
Review

Breaks in the chain: What immigrant workers can teach American about democracy

Paul Apostolidis

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2010, viii + 290pp.,
US\$ 24.50, ISBN: 978-081666982

Contemporary Political Theory advance online publication, 11 September 2012;
doi:10.1057/cpt.2012.15

It's not often that an academic book crosses the theory/practice divide to inform both in the ways that Paul Apostolidis's *Breaks in the Chain: What Immigrant Workers can Teach America about Democracy* does. As an organizer for Arise Chicago Workers' Center and a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, it's an especially rare and welcome instance when this kind of work focuses on the description and analysis of resistance to the current political, social, cultural and economic structures that exclude immigrant workers from full participation in a well-regulated, humane labor market and democratic politics. Although activists, organizers and other participants in the struggle for workers' rights and justice for immigrants may initially be daunted by deeply theoretical discussions of items such as Gramscian notions of hegemony and Foucauldian biopolitics, the insights and claims of this critical ethnography, which documents and analyses narratives of immigrant workers who were part of a workplace struggle in Eastern Washington, are important for more reflective and reflexive practice.

Of paramount importance to the tasks of advocacy and organizing among immigrant workers are three insights the work offers. First, we are reminded that the narratives and stories of struggle that immigrant workers tell each other, allies and policymakers are the building blocks of nascent social movements. Second, we are reminded that narratives are not unambiguously tales of resistance nor do they merely rearticulate dominant ideologies and discourses. For these stories to have power, they have to be broadly understandable by appealing to already established myths and frames, while at the same time being inexplicable enough to call into question those same ideologies (Polletta, 2002). Finally, Apostolidis's use of genealogy as a methodological tool for organizing the narratives of the workers interviewed is perhaps the most important part of the work. Genealogical approaches to the stories of immigrant workers help place the immediate stories of workplace or community struggle



into a larger context that incorporates the entirety of the immigration experience. Beyond that, this genealogical approach also unearths the real work of hegemony and counter-hegemony in immigrant worker lives. In that way, we better understand what aspects of immigrant worker identity and discourse move resistance, and what aspects reinforce dominant ideologies or discourses. For Apostolidis, this means that his interviews with workers involved in the struggle in a meatpacking plant began in Mexico, crossed the border and entered the *enjaulado* life of undocumented work in the United States before entering the story of the decade long struggle at IBP/Tyson. Genealogical work is also important for strategically shaping the stories immigrant workers tell and the way in which they learn their rights as workers.

The best example I have of this is our work at Arise Chicago Workers Center. Here we have taken to heart Apostolidis's dictum that fighting for justice for immigrants would have to 'mean ... more than conducting fact-based workshops on the law for undocumented workers' and extend to:

multiplying the forums where migrants can more freely share their stories ... and where they can sort through the political complexities of their experiences of victimization and self-determination in those domains. (p. 109)

The workers rights workshop at Arise Chicago situates the workplace abuse suffered by immigrant workers who approach the center in a larger world of the stories of other members that reveal the 'structural' roots of the problems and the possibilities of successful resistant action. Workers attend the workshop in groups, and hear the stories of the abuse other workers face. Members of the center often provide concrete examples of their own successful campaigns that build new genealogies of resistance. In some respects, this workshop allows the center to overcome the elitism implicit in the translation of narratives undertaken by the 'critical theory' of intellectuals by providing workers and members with the discursive tools to analyze their own and others' stories in the context of praxis. This praxis is the direct action element that is part of most workplace justice campaigns at Arise Chicago. The role of even this highly structured educational event, which is Frierean only in the most general sense, in generating power building narratives seems to be good evidence for Apostolidis's insistence on narrative as the key building block of power for immigrant workers.

Again, what makes Apostolidis's work so compelling is his genealogical work of showing how the narratives that reveal these tensions go all the way back to life in Mexico before crossing the border. This seamlessness of the narrative lives of these workers is the basis for the most critical part of his work, that we cannot and must not separate the experience of immigration from the experience of work in either academic study or mobilization and activism.

The ‘city trenches’ (Katznelson, 1981) of work and home that so bedeviled activism under Fordism are particularly inappropriate for the biopolitics of the neoliberal order that requires a whole class of disconnected cogs in the productive machinery of accumulation. Worker members of Arise Chicago, for example, are not just immigrants or just workers. Their narratives of struggle do not make the distinction between immigrant and worker. What does change as they participate in a workplace justice campaign is how they talk about their experiences as worker and immigrant. Apostolidis reminds us that combining immigrant and worker rights is not merely a wise strategic or tactical choice, but rather an absolutely imperative discursive move that is really the only way to counter the hegemonic power of neoliberal political economy.

The frustration with Apostolidis’s work for those of us engaged in activist scholarship is one common to critical ethnographies. In reality, this frustration underlies much of the struggle for immigrant worker rights in the United States. Although Apostolidis’s connection to a real, historically grounded workplace struggle alleviates this to a large extent, we are still left with the challenge of figuring out how to translate the narratives of resistance into transformative power through ‘the cultiva[tion] [of] organizational spaces where immigrant workers can speak out loud and share with one another and allies their *stories* about immigration, work, and political action’ (p. 219, emphasis in original). The motivating question of my own work on workers centers is precisely this question: How do organizations capture the empowerment generated by the sharing of stories of resistance in ways that generate the collectivities that mobilize social movements or at the very least, reform public policy? Engagement with the literature on the social construction of social problems and its implication for policy change is likely beyond the scope of this work, but could provide fertile ground for understanding where these narratives go. Apostolidis reminds us that the very existence of the neoliberal economic and political arrangements requires the active consent of the oppressed through the ideological sedimentation of certain beliefs and values (p. 222). As such, the fundamental first task of upending these arrangements that harm us all is to unearth, facilitate the sharing of and amplify the narratives that withdraw that consent and rehumanize the lives and experiences of immigrant workers.

References

- Apostolidis, P. (2010) *Breaks in the Chain: What Immigrant Workers can Teach America about Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Katznelson, I. (1981) *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States*. New York: Pantheon.



Polletta, F. (2002) Plotting protest: Mobilizing stories in the 1960 student sit-ins. In: J.E. Davis (ed.), *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Jacob Lesniewski
University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration,
Chicago, IL, USA