

RECENSIONI

Don KALB, Massimiliano MOLLONA (eds) | *Worldwide mobilizations: Class struggles and urban commoning*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, 2018, pp. 256.

The contemporary rise of anti-globalist and populist right-wing movements and parties has led scholars to formulate retrospective analyses in order to understand when and where the Left failed to oppose the global capital and its socio-economic impact. The volume edited by Kalb and Mollona seeks to answer this question by combining theoretical insights with ethnographic studies of worldwide mobilizations which took place in urban contexts shortly before and after 2011. Drawing on the editors' long lasting reflection on anthropological political economy issues, the introduction to the volume suggests that it is useful today to zoom in this "moment of universalist counter-politics" not only for its significant popular participation, but also for its short life and inability to gain power. Understanding its failure might help shedding light on the derailment of popular insurgency towards "particularistic quasi-counter-politics" of "deserving majorities" (p. 5).

The methodological approach of the book capitalizes on this short-lived Left resurgence for the return of anthropology and neighboring disciplines to the analytical concept of class. This intellectual positioning is framed by the editors in a materialist-realist approach as opposed to an idealist one. While idealists are interested in networks of activists organized in horizontalist forms of spontaneous gatherings (occupying, assembly), realists tend to focus more explicitly on workers or peasants, considering the vertical relations and potential horizontal solidarity in which these subjects are enmeshed within the "really existing capitalism". Inspired by Marx's relational concept of class and in line with Kalb's constant attention for diachronic and systemic analysis, the realists are committed to framing mass



confrontations with the state and capital within historical and large-scale analysis (p. 10). This peculiar approach is used across the book to unpack populist arguments (often illustrated with reference to Chantal Mouffe's and Ernesto Laclau's theories) mainly in two ways: challenging the post-ideological positioning ("neither Left, nor Right") and filling empty signifiers like "the people" or "the politicians".

Regarding the first point, Sian Lazar questions the middle-class and national label of Argentina's mass protests against the corrupted and financially inefficient Kirchner government, inscribing them in the more indeterminate socio-economic structure and ideological orientations of the protesters. The real demarcation line she draws is between traditional protests by workers' organizations and current "spontaneous" rebellions, which lack the capacity to politically articulate social and material demands in order to gain long-lasting impact. Loperfido's contribution, focused on the Italian political scene, similarly reflects on the value attached to "spontaneity" in the rise of a "Third Way Politics". He traces back to the 1970s the emergence of anti-systemic movements such as the *Spontaneista* one, whose socio-economic roots are to be found in the slow economic decline of the 1950s and the consequent ascent of a privileged class born from the alliance between the parties' establishment and the industrial capital. This reorganization led to questioning the Left/Right horizontal political spectrum and to reshuffling loyalties according to a new vertical axis of internal opposition between "grassroots" and "established" political actors. Steur's chapter explores new movements in India denouncing the moral corruption of the political elite and praising the moral integrity and transparency of the "Common man". As in case of the Spontaneista movement, in the Am Aami (common man) Party's rhetoric the Right-Left dichotomy has been replaced by the right-wrong one. However, the Author points out how the transformation of the movement into a ruling party was accompanied by contamination and contradictions, including its ideological shift towards anti-democratic attitude, the intra-party controversy over the need to prioritize anti-corruption as opposed to anti-accumulation strategies, and the way political participation in the Party reaffirms class differences among its members. Hoffman's contribution focuses on the Kamaiya, a Western Nepal movement of ex-bonded laborers who received support from the Maoist party after bonded labor was abolished in 2000. Therefore, the Kamaiya grassroots movement became a powerful organization called Freed Kamaiya Society, which, despite its limited success, deployed "rituals of confrontation with the State" aimed at gaining

visibility, subverting structural inequalities, and enforcing the implementation of the formally acknowledged right to land. Kofti's chapter on Bulgaria addresses similar issues from a specific political positioning, i.e. the electoral abstentionism and lack of political activism of the flexible, precarious and indebted workers of the industrial city of Pernik. Their refusal to join the anti-corruption protests in Sofia in 2013-2014 is seen as the political manifestation of disillusionment with the modern teleology of both communism and capitalism.

A second set of contributions stand out for their attention to the political subjects involved in the uprisings. Kyimulu's chapter focuses on the spontaneous gatherings at Gezi park in Istanbul, whose survival has been threatened by the State and construction oligarchies. He ascribes to so-called "aggressive" or "authoritarian" urbanism both Turkey's main growth engine and the unifying front for a "frictional heterogeneity", that is, a socially variegated mass of people opposing the police. Jansen's attempt at "reconfiguring the people" taking part in the 2014 Sarajevo winter revolts places the populist register of the protests within the specific political scenario of postwar, post-socialist and semi-peripheral Bosnia and Herzegovina. The "people" are thus identified with a wide middle class affected by problems of social reproduction, who demands a "State in order" and social justice, far from having any anti-liberal dimension. Mollona's account of the June 2013 revolt in Brazil shows how, from that event onward, the protestors increasingly came to coincide with a mass of people in which the threshold between middle class and proletariat was fuzzy. The economic crisis that struck Brazil engendered the failure of the populist plan to transform the entire country into middle class and was followed by anti-labor and extractivist policies promoted by the left ruling party. This led to cross-sectional discontent channeled along anti-corruption and anti-inflation arguments that broke out especially in reaction to the organization of world sport events. Looking at the case of New York, another global city with a long history of progressivism, Susser carries out a diachronic analysis that relates evolving social movements to shifting regimes of accumulations in the city. She shows how since the 1970s the passage from Fordism to flexible accumulation had entailed a restriction of welfare services (especially housing) at the detriment of the working and middle classes hit by gentrification, debt and foreclosures. In this scenario, the strong traditional labor unions have been replaced by composite movements like Occupy Wall Street, representing a new way to oppose the divisiveness of the contemporary "selective hegemony".

The extremely variegated geographical and political contexts taken into consideration highlight the ambitious project of this book, which applies a sound common methodological framework to multiple subjects for anthropological reflection. Understandably these are not developed to the same degree in each of the contributions. The urban context in particular, which runs as a red thread throughout the volume, is not given a central role in all of the chapters. Instead, it figures generally as a background for political events and only in a few cases (Kyimulu, Mollona, Susser) as a specific site of capitalist accumulation. The editors seem to take account of this only in the afterword where, however, the centrality of the urban context in the analyzed mobilizations is relativized based on the consideration that the urban/rural divide is increasingly challenged in the frame of global processes (p. 229). This unequal focus however, must be linked to the historicizing and contextualizing effort of the whole volume, in which worldwide mobilizations are not simplistically explained as a global phenomenon but rather as “one worldwide wave of regionally embedded cycles”. Thanks to this peculiar approach, the volume constitutes a fundamental reading to avoid generalizing accounts of what the editors deem the increasingly contested but still dominant neoliberalism as well as commonsensical clues about its local political manifestations.

Zaira Tiziana LOFRANCO

Università di Milano

zaira.lofranco@unimi.it