

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Simon Winlow, Steve Hall, James Treadwell and Daniel Briggs, *Riots and Political Protest: Notes from the Post-Political Present*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 9780415730822 (paper); ISBN: 9780415730815 (cloth)

For those familiar with the ongoing work of Winlow and Hall at the [Teeside Centre for Realist Criminology](#), this is very much the book which they had to write next. After offering a series of advances in critical theory *before* the financial crisis, *Riots and Political Protest* (2015) revisits and reasserts concerns over the foreclosure of politics, but in the new context of an ideological reassertion of neoliberalism *after* the crash. As such, the book could perhaps be read as the post-crash sequel to 2008's *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture* (Hall et al. 2008), revisiting their provocative and unique take on contemporary politics in the context of riots, protests, and revolutions. The text is therefore a crucial addition to the important body of theory Winlow and Hall have been building.

Furthermore, this is also perhaps one of the clearest and most concise outlines of their (at times complex) theory to date, making the book a valuable go-to resource for those wanting to learn more about their approach. They set out their agenda in the introduction well, making a series of provocative claims about, and critiques of, capitalism, post-crash movements *and* the mainstream disciplines which intend to understand them (e.g. sociology). All three of these, they argue, point towards a debilitating foreclosure of the political imagination which has pushed the authors to “develop a coherent and entirely unsentimental analysis of ‘the political’...this, we hope, will allow us to think through quite clearly what politics is today, and to what extent it is active or inactive in the creation of the present and the future” (p.7).

Following this are two theoretical chapters which provide a genealogy of the limits to the political imagination in contemporary society, attributing the “post-political present” to both a post-war symbolic violence against utopianism and the “new Left” turn away from idealism towards pragmatism, identity politics and cultural Marxism. These two literature reviews offer some very interesting critiques of the Birmingham School and E.P. Thompson's empiricist critique of Althusser, as well as arguing that Arendt, Popper and Berlin were all part of a liberal dismissal of utopian thinking. Overall, they make a strong case that

Antipode

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Thompsonite empiricism and Popperist scientism has limited the political imagination of the Left, turning it away from utopianism and more radical possibilities.

In addition, the problem for Winlow et al. is that the Left has not just turned away from utopian thought, but towards a more fragmentary “identity politics”, cultural concerns, and the distrust of universals and leadership in all forms. Indeed, this is what they find to be the common problem of the English Defence League (Chapter 4); the UK riots of 2011 (Chapter 5); the Occupy movement (Chapter 6); *and* the Indignados (Chapter 7)—pointing instead towards Podemos and SYRIZA (Chapter 8) as holding more political potential by virtue of their organisation and leadership. Perhaps a second edition might also include a ninth chapter on the rise of Jeremy Corbyn who, at the time of writing, looks set to win the UK Labour Party leadership election in a month’s time on the back of an anti-austerity agenda. For instance, when the authors write that “idealism is very hard to maintain in contemporary mainstream politics...pragmatism, punctuated only by a brief flurry of idealist rhetoric during election time, immediately floods back in from the edge and moves progressively closer to the centre, until it reclaims its place as the entirety of politics” (p.11), this sounds very similar to the flurry of dismissals and calls for realism that Corbyn has received since announcing his candidacy.

I particularly enjoyed the way in which Winlow et al. continued their tradition of challenging the presuppositions of the liberal mainstream academic Left. When they discuss the EDL, for example, they use original empirical data in order to demonstrate the despair and disgust that members of that movement feel towards “the Left” who, as they see it, are more “concerned with tolerance, multiculturalism and the rights of minorities...[I]ts members are a bunch of sandal-wearing, latte-drinking, middle-class hippies who presume to instruct the working class on the path of liberation and social betterment” (p.126) and who “championed the earthy authenticity of immigrants but found the earthy authenticity of the white working class distasteful and regressive” (p.122). While there are, of course, notable exceptions to this characterisation of the academy (e.g. McKenzie 2015; Tyler 2015), I think this nonetheless reiterates important questions around the classist abjection of the white working class by liberal Left academics. Whilst, of course, the politics of groups like the EDL

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

is “distasteful and regressive”, what Winlow et al. nevertheless demonstrate is how this dismissal is a self-fulfilling prophecy, instrumental in creating such racism in the first place.

The argument goes beyond this, however, to describe identity politics, concerned with “[m]inority sexualities, women, ethnic minorities and so on [who] had clearly suffered disproportionately”, as “a multicultural scramble to improve the status and privileges of one’s cultural interest group” (p.42). The authors’ thesis is that not only does such fetishized diversity and inclusivity on the Left *prevent* the universalism or solidarity they see as necessary for a radical political movement; but also that this indicates a counter-culturalism that has benefited neoliberalism (by fighting “to free the individual from the clutches of an overbearing state”) and consumer capitalism (by drawing “plenty of energy from liberalism’s fight against dull social and cultural orthodoxy and its advocacy of the sovereignty of the individual” [p. 42]). As such, what they define as “cultural interest groups” appear to indicate an over-riding concern with identity and individualism which doesn’t just prevent collectivity, but even indicates a certain complicity with the prevailing ideological framework.

It is my contention, however, that we may need to complicate this analysis further. Whilst I would agree that “identity politics continues to dominate the Left, which, generally, fights for the rights of interest groups but steadfastly refuses to engage in universal accounts of class struggle” (p.147), it seems that this is more a problem of *individualism* than *identity*. For me, this is an important distinction to make, because the critique of “identity politics” risks overlooking how “universal accounts of class struggle” can *also* become fetishized as part of an individualist identity project (one which includes the sandal-wearing and latte-drinking academics stereotyped by the EDL above). Furthermore, this all-encompassing dismissal of those groups under the label “identity politics” may act to foreclose the *democratic* possibility of a universal “we” who “say ‘we’ knowing that there are divisions and differences among us that we express and the term ‘we’ expresses” (Dean 2012: 212). In other words, while the universal *does* need to be exclusive (and not fetishized as “open”), this doesn’t mean that the boundaries of that exclusion cannot be open to contention by those groups dismissed above as part of “identity politics”.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

However, this need to complicate the idea of “identity politics” (albeit in the direction of universalism) does not take away from the core arguments in *Riots and Political Protest*. The book is well-written and fundamentally radical, aiming to find “fragments of the future... scattered around in the present” (p.25) in order to offer a superbly critical yet optimistic reading of post-crash movements. I would agree with Winlow et al. that their approach to understanding the riots and protests after the financial crisis is a necessary step towards “the basic essence of politics” as “a field upon which we strive for the good, but it is not only that...it is also the field upon which we determine *what is good*...it is where we decide what kind of society we want to live in and then begin to work towards that end” (p.102).

References

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August 2015