Book Review

Don Kalb & Massimiliano Mollona, eds, *Worldwide Mobilizations. Class Struggles and Urban Commoning*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018 (Dislocations, 24). 244 pp., ISBN: 978-1-785-33906-6 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-785-33907-3 (eBook), \$ 135.00 (Hardcover), \$ 29.95 (eBook)

Reviewed by **Chiara Milan**, Centre for Southeast European Studies, Graz, Austria

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-2007>

Taking the year 2011 as a watershed for alter-globalization movements, this edited volume by Don Kalb and Massimiliano Mollona explores urban protests that occurred in that year and shortly after. The editors approach 2011 as a ‘critical junction’ at which individuals took to the streets to protest against local elites and neoliberal capitalism, calling for democracy, transparency, and intolerance to corruption. They describe these movements as ‘one worldwide wave of regionally embedded cycles’ (1) which, however, failed to maintain momentum and gain power, leaving a vacuum later to be filled by nationalist and right-wing populist forces. Covering Turkey to Nepal, through to Eastern Europe and South America, the theoretical analysis of worldwide urban mobilisation constitutes the bulk of this edited volume. The book delves into urban popular risings by adopting an anthropological perspective that follows a ‘class-informed understanding of political processes’ (78) and a materialist-realist approach, drawing upon the anthropology of labour and class (10).

The endeavour to reintroduce class analysis and reconsider the centrality of the role of labour in the contemporary political context constitutes a remarkable contribution to the field and the main point of innovation of this volume. Throughout the book, the authors call into question the line separating the working from the middle class. They argue that the division appears artificial, and is progressively blurred. Similarly, the boundaries between the middle class and the precariat appear porous, as emerges starkly in Mollona’s chapter. A further example can be found in Mehmet Barış Kuymulu’s analysis of the 2013 protests in Turkey. Despite the fact that the protesters were generally described as ‘freedom-seeking middle classes’ (31), the author points to a ‘frictional heterogeneity’ and to new solidarities that allowed heterogeneous groups to coexist side by side throughout the demonstrations.

Likewise, Mollona’s analysis of the June 2013 Brazilian revolution focuses on composite class articulation during the protests, disentangling the various working-class articulations brought together by the protest events. Specifically, he

explores the blurry boundaries between members of the precariat and the middle class taking part in the protests, reflecting the emergence of an economic precariat from among the new middle class in Brazil, as opposed to the traditional middle class.

The redefinition of class boundaries also becomes clearly evident in the contribution by Dimitra Kofti, who discusses the refusal of factory workers in the industrial town of Pernik to take part in the anti-austerity protests in Bulgaria in 2013 and 2014. Although the media portrayed this form of mobilisation as working-class driven, Kofti shows how the perception of class distance stopped the workers from participating in the political demonstrations organised by middle-class protesters. Paradoxically, the so-called urban middle class taking to the streets was composed of individuals working in precarious and underpaid white-collar positions.

Ida Susser's chapter analysing social movements in the global city of New York further explores the blurring of distinctions between the working class and 'the lower echelons of the middle class' (209) in the struggle for the commons conducted by movements like Occupy Wall Street. Susser explains how global movements today cut across traditional class lines, redefined also by the '99 percent' slogan. Rather than comprising just the working class, Susser maintains that 'the emerging movements involve a much broader swathe of the population' and cut across identity (212) as a result of the people's struggle against the process of capital accumulation through dispossession.

Similarly, the centrality of labour emerges in Michael Peter Hoffmann's ethnographic description of the struggles of the Freed Kamaiya Movement, which gathers formerly bonded labourers in Western Nepal. Following the abolition of bonded labour in 2000, the movement pressed the state to resettle its communities and give support to their demands. Although, in the view of the author, the movement has neglected labour issues, it still struggles to eradicate the old 'feudal' institutions by providing access to land and engaging regularly in ritual confrontations and concerted bargaining with the state on land rights and compensation for former bonded labourers.

Still focusing on the composite class articulation of demonstrators and the redefinition of class boundaries, a second set of contributions offers an insightful analysis of the different articulations of what Chantal Mouffe (2015) has termed the 'moralisation of politics'. This set of contributions draws on a strand of thought that argues for the disappearance of left/right polarisation in favour of a moral one, claiming that the moral struggle between right and wrong has substituted the ideological struggle between right and left. For instance, Stef Jansen's account of the 2014 social uprising in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows how the revolt forged a new political subject, 'the people'—framed and identified in moral ('the virtuous')

and positional ('the dispossessed') terms—as opposed to the group of *političari* (the politicians).

Along similar lines, Sian Lazar's chapter investigates the moral politics of outrage directed at the established political class that characterises contemporary middle-class politics in Argentina. As in other parts of Latin America, Lazar maintains, 'the left-right polarization appears inadequate to describe the contemporary situation' (112), since class-based distinctions have disappeared as the basis for political action—as already theorised by Mouffe (2005). Consequently, protestors converge in a common 'moral classification of the adversary', regardless of their class position. Similarly, Luisa Steur's chapter on the anti-corruption demonstrations organised by the Common Man Party (*Aam Adami Party*, AAP) in Delhi over the summer of 2012 traces how the moral struggle between right and wrong substituted the ideological one between right and left. The author investigates the contradictions within the AAP, in particular the class background of its volunteers and the convergence between the left-leaning and right-leaning people's movements, united in their struggle for moral integrity.

This 'post-ideological turn' that pits the political establishment against 'the people' emerges also in Giacomo Loperfido's contribution, which focuses on the fascist-inspired 'Spontaneista groups' active in Italy in the late 1970s. In Loperfido's view, the emergence of these groups, which maintained a 'neither left nor right' attitude, marked a 'post-ideological turn' that reflected transformations in the labour force and class structure in Italy. This, in turn, changed the reproduction of ideologies within the social space. In place of left versus right, a conflict started to grow between the supporters of social reform as opposed to those more in favour of a radical rupture. The political struggle thus shifted to fighting the institutional order rather than enacting an ideological project.

Notwithstanding the editors' remarkable and ambitious efforts to 'reintroduce class analysis in the contemporary political context' (226), convincingly stressing how old parameters of class no longer work to explain contemporary urban mobilisation, both the urban context and commoning practices do not really emerge with force in the analysis. Despite the declared intention to explore the struggles spawned by what Kuymulu in this book refers to as 'aggressive urbanism', it is not always clear to what extent these protests qualify as urban mobilisation. At times, they seem to qualify as urban struggles merely because they unfold in the urban space. Occasionally, the reader has the impression that the urban element remains in the background. Similarly, the entanglement between class and commoning does not come to the fore to the same extent in all the contributions. The extremely broad and varied geographic scope of the book, coupled with diverse political contexts ranging across the globe and across time,

risks to hamper the depth of the analysis as it renders challenging the attempt to tie together such different cases in a coherent way.

Nevertheless, the analysis appears sound as long as apparently unrelated urban mobilisation is analysed as interconnected and interwoven in the form of dissatisfaction with authoritarian and globalised capitalism, which has 'benefited capital at the expense of the urban working population' (49). Overall, this volume constitutes a timely and innovative contribution to the understanding of urban mobilisation in the aftermath of 2011 from a class perspective, especially as it explores new attempts to rearticulate class brought about by neoliberal capitalism, challenging old parameters of class difference. For this reason, the book is extremely relevant and important for scholars interested in particular in the anthropological study of political economy, contemporary urban movements, contentious politics in the urban space, and urban and social transformations.