



The revolution before the revolution. Late authoritarianism and student protest in Portugal, by Guya Accornero

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BOOK REVIEW

The revolution before the revolution. Late authoritarianism and student protest in Portugal, by Guya Accornero, Oxford and New York, Berghahn Books, 2016, 186 pages, \$90.00/£64.00, 6 illus., bibliog., index, ISBN 978-1-78533-114-5

Until very recently, the student movement under the Salazar and Caetano regimes in Portugal was a seriously understudied phenomenon by experts and an obscure subject for the general reader. While scholars tended to focus on the period of the Carnation Revolution, they largely overlooked its connections and links to the period that preceded it. This new volume by Guya Accornero, an Italian sociologist with a long presence and research pedigree in Portugal, changes the record and is an excellent contribution to a recently booming field of social movement studies in the country.

Accornero traces the radicalization of the Portuguese student body in the “long 1960s”, partly in response to the frustrated intense expectations of institutional change (98) that Marcelo Caetano had created following António de Oliveira Salazar’s secession in 1968, after four decades of leading the “New State”.

This brief period of softening, dubbed the “Marcelist Spring”, and the subsequent hardening of the regime, combined with a continued involvement in a disastrous colonial war, increased the students’ politicization and led to their eventual dropping of non-political issues in favour of a direct confrontation with the regime. *The Revolution before the Revolution* argues that the heightened social contention and conflict in the Portuguese universities of the late 1960s and early 1970s were in fact channelled into the revolutionary period that started on 25 April 1974, as part of the same “cycle of protest”, paving the way for the explosion in contentious politics. Even though the overthrow of Caetano’s regime introduced new dynamics, with the army pitting itself as the undisputable major political player within the country, Accornero convincingly argues that the revolutionary moment only acted as a multiplier of pre-existing tendencies.

Accornero uses pioneer sociologist Emile Durkheim’s key term “effervescence” (denoting certain periods when social interaction becomes more intense than usually), to describe a time of intense socialization and politicization, of a feverish activity by dissident Portuguese students, who capitalized on the political opportunities offered by the regime. They echoed political developments within the Left – always in accordance with international developments – especially Maoism, which upset the old left’s monopoly of revolutionary initiative. While the Partido Comunista Português (PCP) opted for the strategy of double action, both legal and illegal, it was the more radical students who eventually abandoned the hope of legitimate channels of participation, opting for an open confrontation with the authoritarian regime. These latter were often castigated by PCP as “directionless, divisionary and paralyzing action[s] of pseudo-revolutionar[ies]” (93).

Despite the unique characteristics of the Portuguese case, defined by the longest authoritarian regime in Europe, the confluence with youthful radicalization in other authoritarian (or non-authoritarian) contexts of the continent is striking. This includes the qualitative leaps within the Portuguese student movement and the escalation in its

demands from the right for association and representation to the one for freedom of expression within the university. Even traditionalist higher institutions, like the elitist university of Coimbra, became epicentres of student agitation, alongside the University of Lisbon, which eventually turned to an “authentic boiler of revolutionaries” (105).

What is astounding, however, in Portugal, is the movement’s qualitative leap from 1970/71 onwards from a fight against the dictatorship to a struggle to overthrow the bourgeois state and capitalism itself, adding social to political demands, while urban guerilla tactics and the goal of class struggle turned dominant (127). Accornero masterfully demonstrates that a major catalyst for the escalation in student activity was the bloody colonial war that dated back to 1961 but escalated in the early 1970s, dramatically coinciding with the 1973 economic crisis. Compulsory military service and the high likelihood of being dispatched to fight a dirty war in Angola, Guinea Bissau or Mozambique hung like Damocles’ sword over the heads of male students (391), not unlike the draft for American students at about the same time. Besides 20% of students who refused to be drafted in the years 1970–1974, the ones who did eventually join the army acted as a Trojan horse. PCP, in fact, encouraged student militants to join the armed forces and distribute anti-war propaganda, thus boycotting the military from “within”, politicizing key sectors of the army (124). It is surprising that it did not cross the minds of Caetanist regime members and PIDE’s (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado) experts in counterinsurgency that the massive arrival of these militants in the colonies would eventually prove the best anti-regime propaganda tool within the worn-out Portuguese troops, replacing colonialism with “thirdworldism”.

Accornero’s rigorous analysis of protest policing demonstrates how action generated reaction that proved to be instrumental for the further radicalization of the student body. Next to the counterproductive measure of closing down faculties, she observes a considerable hardening of coercion on behalf of the regime, against the background of the eternal fragmentation and splits within the organizations of the left, and the fluid universe of opposition, which she describes in splendid detail. In fact, a vital element in Accornero’s interdisciplinary analysis, weaving brilliantly together sociology, history and political science, is the use of sources such as the PIDE/DGS archives, and in particular informers reporting on the students. We observe closely how “the expansion of communism” (101) in the universities alarmed the secret services and police, which also felt appalled by the promiscuity, long hair and substances proliferating among the young at countercultural music festivals. Here, Accornero’s book would have greatly benefitted from oral interviews with the protagonists of contestation – some of who happen to be prominent members of the Portuguese academic community at present.

Overall, *The Revolution before the Revolution* reconstructs the “long march” of Portuguese society towards the 1974 revolution, highlighting the central role of the student movement as a forerunner of future political events and modernizing tendencies in Portugal. It is methodologically solid, empirically rich and theoretically innovative and will be an indispensable read to anyone interested in the history of authoritarianism and social movements in postwar Europe, scholarly or not.

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