

The feminist journalist Rebecca Bohlin has looked into the working and living conditions of the least paid workers within the service sector, although reminding to us that many other jobs in different sectors meet similar problems. She has met cleaners, kitchen attendants and cashiers in Stockholm, London, Hamburg and at the same time has interviewed scholars and as well politicians and union representatives about the rise in income inequality and the worsening of working conditions, across Europe and in Sweden.

And to Sweden indeed is devoted the first chapter (*Hur står RUT?*). The question of rising inequalities has become hot after 2007, when tax deductions for domestic service (RUT) were introduced, with the argument that the black market was to be stopped. In fact, however, according to the unions and to some research, the outcome has been an increasing in the number of workers (often asylum seekers or anyway migrants, very often women) exploited and with no safeguard: their formal job contract is legal, but their actual working conditions are definitely different, and for the worse. Yet in Sweden, as Bohlin acknowledges, living conditions of the low-paid workers are better than in most other countries.

In the second chapter (*Så pressas lönerna neråt*) Bohlin analyzes, again through witnesses and interviews, migration policy at the EU level and in some of its member States. She insists on the paradox of a rhetoric stressing the need of labour force from outside Europe, in order to face demographic challenges and to make companies more “globalized”, while at the same time the actual policy is based on a military defence of the “fortress Europe”, at the cost of thousands of human lives every year. And those who succeed in reaching Europe are often exploited both economically and, when women, sexually. And that even in a country that is a world master in workers’ rights and gender equality such as Sweden.

How are trade unions tackling this backward trend to a degree of workers’ exploitation similar to that in the 19th century? Around this unavoidable question the third chapter (*Facket famlar efter en ny solidaritet*) is built. The answer is not at all self-evident; on the contrary, here one goes on attempt by attempt. However, what comes out from the talks that the author has had with union leaders and members, in Sweden and in the UK, as well as with scholars, is that a trade union like the Swedish one, service-oriented, is not well-equipped to face the challenges that labour movements all over the world have to meet. More interesting it seems

R. Bohlin, De Osynliga. Det Europas fattiga arbetarklass; M. Linton, De hatade. Om radikalhögerns måltavlor; B. Elmbrant, Europas stålbad. Krisen som slukar välfärden och skakar euron (All titles by Atlas, Stockholm, 2012) | 2

the experience of the “Social Movement Unionism”, a strategy that has been tested in South America and is made up of a mix of mobilization, learning, dialogue with local society, negotiations – and protest actions. Exactly what many all over Europe – either workers or unemployed, migrant or local – call for.

An even darker side of Europe is the subject of Magnus Linton’s work, that he describes in his Introduction as a book on “majorities and minorities, absolutism and relativism, borders and lack of them, fantasy and reality”. The author, well-known in Sweden for his reports after the carnage in Utøya, has carried out an inquiry about right-wing radicalism in three European countries: Hungary, the Netherlands and Norway, moving from the awareness that the current economic crisis increases its appeal. Linton has met the main targets of xenophobic and neo-nazi groups, respectively Roma people in Hungary, muslims in the Netherlands and left-wing intellectuals in Norway. The first section (*Parasiterna*), after reminding shortly the persecution of Roma in history (culminating with their, neglected, massacre during World War II) and the recent deportation of Roma in countries such as France, Italy and Sweden, introduces the reader to the disturbing world of the Hungarian neo-fascist party *Jobbik* (Movement for a better Hungary), whose programme is openly “roma-centered”, so to say, and that in 2010 established itself as one of the main political forces in the country with 17% of votes. Jobbik’s growing influence resulted in a situation that Linton, with reference to what happened in the municipality of Gyöngyöspata, tells in the following way: “in 2011 in the middle of Europe fascists in uniform marched and families belonging to one of the poorest and most persecuted minorities in the continent were forced to escape what otherwise would have turned into a *pogrom*”. And Gyöngyöspata was only the beginning. However, the political scientist Zsolt Enyedi, interviewed by Linton, points out that these developments in Hungary were at the same time astonishing and predictable. Their roots can be found in a historical process starting from the fall of the Berlin wall; since then, populism has been a constant presence in Hungarian life and in the end has exploded due to the economic crisis. The fact that in 2010 the nationalist and authoritarian party *Fidesz* won 2/3 of the votes has made the situation even worse and transformed Hungary into a stronghold of radical Right in Europe.

Another country, another scapegoat: in the Netherlands, as it is well-known, the thesis that

“our” problems could be solved if only “we” got rid of Muslims has found one of its most prominent champions, i.e. Geert Wilders, leader of the Freedom Party and major pointer for Dutch politics for years (see the section: *Ockupanterna*). Though making sure to distinguish himself from people like Anders Berg Breivik (who pointed at Wilders as his ideological source of inspiration) by stressing his own democratic attitude, Wilders has steadily run down Islam, equating it with Fascism. Together with Pim Fortuyn (murdered in 2002 by a left-wing extremist), he has personified the idea that multiculturalism is a luxury only the privileged few can afford and has transformed the Netherlands into the headquarters of islamophobia in Europe.

The Dutch historian Thomas von der Dunk, here quoted, urges to take into account that politics’ highest aim is economic security, as well as the capability for society to accept cultural uncertainty; but when the former decreases, then the need for a strong cultural identity rises.

Roma people and Muslims are easy scapegoats in a continent affected by geopolitical and economic turbulences; but how came that in the rich and enlightened Norway a right-wing extremist killed more than 70 young left-wing activists? What Berg Breivik aims at with his double attack (a bomb in Oslo and the carnage on the Utøya island) was, as Linton explains, to murder at the same time three generations of “betrayers” (hence the title of the section, *Förrädarna*), i.e. three generations of Social Democrats: the forthcoming (the young activists who met in Utøya), the present (the governmental headquarter in the capital), and the former (Gro Harlem Brundtland, former prime minister, who escaped assassination in the island due to a delay in Breivik Berg’s plan).

What has been betrayed are Norwegian culture and identity, quite obviously. Breivik Berg defines “cultural Marxism” what could otherwise be summarized as “politically correct”, in other words the idea that there are some topics that cannot be questioned, above all feminism and multiculturalism. Linton points out that coinciding with the perhaps unstoppable march of right-wing extremism in Europe is the discontent caused by what has been perceived as the hegemony of political correctness, which has become more and more centered upon universities. After all, right-wing radicalism is not interested in discussing rationally a question (which is supposed to be the academic approach) but, on the contrary, in imposing its own understanding of reality. And it is succeeding in doing this.

R. Bohlin, *De Osynliga*. Det Europas fattiga arbetarklass; M. Linton, *De hatade*. Om radikalhögerns måltavlor; B. Elmbrant, *Europas stålbad*. Krisen som slukar välfärden och skakar euron (All titles by Atlas, Stockholm, 2012) | 4

Linton recalls our attention to the fact that what is striking in Breivik Berg is not his insanity, but how much he reflects stereotypes and plot-syndromes related to Islam that unfortunately are represented in more or less all the European parliaments (as well as in the EU one).

Not even the book by Elmbrant, one of the most prominent Swedish journalists, is intended to bring comfort to the reader. Here as well the impact of the economic downturn is looked into in a European perspective, yet with a particular attention to countries such as Greece (see chapter 1, *Ett land faller sönder*) and Ireland (chapter 3, *Irland på liv och död*). In chapter 2 (*Hur hamnade vi här?*) the author follows the making of the Euro and then compares the faith of two countries, Ireland and Iceland; both hit by the crisis, but the latter (outside the common currency) recovering better. Italy is not at all forgotten in this account: the doubts about its financial soundness have been recurrent amongst EU – and German in particular – leaders, for many years. However, Elmbrant warns (chapter 4, *Skenbilden av krisen*) against those, in Brussels as well as Berlin and Paris, who blame upon *some* countries ? the Southern European ones primarily ? the European financial difficulties, as the problem were simply that if one spends too much, then one has to pay back sooner or later. Elmbrant is well aware that Greece, with all the stereotypes surrounding it, has worked as a perfect scapegoat, but insists on the *European* dimension of the economic crisis. The trouble indeed is not the Greeks' unreliability, but the EU powerlessness in the face of much bigger transnational financial powers. In this connection, it needs to be said that left-wing parties have definitely not been united and consistent in their (often late) condemnation of the abuse of power from private banks and finance at large.

It cannot miss, in this critical report about the EU state of health, a chapter on Angela Merkel, significantly entitled *She who decides* (5, *Hon som bestämmer*) and on Germany's hegemonic role. The outcome of financial powers' and Germany's supremacy are described in chapter 6 (*Europas stålbad*), again focusing mostly on Southern Europe, but raising a more general question: the changing role of the Nation-State. Here Elmbrant mentions an article on *The New Left Review* by the German social scientist Wolfgang Streeck as crucial: the dismantlement of Europe's social policies has restricted the ability of the State as far as mediating between citizens' rights and Capital's diktats is concerned, and by this move increased further the latter's authoritativeness as well. There have been massive

R. Bohlin, *De Osynliga. Det Europas fattiga arbetarklass*; M. Linton, *De hatade. Om radikalhögerens måltavlor*; B. Elmbrant, *Europas stålbad. Krisen som slukar välfärden och skakar euron* (All titles by Atlas, Stockholm, 2012) | 5

demonstrations against budget-restriction policies, at least in Greece, Spain and Portugal (chapter 7, *De unga på marsch*), but Elmbrant does not forget that up to now it is the Radical Right the political actor who seems to have taken more advantage from the crisis, and not the Left. Are the European Central Bank and Merkel right when presenting austerity as the only way out of the crisis or can young people protesting in Athens, Madrid and Lisbon point out to an alternative? The last two chapters are built around this question.

After summarizing the different proposals currently discussed in the EU (in the end all related to the dilemma: more or less unity among member States? See chapter 8, *Stopp i Brysseltrafiken*), Elmbrant closes his report by handling the question of the future of the common currency (chapter 9, *Har euron en framtid?*). After looking at expert analysis and people's mood his answer (well reflecting Swedish attitude to the EU) is: the Euro is doomed to collapse ? after all it has been a mistake from the beginning ? with consequences that in some cases will prove to be devastating. And thinking at what is going on in many European countries we can easily believe that this apocalyptic scenario is not simply a kind of snobbery from the rich Nordic countries.

Share this:

Share