

Review

Eeva Luhtakallio, *Practicing Democracy: Local activism and politics in France and Finland*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012. ISBN: 978-0230309296 (cloth). 264pp.

Practicing Democracy is one of those rare books that does exactly what it says on the label. Introduced in its opening chapter as a *Sociological Travelogue*, it travels through a variety of ideas and methodological approaches as it explores localised democratic practices in Helsinki and Lyon. Luhtakallio's book explores the relationships within selected social movements, in both cities, and their context. It offers a deconstructed comparative politics, rooted in political sociology, with an ethnographic twist. As a read, it is one of the few books I have read recently that I genuinely enjoyed. I enjoyed it so much I have now read it three times, including – and my partner may take some time to forgive me for this – while on holiday.

This is not a book of comparative politics in the traditional sense. Where a more classical approach to comparative political analysis would concentrate on the transferability of practices and frameworks between the locations chosen, this book relishes in the individuality of the practice of democracy in the two cities. Where there are points of commonality these are noted, where there may be points of transferability they are mentioned; but the principle trajectory followed is the highlighting of difference, and that intersects with the localised context.

The book itself is divided into seven chapters; this, however, hides the actual structure of the analysis, which falls under three different analytic phases. Each phase adopting a different methodological approach. The chapters are followed by two appendices, one on methodology and one on the sources of data used; each of them is insightful and interesting in its own right.

Luhtakallio begins with a discussion of the social movements, in Helsinki and Lyon, in which she has participated. She traces the history of social movements in the two cities, and their relationship to local political structures, then discusses them under two principle themes. Firstly she looks at how social movements connect, or fail to connect, to the structures of representative democracy in both settings. Her second theme explores the associated issues of citizenship and gender with the social movements themselves; examining how '...different meanings of 'we' (are) built in the two contexts' (p25). Her approach here is mainly ethnographic, with plenty of first hand detail making her

examination of gender issues particularly illuminating. Her discussion of how gender issues are handled differently in the social movements in which she was active is thorough and thought provoking. I was fascinated by her descriptions of how perceived gender neutrality in Helsinki acted as a block to gendered debate in social movements there; rooted in the assumption that the issue was either a non-issue or one that had already been adequately resolved. However, in Lyon, the instances of discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, within groups, made debate around such concerns a matter for legitimate internal discussion.

From a close examination of social movements, citizenship and gender, Luhtakallio moves on to looking at how the cities, and the practices of democracy within them, are presented in locally produced imagery. Images are taken from a variety of sources, covered in the second appendix of the book, which includes material taken by activists, of activists and reproduced in city specific publications. The photographs used in the text, especially pages 101; 103 and 127, illustrate and extend points raised in the previous analytic phase. For the analysis presented in this part of the book she adopts an adaptation of a Goffmanesque frame analysis. Though akin to a more familiar semiotic exploration of the image, by anchoring her scrutiny in Goffman's approach she is able to more clearly draw out the performative character of them. As well as the many serious points she makes, there also seems to be a degree of pleasure taken in, for example, her examination of smiling citizens in gravity defying poses on the covers of *Lyon Citoyen* and *Helsinki-Info* (p111). Her adaptation of Goffman is developed well, and deployed thoughtfully. It is used to draw out clear tensions and subtle dialectics in the relationships between social movements, their local political activity, and the dominant hegemonic position of the cities in which they are situated, and that of those sat in positions of representational democratic power. The hegemonic tides, present within both of the cities she discusses, enrich our insight into her interest in localised politicisation; a theme that is maintained throughout the book.

The final analytic phase builds on Laurent Thévenot's theory of justification and develops it into a methodological tool for textual critique. In adopting such a technique we are presented with a methodology that strongly contrasts the two earlier approaches Luhtakallio has taken. Her coding takes a highly disciplined form, and the results she offers are predominantly quantitative, though there is still an undoubted interpretivist timbre to the discussions that follow the presentation of her findings. Despite its apparent robustness, presenting us with the percentage use of justificatory themes used by citizens, citizen groups and city representative in an impressive collection of items published in Helsinki and Lyonnais press, this data is at the furthest remove from that presented in the initial ethnographic phase. So while it looks substantial, and it most definitely makes some contribution to the rich picture of local activism and politics in both cities she develops, it comes over as an additional step, simply for the sake of taking one. It therefore has a strange after taste of being superfluous.

While I maintain my opening position, that this is one of the few books I have read recently that I have truly enjoyed, I do have a couple of concerns. Firstly, while the research is analytically solid the work only partially addresses the depth of its theoretical

foundations. Goffman and Thévenot, while vital methodologically to Luhtakallio's analysis, are placed on such a high pedestal that the important task of the works theoretical framework and grounding are downplayed too much. Two of the more high profile absentees are Bourdieu and Foucault. The contribution made by each of these theorists to the analysis of power, particularly the latter's work on biopolitics and the technology of truth (there connection to resistance and the speaking of truth to power are well illustrated in his last lectures on the government of self and others¹), is particularly relevant. The incorporation of such theoretical frameworks would more securely underpinned much of Luhtakallio's discussion, and would have widened the potential impact of the last two phases of her analysis. Robert Putnam's conceptualisation of bonding and bridging social capital would have added considerably to her reflections on the ethnographic field work she undertook. While they do make a token appearance, they do not stay long enough to make the full weight of their contribution felt. The lack of substance given to the philosophic ground from which the ideas of the book appear to spring do make for an easier read. However, their absence undermines the deeper contribution her analysis could actually make. Yes we learn a lot about politicisation in Lyon and Helsinki but, because of this downgrading of any debate around its theoretical foundations, there remains a little voice at the back of our minds whispering...so what!

My other concern also centres on a curious omission. The book was published in 2012, yet the data used in phases 2 and 3 is drawn from material gathered in 2006. I am unclear when the ethnographic material for the first phase was acquired, but the meeting in Helsinki during May 2007, referred to in her opening chapter, would suggest that the bulk of that data would have been gathered around the same time. Little is mentioned of the impact of huge changes that may have had a bearing social movements in both cities since then. This may, of course, be because of the time it takes to move from writing a text to it being realised as a publication. However, to not include an afterword that hints at the possible repercussions of those changes seems like an unfortunately missed opportunity. There are several examples that could be chosen; two immediately spring to mind. Firstly the wave of occupy camps that sprang up around the world following Occupy Wall Street in September 2011; secondly the emergence of revolution movements that began in Tunisia before spreading across a several North African and Middle Eastern Islamic states.

There were expressions of anti-capitalist occupy encampments that occurred in Lyon and Helsinki in 2011. Both were established in October 2011. Though the Finnish campaign was relatively short-lived, only occupying part of the city for a few days, the movement continues to have a web presence. In France, Occupy has fared a little better. In Lyon demonstrations, occupations and gatherings which have a self-declared association with the Occupy movement have, while limited, continued. At the time of writing the most recent expression of this was a demonstration in support of protests in Turkey on 7th June 2013 (occupygezilyon.blogspot.co.uk). However, my concern is not that Occupy or the revolutionary shifts in some Middle Eastern and North African Islamic states should be specifically articulated in Luhtakallio's book; rather it is the absence of any form of

commentary or assessment of the impact of the profound political change that has taken place since 2007, that I would have liked to have seen. Even if no impact could be discerned, that would be an interesting observation. As with the omission of a fully articulated theoretical grounding, this absence lends credence to an impression that the value of the book is predominantly parochial and superficial.

Despite those concerns I do feel the book still makes a highly valuable contribution. Unfortunately that contribution is limited to its methodology; the disappointment is that it could have been so much more. Her combination of ethnographic data gathering of social movements, with her adaptations to Goffman's frame analysis and Thévenot's justification theory, are significant additions to the toolkit of all of us who are interested in understanding, supporting and working for social movements in trying to contribute to social change. For that, at least, the book deserves a wide readership: just don't tell your partner if you decide to take it on holiday with you.

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¹ Published in English in 2010 and 2011.