



Rethinking workers self-activity and mobilization: Solidarity as the foundational moment

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review of

Atzeni, M. (2010) *Workplace conflict. Mobilization and solidarity in Argentina*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, (PB, pp xv + 171, \$120.00, ISBN 978-0-230-58464-8)

Maurizio Atzeni is Lecturer in Labour and Industrial Relations at Loughborough University School of Business and Economics, United Kingdom, and a Research Fellow at Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones Laborales (CEIL/CONICET), Buenos Aires. Born in Italy, the author completed part of his education in Europe before moving to Argentina, where he currently lives and works. Thenceforth, his work has been deeply influenced by European Marxist tradition, especially by Richard Hyman's developments and criticisms of labour process theory (Hyman, 2006). As Atzeni argues, 'studies on the nature of workplace conflict in the Marxist tradition of Industrial Relations provided the theoretical bedrock for the research' [xiii] that gives rise to workplace conflict.

In the book, Maurizio Atzeni presents the outcomings of his qualitative research on automobile plants workers' struggles in Córdoba, Argentina, straightened by 'the study of the past sixty years of Argentina's social

history' [xiii]. Among 2002 and 2003, in fieldwork for his doctoral research, the author collected interviews with several former CIADEA-Renault and FIAT workers that participated on protests in 1996 and 1997 at these companies' plants. At that point, six years after the emergence of these mobilizations, as he argues, the workers' original collective passions and struggles became individual and distant memories that, nevertheless, contributed to the rediscovery of forgotten opposition experiences to labour flexibility and neo-liberalism in Argentina.

The book consists in an important contribution to the discussions about working class' mobilizations and the alternatives and possibilities that they create. Atzeni's approach 'rehabilitates a vision of collective action as a structurally determined and grassroots-based expression of workers' power' [13] by assuming that the contradictions within the capitalist labour process are enough condition for workers' collective action. Starting from Marx's insights about the particularity of the commodity labour, i.e., its inseparability from the worker, that 'imposed a first, natural, obstacle to its free consumption by capitalists' [20] and, consequently, about the structural class conflict, he offers an understanding of workers' mobilizations from a radical point of view that he defines as 'a Marxist perspective on workers collective action' [12].

As the author argues, the structural conflict of interests and antagonism that exists between capital and labour have in themselves the potentiality to produce spontaneous forms of resistance to capital domination and thus, necessarily, to increase the pressure put on by capital to overcome that resistance. 'This resistance often results in the constitution of collective organizations representing workers' [12]. Such organizations that develop further, as trade unions, for example, take a mediation role amid labour's and capital's antagonistic interests, and so they tend to contract and reproduce the same contradictory relations along their historical development.

This theoretical construct relies in a political choice, favoring a bottom-up analysis of workers' collective action bent over the concrete day to day conflict existing at the workplace. To Atzeni, because its inherent nature concealed by this mediation function, trade unions activities are neither an

ideal starting point of analysis nor a reliable framework for studies that seek to understand workers' self-activity – especially to those leaning over what he calls 'micro cases of mobilization' [xiii]. Instead, in his work, the author analyses empirical evidences of the relations established between trade union activists and FIAT and Renault workers on struggle with which he adds to a theoretical explanation for the unions' fails in supporting grass-roots interests.

The 'conflicting nature of the capitalist labour process, as an organization of production driven by valorization' [22] is crucial in Atzeni's comprehension of workers mobilization, also because it adverts for the capitalists' needs to undermine workers' collective action reinforcing the individualistic form of the labour-wage exchange contract. But no matter the efforts made in this sense or how contradictory is the cooperation that takes place in the capitalist labour process, the fact that labour is a collective activity can never be completely burked. For workers, this implies, at first, the need to act together. This need generates a sense of mutual dependency and a need for support: the embryonic form of solidarity, or what can be called

solidarity not yet activated'. This unity has a very practical nature, it is just to perform the job, but it is also the first step in the recognition: (a) that the employer has the power to order the forms and times for the execution of the work and (b) that who gives this order is by, their very nature, on the other side, opposed. [*ibid*: 28]

In highlighting solidarity as 'the social relation that expresses the collective nature of the labour process' [27], the author explicitly rejects a subjective appropriation of the concept that would dissociate solidarity from its material and objective soil. By assuming that solidarity is 'the foundational moment of the collective action' [28], his perspective pinpoints the pre-existence of solidarity to any other organizational developments that may or may not follow; in what it adds an original tribute to debates in organization studies. By conceiving solidarity in its movement and dynamics – and not as a static concept – Atzeni draws on the contradictions of this fundamental relation that reflect the contradictions of the labour process itself. Moreover, he stresses that an 'active' form of solidarity depends on the combination of the forms of labour-capital opposition both in the workplace and in society.

This frame of reference is often reinforced by authors that recapture Marx's writings, once he states that it is in the struggle that workers come together and become a class for themselves (Marx, 2013). Wood (2003), for example, advances the conception of class as a process, highlighting that both the formation of working class' and its consciousness emerge from class struggle. By this means she avoids concepts of class stratification, focusing on the social relations that underpin class formations. Atzeni's concept of solidarity seems to chase the same thread, once it is based on the social relation that it expresses, i.e. the collective nature of the labour process. From this point, he analyses the constraints that historically hinder solidarity to reach or sustain its active form with the intention to understand the emergence of protests and mobilizations.

The book is divided in six chapters. The first chapter presents the broad theoretical context in which the studies of workers' struggles and collective action must be located. Thus, the author addresses four inherent dynamics between workers and capitalists' struggles: the relocation of productive activities, the transformation of labour processes, the investment of capital in new sectors and financial speculation. The first two, says the author, concern the study undertaken by his research in Argentina. It also deals with the model of institutionalized collective action and the spontaneity of struggles, the importance of grassroots mobilizations and the intrinsic contradiction of trade unions aforementioned.

In chapter 2 the author discusses the Marxist perspective on workers' collective action. The chapter is subdivided into three parts: (i) criticism of Kelly's theory of mobilization (1998); (ii) Marx's understanding of the nature of the capitalist labour process, and (iii) the importance of solidarity in the light of its centrality in the work process. In presenting Kelly's theory of mobilization, which takes injustice as the basis for all mobilization, the author argues that the notions of 'just' and 'unjust' are moral judgments and depend on the value and meaning assigned. Thus, there will always be a sense of injustice in various forms and, therefore, it must be considered in relative terms. Notwithstanding the focus on injustice reinforces collective action as a mere contestation of rights, obscuring power and class relations.

On the Marxist understanding of capitalist labour process, the chapter points out that the methods used to control, direct and discipline workers are generally coercive. Given the need workers have of their wages to survive, these coercive conditions are naturalized in the day-to-day work, and exploitation is revealed when abrupt or radical changes are implemented. The author also highlights the workers' struggle motivations, their role in the transformation of the system that exploits them and the contradiction intrinsic to the process of exploitation versus cooperation. Solidarity is presented at this point, as the author argues that any attempt to explain the workers' resistance must consider the centrality that solidarity has both theoretically and in the practical, militant discourse.

The third chapter presents the historical analysis of social and labour mobilizations in Argentina since World War II and subdivides, as well as the previous chapter, into three parts: (i) how the use of repressive practices, adopted systematically by military governments in Argentina until 1983, affected workers' potential for mobilization, (ii) the investigation of the complexity and contradictions within the Argentine trade union movement, and, (iii) the socio-political context that dominated in the 1990's, the time of the events at FIAT and CIADEA-Renault.

In general, the author concludes that violence and repression at the macro and micro levels, such as workplaces, led to depoliticization, individualism and the search for political and charismatic leaders. From the analysis of the Argentine trade union movement, he concludes that bureaucratization acquired different forms and methods according to the way in which the unions structured their relationship with the state and the dominant power. Finally, in a socio-political context of pressure of multilateral financial agencies on the government, economic reforms implemented under IMF auspices and the trade unions' contradictory position relating to the government and its economic policies, Atzeni states that mobilization found a fertile soil, offering workers a base around which their demands could be formulated, and solutions provided.

The fourth chapter emphasizes the importance of cases of workers' direct, spontaneous action for the theoretical understanding of collective action, putting into question the use of morally grounded, subjective concepts such

as injustice while at the same time revealing the existence of other necessary conditions for mobilization rooted in the structural contradictions of the capitalist labour process. Therefore, the author presents the chronology of the conflict in both FIAT and CIADEA-Renault plants, describes the companies and the unions involved in the cases and looks for possible preconditions for mobilization. Comparisons between workers' perceptions of injustice and the process of solidarity formation in the two cases are presented.

The main conclusions of the chapter indicate that injustice is not the basis around which a mobilization can be produced since it can be perceived differently according to the moral/ethical values of certain epochs and the specific cases to which it applies. Besides, he points out how different conditions act upon the formation process of solidarity interfering with the possibility of making it active. Finally, from the cases studied, the author concludes that mobilization has to be seen as the result of the combination of specific internal conditions although considering external factors.

Chapter 5 is subdivided into three sections which present, respectively: (i) how leaders emerged from within the context of mobilization and the role they had in catalyzing workers' grievances, (ii) how workers changed themselves while collectively contesting the social reality surrounding them, and (iii) how effective the company's counter-mobilization strategies of eliminating leaders, dividing workers and breaking solidarity were. As a conclusion, the author presents the perspective of workers and companies on the conflict through the help of a graphic. This double perspective is important, according to the author, both analytically and theoretically. Analytically, considering the complexity of collective action, it contributes to clarify the different outcomes from the combination of divergent forces that drive workers and companies' actions. And theoretically, it draws attention to increase knowledge about these driving forces.

In his final chapter, the author highlights the importance of thinking about collective action as a process and approaching it from a radical perspective. It also warns of the emphasis on detail and micro-conditions in studies in the social sciences, which sometimes turns reality into an abstraction. States that the study of workers' resistance should not seek the development of

generally applicable models and, finally, leave some questions for future reflections.

Despite the local and historical specificities that mark Atzeni's work, we argue that many of his reflections and contributions can be thought of in Latin American broader context – which implies to rethink the historical importance of grass-roots mobilizations in the whole continent.

Just as in Peron's time in Argentina, Brazilians trade unions, for example, underwent a process of institutionalization and subordination to the state during Vargas regime in the 1930's. The counterpart to this subordination was the consolidation of labor laws, which nevertheless granted rights and protections only to a portion of workers; and the state's recognition of unions as the legitimate working class' instance of representation (Braga, 2012). Later, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed similar dictatorships in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Paraguay and other countries. Atzeni's reports of repression and violence against workers, union activists and social movements in Argentina find correspondence in all these countries (Antunes, 2013).

Latin America is also the place where neoliberal policies were first implemented and tested. In 1973 at Chile, with the military coup that deposed Salvador Allende, the first experiment on the effects of these policies was made (Puello-Socarrás, 2015). Ever since, many Latin-American authors, such as Antunes (2011) and Braga (2012), have been concerned with the understanding of workers responses to this attack in which consists the neoliberal stage of capitalism (Puello-Socarrás, 2015). Also, about the threats that the so-called flexible forms of labour relations pose to working class' struggles (Lourenço, 2015; Marcelino, 2006; Santos and Souza, 2017).

Thus, it is reasonable to state that similar mechanisms of cooptation, repression and fragmentation of working class' organized representation bodies can be found in other countries in the same region. Braga's (2012, 2017) denouncement of the historical tension among union leaders and workers base in Brazil reveals the same trade unions power relations as Workplace Conflict in Argentina. If necessary, this further validates the assertion that union activities are not a good starting point for

understanding workers' collective action and reinforces the historical importance of workers self-activity and bottom-up mobilizations as one of the main alternatives to transform Latin-American workers reality.

Furthermore, by highlighting this alternative, Atzeni's contributions may help Latin-American researchers to 'reject a trade union-based pessimistic view regarding the possibility for social change' (Atzeni, 2010: 26). This pessimistic bias is mainly produced in Europe, where workers' struggles, gradually organized through associations and unions, made real gains and advances for the working class in recent history. Currently, under the neoliberal stage of capitalism and the consequent dismantling of the well-fare state, these institutions are losing power and influence, not being able to avoid significant setbacks in workers' rights neither face the challenges that new forms of employment relationships place to workers' organization. This process engages many authors - usually those departing from unions activity to understand workers collective struggles - in a pessimistic comprehension of workers' possibilities and future (Bryson et al. 2004; Standing, 2013).

At least, this perspective appears to be displaced in studies about Latin-American social reality that do not consider the high rates of informal jobs, underemployment and unemployment, and the low percentage of unionized workers always present in the continent as Antunes (2011) work denounces. Taking solidarity as the foundational moment of workers collective action, in other hand, habilitates an approach that do not underestimates the working class' power to change their own faith - what does not imply disregarding the structural constraints that oppose to this change, but, on the contrary, to anchor these possibilities in the contradictions of capitalist labour process itself.

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