BOOK REVIEWS


How could the ‘old’ organized labour rejuvenate thanks to ‘new’ social movements? Conversely, how could ‘new’ social movements learn from their ‘old’ predecessors’ mistakes and successes? Ultimately, does this distinction between ‘old’ labour and ‘new’ social movements still hold in a period of deep social transformation, and notably in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis? If you are passionate about at least one of these three questions, no doubt that you’ll find strong interest in this volume edited by Grote and Wagemann. Their book indeed proposes to investigate the interactions between the (old) organized labour and (new) social movements by creating a balanced dialogue between industrial relations and social movement studies — assuming that these two academic fields too limitedly cooperate. But the ambition (and merit) of the book does not only rely on its relatively original theoretical approach. Rightly assuming that labour-related actions are experiencing unprecedented transformation in the wake of the economic turmoil and the subsequent austerity policies, the book claims to investigate empirically how traditional trade unions and new social movements have been acting and interacting in four Southern Europe countries over the 2008–2014 period. Reflecting this two-sided ambition, the book is divided along two main parts, the first one being composed of theory-focused chapters (chapters 2–5) and the second one gathering empirically informed contributions (chapters 6–10). The first and theoretical part of the book discusses the interaction between (traditional) trade unions and (new) social movements along two main questions. The first theoretical debate revolves around modes of cooperation between social movements and unions. Based on a network perspective, Diani (chapter 3) suggests four ideal-typical modes of coordination, which help distinguishing between unions as social movements and unions in social movements. Tattersall (chapter 4) evidences three different types of coalitions involving unions and allies, each relying on a different form of solidarity (p.70). Zajak (chapter5) finally depicts how these alliances may vary across different types of capitalism (p. 95). The second main theoretical debate compares two unionism models inspired by social movements (chapters 2 and 6). To the ‘social-movement unionism’ classically theorized by Waterman (1993), Mathers and colleagues opposes in chapter 2 a ‘Radical Political Unionism’. While both models share a firm action orientation, the latter
is to be distinguished by a clear class-based and anti-capitalist ideology and its strong links established with radical political parties. There is little doubt that the first and theoretical part offers a substantial overview of current academic discussions. But to my regret, the editors’ promise to position debates in this book at ‘equal distance’ between social movements studies and industrial relations does not seem to hold. Hence, theories and authors centrally discussed here might be very familiar to industrial relations scholars but less so to those in the wider social movement field—the contribution of Diani (chapter 4) being arguably a notable and welcomed exception. In particular, this first part only offers limited room for recent insights from social movement studies, while the field has been particularly burgeoning from the 2010s in the wake of the so-called ‘squars’ and ‘Twitter’ movements. The second and empirical part of the book provides a highly valuable and up-to-date portrait of the interactions between social movements and organized labour in four Southern Europe countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain) since the 2008 crisis. These four country-focused chapters entail an introduction to the respective national industrial relation systems as well as rich and well-structured empirical investigations that reflect authors’ intimate knowledge of each country case. A global impression of a dual evolution emerges from these various studies. On the one hand, all commonly evidence that bottom-up and innovative labour-focused initiatives have been flourishing in an attempt to compensate the disintegration of institutions and to fight against generalized precarity. Defined by one contributor, Markos Vogiatzoglou, as social ‘experimental laboratories’, these initiatives took the form of grassroots quasi-unions, radical unions, associations or networks. On the other hand, all four country-cases equally converge to evidence the relative sluggishness of more classical trade unions. As a result, the 2008 crisis seems to have been creating (or deepening) a fissure between ‘old’ trade unions and ‘new’ forms of social and labour movements. Cases of defiance, misunderstanding and mutual rejection between these two types of actors are indeed much more abundant than those of fruitful collaborations and ‘cross-fertilization’. At best are traditional trade unions portrayed as cumbersome allies. At worse are they considered as part of the problem.

All in all, this second and empirical part is to me the most valuable section of the book. But one regrets that authors did not more systematically analyse why these new social movements have not been more transformative for organized labour while at the same time they have been substantially altering the national political landscape—with the emergence of Podemos and Cuidadanos in Spain, the Five Stars movement in Italy, or Syriza in Greece. Overall, the variety of theoretical approaches and of empirical contexts does not prevent this edited book from having a strong coherence and from offering an actual dialogue between its different contributions. The consistency of the editorial line is additional supported by an overall pleasant and accessible writing style. Editors conclude this book by recalling that is it more interesting to evaluate a collective action through its dynamic rather than from an image at given point in time. The primacy of dynamic over static analysis may also well apply to academic discussions. Hence, not only should we praise this book for providing a compelling image of labour/movements relations in the recent years, but also should we underline its contribution to the dynamic of the much-needed academic conversation at the crossroad of social movements and industrial relations.

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