



Partecipazione e Conflitto
* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 9(1) 2016: 261-266
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v9i1p261

Published in March 15, 2016

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

BOOK REVIEWS

Timothy Peace (2015), *European Social Movements and Muslim Activism. Another World but with Whom?*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 2016.

Peace's path-breaking book is the first cross-national study of Muslim activism within European social movements. Its outcomes are relevant, more broadly, for the analysis of Muslim political participation, the forms of European citizenship, and the relationships between religion and politics in contemporary Europe.

Starting from a social movements study and contentious politics perspective, the author examines how (traditionally leftist and mostly secular) progressive social movements deals with the potentially divisive issue of religious pluralism and activism. More specifically, the book presents the results of a comparative analysis of the relationships between the European alter-globalization movement and Muslim activism in France and the UK. Peace explores the two sides of the relationships – Muslim activism, and the reactions of the alter-globalisation movement – in the two countries, and analyses the factors explaining their differences. Despite their similarities with regard to Muslim migration and settlements, connected to their colonial history, democracy and the forms of citizenship, France and the UK are indeed very different in terms of both Muslim citizens' participation to the alter-globalisation movement and movement reactions to their participation. In this direction, Peace explores and compares the factors that explain Muslim mobilization and participation, especially within the alter-globalization movement and highlights what factors explain the internal dynamics of support or opposition of the movement towards Muslim participation in the two countries.

The book is flawlessly organized and enjoyably detailed. In the first chapter, the development of the alter-globalisation movement is reconstructed, and the author starts making his argument by highlighting the relevant – even though often neglected – role

of religious (Christian) actors within the movement, right from the beginning. Moreover, Peace underlines that social forums have been organized all over the world, including in Muslim-majority countries where, despite being less relevant than in Europe, the movement played indeed a role in Tunisia, Morocco, and Turkey. After having deconstructed the idea of a 'secular' and 'Western' alter-globalisation movement, the author addresses the political activism of migrants and Muslims (both migrants and non migrants). The second chapter is thus devoted to "the chronological account of the participation of 'Muslim migrants' and their descendants in social movements and contentious politics" in France and the UK (p. 33). In this especially relevant chapter, Peace demonstrates the continuity of mobilizations, shedding light on the role of migrants' first and second generation in the political struggles from the 1950s to the 1990s. Post-colonial migrants have been involved in struggles for social and political rights, often together with leftist actors and, sometimes, also joining workers unions and political parties. It is only in the 1990s that migrant activists started mobilizing as Muslims in both countries, in relation to specific factors – for the UK, Peace underlines the role of the Rushdie affair, while in France the role of intellectuals like Tariq Ramadan has been more relevant in Muslims' politicization. In this fascinating account, the relationships and the tensions between the left and the various migrants' and Muslims' movements are reconstructed, analysing the legacy of those relationships and tensions in contemporary activism. This chapter, thus, highlight how migrants' political participation is hardly a novelty, and points out how and in which circumstances activists start to call themselves – or be called – 'Muslims' and how, and in which circumstances the religious dimension started to politically matter in migrants' leftist activism. The third chapter addresses Muslim participation in the alter-globalisation movement in France and the UK, starting from the 2000s, when the previous chapter left, and point the attention to their differences. In France, Muslim activism already addressed the issues that later became important for the alter-globalisation movements. Nonetheless, Muslim presence in the movement was met with bewilderment by the other actors. On the contrary, in the UK, the movement leadership encouraged the Muslim presence and participation, in the attempt of enlarging its basis and internal diversity – apparently, though, without really engaging with Muslims' concerns. The reactions of the alter-globalisation movement leadership and the motivations of Muslims are then explored in the following chapters. Chapter four continues the deconstruction work of the previous chapter, directly addressing the underlying assumption of many activists (and, I would say, many scholars as well) that Muslims activists have different and specific reasons for joining the movement. In this chapter, Peace presents the results of his analysis concerning the personal experiences and external influences that contribute to

Muslims' activism within the alter-globalization movement, highlighting three main elements. First, Muslim became involved in the movement through processes and political trajectories that match those of the other activists: their only specificity is to do with their personal experience of racism. Moreover, second, Peace underlines his interviewees' complaints about being labelled first and foremost as 'Muslim', having their religious identity overcoming all the others and shadowing their differences. Third, Islam is a source of inspiration among others. In this direction, since many activists were inspired by liberation theology as well, the author analyses influential Muslim theorists exploring whether it is possible to speak about an 'Islamic Liberation Theology', showing the importance of Muslim intellectuals in mobilizing Muslims, especially in France. Of course, Peace's study concerns a "minority within a minority" (p. 107): however, far from being a limit, this only reminds us the importance of nuancing the analysis and being cautious about simplifying generalizations. This emerges even more clearly in chapter five, in which the author explores the reactions of alter-globalisation activists to the participation of Muslims. In both France and the UK, Muslims' activism is essentialized and perceived as something different from the alter-globalisation movement: "British leaders assumed that 'anti-imperialism' and 'Islamophobia' were the only issues that interested Muslim activists [...] French leaders assumed that Muslims did not accept *laïcité* and gender equality and presumed that they were putting their Muslim identity before anything else" (p. 134). On the one side, Peace's study confirms that the countries' different discursive opportunity structures, related to different philosophies of integration, shape the general attitude towards Muslim participation: welcoming in the UK and more sceptical in France. On the other side, it also highlights the relevant role of key actors, interactions and cross-fertilization, and the organizations' internal mechanisms of power. In chapter six, the author grounds on both political and discursive opportunity structures to explain the different outcomes of Muslim participation within the alter-globalisation movement in terms of electoral alliances. In the UK, the electoral system and the weakness of the left provide a favourable scenario for leftist parties to seek out Muslim allies, and the Iraq war constituted the discursive window of opportunity for that. In France, on the contrary, the strength of the radical left, the shape of the electoral system, and the possible accusations of communitarianism, unfavourably influenced Muslims' participation. The author then explores various cases of parties, alliances, and Muslim candidacies in the two countries. The analysis of the experiences of Respect at the national level in the UK and the local list Motivé-e-s in France offers the chance to explore the factors that support Muslims' participation in the electoral competition, and exemplifies cross- and within-countries differences. Moreover, the author underlines the slow death of alter-globalization movement,

which indeed influenced the mobilizations' outcomes. Finally, in the conclusion, Peace summarizes his findings about the role of religion in social movements, how social movements deal with differences, and how social movements' dynamics are influenced by (and, in turn, influence) their specific political context.

The book adds to a variety of literatures, from social movement studies, to political science, to sociology of religion, and it is extremely interesting for the topics dealt with by *Partecipazione e Conflitto*. From the perspective of religion and politics studies, Peace's book makes three main points, and opens some other questions. First of all, this book demonstrates that, in Muslims' participation within social movements, being Muslim plays a very little role. Even though this seems like a paradox, Peace in fact convincingly argues that the role of Islam is often overestimated, and it should not "be assumed that religious activists are primarily motivated by their faith" (p. 157). The study, indeed, demonstrates how the context – and, more specifically, the political and discursive opportunity structure, the legacy of the previous political struggles, and external events, such as the Iraq war in the case of Britain – influences activism, and activists' view of religion, by at the same time shaping the possible forms and language of mobilization. This is an especially relevant result of this study, which may be generalized to other field of analysis which overestimate the role of 'being Muslim' and underestimate the internal differences that the 'Muslim' label actually may shadow. The second main point this book helps to make is that in analysing Muslims' political participation, politics matters, indeed. While in the actors' motivations and self-portraits religion plays a minor role, this is not the case for non-Muslim actors, both individuals and organizations, who instead assume that Islam religion has an overarching relevance for believers. Visible religious signs – and specifically the veil – immediately activate in the audience a series of unverified assumptions about thoughts, beliefs and attitudes of people wearing these signs. In this sense, being Muslim plays a major role in Muslims' political participation. Far from contradicting the first outcome, this second point reinforces it instead, and reminds us the importance of analysing both sides, when dealing with religion and politics. Finally, this book points the finger to the main topic at stake when dealing with religion and (in) politics, that is how to deal with differences. Unfortunately, the author does not explore this aspect, while mentioning it among the conclusions. Besides showing how social movements react to and deal with religious pluralism, the debate around the political mobilization of religious people also could tell us something about the political management of diversity and pluralism as such. Indeed, as the literature on Muslims and Islam in Europe widely shows, Islam becomes to represent the 'complete other'. In this sense, Muslims' activism in civil society, and civil society reactions, are to do with religious pluralism but also, at a deeper level, with

democracy. Actually, this leads me to one of the main open questions - Is it religion? Or, is it Islam? – which calls for further analysis. As Peace underlines, Christian organizations played a relevant role in the movement. Yet, their role did not pose a serious problem – even though they lacked acknowledgment. We could say, then, that pluralism and religion are recognized and legitimized in the movement – at least, to a certain extent. The author nicely explains the complex role of Muslims as migrants and religious activists, and highlights when they stop being ‘migrants’ and became ‘Muslims’. Precisely because of this excellent reconstruction, we may wonder whether the reactions raised by Muslim activists would be the same raised by, for example, Sikh activists – as well bearers of a complex intertwinement of differences – or if there is a contextual specificity in the politicization of Islam. In other words, is it being Muslim that polarizes the other actors’ attitudes?

Finally, I want to point attention to the subtitle, *Another World but With Whom?*, which ironically calls for a reflection over the internal pluralism of the pluralism advocacy groups. As already mentioned, religion is indeed a really useful lens through which looking at politics and democracy.

Overall, “European Social Movements and Muslim Activism. Another World but With Whom?” is an excellent and inspiring book, rigorous and enjoyable, which deconstructs and exposes a series of assumptions on both Muslim activism and the alter-globalisation movement in Europe. In this direction, the book adds to our knowledge and methodology to understand our reality, the complex interrelations between the various dimensions of identity (religious and secular, collective and individual), and the outcomes of the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, beyond oversimplification and hasty labelling.

Alberta Giorgi, Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra