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Peter Dauvergne, Genevieve LeBaron. *Protest Inc: The Corporatization of Activism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014. 200 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-6948-9.

Reviewed by Timothy S. Brown (Northeastern University)

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The Corporatization of Protest

Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron's *Protest Inc.* is an important and timely book dealing with a key feature of the modern political landscape: the corporatization of activism. In seeking to understand, as the authors put it, "[where] the radicals are," the book falls into a long tradition, stretching back at least as far as Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), of trying to understand the interplay of forces forestalling progressive social change (p. 1). Where Marx wondered why social classes failed to play their "correct" part in the revolution of 1848 and its aftermath, Gramsci how fascism was able to maintain its social support despite the real nature of its agenda, and the Situationists how consumer capitalism's commodification of desire blunted authentic utopian possibility, Dauvergne and LeBaron are interested in how widespread and sometimes powerful movements of social justice have, in our time, become imbricated in the very structures and discourses they originally sought to combat. This ability of "capitalism to assimilate criticism and dissent" is nothing less than the contemporary face of the capitalist recuperation lamented by activists in the 1960s and 70s; but it is all the more pernicious, the authors argue, because of the constraints and pressures that increasingly force activists to take part in it (p. 4).

Widespread discontent in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, expressed in riots and rebellions, the "Arab Spring," the Occupy movement, and so on, make the failure to effectively combat the neoliberal austerity regime and the persistence of neocolonial "humanitarian intervention" all the more puzzling. Dauvergne

and LeBaron identify "three processes that are interacting with markets and politics to corporatize activism": these are 1) "the securitization of dissent" (i.e., naked repression of the sort that has historically faced workers' and left-wing movements); 2) the "privatization of social life" (i.e., the neoliberal colonization from which no corner of daily life remains sacrosanct); and 3) the institutionalization of activism (i.e., the development of a professional strata of activists prone to seek accommodation with corporate and other status quo-upholding forces) (p. 2). The effect of these intertwined processes, the authors argue, is to severely circumscribe the possibilities of activism. "What we are trying to understand," they write, "is why so many activists within longstanding social and environmental movements are increasingly accepting and working within the framework of global capitalism—and how the forces of corporatization are in turn sapping the power of grassroots protest and movements to change government policies and business practices" (p. 27). The result of this state of affairs is that activism is less radical than it used to be, and paradoxically (because of the increasing stigmatization of activism in the media) seen to be more radical than it actually is (p. 4).

However much the uprisings of 2011 and 2012 may have impressed themselves on the consciousness of the world, the authors are skeptical about their import in the face of the corporatization of activism. "[L]ooking in the cold light of day at actual outcomes," they write, "it is clear that corporatized activism today is doing far

more to uphold the world order than mass protests and grassroots activism are doing to transform it” (p. 137). This trend is strongly linked with structural trends leading to what the authors call the “privatization of social life.” “Now,” they write, “radical collective action faces sky-high hurdles. Associational binds have become more transitory and brittle in a world of wealth and wealth-dreams, where social life is privatizing, and where transformations in culture comprise nothing short of ‘the triumph of the individual over society’ ” (p. 82). This individualization of society, they argue, grows out of an “ebbing of collectivity” in the 1950s through the 1970s (p. 87).

The reader’s response to this book will no doubt hinge on the question of his or her attitude toward capitalism: if capitalism is seen as the least worst alternative to which humankind can aspire, then the imbrication of activism in business processes will perhaps be seen as a positive

good, or at least an inevitability. If, on the other hand, the reader upholds the possibility of a more just and humane alternative to capitalism, then the picture painted by the authors—of a growing together of business and activism to the benefit of the former and the diminution of the latter—will be profoundly troubling.

Written in clear, simple, and forceful prose, *Protest Inc.* is a model of engaged scholarship that raises, and attempts to answer, important questions about the fate of human society. In offering “a warning shot across the bows of corporatizing activism,” the authors wish to “move along conversations among activists about strategy and [encourage] a re-evaluation of public policies that stifle grassroots activism” (p. 156). If, as they predict, increasing social unrest is on the way, the questions they raise in *Protest Inc.* are bound to become more important than ever.

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