The Piquetero (piketero) movement is an emblematic case for social movements and Latin American scholars not only because this is the largest movement of unemployed people in contemporary history, but because it is probably the most representative of a wave of social protests that, in the wake of the century, brought about a unique transformation of national and regional politics, setting in motion a leftist turn later called the Pink Tide. Given its historical significance, the movement has been object of numerous academic works over the past few years, mostly in Spanish (Oviedo 2000, Svampa and Pereyra 2003, Auyero 2003, Kohan 2002). Rossi’s book is a welcomed contribution to this scholarship, representing the most rigorous, original and comprehensive analysis of the Piquetero movement published in English to date. I read the book during my summer vacations but the reader must be warned: this is not exactly a beach reading. The book makes two main contributions to the literature on contentious politics and social movements - one theoretical and one empirical - both of them requiring an equally intense intellectual engagement and disciplined concentration.

The first part of the book sets the theoretical framework. Effectively revitalizing the concept of ‘incorporation’ (Collier and Collier 1991), Rossi proposes an explanation for the Latin American left turn as a ‘second wave of incorporation’ into the wage-earning society and the socio-political arena of social sectors that had been marginalized by the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. As the first incorporation (1943-1955), the reincorporation process is the result of the interaction between claims from below and gradual institutional changes in acknowledgement of a new ‘social question’. The historical perspective adopted to study social protest allows Rossi to identify specific features to this second wave of incorporation, common also to other Latin American countries, the most important being the shift from national corporatist arrangements typical of the first incorporation to a territorialized logic and a new centrality of local politics.

The book also introduced two new concepts for the study of social movements: ‘repertoire of strategies’ (the set of all strategic actions employed by movements in public, semi-public and private arenas) and ‘stock of legacies’ (the intellectual and experiential baggage derived from past struggles that constrains what a movement perceived as available strategic options in the present). Moving from Tilly’s classic conceptualization of contentious politics (and particularly the concept of ‘repertoire of contention’) (Tilly 2006), these concepts aim at filling a gap in social movements theory offering new instruments to understand those situations where contention does not emerge or where actors perform in the private rather then in the public space. In other words, Rossi explores the backstage of social protest, where routine interactions and decision-making are perhaps less epic but equally central to understand the significance, goals and outcomes of collective action.
The second part of the book is a rigorous demonstration of how to analyse social movements’ strategic actions beyond the dynamic of public contention. Rossi identifies repertoires of strategies and stock of legacies for each one of the most important Piquetero organizations and describes their changes and shifts over an historical trajectory of more than 20 years (1996-2009). These five core chapters of the book also contain a detailed reconstruction of the rise, apogee and decline of the Piquetero movement. Using process-tracing analysis that combines archival material and interviews with the main actors, the author carefully crafts a narrative that integrates first-hand voices of the protagonists, with theoretically guided interpretation and in-depth historical reconstruction. The result is an intricate world where Trotskyists, Maoists, Marxist-Leninists, Indigenists, Liberation Theology and Zapatista-inspired movements - all professing a common Peronist inspiration – follow different strategic paths with the shared intent of fighting for poor (unemployed) people’s recognition and inclusion. As in a Tolkienian universe, complex genealogies, changing alliances (and a convoluted puzzle of acronyms and abbreviations) requires to keep constantly on hand the list of abbreviations and the helpful appendixes where networks of organizations and movements are schematically represented. The constant presence and agency of the state is more than a background and is wisely incorporated in the narrative to describe the important dialectical dimension that shape social movements’ actions and trajectory. From a state-centric perspective, the Piquetero movement can be read as a multi-stage process involving an initial quest for recognition, followed by a first failed incorporation attempt under Duhalde’s government and to a second successful territorial incorporation under Néstor Kirchner, which led to the demobilization of most Piquetero organizations.

The book has a shorter third part in which some preliminary basis are set for the application of the theoretical framework to understand other contemporary struggles for reincorporation across Latin America. In particular, the different paths to second incorporation in Bolivia and Brazil are briefly explored, mainly with the aim of illustrating how the analytical lenses adopted for the Argentine case can be valid within a cross-national perspective. Bolivia is described as a case of territorial incorporation through the recognition of a new ‘indigenous question’ and a constitutional reform that set new ‘plurinational’ bases of statehood and citizenship. Brazil, on the contrary, features a mix of territorial and neo-corporatist elements for the recognition of a ‘rural social question’ and the incorporation of landless peasant movements through the country’s most ambitious land reform program.

In recent years, there has been a closer attention to social movements’ routines and private politics (e.g. Risley 2015). Yet theoretical and conceptual instruments to explore the backstage of protests are still limited. One of this book’s main values rests, therefore, on its refreshing elements of theoretical innovation that appear to be widely applicable beyond the specific case study. The non-teleological or normative perspective on incorporation is an effective framework to analyse contemporary Latin American macro-political shifts. At the same time, the concept of ‘repertoire of strategies’ and ‘stock of legacies’ offer concrete tools that contentious politics scholars, even beyond Latin America, will certainly find useful in their own work. Another merit of the book is to refrain from reading the Argentine case through the often abused exceptionalism lenses, situating instead the Piquetero movement in the context of broader transformations and macro-processes of socio-political change. The transnational dimension, both understood as the micro-regional and global dynamics influencing domestic politics as well as the cross-national perspectives on
the second wave of incorporation, would perhaps have deserved a more extensive discussion. The author has, however, picked up this challenge in an edited volume fresh out of the press (Silva and Rossi 2018). Other aspects only marginally discussed in this book might also be worth of a more systematic elaboration and, particularly, the relatively limited analysis of the dynamic aspects of strategy-making (or strategic innovation). The book extensively describes how different Piquetero organizations diversify their strategies, and how cascade, scale shift and emulation mechanisms operate across different movements. While the empirical material on how strategies change over time seems incredibly rich, the efforts to theorize these changes are still embryonic and yet would represent an important additional contribution that this research can make to the study of social movements.

In Rossi’s book, readers will find a well-written, skillful example of rigorous theory-making based on a robust empirical framework. They will also find the vibrant energy of societies in times of crisis; a incredibly detailed and yet engaging description of those confused and unpredictable times in which social movements are shaping history.

References


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