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BOOK REVIEWS

Alteri L. and Raffini L. (Eds., 2014), *La Nuova politica. Mobilitazioni, movimenti e conflitti in Italia*, Edises, Napoli, pp. 224.

Over the last several years, people have occupied squares and parks around the world. Those place names— Syntagma, Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti Park and Tahrir and Taksim Square— evoke a politicization that has emerged out of a gloomy, multidimensional crisis. A plight that many people are harshly experiencing while few are profiting (Wilson J., Swyngedouw E. 2014).

Unfortunately, no public space in Italy has been associated with those international spaces around which this new and vibrant political terrain has been glimpsed. An Italian political ecologist, I believe in the urgency of the politicization of the debate about the future of Italy and Italians with regard to: the current levels of economic stagnation; the increasing impoverishment of large parts of the population; and the varying degrees of ecological disaster the nation faces. Indeed, previously with Berlusconi, and now with Renzi, the Italian politics is staging almost perfectly the post democratic scenario described by Collin Crouch at the beginning of the 21st century. A scenario where the standard procedures of the liberal democracy run as usual, but actually the citizens have little to say on what the governments decide at one with economic elite.

Post democracy is the theoretical starting point of Luca Alteri and Luca Raffini, the editors of “*La Nuova Politica. Mobilitazioni, movimenti e conflitti in Italia*”. With the help of six researchers in sociology and political science - Bulli G., Caruso L., Castelli Gattinara P., Forno F. Giorgi A. and Piazza G. – they try to excavate the Italian mobilizations and social struggles in order to let the political emerge, even in the absence of an Italian evocative squares or parks at international level. This ensemble of authors analyses a series of experiences that have occupied significant spaces in the Italian socio-political arena for the last few decades. They show how a new politics in Italy is trying to make room for going beyond the liberal democratic model.

The authors set their ambitions high; they aspire to retrace the origins and the features of important experiences of participative mobilizations from the bottom up. They look to connect those experiences with international movements and mobilizations. As the editors clearly highlight on their book’s cover, even if the forms and the places of what they call the New Politics are

very heterogeneous and multi-coloured, those experiences share some core traits, such as: *a move away from understanding political participation [as a process] as centred on mandate and delegation; the rejection of hierarchical and bureaucratic organization; an informality, and the resorting to protest and to conflict; and [finally] the foundation of an individualized political practice that stays on the borders of the public and private sphere.*

The authors' ambitions are high because they want to address a diverse readership with their book's content. This array of participants include: students of sociology and political science interested in in-depth case-study analysis; activists and citizens who want to better understand the relation between current cultural, social and political changes and the nature, the meanings and the perspectives of these new participative forms; and finally, researchers of social and political phenomena.

Before I offer my opinion as to whether those ambitions are met or not, I would like to present briefly the seven case studies that compose the seven chapters of the book.

In the first chapter, Loris Caruso presents the typical struggle of advanced industrial society, i.e. the struggle of workers defending their jobs. A sociologist, Caruso skilfully shows why the Jabil case, in the province of Milan, should not be characterized as traditional class struggle. He outlines the ways the case's industrial action combines traditional union practices with the new responses of the so-called social movement unionism. Caruso stresses the fact that the people he interviews tell their own histories, and of their difficulties, primarily as citizens as opposed to speaking from the position of workers; their complaints are mostly against the intertwining of political and economic interests rather than against capitalists *per se*. The employees of Jabil fight commodification rather than exploitation; Caruso concludes (although his conclusions do not emerge so clearly from his discussion) that even if the conflict seen in the Jabil case can be read through the lens of both Polanyi and Marx, the theoretical constructs of the former prevail.

In the second chapter, Gianni Piazza analyses the different waves of protests against the process of privatization of the educational system, which occurred during the years 2008 – 2009 and 2010 – 2012. A political scientist, Piazza shows how these protests cannot be reduced to, or defined as, student mobilization. This is because students found different allies, such as researchers in 2010, and teachers and parents in 2012, in their struggle against government reforms at schools and universities. Piazza points out that even if these struggles were not successful, and always had a defensive and reactive character, they were interesting for specific reasons. He outlines these reasons as follows: an attempt at transnational coordination; a unique networking model; and, spectacular tactics and connections with all those social actors under attack by neo-liberal politics. The author offers an excellent scrutiny of student movement theory, but it is not clear what theory he uses to investigate his case or, from a different perspective, which theory his case criticizes. He concludes that none of the old analytical categories of the student movement researchers explains the new movement. Thus, his opinion appears to be generic because he does not provide a new category researchers might use to better investigate student movements to come.

Francesca Forno is the author of the third chapter. A sociologist, she exhaustively discusses the emergence of the solidarity economy in Italy, its basic principles of environmental and social sustainability, its self-governance institutions and its community-supporting and cooperative relations. She stresses that old and passive traditional boycott practices are being replaced by con-

sumer activism and decisions based on responsible investment. Moreover, she maintains, in this new model the critical consumer goes even further, becoming critical citizens whose actions are not just articulated in the economic sphere; these individuals penetrate the social and political spheres, too. The consequences of this transformation are very important because the new critical citizen is not only animated by ethical beliefs, he envisions new ‘political imaginaries’. What is missing in Forno’s chapter is a discussion of the resilience of these new innovative practices, not because resilience is something important a priori but because Forno introduces the concept in the chapter’s title.

In the fourth chapter, Roberta Giorgi, a researcher in sociology, introduces the interesting protests of workers in the arts and performance arts, or more generically defined “knowledge workers”. The spark that ignited this movement was a 30% reduction in public funding for the arts. One result has been that squatters have moved into a series of theatres and buildings assigned to cultural activities in a series of local autonomous occupations supported by a national network. Giorgi stresses the important process of subjectification, which many of the knowledge activists experiment with, but she never really clarifies what she means by the term. Is she using the terms as Michael Foucault does, or as Jacques Ranciere does, or as Judith Butler does? What she does do eloquently is to show the generative and constituent power of those practices that have transformed the occupied common space by introducing self-governance and principals of direct democracy in a series of heterogeneous and de-territorialized new (economic) practices

The fifth chapter is the result of collaborative research between the researcher Giorgia Bulli and the Ph.D. candidate Pietro Castelli Gattinara. Political scientists, these two brilliantly outline the ascent of the most important contemporary extreme-right movement of Italy, i.e. Casa Pound. They show how and why that movement has been able to revitalize traditional neo-fascist organizations that have, since the end of the second world war, been able to harness the rage and suffering of segments of the population and, above all, an interest in the Fascist tradition in Rome. Gattinara and Bulli accurately describe the differences between Casa Pound Italy and all other significant right parties and movements that exist in Italy. The pair explores the groups’ capacities to use actions typical of groups on the extreme left, such as the occupation of buildings for residential and social uses. Bulli and Gattinara discuss the main characteristic of the far-right movement. They underline its revolutionary spontaneity, its spiritualism, its subscription to deep ecology and its attention to the role of the women, but also the hierarchical nature of the movement as well as its cult of violence. The weakness of the chapter is the lack of any theoretical contribution of the study.

Chapter six is an excursion into the experiences of the Occupied and self-managed Italian Social Centre, which, as typical of the occupation in the South of Europe, is a place where the political emerges more clearly than in the squats of northern Europe. Luca Alteri, Ph.D. in sociology, offers a close examination of the diversified world of the so-called “antagonists” in Italy. He shows the networking nature and polycephalous features of the extreme left occupation. Alteri underlines the important relation between virtual space, or the online articulation of cultural content, social claims and political proposals, and the physical space that the Social Centre is made up of and which is also the strong symbolic component of the occupation. The author shows that the space shows a path for the re-appropriation of the (urban) commons. However, a critical understanding of what (urban) commons looks like is missing, and no other theoretical contribution emerges out of Alteri’s narrative.

Finally, in the seventh chapter Luca Raffini, Ph.D. in political sociology, explores the ambivalence of the new digital media and platforms, those very facets that contribute to the transformation of politics and the achievement of new democratic models where new degenerative democratic practices and apolitical movements appear. The author makes a very interesting distinction between the different uses of the variety of new media, i.e. the communicative/participative, the deliberative, the agonistic, and the control and monitor dimensions. Unfortunately, it is not clear how the author links the four approaches to the entangling case study of the Five Stars Movement founded by the satiric actor Beppe Grillo. According to the author, a vertical distribution and horizontal sharing of the contents characterize this political movement. The result is that digital media is transforming politics, but it is not necessarily true that this change will evolve towards a more democratic configuration.

In the book's introduction, the editors elaborate on the idea that the social mobilizations to be presented are symptomatic of the emergence of what they call New Politics, a conceptual framework in which all the cases discussed in the book converge. However, it's not entirely clear to me what the editors mean with "New Politics". Symptomatic of this too generic definition is the fact that none of the chapters discuss a case study dialectically in order to show why it is representative or not of the New Politics. Moreover, if one looks at what the editors claim to be the core traits of the New Politics, as I reported at the beginning of this review, one realizes that the cases represented do not necessarily cover these bases. For example, as both Casa Pound and the Five Stars Movement show, not all the new relevant movements reject hierarchical organization. The result is that the book is a great descriptive work but there is no theoretical innovation in it. It can be useful for students who need to be introduced to different methodological approaches in order to conduct case studies once they have absorbed effectively the theories of the social sciences. The book might also be of interest to the activist or concerned citizen interested in comprehending the varieties of mobilization current in Italy. However, I doubt the book will attract senior researchers because they normally do not show interest in new case studies *per sé* but rather they are keen to understand what the theoretical implications of those case studies are.

A critical and theoretical appraisal of the mobilizations and struggles presented in these chapters could have been more effectively discussed through the lens of the commons. Indeed, many of the cases speak of the commons and the *commoning* of some mobilizations. Commons are flourishing in the interstice and cracks of the market and state regulatory apparatus; they are invisible to the mainstream politics and economics (Helfrich and Bolier 2014). The social practices of commoning as a plurality of self-management and shared decisions systems are in line with many of those practices described in the book. Not only those chapters that describes those mobilization such as the movement of the "knowledge workers" and the occupiers of Italian social centres that directly claim to practice the commoning, but also, for example, those that describe the solidarity economy actors and the social movement unionists. As De Angelis (2007) outlines in his excellent book, the commons are the spaces and the processes to which history begins again and again, i.e. where the New Politics emerges indefinitely.

It is not always a fault of the social scientists if new theories do not emerge. A good intellectual synthesizes something relevant that is happening in society. The reason none of the Italian squares are associated with the international political ferment probably shows that effective depoliticization has been occurring for two decades in Italy. The result is the repression and a disa-

vowal of the political by the Italian socio-economic forces. The political does not emerge out of the blue, it has to occur on the ground. If the cases presented in this book are representative of the Italian micro-political ferment, the ground will be tread on by the commoner.

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