

## Multiple Temporalities of the Movements

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The clocks seem to be running faster these days. A new cycle of struggle explodes on the scene and then in a few short years it seems to have burnt out and passed on to another. Even the recent past quickly fades from view as we speed past. Cycles of struggle used to continue to develop over decades. Think of the waves of slave rebellions that emanated from the Caribbean through much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the communist agitation in the decades leading up to and following the Soviet 1917, or the anti-colonial revolts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even the explosion of movements across the world in 1968 extended at least throughout the 1970s. Rather than lamenting that contemporary movements are too brief and stunted, however, we should recognize the ways they are embedded in multiple temporalities that link them to the past and embed them in long-term political projects.

A standard narrative of recent cycles of struggle, limiting its vision to Europe and North America, goes something like this. The alterglobalization movements gained global visibility in Seattle in 1999 and reached their demise not long after the Genoa protests two years later; the encampments and occupations of the 2011 movement of squares seemed to be exhausted after Gezi Park was cleared in 2013; and the new electoral projects that mix with social movements – the success of national parties, such as Syriza and Podemos are most visible, but the municipal victories, such as that in Barcelona, are at least as important – have been the focus of much political energy since 2015. Moreover, this narrative of brief cycles and rapid extinction is often told in terms of failures and lessons learned, and thus passages to different – even opposite – organizational strategies. According to this view, for example, the errors of the alterglobalization movement, specifically its nomadic character, moving from one summit meeting to the next, from the WTO protests to those of the G8, was answered and redressed by the local, sedentary nature of the encampments and occupations. Similarly, the failure of both the alterglobalization movements and the movement of squares to achieve electoral, institutional change and their refusal to pose limited policy demands led to the formation of new parties and electoral coalitions. The narrative appears to trace the trajectory of a ping-pong ball, passing over to the opposite side each time a lesson is learned.

The impression of rapid change in social movement organization is often reinforced by the focus on media and communication: the swift rate of technological change gives the impression of accelerated rhythms of political shifts. The independent media centers of the alterglobalization movements, for example, contrast with the use of social media in the movement of squares and the electronic structures of “liquid democracy” experimented with by some new electoral formations. Technological innovations that

replace old communications systems seem to render obsolete also the old political and organizational strategies.

The essays in this special issue, from different perspectives and in different national contexts, all resist treating technology as determining political horizons. They perform the important function of bringing communications technologies back to the political terrain and posing organizational strategies in centre stage. Highlighting political dynamics in this way provides a foundation for situating contemporary movements in a longer temporal frame and developing richer relationships to the past.

There is some truth, of course, in the narrative of rapid shifts, and even oppositions, in movement strategies. It helpfully brings into relief some of the primary organizational challenges and the alternatives that the movements face, such as how to link local revolt to national and global forces, how or if to engage the traditional structures of political representation, and how to confront the established institutions of power. We lose a lot, however, when we fail to recognize the ways in which the organization strategies, critical standpoints, and political aspirations of today's movements are linked to and continue to develop those of the recent and more distant past.

One counternarrative disrupts the standard periodization of rapid discontinuities simply by expanding the geographical frame beyond the North Atlantic, recognizing especially the profound connections and affiliations with movements to the South. Many in the alterglobalization movement, for example, were inspired by the Zapatista experience, which began several years earlier and continues today; the 2011 encampments in Spain, Greece, the US, and elsewhere drew, obviously, from the struggles in Tunisia and Egypt that began that earlier year; and the prominent electoral projects since 2015, especially those in Spain, are motivated and informed by Latin American governing experiences, especially in those Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador over the previous decade. Once the geographical frame is expanded, the dates and duration of each struggle shift.

Profound temporal shifts also result from considering how some recent movements extend long national trajectories. In some respects, for example, the 15M in Spain in 2011 reopened unresolved issues of the "transition to democracy" that emerged in the immediate post-dictatorship period. An even broader temporal arc is suggested by the way that the political project of Black Lives Matter, which shares many elements of the protest repertoire and media practices of Occupy, stretches back across a long history, ultimately highlighting the continuing need to wrestle with the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, reaffirming the goal of an abolition democracy.

A fuller view of contemporary movements emerges when we keep in mind their many, diverse temporalities. In addition to recognizing the shifts in emphasis among the three waves of the standard narrative I sketched earlier, then, we should see the profound continuity that runs throughout the last decades of struggle. One common element that emerges, for instance, is the aspiration to new forms of democracy. The successive phases – protesting at summit meetings, occupying squares, and even constructing new electoral coalitions – are really different faces of this larger project: to reveal the hollowness of the claims to democracy of the ruling system and to experiment with fuller forms of democratic participation. Contemporary social movements and radical electoral projects are not necessarily opposed from this perspective but, at least potentially, complementary.

This approach also helps us recognize that in most cases the movements of the recent decades did not fail but were defeated, by ideological and media forces, by the police, and by the ruling institutions. Whereas failure is closed in a dead end, political projects that suffer defeat live on beyond their death and are often reanimated in new form.

Recognizing diverse temporalities, then, has benefits not only for scholarship. The movements themselves are enriched by maintaining multiple attachments to the past. Just as important as learning lessons from mistakes, then, is recognizing the need and possibility to continue the projects of past movements and develop them in new ways.

### **About the Author**

#### *Michael Hardt*

Michael Hardt is author with Antonio Negri of *Assembly* (2017). They are also co-authors of the Empire trilogy – *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009) – as well as *Declaration* (2012). At Duke University he teaches in the Literature Program and is co-director of the Social Movements Lab. He serves as editor of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*.