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From the Streets to the State: Changing the World by Taking Power

edited by Paul Christopher Gray, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2018, 281 pp., \$90.00/\$27.95 (hard/softcover), ISBN: 97814384 70283

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BOOK REVIEW

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The title of this book gives the impression that it deals with extraparliamentary seizures of power, but neither popular insurrections nor *coups d'état* are included in its contents. Nor is attention paid to the gradual building of autonomous dual powers that might congeal new forms of self-governance. In this edited volume, "taking power" means the legal capturing of elected offices and administrative positions. The recent emergence of so many radical electoral parties around the world provides the wealth of parliamentary experiences upon which this book is based. Beside the United States, authors examine recent developments in Greece, Turkey, Spain, Portugal, South America, and Germany.

Editor Paul Christopher Gray's intention is to reconcile opposing left tendencies he calls parliamentarism and extraparliamentarism. He believes neither is capable by itself of overthrowing capitalism, and that their proponents' continuing repetition of the same argument functions like a "dull boomerang" (p. 7). His statist bias is belied by his assertion that the radical left's "big refusal" (what Marcuse named the "Great Refusal")¹ only expedites cutbacks in welfare and social programs. Critical of the radical left's refusal to participate within the structures of neoliberal states, he insists that radical democratic socialist parties should campaign for government office while consciously advocating "radical" transformation of the economy and government. He oversteps his claim to reconcile the two tendencies when he asserts, "But if the anti-power milieu has clean hands, it is only because they hold them above their heads in surrender as the tide of blood creeps up their legs" (p. 6). Besides revealing how out of touch the left intelligentsia can be, such a strident statement also ignores the sacrifices of thousands of activists killed in insurgencies around the world in places like Gwangju, Venezuela, Thailand, Tunisia and Burkina Faso – to name only a few of the many places where autonomous grassroots insurgencies have sought to sweep away oppressive states and exploitative economies.

Gray insists that "Furthermore, a sum of autonomous institutions linked by a system of mandates likely cannot develop a collective will, a spirit of compromise within the bounds of a generally recognized solidarity" (p. 10). His inclusion of the word "likely" leaves open the possibility that autonomy might be a building block for strategic change. Acknowledging that "socialist" governments have helped to salvage capitalism, he continually discredits what he calls the social democratic trap. Although he limits his examples to Europe in discussing those who have helped to save capitalism, both South African Nelson Mandela and South Korean Kim Dae Jung were leaders of popular insurgencies who became their countries' presidents after harsh imprisonments. Once in power, they each strictly enforced neoliberal policies and legitimated the capitalist underpinnings of their societies, all the while sapping the strength of more visionary movements that helped bring them freedom.

In discussing practical experiences of grassroots insurgencies and the radical parties they spinoff, this book is at its best. It is a different matter when authors delve into leftist concerns that have little relevance outside small circles of academics. The value of case studies is

¹Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p. vii.

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In discussing practical experiences of grassroots insurgencies and the radical parties they spinoff, this book is at its best. It is a different matter when authors delve into leftist concerns that have little relevance outside small circles of academics. The value of case studies is diminished when Eurocentric analysis based upon a resurgent labor metaphysic obscures contemporary mobilizations of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, as occurs in chapters two and three. As is made clear from the example of Syriza in Greece, those who seek to build a “party of a new type” need both to attract the votes of center-left constituencies as well as to retain the support of the social movements which galvanized the party in the first place. In Portugal, Spain, Germany, and Greece, new radical parties moved away from their ties with radical social movements while integrating themselves into the structures of power (Lafrance and Príncipe p. 55–56).

A unifying theme of the book is a repeated call for building “Parties of a New Type.” Drawing upon

experiences from Spain, Greece, Turkey, Mississippi, and Latin America's "Pink Tide" governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, authors provide accounts of experiences in a wide range of institutions, including prisons. While a "state of a new type" is also mentioned, nation-states are central to almost every chapter. Seldom is attention paid to international state dynamics, leaving out much of what we can learn from recent globally synchronized uprisings.²

The movements most successful and also most impressively portrayed are those in Latin America, Jackson, Mississippi, and among Kurds. The Latin American Pink Tide has its origins in Venezuela, where a massive uprising in 1989 was suppressed through the murder of hundreds (some say thousands) of people. To be sure, the subsequent Bolivarian Revolution was more dependent upon the charisma of Hugo Chavez than any political party. In Ecuador, indigenous peoples became the motor force of change, not, as many expected, the unionized working class. In Bolivia as well, a Pink Tide government brought to power by indigenous movements transformed ownership of extractive industries and used royalties to significantly improve the living conditions of hundreds of thousands of people. Despite programmatic success and electoral victories, progressive parties have been systematically undermined by a combination of forces leading to new right-wing governments in the region. Thomas Chiasson-LeBel concludes his chapter on the Pink Tide by insisting, "The left must stop dreaming of the one party that will



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pulls all the strings, the capitalist classes benefit from a network of independent organization, ranging from

research institutes, business interest groups, and political parties with a certain independence from each other” (pp. 86–87).

Kali Akuno’s chapter on Chokwe Lumumba and Jackson, Mississippi provides an insider’s account of the experiences of hundreds of activists. Akuno validates the central importance of people’s assemblies. He distinguishes between a constituent assembly (a representative body that exists for years) and a mass assembly (short-lived consensus-based gatherings during times of crisis). The author finds similar evidence of assemblies’ importance in Venezuela, Chiapas, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Philippines, Burkina Faso, and Granada. Although Chokwe Lumumba was mayor for only 7 months (from July 1, 2013 until his death on February 25, 2014), his legacy includes physical improvements to the city’s infrastructure and water systems, strengthening of neighborhood economic cooperatives, as well as the introduction of participatory democratic practices within the government. Personally, I can think of no person better suited to lead a radical city government than Chokwe Lumumba. In 1972, I invited him to be a speaker in Miami at protests against the Republican National Convention. On the opening day, we convened a rally commemorating the first anniversary of the assassination of imprisoned Black Panther leader George Jackson. Midway through our program, I glanced behind the stage and saw a motorcycle contingent of Miami police depart after escorting hundreds of Cuban exiles (“gusanos”) to the unprotected rear of our stage. Fortunately, hundreds of Vietnam veterans rushed to repel the assault, during which time Chokwe Lumumba and Bobby Seale continued with our program.

Erdem Yoruk’s chapter, “The Radical Democracy of the People’s Democratic Party,” provides an optimistic

prognosis for Kurdish political initiatives. Having changed their strategic goal from a separate Kurdish state to radical transformation of the Turkish state, a plethora of Kurdish progressive voices has collectively articulated visions of direct-democratic forms of governance. Estimated to be eighteen percent of Turkey's population, Kurds are none the less the political vanguard of a rainbow of constituencies. Much like the Black Panther Party's role in the 1960s and 1970s, Kurds in Turkey today are able to galvanize national and international support. Even though the legal wing of the Kurdish movement grew out of the underground armed struggle, the People's Democratic Party became the third largest party in parliament in 2015. Women's self-organization is especially noteworthy within the Kurdish party, which has a policy of equal representation at all levels. The LGBTQ community is also prominently active. The party's goal is "democratic autonomy" – and not only for Kurds. The ascendancy of electoral politics has created discussions at the base of how parties can subvert the movements from which they arise, an experience quite similar to those of the Workers' Party in Brazil, Syriza in Greece, and Podemos in Spain.

Other notable contributions include Hilary Wainwright's call for recognition of alternative forms of knowledge that can be useful in the struggle against privatization. As opposed to an "elitist knowledge economy," she advocates a "solidarity economy" that builds popular participation and the capacity of grassroots groups to govern themselves. Echoing the call for a "different kind of state" Tammy Findlay calls for "femocratic" governance, which "integrates an explicitly feminist analysis into democratic administration." Drawing from both Canadian and Australian experiences, she makes a convincing case that feminism can lead to

transformational politics.

This book's focus on parliamentary dynamics offers summaries of events on four continents that could be useful for classes in comparative politics. Social movement theorists could benefit from its discussion of how movements in the streets strengthen and are dissipated within existent governmental institutions.

Notes

1 Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p. vii.

2 See George Katsiaficas, "Global Insurgencies since 1968," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 17 (2018), 11–23.

Additional information

Author information

George Katsiaficas

George Katsiaficas is a former editor of *New Political Science*. He recently published *The Global Imagination of 1968: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (PM Press) with analysis of insurgencies in more than 50 countries.

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