

Book Review

Neva Löw (2023) *Solidarität und ihre Widersprüche. Gewerkschaften im Sommer der Migration 2015 [Solidarity and its contradictions. Trade Unions in the Summer of Migration 2015]*. Bielefeld: transcript. 281 pp. ISBN 9783839466209. €45 (Softcover); open access PDF.

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How did the so called “refugee crisis” in 2015 and 2016, when more than a million refugees arrived in the EU each year, affect trade unions? How did trade unions react to the struggle for freedom of movement and the conflicting reactions in European societies? And what does this tell us about trade unions more generally? These are the main questions of Neva Löw’s dissertation, now published as a book.

Löw starts off with a review of the existing literature around trade unions and their relationship to migration. Against this background, she develops her research questions and then presents the historical-materialist policy analysis (HMPA) as the guiding methodology of her research. In accordance with HMPA, she structures her analysis in three steps: firstly analysing the actor (here, trade unions), secondly analysing the context (the structural and historical relationships between trade unions and migration), and finally, analysing how trade unions reacted to the conflicts in the wake of the “long summer of migration” of 2015 to 2016. In contrast to most academic works, Löw’s book does not follow the traditional structure of theory and empirical analysis being separated into two distinct chapters. Instead, Löw tries to bring theory and empirical analysis into an “ongoing dialogue”¹ (p. 60), by including a large part of her theoretical elaboration into the actor and context analysis. This might seem a little confusing at first, but proves fruitful in providing a better understanding of both the theoretical concepts and the data.

In her literature review, Löw carves out two distinct but compatible perspectives on the issue of trade unions and migration: the sociology of industrial relations, and critical migration studies. According to Löw, most works in the former research tradition conclude that (German and Austrian) trade unions have changed their position on migration in the past decades, from a quite restrictive stance to a more “open” one (pp. 24-30). Research in the field of critical migration studies complements these findings with a focus on migrants’ struggles within or outside of trade unions, showing how labour struggles and struggles for international mobility have always been intertwined but never without conflicts (pp. 30-34). Löw surmises that existing literature is missing a focus on the internal struggles within trade unions regarding their stance on migration, and how these internal struggles are embedded in the power relations of the society as a whole (p. 37).

¹ All translations by the reviewer.

Building on Josef Esser's (1982) concept of the trade union as an "intermediary organisation" oscillating between state apparatus and societal autonomy, Löw theorises trade unions and their policies as a "product of societal struggles and power relations" (p. 80), thereby highlighting their necessarily contradictory and dynamic character (pp. 70–74). This intermediary position of trade unions affects not only the labour force as a whole (vis-a-vis other state apparatuses and capital), but also different parts of the labour force: "Who is perceived as part of the working class, and who is considered respectable and non-respectable, is shaped by trade unions" (p. 79). In this regard, the inclusion of foreign workers has been a particular point of contention within trade unions historically and continues to be the case today. Löw identifies this contradictory character of trade unions by connecting Esser's concept of trade unions as "intermediary organisations" with the concept of hegemony projects as developed in HMPA (Forschungsgruppe "Staatsprojekt Europa", 2014). Hegemony projects can be understood as an aggregation of strategies that share the same direction within a social conflict, aiming to universalise the particular interests they represent and pursue. In order to analyse trade unions in any particular conflict, Löw argues, we have to situate them within these struggles of competing hegemony projects.

Accordingly, Löw's empirical research focuses on the competing strategies present in the German and Austrian trade unions as well as their European representation during the "long summer of migration". In order to carve out the different strategies engaged by trade unions in the corresponding conflicts, she uses a mix of different qualitative methods: interviews with trade union members and trade union officials, document analysis of official trade union statements, and participant observation at different trade union events.

Löw finds that trade unions, in accordance with their general role in society as a representation of the interests of workers, can primarily be seen as actors pursuing strategies of social hegemony projects, that is, hegemony projects whose strategies focus on social balance and redistribution. However, a clear division between two different types of social hegemony projects can be found: a national social hegemony project, advocating a return to the national welfare state of the Fordist era, and a pro-European social hegemony project, which focuses instead on overcoming the nationalist framework of social policies. In conflicts revolving around migration, the strategy of the national social hegemony project is to treat immigration as a threat from which the national labour force has to be protected, while the pro-European social hegemony project tends to have a transnational understanding of the concept of class, therefore aiming for the inclusion of migrants. In particular, the official statements and actions of trade unions in the wake of the so called "refugee crisis" – such as statements of support for refugees and practical support as part of the "Willkommenskultur" (welcoming culture) – can be associated with the strategies of the pro-European social hegemony project (p. 179). Discussions within the unions, however, were not only much more strongly affected by the strategies of the national social hegemony project, but also by the strategies of other hegemony projects, especially the conservative (and even what could be called a right-wing) hegemony project, and the left-liberal alternative hegemony project. While the latter represents strategies focussing on human rights, the former is characterised by the defence of "traditional values". The influence of the left-liberal alternative hegemony project was visible, for instance, in the cooperation between unions and pro-migrant NGOs, which can be seen as an important factor in the change in the union stance on migration (pp. 212–219). The strategies of the conservative hegemony project, by contrast, affected trade unions primarily internally, for instance through discourses that presented refugees primarily as a security risk also present within trade unions (pp. 219–225).

All in all, Löw's book provides an in-depth theoretical and empirical analysis of the contradictory and dynamic nature of trade unions by taking the example of the issue of migration. Not only are her insights relevant to researchers working on unions or migration or both, her

theoretical and methodological approach is also of great value for analyses of large organisations in general.

References

- Esser, J. (1982) Gewerkschaften in der Krise. *Die Anpassung der deutschen Gewerkschaften an neue Weltmarktbedingungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Forschungsgruppe “Staatsprojekt Europa” (ed.) (2014) *Kämpfe um Migrationspolitik. Theorie, Methode und Analysen kritischer Europaforschung*. Bielefeld: transcript.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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