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BOOK REVIEWS

Street Politics in the Age of Austerity: From the Indignados to Occupy, by Marcos Ancelovici, Pascale Dufour and Héloïse Nez (Eds.), Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, 312 pp., ISBN 9789089647634.

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The Great Recession detonated in 2007, within the US financial sector. It then spread around the world with impressive magnitude and persistence and disrupted the economies of many countries. The austerity measures implemented as alleged remedies to this critical juncture further exacerbated an existing social malaise. Yet not only the economic crisis, but also contestation rapidly propagated across the globe. Following the so-called 'Arab Spring', anti-austerity protests emerged with unexpected strength and size in both the Global North and the Global South. The peak of the cycle of contention was reached in 2011, when the *Time* chose 'the protester' as Person of the Year.¹ Because of their synchronism, one might be tempted to depict such episodes of mass mobilization as different expressions of one single global movement, i.e. the so-called 'movement of the squares'. But is this really the case?

This is the puzzle guiding *Street Politics in the Age of Austerity: From the Indignados to Occupy*, edited by Marcos Ancelovici, Pascale Dufour and Héloïse Nez. The book is a

¹ Time, 'Person of the Year 2011: The Protester'. URL <http://content.time.com/time/person-of-the-year/2011/> (accessed 23 October 2018).

fascinating journey around the anti-austerity protests which emerged in many western countries, namely Spain, Greece, France, Ireland, Israel, the US, and Canada. These cases are compared across time, space, by way of multiple analytical perspectives. The volume is the outcome of a collective endeavor (16 authors in total) that seek to answer the following research questions: “Do the 2011 protests that shook Europe and North America belong to the same family of protests? And how is it possible to simultaneously study their communalities and their unique features?” (p. 12).

The book firstly engages in an extensive review of the literature on the Occupy and Indignados movements. While rich and diverse, there are some gaps in the existing contributions, coupled with an overwhelming prevalence of single case studies. The editors thus build an analytical framework for comparing these social movements altogether, i.e. shedding light on their similarities and differences. They identify three constitutive features shared by all the cases analyzed. First, anti-austerity protests advanced a radical critique of neoliberalism. Wealth concentration and income inequality were at the core of protesters’ claims and demands. Responses to the crisis based on austerity were opposed as socially unjust, economically ineffective, and democratically illegitimate. Second, and related to this, social movements pointed an accusing finger at representative democracy. Political elites were blamed for serving oligarchic interests, to the detriment of the many. As an alternative to post-democratic politics (Crouch 2004), different models of democracy – revolving around the principle of horizontalism – were advocated and practiced during the protest events. Third, protests rapidly spread over many countries. The issue of diffusion is then identified as the most salient for locating anti-austerity movements within a common ‘movement family’.

The book has the great merit of taking structural transformations seriously. Long having been absent from the scene of social movement studies, capitalism is brought back into protest analysis (della Porta 2015). The contribution by George Ross (Chapter 2) is a dense account of the causes, the dynamics, and the consequences of the Great Recession – from the ‘sub-prime’ mortgage crisis and the collapse of Lehman Brothers, to the impacts on the real economy and the European sovereign debt crisis. The role of policy-makers in coping with the financial sector is also taken into account, as in the case of the bail-out of ‘too big to fail’ banks, whose losses were socialized. Moreover, each chapter of the book pays attention to the socioeconomic context in which protests unfolded. Yet authors rightly avoid considering the economic crisis as a sufficient condition for mobilization. Rather than an automatic translation of material grievances, protest could occur as long as organizational infrastructures and political opportunities were available. In a sense, the *economic crisis* did not create any grievance from

scratch. It instead punctuated a *political crisis* of legitimacy that was already at play, at least in western societies.

In this vein, another strength of the book is its emphasis on the interplay between protest and institutional politics. Hanspeter Kriesi (Chapter 3) makes a major step in this direction, so to overcome “the compartmentalization of studies concerning different forms of political action” (p. 67). He understands the 2011 protest wave as a mobilization ‘of last resort’. In his perspective, when mainstream political representatives are perceived as unresponsive to popular demands, populist parties often embody anti-establishment sentiments in the electoral arena. However, if party politics is unable to fill this void of representation, citizens are eventually pushed to directly take the streets to voice their aspirations.

Of course, protesters’ mistrust of mainstream politics is connected with their adoption of direct democratic, non-hierarchical modes of organization. At the same time, the authors are cautious in tracing a direct connection between these two aspects. Though the upheavals of the capitalist economy are not considered to be the only cause of social movements, the crisis of representative democracy does not automatically translate into certain modes of collective action. This is what Marcos Ancelovici contends in his contribution on *Occupy Montreal* (Chapter 7). He shows that in this context not only structural change, but also contingency is worthy of consideration. In his account, horizontalism is also the unstable outcome that inexperienced activists produce when they adopt a trial-and-error approach for dealing with practical problems during occupations.

This aspect is connected to an additional quality of the volume, namely the importance it attaches to local contexts and specificities. Héloïse Nez (Chapter 5) highlights how the international, the national, and the local levels were all relevant for the ‘15M/*Indignados*’ movement in Spain. While national institutions were the main targets of protests, the global echo produced by the massive gatherings in Puerta del Sol pushed the movement to develop a wider international appeal. Local actions – focused on concrete issues at the neighborhood level – were also conducted with the purpose of registering specific victories. This helped to sustain mobilization over time. In a similar vein, Maria Kousis (Chapter 6) focuses on the Greek ‘*Aganaktismenoi*’ (Outraged) and shows, for instance, how in their opposition to austerity measures protesters targeted the national parliament, seeing this as a seemingly more accountable institution than supranational ones.² The Greek mobilizations also had a local significance, as they were often staged in Syntagma Square, Athens’ historical symbol of resistance. The

² Especially the so-called *troika*, constituted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

shift across different scales of contention is thus driven by a strategic endeavor. Relatedly, local peculiarities emerge as crucial in shaping the diffusion of protest across the globe. Leonidas Oikonomakis and Jérôme E. Roos (Chapter 9) challenge the classical theories of diffusion as a linear process from a transmitter to an adopter and propose the alternative concept of ‘resonance’. By sharing similar structural conditions posed by the economic and political crises, activists drew inspiration from movements mobilizing elsewhere in order to express a common discontent. In turn, this facilitated the reactivation of pre-existent, latent networks of local activism with a legacy of horizontalism (cf. also Flesher Fominaya 2015).

Anarchism and other autonomous movement cultures molded anti-austerity protests to a vast extent – also demonstrating a degree of continuity with previous waves of contention (and especially with the Global Justice Movement, as also pointed out by Jackie Smith in Chapter 8). The volume is thus very effective in illustrating where horizontalism comes from. Yet this perspective partly overlooks how protests were not inspired by a mere refusal of representative democracy. They often advanced a *regeneration* of political institutions.

This can be firstly recognized in the importance that the *welfare state* had for protesters. While engaging with the prefigurative politics of direct democracy, activists also demanded the restoration of ‘old’ social rights traditionally granted by the state. Donatella della Porta (2015) adopts a Polanyian perspective to interpret these claims. Polanyi (2001 [1944]) indeed describes capitalism as characterized by a double-movement, i.e. a movement oriented towards the promotion of free market and a counter-movement oriented towards social protection. Anti-austerity protests were (also) a call for truly democratic institutions whose aim is to protect citizens from social insecurity – and which should replace the ‘rigged’ institutions captured by the interests of the few.

The demand for a stronger welfare state was, in a sense, a demand for a stronger *nation state*. National flags were quite widespread during anti-austerity mobilizations (Gerbaudo 2017). While generally evoking a claim for sovereignty over a national territory, they were mainly used by protesters as symbols of popular unity and solidarity in opposing common enemies devoid of democratic legitimacy (e.g. financial powers, corrupt politicians, supranational institutions, German political leaders). The state was identified as the mean by which such popular sovereignty could be reclaimed. Protests clearly had a populist soul in this respect. But such populism is very different from the xenophobic, chauvinist ones of Donald Trump or Marine Le Pen. In Gerbaudo’s perspective, it was instead a democratic, ‘leaderless’, and somehow individualized kind of populism.

Questioning representative democracy at its roots while demanding the revival of the (welfare) nation state is only apparently paradoxical. Gerbaudo indeed refers to *citizenism* as the surprising marriage between two diverse political cultures, namely (neo-)anarchism and populism, which could come together in the context of the crisis. This marks some *dis*-continuities with the Global Justice Movement, which used to engage with the state as an enemy to be defeated rather than a structure to be transformed from below. The biographical, cultural, and political outcomes that anti-austerity protests are now producing – especially in the realm of electoral politics – would support this interpretation. The emergence of new parties such as Podemos and new left-wing leaders such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders are the long tail of those mobilizations. The volume recognizes the importance of such dynamics, but it does not engage with this question systematically.

These critical remarks notwithstanding, the volume is an extremely valuable and ambitious contribution in the field of social movement studies. Theoretical reasoning and empirical investigation are coupled effectively and through an original approach. Many key issues for anti-austerity protests (such as structural transformations, horizontalism, and diffusion) are questioned and investigated with impressive depth – instead of taken for granted. Comparisons across time and space enable a fine-grained understanding of how such mobilizations were both similar and diverse in their emergence, consolidation, and contraction. This is definitely more than enough to make the book a must-read for social movement scholars and activists alike.

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