

Book Review

Óscar García Agustín & Martin Bak (eds) (2016) *Solidarity Without Borders: Gramscian Perspectives on Migration and Civil Society Alliances*, London: Pluto Press, pp 244. Paperback, £22.09, ISBN 9780745336312

How can democratic and progressive movements build and sustain networks of solidarity and action that are effective on a transnational scale? This is a crucial question if we want to halt the rise of inequality, avoid an acceleration in climate change and find egalitarian solutions to global issues. Thus, I read *Solidarity Across Borders*, a new edited collection which explores how solidarity is being envisaged and acted upon in relation to migration, with keen interest.

The book is part of Pluto Press's *Reading Gramsci* series, and the aim of *Solidarity without Borders* is to put Gramsci's ideas "in dialogue with the current political and social context" (p.3). Contributors explore the way the Italian Marxist elaborated an analysis of culture, hegemony, race and ethnicity across his writings. As one might anticipate, Gramsci's 1926 essay 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' is especially important for the purposes of this collection. In it Gramsci argued that it was vital for the Italian socialist movement to develop a mode of analysis and action which was capable of uniting workers in the north of Italy and the rural poor of the south despite the deeply rooted economic, political and cultural divisions between these two regions. Building solidarity, according to Gramsci, requires careful and nuanced exploration of the political impact of uneven development, actively confronting racism, and slow and patient cultural work. All fourteen chapters draw heavily on the 'Southern Question' and in fact one of the main contentions of the book is, to use the words of one of the authors David Featherstone, that Gramsci's essay "remains one of the most enduring, significant and perceptive attempts to think politically about the construction of solidarities and alliances on uneven geographical terrains" (p.169). His insights, it is argued in various ways, can be extended to analyse how solidarity is being, or can be, built across diverse and multiple contexts including between the global north and the

global south today. Struggles over migration, according to the Editors, are “not only a matter of questioning discriminatory practices and racist practices but above all about transforming democracy” (p. 226) and finding a way of moving beyond neoliberalism.

The book situates these struggles within civil society and explores them under four thematic sections which overlap with each other (on the heterogeneity of political actors; on alliances; on misplaced alliances; and on spaces of resistance). Just over half the book consists of broad analyses of these themes and the remainder consists of case studies of solidarity in action, or explore specific national contexts. The ‘wide angle’ synoptic chapters include two primarily historical discussions of the work of Gramsci and the ‘Southern Question’ by Ursula Apitzsch and Derek Boothman which are both scholarly and accessible. There are also several stimulating accounts of the crisis, austerity and the unravelling of neoliberal hegemony written by the book editors, David Featherstone and Peter Mayo. These are interspersed with six chapters that use Gramscian concepts to illuminate particular case studies and contexts. Specifically, two chapters deal with union organising in Denmark and in Ireland; there is also an analysis of the role of Alevis and Kurdish communities in the Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul in 2013; an overview of social movement history in relation to migration in and out of Ireland; an exploration of community mobilisations of second generation migrants in urban politics in Sweden; and an account of ‘Lampedusa in Hamburg’ a political movement contesting ‘fortress Europe’ led by migrants who had recently fled across the Mediterranean to the north of Germany.

By moving between general essays on solidarity and migration and fine-grained case studies, the collection does a very good job in offering a multi-perspectival reading of Gramsci. The book also makes four arguments related to migration and solidarity that I found compelling or suggestive. First, there is the emphasis on heterogeneity of migrant histories and experiences (the book touches on the situation of asylum seekers, first and second generation migrant communities, migrant workers and the political effect of migrants who return ‘home’). Linked to this are useful reflections on how

local, regional, national and international boundaries mediate self-understanding, cultural patterns and political conflicts. This Gramscian sensitivity to the politics of culture, as well as the complex and unpredictable ways we are ‘radically modified’ through personal and political experiences, strikes me as very valuable for thinking about solidarity. Second, is the strong focus on the range of political actors involved in migrant politics (churches, educators, NGOs, grassroots groups, trade unions and so forth) which is linked to the argument that it is vital to build alliances between progressive forces to effect change. Third, it calls for a clear focus on existing struggles as well as an alertness to emergent possibilities. Part of this requires, to borrow the evocative phrase of Laurence Cox (who I should say is a colleague at my university) an ability to think carefully about the specificities of social “movement landscapes” in a given context (p.113). Fourth, that this calls for conscious, long-term efforts to think and act beyond imaginaries anchored to the nation state. But how this might be worked towards on a *cultural* level is only discussed in one chapter (Peter Mayo’s discussion of popular education) and the very real challenges to advancing this sort of project are only addressed in one chapter (in a really fascinating discussion of labour organising in Denmark written by Agustin and Jorgensen).

Every chapter in the book is thought provoking and the collection is well worth reading as a whole, but there are some noteworthy gaps. I was surprised - given Greece’s role as the sacrificial lamb during the financial crisis in Europe as well as the impact of the so called ‘migrant crisis’ on Greek society and politics - that this situation was not explored in more detail. But I am well aware that it is a difficult job editing a collection with such an ambitious remit and that gaps such as this are inevitable. However, there are other more problematic lacunae. There is a level of activity – located somewhere between the epochal analysis of the synoptic pieces and case studies used in the book – which is largely overlooked. I am thinking of the many sustained attempts in recent years to develop the politics of solidarity across borders in multiple sites. For example, a clear-eyed assessment of success and limits of Euromayday organising which aimed to mobilised the ‘precariat’ and which explicitly linked to migrants as central political subjects would have been a very valuable addition to the book. Most strikingly of all

while there is an essay which offers a post-colonial reading of Gramsci by Miguel Mellino and many contributors draw on Edward Said and Stuart Hall the overwhelming focus of the book is on Europe. Amongst other things this means some of the most powerful recent attempts to reimagine solidarity beyond the nation state (for example in Kurdistan and amongst the indigenous people in South America) is not in sight at all.

As Perry Anderson (2017. p. 13) has noted Gramsci's work "is less binding than a finished theory"; it is "a score inviting improvisation". As a consequence, there are many, many versions of Gramsci and his thought has historically proven to be capacious enough to create a shared space for postcolonial critics, Leninist cadre, libertarian activists, Eurocommunist politicians and academic theorists to inhabit. As such, I would welcome in a collection of this sort more explicit dissensus between Gramscians of various stripes and a more pointed interrogation of how Gramsci's ideas relate to *specific* questions of movement organisation and *particular* political programmes today. These are fundamental issues which are touched on in fascinating and varied ways throughout the book, but the structure and format of the publication means they are not elaborated upon in great detail. For instance, there are clearly very different forms of class analysis and various ways of conceptualising the relationship between culture and economy at work in the book and more systematic debate over these things would had added a further layer to *Solidarity without Borders*.

These reservations aside this is a very thoughtful, scholarly collection of essays which deals with a vital topic, raises many interesting questions and, above all, engages with the intellectual legacy of Gramsci in a thought-provoking way.

Reference

Anderson, P. (2017) *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*. London; New York: Verso.

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