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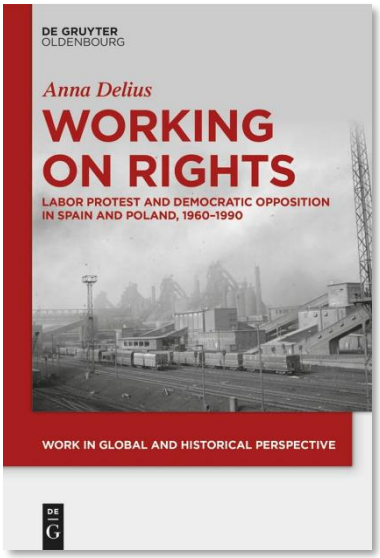

Anna Delius

Working on Rights.
Labor Protest and Democratic Opposition in Spain and Poland, 1960–1990
(Work in Global and Historical Perspective, Bd. 17)

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reviewed by

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Taking on a challenging comparison, Anna Delius blazes a trail that has been left unexplored until now. Comparative perspectives of the social and political realities on both sides of the Iron Curtain have been infrequent, and such studies have tended to focus on differences, marked by antagonisms and by the dichotomy of a bipolar world order. These approaches were, moreover, inevitably tainted by ideological interferences, according to their specific affinities. Delius' book largely overcomes these limitations and addresses the East-West comparison through multiple and very substantial parallels. Once the duality imposed by the Cold War has been overcome, commonalities rise to the surface, revealing shared traits and similar conditioning between the two blocs. And while this approach has obvious limitations itself – there are differences that cannot be ignored – the analysis proves to be both feasible and largely fruitful.

The other undeniable value of Delius' research is her choice of protagonists. Despite their importance, they tended to be relegated in favor of other nations that succeeded better in consolidating their narratives and memories in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Delius' choice is valuable both because it focuses on two semi-peripheral countries – Spain and Poland – and because it centers the workers' movements and its allies as subjects in social mobilizations and the extension of democratic consciousness under two apparently antagonistic dictatorships.

Delius brings the workers to the forefront, along with the organizations they built, the labor conflicts they were involved in, and the alliances they forged, analyzing this phenomenon in two ideologically opposed regimes that both prohibited freedom of association and the right to strike, with the obligatory framing of union structures under state control. Both Spain and Poland were governed by dictatorships that considered the class struggle to be defeated and concluded, and for this they forcibly inscribed the workers in what were little more than political

* Translated from Spanish by Luke Brown

structures for the control of the workers. The consequence – unintended but inevitable – was the political significance that labor disputes came to acquire and the resulting recourse to repression to quell them.

In these conditions, the workers organized from below and clandestinely fought the existing structures by exercising rights denied to them by the regimes. In this way, they were both victims of repression as well as primary actors in the struggle for freedom. And at certain moments they managed to push back against their governments: the favorable results obtained by *Comisiones Obreras* (»Workers' Commission«) in the 1966 trade union elections in Spain and, much more clearly, the victory by the *Solidarność* (»Solidarity«) trade union in Poland in 1980 were two of these moments. In general terms, the workers' movement acted as an engine of democratic demands and ended up being the architect of political transition. This central position allowed the workers' movement to gain support among the intelligentsia. Intellectuals linked themselves to workers' organizations, providing them with ideological coverage, media and propaganda services, legal advice, and so on. The book explores the alliances between workers and intellectuals, advances and repressive setbacks, as well as discourses and rhetoric employed in both contexts.

Paradoxically, Catholics and communists were the main protagonists of these processes in both countries, though with reversed roles. Neither Spain nor Poland, nor their transitions to democracy can be understood without attending to the Catholic Church and the Communist Party. However, in both cases, the grassroots must be differentiated from the official structures and their leaderships. Neither the hierarchy of the Church nor that of the Party were capable of encompassing – much less controlling – the actions of Catholics and Marxists, which makes a history from below indispensable here, to grab the complexity of contradictions. The communists were a democratic force in Spain but upheld the dictatorship in Poland. Meanwhile, anti-communism formed the basis for the political legitimization of the Franco dictatorship. In turn, the hierarchy of the Church was a fundamental pillar of the dictatorship in Spain, but an oppositional force in Poland. However, at the grassroots levels, both among the clergy and Catholic workers, there was a link to the workers' movement and, therefore, to the democratic opposition, which was quite similar in both cases.

This central role of the workers' movement in the aspirations for social and political transformation meant that the future was often imagined as some form of democratic socialism. This socialist horizon encouraged workers' struggles greatly in Spain and considerably in Poland, revealing frameworks of interpretation that apply equally in East and West. As Delius writes: »Democratic labor oppositions in Spain and Poland were both variants of emancipatory and democracy oriented social movements with global interconnections« (p. 7). In this respect, it is striking that the Polish workers' movement did not adopt an openly anti-communist tinge but contained within it genuinely socialist tendencies, albeit mostly detached from the Polish Communist Party, and some Marxist ideologues alongside other currents. In a coalition in which conservatives, Catholics, and socialists converged, the last were far from being a minority but were an influential part of the struggles and discourses. Precisely for that, the intellectual and workers' opposition to the Polish communist regime was able to claim to be authentically socialist in the face of a self-proclaimed workers' party and a so-called popular democracy that was neither democratic nor popular. This is an interesting aspect because the subsequent outcome – namely, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR – has diluted its memory.

Nothing similar happened in Franco's Spain, where there was no opposition that aimed to transform the regime to make it genuinely fascist. Nor were there calls to reform it. Instead, the anti-Franco workers' movement generally followed communist and to a lesser extent socialist or self-management-oriented ideology (anarchism – which had deep roots in the country – had by then entered into a deep crisis). As for the intellectuals with whom alliances were established, some can be labelled as Christian Democratic, while others leaned towards Marxism. However, the changes in the global scenario at the end of the 20th century have

marginalized also this socialist horizon and, with it, a large part of the Spanish democratic opposition to the dictatorship in the historical narratives.

Nor did the national question intervene in the same way in the Spanish case: nationalism was alien to the Spanish workers' movement because the Franco regime appropriated this discourse almost exclusively for itself. In contrast, the Polish opposition relied on a sense of nationalism that the communist government could not match, as its dependence on the Soviet neighbor was obvious and undermined the legitimacy of its ruling power. Recent catastrophic traumas weighed on the collective memories of both countries: the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the Second World War (1939–1945). In relation to these traumatic pasts, the Communist Party of Spain had proposed, since the mid-1950s, a strategy of national reconciliation to overcome the divisions of the war, achieving notable successes in creating common spaces with democratic and working-class sectors of Catholicism outside the Church hierarchy. In contrast, the Polish United Workers' Party was questioned by the opposition as alien to the Polish nation because of its dependence on external forces and was therefore unable to achieve integration based on national identity.

Delius' book explores the practices and rhetoric of workers and their allies in the light of state repression and rights violations. Repression was always present, whether as a threat or as acts of violence that led to imprisonment or even death. But the workers' movement managed to turn the price it paid for confronting the dictatorship in its favor. Denouncing the repressive nature of their governments was a legitimizing factor for both oppositions. It was also a first-rate argument when it came to enlisting foreign solidarity. The position of both countries in their respective alliances made the solidarity shown by Western Europe and the US toward the Polish opposition more effective than the support that the anti-Francoism movement received, although the latter's importance was not negligible either, as demonstrated by the campaign to denounce the trial of the *Comisiones Obreras* leaders in 1974. The double target of the messages – aimed at the population itself, circumventing as much as possible censorship restrictions, as well as at external supporters – led to different emphases in the discursive constructions. Human rights did not acquire the same importance depending on the moment and the recipients. The author devotes considerable space to analyzing these differences in rhetoric.

The relationship between the workers' movement and intellectuals runs throughout the book and highlights similarities within the specifics of each process. In Spain, in the 1960s, the Communist Party formulated a policy of »Alliance of the Forces of Labor and Culture« that obtained appreciable progress in terms of support and militancy within intellectual circles. There was no equivalent formulation on paper in Poland, but, in practice, the link between intellectuals and the workers' opposition was closer and more decisive. The role played by the KOR (»Workers' Defense Committee«) and by the magazine *Robotnik* has no direct equivalence in Spain, for example. In the search for parallels, the author analyzes *Cuadernos para el Diálogo* and the *Boletín de Información Laboral*, later renamed *Gaceta de Derecho Social*, as press organs linked to the opposition. The first represents sectors of the Christian Democrats open to dialogue with the left, including communists; the second, the enormously important support of labor lawyers.

Among the legacies of these processes are two large trade union organizations. To this day, *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO) remains one of the two largest trade unions in Spain, and *Solidarność* has maintained its hegemony over trade unionism in Poland ever since. Despite the verifiable parallels, direct relations between the two trade union movements have been weak in the past, and the few influences that can be perceived have flowed more from the Spanish context to the Polish one than vice versa. This is largely because the Spanish case preceded the Polish one chronologically, allowing it to serve as a point of reference for those who were attentive to the international scenario. The Spanish model of infiltrating official trade unions and the tactic of combining legal and illegal actions was known in Poland, but was not

applied to a comparable extent. In any case, the Spanish reference was present in the parts of the Polish intelligentsia organized in the KOR.

The comparison that shapes Delius' book is enormously enlightening precisely because it is unprecedented. It reveals the common substrates of that time. As the author tells us: »I conceive European processes on both sides of the Iron Curtain as ›variants‹ of global phenomena. [...] The Iron Curtain was indeed a real existing border [...] but it was not hermetic.« (p. 5)

Zitierempfehlung

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