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Josh Pacewicz, Partisans and Partners. The Politics of Post-Keynesian Society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, 392 pp.

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Book Review

Josh Pacewicz, “Partisans and Partners. The Politics of Post-Keynesian Society.” Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, 392 pp.

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This comparative political ethnography of two rustbelt American cities aims to explain some current key trends of US politics, such as the motives and causes reciprocally leading to the polarization of political parties and grassroots party activists, as well as to American common voters’ distrust of party politics in general. With a paired comparison on two communities traditionally characterized by different local political cultures – a traditionally blue-Democratic River City and a red-Republican Prairieville – political sociologist Josh Pacewicz aims to propose a new explanation of contemporary America’s puzzling political culture looking at how the reorganization of the community institutions has radically affected the grassroots base of the two-party system.

Based on the outcomes of several years of ethnographic fieldwork, drawing on multiple sources of data – observations, conversations with city dwellers and key local leaders, archival and municipal quantitative datasets – the book tries to test several hypothesis suggested by contemporary political sociology and voting behavior literatures. Its clear and ambitious goal is to “[replicate] the Elmira’s study in order to explain changes in America’s political system since the late 1970s” [p. 19].

Unquestionably, the outcome lives up to such expectations on many levels, both substantive and methodological. Firstly, the articulation between theoretical claims and the plurality of empirical evidences on which this work is grounded. The book tests and then problematizes with fresh qualitative data several arguments produced by a wide literature, such as studies of US federalism, urban political economy, civil society and the public sphere, the sociology of political parties, and voting behavior.

Secondly, even though Pacewicz’s study is mainly an ethnographic research localized in two cities, his results allow to draw many inferences at a macro-historical and sociological level. It provides new explanations for political phenomena characterizing American democracy, such as the co-determination between the growing polarization of political parties and the diffusion of political apathy among ordinary citizens. As a consequence, Pacewicz aims to explain the nature of political behavior and its “anti-political” tendency in a post-Keynesian society while also raising new normative arguments for the contemporary American democracy.

By showing the intersection between national and local dynamics, Pacewicz analyzes the transformations in urban development and their consequences for key sectors of the policy-making, therefore affecting both the restructuring of the local political élites and the political behavior of residents. In this sense, the approach is originally processual and contextual, by looking at how apparently abstract economic and political processes shape concrete political and even intimately familiar interpersonal relationships, and ultimately giving causal power to “actor’s situated reasoning.”

Pacewicz’s inquiry has many merits. In addition to its ethnographic density and the multiplicity of empirical data, it resorts to heuristic categories that give a further

value to the outcomes and insights emerged on the fieldwork. Partners and partisans, like Keynesianism and Neoliberalism, are indeed two ideal-types that help social scientists to identify recurrent patterns in the real world but without being ultimately identifiable with a totally coherent and pure phenomenon.

While the partisan is indeed a type of political actor that is rooted and at the same time it puts an emphasis on clear ideological cleavages in society, the partner “sets divisive issues aside” and seeks consensus through canons of best solutions. Although not mentioned in the book, the “partner” kind of politics, that Pacewicz identifies as a specific variant of the anti-political subjectivity typical of Neoliberalism, is similar to the conclusions drawn by Boltanski and Chiapello in their sociological account of critiques shaping a new spirit of capitalism. Indeed, the rise of the ideology of partners, consensus-oriented, flexible in their presentation of self and with a problem-solving attitude to political issues, resembles in many ways Boltanski and Chiapello’s idea of a new managerial morality in politics as an extension of the “projective city.”

Used as macro-sociological ideal-types, Keynesianism and Neo-Liberalism are at the same time two general heuristic political philosophies answering to two different questions (respectively, “how much government?” and “how much market?”) and a set of reforms whose concrete effects are translatable on the public sphere.

The local setting of Keynesianism is summarized as *politics embedded in community governance*, characterized by the community leadership party, a mode of grassroots partisan organization typical of the post-war period. Notwithstanding the different economic structure and political culture, the public life in River City and Prairieville was ruled by community leaders who, depending on their role (business owners or union leaders), were supporting respectively Republican or Democratic politics at election time. By following these dynamics, ordinary citizens were considering Democratic and Republican politics as the extension of the political cleavage at the local level.

On the contrary, the set of political reforms of the 1980s – financial deregulations, the decline of locally owned enterprises and the federal reforms of urban development and social services – culminated in *politics disembodied from community governance*. The public sphere radically changed, restructuring the opportunities for new types of leaders. The new complex system of targeted and competitive grants, controlled by federal and state agencies and middle-men nonprofits, created an apt political environment for new figures of leaders – economic development planners, managers of cultural or artistic institutions, municipal staff members – incarnating this new spirit in both cities. These changes in the political spirit shaped the structure of local parties in a new way, creating a space for a new grassroots partisan organization dominated by party activists that reproduces at the local level a pervasively ideological version of political divisions.

Following Pacewicz’s final analysis, the joint effect of partners’ avoidance of politics and a growing partisan polarization of local parties is however conducive to some pathologies of the American public sphere, and particularly it is leading to a *structural deceit*, or a misleading communication between the people and the policy-makers. Since policy-makers at the federal level commonly interact with local party leaders, they tend to have a wrong idea of ordinary Americans. By getting the idea from local party activists that citizens care about ideological issues, politicians tend to reproduce this discourse. Consequently, ordinary citizens are even more pushed to political disaffection. In other

terms, they see politics as an activity not dealing with real problems but just assuming the traits of a sport, «like a football game or something», as explained by a local resident in a telling anecdote cited in the Preface.

Ultimately, *Partisans and Partners* is not only a book about political behavior but above all about public visibility and the struggle around it. For Pacewicz, the public sphere is indeed a political construction, a game where a variety of actors competes for public prominence. Contrary to Habermasian's theory of the public sphere, in this complex struggle involving interests, norms, positions, new and old visions of the world, Pacewicz does not see any pathologies in actors involved in a game intersecting public ideals and private interests. At the same time, following Lippmann's argument, Pacewicz supports the hypothesis of the impossibility for ordinary citizens to grasp the complexity of politics and the importance of focusing on heuristics and the actors influencing the political imagination.

However, if the focus is on general politics, this does not apply only to ordinary citizens but also to political leaders – eventually interested in constructing heuristics, no matter how real. References to John Dewey would have helped to discuss how people problematize single-issue problems directly affecting their ordinary lives and how citizens can be to some extent expert of their own local dimension – as in some parts the book seems to suggest. Ultimately, this would have also contributed to understand if caring for the backyard is becoming more or less salient than in the past and how this eventually reshapes the definition of politics itself and its meaning for real life.

Finally, one last word on the sociological style of this work. This political ethnography is mainly based on several years of fieldwork in which the author, in Marcus' sense, “followed the people,” observing their behavior in real situations and mixing semi-structured and in-depth interviews with conversations in daily life. Important insights and methodological choices are seriously discussed in the Appendix.

As the reader would probably know, Prairieville and River City are imaginary names for two cities in Iowa, where the author conducted his fieldwork. The reason for this fictitious denomination is well explained with the necessity to protect informants from any unintended consequence due to their participation in the inquiry. As this work shows, political ethnography is a very troublesome activity, opening a multiplicity of risks for the researcher involved in it. Anonymization allows indeed to faithfully report conversations, opinions and dynamics that are most of the time unveiling what James Scott called the “hidden transcripts” beyond the constraints of the front stage.

The author carefully problematizes also his own strategic (and somehow mimetic) interactions with a variety of interviewees. Not only his personal and biographical characteristics were influencing the access to some relevant actors, but also his specific position of outsider was welcomed and perceived differently by local residents and leaders.

While this methodological section should be included in every syllabus of a qualitative methods course, Pacewicz's book is a theoretically-informed, analytically rigorous and empirically rich account of the dynamics and problems of contemporary American democracy. It is a precious work of a real social science, critically bringing together the outcomes of different disciplinary perspectives into a broader theoretical picture with

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direct public implications. I do not know if Pacewicz would agree but, in this sense, *Partners and Partisans* is a great work of public sociology.

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