BOOK REVIEWS

Clover, Joshua (2016) Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings

Brooklyn, NY: Verso

In this book, the scholar-poet Joshua Clover is making a historical overview of the "riot", from its "Golden Age" sometime in the 17th and 18th centuries, to its renewed popularity in our global age. In this historization of riots, Clover makes contemporary connections with the "movement of the squares" (2010-2011), including Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Oakland, the riots in Ferguson, and the rise of the Movement for Black Lives. He predicts that we will see many more riots and other forms of "circulation struggles" in the near future in the form of communes, occupations, blockades and other similar political struggles over space. The reason is that the world capitalist system has entered a period of accumulation through circulation, which gives an opportunity for excluded groups to attack this spatial circulation of goods.

Besides providing the research on resistance with a focused history of riots, Clover is also one of the few that suggests a theory of riots. Basically, he argues that it is a mistake to put the "violence" at the center of a definition of the riot (p. 35-9), although violence often accompanies its form of resistance. Instead he wants to understand the riot as part of the anti-capitalist struggle, as a companion of the strike. The strike is a struggle over *the price of labor power* (or the conditions of labor which, he argues, is basically the same), in which workers lay down their work or block, sabotage, or seize control of the production and the machines. Then the riot is a struggle over *the price of market goods* (or their availability and circulation which, he argues, is basically the same), in which dispossessed people (where workers sometimes are a key part of this collective) resist in the context of consumption and create "interruption of commercial circulation" (p. 16). Basically, strikes belong to *the factory floor and*

the capitalist production, while riots belong to *the marketplace and the capitalist reproduction* of the labor force through consumption. This core definitional idea, that riots are about market price, not violence, he picks up from EP Thompson, the influential British historian who spent his life learning to understand the "history from below" of the more informal modes of struggle by the working class. This basic idea is then expanded theoretically, deepened and made more nuanced in an illustrative historic analysis.

Through a longer discussion of the changes in the political economy and its different stages and crises, Clover argues that riots made sense as a key form of struggle in an earlier period, when ordinary people where increasingly affected by the market prices (as in bread and food riots, for a long period the main grievance behind riots), but were not yet integrated in the industrial production as workers. Later on, industrialization led the strike to become the key mode of class struggle until the failures of the General Strike and the later evolution of the welfare state, co-optations of trade unions, and finally with the globalization of capital and the network-based economy. Then again, beginning in the 1960s and following the economic crisis of 1973, riots start to gain popularity again as a mode of class struggle (mainly by the "surplus population" that are excluded from wage labor), and now also as a race struggle, due to the racialization of the unemployed and temporarily-employed in the core Western "overdeveloped" countries.

The early riots – focused on market access, bread, or blocking enclosures and export of goods needed by the dispossessed – have transformed and are today more connected to the police stations (whereas the contemporary version of a "police" did not exist in the early history of riots), streets and squares (p. 10-11). This is because the current stage or crisis of capitalism is creating an ever-growing (racialized) "surplus population" that is excluded from wage labor, but still dependent on the market to survive. Since the market economy is becoming increasingly abstract and distant, yet key to survival, contemporary riots cannot avoid clashing with the state/police. Thus, Clover understands the early "price-setting" mechanism of riots as still valid, but now articulated as a kind of "surplus rebellion".

As always when authors try to suggest heuristic models and make pedagogical overviews of complex struggles in very different contexts, there are simplifications that are less convincing (which, by the way, is a problem the author is well aware of). One problem is that Clover wants to understand all kinds of resistance as "riots" (if they are not "strikes"), as for example the occupation of Tahir Square, despite the fact that it neither focused on market prices, capitalism, market goods, nor property. Tahir was a celebration of unity, dignity and resolve in defying an authoritarian state, and its state of emergency that had held its grip on Egypt for decades. Furthermore, in what way are "bread riots" of the 17th century Europe the same kind of "riots" as the "race riots" against police violence in Ferguson and beyond in the U.S. in 2014? Although Clover suggests these race-state-police-violence-riots are connected to a struggle over "social reproduction" of the labor power: bodies and exclusion of racialized groups from employment (see e.g. p. 27-28), it is not very convincing. Something fundamental is missing in this theory of riots. It seems this political economy perspective of riots lacks a convincing connection to non-economic phenomena such as race, democratization, and dignity. In my opinion, the author makes the classic reductionist move and reduces all social struggles to a matter of economy.

Still, Clover makes a significant contribution to the historical and political understanding of a form of struggles – riots – that for long has been regarded as non-political and an irrational rage from subaltern communities, both by orthodox Marxists, liberals, and the mass media. By separating the "riot" (its market intervention and impact on commerce by the dispossessed in occupying space, and destroying or reappropriating property) from its (common application of) "violence" against the police or other opponents (as strike-breakers or businessmen), Clover helps us to analyze the political economy of riot making.

Stellan Vinthagen, UMass, Editor of JRS

Scott, James C. (2013) Decoding Subaltern Politics: Ideology, disguise, and resistance in agrarian politics

Routledge: New York.

In this short book the founder of the concept "everyday resistance", James C. Scott, professor of political science at Yale University, summarizes his understanding of "everyday resistance" and its relation to "the little tradition" of peasants, ultimately the conflict between the state and "the vernacular world". It is a collection of texts that has never been published in book form before. In the first two chapters, Scott outlines the conflict between peasant society, religion, politics and values embedded in "the little tradition" and "the great tradition" of religious and political urban elites. The following two chapters describe the common "modes of dissimulation" and give an example of how peasants resist tithe/sakar (the Muslim version of tithe or tax) in France and Malaysia. In the final two chapters, Scott argues that the state is fundamentally trying to make the society it dominates legible by transforming the local and vernacular worldview into standardized knowledge. This is illustrated by a detailed analysis of how states produce legal identities in the form of permanent family surnames.

The "little tradition" of the "vernacular world" is based in villages, which are "face-to-face communities and, as such, resist abstractions" (p. 4). Peasants do not have general "class relations" but particular landlords with vital personalities and social relations. Furthermore, small-scale agriculturalists or peasants are importantly following a "subsistence ethic" that aims to minimize risks, not maximize profit, and where maintaining good social relations and solidarity with everyone, including patrons, is essential to social security. Thus, "social and economic arrangements are judged more by how well they protect against the most catastrophic outcomes than by how quantitatively exploitative (e.g. how much of the harvest a landlord takes) they are." (p. 5). Finally, this way of life means that the social and economic is interwoven in the way that social status is connected to the ability to maintain subsistence over time. Therefore,

the (economic) risk aversion is also about a claim for cultural dignity and respect.

This "little tradition" exists in a different world than the "great traditions" we learn about from history books and official (urban) representatives. Scott demonstrate how great traditions of written, codified doctrine (religions or political ideologies) display a systematic "gap or slippage" when it meets folk culture. For example, the ecclesiastical orthodoxy of Catholicism is meeting a "folk heterodoxy, not to say heresy", while Communism has had problems with "'folk' communism" (p. 7-8). This gap is fundamental, with ontological qualities.

It is a well-known fact, for example, that in the perspective of the local village the road going to the city is called something different, than the (same) road when you stand in the city and are going home. The "[city] road" is suddenly called the "[village] road". That is not strange since it all depends on your (local) perspective. However, as Scott shows, this is not acceptable for the standardizing knowledge of the state. The world cannot be different according to your local perspective, since that would make the administration and exploitation of the world much more difficult. Therefore the state has to give the road not just one and the same name, but need to identify the road among many other roads in the country (and the world it comprehends), and thus the road will be given a unique name or number. This is totally meaningless seen from the vernacular world. The same colonial and centralized mapping of the world also applies for addresses, places, names and identifications of people. This epistemological difference is also a sign of something deeper. It is not trivial but amounts to real differences of cultural life-worlds the longer away you come from urban cosmologies and from the discourses of the great traditions. Basically the people of the little tradition and the state live ontologically in different worlds.

According to Scott, these ontological differences create an antagonism, where the little tradition is oriented against the great traditions. The opposition to ruling elites (and sometimes also oppositional elites) comes from "a distinct vernacular perspective that is more than simply a parochial version of cosmopolitan forms and values" (p. 10), and often amounts to a "'shadow society' … [in] opposition to the politico-religious tradition of ruling elites", particularly during rebellious periods

(p. 10), something that is described by Christopher Hill (*The World Turned Upside Down*, 1972, on the English Revolution) and Richard Cobb (*The Police and the People*, 1970, on the French Revolution). This "little tradition" has some salient themes, such as "localism, syncretism, and profanation", which stand in opposition to elite versions of religion and politics (p. 24-63). "Much as the official religious doctrine is selected, reworked, and profaned in little tradition cults, so is the existing political order symbolically negated in popular millennarian traditions" (p. 60). Therefore, Scott's conclusion is that "there is no such thing as a perfect ideological hegemony …[Instead] it would appear that the growth of oppression dialectically produces its own negation in the symbolic and religious life of the oppressed" (p. 61). This gap then produces not just a thin or weak version of Gramscian hegemony, but also a basis for the particular kind of resistance these communities produce.

The "everyday resistance" emanating from the little tradition is small scale, scattered and disguised, but not insignificant, according to Scott. We need to recognize "at least that in terms of durability, persistence, tactical wisdom, and flexibility, as well as results, such activity may well eclipse the achievements of what normally are considered social movements … Acts which, taken individually, may be trivial need not have trivial consequences when taken cumulatively (p. 92-3). He uses as a case in point the Civil War in the U.S. and particularly "the collapse of the Confederacy … [where] … as many as 250, 000 deserted or avoided conscription altogether … [and these] were compounded by massive shirking, insubordination, and flight among the slave population" (p. 92-3). Thus, at least according to Scott, the everyday resistance of the little tradition is even able to determine the outcome of a war, despite its evasive and underground characteristics. Everyone does not recognize this powerful potential, though. These forms of dissimulation and small-acts of resistance, since they indeed "all involve immediate self-interested behavior" and are not principled, at least not in a self-conscious way, "might be termed *opportunistic, unorganized*, and *pre-political*" by a skeptic (p. 93). Scott does not take issue with that, although the terminology is quite condescending. The real problem, according to Scott, is "the tendency to assign greater historical priority and weight to the organized and political than to everyday resistance, a position that,

in my view, fundamentally misconstrues the very basis of economic and political struggle conducted daily by subordinate classes – not just the peasantry – in repressive settings" (p 93). What this critique misses is a full recognition of the necessary variations of class war and how it has to take the context into account. Scott reminds us that: "Class conflict is, first and foremost, a struggle over the appropriation of work, production, property, and taxes" (p. 94). And as part of such appropriation struggles, everyday resistance is just another version of the public and organized class struggle.

Decoding Subaltern Politics is a focused, short discussion of the main perspectives on "everyday resistance". It is a helpful summary as such. However, the themes analyzed in the different chapters do not seem to fit together; they do not appear systematic or complete as a whole. Instead it seems as if they are arbitrarily selected from a huge universe of possible themes on everyday resistance, probably as a result of being written separately to begin with. In any case, the text serves as a good introduction and as a great inspiration for others to do the research and cover those missing themes in future books.

Compared to other writings by Scott, we of course recognize the main arguments about everyday resistance, but the empirical illustrations are different and supplement his already rich variation of examples from historical periods and contrasting contexts. As often, Scott show great familiarity of the detailed research done by others and he demonstrates an eminent skill in synthesizing knowledge from many different strands and shed new light on old facts with his original interpretations.

Stellan Vinthagen, UMass, Editor of JRS

Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (eds.) (2016) Vulnerability in Resistance

Durham: Duke University Press.

Vulnerability in Resistance is an edited book emanating from a workshop in Istanbul 2013 – 'Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance: Feminism and Social Change' – that collects a broad range of themes, contexts, and theoretical approaches to 'vulnerability' and 'resistance'. It assists us all in radically rethinking the connections between 'vulnerability' and 'resistance'. The chapters cover themes as varied as agonism, resilience, temporality, barricades, dreams, art, Palestine, feminism, violence against women, veils and masks, and permeable bodies. This variation is both the strength and the weakness of this collection. It maps a new terrain and creates new (often implicit) links between a vast range of themes which are more or less related to vulnerability and resistance, giveing us a chance to recontextualize and reinterpret vulnerability beyond its stigmatizing victimhood and denied agency; and resistance beyond its masculine imaginings of sovereignty and denial of vulnerability. At the same time, like so many other edited collections of workshop papers, its many voices fail to create something that connects. Unfortunately, *Vulnerability in Resistance* fails dramatically as a book. It is no surprise the editors chose to not have a concluding chapter. Since the chapters do not talk to each other and several do not even seriously engage with both core concepts, it would be almost impossible to write such a conclusion. This is one of those books where you unfailingly read the introduction, and a couple of chapters that capture your interest. The rest you just skim, as did I.

Judith Butler stands at the center of this project, not only as one of the editors and leaders of the workshop, which provided the impetus to this book, but also as the author of inspirational texts such as: *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004); *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009); and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). Thus, during more than a decade Butler has interrogated 'vulnerability' (as well as 'precarity', and what it means to be 'grievable'),

and its links to violence, politics, bodies, performativity and ethics. Basically, Butler argues that our vulnerable human existence compels us to recognize how we are dependent on others and a supportive, material environment in order to have a livable life (Chap. 1). Thus, vulnerability and interdependence are ontological features of being human (in the meaning of being bodily susceptible to sickness, accidents or violence). Since our vulnerable bodies are not discrete biological entities, but fundamentally *relational* (p. 25) or socially and materially embedded, our vulnerability is also profoundly political. Importantly, this also means that although we are all vulnerable, people are vulnerable in very different ways. The distribution of precarity in our neoliberal world order is created from social, political and economic processes in ways that are significantly uneven and hierarchized. Thus, bodies of females, racialized, homosexuals, disabled, working class, poor, or minorities are, for example, made more vulnerable.

In the introduction the editorial team, comprised of Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, argues that the interrogation of 'vulnerability' has been rejected and ignored for various reasons by different groups (p. 1-6). Within feminist politics and research it has been seen as a trap of essentialism: diminishing the agency of those deemed 'vulnerable populations' (often women), and making certain bodies in 'need' of protection, regulation and control by the techniques of discipline and biopower. Simultaneously, the concept has been utilized by white heterosexuality to depict how it is 'under attack' from feminism and LGBTQ communities. Therefore, vulnerability has been relegated to the margins of the feminist vocabulary. Despite its troubled status, the editors maintain there is no way around the importance of the concept for feminists. In their view, a key problem with the existing discourses of 'masculinity' is precisely their denial, displacement and externalization of (your own) vulnerability and (illusionary) celebration of the individual (male and able-bodied) 'autonomy'. Thus, acknowledgment of vulnerability becomes key to any resistance to a masculinist normative order. Furthermore, the meaning of both 'vulnerability' and 'resistance' transform must be considered together, according to the editors. When 'vulnerability' and 'resistance' are seen as coupled together, we can avoid viewing 'vulnerability' as a victimization that invites paternalism and

biopower, and avoid viewing 'resistance' as the heroic individual denial of vulnerability. Instead we become equipped to acknowledge how vulnerable bodies and populations develop interdependent modes of collective agency in which they mobilize their vulnerability in resistance to intolerable living conditions.

In Chapter 1 (Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance) Butler takes the argument one step further. She offers a fundamental critique of some widely-spread misreadings of her theory of performativity, and suggests an ontological human *linguistic vulnerability* (p. 16) in which 'language [and norms] acts on us before we act' in a way that 'assign' us to, for example, a gender, before we can make a choice (p.17). She underlines that '[c]hoice, in fact, comes late in the process of performativity' (p. 17). This does not mean, however, that the repetition of (gender) performativity is automatic, mechanic and without difference – quite the contrary (p. 18). Both glitches and decisive breaks occur in the 'citational chains' of normativity, sometimes by deliberate choice, sometimes by mistake or situational circumstances. So, agency (and choice) does exist, but any performative conceptualization of agency has to incorporate dependency and vulnerability in the social realm, and regarding language in particular, not just agentic choice (p. 19). There is, according to Butler, a similar 'dual' 'dimension' or 'relationship' within performativity (in the meaning of being 'acted on and acting'), and within resistance (p. 24). There is resistance 'to vulnerability' and resistance as 'mobilization of vulnerability', where 'the idea of a political subject that establishes its agency by vanquishing its vulnerability [, which] is the masculinist ideal we surely ought to continue to oppose' (p. 24). Instead Butler wants to 'argue affirmatively that vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment' (p. 22), something that is made clear in examples of 'nonviolent resistance', as performed by Gandhi (p. 26). In my interpretation, Butler does not deny that (legitimate) resistance can be against (certain) conditions of vulnerability experienced by a group of people. Her point is, instead, to emphasize how also such resistance has to recognize itself as a collective mobilization *of* vulnerability in the face of domination and political risks (in order to avoid to entertain and reproduce the impossible and dangerous fantasy of a defeated vulnerability).

Vulnerability in Resistance contains a mix of themes and discussions that often doesn't fit, or only loosely link to the topic of the book, like those texts on how dreams are constitutive for the motive to act politically (Chap. 6), or how vulnerable bodies are articulated in one particular artwork (Chap. 7), etc. Some texts are truly original, and give an unexpected interpretation of the couplet vulnerability/resistance; for example the text on how the ineffective but common habit of revolutionaries to erect street barricades can be seen as public celebrations of a politics of vulnerability (Chap. 5).

And, then there are texts that make the edited volume become truly fascinating and worthwhile, like the chapter on Palestinian 'hyperprecarity', written by Rema Hammami (Chap. 8). This 'hyperprecarity' is created by a context in which Palestinians in the occupied territories are not just (like all of us) ontologically vulnerable, or (like all non-Western or colonized people) rendered ungrievable or made non-human and thus particularly vulnerable for violence and discrimination, but where Palestinians are furthermore made dependent on their survival on the very same state that target them with its violence. Their violated, dominated and discriminated life is also dependent on the Israeli occupation force to be able to continue. It is in relation to such an extreme state of vulnerability that we need to understand one of their particular forms of resistance: the creation of an infrastructure of a livable life under occupation (Sumūd, or the everyday resistance of staying on the land, continuing life despite the occupation). If we do not acknowledge this extreme vulnerability, we will also not understand and appreciate the importance or resistance character of such simple things as planting a new olive tree or organizing a wedding celebration.

Some texts are highly abstract discussions that are hard to follow and make sense of (e.g. Chap 2, which is revisiting agonism). If it is not enough preparation to spend decades within academia to understand a text: whom are we then writing for? It is of course permissible to write a text only understandable for those that already are active participants within your own little specialized sub-discourse, but when you do that, it also says something about who the author counts as relevant readers worth communicating with. In my view, elitist styles of academic texts are somewhat contradictory in a book on feminist approaches to vulnerability.

In a refreshing contrast, Chap. 3 by Sarah Bracke (on 'Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience'), is a clearly-argued and substantial critique of the popular concept of 'resilience' – a concept we meet both in policy documents of global economic institutions and in psychological self-help literature. Resilience is shown to be tied to the neoliberal hegemony of our times and its self-technologies. In one picture, we see a poster on a lamppost in New Orleans after the catastrophe of the hurricane Katrina and the (delayed) neoliberal 'help' program (made by the artist Candy Chang), which nicely sums up the critique and main problem with 'resilience': "Stop calling me Resilient. Because every time you say 'Oh, they're resilient', that means you can do something else to me. I am not resilient.' (p. 71). Unfortunately, in this chapter there is a characteristic silence on how we resist the regime of resilience (although the question is at least raised), something we can reasonably expect in a chapter with that title.

In general the theme of this book is important and warrants our reflections since much resistance is based on a denial of vulnerability. Resistance narratives often articulate heroic acts of individuals, hard men that hide their doubts, suffering, or 'weakness'. We hear of guerilla movements that demand of their soldiers to withstand torture when captured, or of Gandhi who celebrates 'the nonviolence of the strong' and suggests his nonviolent warriors to 'joyfully face the ordeal [of torture]', etc. There is a dominant masculinized discourse about the value of being valiant, tough, audacious, incorruptible, etc. and normalizes the repression of signs of weakness, ambivalence, doubts, fear, etc. Resistance is often imagined as fearlessness, and its opposite is viewed as the 'spineless'.

These fantasies entertain romantic ideas of how our masculinized heroes (men as well as women) take on the fight for us, not only to save us from immanent threats by being victorious, but also from the suffering and danger that come with resistance. Thus, hero-worshipping saves us not only from dangers, but also from having to take the risk of resisting – and ultimately we are 'saved' from recognizing and acknowledging our fundamental vulnerability and interdependence on each other.

A revaluation of our vulnerability is key to make resistance possible, particularly, but not exclusively, in the case of unarmed resistance.

Through such recognition of both our common human or universal vulnerability, and the hierarchies of *different* degrees or positions of vulnerability, we are better equipped to understand and respect people from different contexts and situations, and to mobilize a common struggle against regimes of injustice, exploitation and discrimination. With such recognition, we will also learn to value our dependency on others (especially within resistance communities), and to understand that we need to develop support systems for taking care of each other. Then we might just be able to make it possible to resist despite severe risks to our (precarious) lives, and because our vulnerability and dependency mobilize us to act. If we do not understand the extreme vulnerability some people, like indigenous people, experience in their lives, we will also not be able to act in allied solidarity, recognize our complicity, or value their particular and constrained agency.

Stellan Vinthagen, UMass, Editor of JRS

Knapp, Michael, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga (2016) Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan

Pluto Press: London.

Who could predict that an experiment with a new society, a locally-controlled democratic autonomy without a state that put women at the center, would develop into a multi-ethnic border area in the Middle East, only to become part of an area suffering under a hostile war situation, longstanding patriarchal structures and colonial relations? *Revolution in Rojava* is a unique book that empirically documents and describes many aspects of the revolutionary process in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria ("Western Kurdistan") which has evolved since the summer of 2012. The authors have a long-standing relationship to the Kurdish liberation

struggle, having visited the Rojava area 2014 and 2016 and interviewed some 150 people. This gives them the possibility to write a unique description of the revolutionary process as it unfolds. This description lends nuance and depth to a fascinating experiment with creating a new society, as the authors are able to go beyond the conventional media reports of the celebrated female Kurdish soldiers and their struggle with, and defeat of, IS in Kobane 2014.

At the same time, it is unclear how much the description goes beyond the official narrative of the Kurdish movement, as the authors have not lived and participated in the society that evolves in Rojava; they have only visited and done interviews. Unfortunately, this book therefore cannot help us to understand how the practical everyday reality of this revolutionary process is experienced. But *Revolution in Rojava* helps us to understand what the Kurdish experiment in Rojava *tries* to achieve.

For resistance studies, the book is of interest for at least two reasons: firstly, it describes in detail an *ongoing* revolutionary transformation. Secondly, it focuses on the building up of alternative institutions that make another way of life possible – something that has been otherwise called *constructive resistance*. The authors devote a substantial part of their attention to the armed struggle and its different units and history. Many participants, both within the Kurdish movement and outside supporters, regard the armed struggle as not only a legitimate act of self-defense, but as a key part of the revolutionary process. That is perhaps correct, but it is not necessary to merge the armed struggle and the creation of democratic autonomy. In this book, it becomes clear that the armed struggle creates a space in which a revolutionary transformation can occur, but it also becomes clear how the creation of democratic autonomy in the three cantons of Rojava is a *political transformation* of building new social institutions. That is the revolutionary process I will focus on here.

The authors claim that this revolution is unique in that one and the same movement has created a "dual power situation":

> "On the one hand, there is the democratic self-administration, which looks very much like a government, replete with ministries, parliament and higher courts … [Which looks like a] democratic socialist state. It includes numerous political parties but was largely set up by the

> PYD [the biggest political party in Rojava, promoting democratic autonomy]. On the other there's the bottom-up structures organized by TEV-DEM, the Movement for a Democratic Society…where initiative flows entirely from popular assemblies. The balance between these two institutional structures appears to be fluid and under constant renegotiation." (p. xvii).

Despite the longstanding disenfranchisement of Kurdish people (enforced borders, denial of citizenship, forced Arabization, etc.) and a colonial relationship with Damascus, which treated the area as a resource extraction zone, it has been possible to forge a social contract among the diverse populations under the leadership of the Kurds, aiming for a new society. This has been possible due to a long and ambitious process of new ideas and constructive work to build up parallel structures. Kurdish women's groups developed a feminist approach to "dual leadership" in which men and women shared positions (see Chap. 5), and Kurdish associations developed committees that took care of their own situation already in the 1990s (see p. 164) and later even an advanced council system (since 2007, see Chap. 6). Perhaps most importantly, the PKK leader Öcalan went through an ideological transformation when he ended up in a Turkish prison in 1999.

Öcalan has, in this series of writings, developed a new paradigm for the Kurdish liberation that is based on radical democracy ("democratic confederalism", see Chap 3), feminism, autonomy and ecology. Over the years, this has had profound effects in the Kurdish movement, with for example the creation of ecology projects, autonomy experimentations, etc.

Thus, both an infrastructure and ideological framing were built up over the years, and in 2011 with the revolutionary opposition in Syria getting mobilized, and the civil war erupting later that year, the opportunity presented itself. Since then Kurdish activists have, in alliance with other ethnic groups in the area, developed their self-governance.

Today they have four levels of councils that deal with all issues and organize their life: with the local communes as the basis, then neighborhoods, districts and finally the People's Council of West Kurdistan. These councils work within eight areas with committees dealing with all

aspects of the life of the population. Simultaneously there exists also a structure of Democratic Autonomous Administrations (DAA) in each of the three cantons (p. 114-121). Through this "democratic confederalism," they have been able to organize new institutions and autonomous systems that deal with all key aspects of society: a new justice system (Chap. 9), a Kurdish education system (Chap. 10), free health care (Chap. 11), and a non-capitalist "social economy" (Chap. 12).

The new alternative systems are complex, as a closer description of the justice system will illustrate: At the basis of the new justice system we find the old "peace committees", now given a central role, which operates at the local level and deals with criminal cases and disputes through consensus (except in murder cases), try to foster reconciliation and integration in the society when possible, and which otherwise try to establish a fair legal process (p. 164-166). Cases of patriarchal violence are dealt with by women's peace committees (p. 166). Newly-established justice commissions deal with the legal procedures on a higher (district) level. Their first measure in 2012 was to liberate all political prisoners that had been imprisoned by the old regime, and reopen all cases of those sentenced for non-political crimes. Besides these commissions and committees, there are people's courts and the justice parliament, as well as security forces (Asayîs) that deal with cases the committees cannot manage (p. 167-173). These security forces are seen to protect the society (not the state, as police), making sure the diverse society has the possibility to organize freely and openly. These security forces functions democratically, like everything else in this new society, where members of each level elect their own leaders above them (p. 173). The authors cite Human Rights Watch documents that critique some of the court procedures, but conclude that they could not find any political prisoners in this new society in Rojava (p. 172-3).

The authors recognize that the existence of the democratic confederalism of Rojava is something that is "extremely unlikely", yet it does exists (p. xxii). Despite the civil war situation in Syria, the vicious attacks from IS/Daesh, the constant threats and undermining from the Turkish state, which it borders, the almost total isolation from trade due to the international boycott of Rojava (in which not only Syria, Turkey, Iran, and NATO, but even the liberated area of South Kurdistan in

northern Iraq, also called "KRG", participate, see p. 198). The region is rich on agricultural and oil resources but, due to the international boycott, Rojava has to focus on self-reliance through cooperatives that creates for the immediate needs of the population (p. 197-199). Despite their hardships, unlikely existence, and precarious future, the dignity of those that made their own liberation possible is obvious. As the authors recall from their visit:

> "When we were leaving, we apologized to our hosts that there wasn't more that we could bring them. They were under embargo, almost everything was in short supply. One woman answered, speaking, she said, only for herself: 'Don't worry about that too much', she said, 'I have something that no one can give me. I have my freedom. In a day or two you have to go back to a place where you don't have that. I only wish there was some way I could give what I have to you.'" (p. xxii).

As one sign of the vitality of this new society, we find that when the authors were visiting the area they were not only allowed to talk to anyone they wanted and travel freely, but they were also asked to present their critique of this Kurdish experiment with democratic autonomy (p. xix-xxii). In a response, the authors highlighted three things they see as challenges for the experiment: the need to deal with social class issues (which, interestingly enough, has not been at the center of this uprising at all, much due to the Kurdish movement's rejection of Marxism), the question of time (due to the constant need to make consultation with several different bodies for each decision), and the need to find a way to integrate the self-organizing from below and the coordination into some kind of entity (if not a state, then something else) that external forces can deal with and accept (as of now there is a lot of external pressure to create a state formation). Here I would like to add something: the pressure to commercialize. The Rojava region has – as the authors point out – been less integrated in the capitalist economy historically, which is a source of strength in the present revolutionary situation. It makes non-capitalist solutions easier for the moment, but with time, if their experiment survives, the pressure to commercialize will increase. After all, we all live in a capitalist world economy.

This book shows an unusually strong example of what is referred to as "prefigurative" movement activity, "constructive resistance", "temporary autonomous zones" (TAZ), or "parallel institutions" that often accompany resistance movements. As such, it should be of interest for scholars and activists of resistance studies. Although this book is a book made by visitors to a process that is in the making, it is probably the most comprehensive book on the Kurdish experiment in Rojava in English, and a book that goes far beyond the romanticized images of female soldiers in the Kurdish army.

At the same time, we still do not know much about how the reality of the revolutionary process looks. For example, this book stands in a stark contrast with the rather serious accusations reported by both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International concerning violations in the legal processes, infringements of political freedoms of oppositional groups and demolitions of houses and forced displacements during the war. The Kurdish authorities have refuted most of this, while some have been acknowledged and led to reforms and improvements (as, for example, improved trainings of officials and a reduction of the use of child soldiers).

What we need in the future is writings from people that have, as a difference to these authors, actually participated in the new democratic institutions, people who can give empirical data and first-hand experiences and insider observations of how these new democratic confederalism works in practice. We need to hear from participant observers about how the decision-making happens in reality, the kind of power relations that evolves, and how this exciting Kurdish experiment with democratic transformation deals with challenges in practice.

Stellan Vinthagen, UMass, Editor of JRS

Vergara-Camus, Leandro (2014) Land and Freedom: The MST, the Zapatistas and Peasant Alternatives to Neoliberalism

London: ZED.

The landless workers' movement in Brazil (MST) and the Zapatistas, an indigenous peasant movement in Chiapas, Mexico (with its own army called EZLN, and best known by its former spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos), are among the most studied movements in the Global South. However, there are few studies that understand the MST as a peasant movement or the Zapatistas as a movement with a particular rural development proposal, and no studies that systematically compare them both (p. 2-3). Leandro Vergara-Camus from SOAS, London, UK, has written a book that done just that. *Land and Freedom* is a unique comparison done in a systematic and theoretically-advanced way. It compares MST and the Zapatistas along a number of key themes, such as their socio-economic situations, strategies, gender transformation, relationship to land and alternative institution-building. The study builds on its own empirical fieldwork data, as well as an interrogation of much of the existing literature. The voices of the activists are present and illustrate the analysis throughout the book in a way that builds confidence.

Vergara-Camus claims that the "strength of both movements lies in their capacity to create and/or strengthen 'autonomous rural communities', which depend on access to land for … food self-sufficiency" (p. 3). Thus, land and freedom are linked. This is the main argument in the book, as we will see below. Both movements suggest a kind of rural development model that fits well into what is called "alternative development" within development studies (p. 12-19). According to the author MST and the Zapatistas represent "new forms of peasant rebellions" which are not just defensive, but build autonomous rural communities and participatory political structures guided by a vision, which succeed in transforming relations within contexts of neoliberalism and semi-feudalism (p. 26,

Chap 2, and p. 290-1). These movements have replaced the role of the party in Gramscian thinking through their function as "school of government" (p. 26, Chap 3); they "politicize, organize and train their membership to acquire the capacity to be 'organic intellectuals' capable of self-government" (p. 157). The key here is the autonomy that they are able to create due to their access to land. The "control of a territory along with the development of political structures that are alternative to the state, differentiate peasant movements … because they allow the creation or strengthening of 'autonomous rural communities'" (p. 26). These movements are also developing alternatives to conventional capitalism. Many "practices and decisions regarding agricultural production … correspond to a non-capitalist logic, which is consciously chosen" with the aim of achieving food security or subsistence, which makes it possible for them to "partially mediate the effects of the market" (p. 27, Chap. 4). However, the author argues that despite "growing numerically", both movements have failed to generate a "social and political alliance" that would make other actors adopt positions as radical as theirs (p. 27, Chap 5), which is particularly the case for the Zapatistas (p. 298). We will soon get back to why that is the case, according to Vergara-Camus.

The author argues that their position as peasants is of fundamental importance to their resistance. Peasants are "often closer to the original process of expropriation of the means of subsistence and production", and are therefore "perfect examples of a class that experience the genesis of the process of alienation and disempowerment" (p. 85). It is therefore not surprising that they often express "the desire to be free of the dependence on someone else's will" (p. 85). "Gaining and protecting access to land means gaining control over their labour and the autonomy of taking decisions" (p. 85), and "a way out of the humiliation of unemployment and marginalization … a way to take their destiny into their own hands" (p. 87). However, why this is not necessarily the case for all peasants is not made clear by Vergara-Camus.

The "crucial elements for the creation of an alternative to the neoliberal state and market" by both the Zapatistas and MST are "the territorialization of the struggles, the non-commodified nature of land and the non-monetarized character of many agricultural practices" (p. 289). Examples of such non-capitalist practices are "solidarity, reciprocity

and collectivism" (p. 292). Here the Zapatista struggle has an advantage "because it takes place in a region with little market penetration, where land is not yet commoditized … [which makes the struggle] mainly a struggle to protect and reinforce communal rights" (p. 294, original emphasis). It is not (yet) possible for the Zapatistas to create a complete autonomy vs. the market or the state, but compared to Mexican society in general their autonomy is significant. It is a main argument in the book that, contrary to much research of today, the predominance of capitalist relations looks different in different parts of the world, and for different groups of people or types of activities (p. 290). Thus, according to Vergara-Camus, existing cracks in world capitalism can be exploited and made wider. A reversal of capitalism is possible, at least locally and in relation to some dimensions of capitalism, and at least to some degree and temporarily.

These new peasant movements are not just creating alternatives in isolation from the rest of society. Quite the opposite. Instead, "contrary to what scholars from the alternative development approach argue, the cases of the MST and the EZLN show that social movements do not shy away from challenging state power and are simply retreating within civil society to build a 'counter-power to the state'. [And] by building autonomous structures of popular power that are alternative to the state, the MST and the EZLN challenge state power and are able to confront, oppose or mitigate its policies" (p. 294-5). Thus, it is the autonomy that enables resistance. The autonomy is not total, and it is not creating isolation but instead a renewed relationship with other groups in society and the state. This new position of autonomy means the relationship to the state can be less dependent and exploitative, and therefore also less colonial.

The "advantage of the MST and the EZLN is based on two features: (1) their capacity to organize and mobilize entire communities around autonomous structures of popular power; and (2) the maintenance of a subsistence fallback strategy that provides an opportunity to partially delink from the market, [where both] of these features derive from securing and protecting access to land and controlling a territory" (p. 295). These two features are therefore also what distinguishes them from other movements and communities, and also provide a logistical explanation

not only for their successes, but also for why they have fundamental problems to scale up and mobilize national or international alliances oriented to their radical politics. Since other progressive communities have fewer possibilities to access land and create autonomous structures or subsistence, especially those based in urban contexts, they are also not able to be as radical, according to the author. Here it is unclear how it still has been possible for both the Zapatistas and the MST to get a world of activists to respond. The Zapatistas has prefigured much of the global justice movement by initiating a series of international gatherings in Chiapas during the 1990s, and the MST was one of the key initiators of the world's biggest platform for progressive movements: the World Social Forum (which has gathered up to 100,000+ participants globally since 2001). Unfortunately, Vergara-Camus does not convincingly argue how this is possible at the same time as the Zapatistas and the MST have had problems to build national alliances of significance.

In a critique of some more autonomist interpretations of these movements, especially the Zapatistas (as articulated by John Holloway, for example), Vergara-Camus argues that their resistance and autonomy do not amount to a rejection of power. Vergara-Camus claims that "power relations do not dissolve through this process … Power relations are, rather, democratized and diffused along more equalitarian (although imperfect) lines" (p. 298). Despite that the Zapatistas are correctly associated with a kind of "anti-strategic argument" in relation to conventional political thinking, "the EZLN itself, throughout its twenty years of public history, has offered and pushed for a strategy of radical transformation of power relations by refounding of the state through a Constituent Assembly" (298-9).

As a general conclusion, the author argues "that social movement struggles that seek radical social transformation will be able to bear fruit *if and only if* they are able to transform the subaltern classes from objects to subjects of their own history, *by allowing them to gain control of the means of production and creating a structure of popular power alternative to (or alongside) the state"* (p. 299, original emphasis).

This book is an excellent comparative analysis built by someone with a deep knowledge of both movements. I find very few problems, but want to highlight three things. Firstly, Vergara-Camus is not making much

use of the fact that the Zapatistas are indigenous peasants, although it is mentioned and recognized as a difference to MST. I think that is because it does not really fit into his analysis, which is predominantly inspired by political economy. Still, it is arguably a key difference between the two movements. Indigeneity is also closely connected to the building of new ways of being, the creation of community and the relationship to "land", in a fundamentally different way compared to a (landless) peasant. It is, for example, no wonder that some of the MST land occupations create tensions with indigenous people in Brazil.

Secondly, Vergara-Camus is not making any systematic comparison of the differences between the movements in relation to their *resistance repertoires*, which is an odd silence. If we compare them in a sketchy way, it is immediately clear that one is armed, the other unarmed (although the Zapatistas also rely mainly on unarmed means in their struggle), and one focuses on land occupations (and the building of new communities), while the other creates parallel institutions within already existing villages (although occasionally the Zapatistas also occupy land), and furthermore, the MST is much more than the Zapatistas utilizing the existing state system (having close relations to the socialist party PT and engaging in legal battles in the court system), etc. So, at the face of it, it seems the MST and the Zapatistas have arrived at very different modes of engaging in resistance, most likely as a consequence of their very different historical, political and socio-economic contexts. This seems key to a discussion of any comparison between the two. The author does indeed mention all of these things at different places in the text, but they are not brought together in a systematic comparison as with other key themes.

Lastly, it also seems somewhat unconvincing to argue that there exist "new forms" of peasant movements based on a study of two cases, cases that for many observers seem to be quite unique and prominent. The author is unfortunately not making an effort to describe other similar cases in a global overview that could convince the reader that the MST and the Zapatistas are two out of many within a new tendency among peasants in the world. However, it is likely that Vergara-Camus will inspire other authors to continue this comparative work.

Still, generally I consider *Land and Freedom* a model for how to do cross-contextual comparisons of social movements, sensitive to both

differences and similarities. It is no doubt a significant contribution to our understanding of autonomy, resistance and peasant movements.

Stellan Vinthagen, UMass, Editor of JRS

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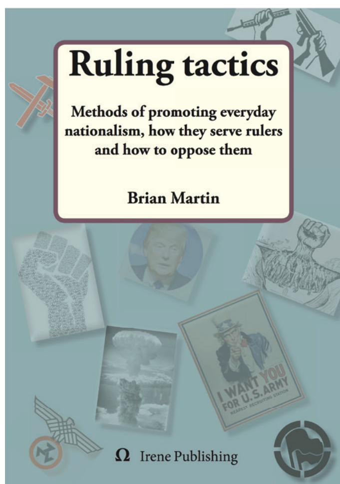

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