
Book Review

Carlos Mignon, *Córdoba Obrera: El sindicato en la fábrica, 1968–1973*, (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2014), 384pp., \$530

Adam Fishwick

De Montfort University, UK; adam.fishwick@dmu.ac.uk

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Abstract

Review of *Córdoba Obrera: El sindicato en la fábrica* by Carlos Mignon.

Keywords: *cordobazo*; *viborazo*; labour history; Argentina

In *Córdoba Obrera*, Carlos Mignon provides a ground-breaking account of the *cordobazo* and *viborazo* – two of the most significant uprisings of twentieth century Argentina – and of the *clasista* radical working class tradition that emerged after 1970 in Córdoba. He begins in the workplace to produce a contribution not just to labour history in the city, but to wider understandings of labour mobilisation and of the revolutionary potential of the working class.

The influence of Italian *operaismo* runs through this fascinating study of worker militancy in the factory, which Mignon convincingly argues can ‘revitalise and reopen the debate over a social subject that profoundly marked the history of the country’ (p. XXVIII). From here, he treats us to a masterly analysis of the working lives and political subjectivities of workers in the automobile industry in Córdoba. In chapters one to four, he describes the context of *clasista* workers’ organisations during 1970 and 1971. He provides, in unparalleled depth, an account of the historical evolution of the industry in the city and of the labour process. It was, he shows, the contradictions that arose in the modernisation of these plants and the differential wages and working conditions of skilled and unskilled workers that produced new forms of organisation and mobilisation. The prevailing model of union organisation was unable to contain these contradictions – as it had elsewhere – meaning that from their concrete workplace experience, workers in the automobile plants of Córdoba were able to introduce new political practices, new demands, and the beginnings of a rupture with the existing order.

Significantly, this claim challenges a key argument of the most important English language analysis of this period – James Brennan’s *The Labor Wars in Córdoba* – that workers in Córdoba possessed ‘not a class consciousness but certainly a union consciousness’.¹ In starting from the workplace, from the workers’ themselves and from the inverted relation between labour and capital of *operaismo*, Mignon shows how a class consciousness *did* emerge. Automobile workers in Córdoba were rendered a class by capital, with the establishment of the independent unions that were formed being possible only by their prior existence as a class ‘in-themselves’. It was the subjective conditions – the context produced by the multiple and fractious parties of the Left operating in the ‘savage Córdoba’ – that then shaped the radical meaning ascribed to these conditions of everyday life.

It is from this point on that Mignon’s *Córdoba Obrera* then makes its most substantial contribution, not only to a specific historical understanding of labour mobilisation in Córdoba, but more widely to labour history and a conceptualisation of labour mobilisation. True to the *operaista* tradition with which Mignon aligns himself, he presents a ‘workers’ inquiry’ that, in dialogue with the historical subjects of his study, identifies the points of contradiction and radical potential for a revolutionary challenge to the prevailing status-quo.

He reconceptualises the *cordobazo* as ‘a conflict declared by the unions’ transformed into a ‘period of insubordination in the factories that shaped the coming years’ (p. 185). While acknowledging the role of the radical Left political parties and ideas present in the factory occupations and mass protests that would follow, it is the new strategies of struggle and forms of organisation born in the factories that are at the heart of his analysis. By entering the automobile factories to unravel the emergence of a potentially revolutionary labour tradition, he shows the limitations of the unions as the subject of labour history and political practice.

Yet, he also illustrates the limitations of this apparent spontaneity. In confronting the prevailing union bureaucracy without constructing an alternative, he shows the relative ease with which the radical demands and political praxis of *clasista* militants were absorbed by the very structures they sought to overcome. It was, he demonstrates, with the victory of Renée Salamanca – perhaps the best known of the *clasistas* – in 1972 that the beginning of the end of this alternative model of organisation was confirmed. The institutionalisation of *clasismo* quickly spelt its demise, marginalising the strongest elements and subduing it as a political movement. It was this endpoint, Mignon shows us, that illustrates the fundamental limitation of this experience of working class autonomy. Without the construction of an alternative organisational form, a genuine ‘political party of the working class’, and when faced by the full force of capital and the state, there was little chance of revolutionary transformation.

Perhaps it is here, then, that we can raise an alternative conclusion to this fascinating analysis. In his conclusion, Mignon points to the significance of *clasismo* in reframing the possibility of alternative

forms of organisation as its greatest legacy (p. 281). This challenge to the prevailing model of union organisation rendered workers a ‘fundamental factor in the crisis’ that emerged after 1973, creating the need for institutional mediation and the repressive violence to come (p. 286). Yet, we can also see this ‘failure’ as part of a longer trajectory of revolutionary movements from below. The veracity of the response – by the state, by firms and by the union bureaucracy – surely demonstrates the radical potential of this experience and raises questions about how to reproduce its transformative modes of resistance today.

Note

¹ James Brennan, *The Labor Wars in Cordoba: 1955–1976, Ideology, Work, and Labor Politics in an Argentine Industrial City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 76.