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Review Essay

Urban Movements in Neoliberal Europe

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Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe

Kerstin Jacobsson (ed)

London, Routledge, 2015, ISBN: 9781137504920 (hardback), £70.00, xi + 309 pp.

Urban Uprisings: Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe

Margit Mayer, Catharina Thörn & Hakan Thörn (ed)

Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2016, ISBN: 9781137504920 (hardback), £64.00, xv + 353 pp.

Late Neoliberalism and Its Discontents in the Economic Crisis: Comparing Social Movements in the European Periphery

Donatella della Porta, Massimiliano Andretta, Tiago Fernandes, Francis O'Connor, Eduardo Romanos and Markos Vogiatzoglu

Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2016, ISBN: 97833195350790 (hardback), £86.00, xv + 307 pp.

Large-scale protests appear to have become common-place in the twenty-first century, bringing down governments in the post-socialist (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011) and Middle East regions (Tripp, 2013), as well as challenging established democratic systems (Tarrow, 2013).

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The specific reason for each protest is shaped by the local context. However, a theme that appears frequently is the perceived quality of governance and a desire for meaningful representation. These pressures have also been expressed in the recent growth in support for populist leaders claiming to understand and represent the interests of 'the people' (Kaltwasser, 2012; Stanley, 2008). The apparent ubiquity of such developments points to the effects of globalisation, as difference and distance are flattened, enabling ideologies and beliefs to propagate with greater speed and ease (Tarrow, 2013). This has also been reflected in the dominance of the market in shaping political decisions at the expense of participation, a tendency that may lie at the core of contemporary instability.

The three books in this essay consider manifestations of protest across Europe in the context of neoliberalism. A focus on the structural roots of protest actions unites them, allowing us to move beyond the forms of particular actions to excavate deeper concerns. Mayer et al adopt the broadest geographical spread, providing details on how patterns of neoliberal urbanism have been resisted both by spontaneous uprisings and organised actions. Jacobsson adopts a tighter focus, drawing on cases across Central and Eastern Europe to identify how post-socialist communities have reacted to pressures to modernise their urban spaces. Finally, della Porta et al refocus attention at the national level, asking how the socio-economic crisis that erupted in 2008 shaped social movement activity in the European periphery, moving from Iceland to Cyprus. Together, the three books examine developments across 21 states, from long-standing democracies such as France and Sweden, through to post-socialist regimes in Poland and Romania and semi-authoritarian Russia. This range provides a broad canvas on which to examine the ways in which diverse social groups have responded to the pressures of neoliberalism across Europe.

The effects of the global financial crisis that shook the world from 2008 were demonstrated in different ways over time, as reflected by della Porta et al's analysis of the sequential spread of anti-austerity protests (see also Hayes, 2017). These protests clustered around the apparent crisis of the state, challenging trust in institutions and calling for new forms of governance, particularly in enabling representation and participation. This drive was illustrated in the case of Greece where Vogiatzoglu (p. 123 in della Porta et al) argues that 'conceptualizing and framing democracy was one of the main goals of anti-austerity mobilization, especially during its second stage and afterwards'. Government responses to the crisis represented an

opportunity for civil society to mobilise and challenge neoliberal practices, surfacing deeper questions about the organisation of society. The reactive nature of the protests demonstrates the challenge involved in questioning the dominant neoliberal ideology, potentially requiring a threat to economic or social security to address the forms of governance that have resulted.

The effects of neoliberalism at the urban level have bitten deeply across Europe and provided drivers to mobilise disadvantaged groups and communities. The breadth of neoliberalism is captured by Jacobsson (p. 2) who argues that 'In few regions of the world have marketization and privatisation have been more pervasive than in countries of Central and Eastern Europe.' Shared experience of the disconnect between 'memories, narratives and habits' and the 'new official discourse' provides a basis on which activists are able to base their objections to neoliberal practices (Tykanova and Kholhlova p. 141 in Jacobsson; also Fernandes in della Porta et al). The longer-term marginalisation that has resulted from these processes is apparent in France where 'geographies of repression' involve 'overlapping geographies of unemployment, stigmatisation, urban policy, and revolts' (Dikeç p. 111 in Mayer et al) that predated the global crisis. In this sense, urban protests can be seen as a reaction against the formation of 'stigmatized districts of dispossession… [and] the growth and glorification of the penal wing of the state' (Slater p. 137 in Mayer et al).

As well as protective and reactive organising, protests have also drawn on and engaged with more positive and creative issues and opportunities. The closure of the public sphere under processes of privatisation and marketization has led to proliferation of attempts to assert the right to the city. Under neoliberalism the 'right to the city has been turned into a narrow, individual right, reserved for a limited economic and political elite' (Hansen and Karpantschof p. 178 in Mayer et al). Therefore, closure provides an opportunity by creating a space and a meaning against which protesters can react. At the same time, opportunities provided by external actors, particularly the EU, have shaped contention and spurred the formation of community organisations (Aidukaitė and Jacobsson in Jacobsson) and provided ideals to strive for (Florea in Jacobsson). Reflecting on the resurgence of civil society, Bitšíkova (p. 240 in Jacobsson) argues that 'transactional networking among civil society movements and organisations and other actors… [is] helping democratise urban governance'. This highlights the diffusion of formal and informal ideals and practices across Europe, facilitated by processes of integration and the shared application of neoliberal practices.

The form of protest adopted across the countries has varied considerably and is shaped by the specific combination of opportunities, experiences and resources available. The cases considered in the collection by Mayer et al are more immediate and confrontational, driven by issues of stigmatisation and loss of space, leading to attempts to resist through practices such as squatting (Hansen and Karpantschof), occupation (Lelandis) and, in extreme cases, rioting (Slater). In Jacobsson's collection, the sense of immediacy is less apparent, as the focus is on longer-standing issues of contention. Given such space people engage in more creative actions, involving humour and the carnivalesque (Lindquist), appropriation of space through bike activism (Kopf) and alliance building (Polanska). Finally, della Porta et al consider the way anti-austerity protests unfolded across the European periphery from Iceland to Cyprus, with the character in each case being determined by local concerns, such as the 'fixation with land and property' in Ireland (O'Connor p. 87) and the 'de facto separation in the northern and southern sectors' in Cyprus (Vogiatzoglu p. 244).

The character of neoliberalism as set out leads to exclusion and atomisation, as the right of the individual is prioritised over that of the collective. This has implications for the actors mobilising and how they are able to do so. Dikeç (p. 99 in Mayer et al) refers to the 'fury of the moment' in Paris while Vogiatzoglu (p. 47 in della Porta et al) argues that in Iceland 'protests were characterized by a totally horizontal and decentralized coordination of small, mostly informal groups and individuals.' The challenge facing such actors is how to create collective networks and build more sustained ties with established groups and movements (Tykanova and Khokhlova in Jacobsson). The ability of individuals and groups to organise is further influenced by their social position and past experience of protest participation (Sabucedo et al, 2017). Examining elderly activists in Ukraine, Leipnik (p. 92 in Jacobsson) argues they 'find themselves having "little or no place" both spatially and symbolically' as their physical and social presence is shaped by prevailing values and expectations.

Although much of the protest considered was driven by less organised reactive groupings, established organisations did play a role. The economic base of the anti-austerity protests meant that in addition to social movements, other actors such as trade unions played a role in advocating change. Examining anti-austerity protests in Italy, Andretta (p. 221 in della Porta et al) argues that the involvement of formalised social movement organisations and trade

unions was significant, as their withdrawal led to an increase in 'violence and disruptive forms of action', suggesting their role in generating certainty and stability. From another perspective, Polanska (p. 321 in Mayer et al) notes that in Poland a 'take-over by populists and right-wing movements of the anti-neoliberal critique' has pushed more progressive groups to broaden their claims and increase cooperation. As della Porta (in della Porta et al) notes, although social movements flourish where opportunities abound, the wave of anti-austerity protests reflected a similar capacity to protect against perceived threats.

An important theme that runs through the collections, connecting the protests and the neoliberal context, is the role of space in shaping behaviour. In a classic formulation, Yi-Fu Tuan (1979, p. 389) claimed the significance of space by arguing 'The space that we perceive and construct, the space that provides cues for our behaviour, varies with the individual and cultural group.' This means that space is interpreted from different perspectives, depending on the location of the participant within the system and the associated expectations. Hansen and Karpantschof (in Mayer et al) illustrate this difference by examining the conflict that emerged over the squatting of the Copenhagen Youth House in 2007. Activists focused on the social, community features of the space, whereas the state was concerned with the potential economic return from scarce and potentially valuable space. Such tension leads to a squeezing out of alternative uses of space, resulting in the characterisation of the neoliberal condition as one of 'no space' (Vradis p. 248 in Mayer et al). Similarly, Sernhede, Thörn and Thörn (p. 162 in Mayer et al) extend the social construction of space by arguing that:

> When the police shoot a resident in a stigmatized area, it may be experienced as an officially sanctioned violation that symbolizes all of the violations that the residents have suffered for years in silence

Space and its closure under neoliberalism serves as a tool of exclusion and control, determining the ability of actors to participate and shaping perceptions of their role in society.

Attempts to challenge authorities and neoliberal practices can draw on this closure to 'reappropriate space and show their presence' (Kopf p. 107 in Jacobsson). The localised nature of much protest enables participants to draw on their connection with place to express and advance their claims. Kopf (p. 104 in Jacobsson) argues that 'urban spaces are generated in and through people's experience and social practices which take distinct social forms in cities'. This point is echoed by Lindquist (p. 39 in Jacobsson), who notes that 'space is not a fixed "backdrop" to social life existing outside of, or framing everyday life, but instead is a

transformative agent in itself.' When considering instances of protest, it is important to note that space shapes the possible actions and how these will be interpreted by participants, targets and observers. O'Connor (p. 87 in della Porta et al) argues the 'territorial nature… [of the] collective psyche' in Ireland initially hampered the spread of protest following the financial crisis through a focus on localised concerns that were depoliticised and not translated to higher scales. In other settings, 'local grassroots initiatives… [can] provide fertile soil for the development of larger-scale mass movements' (Clément p. 163 in Jacobsson) by providing evidence of discontent that can be mobilised across space and at different scales.

These three books demonstrate the diversity of responses to neoliberalism across Europe. Despite varied political and social histories, a common theme has emerged as neoliberal practices have reduced the spaces of everyday life, which rests on an assertion of the right to engage and participate. Attempts by the state to restrict access and rights have been and continue to be resisted in Bucharest as much as in Stockholm. The more spontaneous urban uprisings examined by Mayer et al echo the longer-term build-up captured by Jacobsson, as post-socialist societies adapt and cope with the new economic reality. Della Porta et al additionally demonstrate the way in which the inherent challenges of late neoliberalism spread following the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, while also capturing the specificity of the reactions that emerged in each case. Together, the cases considered here demonstrate the unity and diversity that is embodied in resistance to imposition of neoliberal strictures across Europe.

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