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Unlikely Resistance in the United States

Book Review: Adam Burgos, *Political Philosophy and Political Action. Imperatives of Resistance*. Rowman & Littlefield International: Lanham 2017 (pp. 211). ISBN 978–1-78660–009–7. Price: 39.95 USD.

The book's central argument is that resistance serves the function of renewing democratic legitimacy. It challenges the notion that with a proper theory of the State or a proper theory of legitimacy the possibilities of resistance can be cancelled, making resistance either unnecessary or illegitimate (Burgos 2017, p. 5.) This text approaches legitimacy as a recurrent test a political system has to endure with regards to the common interest and the membership of a polity.

Burgos looks for the possibilities of resistance in the works of four political thinkers (Rousseau, Marx, Dewey and Rancière). Resistance is a word with a twofold meaning: it means the use of force or violence to oppose someone or something. It also means the ability not to be affected by something. The notion of democratic legitimacy that the book articulates states that a social formation is legitimate as it understands and fosters "the necessity of continually being open to having its blind spot be pointed out by resistance movements, as well as to productively respond to them" (Burgos 2017, p. 4.) This notion is grounded on the examination of two social movements that have emerged in the U.S. -which leads the reader to infer that resistance is, above all, a collective endeavour.

In this research into the relationship between political practices of resistance and political theory, the book is empirically grounded on social movements as they "pose a radical challenge to the status quo in terms of physical spaces" (Burgos, 2017, p. 3.) It is based on two instances of social movements: Occupy Wall Street (OWSt) and Black Lives Matter (BLM.) The complexity of the Arab Spring exceeds the purpose and

space of this book. In fact, if democracy effectively has different languages, in terms of geographies, times, and dynamics, as Burgos notes, then the Arab Spring would have to be examined apart from the U.S. experience. Taking these two movements, Burgos examined the structure and language of their discourses of these emerging collective and political identities whose participants use digital technologies to articulate collective forms of action without a centralised leadership.

Resistance is a form of political insurgency that shows how politics confront problems that cannot always be solved by means of deliberation. Following Dewey's line of thought, Burgos argues that if deliberative publics are inadequate to effect the changes needed to halt the erosion of a policy's legitimacy, then the solution to the shortcomings would be "a much wider scope of democratic participation that challenges the status quo" (2017, p. 153.) Resistance would have the empirical form of marches, demonstrations, protests, sit-ins, and different forms of disruption of daily life.

Resistance can be the response to the exclusion of some members from participating in the *res publica* (i.e. deliberations.) Excluded groups and peoples may resent inequality (in its different forms); they may adopt disruptive forms of participation within a democratic polity. The contentious collective action would be a response challenging the legitimacy of such a political order.

The book provides a definition of Revolution, Resistance and Reform. Yet, revolutionary political change is beyond the argumentative possibilities of the book. Burgos argues that resistance is located between Reform and Revolution (Chapter 3); he appears to suggest that resistance would adopt the form of a social movement and would not necessarily reach the level of a revolution. The problem with this argument, however, is that a revolution, more than a theoretical premise, is a perennial feature of political systems. Once a social movement reaches a contentious stage, it might not be so easy to be contained or repressed.

Burgos is aware that changes brought about by social movements may not address "the actual problems at hand" (2017, p. 152); in so doing, he is dismissing the assumption that democracy is a self-correcting system. This is important because we have left open the possibilities for democratic politics to develop authoritarian practices (i.e. differentiation of peoples based on ethnicity, religion, or place of origin.) Indeed, perfect legitimacy is simply unattainable and that resistance is a mechanism by which a political system renews its legitimacy. The scope of changes he considers, as resistance takes hold, seems to lie in the spectrum of reform (i.e. changes to legislation, and public policy), but also in sociocultural changes.

Thus, in looking for the possibilities of resistance in the works of four political thinkers, Burgos tries to connect political ideas with political practices. The book

attempts to examine the nature of political things; it suggests that political theory must remain grounded in political principles but also, connected to everyday politics (i.e. the discourses and actions of political movements) in a “mutually interrogative relationship between political philosophy and the discourses and actions of political movements” (2017, p. 5.)

It is logical then that the New Social Movement perspective helps Burgos to approach the BLM and OWSt movements. These movements, organised around ethnicity, class, countercultures, and human rights, have ways to challenge the semantic spaces and identities “demanding new ways of speaking about race, class, and democracy” (2017, p. 3.) This amounts to a reassessment of the parameters “of the dominant discourse and transform public space and its potential for meaning (*semantic shift*.)” A transdisciplinary approach based on a reading of political thinkers and sociological movement theory is thus productive.

In connecting political thinking to everyday politics, a little bit further, a reader might realise that one social movement that has been successful in shifting the semantics of public discourse, in the U.S., has been the one led by Donald Trump, and seconded by a far-right ethnopolitical complex: Breitbart and Fox News, the Alt Right movement, and the Republican Party. The presidential campaign in that country could take a conspicuous reader to wonder on the extent to which forms of resistance, like the ones enacted by this complexity of actors, can succeed.

The book is centred on analysing resistance as it means the use of force or violence to oppose someone or something; however, it does not necessarily examine the meaning of resistance as the ability not to be affected by something. This second meaning could be interpreted, for instance, as the effort of an oligarchy to maintain the status quo. The “We are the 99%” mantra, as voiced by the OWSt movement, resents the exclusion of a majority of members of a polity.

A reader would wonder on the extent to which forms of resistance, like the ones enacted by the Trump ethnopolitical complex, could be understood as a resistance movement seeking to prevent changes in the status quo. Is there social movement engaged in preventing or arresting socio-political change? Based on Burgos’ work, we can confidently state that the slogan “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) has brought forward a major semantic shift in the U.S. For Burgos, semantic shift, a key concept, aims at understanding the “alterations of public space and discourses”. It refers to changes of meanings in the public life of a policy, it is also an assertion of the existence and importance of new social identities and actors. It is, above all, an attempt to provide a re-articulation of ‘the people’ within the policy (2017, p. 3.)

MAGA is a call for the restoration of the “Ethos of America”; such a narrative has ethnic, economic, historical and political attributes. MAGA is not in line with

a rhetoric that supports the advancement of universal principles and goals such as cultural and economic equality. The restoration of America is a political project that embraces the unequal standing of the members of the polity. One example could be the voicing of tough stances on “law and order” which once decoded show the “disturbing” protection of practices like police brutality, at the expense of the victims (see Sotomayor, 2017.) Those stances can hardly be dissociated from the emergence of the BLM movement.

Thus, a rhetoric of exclusion -that also embraces inequality- is what Burgos refers to as semantic shift. The rhetoric, passed around through technological platforms and voiced by emergent political actors (wealthy “outsiders” and their donors), can lead to a successful power grab (see Gold, 2017.)

If the logic is right, MAGA is resistance. It is a resistance movement that attempts not to be affected by something adverse. Therefore, this movement could be regarded as an undemocratic assault on the democratic polity as it does not regard inclusion and equality as common goods.

The five chapters of the book provide some elements useful to understand the present moment in U.S. policy. They illustrate the importance of the connection between political philosophy and political action from four different political thinkers. The first chapter (*Resistance Movements and Political Identity*) provides a framework for the whole book: the author explains that resistance is a process that renews the legitimacy of a political system by providing new foundations that respond to challenges; perhaps its most important argument is the claim that legitimacy is a perennial problem of political systems. Chapter 2 (*Between Nature and Society: Resistance in Rousseau’s Social Contract*) explores the limits of legitimacy as it can never be absolute or placed beyond question. The limits of legitimacy give foundation to the chances for resistance. It is a paradoxical situation where political authority rests on the articulation of the common interest of a community. That is a precarious foundation as the community’s agreement on its common interest is also precarious. Thus, Rousseau’s Social Contract acknowledges the space of resistance, as resistance is a constitutive part of any contractually legitimate social formation”. In the next chapter (*Resistance Not Revolution: Species-Being and Social Emancipation in Marx*) addresses the potential limits of resistance (Social Emancipation) as he argues that Marx set up an untenable dichotomy between political and human emancipation. Social Emancipation (SE) entails achieving freedom through resistance to oppression and domination in all its forms within society. SE links freedom with the community as he argues that “freedom must be constituted and gained through true communal life” (2017, p. 113).

Burgos also states that “aligning ourselves with communal struggles is what brings freedom to the surface. In doing so, we carry out social emancipation” (p. 122.) He

claims the impossibility of Communism, and that the state “instead of withering away, will always lack complete legitimacy, yielding a theory of exclusion and resistance” (2017, p. 101.) Later, in chapter 4 (*Pragmatism, Participation, and the Construction of Public Problems*), he develops the argument that the ability to participate in the construction of public problems is the way to a public shared life -which is the bedrock of equal standing within democratic communities. One implication of this Deweyan thought is that the constitution of what “the public” is, is itself a major public problem. In the same line, an additional problem would be the definition of the issues that involve and have an impact on the public. Burgos elaborates on the implications of Dewey’s thought by expanding the scope of ways to challenge the status quo beyond the institutional and deliberative structures of society. For him, the solution to the shortcomings of deliberation is: “a much wider scope of democratic participation that challenges the status quo” (2017, p. 153.) In short: when deliberation fails, contestation becomes an option. Then, in the last chapter (*Subjectivity, identification, and the incoherence of resistance in Rancière*) examines mechanisms by which resistance constitutes new and equal political subjects as, it is argued, an equal society could come into existence if political action is successful.

Finally, the book makes an interesting reading as it rehearses the interconnection of political and sociological concepts, grounded on contemporary U.S. instances: protest, inequality, exclusion, status quo, legitimacy, collective action, identity, cultural meaning, as well as revolution, reform, and resistance.

References:

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