Society for the Anthropology of Work

Book Review: Brazilian Steel Town

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***Brazilian Steel Town: Machines, Land, Money, and Commoning in the Making of the Working Class*, by Massimiliano Mollona (2019). New York: Berghahn.**

Over the past decade, the Arab Spring, anti-austerity revolts in Europe, the Occupy movement, student militancy in Chile and South Africa, and mass demonstrations in Turkey, Ukraine, and Brazil put the class question at the center of political debates worldwide. Within the discipline of anthropology, these diverse movements also led to calls to formulate a truly global anthropology of labor, so as to make sense of the precarity experienced by workers throughout the world (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014). In the run-up to this charged political conjuncture, the Italian anthropologist Massimiliano Mollona—who previously wrote an ethnography of British steelworkers—was carrying out fieldwork in Volta Redonda, an industrial city in Rio de Janeiro State, Brazil, even as the former militant trade unionist Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was nearing the end of his presidency.

Brazilian Steel Town is a historically grounded ethnography of workers at the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional (CSN), the largest steel company in Brazil—and in all of Latin America, for that matter. This is why Volta Redonda is known as Cidade do Aço, or “Steel City.” The CSN was founded as a state-owned enterprise by then-President Getúlio Vargas in 1946, only to be privatized in 1992. Today, it is part of what Mollona considers to be a neo-extractivist regime, a version of capitalism in which the exploitation of wage labor becomes less important than extraction through the levying of rents.

In the book, Mollona proposes a “Marxian class analysis from an anthropological and humanist philosophical perspective” (p. 50), which also seeks to address the historical legacies of slavery, nationalism, religion, age, and gender. This implies that Mollona’s perspective engages with “unevenness as an anthropological concept” (Gill and Kasmir 2016) in order to understand the spatio-temporalities of making, unmaking, and remaking the working class. At the same time, Mollona advances “an ethnographic critique of capitalist economic categories” (p. 4). These categories are not only premised on economic theories but also on capitalist fetishes—such as money, land, and technology—that Marx flagged as suspect long ago. Mollona elaborates a critique of these categories throughout the book’s chapters and focuses on practices enacted by his informants—such as the defense of commons and the reproductive labor of caring—that seek to transcend them. Herein lies one of the main contributions of this text: a serious attempt to rethink the internal relations between class (struggle) and fetishism.

Chapter 2 analyzes steelmaking as a labor process and shows how technological fetishism in this sector leads to the dehumanization of workers. This fetishism, as Mollona argues, is a central but perverse mechanism of class reproduction on the shop floor. However, the experiences of workers also differ depending on the department to which they are assigned and the activities they perform. Mollona captures how skilled workers in capital-intensive departments “value their labor as a form of

embodied knowledge, unalienable, un-transferable, non-commodifiable and external to the technological system” (p. 108). In contrast, unskilled workers in labor-intensive departments “experience labor through measures of sales and productivity embedded in the technological system” (p. 108). Thus, while workers in capital-intensive departments seek to resist the money form, those performing work in labor-intensive departments come to embody it.

Chapter 3 goes beyond the workplace and explores land struggles in Volta Redonda. Mollona relates the decentralization of the Brazilian state, the internationalization of the government’s sovereign debt, and the reorganization of capital to changes at the level of grassroots politics. Throughout the chapter, he reconstructs the tense and protracted conflicts between local capitalists and workers around the “land question.” In these struggles, the working class, trade unions, state bureaucracies, the Catholic Church, and other stakeholders intervened by mobilizing narratives around ecology, ethics, class, and social marginality. Many of these narratives, which revolve around the productivity of land and the value of nature, are informed by land fetishism. As Mollona explains, the reason that extant narratives obscure this connection between exploitation and extractivism is that capital accumulation and the commodification of nature and urban rents are so deeply entangled in Volta Redonda.

Chapter 4 is about the Metalworkers’ Union, which Lula actually led during the late 1970s and 1980s as he came to prominence. Arguing that the CSN’s activities are an extension of the extractivist state that controls the company indirectly, Mollona explores how trade unionists confronted the paradox of Lula’s administration. In this context, union militants operated as a nexus between the macropolitical initiatives of the state and the microsocial contexts that were the targets of its intervention. A notable side effect of these efforts during Lula’s presidency was the further financialization of individuals and families, a process that Mollona relates to the trade union-supported privatization of the CSN during the early 1990s.

Chapter 5 addresses the privatization of the company in more depth, relating it to the hyperinflation that marked the last years of the military dictatorship, which lasted from 1964 to 1985. Although inflation was not a new phenomenon in Brazil, during the transition to democracy it became a central problem for the newly elected government. Mollona argues that the privatization of the CSN played a central role in crafting citizens fit for Brazilian democracy as well as bringing the working class into a regime of financial capitalism. He shows how the country’s large but politically marginal working class supported the company’s privatization, due to its desire to take part in financial capitalism. What is important here is Mollona’s critique of the idea that “money under capitalism functions independently from social relations” (p. 230). In this chapter’s conclusion, he explains how “class relations determined how money functioned” (p. 230) and, in the process, offers a critique of the “money fetish” by studying it in conjunction with production.

If the book's earlier chapters deal with the fetishes that capital produces, Chapter 6 specifically interrogates "those value forms that transcend the commodity form" (p. 4). Mollona explores the changes in power relations during and after the CSN's privatization through an analysis of the outsourced workers and their activism. As he documents, these subcontractors, cleaners, and builders became aware of their importance for the functioning of capitalism and, as a result, decided to create alternative value forms. Mollona argues that this shared consciousness rooted in solidarity and its associated practices of valorization acquired an anti-capitalist character and led to concrete improvements in working-class life.

In the book's conclusion, Mollona returns to his discussion of the neo-extractivist model. He explains that his notion of extractivism is an expanded one, referring to a "generalized form of capital extraction based on the maximization of rents instead of wages and embedded in specific social relations of production as they unfold in workplaces and in rural and urban spaces" (p. 279–80). Throughout the book, Mollona mobilizes this expanded conceptualization to understand uneven and combined development in Volta Redonda. To my mind, this purview enables Mollona to offer an exemplary and multi-scalar analysis of capital, class, and the state.

Recently, the geographer Jamie Peck (2019) noted that, unlike in geography, there is an active problematization of uneven and combined development in anthropology. Mollona's highly detailed ethnography of the making of the working class in Volta Redonda is a case in point. In sum, while I have some disagreements around the particular theory of value Mollona adopts (stemming, in the end, from our different readings of Marx) as well as with his reliance on the metaphors of infrastructure and superstructure, I believe that this book deserves to be read and debated by anthropologists, geographers, and other scholars of Latin America.

Author Bio

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