ground. And it contains numerous reflections on nationalism and ethnicity which are applicable also in the present day.

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References

Mihai Varga: Worker Protests in Post-communist Romania and Ukraine. Striking with Tied Hands

Complementing conventional elite pacification explanations [Greskovits 1998; Vanhuysse 2006], this rich book tries to answer fundamental questions concerning what specific strategies can succeed in protecting the rights and living standards of workers threatened by the post-communist transition. Rather than assuming union passivity (either historical-cultural or as a result of pacification strategies), Varga argues that ‘unsettled times’ are conducive to agency that is not confined to the elite level, but also occurs at the level of unions. In this context Ukraine, with its inherited structural constraints (welfare benefits at the plant-level and the legal possibility for management to occupy high union positions), and Romania, with its labour generally excluded from politics, provide more fertile research sites than the Visegrad or Baltic clusters. In addition to general structural constraints, strategic elements within plant-level union actions represent the second focal point of the book (p. 48). Varga’s central aim is to show that even in the most difficult contexts there are specific strategies that unions can implement to protect worker interests (p. 44) in a political climate where the state is perceived to have an interest in fostering democratic legitimacy while setting in place the costly construction of capitalist structures (p. 51).

Without fully dismissing the ‘crisis of ideas’ and/or nationalistic channelling explanations of union weakness (see, most notably, Ost [2005]), Varga nonetheless argues, like Vanhuysse [2006, 2007] before him, that the key factor sapping labour power was elite behaviour, permitted by the frail post-communist institutional set up. Even in the case of Romania, with an above average (by CEE levels) incidence of protests (p. 20), the author argues that elite strategising through early retirements schemes and other targeted benefits preempted massive labour action (with the notable exceptions of the well-known 1999 miners strike). The complexity of reform tasks, further deepened in Romania’s case by the challenges of EU integration from the early 2000s, meant that even a social democratic government like the one in 2000–2004, with the legal implementation of ‘social contracts’ between employers and unions, fundamentally aimed for privatisation at the expense of workers (p. 20; see also Vanhuysse [2007]). However, the crux of Varga’s book is that by moving away from the main suspects for labour mobilisation (Vanhuysse [2007], for instance, discusses the lack of strikes by Romania’s Jiu Valley miners in the early 1990s), one can identify episodes of considerable opposition to reform and at times successful union action. Varga’s analysis of plant-level union strategising does not go against mainstream elite pacification literature, but rather complements it, showing how, on a case-by-case basis, elite action responded (either preempting, eroding, or, when needed, accommodating) to union mobilisation.

It is in this line of thought that the theoretical model revolves around labour interest representation (rather than the classic labour strength), defined as the process through which workers, acting collectively in a trade union, protect their interests (bal-
ancing between wages, security of employment and safety of working conditions) vis-à-vis employers and/or governments (pp. 44–45). The core elements behind this protection strategy are a shared situational definition (between the workforce and union leaders), threat potential, and organising support outside the plant (pp. 58–54). Unlike the more rigid labour strength concept, this approach, which relies on episodes of contention rather than the whole length of the transition (p. 46), permits a better operationalisation of union effectiveness (pp. 46–48). While it is questionable whether the state, as a crucial dynamic component vis-à-vis structural constraints, is always fully committed to a democratic agenda (Iliescu’s early 1990s ‘original democracy’ in Romania comes to mind), Varga nonetheless strikes a fine balance in analysing the deeply interwoven interaction between agency, structure, and process. The book is innovative in its research design as it combines game-theory models with narratives derived from in-depth field observations. The main hypotheses proposed by the game-theory model of labour protest are twofold. First, most union-led protests will occur at plants taken over by asset-strippers, and they are successful only to the extent that conflicts also gain outside-plant visibility. Second, where employers are interested in production, unions will more likely opt for conciliatory strategies that strive to minimise confrontation costs (pp. 55–56). The central tenet of the game-theory analysis revolves around how unions solve collective action problems, which is shown to be easiest in the context where plants are taken over by employers who disregard production, thus effectively threatening employment across the board (pp. 56–57). Varga’s approach is flexible and despite creating a game-theory model based on the assumption of stable employer preferences, some of the contention episodes are selected to also include fluctuations (p. 67).

There is perhaps one interesting, albeit not fully central, point to be raised concerning the game theoretical analysis. While in the case of the industrial protests analysed in the book, employer infringements upon workers’ rights can be treated as equivalent, this cannot be easily abstracted to include all unions—and Varga sometimes does strive for more general aims concerning labour strength. For instance, in the Romanian case a 1998–1999 history textbook scandal revealed that trade unions in education, albeit otherwise fully capable of mass strikes on issues like wages, were not vocal about what seemed to be issues related to the substance of teaching. This suggests that not all employer infringements are viewed equally [Parianu 2001]. While this appears epiphenomenal to the aim of the book, it is worth mentioning as Varga time and again emphasises the importance of outside-plant support and analyses the relationship of industrial trade unions with wider confederations of unions. This points to a limitation to the range of possible further inferences to be drawn from the model.

The episodes of contention are presented in detail throughout two individual chapters, separated into struggles ‘at the plant level’ (chapter 4) and struggles ‘over the survival of the plant’ (chapter 5). What sets Varga’s book apart is that macro-aggregated data on union behaviour is enriched with in-depth interviews fully capturing union agency (successful or otherwise). Zooming in on individual instances of contention which are integrated into a coherent narrative resting on in-depth field work enables the author to argue convincingly that unions can and do proactively strategise. This is shown to be effective for conciliatory unions operating in contexts where employers are interested in production and isolated from the ranks of the unions themselves (p. 109). The common denominator in this scenario in both the Romanian (Hunedoara and Targoviste) and
the Ukrainian cases (Zaporizhia and Kremenchuk) seems to be the omnipresent lack of need for external support, even in instances where threats were not actually carried out (overview table on p. 110). By contrast, where unions faced asset-strippers, outside support was, with very few exceptions, crucial for success (p. 149). In this scenario the presence of wage arrears represents a fundamental common problem, which could seldom be settled at the plant level without external linkages. One issue that could have been further expanded when analysing these privatisation scenarios is the influence of EU conditionality, with its emphasis on transparency and accountability and strict regulations against asset-stripping, which impacted all the Romanian cases, but not the Ukrainian ones. At the level of individual episodes of contention there is some discussion on the influence of the EU, but the issue is somewhat marginalised throughout the book.

When confronting the empirical evidence with the game-theory model (chapter 6), the author unearths important puzzles. Some unions, even when the employer is interested in production, do take part in contention and use disruptive actions or threats and some unions even when faced with asset-strippers do not engage in contention (pp. 153–155). The fundamental structural cause that to at least some extent sends the cases off the expected path of theoretical equilibrium seems to have been the increased autonomy of Romanian unions, which are not responsible for social wages and do not include management the way they are and do in Ukraine. Furthermore, the weakness of Ukrainian unions compared to their Romanian counterparts stemmed not just ‘from above’ (lack of eliciting support from branch- and/or national-level unions), but was also in a sense self-induced by plant-level unions’ reluctance to help struggling workers (p. 165). Notwithstanding, the key element for success, common to both countries, seems to have been threat potential, coupled with actual threat implementation. In addition to structural constraints, Varga rightly points out that union leaders themselves were often hesitant, regarding disruption only as a weapon of last resort, rather than a fundamental pillar for successful labour-interest representation (p. 163).

Varga’s book impresses, on the whole, by its analytical depth. The central argument expands mainstream perceptions about unsettled times being conducive to agency from the level of elites to that of trade unions as well, but also pays heed to structural constraints and new transnational evolutions, and therefore represents an important step forward within the vast literature on the status and power of labour (or lack thereof) in post-communist transition countries. The fusing of game-theory analysis with in-depth field observations creates a compelling narrative which, while resting on what seem to be two outlier cases, unearths important, region-wide conclusions.

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