

Benjamin Dangl, *Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010).

In *Dancing with Dynamite*, Benjamin Dangl presents a journalistic and activist account of the rise of left and center-to-left governments in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela, Brazil, and Paraguay in the past decade. Although it adopts the same causal explanations as much of the existing literature (namely the unequivocal failures of the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s), the book goes further to explore the ways in which grassroots social movements have been incorporated by or remain in tension with the formal political system.

Despite his partisan rhetoric, Dangl displays a remarkable eye for the subtleties and complexities that differentiate each one of these cases. This allows him to move away from the facile conclusions of the “lumper” attitude that characterizes much of the discussion around the Latin American “pink tide”: from Jorge Castañeda’s dichotomy between the “good” and the “bad” left, to much of the media coverage that frequently subsumes all of these countries under the umbrella-category of populist regimes.

Dangl extricates the particularities of each case in at least three different fronts. In the first place, the *leit motif* that guides his trip around South America is the metaphor that gives title to the book. The dance that Dangl refers to is the complicated tango between social movements, the state, and the political parties. By framing the narration in terms of this conflict-ridden *ménage-a-trois*, Dangl finds a dimension in which the variation between cases is significant. This brings to the forefront the differences between, let’s say, the rise of Evo Morales in Bolivia as a result of a long process of social mobilization that finally obtained the strength to compete and triumph in electoral politics, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, where the mobilization of support has been largely created *ex post* through the Bolivarian Revolution launched from the presidency. These differences are relevant insofar as they allow us to read Latin American recent history against the background of larger historical processes and theoretical debates. For instance, David and Ruth Berins Collier, in *Shaping the Political Arena* (1991), argue that the way in which the working classes were incorporated into the political system of Latin American countries in the early twentieth century varied according to the calculations that parties, states and labour movements made when facing a “dual dilemma”: for the state and the political elites, achieving control over or support from the labor movement; for the workers, aligning themselves with a political party or maintaining the radical edge of the movement in opposition to the political establishment. Collier & Collier suggested that the strategy chosen by the elites and the workers had long-term effects on the political stability and democratization of Latin American countries. From this perspective, Dangl’s account of the “pink tide” poses interesting hypotheses: how states and social movements dance tonight will determine the political

atmosphere of tomorrow.

Secondly, Dangel presents a picture of these left-wing governments that reveals how mistaken is much of the demonization or idealization that they have suffered. Instead, he shows that many of these regimes have accepted accommodationist bargains with the old political elites and the international markets. Furthermore, Dangel also underlines the paradoxes of institutionalizing a revolutionary process, signalling how the attempt to consolidate a popular movement in power often comes at the expense of excluding other sectors from the left and closing itself from internal criticism. Regardless of the normative evaluations that this picture motivates, it represents a much more complex assessment of how “pink” the “pink tide” really is.

Finally, the last chapter of the book briefly describes three cases where many of the strategies (what Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam call “repertoires”) of Latin American social movements have been mimicked in the United States: actions of land occupation in Miami similar to the campaigns of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil; occupied factories in Chicago akin to the ones undertaken by Argentine workers in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis; opposition to the privatization of water in Highland Park, Michigan, analogous to the Water War in Bolivia. Dangel’s creative comparison between these movements opens up promising areas of inquiry about the transmission of new forms of political resistance that emerge at the local level and then travel fairly easily across the globe.

Dancing with Dynamite does not provide innovative explanations of the left turns in Latin America. Its activist ethos often impedes a more impartial assessment of these cases ? for example, any mention of the accusations of censorship and harassment against the opposition in Venezuela are conspicuously absent ? and Dangel’s ideological assumptions frequently conceal unresolved debates, such as the old question of the Second International about reformism versus revolution. If there was a lesson to take from the Colliers’ account of workers’ incorporation, it is that radicalized labour movements have faced in the past the bloodiest forms of repression. To aprioristically dismiss any form of accommodation with the political establishment as a betrayal to the cause, or to uncritically overlook the authoritarian and exclusionary dynamics that are often present within social movements, entails falling once again into simplistic portrayals of very complex historical processes. Having said this, Dangel’s merits supersede those defects, and the South America that he presents is full of the particularities, subtleties and nuances that make it the diverse and vibrant region that inspires some of the most creative research in history and social science.

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