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Studies on the effects globalization has had upon the union movement and the world of labor in general already comprise a reasonable literature that tends to underscore the importance of an articulated response involving a dual strategy on the part of local unions engaged in organizational tasks within multinational corporations. This two-pronged strategy involves, on one hand, establishing connections with unions in other countries in which the corporation is also present, and, on the other, forging an alliance with social movements, especially those spearheaded by NGOs. The author calls the former Transnational Labor Networks and the latter Transnational Activist Campaigns. The book therefore increments this literature with the reality of Latin America, in which the effects of neoliberal macro-economic policies and productive restructuring made themselves felt early on (since the 1980s). The intriguing question behind the research on which the book is based is how, why and how frequently campaigns by local union movements reach the point where they garner international support and solidarity from other unions in other parts of the world (p.4). In order to answer this question, four case studies were made in two different areas of activity (the automobile and clothing industries) in two regions of the continent (South America and Central America, respectively). The theory underlying these analyses is largely based on the formulations of Gary Gereffi and his collaborators concerning the ‘global value chain’. It is from this referential platform that the main study hypotheses are cast and the typologies constructed. There are basically four of these, each roughly corresponding to one of the study countries: buyer-driven leftist; buyer-driven moderate; producer-driven leftist; and producer-driven moderate.

A scale can be devised on the basis of these four cases, ranging from institutional structures (State, legislation, freedom of association) that are favorable to the world of labor (Argentina) to those unfavorable to it (El Salvador), with countries like Brazil and Honduras somewhere in-between, the former leaning toward the favorable and the latter toward the unfavorable. In countries submitted to EPZ (Exporting Processing Zones) regimes and connected to buyer-driven global value chains, the chances of constructing a ‘popular’ platform with proximity among the various union movements united in the struggle against an authoritarian State (from students movements, the women’s movement, associations and Catholic activist groups to unions properly speaking) are higher than in their producer-driven counterpart (p.57). However, the author himself notes that there are national realities in which these typologies mix. In more complex countries, those at a more advanced stage of modernization, one can discern a pattern somewhat similar to that described above with regard to recent transitions to democracy. In Brazil, for example, the bloc we could call ‘popular’ created a wave of progressionism and militancy that separated the left and right into those who, respectively, defended social rights and those who defended neoliberal modernization. However, it is true that the content of such a bloc may vary considerably between places like Honduras and El Salvador and others like Argentina and Brazil. While the ranks of the former may include informal workers and community organizations, those of the latter span socially more differentiated layers, such as the industrial working class and middle-class unions. We can also observe collective action strategies that blend union network-based transnationalism with attempts to pressure the State (more characteristic of labor relations with a history of corporativism). Once again, Brazil provides a case in point, with the recent drive on the part of the CUT (Single Workers Center), the largest umbrella union in the country, to encourage contact between global unions whilst, at the same time, investing in national modalities of a tripartite social front. Like-

1 Civil associations in the region, connected with human rights but also with housing issues, poverty and neighborhood organization, will later be referred to as NGOs.

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wise, the characterization of union orientation as ‘moderate’, ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ (p.88) can prove problematic if adopted too rigidly: in the current context, when the most important central unions in Argentina and Brazil rally behind labor laws that are corporative in origin, can we really say they are being ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’?

Another case in which there is some crossover between patterns in Central America (EPZs) and South America (state-oriented) is the contention that unions need to organize the ‘demographic component’ (women and youths) and be more attentive to their demands. This would seem to be a generalized need when it comes to union survival. The observations made here do not undermine the effort to construct a schema of interpretation. As the book does not purport to be a historical study, but rather an analysis of possible organized action patterns within labor in a context of global pressure, one could say that the typologies drawn from the variables industrial structure, State, collective identity and union response (p.168) are pertinent, useful and accurate. They help raise questions, including on the possibility of such mixtures or cross-fertilizations.

Additionally, the book offers theoretical contributions to the labor studies debate, even if they do end up dissolved in the text. Firstly, there are vivid narratives that allow us to think about the role of norms today (pp. 60-1) in the face of economic and legal constraints: the strength of a morally or ethically-based (normative) political campaign could be key to the success of a struggle against MNCs. The notion that norms are, shall we say, above the law because they inform it, because they put the ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ into the ‘body’ (the written Law), is extremely meaningful, as it points the way for a deliberative policy in the sphere of labor relations. It may well inject fresh impetus into a notion of ‘legitimacy’, such that it gains the upper hand against the formalist and liberal argument that ‘there is no alternative’. The interview with the Wal-Mart CEO on the issue of child labor is an excellent indication that legitimacy does count. Secondly, it shows that the union movement is, first and foremost, a social movement, not just an interest-driven collective agent: Latin America would seem to be particularly suited to this framing of the question (pp. 177-8), in which the union accumulates the structural, associational and normative (principled-values) roles. Lastly, one of the positive points of this book is that it contains a wealth of up-to-date information on the union movement in Central America (some data is as recent as 2010). The analysis of social struggles in this region is very elucidating (chapters 2, 3 and 5). Likewise, the application of the notion of radical flank strategy was convincing as a general outline of Latin-American unionism, given the persistent attraction that inequality and injustice exercise upon the formation of more radical strains of contention and their capacity to function as a sort of reference for the action of other political agents in the unions. Without doubt, this is one of the author’s sharpest contributions.

The book is well written, it reads fluently and the chapters are well drawn. Though the author is a North-American researcher, he brings an ‘inside’ view, as his conclusions are based on a solid knowledge of the land. The book will certainly be a reference for scholars interested in studying present-day problems in industrial relations throughout the region, as well as in the answers labor in this part of the globe has found to the challenges it must face. It also testifies to the fact that, among the social agents contesting the order of globalization, and based on the four case studies laid out here, in Latin America at least, unions are still fundamental.


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