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Luisa STEUR | *Indigenist mobilization: Confronting electoral communism and precarious livelihoods in post-reform Kerala*, New York, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2017, pp. 302.

All over the world, the last decades have witnessed a generalized move toward identity politics, where political affiliation has increasingly been based on belonging to particular “cultural”, religious, national or ethnic communities rather than on class solidarities or ideological principles. Nationalism is everywhere on the rise, triggering the approval of exclusionary policies, and the labelling and othering of supposed irreducibly different groups.

Indigenism, a peculiar kind of identity politics, has also been developing as a form of political mobilization in many parts of the world, although, as the author of the book under review rightly points out in the *Introduction*, “it can also become the key site of resistance against the same historical processes that formed indigeneity into an axis of dispossession” (p. 6). *Indigenist Mobilization* is, in fact, a historical and ethnographic investigation of the processes that led a particular section of workers and farmers in Kerala, previously mostly affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) to identify as indigenous people and politically act as such. Luisa Steur brilliantly unpacks the trajectory of such shift in political subjectivity, by asking “why indigenous people increasingly struggle as indigenous people while there are potentially many other identifications open to them” (p. 11). The book addresses the question through a Marxian theoretical framework, which combines a critical struggles approach as advocated by Philip McMichael with an extremely productive relational class analysis. The latter, following Don Kalb, takes class as an analytical concept “rooted in the basic and never frictionless ties and interdependences between people as arising for their efforts to survive and maintain themselves” (p. 190).



In this way, Steur does two things that are worth being described in detail. On one side, she contextualizes the history and practice of the Kerala indigenist movement – mostly represented by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS), literally the “Grand Council of the Indigenous Lineages” – within global processes, while showing the extent to which a local social movement can help us better grasp the current conjuncture of the world system. Such dialectical approach allows to escape the risks of purely structural determinist theories, which see indigenism only as the product of wider dynamics occurring at the global level. Rather, it permits to read it as an event that in turn “intervenes in such processes and thereby also unsettles established histories” (p. 15). On the other side, by relying on an expanded concept of class, Steur offers an extremely convincing analysis of the intertwined trajectories of the Kerala’s political field, the neoliberal restructuring of the State (a process linked to the Indian National level and, in turn, to the global capitalist system), and the people with whom she has been doing research. In this respect, the ethnography presented, offered mainly in the form of activists’ biographies, narratives of past struggles, and people’s expectations and daily life, assumes a much wider scope, appearing as strictly interconnected to, and able to let us grasp, broader political, social and economic dynamics. The neoliberal policies which have changed Kerala, long regarded by many as a bastion of communism with an appreciable performance across most development indices, are thus viewed not merely as “an external threat to subaltern communities, but [as] a process gradually shaping people’s everyday lives and, in doing so, triggering different political imaginations” (p. 253).

Zooming in to the content, the book is structured in five parts: a theoretical and methodological Introduction and a Conclusion, and the three central sections, each made of two chapters, forming the core of the research. In the first section, Chapters One and Two trace a genealogy of the categories of “tribe” and of the – specifically Indian – “adivasi” (literally, “aboriginal”), their emergence in the scientific and public discourse and the way they have been used as exclusionary tools. Steur thus deconstructs these reifying categorizations in order to demonstrate how the border between people supposedly “in” and people supposedly “out” the capitalist world system is a false one, not allowing to properly understand the relational, contextual and historical processes that have brought some people, and not others, to come to be known as indigenous. The author then analyses the rise of the indigenous movement and of the AGMS in Kerala through accounts of particular struggles that are considered as central for the history

of the movement, and by investigating the way in which “adivasianness” has been framed, although in contradictory ways, as a new political subjectivity through processes of conscientization.

The second and third sections, Chapters Three to Six, develop the idea that the rise of indigenism is a formal rather than a substantive phenomenon. In the author’s words, thus, “what hence needs explanation is not why indigenous people rebel but why they have started doing so under an indigenist political program” (p. 4). Through the biographies of five exemplary indigenist activists, Steur makes her point that, rather than emerging because States all over the world were forced by “international norms” on the recognition of indigenous people previously ignored if not dispossessed (what she calls the “democratization argument”), indigenism arose from and in opposition to previous class-based, especially Marxist, discourses and movements. Indeed, most of indigenist activists were previously affiliated to the Communist Party, but started at some point to move away from a class-based understanding of society toward a political critique articulated more in terms of culture and caste. This mostly occurred because in the years of the liberalization of the economy, principally led in Kerala by the Communist Party, “subaltern groups stopped believing the party still stood for greater social equality and emancipation” (p. 182). The rise of indigenism in opposition to the Communist Party (although, at least partly, in continuity with previous leftist ideals as far as it concerns the substantial content of the political and economic critique) has meant that in the last decades CPI(M) and AGMS have gone through “widening cycles of political disidentification” (p. 182), whereby each other’s identity has been framed mostly in reciprocal opposition, increasing the ideological gap between the two.

Chapters Five and Six analyze in detail the life trajectories of common people both in the bourgeoisifying and in the most popular (laborers) layers of the indigenist movement. The centrality of education and consumption for the former, and of land for both, embedded as they are in personal stories of marginalization, stigmatization and dispossession, points to the failure of the Kerala model in being really inclusive. The analysis of the centrality land has acquired within the indigenous movement and the account of the many struggles for it also through land occupation, would deserve a much longer space to be properly presented. But, suffice it to say, the importance of land in the claims of the indigenist movement is linked to a complex constellation in which the cut on social benefits, the employment crisis as well as symbolic factors connected to the stereotyped image of what adivasis’ occupation and way of life is, all concur.

To conclude, *Indigenist mobilization* is a fundamental book not only for those interested in the Indian or worldwide indigenist movements, as it offers extremely useful insights into the connection between local resistance experiences and global processes triggered by the capitalist world system, along with a deep focus on the continuities between past movements for social justice and more recent mobilizations based on indigenous belonging. It is also a must-read for scholars who study identity politics and the new global rise of localisms and nationalisms at large, as it proposes a theoretical approach and a historic-ethnographic methodology able to unpack taken for granted identities through a meticulous work of deconstruction and an extremely productive reading of class in its relational constituents.

Tommaso SBRICCOLI

University College London
tommasosbriccoli@gmail.com