

## Book Review

**Ruy Braga (2017) *A rebeldia do precariado: trabalho e neoliberalismo no Sul global* [*The Rebellion of the Precariat: Labor and Neoliberalism in the Global South*]. São Paulo: Boitempo. 272 pp. ISBN 9788575595725. Paperback R\$59. Kindle US\$9.20**

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*[In February 2021, the Global Labour Journal organised a panel of book review presentations at the International Sociological Association's World Congress of Sociology held online and in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The panel was titled Authors Meet Critics. This review was first presented there – Editor.]*

*The Rebellion of the Precariat* deals with the complex relationship between neo-liberalism, precarious work and social struggles in different countries of the Global South: Portugal, South Africa and Brazil. Inspired on the one hand by the Polanyian concept of countermovement and on the other by a critical appropriation of the concept of precariat, the book proposes an original and thought-provoking analysis of the impacts of neo-liberalism on the subaltern classes. Throughout its pages, it investigates some of the most remarkable movements of resistance to neo-liberalism since the “crisis of globalization started in 2008” (p. 22).

Based on statistical data, sociological studies and ethnographies of working conditions and labour relations in these three countries, the book provides us with a rich overview of the cases analysed. At the same time, supported by the “theory of uneven and combined development, linked to the theory of accumulation by dispossession” (p. 32), it seeks to underpin the global labour studies on new bases, connecting the local and the global, and addressing mobilisations of work in a broad sense, beyond the traditional analysis of strikes.

Over nine chapters, the three countries are each analysed along three axes: neo-liberalism, precariousness and struggles. In two other chapters the author presents in detail his theoretical-methodological framework and reconstructs the main arguments developed throughout the analytical chapters.

Braga's book has many merits: 1) It shows that neo-liberalism changes the conditions of struggle, but does not silence the subalterns, nor does it condemn them to passivity. On the contrary, it encourages different movements to resist dispossession (such as movements of ethnic identities, gender, the homeless and so on). 2) It shows that the proletariat, in spite of its sociological and political-ideological transformations, is organised and mobilised to face the programmes of austerity implemented by different governments. 3) It maintains that the crisis of bureaucratic unionism does not condemn this form of workers' organisation to irrelevance. 4) Despite focusing on the relationship between unions and precarious workers, it pays attention to alliances between unions and social movements, highlighting the interconnection between mobilisations in the sphere of production and reproduction.

All of these merits make this book an invaluable contribution to global labour studies. Sharing with Ruy Braga the Marxist theoretical framework, I present some considerations to engage with his findings and stimulate the debate.

First of all, it would be important to explain the criteria for choosing these three countries as representatives of the Global South, and then explore the meaning of the comparison between three cases that, as the book makes clear, have so many “disturbing similarities” (p. 68) and, at the same time, significant differences. That is, it would have been useful if the author had reflected on what the application of a common theoretical framework in all three cases was able to illuminate and what it might have obscured.

To proceed with the proposed comparison and to draw conclusions from it, it would have been important to consider, in a more systematic way, the particularities of each of the countries, such as: the characteristics of labour legislation, the scope and range of state action, the predominant form of union organisation, the political-ideological tendencies of the main organisations, and their relationship with their respective governments. The book recognises the difficulties of unionism to represent precarious workers, the existence of struggles outside the workplace in spite of union leadership, and the experiences of self-organisation of young unemployed or underemployed workers. However, it does not clarify the reasons for the limits and potentials of these struggles. For example, is the fact that the alliance between precarious workers and unions seems to be more successful in Portugal than in other countries due to the level of benefits and social rights threatened by neo-liberal reforms in that country? Are the difficulties of establishing a similar alliance in Brazil related to the political guidelines of the union leadership? Or are there institutional factors related to the functioning of the corporatist union structure? An explanation of the failure of such an alliance in Brazil must account for the fact that here it is not a question of precarious workers being hostile to unions nor of agreements made by unions that are not acceptable to precarious workers. Rather, unions hardly organise or engage with precarious workers, which means that they are not even covered by collective bargaining.

A second observation on the comparison is how the book deals with the scales of local and global analysis and moves from a higher level of abstraction to case studies that not only contain differences between themselves but are also very different in terms of process temporality and the magnitude of changes. While the reality of the neo-liberal turn and the deepening of the precariousness of work in the three countries is clear, there are important variations related to the different forms of citizenship rights, varying levels of social protection and the characteristics of the governments that have overseen the adoption of neo-liberal policies. The book deals with several of these differences, since it historically contextualises the cases and recognises that the promise of wage citizenship had a different impact in the three countries, but it could go further in discussing its implications.

Unlike the other two countries, Portugal was, for at least two decades, an “almost welfare state”, approaching European wage citizenship. Integration with the European Union is an essential factor in understanding the peculiarity of its situation, characterised on the one hand by a period of widening of rights and by the resilience of its social protection system, and on the other by its subordination to the dictates of the Troika (that is, the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund). This was not the case in South Africa, where the racial apartheid regime was replaced by social apartheid, with successive African National Congress (ANC) governments starting in 1994, and in Brazil, where neo-liberalism also began to be implemented in the 1990s, by the first democratically elected government after the military dictatorship. Here, some differences deserve to be highlighted, as the countries

transitioned to the “post-Fordist and financialized” development model at different times, and this transition was not linear. It is possible to identify different phases, modulations and contradictions throughout this process. In Portugal, adherence to orthodoxy, with the reduction of the public budget and social benefits, deepened after the signing of the Troika’s memorandum in 2011. By contrast, in Brazil and South Africa the shift to neo-liberal policies began in the 1990s. In Brazil privatisation, labour reforms and public–private partnerships were introduced before the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) governments (2003–2016), while in South Africa these policies were promoted by the ANC. Thus, the analogy between ANC and PT holds in many aspects, above all because of their social origins and the relationship with the union movement, but there are nuances in the development models that the two parties implement (even if both of them are considered variations of neo-liberalism). Although informality is historically high in the labour markets of these two countries, in Brazil it registered a downward movement between 2003 and 2014, unlike in South Africa. Unemployment in Brazil has been reduced and the general economic situation of workers has improved in spite of contradictory trends in labour regulation.

In my view, nuances between governments could be better apprehended with the introduction of intermediate concepts, such as (neo) developmentalism. Braga does refer to this concept when dealing with the South African case, but without applying it analytically. And he makes only a quick mention of the term when it comes to Brazil, in spite of extensive debates on this subject existing in that country. Another possibility would be the use of the concept of social-liberalism, which many authors adopt to refer to the neo-liberal reforms implemented by socialist and social democratic parties in Europe.

There is also a certain mismatch in the treatment of cases with regard to the time frame considered. The analysis of Portugal begins in the Estado Novo, passing through the Carnation Revolution; on South Africa, it goes back to apartheid, emphasising resistance to racism; about Brazil, it begins with the PT governments, making a quick reference to strikes in the transition from dictatorship to democracy. In other words, there is a whole historical reconstitution in the case of Portugal and South Africa that has not been replicated for the Brazilian case. This might be due to the fact that the book is published in Brazil and Brazilian readers will know the country’s history. But there is also an analytical reason: although it identifies the genesis of the “post-Fordist development model” in Brazil under the Collor and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB) governments, the book argues that this model was consolidated in the “two governments of Lula da Silva” (p. 106), which is a controversial thesis, for the reasons I briefly mentioned above. So, it would be interesting to examine the hypothesis that it was not the austerity policy that stimulated the protests, but the neo-developmental policy.

Regarding temporality, the point chosen to mark the beginning of the “crisis of globalization” could be discussed. The year 2008 is certainly extremely important, but is it better to think of it as the beginning of the current crisis, or a moment when a previously existing crisis reached a new level and began to affect the core capitalist economies more deeply? Braga points to the “re-emergence of political activism” (p. 38) in the Global South since then, but what about the countless demonstrations in Latin America in the 1990s against neo-liberal policies? Similarly, the 1996 Southern African water war raises an interesting parallel with Bolívia which went through a similar process four years later. These examples show that 1990s not only marked the beginning of alter-globalisation movements, but also many protests concentrated in the national space and addressed to local governments. Braga does not give these developments much attention.

The author argues that there is a qualitative difference between the pre- and post-2008

protest cycles, but it seems to me that there are several continuities such as the social bases which are mobilised, the terms of the demands presented and the repertoires of collective action. The book presents several important protests and identifies an increasing tendency for strikes before 2008 in South Africa, or before 2015 in Brazil, when it understands that the crisis of globalisation has definitely arrived in that country. This weakens his thesis on the social pacification produced by the mode of regulation existing in the three countries before the outbreak of the crisis. I agree that, in Brazil, tensions intensified after June 2013, but prior to that they were not only latent or underground, to use the author's expressions, they were clearly manifest. The class struggle was there; it did not reappear unexpectedly. In this sense, Gramscian-inspired formulas such as "active consent of the leaderships" and "passive consent of the subordinates", used in the case of "Lulism", are contradicted by the many examples that his own book provides.

Regarding the social base of the post-2008 protesters, his characterisation as part of the precariat also deserves a critical note. Although this discussion has been made by the author elsewhere, and he clarifies that he does not use the concept to describe a new social class as Standing does but rather to account for the transformations undergone by the working class, I think it is appropriate to question its explanatory potential. What is the advantage of using it in place of the concept of proletariat, since precarious work is a constitutive feature of capitalist relations of production? After all, who is part of the precariat? Does it make sense to speak of the precariat before the advent of neo-liberal globalisation, that is, before public labour regulation was imploded by reforms that commodified labour? The use of this category suggests a certain imprecision throughout the book, referring to sectors with very different working conditions, including workers in telemarketing, commerce, cleaning services and miners, but also metallurgists, workers in the furniture industry, bank workers and subway workers. Obviously, all these sectors are affected by precariousness, but this is a dynamic and heterogeneous process, which affects capitalist social formations in different ways and takes different forms.

Thus, even if the boundaries between formal and informal, included and excluded, are blurred with neo-liberal globalisation and its crisis, which could justify the expansion of the precariat's boundaries, it would be important to clarify the definition of the concept so that one can better understand the relationship between precarious workers and social movements, including unions. In the case of South Africa, for example, although Braga says that precarious employment is the norm for black Africans, at times the text opposes the "vast urban precarious" (p. 76) to unionised workers, a minority with relatively stable jobs and with access to social benefits, suggesting that these more "regular" workers are not part of the precariat. With regard to the organisation of workers, despite identifying a reluctance by South African unions to organise workers who cannot afford membership, there would be no dichotomy between unions and precarious workers, but rather a complementarity between them: while unions promote strikes for better wages, precarious workers protest for basic public services. In Portugal, unions are allies in the defence of rights, so that the agenda of unions and "precariat" movements would be more collaborative than competitive. Before proceeding, allow me to make a small caveat: the use of the terminology "new social movements" to refer to these movements assumes an opposition, as exhaustively argued by a certain strand of social movement theory, between new and old, identifying the union as the old movement. This designation does not contribute to the analysis for two reasons: First, as the author demonstrates, this activism is not hostile to unions; it occurs in collaboration with them. Second, it is not just a question of fighting for recognition, but also for redistribution: against the destruction of the welfare state, for housing, for public transport, against abusive tariffs, etc.

In Brazil, despite the importance of housing movements in the organisation of precarious

workers, we do not have a movement equivalent to Ferve or the Precarious Inflexibles, which organises the Portuguese from the labour axis and with a focus on compliance with labour legislation. And the example of the call centre as an expression of the pressure made by precarious workers in relation to union leaders leaves aside a very important aspect: the unions that legally represent these workers in the city of São Paulo are affiliated with union federations that have a more conservative political profile. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to discuss the experience of politicisation that these unions provide their members as well as the organisational unfoldings of the experiences built outside the unions.

This leads me to one last question: Braga makes an interesting assumption of neo-liberalism as spoliation and as subjectification, but does not develop this last dimension. His approach prioritises spoliation, leaving disciplinarianism in the background. He mentions entrepreneurship very briefly and maintains the impossibility of it being successful in containing social unrest, but he does not develop the political-ideological impact of neo-liberalism on workers and their struggles. So, it seems pertinent to raise the question: does job insecurity and social vulnerability generate only insurgency? Can't it generate conformism? What, after all, is the meaning of social unrest? Is it necessarily progressive? What does this analytical perspective tell us about the possibility of right-wing protests and the capture of precarious sectors by conservative movements? How can we explain when the plunderers themselves reproduce the neo-liberal discourse, support austericide policies and vote for neo-liberal governments? Braga's approach has a bias that, if not completely "Pollyanna", is, in my view, overly optimistic. He takes into account the limits of the protests, including the absence of internationalism, points out their embryonic character and their fragile results but he emphasises their positive aspects, as forms of solidarity and collective identity that certainly exist. But what are the projects in dispute? Does resistance to neo-liberalism mean defending universal rights, even if those rights are restricted to the national scope? Political developments after 2016 have shown that the instability and radicalisation of social conflict has another side, a darker one, that not only stimulates individualism to the detriment of class solidarity, but also feeds fascism.

The book begins with a brief allusion to this problem, starting with Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, but does not return to it, although there are references here and there to the increase in political polarisation in Brazil and Portugal and to xenophobic manifestations in South Africa. Perhaps it was too early at the time the book was written to realise the size of the challenges facing a project of social emancipation.

This does not detract from the book's merits, as previously mentioned. Although the struggles portrayed in its pages are promising, the path to strengthening them goes through a political project that goes beyond simply resisting neo-liberalism, and takes up the task of constructing a real alternative to capitalism. As Braga points out, this project certainly involves unionism and the organisation of precarious workers.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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