Book Reviews: *Interface*, 13 (2)

Review editor: Dawn M. Paley

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Benjamin Heim Shepard, 2021, *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action: Case Studies in Dialectical Activism*. London & New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield (275 pp., hardcover, $115). Review author: Chuck Morse

Thea Riofrancos, 2020, *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. (264 pp., softcover, $24.65). Review author: Irmgard Emmelhainz

Pankaj Mishra, 2007, *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond.* London: Picador. (365 pp., paperback, $25). Review author: Isaac K. Oommen

Susana Narotzky, 2020, *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe*. London: Pluto Press (272 pp. paperback, £24.99). Review author: Maria Vasile

Dario Azzellini, 2017, *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*. Leiden, NL: Brill (303 pp., paperback, $28).

Geo Maher, 2016, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso (138 pp., paperback, $15).

Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert, 2020, *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle*: *Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press (376 pp., paperback, $22).

Review Author: Jeremiah Gaster

Review of Judith Butler's *The Force of Nonviolence*

Review Author: Benjamin S. Case

Judith Butler, 2021, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. New York: Verso. (235 pp., paperback, $20.95).

The debate over "violence" and "nonviolence" in social movements is as old as it is contentious. Is revolutionary violence necessary to overcome oppression, or does it represent a moral failure? Does resisting violently enable or forfeit legitimacy? Is nonviolent resistance effective? Are all manifestations of violence morally equivalent? How do different types of action impact movements? And what do we mean by "violence" and "nonviolence" in the first place? Judith Butler's 2021 intervention, *The Force of Nonviolence*, arrives at a moment when we are re-evaluating these questions.

Butler begins by acknowledging the contested concepts we're working with. She correctly mentions that when we talk about violence and nonviolence, these terms arrive "already interpreted, worked over by prior usages" (p. 7), and she is right that the task of intervening in these interpretations is crucial for the left. Butler goes on to argue for a "forceful nonviolence" as both a form of assertive political action and as a method of reinforcing interdependent social relations.

Most page space in *The Force of Nonviolence* is focused on critical forays into the writing of Hobbes, Kant, Freud, Foucault, Klein, Benjamin, Einstein, Fanon, and others, as they relate to violence, death, and grief. For Butler, nonviolence demands a critique of individualism. Contra liberal conceptions of individuality, Butler demonstrates how human lives are inescapably interdependent, and on this basis argues for a politics of egalitarianism. More radically, she suggests at times that it is not just human life but the entirety of living systems on the planet which are all reliant upon others, implying an extreme broadening of the scope of equality.

In passages that evoke her 2016 book, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler emphasizes the concept of grievability, interrogating whose lives are grieved and who is treated as though their loss would be worthy of grief. She suggests a principled notion of equal grievability among humans (and perhaps all life forms) should lead to a politics of nonviolence.

The Force of Nonviolence is well written, and Butler weaves analysis of prior theory together with her own interventions like a master of the craft – it is Judith Butler, after all. Her commitment to justice and equality are palpable, and the push toward a holistic theory of life-affirming politics is welcome. But ultimately, the book feels like a missed opportunity.

As a philosophical exploration, *The Force of Nonviolence* takes a global approach and examines violence and nonviolence through ethical and psychological lenses, but its framing feels at once too broad and too narrow.

Butler states at the outset that she is setting out to "challenge some major presumptions of nonviolence" (p. 20) and articulate a version of aggressive or forceful nonviolence. Yet the "presumptions" she goes on to challenge feel contrived, for example that nonviolence is necessarily weak, passive, and useless.

Butler does not say who presumes nonviolent protest is useless, but from an organizer's standpoint it seems quite the opposite. The emphasis that media, public figures, and many of the most prominent social movement commentators put on strictly nonviolent protest as opposed to any type of violent action indicates that nonviolent tactics are not only widely perceived as legitimate and effective but are often treated as the *only* appropriate means of effecting change from outside the system. Indeed, the case for assertive and efficacious nonviolent action has been well made by many practitioners and theorists from a variety of perspectives. Not only are prior theorists of nonviolence all but absent from *The Force of Nonviolence*, by the end of the book we aren't even left with a clear articulation of nonviolent force.

There are several, interrelated issues which hinder the otherwise generative observations in *The Force of Nonviolence*, all of which stem from a central issue: Butler's arguments are not grounded in real world movements.

Who is theory for?

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the dominant position on the global left was that revolution required force of arms (see Mao 1937; Guevara 1963; Taber 1970). At the same time, there were some who argued for unarmed and nonviolent rebellion on primarily moral and spiritual bases (see Day 1936; Gandhi 1927; King 1963). Following the repression and collapse of the 1960s global revolution, the Soviet Unions' dissolution, China's turn toward capitalism, and the rise of the non-profit industrial complex, the pendulum swung in another direction. The notion of "strategic nonviolence" became the standard for many social movements – that is, the idea that the most effective method of political struggle from below is through nonviolent protest (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Engler and Engler 2016; Sharp 2012).

Now, following racial justice uprisings and the resurrection of fascism as a political force in the US and around the world in recent years, the meanings of violence and nonviolence in movements are back up for debate.

The Force of Nonviolence is clearly meant to relate to movements for justice. Its opening sentences and closing remarks are about political transformation and collective action, its cover image is of a protest, and the book jacket claims: "Butler shows a way forward for social movements." But while movements are mentioned here and there in the book, Butler does not ground her discussion in the dynamics of real life social and political struggle that has brought the conversation over violence and nonviolence back to the fore. The result is a book

on nonviolence that is better suited for a philosophy classroom than an organizing meeting.

After reading this book ostensibly about the force of nonviolence, I was left without a sense of what Butler thinks of the events that drive the urgency of the conversation around violence and nonviolence today. I don't know what Butler thinks of protesters burning down the Minneapolis Third Precinct after Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, nor the tenacious persistence of George Floyd Square at 38th and Chicago. I have no idea what she thinks of the limousine fire or Richard Spencer's punched face outside Donald Trump's 2017 inauguration. I don't know what Butler thinks of antifascists physically confronting neo-Nazis in the streets, Palestinian protesters throwing rocks at Israeli tanks, activists popularizing the slogan "kill your rapist," militants sabotaging railways to stop pipelines through indigenous territory, or the People's Defense Units and Women's Protection Units in Rojava.

To expand on one example, in the book's postscript Butler lauds nonviolent street performance in Taksim Square during the 2013 uprising in Istanbul (p. 195). But she fails to mention the moments during that same uprising when activists attempted to defend their occupation of Gezi Park against brutal police attacks by throwing rocks and fireworks and tear gas canisters that had been fired by riot police. Should we understand from Butler's example that the Gezi Park uprising was an expression of forceful nonviolence, during which the street performance was an exemplary moment? Or is it that the street performance was an example of nonviolent resistance counterposed with the moments during that episode when activists did not behave non-violently? Butler does not mention the latter instances, so we're left to guess. Or perhaps to ignore the moments that do not fit the argument.

For some reason, Butler also decides not to put her arguments in conversation with the most prominent voices discussing nonviolent action. We do not meet Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (2011), who made the now-famous argument that nonviolent struggle has been more effective in overthrowing governments than armed struggle. Nor Stellan Vinthagen (2015), whose holistic view of nonviolence in theory and practice accounts for both moral and tactical approaches, as well as nuance around application of force to resist systemic violence. Nor April Carter (2015) or Sharon Erickson Nepstad (2015), who have outlined the history, theory, and practice of nonviolent struggle. We don't meet Elizabeth Hinton (2021), who argues for the centrality of violent urban uprisings in the history of Black resistance to white supremacy in the US, or Vicky Osterweil (2020), who unapologetically defends looting, or Charles E. Cobb (2014), who writes about the importance of armed community defense in the Civil Rights era – including among nonviolence advocates. Like her sparse interactions with movements, Butler's lack of attention to contemporary debates over violence and nonviolence makes the book feel strangely out of touch.

Butler does converse with the likes of Frantz Fanon and Walter Benjamin, but, incredibly, she evades those thinkers' arguments for the use of violence. Butler brings up Fanon's racial schema from *Black Skin, White Masks*, but does not

engage with his well-known argument for revolutionary violence in *Wretched of the Earth*. Instead, she dismisses his revolutionary violence as a "fantasy of hyper-masculinity" in its "imagining of the body as strong enough to overthrow the fortress of colonial power" (p. 143). This appears to me as a stunning misrepresentation of Fanon. Not because Fanon's writing cannot be criticized for its masculine disposition, but because his argument for violence is not at all based on imagining that colonialism can be overcome through bodily force. On the contrary, Fanon's revolutionary violence has to do with the bodily struggle that he argues is necessary for the colonized subject to overcome the inferiority complexes engendered by colonial rule, an overcoming which itself is required to build a liberated society. Either way, Butler's evasion of Fanon's theory of violent resistance, as well as the context which informed that theory – Fanon was a clinical psychotherapist who treated both colonizers and the colonized in Algeria before joining the Algerian Revolution against French occupation – makes her selective use of his earlier work difficult to interpret.

In her 1968 pamphlet, *On Revolution and Equilibrium*, Barbara Deming uses Fanon's theory to argue for assertive nonviolence. In that work, Deming proposes that we read Fanon by swapping out the word "violence" and substituting "radical and uncompromising" action in its place (Deming 1968: 4). For Deming, when Fanon says "violence," he is getting at the psychological effect of confronting power, something she argues can be accomplished through nonviolent methods. In this example, Deming *engages* with Fanon's work to argue for nonviolent action, whereas Butler simply mentions Fanon for his ideas of racial schema, dismisses the resulting theory of anti-colonial violence, then moves on.

Same for Walter Benjamin, to whom Butler devotes a substantial section. The focus is on Benjamin's 1921 essay, "Critique of Violence," in which he argues for the revolutionary force (or violence) of the general strike. Benjamin wrote this piece following the 1920 Kapp Putsch in Germany, in which he had witnessed liberals turn on and repress the radical left after a general strike had defeated a far-right coup (see Stuart 2021). The betrayal undercut the power of the left, reinforced state violence, and set the stage for the rise of fascism. (In the US we might do well to revisit these lessons today.) Benjamin highlighted the power of the general strike, which can deploy a type of radical force that he argued can overcome the violence of the state. Butler accepts the critique of oppressive violence but glosses over the forms of violence that Benjamin implies are required to displace it. Likewise, Butler endorses the logic behind Benjamin's argument for the inherent violence of the state, but distances herself from its "anarchist conclusion" (p. 136) without discussion of why. Then she moves on.

Butler's social-political argument against individualism is compelling, but it would be stronger without nonviolence attached to it. Our lives are indeed incontrovertibly connected in a grand network of interdependence that spans the globe. It is also true that, philosophically speaking, this should imply a radical equality. The world as we know it is characterized by horrendous systemic violence, and we are figuring out how to counter it and build a world

for the living. Where Butler inserts nonviolence, however, the argument loses its sense of direction. For example, Butler argues that our interconnectedness, morally equal grievability, and the impulse to preserve the life of the other lead us to a convergence of being: "Could it be that even now, in destroying another, we are also destroying ourselves?" (p. 98). Surely such a question bears pondering, but it is purely abstract, devoid of power dynamics, and only tangentially related to real life strategic and tactical discussions.

Butler argues that "we cannot, or may not, take away the lives of others we would rather see gone [because] we cannot consistently live in a world in which everyone does the same" (p. 82). But we *do* live in a world where some people directly and indirectly take away the lives of many others. In fact, we live in a society in which such an arrangement is legal and profitable. The question is what we can do about it. In answering, it is unclear why we should use destruction and killing as a foil. Regarding a critique of state violence, such a focus might make sense, but concerning resistance it misses the mark. The book's arguments completely overlook the types of actions by protesters and militants that drive violence/nonviolence debates in real life – not death drives and killing but rioting and looting, vandalism and equipment sabotage, traffic obstruction and physical blockades, community defense formations and combative antifascism.

Beyond the binary

The most venomous debates over violence in movements relate to rioting, unarmed protester violence, and other forms of physically destructive but typically non-lethal actions. Butler focuses on the centrality of preservation of life and grievability – in other words, violence as related to killing, and in some examples, sexual violence. The connection is presented as a kind of slippery slope, in which the use of any violence "licenses, implicitly or effectively, the use of violence more broadly," making the world a more violent place (p. 14).

Throughout *The Force of Nonviolence*, Butler examines violence-as-killing in abstract, at times almost romantic ways, for example when she argues that "the blind rage that motivates war destroys the social bonds that make nations possible" (p. 154). The suggestion that wars are motivated not by power and profit but by "blind rage" entirely ignores historical and structural explanations for conflict as well as the gross power disparities at work in resistance. How does such an approach help us understand someone who is incensed and heartbroken at the police murder of a community member, who expresses the impossibility of the status quo via a brick thrown at police lines? Is this really the blind rage that leads to war and destroys social bonds? Are we certain that this act licenses the use of violence in general?

Nearly all mass uprisings of any consequence involve riotous moments (Case 2018). During the 2020 racial justice uprising in the US, sometimes called the George Floyd Uprising, researchers have shown that the vast majority of protests were nonviolent (Kishi and Jones 2020), challenging widespread

misconceptions that the movement was frequently violent. But that finding was quickly repackaged into claims that the movement was *exclusively* nonviolent, as though the small number of instances in which people set things on fire or fought police were insignificant or were not really part of the movement. We saw something similar in the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which was at the time widely hailed as a nonviolent phenomenon (e.g., Chenoweth and Stephan 2014; Engler and Engler 2016). Many accounts of the uprising that led to the overthrow of the Mubarak regime left out the fact that dozens of police stations were burned in the opening days of the revolt (Ismail 2012; Ketchley 2017). A violence/nonviolence binary encourages us to associate our enemies with violence and ourselves with nonviolence, and therefore either ignore or dismiss moments of violent resistance.

Rioting is not nonviolent, but also is not the same as the violence of oppression or war. Furthermore, riotous resistance has deep and widespread resonance. The 2014 fires in Ferguson ignited a global resurgence of racial justice struggle. The burning of the Minneapolis Third Precinct in June 2020 had a massive nation-wide impact as a symbol of resistance to racist police violence and was followed by what was possibly the largest movement in US history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). The symbolic power of riots is clear in the images of Molotov cocktails and burning squad cars that frequently appear in leftist art and imagery (sometimes even deployed by individuals and organizations who rush to distance themselves from the people who actually set those fires).

When we hear from rioters themselves, it becomes clear that we are dealing with violence that operates primarily on a symbolic level (see Case 2021; Dupuis-Déri 2014; Meckfessel 2016). Property destruction, fires, and thrown projectiles are typically not meant to physically defeat the forces of the state, white supremacy, and capital in the long term. Instead, rioting signals the depth of resistance, fortifies seriousness of dissent, and communicates that the status quo is intolerable. In an impossible situation, rioting can be a method of reclaiming and reaffirming our shared humanity. Dismissing these moments as "violent" in direct association with the violence of war obscures the ways in which histories of oppression, exploitation, and police violence accumulate in people, are embodied, and in some circumstances can be released and converted into political energy via a brick thrown at authorities. There is a reason the Stonewall Riot continues to serve as a radical symbol until today.

This is not to romanticize riots either – riots are frightening and dangerous and often lead to enhanced repression. Certainly, people can and do get hurt at the hands of protesters in these moments, and there are undoubtedly bad actors among rioters – as there are amidst nonviolent protest and just about everywhere else. Associating violent protests with death is not only misleading, but it can also reinforce a logic of repression: that rioters are driven by the will to chaos and a desire to kill and therefore must be stopped. Butler undoubtedly does not mean to do this, and she quite correctly points out that accusing protests of being violent is itself a tool of oppression. But she nevertheless

argues for maintaining a hard distinction between violence and nonviolence without telling us where the line is or what she thinks of protesters who cross it.

Likewise, Butler mentions the nonviolent power of labor strikes, but does not talk about when workers damage machinery or fight with scabs and strike-breakers. A common misconception among advocates of nonviolence is that strikes are a fundamentally nonviolent tactic, since at its core is the refusal of labor. In reality, the labor strike grew into a powerful mode of class combat specifically through the use of militant and often violent tactics (see de Cleyre 1897; Clover 2016). It is precisely this potential that Benjamin points to in his argument for the force of the general strike.

Butler repeatedly refers to the ambiguities and ambivalence around nonviolence, and she also states at one point that she does not dispute the possibility that violence could be necessary in political struggle, but she usually follows these statements with rhetorical questions posed to negate them. The suggestion that violent resistance brings more violence into the world falls flat without an explanation for how or why hyper-local and low-level expressions of violent resistance get scaled up towards a totalizing, endemic notion of violence-as-war. Most importantly, the argument for nonviolence is entirely banal if it avoids discussion of the types of actions that complicate the term.

Nonviolence has become a story we tell about movements – a story that sometimes tells us more about the storyteller than the characters. Violent urban uprisings have been a longstanding aspect of resistance in the US as much as anywhere else. On the ground, most unarmed political struggles worldwide involve nonviolent actions alongside or in addition to rioting, sabotage, and physical fights with police and political opponents (Piven 2012). *The Force of Nonviolence* does not tell us anything about the many grey areas that complicate the violence/nonviolence binary and, consequently, it struggles to tell us much about real world nonviolent action.

The force of radical action

Butler has elsewhere admitted that there are extreme scenarios, for example the rise of a fascist regime, in which she would partake in violent resistance (Butler 2017). Beginning there, what if we accepted Butler's arguments for interconnectedness and grievability, but instead of concluding at nonviolence, we took a different path? Just as Deming proposed attempting to read Fanon by replacing "violence" with "radical and uncompromising action," I want to make an inverse proposition. What if in the place of "nonviolence" in Butler's work, we substitute "radical and uncompromising action." In Deming's time, she was pushing back against a left that often assumed the need for armed struggle. Deming argued against this assumption, even using examples from revolutionary warfare, for example highlighting how kindness toward captured state troops by communist Chinese and Cuban guerrillas often resulted in widespread recruitment for revolutionaries (Deming 1968: 22).

In our time, we face a left that has become too comfortable with the parameters of nonviolence. Radical and uncompromising action remains an excellent benchmark for movements, and best of all enables us to focus on our goals while relieving us of the need to litigate the granularities of violence and nonviolence in every moment of uprising.

In the framing of radical and uncompromising action, perhaps nonviolence can be approached the way Benjamin explains the commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." For Benjamin, that commandment exists not as a judgement, but rather "as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it" (Benjamin 1921: 250). While it might be unspoken, this strikes me as largely consistent with the ways radical movements approach resistance. Movements for social justice do not want to hurt and destroy, but to heal and build. We are however sometimes faced with realities that emotionally or strategically demand a physical response. Or at other times, a physical response is simply an organic reaction to being pushed too far. We can and often do take responsibility for these moments with their power, their potential, and the harm they sometimes cause without needing to see them as failures through the virtue of their non-nonviolence alone.

Butler appears to care dearly about the fate of struggles for life and liberation, and her commitment to radical transformation is evident. And it is true that in the broadest sense, the structures of oppression and exploitation operate on logics of separation and violence, and for our resistance to be transformative it must organize around logics of connection and justice. The problem is not that Butler gets this conclusion wrong, it is that the violence/nonviolent language through which she is operating obscures the dynamics of real-world social struggle. When Butler focuses her analysis on the violence of the law and the carceral state, as she did in her recent lecture on the topic at the University of Chicago, she provides significant insights. The book would have benefitted from focusing more on these areas.

Nonviolent action certainly plays a major role in fighting for a better world, but it must be understood in a context that transcends an overarching violence/nonviolence dichotomy. I am encouraged to witness the trend of activists and commentators increasingly refusing to retreat from the reality that resistance sometimes means setting things on fire. More and more we are refusing to succumb to the false "slippery slope" idiom that would equate throwing rocks at a squad car with genocide in the same murky sphere of "violence," and refusing the rejoinder that doing so means we have become like our enemies. Butler's book repeatedly nods to this context, and includes the requisite qualifications, but overall, it feels like the book is trying to refocus us on ethical nonviolence in a conversation that is moving on.

Not that it isn't enjoyable to read someone as brilliant as Judith Butler musing about written correspondence between Freud and Einstein – it is. But when it comes to the extremely meaningful and fraught debate over violence and nonviolence, we need analysis and theory that grounds itself in struggle and

which helps us organize and resist. As Butler correctly points out, the consequences of real-life struggle against the forces of domination are serious, probably decisive for the future of the planet. *The Force of Nonviolence* presents an erudite contemplation of a concept but fails to provide struggles for liberation with a theory that helps us, as the book jacket says, find our way forward.

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About the review author

Ben Case is a social movement scholar and organizer with over two decades experience in community, political, and labor struggles. He is a postdoctoral researcher at Arizona State University's Center for Work and Democracy, a fellow at the Resistance Studies Initiative, and an affiliate faculty member in the Department of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Contact: benjamin case AT umass.edu

Review of Benjamin Heim Shepard's *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action*

Review author: Chuck Morse

Benjamin Heim Shepard, 2021, *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action: Case Studies in Dialectical Activism*. London & New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield (275 pp., hardcover, $115).

"Alienation extends everywhere, but so does connection," writes Benjamin Heim Shepard in the first line of *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action: Case Studies in Dialectical Activism* (p. 1).

Against left-wing pessimists who think capitalism's grip on social life is total, Shepard believes that we have reasons to be hopeful about our capacity to build a society organized around connection. There is a creative, coherent movement for radical social change right before our eyes, he argues. By reflecting on its politics, exploring its ideas, noting pivotal events in its history, and getting to know some of its personalities and the spaces that they inhabit, Shepard believes that we can enrich our experience of the present and make the future seem less grim.

In fifteen fast-moving chapters, *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action* brings readers into the history and culture of left-leaning protest movements in New York City from the late 1990s up to the Covid pandemic. The author describes mobilizations to defend community gardens, Critical Mass bike rides, squatter and housing rights organizing, activist groups like the Lower East Side Collective and Reclaim the Streets, among other efforts to make New York more democratic and ecological.

Shepard considers the key ideas in these movements—he touches on neo-Marxism, anarchism, queer theory, the DIY ethos, and play as a paradigm for radical politics— and details his own experience as a participant in this activism. The text swings from reportage to memoir to interviews to theory, all of which are enhanced by photographs of protests and Caroline Shepard's lovely portraits of organizers.

Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action "is intended to be a bit loose and decentralized" like the movements it studies, although it is more accurate to say that it reads like a fanzine authored by a professor (p. 21). Well-written and exuberant, the book provides a vivid, multi-dimensional sketch of groups and individuals fighting for an alternative in a crucial global city during a particularly fraught moment in time.

By organizing his analysis around a conflict between alienation and connection, Shepard gestures to his indebtedness to an expressive worldview born of the 1960s that understands history as an epochal battle between the forces of "life" (variously conceived) and the forces of "the system" (variously conceived).

Contrary to those who think that politicians and politics are the primary agents of social change, he argues that the activist scene that he chronicles presupposes and promotes a radical vision of social life built upon a devotion to the values of horizontalism and interdependence.

Although this milieu typically mobilizes around protests designed to accomplish a specific goal, like defending a garden against developers, what drives it, Shepard claims, is a commitment to resisting "the commodification of water, air, and our bodies [and to creating a] livable, autonomous, and sustainable urban space" (p. 23).

Drawing on the writings of Hegel, Marx, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Murray Bookchin, and others, Shepard maintains that dialectical thinkers' investment in flux and change enables them to supply a conceptual vocabulary that articulates the dynamism of connection while mitigating against the rigidities of alienation.

Shepard also insists that openness to change is a pillar of the political culture of the activist world that concerns him. If some see "urban space as a commodity [from which] to extract profit," these "dialectical activists" regard it as a generative site of "life, liberty, and multiple expressions of happiness" that cultivates "ideas and [inspires] connections between bodies and cultures" (p. 4, 17).

Shepard's depiction of this activist scene is persuasive. His survey of actions, individuals, and groups, rooted in extensive interviews and a deep familiarity with movement literature, makes it clear that this chapter of New York's left is not only invested in discrete policy goals but also motivated by a broad social project that comes alive in the continual navigation and re-navigation of the links between facts and values and particular issues and the totality of society.

Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action reveals how campaigns to save community gardens presuppose and foster "a resistance culture [and] model of social action" based on an anti-capitalist environmental perspective; the author demonstrates that bike activism puts forth an ecological message while reminding us that traversing the city can be a source of delight, etc. (p. 39). He also shows that movement discourses can possess an unappreciated complexity by pointing to the common ground that queer theory and anarchism share and by outlining how the rhetoric of "harm reduction" deployed by some social workers frequently rests upon an affirmation of pleasure generally.

Shepard’s accounts of his own participation in mobilizations and projects are integral to his "case studies" and betray a novelist's sensitivity to nuance and character. In addition to affirming the existence of this vibrant oppositional current, Shepard challenges a common trope about New York City. Home to the Stock Exchange and site of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which are often invoked to justify contemporary modes of state repression, many think of the city as the epicenter of global neoliberalism.

Though Shepard focuses primarily on lower Manhattan, particularly the Lower East Side, he defies this view of New York by making it clear that it is also home to a diverse community of radicals who have waged a decades-long fight for an ecological, democratic vision of urban life and who understand their contributions in the context of a legacy of rebellion that stretches back to the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the Stonewall riots, and the Living Theater, among other groups and episodes. The range and intricacy of Shepard's narrative, his reflective and playful prose, and his dedication to illustrating ties between ideas and events all seem to embody the enthusiasm for connection that inspires the book.

Shepard's reliance on an anti-political vocabulary, which defines activists primarily by what they do (activism) and minimizes their convictions, leads him to overlook opportunities for insight. Although he describes the values of the movements that he examines in general terms, he does not inquire into their concrete political and economic goals. We are left wondering whether participants want to create a Swedish-style social democracy, an anarcho-syndicalist society organized around workers' councils, or perhaps a radical municipalism that would please Murray Bookchin.

Of course, activists fighting for things like community gardens and better bike infrastructure will likely embrace disparate and conflicting ideologies, but what are their aspirations and how have activists negotiated the tensions between them? Shepard does not discuss this, and steers clear of events that would engender a reflection upon the broader goals of the left-leaning protest movements he describes. *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action* does not examine cases in which authorities effectively repressed and defeated activists, or occasions in which internal divisions prompted groups to splinter.

Strikingly, Shepard does consider the spectacular rise and fall of Occupy Wall Street, which occurred in New York during the years that he was collecting material for this book. A propensity to erase difference is also evident in his commentary on dialectical thinkers. While he rightfully asserts that theorists such as Hegel, Marx, and Bookchin share significant commonalities, he does not acknowledge that they also advanced many irreconcilable ideas and typically understood their respective projects as means of negating their predecessors' legacies.

In 1807, when what we now know as dialectical thought initially began to take shape, Hegel chided Friedrich Schelling, his peer and competitor, for depicting a world in which "all cows are black" (Hegel 1977, 9). This was a way to assert the centrality of differentiation to the dialectical worldview: it can help us grasp the spaces that exist between absolute connection and absolute alienation.

By documenting the existence of a vigorous radical tendency in one of the world's most important cities, *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action* shows that left-wing doomsayers are wrong to imagine the present as a site of unadulterated capitalist dominance. This hopeful message relies on a method of reading capitalism that appreciates its vulnerabilities, which is hopeful in its

own right. Shepard is less successful in his effort to theorize this opposition, but, at the very least, he formulates the question in an engaging way and provides an affectionate portrait of groups and individuals who are helping to keep resistance alive.

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About the review author

Chuck Morse is a writer and translator. He lives in Oakland, California and is presently writing a book on Tijuana, Mexico. He can be reached at cwmorse AT gmail.com.

Review of Thea Riofrancos' *Resource Radicals.*

Review author: Irmgard Emmelhainz

Thea Riofrancos, 2020, *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. (264 pp., softcover, $24.65).

Throughout the first decade of the 21st Century, Latin America heralded a new left that seemed to mark the defeat of neoliberalism and the Washington consensus. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador became part of what the media called the "Pink Tide," an umbrella term for a variety of political tendencies that promised progressive-left governance, highlighting the role of states in building local and regional economic alternatives to neoliberalism, and even, in some cases, the building of "socialism for the twenty-first century."

The economic policies of these leftist governments, however, established a new form of political polarization: If social movements in the 1990s and early 2000s fought to nationalize resource extraction against neoliberal privatization, under the Pink Tide, leftist governments built economies to further development from below based on the re-nationalization of resource extraction.

This, in turn, led to the birth of a new anti-extractivist left, which fought for territorial defense against extractivism of any kind, and the importance of Indigenous rights. In the wake of the collapse of commodity prices in the 2010s and general demise of the Pink Tide, a confusing shift to the right has taken place in Latin America (Bolsonaro in Brazil, Macri in Argentina [before it swung back to *Peronism*]; Maduro in Venezuela; López Obrador's populist militarized economic re-nationalization in Mexico) all struggling to build new hegemonic socio-economic political projects.

Thea Riofrancos', *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*, takes Ecuador as a case study for these historical developments, positioning the small, South American country as a privileged site to understand the conflicts generated by a leftist government committed to a development model based on extractivism.

Riofrancos seizes a unique historical moment in which the same social movement activists who helped Rafael Correa to power, turned against his radical national resource policies. She analyzes how shifts in government policy and opposition were re-signified around a discourse adopted by social movements in the 1990s and early 2000s opposing neoliberalism. This discourse was re-signified by Correa's government as the banner for a State-led development program based on the commercialization of raw materials in global markets. Part of the problem was that, even though it was led by a leftist government, Ecuador's economy continued to be based on the export of

commodities such as natural gas, soy, and oil. The business elite were kept content, and (neoliberal) capitalist structures intact.

Resource Radicals lays out the charged history of resource extraction and governance in Latin America, from colonial plunder to mid-century nationalist projects of oil-fueled modernization and the subsequent privatization and deregulation of hydrocarbon and mineral sectors.

Riofrancos's story begins with the discovery of oil in the Northern Amazon in 1967 by Texaco Gulf. In 1971, then President of Ecuador Velasco Ibarra declared oil the "inalienable property of the state," eliminated the concession model, and replaced it with a contract model that stipulated taxation and royalty rates. This policy was short-lived, however. In 1980, neoliberal oil governance –defined by privatization, deregulation, and foreign investment– was introduced, and remained in place in Ecuador until 2006. Under this scheme, the profits from oil extraction were primarily realized as corporate profits and payments for foreign debt.

Claiming an end to the "long neoliberal night" in 2006, Correa's government prioritized state-led mining and drilling for oil reserves in Ecuador, enacting legislative reforms that gave way to contract models which increased state revenue from extractive projects and/or increased the share of state ownership. Correa used this new revenue to fund social programs such as a monthly cash transfer known as the *bono de desarrollo humano* (human development payment).

As Riofrancos observes, there was a decrease of poverty over this period in Ecuador, the structures of inequality remained untouched as new groups enriched themselves through links with the State. When commodity prices plummeted in 2015, cuts in social spending resulted, and mass impoverishment returned with a vengeance. Riofrancos argues that Correa's post neoliberal capitalism was problematic in part because it depended on the insertion of the region into the world economy as a supplier of primary goods, establishing a continuum between colonial history and the global division of labor that relegated Ecuador to peripheral status in an unequal exchange of raw goods for refined or manufactured imports.

Resource Radicals is based on over a hundred interviews with bureaucrats in the Correa administration, opposition politicians, corporate representatives, public intellectuals, professors, NGO personnel, and social movement activists in Indigenous, environmental, human rights, student, and labor union organizations. The author witnessed and accompanied protests, activist meetings and mining and oil conventions in Ecuador between 2011 and 2017. Through interviews, archives, and on-site documentation of historical events as they were unfolding, Riofrancos tracks the discursive construction of natural resources extraction as a site of radical politics. Her focus is on how each political-economic model left ideological legacies that shaped policy making and protest, giving way to a new post-developmentalist model based on *buen vivir*, the translation of the Quechua concept *Sumak Kawasai*.

Buen vivir refers to a form of public coexistence in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve a good way of living. It further implies ensuring Indigenous rights, battling environmental pollution and labor exploitation, and defending territorial autonomy and local self-determination. These forms of opposition emerged as means to resist Correa's nationalization of oil, gas, and mineral resources. Riofrancos sets out to elucidate the paradox of how activists who resisted neoliberalism for decades ended up protesting Correa's leftist government. This led to two versions of the left: the "left-in-power" and "the-left-in-opposition," each based on contradicting positions regarding the economic model, the relationship between nature and society, and the territorial self-determination of Indigenous nations and peoples.

According to *Resource Radicals*, the origin of this oppositional left in Ecuador was in the fourth year of Correa's administration, at "The Gathering of Social Movements for Democracy and Life" in 2011. At this gathering, diverse social organizations condemned Correa's government for "representing an authoritarian and corrupt model of capitalist modernization" (page 49). Opposition to Correa's "extractivist-populist" emerged after four years of Correa's presidency, and Riofrancos notes that state actors and opponents did not recognize each other as legitimate counterparts. Each accused the other of perverting the language of radical transformation. Correa even dismissed grass-roots activists who contested oil and mining for being misinformed and "proto-imperialist" (p. 53).

In *Resource Radicals*, Riofrancos lays out the mechanisms through which government discourses and social movement positions bend and shape each other in a sort of dance. In her view, this dance crystallized in Ecuador's Constituent Assembly, which led to a new constitution being signed in 2008. Riofrancos notes that constitutions were also rewritten in Venezuela and Bolivia, as leftist presidents were emboldened to rewrite constitutions due to their perceived need to re-found the state, so as to definitively end the legacies of colonialism, exclusion and capitalism that had traditionally structured politics.

In Ecuador, the 2008 Constitution was written in dialogue with social movements representatives, and it defined the country as a plurinational state oriented toward Sumak Kawasai or *buen vivir*. Paradoxically, the new Constitution laid the groundwork to establish the state as the central economic regulator. In other words, the same document that recognizes nature as a rights-bearing subject also makes non-renewable resources and even biodiversity the exclusive, inalienable patrimony of the state.

In her examination of the political life of the 2008 Constitution, Riofrancos conducted many interviews to determine how the new Constitution established a technocratic approach to social participation. In this context, it meant informing communities about the impact, mitigation measures and environment management plan. Within this framework, communities could express their opinions, but were expected to conform to a technocratic model of

"*consulta previa*" (prior consultation) with regards to megaprojects in their territories.

Correa's "post-neoliberal" economic policy was based on radical resource nationalism: collective ownership of oil and minerals, which is just what anti-neoliberal activists once fought for. This model was, however, met with strong opposition, since extractivism creates dependency and exacerbates corruption while destroying the environment and entire peoples and their means to sustain their lives. Beyond nationalization, in the face of globalization, contemporary popular movements in Ecuador and elsewhere are calling for radical sovereignty over resource extraction. As Amazonian communities identified resource extraction as a threat to their territorial integrity and self-determination, a counter-left emerged to propose models of resource governance based on Tom Perreault's formulation of the political and economic coordination of socio-natural relations" on the part of state and corporate elites (p. 6).

Despite some conceptual juggling that is sometimes hard to get through, Thea Riofrancos' *Resource Radicals* convincingly argues that anti-extractivist movements in Ecuador shifted from struggling to state ownership and regulation to fighting more localized battles against socio-environmental devastation and for territorial integrity. This nuance allows us to acknowledge that Pink Tide governments inherited and intensified a model of accumulation based on extractivism and serve as lessons in the fight for a post-extractive future.

I write from Mexico, where opposition against Andrés Manuel López Obrador's reconfiguration of the economy inspired in resource nationalism and militarization has found little room to respond through collective expressions of resistance. Anti-extractivist struggles are local and fueled by the urgency of short-term survival of communities across the country that are also besieged by State, paramilitary, and subcontracted violence. A cohesive, organized opposition against López Obrador's populist absolutist capitalist political economy is lacking. In *Resource Radicals*, Riofrancos asks: How do we build an opposition when the government is anti-neoliberal and claiming to act on behalf of marginalized populations? Her question is very relevant to the contemporary Mexican context.

In the face of the lack of global political will to stop global warming –as evidenced by the recent COP-26 meeting in Glasgow– the unprecedented participation of Indigenous peoples to protect the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador showed once again that frontline communities can be teachers and leaders in fighting against climate change and for the possibility of a human future on earth through an anti-extractivist, counter-left that binds urban and rural populations across territories against "post neoliberal" absolutist capitalist states.

About the review author

Irmgard Emmelhainz is a professor, writer, researcher, and translator based in Anahuac Valley (Mexico City). Her most recent publications are *Toxic Loves, Impossible Futures: Feminist Lives as Resistance* (Vanderbilt 2021) and *The Tyranny of Common Sense: Mexico's Postneoliberal Conversion* (SUNY 2021).

Review of Pankaj Mishra's *Temptations of the West*

Review author: Isaac K. Oommen

Pankaj Mishra, 2007, *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond*. London: Picador. (365 pp., paperback, $25).

Pankaj Mishra's collection of essays, *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond* is by no means easy to categorise. Kicking off with a prologue called, "Benares: Learning How to Read," one might at first imagine that the book is a memoir. It sort of is, but is far more than just that.

The prologue helps set readers up to think about how they digest political essays, through an analysis of Mishra's own bookworm academic beginnings within the context of poverty and politics in India. As much as Mishra the college student was a library-loving chap, he also had close interactions with a fellow student that went on to become a hitman.

These close encounters with the chaos and mayhem that are Indian life/politics are a needed setup to what come in later chapters: A deep look at political upheaval in north India (Mishra specifically notes that his work deals with the north) as well as the titular "beyond" – Kashmir, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Tibet. The prologue becomes doubly important as the book carries on, since one does wrestle with how to read these essays.

More than a memoir and definitely more than on-the-ground reportage, *Temptations of the West* is an analysis of these geographically and politically connected regions in light of their influences from the west.

These influences can be best seen in Mishra's analysis of India, on which the book is focussed. He writes how middle classes in Indian cities live in "Subdued fear and foreboding," which, "created during colonial time, had inherited the British instinct for law and order" (p. 65). It is this fear that leads so many middle-class Indians to send their children abroad to study at university and is realised in contemporary India where order can turn into chaos overnight, the pogroms against Muslims in multiple cities being examples.

This fear is not present in India alone: Mishra uses the examples of a westernised elite in Afghanistan styling a much-accosted "Paris of the west" look for Kabul before Taliban takeover (p. 362), as well as a western-educated, radicalised Nepali prince massacring his own family (p. 389).

It is against this backdrop that Mishra analyses populist movements across South Asia, from Hindu nationalists to Afghan Taliban to Nepali Maoists. Like the middle and ruling classes that they came to combat (and sometimes collaborate with), these movements are strongly influenced by the west.

Mishra calls attention to analysis that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as the many other wings of the Sangh Parivar (the umbrella term for the organisations that make up the Hindu fascist right in India) of which it is part, started gaining support first among diaspora Indians in the USA and UK before it took real hold in India. He also notes how the Taliban along with Pakistanis trained to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviets received, at least initially, generous support from the US.

The author points out that similar "western temptations" plagued Indian prime ministers including Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, both of whom somewhat re-discovered and wanted to re-form India after their education in Britain. It is thus that Mishra draws a convincing parallel between these moderate (Nehru) as well as extreme (Gandhi) heads of state.

The modern India that emerges from these western temptations is one of both chaos and a strange order. Hindu nationalists create massive chaos across the country by targeting Muslims and other minorities. At the same time, Mishra notes how said Hindu nationalists are a force for order among all the messes of modernizing India, bringing together lower and middle castes that felt disenfranchised by the Congress party. "The superior organization of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) [the volunteer organisation that works alongside the BJP]… is its strength in a chaotic country like India" (139) he notes, especially in how it permeates throughout institutions from political parties to labour unions to religious sects.

The RSS meets modernity in the BJP's love for the free market (p. 140), and in newer methods of war against Muslims and other minorities. One of the most poignant and horrific recounts of this modernized extermination process is that of Gujerat in 2002 in which "Benetton-clad young Hindus carted off the loot of digital cameras and DVD players in their new Japanese cars" (p. 151).

Though many analysts look at India specifically in terms of Hindu supremacy and right-wing nationalism, it is Mishra's holistic analysis of "India and Beyond," that brings together the crisis of westernised modernity throughout northern south Asia. *Temptations of the West* does look at the cyclical creation of Islamic extremism in India and Kashmir, when the author interviews a Muslim activist from Nagpur, Professor Saghir Ahmad Ansari, who says that after a Hindu mob attacks and rapes "You can't hope that the victims won't dream of revenge…I fear…that the idea of jihad and terrorist violence would find new takers among the 130 million Muslims in India" (p. 144).

A similar outcome is noted by Mishra in Kashmir where, after Indian military killings, torture, and rapes; people who otherwise would not have become radicalised into militancy (p. 264). Maoist insurgency in Nepal similarly comes about because of the ruling family's actions (via the military) against Nepalese lower classes (a militancy that then comes across the border to the northeast states of India).

One final and important sign of western influence is in the creation of bogeymen, both real and imagined, in all these countries and areas. Much like

America mythologized the idea of Islamic terrorist attacks, northern South Asia also mythologizes its enemies – from Hindu nationalists talking about Muslim population explosion conspiracies in India, to the Indian government talking about Muslims being radicalised in Kashmir, to the Nepalese government labeling villagers as Maoists. There may be a sliver of reality to some of these notions; however, they are bloated out of proportion by national imaginaries and propaganda machines. For instance, the myth of Muslim moguls ravishing Hindu South Asia, is a myth that Mishra notes contrasts with how said moguls governed India – mostly in harmony with the Hindu populace.

Mishra ends the book with a slim chapter on Tibet, which like Kashmir, is a region that is occupied by one of the largest powers in Asia. His chapter on Tibet stands in stark contrast to the others in the sense that the Tibetan leadership in exile are native to the region, and because Tibetan resistance is far different than the others he covers in this volume. In Tibet, Mishra writes of a mostly non-violent resistance movement against Chinese occupation, in stark contrast to armed insurgencies elsewhere. This is also an insurgency that is not foreign influenced, unlike the Islamic jihads and Maoist rebellion. Mishra also highlights that there is a variety of resistance in Tibet, including armed militant struggle, exemplified by a young nun who took to the gun and attacked Communist headquarters (p. 432).

Unlike the other places and countries he covers in *Temptations of the West,* Tibet seems to be the only one Mishra sees as having the potential to come to some sort of resolution in terms of its government, elites, and underclasses. Even this idea he balances with the grim reality of the Chinese government's call to bring more Han Chinese to take over the area and turn Tibet into a soulless tourist trap. However, he does note changes on both the side of the Dalai Lama as well as the Chinese government in terms of the status of Tibet may come one day soon. In this a major factor may be that Tibetans, whether those who follow principled non-violence or radical insurgency, both have eluded the temptations of the west.

Though published in 2007, Mishra's book is well worth reading in our COVID riddled reality. Amidst the recent victory of the farmers' protests in India against the Hindu-fascist central government's farming deregulation reforms, Pakistan's financial crisis that is reaching the levels of Lebanon, and US withdrawal from Afghanistan after a 20-year occupation (with the ensuing chaos of Taliban re-takeover), readers can see the results of the economic and cultural modernisation schemes outlined in the book.

About the review author

Isaac K. Oommen works in post-secondary education and is based between Allapuzha (Kerala) and Vancouver. He is also a freelance journalist. Although he travels a lot for work, he despises airplane travel, as much as he enjoys visiting West Africa and the Middle East. He can be found at @3ikos on Twitter.

Review of Susana Narotzky's edited collection *Grassroots Economies*

Review author: Maria Vasile

Susana Narotzky, 2020, *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe*. London: Pluto Press (272 pp. paperback, £24.99).

Since 2008, Southern European countries have been greatly impacted by the economic recession and structural adjustment measures. Public spending cuts and welfare state retrenchment (also called austerity) have resulted in an increasing share of the population living and working in precarious conditions, and growing social inequalities (Knight and Stewart, 2016; Sarapioni and Hespanha, 2019).

The ten pieces gathered in Susana Narotzky's edited volume *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe* explore, through ethnographic accounts and analyses, the contemporary socio-economic crisis as experienced by ordinary people in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

The authors, who are anthropologists working together as part of the research project "Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and Practice in the Pursuit of Livelihood" (GRECO), use ethnography and comparison to analyse the impacts of austerity from the point of view of local populations' everyday lives, ways of making a living, needs and struggles.

In each chapter, the reader becomes acquainted with the life experiences of different people, such as Anna and Marco, two Italian small entrepreneurs who went bankrupt and are indebted and isolated (Loperfido); Maria, a market vendor in northern Portugal, who does not manage to meet municipal regulations and develops her own response (Leidereiter); and Thomas, a Greek miner working at a power plant, whose salary and benefits are cut as the energy company is being restructured (Vetta).

While each of these stories are contextualised and to be read within their specific historical, political, and economic contexts, their broader significance emerges through the authors' original analyses and the common framework through which they are approached and organised.

Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe begins with an introduction that addresses its theoretical concerns and overarching themes (Narotzky) and is further divided into three sections: "Making a living," "Social Reproduction," and "Experiencing and Embodying Austerity."

The reader learns not only about current transformations (in the ways in which people are impacted by, navigate and resist austerity), but most importantly how reading through daily practices is key to gain a deeper understanding of

what large economic phenomena translate into, for different people, in specific contexts.

A red thread throughout the volume is the "widespread acceptance of austerity" and the "continuous dispossession of the means of livelihood" (p. 13) that people experience while developing strategies for making a living. Central to these processes are what Narotzky calls "valuation struggles":

> Valuation is the process that creates social systems of categorisation that describe and evaluate social life… Valuation struggles are not only fought around "evaluation" (the process of ranking) but also over the framing system itself (what is defined as relevant). Most of the cases that we present in this book are struggles around the categories for valuing human worth (p.16).

The analyses presented in *Grassroots Economies* resonate with the issue of valuation, from various perspectives. Welfare, its transformation, and related changes in the definition and evaluation of people's welfare entitlements, are discussed in chapters by Pusceddu, Homs and Matos. These authors discuss workfare schemes, the social economy's welfare responsibilities (and subjection to the logics of capitalism) and the popular reconfiguration of social rights into needs, respectively.

Another set of authors illustrate how, as part of such transformations, people increasingly must rely on family support, finance, and assets (Palomera). Such dependency on family resources and care work entails tensions and anxiety. People face difficulties accepting their condition, which contrasts with hegemonic imaginaries of individual autonomy and success (Narotzky and Pusceddu).

Hegemonic imaginaries, approached in the book in terms of the neoliberal morality (see also Muehlebach, 2012) intermesh with and recast local understandings of labor, the economy, and the crisis (Vetta; Sarkis and Amarianakis). These ideals often also clash with how people decide to resist and to "refuse to silently accept the blame for austerity, to be pushed into low-wage labor or to buy into the narrative of austerity as exception" (Leidereiter, p. 89).

Such tensions and contradictions between neoliberal moral values and actual everyday life under austerity also have dramatic effects on people's identity and sense of self and translate into embodied forms of oppression and resistance (Loperfido; Sarkis and Matos).

Overall, *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe* provides important and fresh insights into neoliberalism and austerity as an encounter between restructuring processes at different scales and everyday life experiences in Southern Europe (and beyond).

Importantly, all authors developed rich pieces, pointing to the complexity, paradoxes, and ambiguities of "living with austerity," sometimes resulting in forms of dispossession and resistance at once. Their focus on the working class

and women particularly allows one to grasp these tensions, while the overall effects of neoliberal policies, like poverty, precarity, downward mobility, institutional void, depoliticization of rights, domestication of alternative political and economic practices, oppression, also remain central to the discussion.

Grassroots Economies raises questions about the future of welfare, employment and livelihoods, social fragmentation, people's sense of self and, more generally, citizenship. Though this last concept is not particularly at the forefront nor explicitly theorised, all contributions highlight aspects of contemporary redefinitions of citizenship rights, related moralities and people's ways of understanding and reacting to their (new) conditions.

All these queries and research directions could not be more important today, as the COVID-19 crisis increases livelihood instability and vulnerability. While a variety of grassroots solidarity and mutual aid initiatives have emerged (see for example Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, 2020), it remains an open question whether people's mobilisation and institutional responses will challenge the reproduction of social inequalities and processes of dispossession examined in this book.

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About the review author

Maria Vasile is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University (The Netherlands). She is part of the ERC Consolidator Project "Food citizens? Collective food procurement in European cities: solidarity and diversity, skills and scales."

Review of three recent books on Venezuelan social movements

Review Author: Jeremiah Gaster

Dario Azzellini, 2017, *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*. Leiden, NL: Brill (303 pp., paperback, $28).

Geo Maher, 2016, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso (138 pp., paperback, $15).

Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert, 2020, *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle: Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press (376 pp., paperback, $22).

> "Outside Venezuela, almost nothing is known about the process through which local self-government structures with direct, non-representative democracy have been created by means of communal councils and communes." *Communes and Workers' Control* (p. 2)

There is much that is not known or understood about what is happening in Venezuela. Add to the mix, a mainstream media in the global north quite often inaccurate in its reports on Venezuela, and we will tend to have an incomplete picture. It is true that politics have been continuous and quite contentious in Venezuela for decades, and that many have fled Venezuela's shores, but this does not mean that what has been occurring is without any support from Venezuelans.

In *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle*: *Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution,* Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert, two political science professors employed in Venezuela, put it bluntly: "Despite the diversity of their prescriptions, all mainstream positions on Venezuela systematically deny that the masses are capable of purposeful world-changing activity" (p. 14).

Since February 27, 1989, the Venezuelan people have completely and thus far irrevocably changed the Venezuelan political landscape. After years of research, I believe that Venezuela has one of the most organized, largest, and most experienced social movements in the world. Yet most outside of Venezuela do not know about this wealth of experience and have little sense of the strength of these movements.

Each of the three books reviewed here, are important in their own way, and together these four different professors of political science, describe in some

detail, the experiences of resistance, of creation, and of solidarity within Venezuela. According to these authors, the Venezuelan people have organized an impressive collective experiment in solidarity that has lasted for at least three decades. In different ways, these books layout how, why, and what has changed in Venezuela since 1989. Each of the authors also insists on the importance of field work in understanding Venezuela's movements in all their complexity.

These books all insist that to understand what has been happening in Venezuela it is necessary to understand the politics of the people is the core of the political community of Venezuela, and that the people are the driving force in Venezuelan politics.

By the end of the twentieth century poverty rates had risen substantially in Venezuela, with following monetary devaluation on February 18, 1983 (called Black Friday) (see, e.g., Maher p. 3-4; see also Roberts 2003, p. 59, Lopez Maya 2002), and neoliberal restructuring, poverty was spiraling out of control. But even with some increased protests at the time, nothing changed (see Lander & Lopez Maya 2005, p. 95). Because of the way the political system was constructed, the Venezuelan people were consciously excluded from participating in it.

Then came the events that would forever alter the course of Venezuelan history.

In the first few days of the second term (February 1989 – May 1993) of Carlos Andres Perez, a suite of neoliberal reforms and policies was announced by Perez (this came as a surprise to many, as he had been elected as somewhat of an anti-neoliberal, see e.g., Coronil and Skurski p. 295, 312). Shortly after, on February 27, 1989, Venezuelans woke up to around a 300 percent hike in bus fares (Coronil and Skurski, p.315). Venezuelans responded with days of rioting, leading to intense class warfare between the poor and the state, which completely altered the Venezuelan political landscape. According to official numbers, between 300 and 500 people were killed by state (and paramilitary) forces in the following week (see: Coronil and Skurski 1991, 325-326). Unofficially between 1,000 and 5,000 people were killed, and the attempted reforms were never implemented (Maher, p. 5; Coronil and Skurski 1991 p. 325).

The *Caracazo* (as these events are known), came at a moment when Venezuelan society was already highly polarized. Azzellini calls the Caracazo "a rupture in the continuum" of Venezuelan politics.

Pascual Marquina and Gilbert (2020) questioned one of their interviewees, Edgar Perez, a popular organizer from La Vega - a poor Caracas neighbourhood, about the Caracazo. "During those days, people, humble people, took over the streets — we made them our own …It was a totally spontaneous insurrection" (p. 160). Perez goes on to say "We affirmed our existence in a process of expropriation of the expropriators… It was us, the people from the *barrios*, doing justice, taking what was ours…" (p. 160) (see also: Coronil and Skurski 1991, p. 297, 315-319).

Indeed, Perez describes the Caracazo quite succinctly: "We are talking about two or three days when the people were center stage, and they corralled the political class and the rich" (Pascual Marquina & Gilbert, p. 160). I would suggest that, in fact, this "corralling" continues to this day, remaining one of the most important aspects of Venezuelan politics. Moreover, understanding the Caracazo also helps us understand the continued *Chavista* experiments in moral economy.

Pascual Marquina and Gilbert's *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle*: *Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution* is made up of 35 interviews with different people by two Political Science professors. It could amply serve either as an introduction to Venezuela's situation or form a consistently Chavista perspective as a complex series of primary documents on the revolution. For Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, the Caracazo was both "…an expression of our rejection of neoliberal policies, but it was also a move to access the promised land, the land of goods and merchandise…" (p. 160). Chávez's elections only cemented the social revolution, but the moral economy of 1989, echoed in the years since throughout Venezuela's political outburst in 1989, previous even to Chávez's election, the masses were unruly.

As in the case studies by Maher and Azzellini, the interviews in *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle* read as erudite interventions of not just a few Venezuelans in their own lives. This is where we can see that it is necessary to listen to the millions of Venezuelans who are involved in creating their own political order. Pascual Marquina and Gilbert's book exemplarily amplifies the voices of Venezuelans creating, constructing, and criticizing their system as it existed in 2019. This is the second such a collection, but it is the first collection compiled by Pascual Marquina and Gilbert. The interviewees in *The Present as Struggle* are from eclectic walks of life: from famous political analysists through to locally active Chavista activists. The interviews run the gamut showcasing the strengths and discussing weaknesses of Chavismo. Overall, the interviews seem to represent political conversations that could have taken place all over Venezuela, and that continue to take place today. As I saw in July 2018, these conversations like these occur on the streets, and in people's homes, work, and in community spaces and are clearly the continuation of much collective thought and discussion.

Building the Commune is a slim but potent volume that invites us to engage with this country in which politics have been turned upside down. For his part, Maher suggests that the Caracazo was among the first "rebellions against the spread of neoliberalism" (p. 2). Maher further writes, in Venezuela, "…[T]he Caracazo led not only to Chávez's election, but also to a long and continuing experiment in radical democracy that continues to this day…" (p. 7).

Chavismo is not an uncomplicated thing, and Maher takes us through some of its various tendencies. His writing style transports us to Venezuela, where we can share in a *Sancocho* (communal soup) (p. 83-84), be immersed in the poorest neighbourhoods of Caracas (p. 43-44) and take part in upper class protests (p. 53).

Building the Commune also traverses the country to the border of two Venezuelan states, to a Commune called El Maizal. Maher defines Communes as "…new institutions of local self-government" (p.7), which he then suggests can be used and made to go beyond the local. Like all communes in Venezuela, El Maizal is constructed in the interstices of the state, in its case the two states of Lara and Portuguesa (p. 84-94). My own fieldwork also partially took place in *El Maizal*, a beautiful place of communal hope, with corn fields, cow sheds and runs, many areas of recovered vegetable cultivation, and a huge pork complex, all run communally.

Maher's book is clear on the larger themes of the purpose of mass movements, and their roles in constructing socialism. For example, "…the fundamental demand to control one's own everyday life, a search for the kind of collective power that Marx sought when he described the commune as the 'self-government of the producers'" (p. 22) is one key passage. Alternatively, Maher suggests this would mean that "Venezuelans would increasingly take control over their own lives. They would elect their own political delegates and police forces; they would decide what to produce and for who. Everyday people would be constantly involved in managing their local communities, and institutions would no longer stand above and apart from the people" (p. 24).

To be clear, all four authors practice similar methodological tools in interviewing and parsing the everyday lives of their subjects, the four authors are also logically consistent with each other's arguments, and all four political scientists would seem to hold similarly cogent positions.

In the longer volume *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*, Dario Azzellini launches into a discussion of different case studies from Venezuela. Like Maher, Azzellini describes the multiple tendencies and currents which came together within Chavismo in defense of the revolution's polarized participatory *protagonismo*. Protagonismo is a term that Venezuelans use to signify that the poor do not just participate in the system, rather they are the engine that drives how the system is structured.

That what has been occurring in Venezuela is polarizing, cannot be disputed. What Chavistas dispute is whether polarization is the fault of Chavismo or the fault of the capitalism that has bled Venezuela during the twentieth and thus far throughout the twenty-first century. Chavistas yet describe what has been occurring in Venezuela as participatory protagonismo. Participation has been a claim that allows Venezuelans to specify the involvement of the poor in a system that had long excluded them.

Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela goes on to examine institutional structures that people utilize at their workplaces to induce worker control, including cooperatives, attempts at co-management, and companies that are communally managed whose purpose is not profit but sustenance (p, 169-177) and similar communal projects and thus Azzellini reveals much work has been done in Venezuela around the topic of social property (p.159-172). Other attempts at worker control documented by Azzellini include worker's councils,

recuperated companies, and even (state led) efforts of nationalization (p.178-242).

Azzellini highlights discussions about how to define concepts like the masses/people (p. 23-33), processes of constituent power (p. 33-51), and the difference between social movements and popular movements. Like Maher, Azzellini examines the two key institutional structures that Venezuelans had begun to utilize to great effect: community councils and communes.

If the political occurrences in Venezuela since 1989 are accurately described as a revolution, what does this experience tell us about what revolutions are?

Trotsky's adage that "revolutions are the direct interference of the masses in historic events" (Trotsky 2008 [1932/1961], p. xv) would indicate the necessity of a high level of mass participation in a revolution. I would argue that in Venezuela, this adage has been shaped into common sense. For further example of this concept of protagonismo: The return of the social revolutionary wave in Venezuela during the weekend of April 11, 2002, which led to the unprecedented, the return of a President from a civil and military led coup d'état, only being one of the many examples.

In the 1999 constitution, there was a broadening "conception of participation that, besides redefining political participation, encompasses social, economic, and cultural rights, with collective rights for specific groups" (Azzellini, p. 5). This form of participation is fully claimed by the Venezuelan masses, and wherein, in the view of the four authors, the Venezuelan masses have made this participation their foundation for a new Venezuela. Even with strong polarization throughout the country, as this review goes to print, I believe there is still strong unification behind the project of Chavismo.

One might argue that participation is not a sufficient threshold for a revolution, and Venezuela's experiences are also cases in point. All four authors illustrate that the concept of protagonismo, as defined by *Chavistas* is the direct action, control, and initiative of the broadly defined poor in Venezuela, and this concept has been Venezuela's strength, is central to the Bolivarian revolution, and is also a self-defined term expressed by Venezuelans to explain their situation.

Building the Commune contains a good description of the Communal Councils (CCs, also called Community Councils). "The building blocks for this new socialist democracy were the communal councils, established in a 2006 law" (Maher, p. 15). So, what are these institutions? According to Maher the CCs are "directly democratic and participatory institutions for local governance" (p. 15). Azzellini writes "The April 2006 law specified that CCs were to be autonomous bodies of popular power" (p. 96). He then quotes from the law itself:

> The communal councils in the constitutional framework of participatory and protagonistic democracy, are bodies of participation, articulation and integration between the various community organizations, social groups, and citizens, which permit the organized pueblo to exercise directly the detailed

> work of public policies and projects oriented to respond to the necessities and aspirations of the communities in the building of a society of equality and social justice (Azzellini, p. 96).

The point is that through organization, and protagonismo, the people can be responsive to and resolve their own problems.

Maher notes these structures became very popular:

> These councils …quickly numbered in the thousands as neighbours began to come together weekly to debate and discuss how to govern themselves. Whether in a dingy room adorned with little more than a poster or mural of Chávez or outside around a collective stew pot, the debates ranged from banal to engaging, from the local to the national and everything in between (p. 15).

Azzellini's numbers indicate that around June 2015 there were 44, 794 CCs (p. 94). We can see the importance of these structures, given that they are supposed to be working institutions (enabling communities to do projects based on need). They are thus predicated on empowering communities to make their own decisions. In addition, this decision-making process is based on the general assembly of the community.

Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela notes "The CCs skip over all the intermediate levels between central government and communities" (p. 97). As such, both "the mechanisms for their constitution, as well as the procedures for the formulation of projects and obtaining of resources, have been simple and fluid, with few bureaucratic mediations," (Azzellini, p. 97).

In this regard, Azzellini reveals that what has begun is a process wherein "Many communities began to discuss their problems and needs, formulate their own solutions, and administer their projects. This strengthened the social networks and the culture of participation in the communities" (p. 97).

As working bodies, the CC's must constantly study the conditions of the community, at every step along the way. Such social investigation is a key part of the process of formation and activity of CCs which have a specific role as problem-solvers for communities.

But it is not enough for the local to be organized into community councils: there needs to be an institutional structure that helps structure the cc's beyond being local. Anacaona Marín, a member of the Chavista *Alexis Vive Patriotic Force*. This organization can be found in the *Barrio 23 de Enero* in Caracas, and Marín in an interview with Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, says: "The commune is the historical subject; the commune and its people, the *comuneros*, that is where the revolution really begins" (p. 32).

It is quite true that the Venezuelan state still needs to change quite drastically for the communities to fully gain control over their own lives. I too heard the

same in my interviews with people involved in mass organizations during July 2018. I too found many people tell me that as M. Lía Grajales', a member of "*Surgentes Collective"* part of the larger *Chavista* movement, argues in an interview with Pascual Marquina and Gilbert.

> The state is a disputed territory and [entering it] is necessary if we want to promote popular interests, but state power is not in any way the goal. In any effort to build popular power, there must be synergy between the bottom and the top" (p. 56).

All three books take us through the need to break the capitalist state and discuss the need for something to replace this capitalist state.

All three books discuss building the communal state, this includes the four authors and many of the different interviewees throughout the three books do as well. They affirm the need to work towards ending this capitalist state. Maher, Azzellini and many of the interviewees also talk about the need to break capitalist relations, and thus the need to change the "system of production" from private property to one "rooted in social property" (Maher, p. 21), and thus have created a form of moral economy in Venezuela.

Each of the books point towards worrying trends in Venezuela. For example, interviews in Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, demarcated the hopes of the new Constituent Assembly (2017-2020) which could have deepened the revolution by altering the already revolutionary 1999 constitution and making it more radical. However, the assembly ended without engendering a new constitution.

The books also tell us about splits within *Chavismo*. One of the key splits within the larger movements is between the officials who would claim to be revolutionary and who are not and Chavismo of the base and masses, who constantly struggle to deepen the revolution against the officials. This has been a long struggle, with no clear winners as yet.

Also discussed in all three volumes is the fact that President Maduro is a contradictory figure, both on the side of the revolution, but also potentially aligned with counterrevolution. The authors, and the interviewees in each book, insist that Maduro's role is not as clear as Chávez's, that Maduro himself is less well understood, that some of his policies and decisions have been backwards, and that he is too lenient on the opposition. The revolutionary Chavistas quoted in these books and in interviews I conducted in July 2018, insisted that they support him, for now.

Notwithstanding internal issues for Venezuela, all the authors reviewed here identify the main problems facing Venezuela with external problems, the various blockades, sanctions, and the vicissitudes of global capitalist markets. It is not just that the price of oil has dropped: there is an economic war against Venezuelans.

The economic situation has gotten harder and worse since Chávez's untimely death in 2013, but since Chávez's election in 1998, these problems have long been evident. Imperialism has been gunning to help the Venezuelan elite re-take political power in Venezuela, ever since Chávez's election, and the elite have been trying themselves to re-gain power since 1989.

In my view, much of the deterioration of the standard of living for Venezuelans is due to the economic war against it, enacted since 1998. All three books identify the problems of state mismanagement in the Venezuelan case, but they reveal that as Venezuela remains as a capitalist state, even if the revolution has captured the state in quite a unique way, the nature of the Venezuelan revolution is a bigger problem for Venezuelans than state mismanagement.

In many ways, for the revolution there is not much the state can do against either capital flight, or open imperial blockade. Both of which have also contributed to the general unease created by billions of cash flows both leaving Venezuela, being taken away from the lawful government, and - some of which is then returned to Venezuelan soil through attempted coup d'état adventures- but what is lost is invaluable. Venezuelans are caught in these imperialist traps, but they are struggling to get out of these traps. Many have left Venezuela, but there are also those who have stayed and many who still believe in the project of Chavismo.

Between the structures of the CCs and the commune, Venezuelans have found tools such as differing and yet very similar experiences of a different moral economy to help each other out of the traps of imperialism and capitalism.

As an expert on the Bolivarian revolution and Venezuela's present political conjuncture (master's research project, main case study of my dissertation both in political science), I enjoyed and learned from all three books, which could also provide excellent introductions to the topic for a beginner. Mainly because, the three books get to the roots of the problems and success in Venezuela. Indeed, these three books all pack a punch, whether read individually or read together.

All three of these books were written between 2016 and 2020 and show readers the various dynamics at play: The rising arc of the Venezuelan masses, 1989-present, the dynamic reasons for their continued control of Venezuela, including their organization in community councils, and other forms of social movements, including communes. These three books illustrate the struggles of the Venezuelan people against capitalism, in their attempts at constructing moral economies, we can find the analysis and possibility to fulfil the need for humanity to move beyond capitalism. Conclusively, the authors show that the solution for Venezuelans is the need to end the misery that imperialism and capitalism impose on our lives, and the experiences within Venezuela show that this potential can only be achieved through building a collective moral economy.

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About the review author

Jeremiah Gaster is a Ph.D. Candidate, at the Department of Politics, York University, is working on his dissertation, *Rethinking Revolutions*. He would like to thank J Cummings, K Kilibarda, A Narbutt, L Wood, and D M Paley, for their helpful advice, comments, and suggestions on this review, and Jeremiah hopes that all understand that any errors are his and his alone. Above all else, Jeremiah would like to thank his partner in everything, L Rodriguez. Contact: j_gaster AT hotmail DOT com