From One Crisis to Another: Changing Patterns of Mass Mobilization and Politics

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Please note: This is an incomplete essay pointing to a larger project. Please do not cite
We live in a large puzzle about the sociopolitical consequences of the “Great Recession.” Unlike 20th century economic crises, the Great Depression of the 1930s, there seem to be few large changes in economic policy and political coalitions emerging from the Great Recession and there looks to be a restoration of the political and social status quo ante crisis (Helleiner 2014; Drezner, 2014). From the multiple miseries of the Great Depression, anti-democratic protectionist nationalism emerged in some countries, movement towards post-World War II social and economic reformism began in others, while in still others forces deadlocked over change. The Great Depression spawned multiple protests, but elite and policy realignments were very often supported and prodded by maturing, well-targeted mass mobilizations, whether favoring anti-democratic political arrangements or of expanding citizenship prerogatives to industrial working classes. In the Great Recession seven decades later, there was also widespread misery and social protest, but neither has fed substantial changes in elite alignment and economic policy outlooks.

How can we explain these differences? This essay is a preliminary examination that compares the political and mass mobilizational contexts of the Great Depression after 1929 and those we can perceive from the global financial crisis after 2007-2008. This focus comes with a caveat. We are neither trying to explain “crisis” in general nor to provide a model that explains why different alternatives won or lost. Instead, via observing differences in mobilizational trends and practices between the two crises we are seeking insights that might help explain why, in today’s crisis, some alternatives are marginalized and others have lacked ambition. Our main claim will be that when the crisis happens matters greatly with respect to the organization of large national political cleavage patterns and ambient mobilization models – whether they are “rising,” “declining” or in uncertain transition. Because our discussion is about differences in the politically destabilizing and reconfiguring effects of two epochal capitalist crises we need to begin with brief portraits of what happened in each.

I. Cleavages, Coalitions, and Popular Mobilization in the Great Depression

The Great Depression was the product of simmering national economic problems in the aftermath of World War I that exploded after the collapse of the US stock market in October 1929. Because the US had become central in international financial arrangements but lacked both the toolbox and ambition to manage this, the American crisis proved contagious. The post-crash American decline exposed international financial policy management issues between the US and Europeans, in particular about managing joint problems around the gold standard and post-World
I debts. The consequences were market collapses, financial sector failures, huge growth and job losses, and widespread misery. The Great Depression has since provided the economics profession with puzzles to solve, a vast data base, and huge incentives to explain what happened in order to prevent such collapses from recurring (for some results see Keynes 1936; Friedman and Schwartz, 1963; Temin 1992; Eichengreen 1992, 2015; Bernanke 2000; Kindleberger, 2013;).

**The Great Depression as Catalyst for Change?**

National circumstances varied greatly in the interwar period, along with the interests and political conditions behind them. Peter Gourevitch’s classic book on different crises argues that in almost all national cases (he examines the US, Germany, France, the UK, and Sweden) the severity of the Great Depression broke pre-existing elite coalitional deals and opened to new coalitions and economic policies (Gourevitch 1986). We should begin, therefore, with a concise map of these processes.

Germany’s crisis was the most tumultuous and the results most menacing, as we know. The Weimar Republic was riven by revanchiste anti-democratic nationalism and divisive economic problems often connected to the Versailles Treaty. Pre-crisis protests were endemic, in particular from anti-democratic right-wing groups and a hard-line Communist party. Things came to a head in the economic collapse of the Great Depression, after which the Nazis took over and replaced Weimar by their murderous one-party regime.¹ France’s later, gentler depression was confronted by divided political elites. Until the German invasion in 1940, extensive Popular Front left reforms were partially retracted by the economically more orthodox governments that followed. In the UK, after 1918 British elites attempted to reestablish the pre-war liberal trade-imperial order despite challenges from an expanding union movement and a rising Labour Party. In the crisis, coalition governments dominated by the right pursued long-standing liberal orthodoxy that created widespread misery. In the US the 1929 crash followed years of reckless financial exuberance under a Hoover Republican presidency that pursued liberal policy orthodoxy until the 1932 election of Roosevelt. Then followed extensive experimentation, first at producer group corporatism, and then, to financial and regulatory reforms to reign in banks, new agricultural support policies, and the beginnings of an American welfare state in social security

¹ Gourevitch notes that, horrific politics aside, the autarchic, militarist Germany the Nazis created was the most successful economic recovery among his cases
and poverty programs, a complicated path that was partly a product of electoral concerns about millions of immigrant workers becoming voters and the eruption of militant industrial trade unionism. The result was a reformist union movement attached electorally and in lobby-like forms to a Democratic party also tied to Wall Street and the a segregationist South. Finally, in Sweden, economic problems prodded a new political alliance between social democrats and agrarians (the so-called Cow Trade) that began six decades of social democratic hegemony, founding the precocious Swedish social model.

**The Great Depression as high point of 20th century mass mobilization**

Gourevitch’s goal is to explain how the Great Depression dislodged existing “treaties” between large social forces to produce new deals. He focuses on the impacts of international shocks on pre-existing national ruling social coalitions, taking into account different forms of representation and state institutions, to explain patterns of crisis policy change. Beneath these categories lay varying national production profiles (types of production, service sectors, and regulations), intermediate associations (political parties and interest groups), national political rules, institutions, and constitutions, and ambient economic ideologies. In the argument that follows we want to propose a small, but significant, addendum to this, concerning predominant patterns of popular mobilization and political processes.

We have learned much from recent “contentious politics” studies (della Porta, Kriesi, and Rucht eds 2009; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Imig and Tarrow 2001; Tarrow 2011;). Despite incessant preventive efforts by established elites, protest mobilization has been a permanent fixture in all societies, and the years around the Great Depression were no exception. Many, if not most, protests connected to economic disruptions such as sudden, very high, and lasting unemployment, loss of economic security, bleak futures, and new poverty. Most protests were local, narrowly issue-focused, and populist, denouncing elites in vehement ways. In this analysis, however, we want to highlight the most important protest mobilizations of them all, those tied most closely with the basic political cleavages of the day.

In interwar continental Europe, if to a much smaller degree in Anglophone democracies, consensus on liberal parliamentary democracy was fragile, particularly in relatively new nations whose strong nationalist feelings had been teased to a high pitch by World War I and where politics had recently been undemocratic. In the interwar period in such places pro and anti-democratic social movements and mobilizations were the central actors in a basic standoff
between democracy and modernized authoritarianism. In other places this cleavage, when present, was subordinate to more modern patterns of left-right cleavage within democratic institutions whose central issue was whether or not to expand political and social citizenship to the working and lower classes. The historic co-existence of these two fundamental but very different political cleavages made the years around the Great Depression extremely turbulent. At stake was nothing less than whether industrial societies should be authoritarian or democratic.

These overlapping and fundamental cleavages were not simply elite ideological conflicts, but also, and to a degree rarely found since then, based on popular mobilization. A few examples help illustrate this. Precarious Italian democracy fell to the mass organizing skills and popular enthusiasms of the Fascist movement in the years just after World War I. Mussolini and supporters then ruled through top-down authoritarian mass organizations, harsh policing, and street theater to promote tightly controlled fascist enthusiasm. Post-1918 Germany was a place of constant protests, coup attempts, demonstrations, street fighting and mass movements. On the left were Communist and democratic Socialist mass mobilizations and on the right, mobilizations of traditional nationalists and modern fascists in factories, streets, beer halls, and elections. All of this, in the crisis, eventuated in the Nazi regime, with its own top-down authoritarian mass organizations, harsh policing, and manipulated mass mobilizations. In countries where democracy survived, mass organizations and mass-membership parties of the left confronted elites over expanding social and political citizenship, as in France, Sweden, and, in different ways, the USA (Weir and Skocpol 1985). The Labour Party-trade union couple in the UK had its less happy version of mass organization-party mobilization that failed to dislodge traditional elites and economic policy orthodoxy.

If there was great variety in protest activity, the Great Depression-interwar years were arguably the historic high point of modern mass-organized protest and political mobilization, usually with firm ties to mass membership parties of left and Right. Whether the fundamental struggle was for or against democracy or left vs right within democracy, a 20th-century pattern of mobilization then made its greatest breakthroughs. In the background was a long accumulation of mobilizational experiences towards modern 20th century forms that were useful both for those seeking to expand democracy and those who sought to prevent it. To win, different actors needed to incorporate large numbers of people into dynamic and encompassing organizations around broad, plausible visions for change that brought different aggrieved groups under unified banners.
There were different models for this, but German Social Democracy provided a generic blueprint. It had union supporters based on labor market issues, youth, womens’, and cultural organizations focusing on important collateral matters, all connected to a mass-membership party that provided political and programmatic leadership, altogether aiming to create a “counter-society” to socialize adherents to certain unique values and goals and block out contrasting external influences. The interwar-crisis years brought a multiplicity of sub-types of this model ranging from the quasi-military organizations of Third International Communists, the much less encompassing organizations of labor and politics in Anglophone democracies, to the mass political fighting machines of fascists and Nazis. As Robert Michels noted at the time, in the German model the role of bureaucratically-effective professional organizers was central, as it was in other forms (Schorske 1955; Michels 1966). Retrospectively, these modern mass-mobilization-based social and political organizations reached their highest strengths and forms in the years around the Great Depression (for lefts, see Bartolini 2000, chapter 2; and Sassoon 1996, part one, and for rights, see Hobsbawm, 1994, chapter 4).

II. Changing Political and Mobilizational Patterns in the Great Recession: Restoring the Status Quo?

Several decades later, in the Great Recession, there was also widespread misery and considerable social protest, although neither as dramatic as in the Great Depression. There were also few profound changes in elite ruling coalitions and, once the worst was over, what emerged looked likely a mild freshening up of the status quo ante. Historic changes in the forms of basic political cleavage structures and of the forms of popular mobilization have been important to this. Before this, however, we need a brief description of the Great Recession itself.

Born in the USA?

The “Great Recession” started after 2007 when an American housing bubble began to burst (Chinn and Frieden, ch 2-4; Blinder ch. 2,3). In the 1990s the Clinton administration had stimulated home ownership, deregulated financial institutions, and promoted American globalization strategies (Panitch and Gindin 2012, part VI). Alan Greenspan, US Federal Reserve head from 1987 to 2006, then lowered interest rates after 9/11 and kept them low for several years, dropping borrowing costs on everything. Greenspan also convinced himself that self-regulating markets invariably priced products accurately, that financial innovation spurred
economic success, and that the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century had brought a “great moderation” of steady, inflation-free growth.\textsuperscript{2}

It was the collapsing housing bubble that began exposing the darker mechanisms at work in the financial sector. The real estate and finance industries had used new “sub prime” mortgages and misleading marketing techniques. The financial sector had repackaged mortgages into derivative products structured to disguise risk. Buyers of these products then purchased credit default swaps from risk-insuring businesses to hedge their bets, while the financial sector profited from the loyal help of rating agencies. In general, the quicker things were turned over rather than held as collateral, the greater the profits, leading the financial sector into dangerous overleveraging (Fliqstein and Shin 2007; Fliqstein and Goldstein 2011). As the real estate market grew hotter and house values climbed, homeowners took on greater debt, often to find themselves over their heads when the bubble burst. And when the questionable value of mortgage-based derivatives led CDS holders to cash in their insurance, over-leveraged financial institutions and the unregulated ”shadow banking” system were in mortal danger.

The first threatening signs appeared in mid-2007. But in September, when the US Treasury and Fed failed to prevent Lehman Brothers from bankruptcy, panic followed. The next day AIG, a huge insurance operation loaded with CDS contracts, received $85 billion to stay afloat. In a few months the stock market lost half of its value and the overnight supply of commercial paper, along with credit more generally, had frozen. The “real economy” stalled, consumption and growth stopped, pensions and savings shrunk, companies and real estate loan operations failed, unemployment shot up, government revenue streams diminished, and public debt rose.

The experts, including US Fed chief Bernanke, the Bush and Obama Treasury teams, and many economists, recalling lessons from the Great Depression, converged on short-term “neo-Keynesianism” to stop the downward spiral. There followed huge Fed interventions – several trillions of US dollars, and massive emergency funding legislation (TARP in 2008, ARRA in 2009) to inject funds into the US economy (Blinder 2013, ch 7,8; Burtless and Gordon, 2011; Helleiner 2011). The contagion of crisis from Wall Street and the City of London to continental European banks demonstrated the extent and density of global financial sector interconnections.

\textsuperscript{2} Some analysts also accused a foreign culprit, China, of manipulating exchange rates to export more and Americans to live beyond their means in ways that created an untenable international “savings glut” (Streeck 2011; Eichengreen 2012; Pettis 2013).
and called forth similar international public policy responses. These efforts prevented the worst in the US, even if estimates of the Great Recession’s total cost were calculated to be at least $14 trillion (Atkinson, Luttrell, Rosenblum 2013; see also Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013). Seven years after the first signs of crisis, the US and UK, at the origins of crisis problems, have had slow recoveries. The US suffered one two-year long recession ending in June 2009, during which unemployment rose from 5 to 9.5%, eventually falling to 5.3% by June 2015. Some even hoped that US crisis responses would start a new Keynesian era (the gist of Eichengreen’s 2015 analysis, for example).

Crisis à la Euro

Europeans initially hoped to escape the “American” crisis, but the collapse of the global financial sector obliged them to acknowledge contagion of dubious practices to its own financial systems. Their first responses went smoothly. The European Central Bank (ECB) supplied liquidity to keep credit flowing, closely coordinating its actions with other central banks (Quaglia, Easterwood and Holmes 2009, 74-75). EU members then agreed to pursue common policy objectives in their own national ways (ibid 76-77; European Commission 2009; Bastasin 2012). First came bailouts, then stimulus packages, both organized around coordinated general objectives and different national paths, totaling 3.3-4 percent of EU GDP. Financial sector regulatory reform was urgent and a ‘High Level Group on financial supervision’ recommended higher capital requirements, reforms to credit-rating agencies, and new asset accounting techniques, and concluded generally that those parts of the financial system with systemic importance needed new supervision and new EU regulatory oversight (Pisani-Ferry and Sapir 2009; Ross 2011, chapter 9).

The Euro-zone crisis that followed was fed by deep flaws in the EU’s Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). EMU was originally focused on rules to squeeze down inflation and debt. (Heipertz and Verdun, 2010). It lacked compliance mechanisms, emergency plans, and the ability to provide transfers to counter shocks, however. When the 1998 choice of EMU members

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3 Internationally, some had “better” crises than others. Canada escaped the worst, did better because of better competitive and budgetary situations. Poland avoided recession altogether.

4 The G-7 rapidly convened the G-20, enlarging discussions beyond the rich North. The November 2008 G20 meeting concluded that members should use fiscal stimulation and initiated an avalanche of good international intentions.
came, the Euro zone included poorer, peripheral countries and richer, northerners. Their differences, in a context of rapid globalization, newly open capital flows, and one-size-fits-all Euro-zone interest rates, encouraged divergence rather than convergence. Richer EMU northerners exported to less developed members and then re-exported profits to help these peripheral economies finance more imports. This system obscured economic differences between EMU members and tempted poorer ones toward risky debt-floated development strategies (Fernandez-Villaverde, Garicano, Santos 2013; Aglietta and Brand 2013, chapter 2; Blyth, 2011, chapter 3). After 2008 interactions between the global financial crisis and Euro-zone problems became dangerous. Extensive lending after Lehman Brothers, meant to counteract credit-liquidity freezes, prevent financial failures, and stimulate collapsing real economies, in a situation of rapidly rising expenses due to rising automatic stabilizer costs and declining tax revenues, fed increased national indebtedness everywhere. Peripheral EMU member countries were already in difficult because of economically unhealthy growth strategies (Mitsopoulous and Pelagadis 2012; Jones 2012; Dullien and Schwartz 2009).

The breaking point came in autumn 2009 when a new Greek government announced that its predecessor had cooked the national books to cover a budget deficit that was four times the EMU limit. Greek bond interest rate premiums for Greece shot up, pointing to imminent national insolvency. EU and Euro-zone members then had to decide what to do. It took six costly months before member states could decide to “save the Euro.” Loans were provided by EU member states, the EU, and the IMF to Greece, then Ireland, Portugal, and Cyprus, with eventual help to Spanish banks. The loans came with very tough conditions enjoining harsh austerity and supply-side structural reforms. For borrowers growth then dropped, unemployment shot up, and cutbacks had devastating social consequences. In some cases—in Ireland and Spain, and to a lesser degree, Portugal and Cyprus, these economic cold showers eventually gave way to anaemic growth. Greece was the exception. Loans in 2010 and 2012 had pushed Greek national debt up to 177% of GDP by 2015, an unsustainable burden necessitating new loans and incessant EU political conflict.5 Euro-zone crisis decisions were reached in asymmetrical intergovernmental bargaining biased towards economically stronger northern countries, Germany in the lead. Beyond cold-shower “internal devaluations” for the debtors, it was also necessary to remodel EMU economic

5 The author of one of the best monographs on the Greek concludes, pithily, that the “…Greek sovereign debt crisis serves to remind all parties that they got it wrong and that they keep getting it wrong” (Panagiototarea 2013, 8).
governance in ways that placed greater constraints on national fiscal and budgetary powers. As the crisis ground on these new constraints, understood in many countries as coming from outside, tarnished the EU’s already declining legitimacy. Euro-zone crisis fire-fighting policies thus hurt a great deal and greatly accentuated north-south differences. Debtor EMU members contracted draconian reimbursement, debt- and deficit- reduction schedules. For Greece things became much worse than needed while others suffered unduly from policy harshness and institutional inefficiency. Beyond “austerianism,” EMU reforms brought new invasions of national economic policy sovereignty, usually through technocratic mechanisms in the European Commission lacking clear democratic mandates.

For the Eurozone as a whole negative economic growth lasted from 2008 until mid-2013, including a second recessionary period caused by the crisis, as shown in Chart 1, with weak recovery finally leading to .4% growth in 2015.

![Chart 1](chart1.png)

**Chart 1**  
**Euro Area (18) GDP Growth Rate**

Source: Eurostat – code: tec00115 (27 March 2105)

Table 1 provides a useful supplement for following the growth losses of different Euro-zone countries, particularly those hardest hit by debt and austerity problems.
Unemployment and youth unemployment, a very important indicator, both went up substantially in the Eurozone in general, as Charts 2 and 3 show, while long-term unemployment, which had only recently been reduced in the EU, doubled.
Chart 2
Euro Area (18) Unemployment Rate

Source: Eurostat – code: une_rt_a (27 March 2015)

Chart 3
Euro Area (18) Youth Unemployment Rate (under 25)

Source: Eurostat – code: une_rt_a (27 March 2015)
These Euro zone aggregate numbers disguise the very large disparities between Euro zone northerners, who managed to get through the crisis better, the Euro-zone countries who had “less good” crises, and, most importantly, those deeply-indebted Euro zone peripheral countries, obliged to undertake “internal devaluations” who did much worse, as Table 2 indicates (see also Armingeon and Baccaro 2012).

Table 2: Euro-zone growth and unemployment disaggregated:

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Youth unemployment has been an especially critical problem in EU Europe and in Euro zone countries for some time. Table 3 demonstrates this over the longer term since the Maastricht Treaty. In particular it indicates the spectacular rise of youth unemployment in the worst-hit Euro zone countries, particularly those obliged to undergo “internal devaluations,” since 2008.
“Internal devaluations” have thus left poorer EMU countries in persistent austerity (Petmesidou and Guillén 2015; de la Porte and Heins 2015; Theodoropoulou 2015). New growth, where it now exists, has been very low and relatively jobless. Even the best-educated young people face grim employment prospects, placing strains on their families, delaying entry into the workforce, and creating career limbo. Poverty and social exclusion have gone up, especially in these most afflicted countries (Eurostat 2014; EU Commission 2013a,b; ETUI 2013; Diamond, Liddle, and Sage 2015, chapter 2). Migration to better-off EU countries is possible, and it has indeed grown, especially among the young, but intra-EU mobility has always been limited by differences in culture, language, and “foreign” places that reserve better jobs for locals.

It was inevitable that the crisis would worsen the EU’s chronic legitimacy problems. Throughout most of the crisis Eurobarometer surveys showed that favorable opinions of the EU were in rapid decline and pessimism about the future much higher, with trends stronger in southern member states (Debomy 2013; Walton and Zielonka 2013). The spring 2013 Pew Global Survey reported declining support for the European project - only 28% believed that European integration had helped their economies, with the loss of confidence particularly strong.
among younger people (Pew 2013). Euro-skeptical attitudes and political currents have rapidly spread (Torreblanca and Leonard 2013). Such surveys are but snapshots of opinions that could be evanescent, and the Pew Global Survey for 2015 indeed showed signs of a slight uptick (Pew 2015). Fluctuating opinions have also correlated with crisis election results. European voters, excepting in Germany, have repeatedly removed the incumbent governments that had presided over crisis responses. Fianna Fail electoral domination in Ireland, which had seemed eternal, has ended. Social democratic governments in Portugal, Spain, and Greece were all replaced by right-wing regimes that rapidly became more precarious, with the 2015 Syriza success in Greece perhaps premonitory. The apparent defeat in the crisis of Latin European social democracy may be particularly significant because Europe’s post dictatorship south had become a bright spot for social democracy after socialist parties successfully harnessed modernization processes after joining the EU.6 The 2013 Italian elections went beyond firing incumbents. In a campaign saturated by EU and Euro zone issues, nearly 25% of the vote went the Five Star Movement (35% of those between 18-34), a party led by a professional entertainer whose appeal was to refuse the traditional Italian political game. At about the same time, new Greek elections saw PASOK decimated, the center-right returned to power, with Syriza, a left party whose indignation was clearer than its proposals, making more progress than anyone else, leading toward its January 2015 success. In general, the crisis has generally been good for protest parties of left and right. It has also accentuated divisions between the Eurozone’s north and south. Northerners, arrayed around Germany, have insisted on the “cold shower” approach for stricken southerners who had hoped for more, a significant matter because EU southerners had been among the most positively “Europeans” prior to the crisis. The crisis has also deepened division between EMU “ins” and “outs,” encouraged Euro-skeptics in the UK and other places, and laid the foundations of a more complex, “geometrically variable” EU.

Are the Times a-Changin? Great Recession Protest and Mobilization

If one believed, as “economistic” left analysts and “relative deprivationists” have tended to do, that sudden, sharp, shocks to popular living standards promote popular protest and mobilization, and further, that young people are more likely to protest and mobilize than older ones, then one would have expected the Great Recession to be protest-ridden. Of course, by now

6 These defeats are even more significant in a context in which European social democratic parties in general have been slowly losing electoral support (Moschonas 2011, Charlemagne 2015).
we should all know, after decades of strident protest around lifestyle, religion, citizenship rights, international political issues, and other non-economic matters that people are also very capable of “unconventional” political behavior for “cultural” reasons. Still, major economic crises upset many people, whether economically, culturally, or both. What do we see in the Great Recession?

Crisis in the USA has had large social costs, but the American context made protest, whether economic or cultural, quite difficult. Crisis response policies were direct and effective and, despite blocked American federalism, the US’ strong central bank and determined political elites possessed considerable leverage, and its single national jurisdiction and favorable international financial position allowed the beginnings of slow recovery before it emerged in most of Europe. Uncertainty about the US’ economic health persists, even with new growth and declining unemployment, because wage levels are stagnant, underemployment high, social mobility in decline, and younger generations face career and life course worries. Threats of “middle class” hollowing out by technological change, globalization, and growing inequality have become fundamental partisan political issues. However, when compared to the Great Depression, with its widespread populist movements, factory occupations, hunger marches, veteran’s mobilizations, leftist agitations, Father Coughlins, and Townsend Movements, not to speak of rapid changes in electoral balances and party platforms, protest reactions and mobilizations since 2007-8 have been limited. The ebullition of harder-right movements like the Tea Party inside the Republican Party, are an exception (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), even if their anti-immigrant, anti-statist, hyper-liberal appeals long predated the crisis.7 The issues, direct democratic repertories, uses of social media, and temporal ties with the Arab spring of the 2011-12 Occupy movement have been endlessly discussed by the media and progressive intellectuals forces hoping to reset the Obama agenda on US inequality. Pointing to and analyzing growing inequality and declining social mobility has had a long history among the American left-of-center intelligentsia, however. On-going “cultural” mobilizations around abortion, same-sex marriage, peace issues, climate change and environmental matters, anti-racism and anti-gun crusades, and boycotts of various kinds, including of Israel, have continued, but without prominent ties to the economic crisis. It is tempting to assert that US protest and mobilization in response to crisis was more or less similar to what had been happening on prior to it (Edsall 2015). US protests may or

7 Similarities between these movements and their European hard-right counterparts movements are often overlooked by Americano-centric analysts.
may not articulate with great national partisan conflicts or huge American lobbies, but the US has been riven for decades by partisan mobilization around fundamental social choices between a neoliberal and culturally conservative new Republicanism and a defensive Democratic “liberalism,” both cultural and economic.

In terms of crisis protest and mobilization, Europe looks both similar and different to the US, with differences following mainly from the Euro zone imbroglio. Salvaging the Euro has thus far involved clumsy intergovernmental decision-making, an imposition of harsh policies by some on others, and, by indirection, a second recession and slow growth even for those who were not forced to borrow. Positioning in crisis situations has varied from country to country, but northern vs southern-peripheral differences stand out. Indignado “progressive” protests against austerity, particularly in Spain, have been highly publicized by analysts and the media, for many of the same reasons that Occupy attracted attention in the US, with recurrent analogous movements, as in Ukraine, keeping memories fresh (see Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2014; Ancelovici, Dufour, Nez. eds 2015; Ancelovici 2015; della Porta and Mattoni, eds 2015; della Porta 2015; Antentas 2015). Indignado movements, however widely reported, were not particularly contagious to other economically stricken Euro-zone countries like Portugal and Ireland, despite similar conditions. Other types of protest of more “traditional” kinds may have been more prominent in stricken Euro-zone countries and elsewhere. The anti-globalization movement, which long predated the Great Recession, demonstrated against the G-20 in London in 2009 and on other occasions, including agitation against new international trade treaties like that proposed between Canada and the EU. Official and unofficial strikes have recurred, particularly in Greece (well over two dozen “general strikes” during crisis moments), Spain, and, to a lesser degree, Portugal, against creditor mandated cutbacks and reforms, but also in France, often against government efforts to control budgets through cuts and social program reforms, the UK, and even Germany, where unions have mobilized against lagging wage levels (Stan, Helle and Erne 2015). Educational budgets and policy reforms have elicited repeated student protests. Not to be overlooked are strident mobilizations by economically threatened interests in transport sectors (blockades), agriculture, and social services. Alongside these actions there have also been recurrent “cultural” mobilizations around issues common across advanced societies, such as same sex marriage, abortion, peace, climate change and the environment, and immigration.
Several things stand out from this overview. First, there have been elements of protest novelty in some Euro zone movements, including Indignado insistence on “prefigurative” direct democratic procedures (i.e. mistrust of representative democracy), the use of new social media, plus the growing anti-EU sentiments of street-level protests (della Porta 2015). In addition, there has also been a great deal of strident militancy in Greece and other peripheral EMU places. the rapidity with which movements of the harder left have accentuated their anti-Europeanism in the crisis to complement nationalist anti-capitalist opposition to globalization has been striking, as has how movements of the harder right did the same to complement nationalist xenophobia. Even more prominent, however, is how rapidly much of the new protest energy in the crisis turned to partisanism and party formation within existing democratic European polities and not against them. Playing the partisan-electoral game from the harder left has for some time been a European trend in Europe, with forms depending much on constitutions and electoral systems. Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and the Italian Five-Star Movement are new crisis-stimulated examples. Similar trends have been even more notable on the harder right, embodied in the Front National, UKIP, Geert Wilders, the Finns, the Danish Peoples’ party and a great many others, most pre-existing, but profiting from, the crisis.

**Larger Stories?**

The recent global financial crisis has produced a great deal of popular unhappiness that has prodded considerable diversified protest mobilization in the US and Europe despite differences in crisis experiences, even if is too early for a precise count. Some larger trends stand out, however. First, Great Recession protest and mobilization does not look to be anywhere near as widespread, tumultuous, and politically significant as what occurred around the Great Depression. Next, if there have been numerous well-publicized protest and mobilization novelties, there may have been more “traditional” actions such as strikes, actions of the hard right and hard left, and “cultural liberal” actions that fit well within longer term mobilizational models. Thirdly, following pre-crisis precedents, much of the protest and mobilization that has occurred has ultimately channeled into partisan form, either towards a few genuinely new parties or, more often, by strengthening partisan groups already established prior to 2007 – hard left groups rejecting social democracy, Greens, and xenophobic hard Right parties that have opportunistically amplified nationalist anti-Europeanization credentials. Outcomes here have depended on constitutional and electoral systems. Entry costs for newer parties have been lowest
in open proportional representation systems and, while majoritarian systems have been touched by these changes as well, outsider successes have been more difficult, sometimes leading indignant groups to “burrow from within” traditional parties, à la Tea-Partyists in the US and anti-Europeans elements in the British Conservative party. Next, despite considerable commotion on the partisan and electoral front, the crisis has but rarely produced serious protest challenges to the pre-crisis status quo (with Syriza in Greece being one, in the most severely crisis-wracked country of all, that seems to have been severely mauled in its efforts). Finally, the Great Recession has thus, at least to this moment, produced a status quo ante equilibrium, in strong contrast to the widespread political and policy changes emerging from the Great Depression.

Specialists have provided important elements for analyzing the backgrounds of these crisis results. Partisan and electoral cleavages have changed fundamentally since the 1930s, for example. The widespread rejection of democratic institutions that made the Great Depression period look like a struggle to the death between democracy and authoritarianism is no longer prominent, albeit with a great deal of help from World War II, the Cold War, and 1989.\(^8\) This has left the classic left-right cleavage dominant, but recent arguments claim that there have been new partisan-electoral cleavages emerging alongside it (Kriesi et al 2008, part 3; Kreisi et al 2013; della Porta 2013; Hutter 2014; Kriesi 2014). On the left, “cultural-libertarian” issues about lifestyle, basic rights, individual freedoms, the environment, war and peace, and several have become salient in protests, in part in the wake of 1960-70s rebellions – that are orthogonal to, and often competitive with, the left’s focus on economics and distributive questions (Kitschelt 1994; Bailey et al 2014). On the Right, nationalist anti-immigrant xenophobia emerged from slow beginnings in the 1970s, and has recently added anti-European and anti-globalization appeals to its political repertory, posing serious problems for the liberal center right. Hard left movements and parties have emerged from the same constellation of changes. It was this left that promoted mass protests against globalization at WTO and G7 meetings beginning at Seattle in 1999 and then institutionalized transnational “social forums,” converging on sovereignist-

\(^8\) There are a few older-style crypto-fascist movements, however, like Greece’s Golden Dawn, Jobbik in Hungary, and Svoboda and Right Sector in Ukraine, and other hard right parties have roots in fascist past orientations – here the Front National, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the FPÖ in Austria stand out (Löwy 2014).
nationalist lines, absent the hard right’s xenophobia and with a strong dose of “old left” voluntarism and statism arguing that mobilized national energy could break the molds of globalization and Europeanization.

Perhaps the most important cause of these changes has been the transformation of the policy and political repertories of key actors in the traditional left-right cleavage. Prior to the 1970s inflation and oil crises, and during the “post-war settlement” and high Cold War years, lefts and rights alternated in power by managing economic matters that was convincing to broad constituencies because high levels of economic growth facilitated credible reformism. This dynamic was broken by the collapse of Bretton Woods, the success of neo-liberalism, and, over time, financial and other forms of globalization. The 1980s and 1990s saw both center-lefts and center-rights obliged to manage economies within much narrower constraints that enjoined more open, flexible markets and brought lower levels of economic growth, often at the expense of the industrial workers whose protective organizations were in decline and of post-war social policies.

Another strong contributory cause was the triumph of revolutionary new media and electoral techniques. As party leaderships of the center left and center right became ever more dependent on policy architects with the necessary expertise to cope with the new economic environment, and innovative and highly technical electoral mobilization techniques devised by pollster-strategists created new ways of chasing fragmenting constituencies. On result was that in the area of political conflict occupied by traditional left-right actors, to cite Peter Mair, “…party as such appears less and less necessary to processes of interest representation, aggregation or intermediation. The articulation of popular interests and demands now occurs more and more often outside the party world, with the preferred role of parties being that of the receiver of signals that emanate from the media or the wider society…” (Mair 2013, 93-94). The core of these changes “…is the ascendancy of the party in public office. Parties have reduced their presence in the wider society and become part of the state. They have become agencies that govern…rather than represent…” (97). In practice, partisan players that had once been seen as bearers of broad and publicly understandable policy alternatives became a combination of presentable leaders, “scientific” electoralists sitting in the political center and seeking ways to buy in voters in the most sophisticated ways conceivable, plus staffs of professional policy experts highly trained to manage small pieces of European and global capitalism in the slightly different ways that might ensure governmental longevity. In the Great Recession moment, this
has meant worriedly trying to “manage the crisis” economically while avoiding losing elections and, more important, avoiding the very large costs of things getting too far out of control, which could include reforms seen as reckless by large market actors. In themselves this new set of roles and tasks strongly precluded Great Recession alternatives other than restoring the status quo ante.

It could be that it is the next large cause, the decline of traditional mass organizational politics, that most differentiates protest responses to the Great Recession from those of the Great Depression. The Great Depression brought significant changes in dominant political coalitions and economic policies in most wealthy countries and discussion of these changes should begin, as in Peter Gourevitch’s argument, with realignments among well-structured basic sociopolitical forces, in particular, producer groups. But the years around the Great Depression also revealed the strong positions of mass parties and mass organizations, whether anti-democratic or social democratic, that were then at their historical zeniths of strategic clarity and mobilizing power. Political parties were deeply rooted in civil society through mass memberships and multiple mobilizing activities that had developed over decades, beginning in the prior century. These parties were also most often connected to like-minded mass organizational “counter cultures,” a large part of whose business was to lead citizens and voters to believe in specific utopias, large collective identities, and in the importance and feasibility of big picture political platforms. During this critical moment it was also the case these parties and mass organizations simultaneously represented their social bases and manipulated them and as they did, they played substantial roles in the large changes that occurred.

The processes that transformed parties into electoral machines, ‘agencies that govern…rather than represent,’ and sophisticated managers of complicated market economies and societies in the last quarter of the 20th century had as their complement the decline and relative marginalization of this earlier mass organizational world. The parties themselves – that both media and scholars now call “center” left and “center” right, tried to sustain vague ideological profiles tied to earlier times, but their self-conceptions, personnel, and vote-producing practices were profoundly different and had much looser connections with civil society. Deeper social change connected with changing social structures – deindustrialization from automation and globalization, rapid shifts to service economies, new individualism from educational changes, consumption styles, and the great power of new media – led both to the “professionalization” of mass organizations (often transforming them into lobbies) and the
decline of some of the most important among them, including trade unions, which were also being attacked politically as capitalist societies embraced neo-liberalism. In short, mass organizational mobilization that sought to incorporate social protest impulses into a “big tent” of connected interests slowly lost much of its importance. Compared to mobilization in the Great Depression, its day seemed to have past.

Conclusions: New Political Discourses and Futures?

The relative decline of mass parties and mass organizations has not meant the decline or disappearance of protest and large mobilizations. Contentious politics is alive and well, seen not only in narrow issue-focused ways, but also in the proliferation of “rebel” political parties of left and right that have made significant appearances over the Great Recession moment. Civil society is clearly active, but in very different ways from the 1930s. The “center” parties of left and right – entities that now officially stand for the left-right cleavage - tend to lead governments and come out ahead in elections, but they no longer “represent” civil society as they once did, even if they strive mightily to link to and “loyalize” different groups of voters. Many citizens still insist more forcefully, however. Relatively narrow issue-oriented protest mobilizations, often “cultural,” can retain their autonomy and still target satisfaction through existing democratic politics, whether by forming a strong enough lobby that center left and right parties find hard to ignore, or seeking representation through legal litigation. What has changed is that such issue-oriented protests can refuse full integration into the programs for economic management that are the central concern of centrist parties. Other, and broader, forms of contentious politics - harder left political movements that refuse centrist economic management, Greens, with environmentalist platforms for economic change, or harder right movements with their anti-globalization nationalist and xenophobic alternatives – are now also serious players. What is most significant about both these types of “contentious politics” is the relative rapidity with which they move from street-level politics to assume partisan forms. As earlier noted, practically everywhere in European proportional representation systems we now find hard right xenophobic and anti-European right-wing parties winning noticeable shares of the vote and sometimes participating in governing coalitions. Analogous phenomena are not absent in majoritarian and presidential systems either, whose higher entry costs for new parties encourage the “burrowing from within” centrist party strategies as seen in the USA, in France, the UK and elsewhere.
All this may seem self-evident. Market structures have been changing because of globalization and Europeanization. Governance structures have also been changing in large part because these economic changes have removed many of the levers for national regulation that existed earlier. Governing in democracies has changed because it is now necessary to conciliate the newly complex tasks of economic governance in a much more open transnational context with gathering enough popular support to win elections. Mass membership political parties and mass organizations, particularly of labor, have suffered the consequences, although the decline of mass organizations has varied from place to place. In general, traditional center lefts may have suffered more. Finally, these many changes have induced strategic shifts in “contentious politics” that may have facilitated the status quo restoration outcomes of the Great Recession.

These political-mobilizational shifts are far from insignificant. Perhaps the most important ricochets, visible in almost every national context and at transnational governance levels in the EU and other influential international organizations, is the emergence in force of a new political discourse that one might label the “we are responsible and you are dangerous populists” exclusionary trope. More recent forms of protest mobilization, particularly those that present broad policy platforms and assume partisan forms, present alternatives to citizens that the “responsible” political forces of the traditional center left and right, whose conflicts had for long structured plausible political discourse, refuse to take seriously and denounce as “populist” partly because to their minds, taking the demands of such groups seriously would bring unacceptably high economic and political costs.

The result today is what the French would call a dialogue des sourds. On one side are political and economic managerial elites well armed with expert knowledge, elaborated theories, and shared visions of the worlds, even if there remain differences between left and right. To these elites, there are few alternatives in today’s world to those they promote. On the other side are well-constructed political forces proposing “unrealistic” alternatives, i.e. programs that, if taken seriously, could upset precarious apple carts and mobilize the dangerous economic and social losers of globalization and Europeanization. This non-dialogue is labile and open to opportunistic manipulations. For elites, huddled together trying to make things work on their terms in difficult conditions, it is all too easy to label anyone that seriously and threateningly disagrees as a “populist,” i.e. someone who refuses to recognize and compromise with reality. For the semi-excluded mobilizations of all kinds, such responses are inflammatory and likely to
confirm movement visions about the illegitimacy and unresponsiveness of elites. This is not simply an abstract observation. Indeed, nothing is more evident from the most recent episodes of the on-going Greek-Euro trauma than that Euro-zone leaders were not only unwilling to modify the harsh approaches that they had devised to confront Greek debt problems, but that they were determined to punish the Greek Syriza government politically for having the audacity to suggest, however ineptly, that there might be less harsh ways of moving forward. The immediate results have been new and widespread indignation about the assymetrical bargaining of a European Council and Eurogroup clearly dominated by German preferences. This could have detrimental consequences for the future of European integration but, more importantly, it could have dangerously divisive effects for the future of democratic politics writ larger.

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