

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Rebecca Fisher (ed), *Managing Democracy, Managing Dissent: Capitalism, Democracy, and the Organisation of Consent*, London: Corporate Watch, 2013. ISBN: 9781907738098 (paper)

It can be a difficult task to review an edited volume, especially when the spread of topics and perspectives contained therein is broad, the backgrounds of the authors diverse, and the varieties of analysis heterodox. This is certainly the case with *Managing Democracy, Managing Dissent*. Without doubt, the volume is a timely and diverse collection of essays. It is also so wide ranging that its coherence seems somewhat strained. The introduction by the editor, Rebecca Fisher lays out the conceptual remit of the volume; it's an analysis of the contradiction that emerges between capitalism and democracy, how consent is maintained despite the anti-democratic tensions immanent to capitalism, and how various groups appear to be contesting liberal democratic hegemony. It combines articles by academics, journalists, and activists in a manner that is rarely seen, and in so doing provides a useful resource for anyone interested in the challenges facing radical and progressive movements under capitalist democracy. The volume is accessible and the vast majority of contributions are appropriate for an activist audience or the undergraduate classroom. This is both a strength and a weakness of the text. In what follows I briefly lay out the structure of the book before turning to a critical examination of several of the chapters that I think particularly provocative.

Divided into five sections, the volume addresses: 'The Contradictory Nature of Democracy Under Capitalism'; 'Masking the Contradiction'; 'Co-opting Dissent'; 'Legitimizing the Repression of Dissent'; and "'Democracy Promotion" in Pursuit of Global Hegemony'. Each section is composed of three to six short-ish essays exploring

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some aspect of the respective theme. The first section serves to illustrate how the liberal state occupies a contradictory space “as both the impartial judge protecting the supposedly innate and universal rights of the individual, and the authority entrusted with protecting private property rights, and thus the unequal social order, from challenges from the dispossessed majority” (p.20). None of these essays tread much new ground, but several of them serve to quite clearly introduce some enduring themes of critical theory without resorting to the alienating language of, for example, the Frankfurt School critiques they often resemble. Fisher’s contribution, ‘The Paradox of Democratic Capitalism: An Historical Overview’, is particularly noteworthy in this regard. She skillfully introduces the emergence of liberal democracy and the expansion of the franchise (in the US and UK contexts) as an attempt to enroll working class struggle into the reproduction of capitalism through the provision of closely circumscribed popular participation in governance. Hers is a compelling account of limited democracy as a capitalist weapon of class struggle.

The second section of the book, meanwhile, is essentially concerned with the operation of capitalist control in subverting the democratic potential of the media, and therefore of the public sphere. In this all four contributions share a broadly Habermasian concern with the cooptation of public democracy. None of these chapters will be news to radical geographers, nor to most activists, but all of them skillfully expose the propaganda role of the contemporary media in ways that are likely to stir a concern for justice in the minds of those not already counted as radicals.

Section three contains several of the most interesting articles in the entire collection, while at the same illustrating the divergences between the various ideological perspectives represented therein. William Carroll and Matthew Greeno’s contribution,

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‘Neoliberal Hegemony and the Organization of Consent’ (ch.9), examines the role of market logics in coopting resistance to neoliberalism. They argue that a fragmentation of society driven by market segmentation along with depoliticization of economic management and the rescaling of accumulation outside the nation-state prevent the emergence of effective counter-hegemonic movements. Complimentary to this argument is Sibille Merz’s ‘Reforming Resistance: Neoliberalism and the Cooptation of Civil Society Organizations in Palestine’ (ch.10), the essential thesis of which is that the neoliberal focus on enterprise-based NGO programs agitates against the reproduction of a Palestinian national-identity as a basis of militant struggle.

Whereas the above essays focus on the role of market logics in dismantling counter-hegemonic movements, chapters 13, 14, 16 and 17 focus instead on the use of police methods to de-escalate radical struggles. Dealing largely with UK-based environmentalist and anarchist groups, this set of essays outlines state strategies for delegitimizing direct action protest through use of liberal rhetorics equating encampment, protest, and riot with criminality. The irony of course is that these forms of resistance are often illegal, a point that is made by Katie Pollard and Maria Young in their contribution ‘Criminality Pure and Simple: Comparing the Response to the Student Protests and the August Riots’ (ch.14). Pollard and Young make two points that contribute significantly to contemporary debates on protest politics. First, they argue that the liberal media and intellectuals perceived both the student protests against the raising of university fees and the August 2011 riots in the UK as, essentially, a form of speech directed at influencing policy. That is to say, both actions were reduced to a discursive terrain on which they appear as political debate. The authors point out that while this may be the case for the student protests it in no way reflects the reality of the riots, which were actually a series

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of direct actions that satisfied immediate demands in a non-discursive manner – the rioters simply took what they were denied by capitalist society rather than petitioning government for redress. Thus, the authors expose the tension running through much of contemporary street politics, the disjuncture between the political actions of those engaged in political discourse and those engaged in extra-liberal struggle.

This is also the topic of a great deal of new theoretical work on politics. From David Graeber's (2013) *The Democracy Project* to Jacques Ranciere's (2009) *Hatred of Democracy* to Miguel Abensour's (2010) *Democracy Against the State*, the fundamentally anti-democratic aspects of liberalism are being rethought and the prospect of a new democracy, a real democracy, is again a topic of radical discourse. All of these interventions have also spurred research into the real democratic praxis of radical groups. This is essential in separating this trajectory of work from earlier modes of theorizing based in Gramscian analysis of hegemony, regulation-theoretic analysis of the perpetuation of accumulation, and Frankfurt-style critical theory's analysis of the difficulties of effective radical action. Whereas much theory stresses the near-impossibility of resistance to contemporary liberal capitalism, the above theorizations reassert the pervasive character of contestations to hegemonic capitalist democracy.

Managing Democracy, Managing Dissent includes contributions from both sides of this perspectival split, giving the text an instability that at best might be productive of new discussions. The problem being that this split is never explicitly laid out in the text, nor are the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of the various contributions explored, giving the whole volume a rather under-theorized feel. Avoiding needlessly arcane theory is laudable in writing for diverse audiences, but in this case a more rigorous over-arching theorization, explicitly confronting the divergent perspectives that haunt the

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text, might have given it a better chance to advance radical praxis. All this said, the volume certainly deserves to be read, if primarily for the excellence of many of the individual contributions rather than for the overall effect of their co-presence in one collection.

References

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