

Book review: Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*; Donatella della Porta et al, *Movement Parties against Austerity*; Richard Seymour, *Corbyn*.

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Jodi Dean, 2016, *Crowds and Party*. London & New York, NY: Verso (276 pp., hardcover, \$26.95/£16.99).

Donatella della Porta, Joseba Fernández, Hara Kouki & Lorenzo Mosca, 2017, *Movement Parties Against Austerity*. Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity (237 pp., hardcover, \$70.31/£55).

Richard Seymour, 2016, *Corbyn. The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics*. London: Verso (248 pp., paperback, £12.99).

The crisis of neoliberalism and the associated austerity politics generated a global wave of protests which in turn has produced a renewed interest amongst activists and academics for political parties as means of expressing social movements and addressing their limitations in delivering an alternative project. Three new books, *Crowds and Party*, *Movement Parties against Austerity*, and *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* offer useful insights for how to consider fruitfully the relationship between social movements and parties.

Writing mainly in response to her experiences of Occupy amidst the broader protest wave, Jodi Dean writes in *Crowds and Party* that the lack of “capacity to give social struggles political form” (p. 264) warranted a serious attempt to revive and reimagine the party as a form of organisation and struggle. She rejects the Left’s acceptance of individualism and fragmented identities as the basis for developing an alternative politics in that this merely expressed earlier political defeats and celebrated organising on the bases on which the subject is constituted by capital and state. Dean proposes the Left refound communist organisation (‘the Party’) as a means of realising the new political subject (‘the people’) that exists within the collective desire for justice (‘the crowd’).

Dean uses Le Bon's *The Crowd* and Canetti's *Crowds and Power* to identify the crowd's 'collective courage, directed intensity and capacities to cohere' (p. 115) as a positive negation of the capitalist social relations that it ruptures, albeit temporarily. Crowd events, such as riots, strikes and protests, are a 'beautiful moment' that manifests momentarily the political subject which only the party, through a political struggle of interpretation, can reveal fully. Following Lenin, *Crowds and Party* argues that the party concentrates and directs the struggle by providing it with its lacking political dimension.

The analysis that the Party is less concerned with state power (at least in the current period) than with enabling the formation of a new political subject by linking and universalising specific struggles suggests the 'movement party' does not stand in an external relation to the movement and act merely as its political representative, but is persistently implicated in its development. This reveals that demands to defend the autonomy of the movement from political interference is itself a deeply political position. However, *Crowds and Party* dismisses the questions of 'substitution, vanguardism, or domination' (p. 157) that may produce such a position by labelling such valid concerns as 'attacks on mass, democratic, and people's politics' (p. 170) and by an analysis that focuses unduly on the affective, at the expense of the instrumental, dimension of the movement-party relationship.

This analysis results in a curious celebration of the oligarchic tendencies identified by Michels' *Political Parties* as necessary and normal political processes that indicate organisational capacity. The crowd, we are told, is relieved to delegate activities to leaders the idolisation of whom is represented as the displaced self-love of the crowd and deflected delight at its own power. The focus on the term 'crowd' may be admissible due to the spontaneity of movements, but is suspect when it downplays the capacity for democratic self-organisation in social movements (particularly pertinent to Occupy) which prefigure egalitarian structures for party and state.

Crowds and Party presents a remarkably uncritical examination of the experiences of the activists of the Communist Party in Great Britain and the USA to demonstrate Dean's Lacanian analysis that the party acts as ideal ego, ego ideal and superego. This produces a constant collective self-examination that translates into incessant activity driven by a party discipline that, when not internalised, is reinforced through a show trial in which the accused party member is reduced to a shaking wreck incapable of speech. That this is presented as promoting an acceptable 'communist sensibility' is a disturbing thought and one which should send social movement activists running for the hills. Moreover, presenting unproblematically the 'lifeworld' of party organisations as the means through which a 'red thread' runs through and connects 'movements of the oppressed' (p. 262) does not consider how such organisations risk stifling the movement through its colonisation. The risks of substitution, vanguardism and domination simply cannot be finessed by a psychodynamic analysis. Although the book is a welcome corrective to ahistorical accounts of the party-form, by not interrogating this form fully it is unlikely to help rectify its previous shortcomings and disastrous consequences.

A more rounded analysis is provided by Donatella Della Porta et al's *Movement Parties against Austerity*, a study of movement parties in southern Europe which includes a theoretically and conceptually informed empirical investigation of Syriza, Podemos and the Five Star Movement (M5S). The genesis of these parties lay within anti-austerity protests triggered by the economic and political crises of late neoliberalism. In general, the movement parties examined developed where distrust in political institutions was greatest and where existing centre-left parties were most implicated in implementing austerity and so pressing issues arising from the movement arena were left largely unrepresented in the party system. The analysis of each case study proceeds by examining the interaction between the social movement field and the party system in terms of three key elements (framing, organizational model, and repertoire of action) using concepts drawn mainly from the field of social movement studies. *Movement Parties against Austerity* is sensitive to national

variation yet the case studies show how although some movement qualities were present within each 'movement party', this was a rather limited and, as electoral office was attained, an increasingly fragile development.

The parties offered ideological resources that enabled a translation of movements' conceptions and demands into a new political language and political identities. Diagnostic framing reshaped the political cleavage from 'centre-left' versus 'centre-right' to 'the people' against 'the establishment'. Prognostic framing shifted the possible solutions beyond the framework of neoliberal inspired austerity to a revived social democratic programme (Syriza and Podemos) and a reformed capitalism favouring small and medium-sized enterprises and environmental protection (M5S) both within a framework of a 'social Europe'. Motivational framing generated hope as seemingly futile protests were displaced by voting 'with excitement' (p. 119) with the realistic prospect of governmental power fuelling hope for real change. Yet this hope was attenuated as governmental office translated into policies that resonated much less with movement frames.

Movement Parties against Austerity examines how organisational structures and repertoires of action emanating from the movements were harnessed by the parties to create a new political culture that favoured participation and protest. Each party developed an unconventional repertoire of action which included the mobilisation of, and support for, extra-parliamentary protests and this partly filtered through into institutional activity that broke with parliamentary orthodoxy. Organisational innovations that enable participation through utilising new communication technologies remain strongest in Podemos that allows an open membership with no fees, is based on crowd funding, selects candidates through open primary elections, includes citizen inquiries to make policy, and has a structure centred on a citizen assembly the basis of which are 'circles' reminiscent of the M-15 movement. This has enabled power to be distributed more horizontally than in either Syriza or M5S, yet it has produced a highly personalised leadership that is shared by M5S and increasingly by Syriza in government. This is an indicator that the 'movement party' can take various

forms (tabulated on p. 16) one of which is a populist party with a plebiscitary, rather than a participatory, relationship with citizens. That these parties are increasingly by-passing movements once in office may be explained partly by the fact that these parties arose during the downswing of the anti-austerity protest cycle. They were more the products of the remnants of movement energy than a synergy of movement and party. The limits of substituting the party for the movement have been increasingly apparent once in office.

Della Porta et al's study demonstrates well how breaks in political organisation are generated partly by social movements, but also how the trajectories of existing political parties are a crucial element in shaping political developments. This is evident in relation to the shift in direction of the British Labour Party since the election to its leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. In *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics*, Richard Seymour explains this surprising result in relation to the same crisis of neoliberalism within the British context. This crisis was expressed particularly acutely in the Labour Party as its increasing orientation to office above electoral support resulted in a drastically falling party membership, itself largely disillusioned and disengaged. This was echoed by many of its traditional core supporters who increasingly abstained from voting, often deliberately as a means of punishing the party's bipartisanship on austerity and war. Labour's shift to the neoliberal centre-ground did not give rise to a radical left party as the 'vacuum thesis' would suggest. This was due to the utter defeat of the Labour Left in the 1980s which demoralised the older generation of activists and the relative weakness of recent anti-austerity protests which, beyond the unions, were led mainly by the younger generation which was highly reticent about finding a political home. In this context, Corbyn was recognised universally, and elected unequivocally, as "a man of the movements, not of the markets" (p. 7).

Seymour offers a hyper-realist, indeed a pessimistic, assessment of the prospects for 'Labour's nascent new Left' (p. 84) suggesting that under Corbyn the likelihood of election victory is slim, democratising the party is highly unlikely, and taking office would be a 'poisoned chalice' (p. 86). This assessment

is based on a historical analysis of the Labour Party as emerging from, and inextricably tied to, an ideology of labourism and a social democratic practice the successful prosecution of which was based upon sustaining economic growth and profitability. The likelihood of reproducing these conditions in contemporary globalised capitalism he argues is very low indeed. History also shows that prospects for transforming the Labour Party into 'real Labour' are largely illusory and therefore 'Corbynism' is a fleeting moment in the inevitable 'degeneration of Labourism' (p. 90): a long process that accelerated during the New Labour years.

It is difficult to fault the almost entirely accurate account of the Labour Party as a parliamentary party, yet this is a largely one-sided account that pays little attention to the extra-parliamentary activities and movements associated with the party. In *Labour: A tale of two parties*, Hilary Wainwright (1987) provided a different reading which contrasted the 'ameliorative, pragmatic' social democratic tradition expressed principally in the Parliamentary Labour Party with a 'transformative, visionary' democratic socialist tradition associated mainly with the grassroots members engaged closely with extra-parliamentary struggles. This account enables a greater focus on the party-movement relationship and thereby opens up the analysis of the current situation to a different trajectory to the one offered by Seymour who states that the 'Syrizafication' (i.e. the neutralisation and defeat of the radical left in the party) is the highly likely outcome.

Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics spells out the dangers of favouring a shorter-term strategy of transforming the Labour Party above the long game of rebuilding social movements, and the labour movement particularly, as the basis for effective political organisation. Seymour does this though at the expense of missing the opportunities present in that although he suggests the need for a 'vibrant and mobilised grass-roots Left in the unions and beyond' (p. 217), he fails to recognise the contribution that the resurgence of grassroots activity in the Labour Party could contribute to making this happen

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by developing a more organic link between party and movement and especially amongst the grass roots.

All three books make specific contributions to the field which can be comprehended through Roberts' (2015) model of the relationship between movement and party: vanguard, electoral, and organic. *Crowds and Party* celebrates a revival of the vanguard model in which the party controls social movements. *Movement Parties against Austerity* demonstrates how in Southern Europe the dominant form is tending towards the electoral model in which party relations with social movements are mobilised for electoral gain. *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* warns of the possibility, indeed the probability, of this model occurring in Britain. Seymour dismisses, however, the admittedly slight but still real possibility for the development of an organic model in which a mass party with a class basis becomes deliberately blurred with the movement. It is only to parties operating according to this organic model that we can satisfactorily attach the label of 'movement party'.

References

Roberts, Kenneth, M. 2015. *Changing Course in Latin America: Party Systems in the Neoliberal Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wainwright, Hilary. 1987. *Labour: A Tale of Two Parties*. London: The Hogarth Press.

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