zukerfeld 2014; Bergvall-Kareborn and Howcroft 2013], highlight a set of systemic ambivalences that, as we will see, appears isomorphic to the political ones:

*a) Socialization of the production process/individualization of the employment relationship.* The individualization of the employment relationship, together with job insecurity and the pressure for horizontal competition among workers exerted by firms, comprise a tendency to socialise production processes and to diffuse ownership of the means of production. This is a tendency, however, that cannot be annulled owing to the specificity of “commodities” such as knowledge, information and science.

*b) Cooperative exchange/market exchange.* The social contents of work – relational activity, diffused knowledge, logical skills – are constantly injected into the production-consumption cycle. What workers and consumers may perceive as cooperative exchange within the firm and its external environment, between workers or between consumers, is re-shaped by firms as a market relationship. The contradictory link between “free cooperation” and formal value of the market, is the driving force of productivity.

*c) Collective participation in decision-making/verticalization of decision-making processes.* Workers are induced to participate in formally horizontal decision-making processes, but the rhetorical invitation to participate actively is mainly functional to reorganising command methods and to a substantial verticalization of decision-making processes. Horizontality is confined to decisions concerning the most immediate work processes, whereas on strategic choices the hierarchy and the verticality of structures are strengthened. Nevertheless, the rhetorical call for active participation is essential for firms, on both the work and consumption sides, becoming a “competitive asset.”

d) Autonomy of labour/digital Taylorism. Work based on knowledge and partial cooperation among peers raises problems for capital from the point of view of the complete objectification of work, the measurability of work performance, and the governance of cooperative exchange. On the other hand, such problems seem currently resolved through the rigidification of immaterial ownership and the Taylorization of a significant part of knowledge production.

A new bond has developed between producers and consumers, creating *prosumers* [Rullani 2004]. Firms often seek to refine their products and services based on feedback received by consumers, and have been building extensive participatory networks to this end, even asking external scientists and researchers for solutions. This “participatory” production model weakens the boundaries between firms and society. Businesses must relinquish a portion of their property (especially intellectual property) to enable knowledge-value to grow by circulating around the web. Firms are forced, in order to keep a foothold in increasingly saturated markets, to seek out, attract and haul in cultural attributes, social networks, behaviours, and attitudes that arise outside of the market and are considered at least partially non-commercial in nature.

Such new production and consumption dynamics give rise to a new set of contrasts in the relationship between economy and society. It becomes a relationship marked by a dialectic where the former, in order to incorporate mechanisms for potential valorization that form within the latter, must embrace external actors, practices and cultural elements that are in some ways alternative to typical trade. The general tendency of economic organizations is to “reach out” to other actors and social processes, in an effort to interpret and appropriate qualities, inclinations, emotions and forms of cooperation that develop in social spheres. The current dialectic between economy and society is characterized by this dynamic of extroversion and mimesis, where individual qualities and spontaneous social cooperation are encouraged to develop and, at the same time, are continually appropriated for the creation of exchange value. One thus witnesses a reduction – organizational, normative, cultural – of the barriers between firms and society, a mutual “precipitation” of one into the other: “structure” (production) and “superstructure” collapse into each other, and society is crossed by a process of de-differentiation among social sub-systems. This dialectical overlap between economy and society can simultaneously engender a more subtle dominance of the former over the latter, or the growth of autonomy, self-organization and peer cooperation among social actors. Currently, nevertheless, the first process sharply is overcoming the second, while the second mostly relies upon the emergence, diffusion and strength of effective collective actions and social conflicts by workers.

This is where the current “participationist” rhetoric and practices fit in: there is now a need among firms to actively include an increasing number of individuals, social networks and external processes. In digital capitalism, it is sometimes the case that in order to maximize the performances of workers and *prosumers*, companies ensure a certain margin of autonomy and non-hierarchical cooperation to workers and prosumers, so as to instil in them a sense of community and internal solidarity; rather, companies try to associate their products and brands also with values such as giving free of charge, a high quality of life, carefreeness, solidarity or protecting the environment, to make their brand widely attractive. Aspects of revolutionary tradition like bridging the gap between governors and the governed (or in the case of businesses, between producers and consumers) can be incorporated into commercial and communication formats, in keeping with what Boltanski and Chiapello [1999] have defined as the new spirit of capitalism.

Politics and economy show an isomorphic set of ambivalences: autonomy vs. heteronomy; empowering the top tier vs. exalting horizontal relations; cooperation vs. competition; community vs. hierarchy; sharing vs. individualization; participation vs. rejection of conflict. Within this set of dialectic pairs, the opposing terms complement each other, but the first actually appears to play an essential role in the progression of the second. Inclusion of these contradictory elements allows – in both economic and political spheres – for the “natural” limits of a market or a political strategy to be surpassed.

In the media there is an analogous ambivalence. The media – both traditional and digital – are one of the more concentrated industrial sectors. Competition is very limited and few great actors occupy almost the totality of the market. These actors are able to make forms and contents of current communication rather homogeneous beyond the national boundaries.

On the other side, processes like the mediatization of the public sphere and the popularization of political communication [Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009] tend to lower public discourse to the level of the praxis and language of daily life: they “move towards,” collapse onto this in an effort to excite identification. Also in this field it has occurred, since the early 1990s, a participatory turning point. Everyday life and the “ordinary people” have been firmly placed in the communication flow. Moreover, newspapers, websites and television programs are constantly asking the viewer/reader to intervene with votes, comments, remarks and testimonies. At the core of this change is the need of publishers to sell to advertisers an active and participative audience. Social media are celebrated as the places of the peer-to-peer interaction and creation of online-communities. Participation and (individual or collective) mobilization are rhetoric that fully concerns these communication devices. Also



in this field, we face the complementarity and the ambivalence between an oligarchic pole and a participative one, where the latter is mobilized to empower the farther.

#### **4. Structural Ambivalence and Forms of Political Action**

The dialectic field constituted by the ambivalences in political, economic and media systems, leads to a “structure of opportunities” regarding both social movements and the emergence of one of the main phenomena we are discussing in this Symposium: the electoralization of movements and its relationship with the emergence of left-wing outsider parties. The structure, as I have here tried to define it – a structural system of isomorphic ambivalences that regards politics, economy and the media – has consequences both on the constitution of the political field and the characteristics of collective actors.

##### **4.1. *The Regressive-Oligarchic Pole, the Participative-Mobilizing Pole and the Populist Political Field: from Structure to Political Action***

Let’s consider the consequences of the ambivalences between the two poles on the constitution of the political field, on social movements and the emergence of party-movements [Kitschelt 2005].

All the processes I have cited in association with the regressive-oligarchical pole, from a political and economic point of view, leave the purportedly sovereign people unprotected, underrepresented and less capable of expressing collective identities through politics. Simultaneously, large sectors of “the people” are impoverished, precarious or unemployed; they lack a safety net and their social rights have diminished.

The first consequence of these processes is the constitution of the political field as a *populist field*. The convergence and simultaneity between these two factors – underrepresentation of the social majority and increasing inequalities – greatly contribute to delineate the field of contemporary politics as based on the cleavage between “the people” and the élites. This becomes the master frame within which political disputes are interpreted and performed, by both social movements and outsider political parties that try to represent the socio-political demands to which this cleavage is connected. Political actors can interpret and act this cleavage also through its sub-cleavages, which assimilate or even replace the traditional left/right and class cleavage: low/high, new/old, civil society/official politics, spontaneity/bureaucratic organization, horizontal/vertical organization, democracy/oligarchy (or “caste”), close/remote, and specific/general.

The last two dyads (close/remote, specific/general) are actionable in local movements: what is close, near, specific and embedded in local social relations is contrasted with all that is remote, perceived as abstract and impalpable, that is, to decisional centres, interests and actors that are extraneous to local society and its specific and situated culture, way of living and needs. All the other dyads are in different forms mobilized by contemporary social movements, outsider parties, and by certain extent also by mainstream parties. We have seen how much local movements stress the élite/people cleavage and its sub-cleavages. But, once more, these are not limited to local movements. The same type of framing has also been central to the *Indignados* and *Occupy* movements, in student and youth movements, in movements for the defence of common and public goods such as the Italian public water movement and the Spanish *Mareas*.

The élite/people cleavage itself and its sub-cleavages are also central in the political discourses of left-wing outsider parties such as *Podemos*, *Syriza*, France's *Parti de Gauche* or the Portuguese *Bloco de Esquerda* – which try to give political-electoral expression to the *Indignados* and anti-austerity protests – and even of right-wing parties all around Europe that are challenging the mainstream political families. Of course, left-wing social movements and parties and right-wing parties do not inflect the 'populist cleavage' in the same way. They don't single out the same rivals and don't advance similar claims. But to a certain extent, they all indicate and highlight contrasts in the same processes, regarding popular and political sovereignty, the relationship between the people and the élite and that between politics and economy. These parties are different, even opposite in many aspects, but they play in the same field.

In this context, what appears fruitful to me is not to label one or another political actor or political discourse as populist, or to measure their degree of populism on the bases of some supposedly scientific definition. In recent years, scholars, the media and politicians alike have been using the populist label for any actor who opposes the mainstream parties, aiming to discredit the opposition itself. In this way, France's *Front National*, Spain's *Podemos*, Greece's *Syriza*, GB's *UKIP*, both the *Northern League* and the *No-Tav* movement in Italy, the *Indignados*, Jeremy Corbyn, Hugo Chavez, Bernie Sanders, Evo Morales and Beppe Grillo have all been lumped together in the global populist family, and essentially equated with each other.

What to me appears more fruitful than this deceitful labelling is to note that the general processes we are discussing in the Symposium, and even the intentional and self-absorbed, sweeping use of the populist label, signals that what is "populist" is the current political field itself. Nobody, currently, gains legitimacy and consent by playing outside of the people/élite cleavage and its sub-cleavages.

Why call it “the populist cleavage” and not just “the democratic cleavage?” The issues and the contrasts on which it is based – élite/people, oligarchy/popular sovereignty, privileged minority/social majority, parasitic/productive classes – have been at the core of democratic struggles, social movements and revolutions ever since the late Eighteenth century. Defining the present-day conflicts as democratic conflicts, as Davidson suggests following Ranciere, is largely correct in my opinion. Nevertheless, I think that the term “populist” can better describe three core aspects of the current political field adopted by many social movements and outsider parties. First, the configuration and the very broad framing of “We” (which includes all social classes and groups except the “1%”) combined with the very limited framing of “Them” (the “1%”, the politicians and high finance, the super-rich and powerful – targeted more as individuals than as a social group). Second, the lack of a clear social cleavage contrasting one or more specific social groups and interests with other specific social groups and interests, that is, the fact that social antagonisms are played out more in the fields of politics and symbolic representations rather than within social and economic processes themselves. Third, the left/right cleavage is considered as secondary – not ineffective, but to a great extent reabsorbed in the élite/people cleavage and its sub-cleavages.

For what regards social movements, the class and the left/right cleavage has not disappeared. The *Indignados* and *Occupy* movements promote materialistic claims. They contrast “common workers” with “the privileged and the powerful.” Certain social movement organizations and left-wing radical unions, parties and networks have been promoting anti-austerity mobilizations through class-driven discourses and claims [della Porta 2015; Peterson *et al.* 2015]. Anti-austerity, *Indignados* and *Occupy* activists largely define themselves on the left/right axis. Nevertheless, in their public political discourse – which to interpret social movements is more important than considering what individual activists privately think about themselves – the left/right cleavage is greatly subordinated to the élite/people one; a strictly intended class discourse (i.e. discourse based on the opposition between workers and entrepreneurs, not on other generic oppositions) is quite absent from their public discourse (corporations are almost never targeted as rivals). The *Indignados* and *Occupy* movements have targeted as rivals the political and financial élites much more than corporations. Moreover, mobilizations that in recent years have succeeded in gaining a mass dimension have been the ones mobilizing the élite/people cleavage, such as the local ones, the *Indignados* and *Occupy*, more than those promoted by radical left-wing parties, unions and similar networks.

The workers/owners contrast is also absent from clearly left-wing outsider parties such as *Podemos*, so greatly connected with the experience of the *Indigna-*

*dos*, anti-neoliberal and anti-austerity movements. Little and medium firms, little and medium entrepreneurs, autonomous and independent workers are fully part of “the people” that *Podemos* aims to defend [Torreblanca 2015]. Even in the more recent political discourse of *Syriza*, which originated as an anti-capitalist and classist political force, and in the discourse of its leader Alexis Tsipras in the latest elections, the élite/people cleavage has gained importance vis-à-vis the workers/owners one [Stavarakakis 2014].

We can now return to connections. On the one hand, as I have argued, the centrality that the élite/people cleavage and its sub-cleavages have acquired, is to be attributed to the effects of the regressive-oligarchic pole in politics and the economy. On the other hand, it can be attributed to the effects of the dialectics between the regressive-oligarchic and the participative-mobilization poles.

Several elements constituting the media, economic and institutional mobilization of participative rhetoric and processes are comparable with elements constituting the populist cleavage. The rulers/ruled and low/high divides are inflected by firms as bridging the divides between workers and entrepreneurs and between firms and consumers; by the media as the bridging of the divide between producers and consumers of information; by official politics as bridging the divide between the representing and the represented. An anti-élite rhetoric spreads: firms, media and political parties all try to promote individual or collective mobilization and communicate that everyone, by mobilizing, can “write his/her destiny” by her/himself, becoming a “prosumer,” a citizen journalist, an entrepreneur, an independent or autonomous worker, and can influence institutional and party decision-making from below. A great rhetoric on dis-intermediation is promoted: politically, as opposition to parties, unions and more in general to social and political organized representation; on the media, as a call to becoming a protagonist of the media show as common people, without any political or social “tutelage” or mediation; economically, through the rhetoric that everyone can challenge the big players and compete with them from below, or through the practical reductions of the mediations between production and distribution. Moreover, for thirty years, private media networks, firms and even political parties and politicians, have been spreading a continuous anti-political, anti-party, non-partisan, anti-mediation and people-*vs*-élite rhetoric [Mastropaolo 2005].

Movements and outsider left-wing parties are not at all extraneous to this rhetoric and these processes. The populist-participative turn in managing political, economic and media power affects their discourses, rhetoric and organizational practises. This is a major casual factor for the change in the relationship between resources, protest entrepreneurs and collective mobilization I have discussed in Section 2, that is for the current ineffectiveness of POS, the resource mobilization theory and whole

paradigm of the structural mobilization factors. The anti-organizational attitudes diffused in many contemporary movement actors, as well as their “proto-anarchist” distrust towards political and social organizations, couldn’t be understood without referring to the rhetoric on dis-intermediation, participation from below, generalized mobilization that media, political institutions and economic actors have made hegemonic.

A further element – a further connection between the ambivalences in the social, institutional and economic structure and the forms of collective action – is that the electoral dimension re-acquires a strategic role. This is due to the fact the current societal change and its converging crises (the crisis of political authority and the economic crisis) are mainly represented as a divide between society and politics. If the main problems that society has are politicians and parties, it is a priority to replace them. Moreover, with collective mobilization becoming greatly ineffective in influencing public agency and governments, and with political parties almost completely de-legitimized, movement actors have begun considering entering the institutional system directly and participating in the electoral process. Direct electoral participation offers two kinds of resources: it furnishes a sense of effectiveness, whether as an alternative or in addition to social mobilization; it constitutes a favourable field to build and stabilize collective identities that on the field of mobilization have turned out to be fragile, instable and too heterogeneous. “The people,” the citizens, the social majority, the “low” against the “high,” the 99% against the 1%, the new against the old, are symbolic representations that can be more effective on the electoral field than on that of mobilization. Even more, these self-representations are originally “electoral,” as they are elaborated on the field of symbolic representation as tools to gain a “catch-all” consensus. The *Podemos* experiment is all here and fully talks about this [Martín 2015; Subirats 2015; Calvo and Alzarez 2015; Lobera 2015].

The electoral dimension is practically the only one where contemporary movements have gained a certain efficacy. Not a direct efficacy, but an indirect one. While the *Indignados*, *Occupy* and anti-austerity movements have not conditioned the political agenda or government decision-making at all, they have had – in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and in the USA – a deferred, postponed indirect electoral effect. The *Syriza* electoral victory would be difficult to understand without the Greek anti-Troika mobilizations, as would *Podemos*’ success without the *Indignados* and the *Mareas*, and the Portuguese left-wing government without the anti-austerity mobilization cycle in that country [Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015]. In the USA, Bernie Sanders’ success can’t be interpreted without considering *Occupy* and the successive campaigns

in the country,<sup>1</sup> nor can Donald Trump's rise be explained without considering the *Tea Party*.

#### 4.2. *The Regressive-Oligarchic Pole, the Participative-Mobilizing Pole and the Party-Movement*

There is one further connection I will note, regarding the constitution of collective actors. The movement-party is the political form in which the left-wing political organization is going to be re-shaped. Movements can directly give birth to political movements that participate electoral processes. This is the case of local movements, as we have seen. This is also the case in Spain, where the founders of *Podemos*, as well as a good portion of its ranks, officials and managers participated in the *Indignados* movements, in the *Mareas* or in the *PAH* (Platform for those affected by mortgage). *Podemos* connects the vertical axis of party leadership (involving strong personal leadership by Iglesias and firm party governance by its core group of leaders) with a horizontal and participative axis, the one constituted by its tools for direct participation by its members, the local sections (*circulos*) and its dense system of relationships with social movements and civic organizations. But in Spain there is not only *Podemos*. The *Indignados* cycle has been followed by the establishment of local and regional political movements all around the country. These movements are often seen entering the electoral dimension, to a great extent by local or regional electoral alliances with *Podemos* and *Izquierda Unida*. These experiences allowed the leader of *PAH*, Ada Colau, to become mayor of Barcelona, the former judge Manuela Carmena to become mayor of Madrid, and *Podemos* to be the number one political force in Catalonia in the December 2015 national elections, as well as the third in the Country.

*Syriza*, too, is often defined as a party-movement. It is, also after becoming the governing party, a political ecosystem in which a horizontal and a vertical axis are connected. The horizontal axis is a wide range of social organizations linked to *Syriza* that support on-the-ground work on the social effects of the economic crisis. This social work and solidarity network-building, aiming to concretely help people who have not access to basic goods and services, is one of the premises behind *Syriza*'s electoral victory. The vertical axis is that of a traditional bureaucratic organization, a central leadership and the firm personal leadership by Tsipras.

<sup>1</sup> Notable campaigns include the movement to raise the minimum wage (the Fight for \$15), *Black Lives Matter* (defence of African-Americans' rights), campaigns to combat climate change, for immigrants' rights, and for a tax on financial transactions.

The Italian *Five Stars Movement* (FSM), meanwhile, has nothing to do with the left and is definitely more a party than a movement (it is even a corporate-party, as its organizational core is literally a corporation). However, it too is linked to the party-movement form. Among its officials and spokesmen, many started out as activists in local and/or environmentalist movements and campaigns. It is a party professing “the end of all parties,” which it claims must be replaced by movements and committees and by direct democracy. It completely assumes the corporate and firm-driven participative-mobilizing rhetoric, as well as the rhetoric on the Internet as the premise of the triumph of a direct and dis-intermediated democracy. Its organization completely refuses the traditional party’s bureaucratic organizational structure and aims to be identified as a movement. The FSM has no local, regional or national structures. Its organization just consists of a central office (a web-marketing private company, the Casaleggio and Associates), a central communication platform (the website [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it)), an informal national leadership constituted by the founders (Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio) and a “directory” of five parliamentarians subordinated to them, and the elected officials.

Party-movements have lot to do with the ambivalence between the regressive-oligarchic pole and the participative-mobilizing one. They connect the vertical dimension of the former with the horizontal dimension of the latter. They resort to tools that are typical of both dimensions. They make use of strong personal leadership and solid central party structures. The core firmly orients the periphery as regards political strategy and communication. They assign great importance to top-down communication through the media (both traditional and digital) and to political discourses that can successfully be translated in media terms. As for the second pole, they try to integrate claims, discourses, activists and networks from social movements and civic organizations. They resort to participative tools: they widely use social networks and digital participative means as organizational tools; they consult their membership on their candidacies, political strategies and manifestos.

I agree with Aguilera’s statement that the relationship between the two axes can be conflicting. In *Podemos*, the horizontal axis can be used to reaffirm and strengthen control over the party by the central leadership. In *Syriza*, internal dissent due to the government’s action has been resolved by removing the dissenters. The relationship between the vertical axis (the leadership-party-government series) and the horizontal axis (social organizations with close ties to *Syriza*) is experiencing great tension at present. In the FSM, the horizontal axis is rhetorically mobilized just to strengthen the vertical one and the party’s communication strategies.

In different forms, however, these party-movements connect a vertical with an horizontal axis. This connection refers to the dialectics between the oligarchic-regressive and the participative-mobilization pole.

## 5. Conclusion

The current political, economic, social and cultural changes are centred on the ambivalence between two poles: a regressive-oligarchic and a participative-mobilizing one. Between these two poles there are both complementarity and tensions. They are at the same time strictly connected, necessary to each another, and opposed. These two directions of social change and the relationships between them constitute a *structure* – intended as a social totality involving all social subsystems – that reshapes the forms of collective actions, the discourses and organizational practises of social movements, the relationship between movements, electoral competition and parties, and the political field itself. This structure constitutes an opportunity structure for social movements and for the emergence of the party-movement as the form in which left-wing parties are re-defining themselves. Moreover, it consists of a series of social processes that have rendered scarcely effective theoretical paradigms such as the Political Opportunity Structure, the Resource Mobilization Theory, and the whole structural mobilization factors paradigm, as it modifies and re-shapes all the constitutive elements of this paradigms, as well as the relationship between these elements.

Movements and left-wing party-movements partially absorb, partially contest and partially develop the ambivalence within and between the two structural poles. They contest the first pole and its constitutive elements: oligarchy; inequality; mediatisation and personalization of politics; anti-partisanship; competition; heteronomy; individualization. Yet they also include some of these elements in their organizational choices and political discourses.

The first pole also can constitute a casual factor in the emergence of movements, electoral attempts by movements and the emergence of party-movements. Movements can have great direct or indirect influence on electoral processes. They may contribute to political experiences capable of restructuring a national political space to an extent that was difficult to imagine only a short time ago. We may even say that the electoral aspect is the privileged ground on which movements currently show effectiveness. The structural base of this success is the lack of politics, partisanship, representation and identity provoked by the first pole, and the “populist cleavage”



to which this lack helps instil. Movements and party-movements take up a great deal of the elements constituting the populist cleavage and its sub-cleavages.

On the other side, movements and party-movements give value to the second pole and its constitutive elements: participation, mobilization, grassroots action, community, autonomy, horizontality. They work on the mechanism of the “unfulfilled promise” that arises from the ambivalence between the two poles, and on the social expectations solicited by constant recourse to the second pole by corporations, the media, institutions and parties. They take advantage of the technologies, rhetoric, symbols, discourses, practices, forms of social cooperation, forms of social relationships, and diffused skills that the participative-mobilizing pole evokes, shapes, legitimates, spreads and assembles.

This set of processes can be viewed, to follow Vitale’s suggestions, as a “structure of opportunities” for movements, for electoral attempts by movements and for party-movements. However, they sometimes include these elements in ways that are not dissimilar to those used by firms, the media and the institutions, that is, to strengthen the first axis by using the second one, searching for a “catch-all” consensus. I agree with Aguilera that within contemporary social movements and movement-parties, the dialectical relationship between the two poles doesn’t disappear. However, the hybridization between the movement-form and the party-form can constitute an important democratic innovation, as well as a vehicle for the re-connection of popular classes to politics. While within the dialectics between the two poles in the economic, institutional and media spheres, the first pole is hegemonic with respect to the second, these current political experimentations may become a useful means to revert this hegemonic relationship. While they partially include the first, but also by virtue of this inclusion, they may delineate a field on which a counter-hegemony can be pursued.

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## A Response to Comments

### The Structural Mobilization Factors and the “Populist Cleavage”: Searching Connections between Social Change, Economy and Politics

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**Abstract:** The current political, economic, social and cultural changes are centred on the ambivalence between two poles: a regressive-oligarchic and a participative-mobilizing one. Between these two poles there are both complementarity and tensions. They are at the same time strictly connected, necessary to each other, and opposed. These two directions of social change and the relationships between them constitute a *structure* – intended as a social totality involving all social subsystems – that re-shapes the forms of collective actions, the discourses and organizational practises of social movements, the relationship between movements, electoral competition and parties, and the political field itself. This structure constitutes an opportunity structure for social movements and for the emergence of the party-movement as the form in which left-wing parties are re-defining themselves. Moreover, it consists of a series of social processes that have rendered scarcely effective theoretical paradigms such as the Political Opportunity Structure, the Resource Mobilization Theory, and the whole structural mobilization factors paradigm, as it modifies and re-shapes all the constitutive elements of this paradigms, as well as the relationship between these elements.

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**Keywords:** *Social Movements; Party-Movements; Political Participation; Oligarchy; Digital Capitalism; Social Structure.*

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