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# Temporality in social movement theory: vectors and events in the neoliberal timescape

Kevin Gillan

Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

**ABSTRACT**

Existing theories of social movements have a weak conception of temporality, which is generally tied to truncated protest waves or else to micro-scale sequences of interaction. Neither approach enables an understanding of continuity and change in the content and form of social movements over longer periods. This article develops a new conceptual terminology intended to bring temporal sensitivity to our understanding of the interplay between movements and their socio-political environments. *Vectors* highlight evolving patterns of interaction that carry ideas and action orientations into a range of social settings over a period of decades. Examining the interplay of different vectors, and accounting also for the unfolding character of historic events, enables the apprehension of an overarching *timescape* within which movements move. This theoretical approach is illustrated with an examination of three significant periods of transnational contention associated with the Alter-Globalization, Anti-War, and Occupy movements. Analysis of vectors that shape discourses of conflict, organizational preferences, and practices of individual autonomy explain dynamics of continuity and change across different movements, each of which is shaped by a dynamic neoliberal timescape.

**Abbreviation** CBDM: Consensus-based Decision Making; ICT: Information and Communication Technology; IFI: International Financial Institution; IMF: International Monetary Fund; WTO: World Trade Organisation

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This article introduces a new theoretical vocabulary geared towards a temporally sensitive approach to understanding both social movements and the socio-political environments in which they act. Social movements are temporally located, they are 'of their time'. Below, I develop the concept of *timescape* to specify the macro-level spatio-temporal boundaries in which we can locate the action of multiple movements. As an approach to historic temporality, 'timescape' draws our attention to the centrality of events. Following William Sewell's (2005) call for an 'eventful sociology' and Robin Wagner-Pacifici's (2017) focus on the unfolding semiotics of events, we can reveal how historic events punctuate the cultural and material flows of interaction in which

**CONTACT** Kevin Gillan kevin.gillan@manchester.ac.uk Arthur Lewis Building, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL UK

movements are involved. To make sense of those cultural and material flows, I introduce the concept of *vectors*. 'Vectors' signal aspects of society, such as discourse, practices, and subjectivities that evolve over an analytically relevant timescale. 'Vector' additionally highlights that such aspects of social behaviour develop with a direction that may cut through and beyond individual social movements and other collective actors. As such, a study of vectors reveals the playing out of social conflict without over-reliance on simplified notions of interest or grievance and also helps make sense of the balance of continuity and change among social movements over time.

Theoretical development of events, vectors, and timescapes below is followed by an extended illustration via examination of empirical literature on three key movements of the *neoliberal timescape*: the Alter-Globalisation, Anti-War and Occupy movements. We already know that there are significant continuities across each of these movements, in terms of active groups and individuals, core practices and important beliefs (Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Graeber, 2014), but standard approaches to social movements offer scant theoretical resources for explaining these. To explore both continuity and change, several sets of vectors animating and connecting these movements are identified, which relate to discourses of political economy, horizontal networks as organizational form, and commitments to individual autonomy. Examining discursive development through movement participants' commitment to knowledge generation and their responsiveness to historic events reveals the generation of conflicts among actors in a manner that shifts over time. Additionally, examining the pursuit of individual autonomy and the preference for forms of organization based on horizontal networks reveals a rather more counter-intuitive set of symmetries among contesting actors.

'Timescape thinking' as developed below is shaped by a commitment to understanding social movements as signifying something important about the socio-political conditions of their historical moment: a question that was at the heart of the new social movement theories of the 1970s and 1980s. Melucci (1989, pp. 21–22) expressed this as a matter of prioritizing the 'why' over the 'how', although I suggest below that answering the 'how' (via organization and strategy) also tells us much of importance about 'why'. For Touraine (1988) significance meant a search for a singular conflict expressive of a 'social totality', although in the analysis below the environment of movement action is defined with a more modest scope than 'totality' would imply. The *significance question*, then, can be posed as: what do the key characteristics of movements – including conflict, organizational form, and subjective motivations – tell us about their socio-political environment?

## Protest waves and interaction sequences

Social movement scholarship has long attempted to apprehend the dynamic qualities of social movements, resulting in two dominant approaches to temporalities of action: waves of protest, and sequences of interaction. These will be briefly outlined and critiqued before offering an alternative theoretical approach.[1]

Observation of protest frequency often describes a wave-like form, which can be described as a sequence of mobilization, interaction and demobilization (c.f. Koopmans, 2004). As a simple heuristic this is useful in locating many key movement processes and is visible in quantitative approaches to protest event analysis. There are, however,

significant weaknesses with the wave model as it most often appears. Firstly, waves are measures of public protest and as such miss the movement activity 'beneath the wave': the private meetings and online discussions through which interpretative frames, collective identities and strategies are developed (c.f. latency and submerged networks in Melucci, 1989). Secondly, a tendency to conflate explanations of waves with explanations of social movements *per se* produces a foreshortened analytical timescale. When the temporality of the wave – from rise to peak to decline – stands in for the temporality of the movement, continuities within and between movements that cut across waves easily disappear. The model developed below recognizes the importance of the occurrence of waves of activity but, as with the best event analyses (e.g. Almeida, 2008; Hutter, 2014), never allows individual waves to stand in for wider movements.

A further problem is that explanations of particular waves often overplay 'contextual factors', usually theorized as opportunity structures (for an overview, see Tarrow, 1996). This is an inevitable result of an approach in which movement activity that is less public (both 'beneath' and 'before' the wave) is largely invisible. Thus, movement agency may be underestimated and an excessively rigid boundary between the 'internal' features of movements and the 'external' context is constructed. It is not that context is unimportant – quite the opposite – but we should see that movements and their contexts are made of the same 'stuff' and recognize that the boundaries are forever porous. The distinction between 'internal' movement processes and 'external' context is only at all persuasive in a static view. A more dynamic approach should recognize flows in all directions. New participants in movements bring their frames, identities, tactical preferences, networks and resources with them: the context flows into the movement. In the opposite direction every movement action changes the context in which the movement acts, even if only in terms of micro-level interactions. Movements impact their context simply because they are a part of their socio-political environment, not separate from it. Indeed, the ecological connotation here usefully sensitizes us to the fact that what we call 'environment' is always shaped by the interactions of its inhabitants. My discussion of vectors below includes political, economic and cultural features that have simultaneous (if differentiated) effects across the socio-political environment; the latter inevitably includes movement participants, opponents, interested bystanders, authorities and all sorts of other social groups.

A second temporality common in movement scholarship is the examination of interaction sequences. Since the publication of *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001), theories of contentious politics have sought to understand movements through the identification of mechanisms and processes of contention. In that book and elsewhere (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007) the authors apply their framework to 'episodes of contention' covering a wide geographical and temporal scope, where the aim is to identify 'frequently recurring causal chains, sequences, and combinations of mechanisms … that operate identically or with great similarity across a variety of situations' (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 27). Dynamism is present, then, but appears as the 'click-whirr' of mechanisms concatenating into processes, operating necessarily over short timescales and independently of socio-political context. The identification of dynamic mechanisms such as diffusion (e.g. Edwards, 2014; Wood, 2012) certainly improves our understanding of movement processes, and the focus on interaction within the approach is laudable. Indeed, in keeping with developments in relational sociology, it may be argued that it

is only through interaction and relationships (as opposed to either individuals or grand structures) that we can find ontologically secure ground from which to build causal explanations (Crossley, 2010; Emirbayer, 1997). However, as with recent attempts to understand strategy through interaction (e.g. Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015), the focus on identifiable moments of interaction between discrete actors pulls analytic focus to the micro-level and tells us little about the wider socio-political environment. Precisely because of the aim of abstracting mechanisms from context (or rather turning context into routine 'environmental mechanisms' with regular impacts on movement behaviour), the mechanistic sequential temporality in this approach makes it unsuitable for answering the significance question set out in the introduction.

## Timescape thinking through events and vectors

The notion of *timescape* in this article is used as a metaphorical placeholder for the socio-political environment in which social movements operate, with the intention to include both durable patterns of interaction and the events which often serve to make social change visible.[2] The *neoliberal timescape* described in the sections below fills out that placeholder in a specified spatio-temporal framework. As with a landscape or cityscape, a timescape represents a large-scale vista from a particular perspective, and within the boundaries of a selected frame.[3] To emphasize dynamics, we must observe our vista changing over time, and events figure centrally with effects on both more durable structures and flows. Briefly taking the cityscape metaphor literally, by picturing New York City from September 2001, may help demonstrate the relationship here: the impact of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre is instantly recognizable; the destruction of durable structures ruptures the normal flows of everyday life. Afterwards the city adapts: traffic moves but on reconfigured routes dependent on pre-existing highways; moments and monuments of remembrance are novel; otherwise many of the routines of everyday life – patterns of work and play, love and friendship, hustle and bustle – visibly return. New Yorkers' affective experience of these routines is likely changed forever. This spatial imagery is consistent with the eventful temporality invoked by William Sewell (2005, p. 102): 'History displays both stubborn durabilities and sudden breaks, and even the most radical historical ruptures are interlaced with remarkable continuities.' To be useful in understanding the significance of social movements, then, timescape can be reduced to neither 'opportunity structure' nor 'context'. Movements move within an uneven temporality encompassing both repeated patterns of interaction and the contingent unfolding of historic events; movement actors are implicated in reproducing and contesting both.

Sewell's argument for an 'eventful sociology' is built from his account of temporality in historical thinking. Two features are pertinent. Firstly, understanding change over time requires a focus on the contingent: 'effects will depend upon the particular complex temporal sequence of which it is a part. The effects of a given happening may be nullified, magnified, deflected, compounded, channelled, or broadcast by previous, subsequent, or simultaneous happenings' (Sewell, 2005, pp. 7–8). Secondly, rather than seeing change emerge out of the gradual playing out of on-going, linear processes, 'historical temporality is lumpy, uneven, unpredictable, and discontinuous.'

(Sewell, 2005, p. 9) An eventful approach thus offers a non-mechanistic appreciation of the dynamic sequences within which movements are implicated.

Events are historically significant to the extent that they impact on actors' ability to understand and act in the world; they thereby lead to changes in durable patterns of relations (Sewell, 2005, pp. 225–262). An 'eventful' approach is beginning to make a mark on social movement scholarship primarily through analysing moments of protest as events, in which speeded up or more intense interactions contribute to social change. The focus here is generally on the temporality of the event itself; the effects on participants and bystanders are rendered in one account as a 'mechanism of identity transformation' (Della Porta, 2016, pp. 113–140; c.f. Meyer & Kimeldorf, 2015). The eventful approach also allows for recognition of the difference between immediate and medium-term impacts on the individuals and collectives involved in moments of contention (Wood, Staggenborg, Stalker, & Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2017). What is lacking, however, is an identification of the ways in which events form a vital part of the environment in which movements operate. Movement participants may well be protagonists in events that have larger or smaller, longer or shorter-term, ramifications. But they also exist in an eventful world, in which their identities, material life chances and political and strategic orientations are affected by the unfolding of world-historical events. Wagner-Pacifici's (2010) account of the restlessness of events is valuable here: making sense of the 9/11 terror attacks on the US is an unfolding semiotic process in which many actors attempt to control interpretation. The event persists – becomes multiplied, reproduced and represented – through the repeated 'handings off' from one interpretative moment to another. Social movements are undoubtedly in the business of reinterpreting their socio-political environment and therefore engage in hermeneutic tugs-of-war over events; the unfolding of both 9/11 and the recent global financial crisis are described below as fundamental parts of the neoliberal timescape. Not only should we recognize social movements as located within a contextual, eventful world, therefore, we should also recognize that movements are neither simply protagonists in events, nor simply reactive to events: they are social actors involved in the temporally uneven, contingent flows through which events become interpretations, become social action, become new events.

While a focus on the contingency and openness to reinterpretation of events can aid explanation of social changes, it is harder to make sense of continuities in this way. To capture and distinguish between continuities I therefore refer throughout to a variety of *vectors*. By 'vector' I am referring throughout to patterns of social interaction whose repetition over time sustains or encourages further iteration. To say that interactions are patterned is merely to say that when we attend to particular domains of activity (or fields, Fligstein & McAdam, 2011) we see a degree of repetition in form, purpose or content of relationships, which may be shaped by practices, discourses, formally instituted rules and so on. A vector therefore has some content in the form of both ideation and action orientation; we must be able to recognise also how such patterns are reproduced such that vectors are carried into the future. Vectors are dynamic, meaning that we can see development over time: vectors may diffuse across space, for instance, or increase or decrease in salience, intensity or velocity. The term 'vector' is used by physicists and mathematicians to express motion in terms of both magnitude and direction. In the following sections I exemplify a set of vectors related to the neoliberal timescape that have

'magnitude', understood through attendance to extensity and intensity: some patterns of interaction have impacts with large geographical and temporal scope (i.e. they are extensive) and some have impacts that affect many kinds of interaction simultaneously (i.e. they are intensive). The notion that vectors have 'direction' can only be understood relatively; otherwise we would need to identify a teleological endpoint against which to measure them.[4] In the following sections I will describe vectors as complementary when they are mutually supporting and as countervailing when they produce interruptions, blockages or conflict in the playing out of patterned interaction.

## Vectors and events in the neoliberal timescape

I now address three periods of movement activity that are represented in highly simplified form in Table 1. I will simply refer to these as the Alter-Globalisation, Anti-War and Occupy movements and bracket questions of empirical heterogeneity, which is a necessary cost of the breadth of focus here. These movements are the focal phases of contentious activity described below, in part because of personal familiarity through my own empirical studies in separate research projects.[5] They are also highly pertinent because each took on a significant transnational character and scale in terms of participation and protest events. Each subject movement could be described as a 'wave of protest', although as Table 1 indicates, they each drew on earlier movement activity, and spawned later periods of contention. Each period has also been the subject of numerous scholarly studies in which they are treated as bounded 'social movements'. Extended case studies, often ethnographic in form, can teach us a great deal about such movements and reveal especially their 'internal' diversity and dynamics; these form the empirical basis for the following analysis.[6] I am not, however, conducting a comparative case study and argued above that analysis should not rest too heavily on the purported boundaries between movements. I have deliberately selected three movements for study that bleed into each other; we already

**Table 1.** Three movements-as-waves, overview.

| | Alter-Globalization | Anti-War | Occupy/15-M |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Peak Years* | 1999–2001 [a] | 2002–3 | 2011–12 |
| *Primary Repertoire* | Confrontational demonstrations | Orderly marches | Occupation |
| *Targets* | International institutions | National governments | Political and economic elites |
| *Precursors* | Wave of 'IMF riots' in less economically developed countries (1980s); Zapatista uprising (1994); campaign against Multi-lateral Agreement on Investments (late 1990s). | Organizing against the military response to 9/11 started in 2001; drew on networks from Alter-Globalization movement and long-term peace organizations. | Icelandic 'pots and pans revolution' (from 2008–9); Arab Spring (from late 2010); tax transparency movements (from 2010); longer history in Alter-Globalization networks. |
| *Successors* | World Social Forum and regional and local equivalents (from 2001); continuing demonstrations at IFI meetings. | Some continuing organizational presence focusing on a variety of foreign policy issues. | Range of local and community-centered initiatives; very geographically variable. |

[a] The fuzziness of the spatio-temporal boundaries of movements indicated above is especially true for the Alter-Globalization movement; here I indicate the height of the 'summit hopping' phase of the movement. For a longer and more global view, see, e.g. Pleyers (2011), Cox and Nilsen (2014).

know there are continuities across these phases of activity (Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Graeber, 2014). Examining these connections is essential to understanding the movements individually, but the bigger issue at stake is disclosing the significance of these movements with respect to their socio-political environment, namely the neoliberal timescape.[7]

The terms 'neoliberal' and 'neoliberalism' are in danger of being stretched beyond usefulness, the former often appearing as a simple term of abuse (Venugopal, 2015), and the latter in danger of oversimplifying the existing variation in contemporary capitalist institutions (Cerny, 2004). Here, in keeping with the dynamic approach sought, it is more appropriate to think in terms of neoliberalization as 'an open-ended and contradictory process of politically assisted market rule' (Peck, 2010, p. i), rather than neoliberalism as a structure or ideology. Characteristic policy content (outlined below), flowing from a discourse of political economy, is the central starting point but we should maintain awareness that the way such policies are pursued may be greatly variable in different locations. In order to maintain some coherence, I bound consideration of the neoliberal timescape below by drawing on material that is primarily based in the US and UK, although examples and literature from other 'Western' (or capitalist 'core') countries are integrated.

I use this conventional geographic focus, aware that doing so potentially opens up the charge of Eurocentrism. The core economic policies associated with neoliberalism have certainly extended with great geographical reach into all continents via, for instance, the direct influence of Chicago school neoclassical economists in Latin America (Klein, 2008) or IMF structural adjustment programmes in Africa and Asia (Peet, 2003). Opposition to neoliberal policies has also occurred in many locations. But some differentiation about the environment in which neoliberalism is pursued and contested is essential to understanding the forms of action taken. It matters whether neoliberalism came through democratically elected governments in countries that had previously experienced something resembling a Keynesian welfare state, or whether it was foisted on postcolonial countries by international institutions or local authoritarian rulers. It matters whether preceding movements had been shaped by their opposition to capitalism, communism or colonialism. The process of neoliberalization may well have had impacts the world over, but those impacts would have been refracted by the existing conditions, as is clear in, for instance, Asef Bayat's (2017) account of the Arab Spring.[8]

For present purposes, the 'neoliberal' in 'neoliberal timescape' is intended as a label that sharpens focus on one set of important vectors within these spatio-temporal boundaries. But this is not to suggest that everything within is merely an instantiation of a system so dominant that it is impossible to act without merely reinforcing hegemony. We need not assume, therefore, that the vectors identified below are necessarily either aspects or outcomes of neoliberalization. As this is an article about social movements, not about neoliberalism *per se*, selection of vectors is guided by seeking clear relevance to recent movements, in part because of their appearance in the critical discourse of those movements. As an analytical strategy, this may appear dangerously circular. However, that would only be logically problematic in a generalised argument that these, and only these, aspects of the socio-political environment were relevant to the formation of all social movements across the neoliberal timescape. No such argument is deployed in this article. Instead, what this indicates is the circle of hermeneutic interpretation, whereby one repeatedly shifts attention between the 'parts' (i.e. vectors and events), the 'whole' (i.e.

the neoliberal timescape), and back again, in search of increasing coherence and conviction (Oliver, 1983, pp. 527–528; Tate, 1998; Gillan, 2008a; c.f. Ullrich & Keller, 2014). The significance of the vectors is not, therefore, justified on a quantitative weighing up of individual parts, but on the degree to which we can make sense of developments over time through a coherent resulting narrative, as portrayed below.

### The core conflicts

Whatever else it signifies, 'neoliberalism' is rooted in a set of beliefs about political economy that have been in the ascendancy in both policy and academic study since the 1970s (Harvey, 2007). Free market thinking, with the particular influences of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, became Thatcherism in the UK, then Reaganism in the US, and then 'The Washington Consensus' that informed international development processes (Peck, 2010). Several of the key vectors over this period are therefore directly driven by policies that have either been supported willingly by governments of right and left in many countries, or foisted on states in Structural Adjustment Programs linked to loans from the IMF, or else extracted as the price of entry to global trade via the WTO (Klein, 2008; Peet, 2003). Privatization, trade liberalization, deregulation of markets, and attempts to shrink the welfare responsibilities of the state all, therefore, figure centrally as economic vectors. There is some path dependency here as once states have engaged in competitive deregulation it is very difficult to reverse and states have been (sometimes willing) participants in the destruction of their own capacity to curtail the excesses of the market (Crouch, 2004). The various vectors are clearly complementary in orientation since each generates changes that tend towards further empowering the market as the primary means of socio-economic coordination and control. Economic vectors over this period are clearly extensive in geographical scope – becoming more so over time – and intensive in effect in the terms defined above. These vectors do not add up to a static structure but must be understood as rooted in developing patterns of interaction moving in a broadly consistent direction: freer trade, less regulation, lower corporate taxes and so on, all of which apply over ever larger portions of the globe (Harvey, 2007).

The political economic vectors of the neoliberal timescape are most obviously relevant to social movements in the generation of grievances against which to move. The 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999 is often described in terms of the coalescence of multiple critiques: the point at which different grievances were identified as flowing from the same set of tightly knit processes of neoliberal globalisation (Starr, 2000; Thomas, 2000). This critique was not a spontaneous creation but the outcome of multiple processes of knowledge making and dissemination, as is common to much movement action (Cox, 2014; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991). The period leading to, through and beyond Seattle was marked by an increasing intensity of interaction between participants of previous movements including radical ecology, revolutionary socialism, and increasingly politicized charitable NGOs (Gillan, 2006). As an event, the Battle in Seattle also had unfolding ramifications within and beyond the movement, not least in figuring as a victory for disruptive direct action based on direct democratic organizing, communicated through innovative citizen media, and marked by significant ideational diversity (Graeber, 2002; Klein, 2002). Throughout the period the focus of critique and action was international institutions, and while the details of the critique varied they always included the growing power of transnational corporations; the imbalance of power between nations in international governance; and

**Table 2.** Countervailing vectors of political economy.

| | In elite organisations | In movement groups |
|---|---|---|
| *Ideational Core* | Economic growth as purpose of political economy; fairness as 'free market' competition at collective and individual levels, even where that must be created and maintained by states. | Pursuit of social justice and ecological sustainability via democratic control at local, national and international levels; seen as necessitating conflict with powerful actors. |
| *Action-oriented Core* | Characteristic policies pursued via international financial institutions and nation-states; empowerment of private corporations. | 'Diversity of tactics' enables both moral claims-making alongside militant attempts to directly disrupt workings of targeted actors. |
| *Basis for Reproduction* | Strongly embedded in international financial institutions and professional economics, hence power to construct economic 'common sense'. | Centrality of sharing knowledge in events and via citizen media initiatives; activist literature and longer-term groups provide practical activist training. |
| *Post-9/11 Modifications* | Rise of neoconservativism and doctrine of liberal interventionism; exists in tension with continuing neoliberal policy processes. | Shifting focus from economy to international relations; more emphasis on national power alongside corporate ambitions; moral appeals to UN and democratic states more visible than continuing direct action. |
| *Post-Crisis Modifications* | Enhanced role for some nation states in maintaining markets, especially through 'quantitative easing'; increased activity of IMF as lender within Europe. | Greater focus on interpersonal inequality and role of wealthy elites from both political and economic institutions; rejection of legitimacy of key national democratic institutions. |

the undemocratic nature of the global trading regime. Movement discourse developed as an ideational vector with a clear countervailing orientation to the spread of neoliberal ideas shaping both international institutions and many national governments. Both sets of vectors, as summarised in Table 2, were affected by the unfolding of historic events, of which two stand out most obviously: 9/11 and the global financial crisis.

## Events: rupture and revelation

The immediate impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the American homeland may appropriately be understood as beginning with rupture – a period of intense uncertainty during which happenings are so incoherent they cannot be named – but authoritative voices soon attempted resolution of meaning through speech acts establishing the characteristics of war (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). Most relevant to the present analysis is the resolution of this event as the start of a new 'war against terror', which enhanced the magnitude of neoconservativism, already a salient vector within US politics. For some decades prominent politicians had promoted greater US military presence overseas to actively pursue national interests, criticized the limitations imposed on US foreign policy by the UN Security Council, and targeted regime change in Iraq as a major American foreign policy goal (Dorrien, 2013; Ryan, 2010). Wagner-Pacifici argues that in order to make sense of events, 'societies require a cognitive and perceptual apparatus to integrate ruptures into linear time' (2017, p. 33); since 9/11 was readily interpreted as a consequence of America's apparent military decline the enhanced power of neoconservativism flowed from its representational ability to provide just that perceptual apparatus. While the political-economic vectors shaped by neoliberalism undoubtedly maintained their previous orientation they existed in an uneasy tension with, and become less salient than, the more obviously political vectors of

neoconservativism and allied positions, which were now greatly enhanced in magnitude by the new 'war against terror'.[9]

The speed of military mobilization against first Afghanistan, and then Iraq, was matched by a remarkable global movement against these invasions. Public protest swelled enormously as many core Alter-Globalisation movement groups shifted their priorities, discourse and tactics and found themselves joined by a diversity of groups who had not previously been active. Many of the protest networks formed in the Alter-Globalisation movement fed directly into the Anti-War movement, which is why it mobilized so rapidly (Gillan, Pickerill, & Webster, 2008). The Iraq invasion was often framed as a 'war for oil' and critics pointed to the corporate interests present in the US administration's drive to war. For those who had been interpreting the international financial architecture as a network through which US dominance over the global economy was assured, the interpretation of the invasion of oil-rich Iraq as a continuation of the same trend was readily made (Gillan, 2006). Huge numbers of new participants joined the protests, but nevertheless, those drawn from the Alter-Globalisation movement, and therefore framing the war with reference to the influence of corporations over governments in the neoliberal age, were an extremely important grouping (Gillan et al., 2008; Walgrave, Rucht, & Tarrow, 2010). Targets shifted accordingly, with demonstrations clearly oriented to national governments, or, where governments officially opposed the invasion, embassies of more belligerent nations. While Alter-Globalisation activists had criticised undemocratic institutions of international governance, now the focus was on the failings of liberal democracies. Observing US and UK governments engaging in misinformation, tactical uses of anti-terror legislation, and attempts to confound or override the United National Security Council, many anti-war protesters intuitively recognized the de-democratizing impulse that Brown (2006) described as the 'American nightmare' of neoconservativism allying with neoliberalism. The key anti-war slogan 'Not in My Name', after all, made an essentially representational claim and appeared on the streets of dozens of countries. For the movements, therefore, 9/11 was less a 'rupture' and more a redirection of ongoing vectors of critical movement discourse and action, which responded directly to the enhanced power of American neoconservativism and its key allies.

While the eyes of the world were on the developing 'war against terror', neoliberalization continued largely unabated. Most notable, at least in retrospect, was the continuing process of financialization, implicating ever more sectors of the 'real' economy into the globally networked 'shadow' economy of derivatives trading and securitization (Castells, 2000). The direction of this vector was shaped by the general commitment to deregulation by states oriented to neoliberalization, including an accelerated period of 'deregulatory arbitrage in which, in effect, US and UK regulators sought to outdo one another in how far they could liberalize market rules' (Hay, 2013, p. 4). This intersected (in the US mortgage market especially) with the rising dependence of wealthy economies on growth driven by private consumer debt – a period oxymoronically labelled 'privatized Keynesianism' by some (Crouch, 2009) – such that not only did each vector fuel the other, but together they made the economies of the US and UK appear much stronger than they were.

The global financial crisis was not a singular event, but a series of happenings from late 2007 that we can only retrospectively bring together into a semblance of coherence

(Wagner-Pacifici, 2017, pp. 71–75). As it unfolded, multiple interpretations signalled its growing magnitude and revealed more of the risks associated with the profitability of finance: it was at first a US mortgage crisis, then a banking crisis, a 'credit crunch', a Eurozone crisis. We seem finally to have rested on a 'global financial crisis'. In response, national governments began to take much more interventionist approaches to the economy. While this may appear to counter the diktats of free-market ideology, it should be remembered that neoliberal thinking has never had a single position on the appropriate positive role of the state, other than that it should assist market-led capitalism (Peck, 2010, pp. 42–73; Dardot & Laval, 2014). The political-economic vectors identified above became redirected to act wherever possible through national governments and national banks. For those nation states that simply could not cope with the effects of the crisis, we see the renewed relevance of the IFIs in shaping domestic economic policies, and which have again become the target of anger and protests (Flesher Fominaya & Cox, 2013). The following period of 'austerity' – meaning primarily cutting back welfare and public services, but also a new wave of privatization – was justified by a need to reduce national debt; although in the UK at least politicians hardly ever publicly attributed those debts to bank bailouts. In almost all countries that have experienced sovereign debt crises, the solutions posed fit very clearly within the confines of free market ideology (Aalbers, 2013); the dominant political-economic vectors were back on track.

It is not surprising, then, when we look at the grievances articulated in resistance to austerity in the Spanish 15-M movement and subsequent Occupy wave, that we find significant discursive continuities from the Alter-Globalisation period (Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Flesher Fominaya & Cox, 2013). But two differences between earlier and later critiques should be highlighted. Firstly, the targets have shifted to political and economic elites, understood to be acting 'in cahoots' and through national governments at least as much as international institutions. While the local roots of key summit protests were certainly important to mobilization efforts (Staggenborg, 2015), the engagement with the local was much less sustained than in the long-term occupations of public space, in which local urban issues such as the condition of local homeless populations, the repossessions of particular homes or threats to publicly funded local institutions, became especially important (Halvorsen, 2012, Matthews, 2016, 2018). Secondly, Occupy offered a much greater focus on economic inequality, especially within richer countries, than the Alter-Globalisation movement ever had. The latter tended more to a concern with absolute poverty in poorer nations (albeit often explained in relation to power inequalities), a result in part of genuine interconnection between 'Northern' and 'Southern' activists recognising their common enemies in the WTO, IMF and World Bank. In the Occupy movement, slogans highlighting the wealth of the 99% versus the 1% resonated, but would often be interpreted at the national level rather than the global. New material grievances needed little interpretative work by those on the sharp end, witnessing austerity driven not only through welfare policy, but also through the wider domains of political representation and civic and legal rights (Bruff, 2014; Flesher Fominaya, 2017; Hayes, 2017). Wealth and income inequalities within most developed economies had been rising quite sharply since the 1980s (Piketty, 2014), but the effects of inequality on spending power had been

mitigated by cheap and easy credit (Stiglitz, 2010); the crisis threw inequality into much sharper relief.

## Symmetries: networks, technology and individual autonomy

Thus far we have encountered the movements of the neoliberal timescape through their conflicts with major political and economic vectors running through the period, redirected and sometimes disrupted by world-historic events. Movement discourse is rendered as a vector with a countervailing direction to the discourses of neoliberalism and neoconservativism, themselves reshaped by events over this period. The focus on ideation is not intended to imply that conflict is 'only cultural', rather that it is only through the effort of interpretation that the material features of the political economy can shape further social action. In this section I will highlight further vectors centred on network organization alongside practices of individual autonomy. Each of these, I argue, move in broadly complementary directions and reveal a degree of symmetry between interaction located within social movements and that among many other social actors.

Studies of contemporary movements have often highlighted horizontal network forms of organization alongside uses of new information and communication technologies as defining features (for a review, see Flesher Fominaya & Gillan, 2017). Collective action in movements has some similar organizational requirements to that in corporations, and so it is not surprising when technological developments aimed primarily at business (such as email or early mobile phones) are adopted also by social movement organizations. At times, movements have been ahead of the curve. Indymedia, for instance, was established at the Battle of Seattle and used throughout the peaks of both Alter-Globalisation and Anti-War movements. By enabling activists to report on protests and discuss motivations, directly and without moderation, the websites prefigured the focus on 'user generated content' that became a vital feature of the venture capital-led 'Web 2.0′ (Gillan, 2008b). Indymedia was organized on an anti-hierarchical basis, mirroring many other key Alter-Globalisation groups (Wolfson, 2014). This, alongside the development of the World Social Forum and its regional and local variants, suggests that while information technologies were clearly important, a new 'cultural logic of networking' was the central innovation during this period (Juris, 2008). Here too we can see a vector reflected in the corporate world. The importance of horizontal networks were a key element in accounts of post-Fordism that emerged from the mid-1970s onwards (see, e.g. Amin, 1994) and clearly shaped Castells' (2000) theory of the network society. For the latter, the large corporation is a powerful actor precisely because of the position it attains in a network of relations, which it has the ability to activate in a multitude of different ways according to the demands of its current projects. So, here we see a complementary set of vectors (see Table 3) centred on both network organization and technological development, interweaving among many forms of social interaction in social movements, corporations and elsewhere.

For Castells, Occupy demonstrated the existence of a particular form of social movement for the network society within which autonomy is central. Drawing partly on corporate-controlled social media (which, due to ease of use and accessibility via mobile devices now largely overshadows activist-built media; Leistert, 2015) what results is a form of 'mass self-communication' and the building of 'spaces of autonomy'

**Table 3.** Complementary vectors of networked organisation.

| | In elite organisations | In movement groups |
|---|---|---|
| *Ideational Core* | Flatter, horizontal networks within and beyond firms seen as providing flexibility to respond to rapidly changing markets; enables greater use of worker knowledge more worker control (e.g. 'Toyotism') | Networks as fluid, nimble and better able to cope with repression; avoidance of 'vertical' dominating power relationships; makes best use of grounded experience, knowledge and skills of individuals. |
| *Action-oriented Core* | Outsourcing; multi-firm networks; removal of some middle-management layers; multi-role workers; networking as inherently valuable activity. | Sharing experiences, knowledge and skills through a variety of forums; 'hubs and spokes' model for organising actions; facilitation and role rotation in meetings; networking as mobilization. |
| *Basis for Reproduction* | Present in management literature and training; encouraged by trade liberalisation, banking deregulation and affordances of ICTs. | Present in core movement documents that have shaped practice[a] and standard meeting rules; further encouraged by use of ICTs in mobilization. |

[a] Examples include the People's Global Action Hallmarks, which in turn inspired the Indymedia Organising Principles and the World Social Forum Charter of Principles (Gillan, 2006, ch. 8).

(Castells, 2007, pp. 37–39, 2015, p. 250). The latter term combines the territorial control of spaces of resistance that are the defining repertoire of the Occupy movement, alongside individuals' autonomous communicative capacity. However, discussing 'spaces of autonomy' as an innovation of the Occupy phase would be historically myopic. The central importance of autonomy should be understood in relation to longer-term developments, especially as they relate to a particular vision of direct democracy. To understand the meaning of autonomy here it is useful to expose the level of small group interaction in more detail.

Tracing the core conflicts of the neoliberal timescape above indicated the importance of movement participants' concerns with democracy. A prominent critique of representative democracy is evident in the commitment of many movement groups to consensus-based decision-making (CBDM) as an alternative democratic practice (Maeckelbergh, 2009, pp. 139–187). The alterity of this vision compared with the liberal democratic norm is found in a decision rule (consensus instead of majority) and a process (participation instead of representation). Both positions rest on the very high valuation placed on individual autonomy. In relation to decisions, a vote is understood as the creation of a minority, whose will is subjected to that of the majority. As an alternative, consensus generates a productive conflict that, in the end, needs to be solved by a compromise everyone can sign up to (Maeckelbergh, 2009, pp. 99–101). Because CBDM offers any participant the power to block a decision, when a group reaches an impasse over two alternatives it must find a third. Individuals are thus empowered; their autonomy potentially overrides the collective position, although in the most positive formulations the point is that through the consensus process interests become collectively held, not individual. In CBDM, consensus is coupled with a deep distrust of representation. Representation (via categories, group markers or institutional loyalties) appears unacceptable, from this point of view, because all individuals must be respected as holding a unique perspective on the world.

Critical observers of CBDM frequently claim it cannot be scaled up beyond the very small affinity groups in which it has most often been practiced. The affinity group typically begins with a specific goal and a number of individuals who trust each other. However, the Battle in Seattle looked like a victory particularly for those who focused on the way that a 'hubs and spokes' approach to delegated consensus building among

affinity groups reached rapid and effective decisions (Klein, 2002). When protesters chanted 'This is what democracy looks like!' they referred precisely to this ability to organize large-scale collective action while respecting the autonomy of every participant. CBDM rests, then, on a form of individual autonomy that sees all individuals as equal and unique; each person's knowledge is valuable but unknowable without active deliberation (Gillan, 2006, pp. 148–51). Thus genuinely collective action can only emerge from specific circumstances, among participants in horizontal network structures, by which individual and collective wills are brought into coherence.

The methods of CBDM returned to centre-stage in Occupy – in the form of inclusive meetings, attempts to avoid discriminatory practice, characteristics hand-signals, and, above all, a commitment to direct participation – having been passed on through individuals and groups with histories of participation in both the Alter-Globalisation and Anti-War movements (Graeber, 2014). But the challenges for CBDM in Occupy were rather different than in earlier waves of protest. Regularly meeting in a public place that had received a great deal of media attention meant that the 'collective' was no longer restricted to the small, trust-bound affinity group with relatively unified purpose (Maeckelbergh, 2012). Now, larger groups of strangers discussed a wide range of topics without necessarily maintaining an action orientation. The commitment to individual autonomy was maintained, while the network logic that supported it was arguably replaced by a logic of aggregation, which, for Juris, means that the occupations were 'the physical and communal embodiments of the virtual crowds of individuals aggregated through the viral flows of social media' (2012, p. 269). In a similar argument, van Stekelenburg describes the Occupy movement as a 'collection of disparate individuals who temporarily join', and argues that against the background of 'individualization processes amplified by ICTs', Occupy is a 'typical product of our time' (2012, p. 229). The focus on social networking platforms (principally Facebook and Twitter) in these accounts is instructive. Here, 'social networking' means that individuals become informational nodes, building 'relationships' represented as hyperlinks. It is thus a shallow form of connection; a long distance from the ideal described by Maeckelbergh, in which CBDM indicates a 'shift from viewing interests as fixed, individual possessions to collectively determined potentials' (2009, p. 199).

What we see in these movement practices is an interpretation of autonomy as the individual commitment to collective action, framed as democracy, and grounded in the discourses and practices of the Alter-Globalisation movement. But more widely we can find evidence of an influential second vision of autonomy: not free subsumption within the collective, but as the freedom to choose and continually reconfigure one's connections according to individually constituted desires. To locate the roots of this second version of individual autonomy in social media, however, would again be historically myopic. After all, neoliberalism has itself been formulated as a project in defence of the free (rational, economic) actor against the impositions of the state; and after all, for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher 'there is no such thing as society … there are individual men and women and there are families' (Keay, 1987, p. 9). For Thatcher's ministers, the state's role was positively and explicitly to inculcate an alternative set of attitudes more appropriate for the future economy: an 'enterprising self', marked by initiative, responsibility and flexibility and acting too as a 'sovereign consumer', claiming the freedom to satisfy individual desires via the market (Heelas, 1991). Moreover, as

**Table 4.** Complementary vectors of autonomous subjectivities.

| | In elite organisations | In movement groups |
|---|---|---|
| *Ideational Core* | Autonomy as solution to critiques of alienating nature of Fordist workplace; gives workers freedom to pursue individualised career trajectories; autonomy as choice in consumption. | Autonomy a prerequisite for meaningful democratic deliberation and avoidance of discrimination. |
| *Action-oriented Core* | Flexible specialization affects both production and consumption; increasing use of flexible contract types; increasing provision of choice in both consumer markets and public service provision. [a] | Freedom to enter and exit movement spaces regardless of categorical memberships; practices that emphasise respect for individual knowledge and positionality. |
| *Basis for Reproduction* | Management literature; market successes; use of branding to generate impression of (and desire for) choice between functionally similar products. | Oft-repeated meeting rules, reproduced in many different groups; facilitation training; further encouraged by coherence with network organisation. |

[a] There is seemingly a stark contradiction between the positive evaluation of autonomy here and the related process of flexibilization. For those familiar with the critique (or experience) of precarious working conditions generated by the demand for a flexible labour market, it would seem to produce quite the opposite of autonomy for most workers. The purported connection between flexibility and autonomy is most likely to exist among the management cadres considered by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007). Nevertheless, the discursive connection here has undoubtedly been influential on policies intended to enhance flexible working (e.g. the 1997 EU Part-time Working Directive) as well as the more recent claims for the 'sharing economy' (Sundararajan, 2017).

the characteristics of the enterprising self were further understood and disseminated they took on the form of the 'connexionist' networker. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) empirically establish the unfolding commitment to individual autonomy from the 1960s through to the mid-1990s as central to justifications for activity within the 'new spirit of capitalism'. Especially pertinent for my argument here, the impetus for these changes is not only found in the productivity crises that have been widely understood as prompting the development of a post-Fordist regime of accumulation. Rather its roots can also be seen in what these authors describe as the 'artistic critique' of capitalism, which was prevalent in the European movements of 1968. That is: the prizing of autonomy (even at the expense of workplace security) and authenticity of expression (via choice in work and consumption).

We have seen, therefore, some significant symmetry in developing ideation and practice across different segments of society, especially as it pertains to the interlinked issues of technology use, network organization and the autonomous individual (see Table 4). But to point to similarities is not to say that we are dealing with identical vectors: the link between the autonomous actor and the network especially demonstrates different meaning depending on where and when it is perceived. Neither should we reduce this narrative to one in which the network as aggregation of individuals has triumphed over the network as achieved collective. Rather, among the many subjectivities present in the General Assemblies of Occupy, multiple versions of individual autonomy were expressed, alongside, indeed, collective commitments to solidarity based on class or ethnicity. But by highlighting a degree of symmetry between the organization and cultural bases of neoliberal capitalism and those of the movements against neoliberalism it is possible to perceive why these movements have taken on the collection of characteristics that they have done. The motivating ideas – that one can find power to confront inequality through networks, and that the preservation of individual autonomy be the root of any engagement with collectives – are alluring not because they are entirely counter to strong trends in the discourses and practices of the

neoliberal timescape, but precisely because they resonate with the kinds of subjectivity produced within those contested, dynamic conditions.

## Conclusion

The theoretical framework introduced above offers a temporally-sensitive account of social movements wherein we can discern the entwinement of movement dynamics with those of the socio-political environment in which they act. The vectors I have described as central to conflicts in the neoliberal timescape have been selected because each has a striking magnitude, understood as extensity and intensity, and as evident in the relevant empirical literatures. This selection has revealed three kinds of dynamics operating over this period. Firstly, we see the production of conflict through the countervailing discourses of neoliberalism and of the social movements themselves. Understood as long-term vectors these operate both in the domain of culture and through the political and economic realities of the neoliberal timescape: the discursive developments described are productive of social action because they make sense of the material conditions of life. Secondly, the unfolding of events has distinct effects on on-going vectors: they redirect, interrupt or impact on the magnitude or salience of vectors as evident in the rapidly increased influence of neoconservative ideas after 9/11, or in the increased focus on interpersonal inequality after the global financial crisis. The third dynamic is the production of symmetries in organizational forms and rooted subjectivities as vectors shape the ways in which relationships are reproduced and interpreted over time. The identification of symmetry is not a claim that all actors are carried along by identical patterns of interaction. For those whose perspective on the world is shaped by a critical position on the core conflicts of the neoliberal timescape, the increasing importance of individual autonomy within networks is centred on the empowered individual's role in enhancing democratic control over the direction that society is taking, rather than the pursuit of autonomy with respect to choice in consumption and flexibility in work arrangements.

While this article is certainly intended to contribute towards a temporal theory of social movements, it is necessarily incomplete. As the introduction to this issue makes clear, there are other temporalities that are highly pertinent to movement action, and so building an appropriate theoretical approach is an open, collaborative process. Through development of the concepts of vector and timescape, this article offers two pieces of the temporal puzzle. Vectors allow us to see how the micro-level relations happening at the speed of social interaction combine over time to more significant patterns, developing with recognisable magnitude and direction. By denying the analytical priority of the boundaries we typically draw around named movements, the decomposition of important aspects of movement action into component vectors reveals continuity and change over time. By integrating an account of the contingency of events we can see continuities unfold in a non-mechanistic manner, involving both the daily reproduction of patterns of thought and action, and shifts in direction in responses to new material and cultural circumstances. Timescape indicates a more temporally stable set of arrangements and may be considered the historical time of movement action (c.f. Lazar, 2014). In order to avoid a totalising concept here I have also argued for the importance of spatial boundaries. Such boundaries are porous, of course, and as indicated above we can see certain forms of neoliberalization spreading across most of the globe. Nevertheless, the

characteristics of the neoliberal timescape cannot be understood as a long neoliberal 'moment' without historical specificity; they are refracted by past lived experience and formalised structures in different political spaces. If the concept of 'timescape' does work for other times and places, then we might (rather speculatively) imagine both a 'post-colonial timescape' and a 'post-communist timescape' as identifiable with similar ontological weight and wide geographic relevance. Specifying their boundaries, examining movement-relevant vectors characteristic of those places and times, and comparing vectors as they appear in different locations, might all aid the general ambition, expressed throughout this article, to understand the significance of social movements.

## Notes

1. The arguments outlined in this section are considered in a more detailed review of temporality in social movement theory in Gillan (in Press).
2. 'Timescape' is not an entirely novel coinage. The term was used by Barbara Adam (1998) in an important book on the production of environmental hazards in the 'industrial timescape'. Adam particularly critiqued the dominance of a Newtonian temporality that is unable to recognise the non-mechanistic production of hazards through multiple causal pathways that involve precise timing of exposure to risk and include periods of invisibility where the effects of exposure are latent. One could easily extend this insight to socio-political processes. For instance, the 'credit crunch' phase of the global financial crisis existed precisely because the chain of interactions leading from the agents selling subprime mortgages to the sudden discovery of holes in the balance sheets of financial institutions or pension funds involved latency, invisibility and multiple pathways of effect (see, e.g., the account in Stiglitz, 2010).
3. Arjun Appadurai used a similar metaphor in his exploration of the cultural disjunctures of globalisation; like his five 'scape' terms, 'timescape' stresses 'not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather that they are deeply perspectival constructs' (1990: 296).
4. Sewell (2005, pp. 83–91) offers a powerful critique of teleological temporalities. See also Crossley (2010, pp. 7–10).
5. Ethnographic work on alter-globalization and anti-war movements published in, e.g. Gillan 2006; Gillan et al. 2008; empirical study of three US Occupy sites carried out in November 2011 as part of a wider project on movements contesting corporations (ESRC project, ref: ES/H011048/1).
6. Exemplars include, for the Alter-Globalisation movement: Pleyers (2011); Maeckelbergh (2009); Graeber (2009). For the Anti-War movement: Gillan et al. (2008); Walgrave et al. (2010). For Occupy: Graeber (2014); Matthews (2016). Many others are cited throughout the text.
7. Selecting movements 'of the left' for analysis here does not imply that this is the only possible position for critique in the neoliberal timescape. Hutter, for instance, sets out the growing relevance of right-populist protest about immigration during the 1990s as part of a new 'integration-demarcation cleavage' in Western European politics. Nevertheless, his protest event analysis also shows that protest during this period is 'still more shaped by the issues and political demands of the left-libertarian round than by those of the right-populist round.' (Hutter, 2014, p. 134).
8. A fuller account of the dynamics of the neoliberal timescape might need to recognise both the entry and exit of different geographic areas over time. The Latin American experience in particular suggests that neoliberalism need not be a permanent state (Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2012).
9. There is some debate over whether self-identified neoconservatives successfully 'hijacked the White House', but even Parmar (2009), arguing against that claim, sets out an ideological 'fusion' that contains policies which are clearly shaped by neoconservative

thinking in the US administration. In Europe, the wars were justified somewhat differently; Prime Minister Tony Blair developed the doctrine of 'liberal interventionism' to provide normative backing for invasion (Plant, 2008).

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## Notes on contributor

*Kevin Gillan* is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Manchester and Editor-in-Chief of *Social Movement Studies*. His work focuses primarily on the ways in which social movements generate and communicate alternative conceptions of political economy. He is currently writing a book with the working title *How Capitalism Matters: Economy, Polity, Society* (Palgrave).

## ORCID

Kevin Gillan http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1693-9170

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