

2017

Review of Guya Accornero, *The Revolution Before the Revolution: Late Authoritarianism and Student Protest in Portugal*.

Pamela Radcliff

University of California, San Diego, pradcliff@null.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Radcliff, Pamela (2017) "Review of Guya Accornero, *The Revolution Before the Revolution: Late Authoritarianism and Student Protest in Portugal*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 24.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1263>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol42/iss2/24>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Accornero, Guya. *The Revolution Before the Revolution: Late Authoritarianism and Student Protest in Portugal*. Protest, Culture and Society. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2016. 169 pp.

This welcome addition to the small number of English language monographs on the Portuguese political transition of the 1970s explores the role of the student movement in destabilizing the dictatorship during its final two decades. More broadly, Accornero adopts a social movement framework to analyze the popular origins of the transition that officially began with the April 1974 coup, which in turn unleashed a process of state crisis, revolution and eventual establishment of a liberal democratic regime. In contrast to the majority of the scholarship on the Portuguese transition, she argues that the massive mobilization unleashed after April 1974 was not a sudden and ephemeral phenomenon, but a culmination of a protest cycle that began under the dictatorship. Using the case study of the student movement, which she argues was one of the main threats to the Portuguese “new state” despite its small size, the book makes the case for a “revolution before the revolution.”

The argument that social movements under the dictatorship played an important role in undermining the authoritarian regime should sound familiar to scholars of the Spanish transition. Indeed, the trend over the last couple of decades in Spanish historiography has been a proliferation of “bottom up” studies of the origins of the transition that have challenged the once-hegemonic “transitology” narrative of a short-term, elite-negotiated process. The transitology paradigm incorporated all the Southern European transitions into a single model that emphasized the successful outcome of institutional democratization, facilitated by elite actors who implemented western liberal structures. The Portuguese case was somewhat awkwardly shoe-horned into this model by downplaying the revolutionary period (April 1974-Nov 75) as ephemeral. Recent Portuguese studies have begun to resurrect the revolutionary period as a key piece of the transition process, seeking to understand the dynamics of mobilization and the legacies that remained after it was suppressed. But most studies view the mobilization as a product of the coup and the state crisis. Where Accornero makes her main intervention into the Portuguese historiography is precisely her claim that mobilization was also one of the causes of the coup. Instead of a one way cause and effect, from state crisis to mobilization, Accornero makes the case for a feedback loop, in which mobilization under the authoritarian regime helped precipitate state crisis, which in turn opened the floodgates for more mobilization, culminating in the peak of the protest cycle in 1974-5. Similar to Spanish studies on the late Franco regime, Accornero argues that the student movement opened “democratic spaces” in an authoritarian regime by reinforcing “horizontal” vs. “vertical” relationships.

Beyond the book’s intervention in the democratization scholarship, it also contributes to the recent trend to incorporate the Southern European authoritarian regimes into the “long 60s” protest cycle. In contrast to the original framework formulated to make sense of the social movements that developed in the western democratic countries, recent studies have argued that there were similar trends across the authoritarian/democratic divide. Social movement scholars have been adapting concepts developed for democratic contexts to authoritarian and democratizing societies, highlighting the similarities as well as the differences between the 60s social movements in authoritarian and democratic regimes. For student movements in particular, Accornero

asserts there are many points in common, in addition to some distinct repertoires. Thus, under authoritarian regimes, many “normal” democratic channels are illegal, pushing movements towards more clandestine or illegal activity. In addition, student movements under authoritarian regimes tended to focus more heavily on political critiques, while their democratic counterparts placed more weight on the cultural and social aspects of the “new left.” And yet there were also similarities, from “assemblyist” decision-making to anti-war protests and anti-authoritarian values. Thus, Accornero’s book, along with a recent volume published in the same Berghahn series on the Greek student movement, contribute towards integrating Southern Europe into a comparative 60s framework.

Social movement concepts frame the structure of the book as well as Accornero’s analysis. The chapters are organized around the origins and development of two “protest cycles” (1956-65 and 1968-75), a concept coined by Sidney Tarrow to theorize how and why collective mobilization seems to rise and fall in waves that begin with the “early risers,” spread to broader sectors of the population and finally fizzle out. Chapters one and three analyze the changing “political opportunity structure” that created the space for the protest cycles examined in chapters two and four. Chapter 5 hones in on the culmination of the second cycle and the demise of the authoritarian “new state.” Each chapter also attempts to situate the Portuguese case within a transnational frame of events, movements and ideologies that shaped opportunity structures across the “global ‘60s.”

Thus, in chapter one Accornero sets the stage for the opening of the first protest cycle with both international events like Khrushchev’s 1956 speech and the U.S. Civil Rights movement, as well as the unique features of the Portuguese authoritarian regime that allowed some space for a student movement to develop. Semi-autonomous student associations that could elect their own representatives and make decisions in open assemblies provided a space not available for most other groups in Portuguese society. Catalyzing events in Portugal were the 1958 presidential election and the launching of the Colonial War, both of which generated mobilization and growing demands for political change. The protest cycle that unfolds in chapter two peaked in a university mobilization in 1962, followed by a process of repression and demobilization, including the disarticulation of the main political opposition group, the Communist party (PCP).

The second cycle was precipitated by external events like May ‘68 and the impact of Vatican II on Portuguese Catholics, as well as the timid reforms of the post-Salazar government under Caetano after 1969 and the intensifying crisis of the Colonial War. The second cycle also featured an expanding divide in repertoire and ideology, between “moderate” PCP-led groups that emphasized legal, mass mobilization towards democratization, and “radical” mostly Maoist “new left” groups that rejected legal channels and critiqued capitalism, colonialism and liberal democracy as much as authoritarianism.

The book ends with the culmination of the protest cycle after the April 1974 coup, making the case for continuity in repertoire, networks and resources. I would have liked to see these links fleshed out a bit more, which would have made the case for the legacy of the “pre-history” of the revolution more tangible. One of the legacies that could have been emphasized more strongly is the division between moderates and radicals, which must have impacted the revolutionary period. However, what is entirely convincing is the argument that the student movement was part of a longer term cycle of protest that

contributed to the weakening of the authoritarian regime. From this perspective, Accornero's book should open the door to further exploration of the role of social movements as a cause and not simply a result of authoritarian collapse.

Pamela Radcliff
University of California, San Diego