Review Essay

Revolts, migrations and their boundaries

Contemporary Political Theory (2023). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00632-6

The Time of Revolt
Donatella Di Cesare
Polity, Cambridge, 2022, 142pp. ISBN: 1509548394

Resident Foreigners: A Philosophy of Migration
Donatella Di Cesare
Polity, Cambridge, 2020, 231pp. ISBN: 1509533559

Israele. Terra, ritorno, anarchia
Donatella Di Cesare
Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2014, 105pp. ISBN: 8833924939

Over the last decade, Donatella Di Cesare has emerged as one of the most prolific political thinkers in the Continental tradition, as well as one of the most renowned Italian public intellectuals. Her new book, *The Time of Revolt*, is a brief but complex text. Composed of twenty-three short sections, the book reads more as a collection of erudite meditations on authors who have written on the topic than as a monograph with a clear thesis to offer—in stark contrast with other recent works she has devoted to pressing political phenomena. From a conceptual point of view, *The Time of Revolt* is sometimes elliptic: Di Cesare never provides an explicit definition of revolt, and it is not always clear which of the many political mobilizations and uprisings mentioned in the book, she sees as revolts. When venturing into empirical generalisation, moreover, she offers limited supporting evidence. For instance, her (debatable) claim that in recent years conflictual modalities of political participation (such as ‘occupations’) ‘have left the factories and workplaces behind and largely also the universities, schools, and all the sites where social functions are performed’ (Di Cesare, 2022a, p. 20) is presented as self-evident.

Despite coming from an author who in the past has demonstrated a remarkable talent for ‘on the ground’ philosophical journalism (Di Cesare, 2014b), *The Time of Revolt* feels somehow detached from the social movements it touches upon (from Black Lives Matter to the 15M and Occupy Wall Street), hardly making any reference to studies devoted to them by social scientists. A bit paradoxically, the main exception to this trend is provided by Anonymous, on which the author

© 2023 The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited, corrected publication 2023.

spends several pages but that, for its very nature (a loosely connected network of anonymous hackers) is difficult to analyse with confidence (cf. Di Cesare, 2022a, pp. 88–97). Di Cesare frequently sounds enthusiastic about the radical potential of contemporary revolts, but she also appears scarcely interested in the accounts provided by activists and protesters themselves. On the contrary, her attention is centred on the philosophical questions arising from recent uprisings.

In this connection, weighty theoretical claims are made at several points in the book. The previous assertion regarding the transition of social struggles 'from the factory to the city square' is thus radicalised: 'The transition is a both wider and deeper process: the new revolts revolve around the question of inhabiting. [...] Inhabiting ought to be understood, not as the possession of a habitation, but rather as a political-existential relationship to the self, to others, to the earth. How ought one to reside and cohabit?' (Ibid: 71). At this level of generality, however, 'inhabiting' seems slightly more than a synonym of politics itself—which tells us little regarding the purported novelty of contemporary revolts.

The topic of inhabiting reappears quite abruptly at the end of the text. In the penultimate section, Di Cesare argues that 'even the most radical expressions of opposition that invoke freedom, equality and social justice [...] mostly play out according to codified patterns and take place within institutionally established traditions'. As a consequence, even revolts would often end up reinforcing a view of politics centred on the sovereign state and biassed by methodological nationalism (Ibid, pp. 117–119). Against such a backdrop, the best alternative would be represented by the 'anarchist revolt', which 'violates state borders, denationalises the supposed citizenry, unbinds and estranges them, makes them provisionally stateless, invites them to proclaim themselves resident foreigners' (Ibid, p. 119). While some instances of no-border activism may come to mind here—and Di Cesare seems to imply that NGOs saving migrants in the Mediterranean are a case of anarchist revolt (Ibid, p. 87)—she is less explicit in other occasions (do members of Anonymous fall into her definition?). The author briefly considers what subtracting oneself from the capture of a state community into which one was born may imply while discussing the cases of Assange, Snowden and Manning, but her reflections enigmatically end in further thoughts on inhabiting: 'It is not enough to untie oneself, to opt out, to consider oneself as having no homeland. Beyond stateless flight, one must reside as a foreigner. [...] Only if, rather than devoting oneself to wandering, the stateless recognize their alienness to the city—something they have in common with the foreigner—is another way of inhabiting possible' (2022a, pp. 123–124).

With its elliptic references to inhabiting, *The Time of Revolt* implicitly shows that Di Cesare's political philosophy can be fully understood only if taken as a unified project (cf. Astone, 2022). The notion of 'resident foreigner' (*straniero residente*) appeared as early as 2011, in an article which Di Cesare (2011: 41) later expanded into a (still untranslated) book, *Israele. Terra, ritorno, anarchia*

© 2023 The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited, corrected publication 2023. 1470-8914

(2014).[1] As she shows there, the phrase 'resident foreigner' comes from the Torah (Lev. 25, 23), more precisely from a passage where God affirms Himself to be the only owner of the earth and puts therefore a limit to land alienation—from a divine standpoint, even the legal owner of a given portion of land is just a 'resident foreigner' thereupon (cf. Di Cesare, 2014a: 50–51). Since everybody is a foreigner in God's eyes, Di Cesare sees in the Jewish notion of *gher*, of a foreigner that is always already an inhabitant (in Hebrew, *ghur* means 'to live'), a fundamental resource for rethinking migration and hospitality in our time. Indeed, if the foreigner is constitutively a resident, the latter always remains, from a theological perspective, a foreigner—thus potentially bridging the gap between a native 'us' and an immigrant 'them'. In her reinterpretation of Jewish thought, Di Cesare claims that the state relies on the constant possibility of declaring war against those it considers as foreigners—as a result, the only hospitality and peace worthy of the name would be 'anarchist', against and beyond the state (cf. Di Cesare, 2014a, pp. 96–105).

She further expands on these claims in *Resident Foreigners: A Philosophy of Migration* (2020). In the first chapter, the author positions herself against both communitarian defences of closed borders (her main target being Michael Walzer) and the liberal-egalitarian arguments for open borders advanced by Joseph Carens. Both approaches are criticised for thinking of migration 'from the riverbank', taking for granted what should be questioned, 'from the state-centric order of the world to the concepts of citizenship, belonging and territory' (Ibid: 20). As an alternative, she proposes an anarchist radicalisation of Arendt's reflections on the rights of refugees (cf. Ibid: 22–25, 29–37) and of Kant's 'right to visit' (Ibid: 75–77). In the second chapter, Di Cesare offers an example of public philosophy at its best, raising poignant criticisms against many assumptions that are common in debates around immigration (e.g. the possibility to meaningfully distinguish between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants', the belief that the state's right to grant 'asylum' is a meaningful tool to address migrations, the depiction of 'illegal' migrants as criminals).

It is, however, in the third chapter that the notion of 'resident foreigners' is developed. In particular, her earlier thoughts on the concept of *gher* are systematised through the comparison of three models of citizenship, each symbolised by a city: Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. While in ancient Athens democratic citizenship was strictly limited according to a 'mythical' notion of *autochthony* (Ibid: 140–147), in the Roman Empire the introduction of a juridical notion of citizenship made room for its extension to people born in significantly different places. Nonetheless, granting citizenship rights remained a sovereign

[1] Although she had not yet focussed on the notion of 'resident foreigner', Di Cesare had laid the theoretical foundations of her later reflections even earlier, in a book originally published in 2003 (2012, chap. 2).

© 2023 The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited, corrected publication 2023. 1470-8914

prerogative, which could be exercised or not (Ibid: 147–153). On the contrary, the conception of citizenship emerging from the Torah coincides—at least in some readings—with that of hospitality: nobody is allowed to reclaim her autochthony as the ground of citizenship rights, and no sovereign authority can bestow them as it pleases (Ibid: 153–163). While theoretically deep and politically stimulating, Di Cesare's reflections on 'resident foreigners' do not evolve, in the fourth and last chapter of her 2020 volume, in a clear account of what an anarchist citizenship as hospitality would look like today, nor of the political initiatives that may be taken to get us closer to that ideal (cf. Franke, 2021; Astone, 2022, pp. 194–196).

Once we acknowledge this background, Di Cesare's take on revolts not only becomes clearer, but it can even be read as a much needed development of the arguments presented in *Resident Foreigners*. In one of the few references to specific social practices featured in *The Time of Revolt*, she mentions French *Zones à defender* (ZAD) as the product of a series of revolts: they are 'areas occupied out of opposition to agro-industrial programmes or controversial projects, such as the building of an airport or a car park' (2022a: 71). ZADs are important because 'they are the prefiguration of radically democratic and ecological ways of inhabiting the world', also working as 'a trial run at decapitalisation' (Ibid.: 72). Those living in ZADs or analogous contexts—we may now hypothesise in the light of Di Cesare's earlier works—are among the contemporary 'resident foreigners' we were looking for.

Di Cesare may thus be said to have found in a particular subset of revolts a fertile empirical ground for her philosophy of inhabiting. However, the reader gets the feeling that her conceptual categories have not been put fully to use: autonomous zones are extremely fascinating, but difficult to replicate on a large scale. What about, for example, anticolonial and anti-imperialist revolts? They put into question states' borders and property rights; they defend or try to reappropriate lands which were once held in common; they contrast brutal instances of capitalistic value-extraction in strategic ecosystems; they disrupt national allegiances by making appeal also to the citizens of those states whose expansionary plans they fight against.

It is at this point that we stumble on what is perhaps the main weakness in Di Cesare's political thought. In order to see why, we need to go back to her book on Israel. There we find out that her project does not limit itself to an insightful re-reading of some Jewish motifs about inhabiting, but includes the elaboration of a problematic version of Zionism. Even though the state of Israel seems as contradictory with Di Cesare's anarchism as a state can be, she maintains that the concept of 'resident foreigner' is an exclusive of Israel's culture, which in this connection would be the most advanced of all:

> Indeed, while [Israel] is accused of occupying a land which is not its own, it shows the possibility of a new way of inhabiting, reminding itself as well as

> others that nobody is autochthonous. The condition of the 'resident foreigner' is outlined [in this book] not only to show the value of an open citizenship, disconnected from territory and state, but also to look at the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict from a new angle. Is it not the emergence of Israel the emergence of new times? What if its task is the subversion of the world's state-centric order and the implosion of the nation-state? If Israel brings foreignness, its return is an incursion (*effrazione*) in the inhabiting of Palestine. Almost as the delegates of [all] other peoples, the Palestinians find themselves facing the abyss, the empty foundation of all nations, of which Israel is a reminder. It is as if, in the history of peoples which split territories among themselves during the centuries, Israel has come back to disturb that partition, contesting it from within its frontiers (Di Cesare, 2014a: 12–13; cf. also 45 and 76–77).

A bizarre passage indeed, from which we may be tempted to infer that the inhabitants of Gaza or the West Bank should be grateful to the Israeli authorities for the unrequested lecture in political theology. It does not help that Di Cesare often recurs precisely to those dichotomic readings that the notion of 'resident foreigner' should allow us to avoid: she writes—despite contrary evidence abundantly provided by Israeli scholars themselves (e.g. Sand, 2009, 2014)—that 'in twenty centuries of exile the bond between the Jews and the land of Israel has never ended' (Di Cesare, 2014a, p. 17), while Palestinians would 'mainly descend from the 1930s Arab immigrants' and their national identity would be merely the result of the confrontation with Israel (Ibid.: p. 41). Similarly, Israel is described as a 'post-national society' projecting itself into a globalised world, while Palestine is characterised as 'proto-national' and backward (Ibid.: p. 39)—the fact that the close coexistence and the painful interaction of such societies may have something to do with their differences is not taken into account.

In the face of the anarchist potential that she seems to find almost anywhere within Jewish culture, even in the expansionary wars narrated in the book of Exodus (Ibid.: 82–83), Di Cesare reduces the really-existing-state-of-Israel to a sort of bump in the utopian road. The well-documented, long-lasting and still ongoing practice of racialized settler-colonialism, when mentioned at all in her writings, is dismissed as 'the right-wing, belligerent politics of expansion which, *during the last years*, has provoked great and useless tensions' (2021, italics mine). Similarly, 'apartheid'—a concept nowadays applied to Israeli power in Palestine even by Amnesty International—is a 'serious word' which Europeans should refrain from using (Ibid.). Virtually closing the circle, a generic 'anti-Zionism' has been recently defined by this author as a form of anti-Semitism (2022b: 139–143)—a claim that several Jewish intellectuals have rightly characterised as unfounded and even dangerous for the effective contrast of anti-Semitism (e.g. Butler, 2004: 101–127).

© 2023 The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited, corrected publication 2023.

That ideas like these can be advanced with the aim of promoting an 'anarchic peace' (Di Cesare, 2014a: 103–105) in the Middle East is perplexing, but what I find most interesting here is not a matter of inconsistency. Rather, I see Di Cesare's work as a good starting point for an uncompromising reflection on the need to decolonize political theory. Indeed, how could an anarchist like Di Cesare, who rightly lambastes her colleagues for their methodological nationalism (2022a: 120) and advocates for the overcoming of the nation-state, be criticised for her problematic (lack of a) record on anticolonialism? That questions like the former make sense to us demonstrates how common a moralistic approach to these issues still is: colonial assumptions and methodologies are seen as individual mistakes, rather than as the product of significant epistemic blinders deriving from structural injustice. In this connection, the growing body of work devoted to cognitive and epistemic (in)justice, as well as to the (often preconscious) processes of learned ignorance to which we are particularly vulnerable as white, Western academics, is still far from being incorporated into the political theory mainstream (radical and moderate, Continental and Analytic).

Precisely because Di Cesare is an astute political philosopher and an often-commendable public intellectual, her shortcomings cannot be reduced to intellectual laziness or bad faith—they speak to the current state of Western political theory itself. Why is it perceived as normal that a book on the politics of revolts *in general* features almost exclusively the political life of Western Europe and North America?[2] Can we really believe that a non-statist conception of inhabiting can be developed only or even mainly from the religious sources of Judaism and Christianity? What about, among others, Native American and Indigenous political thought?

Di Cesare does not consider that her long-time commitments to anarchism and non-violence can go hand in hand with the celebration of revolts only within fairly narrow political scenarios—where, among other things, the levels or repression that activists will face are not those experienced under military occupation or authoritarian rule. In this connection, while *The Time of Revolt* must be praised for its insistence on the institutional violence of the state against those who voice social dissensus, we should also notice its odd silence on the violence enacted by revolts themselves. A passage devoted to criticise Rawls's liberal account of civil disobedience is here particularly telling (2022a: 83): in a few lines, Rawls's '*non-violent* expression of public-mindedness' (italics mine) becomes a view of civil disobedience based on 'publicity and responsibility'. Where has the non-violence requirement gone?[3] In what follows, Di Cesare critically analyses in turn publicity

[2] Franke (2021) raises a similar concern regarding Di Cesare's *Resident Foreigners*.

[3] The emphasis on non-violence is not a Rawlsian peculiarity: 'non-violence may very well be the notion most often associated with civil disobedience both in the public imaginary and in theoretical discussions' (Celikates, 2016: 41).

© 2023 The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited, corrected publication 2023. 1470-8914

and responsibility, but non-violence never enters the picture (Ibid: 83–87). In her view, revolts represent a radical alternative to civil disobedience, but apparently not on the issue of violence—a peculiar position, given that even some of the social movements cited by this author, like Black Lives Matter, recur to violence *against things* (Hooker, 2016). In fact, it would be difficult to find a definition of revolt that does not at least contemplate the recourse to violent means. Paradoxically, Di Cesare's no-border political philosophy remains trapped in the narrowness of its boundaries.

References

Astone, G. (2022) From *Immunopolitics* to *Xenopolitics*: Sovereignty and Migration in Donatella Di Cesare's *Resident Foreigners*. *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 5: 186–199.

Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious Lives. The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* Verso.

Celikates, R. (2016) Rethinking Civil Disobedience as a Practice of Contestation—Beyond the Liberal Paradigm. *Constellations* 23(1): 37–45.

Di Cesare, D. (2011) Terra-madre o terra-sposa? Ripensando il sionismo. *La Rassegna Mensile Di Israel* 77(1–2): 29–44.

Di Cesare, D. (2012) *Utopia of Understanding. Between Babel and Auschwitz.* Trans. by N. Keane. SUNY Press.

Di Cesare, D. (2014b) *Crimini contro l'ospitalità. Vita e violenza nei centri per gli stranieri.* il melangolo.

Di Cesare, D. (2021) Tra Israele e Palestina l'idea di due popoli e due stati non regge più, *L'Espresso* 21/5/2021.

Di Cesare, D. (2022b) *Se Auschwitz è nulla. Contro il negazionismo.* Bollati Boringhieri.

Franke, M.F.N. (2021) Review of *Resident Foreigners. International Migration Review* 55(4): 1270–1272.

Hooker, J. (2016) Black Lives Matter and the paradoxes of U.S. Black politics: From democratic sacrifice to democratic repair. *Political Theory* 44(4): 448–469.

Sand, S. (2009). *The Invention of the Jewish People*. Trans. by Y. Lotan. Verso.

Sand, S. (2014). *The Invention of the Land of Israel. From Holy Land to Homeland.* Trans. by G. Forman. Verso.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Franco Palazzi
University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK
palaf120@newschool.edu

© 2023 The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited, corrected publication 2023.