

Buchbesprechung (Dirk Hoerder): Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini (eds), Ours to Master and to Own. Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present, Haymarket Books: Chicago 2011. 443 pages. £ 13,99

Studies on workers' self-management of factories – *autogestion* in French – are few. After a brief flurry of interest in the years following 1968, most scholars lost interest and turned back to labor unions, left parties or larger strike movements and, in particular, working-class culture. Thus, this collection of essays, covering the period from the 1870s to the present in a global perspective, is a much-needed corrective. Its publisher, a “little press” – Haymarket Books – has a long tradition of publishing alternative, left views of working-class history. It is named in memory of the persecution of anarchist immigrant workers in Chicago after the 1886 workers' mass meeting during which a bomb was thrown and a subsequent show trial against the organizers of the meeting took place. The book is also timely because, at the time of the writing of this review (April 2013), a few minor, alternative newspapers noted that in post-Yugoslav Serbia the last factory controlled by working men and women, Jugoremedija, had been forced to declare bankruptcy because of a speculator's machinations at the time of privatization, the cutoff of credit by banks and a hostile state.

The volume's twenty-two essays are divided into seven sections. The first two sections contain studies on the theoretical debate concerning the role of workers' councils and a historical overview. The next five sections follow a chronological arrangement: workers' self-administration “in revolution” during the early 20th century (Germany, Russia, Italy, Spain); workers' control under state socialism (Yugoslavia, Poland); workers' self-management and control in anticolonial struggles and democratic revolution (Indonesia, Algeria, Argentina, Portugal); workers' struggles against capitalist

restructuring since the 1970s (Great Britain, United States, Italy, Canada); and a concluding section on the decades since the 1990s (India, Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil). The authors are specialists on the region they deal with and thus able to anchor the struggles in the specifics of a country's and class's history – sometimes with references to the larger region, like the Bolivarian tradition in Latin America. Both editors have a long record of critical monographs, encyclopedias, and films. New-York-based Immanuel Ness has emphasized workers' resistance outside of unions, is editing the quarterly journal *Working USA* and, indispensable for scholars, has edited the *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements* (4 vols., 2004), the *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to Present* (8 vols., 2009), as well as the *Encyclopedia of Global Human Migrations* (5 vols., 2013). Dario Azzellini, based in Linz (Austria), Berlin (Germany) and Caracas (Venezuela), has worked on revolutionary militancy, racism and migration and workers' control in Latin America. In 2002 he published *The Business of War* on the privatization of military services, which was translated into eight languages. He is also a writer and director of documentary films.

In their introduction, the editors raise basic as well as moral questions: do workers have a greater right to decide on matters of production than consumers or other groups in the community? What about the cases of (temporary) workers' control in which the workers have followed a capitalist logic? Ownership of specific means of production does not change the system! What if control is achieved over a factory producing land mines or contaminating the surrounding community with toxic emissions? Workers need to continue production to retain their jobs and thus their own and their family's livelihood. They find themselves in a fundamental conundrum: how do they organize production to achieve economic viability while simultaneously changing labor relations and their lives? Unions, bureaucratized to achieve organizational strength and negotiating impact, have hardly ever supported "bottom-up" projects and struggles.

In their movements, the workers questioned the foundations of state power and the concept of the state itself. Political science might have learnt from them. What about a state in which 800 men, women and children – perhaps: children, women, and men – die daily of hunger (World War One Germany), and which sends troops or militarized and racist police to quell working-class agency, or even planes with bombs against strikers. Such states are certainly not citizen states – neither are those that presently export hundreds of thousands of working women and men to balance their budgets through the migrants' remittances. These aspects are neglected in the theoretization of modern states. Workers without food and wages cannot afford such neglect. This was the message from the English Chartists of the 1840s to the present-day worker activists in Latin America and elsewhere.

In his essay on workers' control in Java, Indonesia, 1945–1946, Jafar Suryomenggolo emphasizes the role of workers in defeating colonizer rule and the workers' expectation that the new independent nation state would provide protection for native workers. He points out how easily postcolonial state leaders from Vietnam to Botswana took control of the labor movement for their own purposes. He argues that the community of interests ends with the achievement of independence – in subsequent state-building, national political elites and labor unions often pursue different agendas. Taking workers in Java as an example, he demonstrates how the state could grant a political space to the unions and rescind it: unions were to support the state even when its objectives conflicted with working-class interests. Samuel J. Southgate's analysis of *autogestion* in Algeria 1962 and 1963 traces a similar trajectory: from workers' self-management to state bureaucratic control, via the formalization and neutralization of workers' control. In Portugal in 1974 and 1975, Peter Robinson argues, workers' councils hoped and struggled for socialism – always under the threat of counter-revolution – and underestimated the capacity of capitalism to self-reform and modernize (under pressure) by using Social

Democracy as a tool. He warns of a historiographical homogenization of the marginalized collective memory of upheavals and revolts.

While successful in achieving the goal of reinserting *autogestion* in public memory, the essays retain a traditional approach. They discuss and assess the impact, strategy and tactics of particular movements, demonstrate the authenticity of workers in their struggles, criticize the manoeuvring of left parties and unions in the face of spontaneous action and emphasize the havoc wrought by plant closings. But what did the struggles mean for the workers involved – besides imprisonment or even death? Did workers cherish their dignity in standing up for their rights and their humanity? Did they pursue concepts of equality and human rights? The history of bodies and minds, and of class mentalities, has achieved much. Another route of research would have included the personal context: family, children, loved ones – all remain absent. Women seem hardly to have been present, neither among those fighting for workers' control nor in the concepts, programs and projects they advocated. What about families who need food now and a better and self-determined future in addition? Is this focus part of the authors' agenda or is there an inherent focus on production in the very struggles on and about sites of production that relegates reproduction backstage? The history of mentalities, of the body and the mind, of gender interaction and of the incredible tension between the exigencies of everyday life and the need for steps towards the future would have provided a range of options to add to the approach selected.

However, a reviewer should not expect authors to write what he would like to see as a book. As it stands, the volume is an outstanding contribution to the history of workers' councils, control and self-management. It is the most comprehensive study available and the essays adduce substantial data and cover much of the world. The authors have recovered lost histories and emphasized participatory democracy; they have shown the political feasibility and

economic viability of working-class grassroots agency. Autonomous agency is feasible – in this sense the book conveys a sense of hope. I would like to see it adopted as major text in “Political Science 101” or first-semester introductions to political science.

Dirk Hoerder