

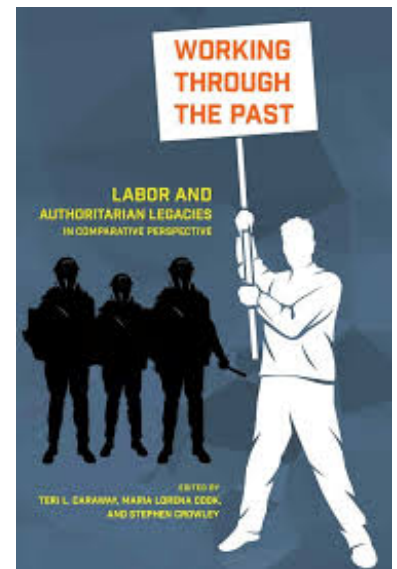
Book Review: Working Through the Past: Labor and Authoritarian Legacies in Comparative Perspective edited by Teri L. Caraway, Maria Lorena Cook and Stephen Crowley

In Working Through the Past: Labor and Authoritarian Legacies in Comparative Perspective, editors Teri L. Caraway, Maria Lorena Cook and Stephen Crowley offer a collection that explores the role that 'authoritarian legacies' have played in the development of labour politics in new democracies, drawing on case studies from Eastern Europe, East and Southeast Asia and Latin America. While Maximiliano Korstanje would have welcomed more nuanced discussion of democracy and its varied conceptualisations, this book is a must-read for economists and those looking to better understand the intersection of labour, production and politics.

Working Through the Past: Labor and Authoritarian Legacies in Comparative Perspective. Teri L. Caraway, Maria Lorena Cook and Stephen Crowley (eds). Cornell University Press. 2015.

During the 1990s, wider processes of globalisation engaged peripheral and central economies in ways that precaritised labour worldwide. Understanding the reactions of workforces in societies that have been subject to 'authoritarian legacies' is the main goal of this new book, *Working Through the Past: Labor and Authoritarian Legacies in Comparative Perspective*.

In the introductory chapters, editors Teri L. Caraway, Maria Lorena Cook and Stephen Crowley explain the concept of 'authoritarian legacies' as the effects produced by undemocratic regimes that constitute a particular 'juncture', which, even once democracy has been adopted, still exert considerable influence on the ways that unions react against capital-owners. Capitalism has expanded beyond the boundaries of the USA and Europe into societies in which democracy has not previously flourished, suggesting that capitalism and democracy are inextricably intertwined. Authoritarian legacies are defined as the constant causes that remain from authoritarian experiences. These events still determine the autonomy of worker-unions with respect to the central government.



The project of *Working Through the Past* unfolds in three complementary directions. The main argument is that in countries in which worker unions have witnessed 'authoritarian legacies', their power of negotiation is feebler than in democratic nations. Not only does this enable the elite to keep legitimacy, but it also protects the centralised 'extractive institutions' that amass wealth into few hands. Secondly, those countries that have faced authoritarian governments have fewer opportunities to develop independent unions that meet the needs of workers. Last but not least, the rights of workers to protest and strike are two significant indicators of democracy. Since capitalism has flourished in cultures where liberty prevents the formation of extractive institutions that monopolise the produced surplus, no less true is that the independence of unions struggling against such monopolies is vital for the formation of healthier economies.

The book presents these arguments through ten interesting chapters, which are based on the evolution of unionisation in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Readers will nonetheless find that they all can be divided into two main patterns. On the one hand, we have some unions which were originally supported and intervened upon directly or indirectly by the executive branch. This seems to be the case in Poland and Russia and in Latin

American nations including Argentina, Mexico and Brazil. The legacy of communism ideologically created a paradoxical situation. In retrospect, labour was installed as the main right of workers, but a lack of competence crystallised in institutions. Over the decades, the Soviet Union played a crucial role in the configuration and evolution of worker unions. Though these organisations were larger than in other nations, their capacity to negotiate with politicians was feeble. Once the Soviet Union fell, the promise of neo-liberalism became widely accepted as anti-communist sentiment developed amongst the people.



Image Credit: Strike On Hold (Daniel X. O'Neil)

In the case of East and Southeast Asia, unions went in the opposite direction. The case studies of Indonesia, The Philippines, Korea and Taiwan (in addition to Yugoslavia) are detailed in Chapters One, Two, Three and Five. Sharing commonalities but with substantial differences, these analyses centre on two key factors present in the examples: a) the lack of worker interest in forming stronger unions; and b) the atomisation of unions, which is conducive to maintaining the interests of the financial elite.

The cases of Mexico and Argentina are covered by Graciela Bensusan and Cook in the seventh chapter. Following the common argument of the book, these scholars state that authoritarian legacies incorporated 'mechanisms of structuration' that defined the lives of unions in both countries, even after the advent of democracy. Corporatism has accompanied the configuration and evolution of worker unions to date. This chapter is of paramount importance as Argentina exhibits one of the powerful and major unions of the world, independent of state or particular officialdom interests.

Though *Working Through the Past* is an interesting attempt to explore the strengths and limitations of nations that have kept an 'authoritarian past' by focusing on the role of worker-unions as bulwarks of democracy, two major objections should be made. The main argument that richer nations in which capitalism has successfully evolved are inherently democratic rests on shaky foundations. US ethnocentrism consists in constructing the 'Other', while the centre remains unmarked. Democracy is a key factor in delineating the boundaries between the 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' world. In comparison to the USA, the rest of the world is often portrayed as a hostile place, fraught with semi-Leviathans, where democracy did not find the necessary elements to surge. Since the USA is seen as a successful project where different migrants have been welcomed and integrated into civil life (the 'Melting Pot'), it is often believed that the world should follow its example in adopting its main institutions: democracy, trade and liberty.

This perspective over-valorises democracy as the best of all possible worlds.

However, this discourse – which the book echoes – ignores that Europeans and Latin Americans, for instance, have different ways of conceptualising democracy. Beyond the fact that the term takes different shape according to the time and the society, no less true is that while Latin Americans ponder the efficacy of the executive branch – i.e. presidentialism – over other values, European cultures are more corporatist, tending to valorise the independence of these branches. This suggests that democracy for Latin America is seen as good or bad depending on the economic benefits that can be obtained. In contrast, for North Americans, democracy should be protected to ensure that no one group accumulates major portions of power.

In this context, unsurprisingly, workers and their unions behave or adopt different strategies depending on the government. Unions in Latin America are more prone to presidentialism, if governments allow them substantial rights. Additionally, army forces have often been educated to intervene in politics when they consider that civilians threaten the social order; this belief has led to many civilians, even unions, supporting successive coups. It is therefore important to understand that the notion of ‘authoritarian legacies’ is a concept that is very hard to grasp and operationalise in applied research because, in part, it misjudges the historical evolution of democracy, which has not always been related to freedom. In Ancient Athens, where democracy evolved, the authority of the king was never questioned. The term only signalled the possibility that lay-citizens could call to assembly if a law was seen as unjust. Nowadays, to what extent can we do the same?

Beyond the above discussed polemic, this book sheds light on the intersection of production and politics and is a must-read book for scholars studying economy. The editors undertake the titanic task of presenting numerous case studies that reflect the different reactions of unions across the world. Undoubtedly, one must accept that the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1990s has caused serious harm to unions and the workforce. However, the effects have varied notably from country to country. While in some nations, such as Chile, where the bloody repression was overtly planned to be witnessed by citizens, unions developed less interest for militancy, in Argentina, where kidnappings and torture were kept in secrecy, unions played a leading role in politics. What this suggests is that authoritarian legacies were conducive to instilling extreme fear in many societies, affecting how lay-citizens have adopted or rejected union militancy.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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