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Rising powers, people rising: neo-liberalization and its discontents in the BRICS countries

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa – has called into question the future of Western dominance in world markets and geopolitics. However, the developmental trajectories of the BRICS countries are shot through with socio-economic fault lines that relegate large numbers of people to the margins of current growth processes, where life is characterized by multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities. These socio-economic fault lines have, in turn, given rise to political convulsions across the BRICS countries, ranging from single-issue protests to sustained social movements oriented towards structural transformation. This article presents an innovative theoretical framework for theorizing the emerging political economy of development in the BRICS countries centred on neo-liberalization, precarity, and popular struggles. It discusses the contributions to this special issue in terms of how they illuminate the intersection between neo-liberalization, precarity, and popular struggle in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

KEYWORDS

BRICS; inequality; neo-liberalization; precarity; protest; social movements

The onset of the twenty-first century has witnessed substantial shifts in the vectors of economic and political power that undergird and structure the workings of the world-system. Whereas the unravelling of state-led developmentalism in the Third World and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in the late twentieth century initially seemed to signal an 'end of history' that pivoted around American hegemony, developmental shifts in the new millennium have cast doubt on such diagnoses. It is above all the rise of the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa – that have called into question the future of Western dominance in world markets and geopolitics (Nayyar, 2016; O'Neill, 2013; Pieterse, 2018). Mainstream narratives of the economic and political ascent of these emerging powers tend to highlight the potential that this process holds for poverty reduction and progress towards higher levels of human development. Thus, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2013a) recently celebrated 'the rise of the South' – a process spearheaded by China, India, Brazil, and South Africa – as a progressive and hopeful transformation; and Russia has been widely perceived to be regaining significant economic and strategic ground in a post-communist world (Stuermer, 2009).

More critical voices have questioned the assumption that the rise of the BRICS countries points towards a tendency of developmental convergence in the world economy (see, for example, Kiely, 2007, 2008, 2015, 2016; Starrs, 2014). In part, this scepticism is grounded in the persistence of

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Northern power and domination in the global economy (see Hickel, 2017a, 2017b). However, an equally important reason for questioning celebratory accounts of the rise of the BRICS countries is the fact that the changing geography of economic and political power in the world-system is closely related to the emergence of a 'new geography of global poverty' (Kanbur & Sumner, 2012) in which more than 70% of the world's poor now live in middle-income countries (see also Sumner, 2012). Despite impressive growth rates, the southern BRICS countries – Brazil, India, China, and South Africa – are home to more than 50% of the world's poor (Ravallion, 2009). In Russia, poverty has been aggravated by the recent recession, with more than 13% of the population – that is, around 19.2 million people – currently living below the poverty threshold (Agence France-Presse, 2016). Persistent poverty is coupled with very deep and, in most cases, widening inequalities. South Africa is a case in point with a Gini coefficient of 0.631, but China and India have also seen rapidly escalating inequalities in recent years (see also Hung, 2016, Chapter 4; Jayadev, Motiram, & Vakulabharanam, 2011; Oxfam, 2017; UNDP, 2013b; World Bank, 2016). Indeed, recent research shows that Indian inequality is at its highest levels since the early 1920s, as 22% of all income currently accrues to the top 1% of earners (Chancel & Piketty, 2017). Brazil is an exception from this trend – its Gini coefficient declined from 0.594 in 2001 to 0.514 in 2014 (see data.worldbank.org) – but remains a deeply unequal country (World Bank, 2014). And in Russia, the top decile of wealth holders controls 77% of all household wealth, a level of inequality that is equal to that of the USA (Credit Suisse, 2017).

What these statistics ultimately testify to is the fact that the developmental trajectories of the BRICS countries are shot through with socio-economic fault lines. As a result, large numbers of people are relegated to the margins of current growth processes, where life is characterized by multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities rooted in a lack of access to secure and decent livelihoods, the absence of basic social protection and essential public services, and often also the exclusion from established political arenas. Moreover, these socio-economic fault lines have given rise to political convulsions across the BRICS countries, ranging from single-issue protests to sustained social movements oriented towards structural transformation (see, for example, Braga, 2017; Chen, 2014; Clément, 2008; Gabowitsch, 2016; Lee, 2007; Menon, 2013; Naidoo, 2015; Ness, 2015; Nielsen & Nilsen, 2016; Saad-Filho & Morais, 2014; Smith & West, 2012; Von Holdt et al., 2011; Von Schnitzler, 2016). This special issue is dedicated to developing an approach and a set of analyses that can decipher how the developmental trajectories of the BRICS countries generate distinct forms and patterns of mobilization and resistance and, conversely, how popular struggles impact on and shape these trajectories. In doing so, we hope to lay the foundation for a critical conceptualization of the political economy of development in the BRICS countries that unearths those economic, social, and political contradictions that tend to disappear from view in mainstream narratives. To achieve this, the analyses that are offered in this special issue are centred on a triad of key concepts: neo-liberalization, precarity, and popular struggles. Before outlining and discussing these, we briefly introduce the articles collected in this special issue.[1]

All of the authors examine popular mobilization and movements in relation to large historical processes and across a variety of case studies, sites or periods in order to identify longer-term trends, shifts, and possibilities. Ching Kwan Lee examines the changing forms of worker precarity and resistance across three eras of modern Chinese history – state socialism, high-growth market reform, and the current shift to slow growth and overcapacity. Russia followed a very different path of transition from communism, and Karine Clément explores changing popular responses, from the period of shock therapy neoliberalism in the 1990s to the period of growing patriotic nationalism under Putin. Gayatri Menon and Aparna Sundar trace changing forms of dispossession and resistance in India through three case studies, the first two in the period of state-led capitalist modernization

and the third in the period of neo-liberal globalization. Karl von Holdt and Prishani Naidoo frame their discussion of South African movements with an analysis of the African National Congress (ANC) domination of the movement landscape, and use case studies of four different moments of mobilization to examine continuities, shifts, and new possibilities. Ruy Braga and Sean Purdy draw out the changing dynamics of popular incorporation and demobilization, followed by both popular and middle-class right-wing mobilizations against the Lulista regime of accumulation, to explain the parliamentary coup against the Workers' Party (PT) president in Brazil. Fabio Luis expands the analysis of neo-liberalization and social conflict in Brazil by examining their role in the expansion of Brazilian companies in the Latin American region, accompanied by super-exploitation of workers and the destruction of the environment. Gathering these articles in a special issue allows us to deepen our understanding of neo-liberalization, precarity, and popular struggle, both conceptually and in terms of the political possibilities they produce.

Neo-liberalization

In many scholarly accounts, the developmental trajectories of the BRICS countries have come to be associated with the term 'post–neo-liberalism' (see, for example, Craig & Porter, 2004; Dale, 2012; Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2012; Harris & Scully, 2015; Sandbrook, 2011; Schmalz & Ebenau, 2012). Crucially, the BRICS countries have been seen as drivers of the emergence of a political economy of development in which market-oriented accumulation strategies are increasingly embedded in modes of regulation that provide social protection and redistribution (see Ban & Blyth, 2013; Ghai, 2015; Nölke, 2012). Such claims, however, tend to disregard the strong continuities that exist between the projects of neo-liberal restructuring that shaped developmental trajectories both in the global South and in post-communist Europe in the 1980s and 1990s and the regulatory regimes that are currently crystallizing in the BRICS countries (Clarke, 2007; Katz, 2015; Prashad, 2012).

Consequently, our approach to understanding the political economy of the BRICS countries in this special issue takes a different view, in which we understand recent interventions in the field of social policy in terms of the 'roll-back' and 'roll-out' dynamics that criss-cross particular and contingent processes of neo-liberalization (see Peck, 2010; Peck & Tickell, 2002). Roll-back strategies are most commonly associated with the onset of processes of neo-liberal restructuring, in which the principal aim is to dismantle regulatory institutions and policy regimes associated with a previous form of state-centred development in order to extend and deepen the reach of the market logic. Conversely, roll-out strategies tend to be spawned by the limits and contradictions of deregulation. Therefore, such strategies tend to be oriented towards enmeshing markets in institutional structures that mitigate market failures and the detrimental social consequences of initial processes of restructuring (see Cammack, 2004; Peck & Tickell, 2007). The extent to which there is an emergent political economy of development in the BRICS countries that is shaped by the kind of interventions associated with roll-out strategies of neo-liberalization, we suggest, must be understood in terms of the crucial tension that animates attempts to reconcile the imperatives of accumulation and legitimation.

Offe (1972) of course identified the reconciliation of accumulation and legitimation as an animating dynamic in the workings of the capitalist state. On the one hand, capitalist states have to ensure that the requirements of accumulation are met by implementing an adequate strategy for economic growth and intervening to adjust imbalances and counter stagnation (see also Jessop, 1990, pp. 198–206). But on the other hand, capitalist states must also ensure democratic legitimacy by gaining the consent and support of their citizens for their mode of governance. As Offe (1984) points out, one of

the key ways in which legitimation is achieved is through decommodification in the form of access to social protection and public goods via welfare regimes (see also Borchert & Lessenich, 2016).

By situating the interplay between accumulation and legitimation at the centre of our approach, we move away from a totalizing account of neo-liberalism as a uniform project that is always and everywhere the same[2] and towards an understanding of neo-liberalization as 'a variegated form of regulatory restructuring' (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010, p. 330). Such an understanding acknowledges the existence of a common denominator of neo-liberalism – namely, that it is a project centred on 'extending market-based, commodified social relations' (Brenner et al., 2010, p. 331) through the deregulation of markets, financialization, and privatization. However, at the same time, it takes cognizance of how neo-liberalization is unevenly developed across 'places, territories, and scales' (Brenner et al., 2010, p. 330), in large part as a result of how neo-liberalizing processes are articulated with the institutional and regulatory legacy of previously hegemonic regimes in the context of specific states (see Cahill & Konings, 2017).

The contributions in this special issue centre neo-liberalization in the BRICS countries in different ways and to different degrees. However, what is common across all the articles is an attempt to bring out how the workings of inter-jurisdictional policy transfer and transnational rule regimes are mediated in and through the encounter with pre-existing political economies and state–society relations in the BRICS countries. This entails an orientation towards discerning how the making of market-oriented forms of regulation have been shaped in path-dependent ways by their encounters with the accumulation strategies, state–society relations, modes of governance, and regimes of citizenship that were forged by state-led developmentalism in Brazil and India, apartheid in South Africa, and communism in China and Russia. It is in these encounters that actual constellations of accumulation and legitimation are configured, and it is by studying them that it becomes possible to unravel how pre-existing political economies and state–society relations have been reworked and transformed at the same time as market-oriented restructuring has come to be patterned in contextually specific ways.

The two post-Communist countries in BRICS have approached the problem of the transformation of their sociopolitical orders and their positioning in the globalized economy in very different ways, as Clément and Lee show. While Russia adopted democratic reforms along with 'violent ultra-liberal reforms', including privatization of state industry, producing radical atomization, precarity, and social destabilization in the 1990s, China retained a strong authoritarian Communist regime along with a carefully managed opening to global capital to the 1980s, while retaining state and collective enterprises. Thus, as Clément shows, citizens in Russia were subjected very rapidly to the collapse of old certainties and to a new ideology of individual responsibility and self-blame for their failure to adapt to the new market economy. A revival of rhetoric of patriotic nationalism that implies a rebuilding of state–society relations came later, with the presidency of Putin. In contrast, the Chinese regime retained strong state–society relations and paternalist commitments, and has only shifted rhetoric to promote a culture of individual self-responsibility based on 'innovative entrepreneurship' rather than 'a culture of employment' more recently, with the 'new normal' of slower growth and overcapacity, as Lee argues. These different trajectories have had very different implications for state–society relations and popular mobilization.

India and South Africa were both British colonies, but of very different kinds – the former a colony that achieved independence in the late 1940s, the latter a settler colony which achieved independence under white supremacy in 1910, and national liberation with a black majority government only in 1994. The different character of colonialism in the two countries, and the different periods in which they attained liberation and majority rule, have had implications for their responses to neo-

liberalization. India has experienced half a century of state-led modernization and development prior to the era of globalization, while South Africa was plunged into neo-liberalism at the same time as it attained liberation. While India has a strongly established and diversified bourgeoisie which has been able to control the pace of neo-liberalization, South Africa is characterized by a strong and globalized white corporate sector, and a black elite whose development has been stunted by settler domination and now the combined domination of white and multinational capital – tensions which have produced the current political crisis in the country. The two articles presented here show how popular mobilization bears the marks of these different histories and processes of neo-liberalization.

Brazil is also a post-colonial society, but with a much longer history of independence than India or South Africa. Here the key political transition is from military dictatorship to democracy in the late 1980s – roughly coterminous with South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, and with similar consequences, as the democratic regime has since its birth been characterized by neo-liberalism. In Brazil, the PT was only elected into the presidency a decade later, in contrast to the immediate ascendance of the ANC in South Africa. However, in both cases, political movements that embodied enthusiastic popular aspirations adopted or maintained neo-liberal macroeconomic policies but attempted to retain legitimacy with mildly redistributive policies and the incorporation of movement leaders and activists into state institutions. In Brazil, the contradictions of these developmental paths are producing shifts and realignments among elites, generating the political crisis of the parliamentary coup, as both Braga and Luiz show, and portending a radical intensification of neo-liberal policies unencumbered by concessions to the popular classes.

While each of the five BRICS countries has pursued trajectories of neo-liberalization marked by specific histories and compromises with existing regimes and social forces – including the popular classes – these different trajectories have all produced new forms of precarity in society, though again with distinct features as well as cross-country resonances.

Precarity

Deepening inequalities across the BRICS countries have to be understood as manifestation of how growth processes have come to be associated with tenacious and in some cases escalating unemployment, widespread underemployment, and increasingly insecure employment (see Denning, 2010; Foster & McChesney, 2012; Ness, 2015). The multiple insecurities that this entails – not just related to inadequate wages and poor working conditions, but also limited access to social protection – have in recent years come to be conceptualized in terms of precarity. As is well known, the concept of precarity was brought to the centre of scholarly debates on the contemporary world of work by Guy Standing's (2011) study of the rise of the 'precariat'. Precarity is on the rise, Standing argues, as a result of the neo-liberal drive 'to create a global market economy based on competitiveness and individualism' (2011, 37).

As much as Standing's concept has set the terms of debate on the nature of work under neo-liberalism, critiques articulated from the point of view of the global South have raised important questions about how precarity is conceptualized. Precarious work, this critique argues, is nothing new in the global South: indeed, it is not tenable in this context to craft an analysis on the basis of a contrast between a precarious present and 'a non-precarious past' (Scully, 2016a, p. 161) in which stable employment, high wages, and access to welfare provisions prevailed (see also Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Paret, 2016). As Breman and van der Linden (2014, p. 926) point out, casualized and part-time jobs, low and stagnant wages, outsourcing and subcontracting, the substitution of waged work by self-employment, restricted access to welfare, and poorly regulated working conditions

have always constituted 'the dominant mode of employment in the developing world' – especially in the informal sector, which is of tremendous importance in many Southern economies (see also Mosoetsa, Stillerman, & Tilly, 2016; Munck, 2013).

This critique is, of course, relevant to the project that we are attempting to articulate in the current issue, where the five countries that are subjected to analysis belong to the global South,[3] and where the emergence of precarious working classes have arguably been absolutely central to recent growth processes (Ness, 2015). We, therefore, approach precarity not as something new and unprecedented, but rather as a constant aspect of work under capitalism, which is constituted in particular ways and present to different extents in particular historical conjunctures and geographical spheres in the world-system. The central substantive analytical challenge then becomes that of disinterring what is specific about precarity in the new political economy that is emerging in the BRICS countries today.

In order to move in this direction, the contributions to this special issue are informed by a two-pronged view of precarity. Firstly, precarity is conceptualized as a material reality. Poverty and inequality, in other words, are seen as being directly linked to unemployment, underemployment, and insecure employment, as well as the extent to which precarious workers have access to public goods and social protection that can mitigate material deprivation. The production of precarity as a material reality is, in turn, understood as a consequence of how specific groups have come to be adversely incorporated into economic and political power structures across spatial scales – from the global, via the national, to the local – as a result of the dynamics of specific processes of neo-liberalization (see Hickey & du Toit, 2013; Mosse, 2010). Secondly, precarity is conceptualized in terms of how it is 'located in the microspaces of everyday life' as 'vulnerability relative to contingency and the inability to predict' the form and direction of life courses (Ettlinger, 2007, p. 320). This entails exploring how precarity is experienced as an inability to rely on work-based incomes to sustain what is considered to be dignified livelihoods and lifeworlds, underpinned by durable social relations in specific places and sites. Crucially, our approach emphasizes how people respond to this experience in ways that are shaped by the intersections of gender, race, caste, and region.

Extant work on this dimension of precarity revolves around mapping how precarity engenders senses of loss, danger, anxiety, and disruption (Han, 2012; Millar, 2014; Neilson, 2015). These are of course very real aspects of precarity as a subjective experience of being in the world. However, abjection does not exclusively define the experiential dimension of precarity. Indeed, life among the urban poor in the global South is characterized to a significant extent by 'quiet encroachments' – that is, the 'silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful, in order to survive and improve their lives' (Bayat, 2000, p. 545). And the significance of oppositional agency in various forms takes us to the last component of our triad of concepts, namely popular struggles, which we discuss further in the next section of this article.

Several of our authors work with fresh definitions of precarity that broaden and deepen the concept. Ching Kwan Lee develops a 'relational and relative concept of precarity' as a condition produced by struggle between workers, employers, and the state, rather than a condition to be identified by a specific set of characteristics. Thus precarity varies over time and in different places. She also extends precarity beyond the traditional focus on the regulation of production to include the politics of recognition, that is to say symbolic or classification struggles over status and the legitimacy of claims, as well as the politics of social reproduction, thus including struggles over the dispossession of land or other means of social security and subsistence. With this concept she is then able to demonstrate that precarity is not a new condition introduced by neo-liberal capitalism, but rather has been continuously produced in different forms and in different ways, differentially affecting

various categories of workers, by the state and employers through the three periods of modern Chinese political economy – state socialism, market reform, and the low growth and overcapacity of the contemporary period. In each of these periods the terrain of struggle has shifted: from a struggle over recognition under state socialism, when precarious categories of workers struggled for recognition as full proletarians with all the rights that this entailed; to struggles over the regulation of labour in the period of marketization and integration into the global capitalist economy; and, finally, the emergence of struggles over social reproduction in the current period characterized by increasing unemployment, dispossession, and precarity of livelihoods.

Menon and Sundar undertake a similar move, emphasizing that precarity is a much broader concept with multiple layers of meaning than allowed by the Northern concept of precarious labour. Examining it through the lens of a society characterized by very high levels of informal labour, as well as the attachment of producers to place and the rights of place – land, access to natural resources, an urban pavement to live on and trade from, a stake in an investment fund which provides for generational reproduction – they argue that what is at stake in struggles over precarity is livelihood, a concept that includes the rights to place through which livelihood may be stabilized. Such a definition points to precarity as including multiple processes of dispossession that afflict the labouring classes and petty commodity producers. Like Lee, Menon and Sundar demonstrate that such dispossession has a long history, preceding the advent of neo-liberal capitalism. Through the concept of precarity they explore three different struggles: of fishing villages, to retain control over fishing rights in the face of mechanized trawling; of pavement dwellers, against eviction from places of living and trading; and of garment workers, against the employer efforts to prevent them from accessing their accumulated savings in provident funds.

Clément deepens the concept of precarity to explore its impact on subjectivity in Russia, developing a concept of desubjectivation to describe the loss of self and agency produced by the extraordinary destruction of industry, jobs, and incomes that attended the market transition, as well as the collapse of the institutions and ideological reference points of communism. As Clément puts it, 'people lost the ground under their feet' and had trouble making any sense of the society they lived in or of their place in it. Clément argues that Putin's turn to patriotic nationalism, particularly after the annexation of the Crimea and the confrontations with the West, provided the dominated with a new language and set of reference points through which to 'recover the ground beneath their feet' and understand their society and their place in it, thus in a sense reducing precarity despite the continuity of neo-liberal policies. Clément thus signals the importance of identity and a sense of social place for the possibility of agency, thus returning us to Lee's insistence on the importance of symbolic and classification struggles to the experience of precarity.

The articles on South Africa and Brazil do not directly discuss or redefine the concept of precarity, as do the articles referred to above. However, they implicitly make use of an expanded concept that includes public goods and struggles over social reproduction, such as access to housing, urban land, clean water, and electricity. Both Braga and Purdy's article on Brazil and Von Holdt and Naidoo's on South Africa expand the experience of precarity beyond the marginalized and labouring classes, to include middle-class experiences of a decline in living standards (Brazil) and the financial and debt burden of seeking to enter the middle-class through university education (South Africa).

Braga and Purdy reminds us of Ching Kwan Lee's relational definition of precarity by showing that neo-liberalization is not necessarily directly accompanied by the spread of precarity. Under the 'Lulista regime' of regulation, workers and the urban poor experienced expanded employment opportunities, increased wages and expanding social security through the Bolsa-Família programme, leading to modest redistribution and a decreasing inequality. However, many public goods did not

improve in quality or accessibility, and the international financial crisis and the end of the commodity supercycle reversed many of these gains. South Africa exhibits similarly complex dynamics of precarity, with deindustrialization, subcontracting, and outsourcing undermining the conditions of workers and generating large-scale under- and unemployment, at the same time as social policies have focused on large-scale free housing programmes and a huge expansion of social grants.

Taken together, these articles deepen and expand our understanding of precarity in the global South to include dimensions not usually considered in the Northern literature, and also delink the concept from neo-liberalization to include earlier historical periods and social systems not normally considered to be drivers of precarity – colonialism, state socialism, state-led modernization – identifying significant continuities between past and present in place of the rather simple narrative of a rupture with the 'golden era' of full employment and welfare capitalism.

Popular struggles

The contributions in this special issue focus on how precarious workers and poor urban communities constitute themselves as collective actors to contest precarity, and attempt to decipher how and the extent to which their organizing and mobilizing shape the new political economy that is crystallizing in the BRICS countries.

Going beyond the more traditional interest in constituencies, collective identity, and strategic goals, we develop an approach that maps and analyses both broader movement landscapes and the internal life of social movements. The former axis of investigation is intended to direct attention to the way in which specific social movements are embedded in wider 'movement landscapes' (Cox, 2016) and how this embeddedness shapes the form and trajectory of oppositional collective action. This concept is meant to highlight how social movements cannot be understood in isolation, but have to be conceptualized in terms of 'a system of characteristic alliances and oppositions' (Cox, 2016, p. 114) that endure over time and define the context in which both movements and their opponents operate. The second axis directs attention to the micro-dynamics that animate the collective articulation of grievances and claims in public spheres (see Cox & Nilsen, 2014). This entails detailing how objectives, strategies, and tactics emerge through processes of dialogue, debate, and dissent among activists, how forms of leadership and internal hierarchies impact on movement dynamics and, finally, what forms of political skill, knowledge, consciousness, and subjectivity movement participation fosters among precarious workers and poor urban communities.

Bringing these two axes of investigation together and drawing on a quintessentially Gramscian conception of hegemony, the analyses that are developed in the contributions to this special issue seek to determine how popular struggles engage and appropriate hegemonic political institutions and idioms in order to pursue grievances, stake claims, and articulate rights. Simultaneously, we consider how responses from dominant groups and state authorities fuse accommodation through policy changes that concede to oppositional demands with various forms and degrees of coercion with the objective of reproducing a given hegemonic formation (Nilsen, 2015, 2016; see also Nilsen & Roy, 2015). Examining protests through this prism brings to the fore the ways in which movement processes unfold in fields that both enable and constrain oppositional collective action, while simultaneously illuminating how the reproduction of hegemonic formations has to be constantly negotiated in the face of contention (see Gramsci, 1998, pp. 52–55, 180–182; Green, 2002; Mallon, 1995; Roseberry, 1994).

For example, it becomes possible to ascertain whether policy concessions result in co-optation and demobilization, and therefore entrench existing power relations between different actors and groups,

or whether they alter balances of power and add momentum to movement processes. It also becomes possible to determine whether specific movement processes have the potential to give rise to political disruptions or whether hegemony is likely to be reconstituted on different terms, and to detail when and why some forms of protest become subject to coercion. It is precisely by unravelling the workings of these equations in and across particular contexts that the approach that we pursue is able to shed some light on how contemporary popular struggles shape the configurations of accumulation and legitimation that undergird neo-liberalization in the BRICS countries. Moreover, it enables us to assess the impact of popular struggle on the forms of adverse incorporation that yield precarity and to ascertain whether incipient patterns of alternative political economies can be discerned within the claims and demands that are being voiced within the practices of social movements in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

Turning to the empirical material and arguments presented in the six papers of this special issue, we discuss here the resonances and tensions between the BRICS countries across three themes: the trajectories of protest and resistance highlighted by each article; the contested languages and claims mobilized from below in each of the countries, and the process of reciprocal appropriation between movements and authorities, as the former attempt to press the justice and legitimacy of their claims, while the latter attempt to absorb and demobilize them; and the prospects for reinvigorated and expanded resistance.

Ching Kwan Lee presents shifting trajectories of mobilization from below across the three periods of Chinese development outlined above. During the authoritarian state socialist period (1949–1979), the categories of workers excluded from the rights and benefits of regular workers (a minority of the workforce) were acutely aware of the discrimination they faced and inferiority of their position because it contradicted so sharply the official ideology of equality and the leading role of the working class, and were able to mobilize their claims during periods of officially sanctioned mass mobilization of the Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Cultural Revolution. During the period of market opening and high growth, the state turned to legal reform and bureaucratic procedures to manage conflict; workers took up these terms to frame their protests and claims, leading to a complex process of collective action (marches and occasional strikes), mediation, and negotiation (in some cases assisted by a new generation of NGOs and in others undertaking independent action), countered by selective repression by the state. Although the 'volume and persistence of worker activism' increased pressure on the state, workers almost invariably avoided moving beyond 'cellular' activism – localized and centred on an individual workplace – avoiding broad mobilization for fear of repression.

Lee thus illuminates a process through which workers appropriated official ideology and institutions – Communist ideology and official campaigns in the first period, legal and bureaucratic procedures and promises in the second – to legitimate their actions and make claims, while authorities responded by incorporating, negotiating, or repressing workers, and on occasion refining forms with new legislation or promises. With the third shift to a 'new normal' of increasing dispossession, indebtedness, disempowerment, and job loss, combined with intensified repression, Lee detects contradictory trends: on the one hand, sporadic instances of 'more violent, volatile and less institutionally incorporated' clashes between precarious workers and the state and, on the other, a trend towards atomization and acquiescence.

Karine Clément detects similar processes through which Russian workers and precarious communities mobilize by framing their protests with the rhetoric presented by authorities, while authorities appropriate the resentment and resistance from below, incorporating these into a new rhetoric of paternalism. While there are many grassroots and labour protests in Russia, they tend to be 'scattered and mostly small-scale', characterized by 'everyday activism' and showing persistent trends towards

the localization of struggles, as in the case of China, rather than national mobilizations for social justice. The one exception was the wave of spontaneous protests in 2005 against Putin's attack on the national social benefits system which began with pensioners, and expanded to include a diversity of groups across 100 towns and nearly 80 regions. The Putin regime responded by partially repealing the reform, adopting a new language of social paternalism and launching a variety of health, housing, and education programmes. The recession that hit Russia in 2014 after the annexation of the Crimea has produced widespread hardship, and the Kremlin has accelerated its turn towards a populist and patriotic discourse, successful in mobilizing big demonstrations in its support and against the West. Clément perceives within this the emergence of a new 'social critical' populism from below, as citizens have appropriated the regime's new discourse and have begun to use this language to critique the current order of things. In Clément's analysis, popular nationalist rhetoric from above produces a new social imaginary of a society characterized by cleavages between the elite and the wealthy and the 'hard-working people' and the 'ordinary folk'. The earlier desubjectivation is reversed with a new subjectivation and sense of agency. Thus, in contrast to Lee's analysis of China, Clément sees in Russia both the ongoing vitality of everyday activism, and the beginnings of a new social critique from below which may provide the foundation for more expansive mobilization that articulates explicit demands for social justice.

While Lee's and Clément's respective prognoses diverge, there is a remarkable similarity in their analysis of the ways in which dominated people in the post-Communist states appropriate the rhetoric of authorities in order to claim justice or rights, while authorities in turn adjust positions in response to mobilization, appropriating demands and refashioning them into new policies, new rhetoric, and new promises.

Von Holdt and Naidoo pursue similar themes in their analysis of popular mobilization in South Africa. They develop the concept of 'movement landscape' as a terrain structured by institutions, organizations, symbolic fields, and discourses and laid down by formative action both from above and below, which both empowers and constrains popular mobilization. Popular forms of engagement 'may reproduce prevailing terms of incorporation, negotiate an alteration to them, or transgress them profoundly' – and it is these dynamics they set out to explore through an analysis of four different cases of popular struggle. Essentially they argue that the movement landscape has been deeply structured by the forms of ANC politics laid down during the liberation struggle, as well as the terms and rights established by the new constitution. In all the cases they examine, mobilizations and movements emerge from within the ANC 'constellation of organizations' and tend to adopt the repertoires of action and symbolic discourses that have been sanctified by the same forces, but in the process tend to push up against the structures and forms of the landscape and, in some cases, breach them in different ways. For example, the struggles and massacre of platinum mine workers at Marikana have triggered a process of fragmentation and realignment within the labour movement, and the emergence of unions and federations outside of the ANC constellation, while the #FeesMustFall student mobilizations have proved a fertile crucible for new ideas and symbolic power outside of the ANC tradition, drawing from previously silenced currents of struggle such as black consciousness, the emergence of black feminism, and a focus on decolonization.

This remains a contradictory process, however, as dominant currents within both the student movement and the new labour formations continue to mobilize the popular rhetoric of the ANC, rich as it is in the themes of struggle and resistance, in articulating grievances and making demands, thus reproducing the practices and symbolic universe characteristic of this constellation of organizations, as do the multitude of community mobilizations that operate almost entirely on the terrain of the ANC. This tendency to operate on the terms of the dominant ideology tends to produce multiple

localized struggles rather than large-scale mass movements challenging the ANC and its neo-liberal policy orientation – resonating with the analyses of China and Russia summarized above. Von Holdt and Naidoo make visible as well the ways in which the ANC government actively contests the terms of engagement, absorbing organizational leaderships, and refashioning and appropriating demands in the form of new policies in some cases, and in others working to delegitimize struggles and organizations and deploying repressive strategies – most strikingly in the case of the Marikana strikes and massacre, but also in ambivalent ways against the student movement. The authors thus conclude that the high levels of activism and mobilization visible in South Africa 'demonstrate a complex mix of trends', with some tending to 'conserve and reproduce the existing landscape' while others are beginning to refashion the landscape, 'establishing new organizational nodes and repertoires of struggle'.

The case of Brazil, as presented by Ruy Braga and Sean Purdy, presents a dramatically different dynamic of struggle. Whereas in China, Russia, and South Africa our authors analyse tentative and shifting processes of mobilization in the context of politically, ideologically, and institutionally dominant regimes, in Brazil the domination of the PT presidency since 2003 appears to have been more fragile, weakened by the compromises it had to make with a congress dominated by right-wing parties and an extremely confident capitalist class, and only able to exert what Braga describes as a 'precarious hegemony' over the subaltern classes. The latter was maintained with the 'active consent' of the leadership and bureaucracy of the trade union movement and social movements, which were absorbed into government and state institutions with the aim of implementing a progressive developmentalism, and the 'passive consent' of the mass membership secured through progressive social policies such as substantial increases to the minimum wage, the Bolsa-Família and housing programmes, economic growth, and job creation. As in the case of China, Russia, and South Africa, the Brazilian popular movement had been absorbed into the discourse and practices of the PT.

However, this moderated version of neo-liberalism was only able to succeed for as long as it was propelled by economic growth premised in large parts on the global commodity supercycle. As the international financial crisis worked its way through the global economy and the supercycle faded, the PT government of Dilma Rousseff came under pressure to retreat from these social programmes. The result was growing disaffection from below, culminating in the militant strike wave of 2013/2014 and the extraordinary popular mobilization against fare increases in the 'June days' of 2013. While this resulted in substantial wage concessions as well as the withdrawal of fare increases across many cities, the PT government proved unable to absorb or appropriate popular discontent as the regimes of the other three governments discussed above have been able to do. The paralysis of the Brazilian government in face of pressures from the capitalist classes above and popular pressure from below exposed the fragility of PT domination, and culminated in a parliamentary coup by right-wing political parties. Thus, unlike the previous cases, the PT government proved unable to absorb or contain popular pressure beyond the two terms of Lula's presidency, which – in contrast to the previous cases – led to massive explosions of popular protest, including large-scale right-wing mobilizations of middle-class constituencies against the PT. In this context, the capitalist classes and elites felt confident enough to engineer a coup on very flimsy pretexts, and install an aggressively neo-liberal regime which is not only unravelling PT reforms, but attempting to entrench constraints for decades to come. The corruption scandals – which implicate all political parties – and the blatant hypocrisy and self-interest of the political elite have done much to discredit the Brazilian political system. It is not clear in this very new situation what form future popular resistance may take.

Fabio Luis fleshes out Braga and Purdy's analysis of the PT and popular mobilization in Brazil, with an account of its role in the drive to regional integration. Though his project

focuses on the expansion of Brazilian business and investment into the region rather than the forms of popular mobilization, he does demonstrate that Brazilian business diplomacy has worked to blunt the radical edge of the Latin American 'progressive wave' at government level, while the environmental devastation, land destruction, and harsh working conditions of Brazilian-funded megaprojects have provoked widespread militant opposition in several Latin American countries, perhaps in some ways mirroring the processes of leadership incorporation and mass protest evident within Brazil.

Gayatri Menon and Aparna Sundar take their analysis of popular mobilization in India in a different direction to that pursued in articles summarized above. Rather than attempt to provide an overview of the development of labour and popular mobilization and its shifting relations with political regimes, they zoom in on three moments of struggle by precarious groups that enable them to explore their specific notion of precarity centred on the concept of livelihoods and place, rather than on labour and the workplace (see above). Each of these moments illustrates what they call a 'regime of dispossession' (following Levien, 2013) – and here they demonstrate that such regimes of dispossession certainly did not make their first appearance with the neo-liberal turn in India, but that they long predated that (no doubt into the colonial period as well). The dispossession of their fishing grounds experienced by the fishers in Tamil Nadu in the form of plunder by mechanized trawlers represented an enclosure of the village commons defined by local custom and notions of village sovereignty – which were in turn mobilized in resistance as the basis for ostracizing trawler captains and merchants, making claims on the state which resulted in legislative changes, and participating in broader alliances against displacement. The second moment, the eviction in Mumbai of some 100,000 pavement traders and dwellers who had previously been displaced from their agricultural land, gave rise to constitutional litigation arguing that the right to life (constitutionally entrenched) included the right of making a livelihood which, in turn, included the right to a place. While the court accepted this expansion of the definition of the right to life, it also permitted the eviction to stand.

These first two moments had their origins in the state-centred national development phase in post-colonial India. The third moment discussed by Menon and Sundar is that of a flash strike of 120,000 mostly female garment workers in Bengaluru in 2016. The strikers avoided trade union involvement; nor were they striking over the extremely low wages and poor working conditions in their industry. Rather, they were striking against a new rule that would have restricted their ability to withdraw savings from their industry provident fund in order to finance their children's education or weddings. Thus, the authors argue, this was not a strike over workplace benefits so much as an entitlement connected to social reproduction, and thus similar to the struggles over livelihood in the first two moments.

Menon and Sundar reject prevailing analyses that typecast these kinds of struggle as petty bourgeois, amorphous and politically unreliable, or alternatively, citizenship struggles, and argue that they constitute 'incipient or emergent' 'forms and languages of contestation' over precarity that suggests a new politics of livelihoods. Finally, they make the important methodological point that researchers such as ourselves should pay attention to the dynamics and meanings of *what is* in the field of popular resistance, rather than imposing a grid of preconceived conceptions about what constitutes a genuine movement or moment of resistance and then seeking evidence for such a development. This may, to a greater or lesser extent, serve as a kind of manifesto for the work presented in this special issue, as well as to the urgent work of charting and analysing the contours and dynamics of the new political economy of development that seems to be crystallizing in the world-system.

Notes

1. The authors whose contributions are featured in this special issue met for the first time in Bergen in 2016 and collectively developed the orientation outlined in this introduction.
2. Examples of such accounts would arguably be Gill (2003), Harvey (2005), McNally (2010), and Panitch and Gindin (2012).
3. We use the term 'global South' loosely so as to include Russia. Clearly reconfigurations of the world-system render the homogeneity of the 'global South' moot.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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