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Book review:

'The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organising Hope' by Ana Cecilia Dinerstein

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The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organising Hope by Ana Cecilia Dinerstein (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 282pp

Autonomy has a long and contested history. While some see it as a central goal for grassroots organizations and social movements, others see it as a futile exercise. This thought-provoking book makes a timely and important contribution to this debate. Drawing on the humanist philosophy of Ernst Bloch, Ana Dinerstein identifies four modes of autonomous praxis – negating, creating, contradicting and exceeding – and places them in the 'key of hope'. From this perspective, 'negating' is understood as the rejection of given realities; 'creating' involves establishing concrete utopias; 'contradicting' relates to negotiating and challenging appropriation; and 'exceeding' concerns prefiguration or the pursuit of 'an unrealised or an existing-oppressed reality' (p.71). These four modes provide the basis of what the author calls 'the art of organising hope' or, more precisely and poetically, 'the art of using knowledge creatively and politically to weave dreams out of misery, against the odds, amidst brutal state violence, endemic poverty, desperate hunger and social devastation' (p.26).

The author develops her argument in three main stages. She starts by critically evaluating the existing literature on autonomy (Chapter Two). One of the central claims she makes in this chapter is that notions of autonomy formulated in the 'north' cannot be generalized to the 'south' where indigenous struggles force us to rethink autonomy. The distinct historical path indigenous peoples have followed is central to the line the author draws between 'indigenous'

and 'non-indigenous' autonomy. Memory is 'mobilised and articulated with political imagination' in indigenous struggles (p.51). The past and present collide to open the door to the creation of alternative realities. History is also crucial for understanding indigenous conflicts over land and territory, which are frequently rooted in the defence and reclaiming of ancestral land and part of a wider struggle for decolonization.

Having identified the limitations of the existing literature, Dinerstein explains the alternative framework she develops to understand autonomy, examining her four modes of autonomous praxis through the lens of the humanist philosophy of Ernst Bloch (Chapter Three). The central insight she takes from his oeuvre is the idea of the 'not yet'; the notion that humanity is unfinished and undiscovered. Developing this idea, Dinerstein argues autonomous struggles 'are about hope, i.e. about realising something that is *not yet* – by trying, exploring, rehearsing, anticipating different – better – worlds' (p.23, emphasis retained).

The author then applies her theoretical framework to four empirical cases, exploring negating, creating, contradicting and exceeding through the analysis of social and political struggles in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico (Chapters Four to Seven). Of the four chapters, the first is the least captivating. While the author's claim that the Zapatista uprising and movement represent a negation of neoliberalism is persuasive, her analysis of the rise of neoliberalism and the 'political construction of hopelessness' is less convincing (p.81).

The next chapter, which focuses on Argentina, is more impressive. Drawing on her own academic research and personal experiences, Dinerstein shows how social movements and grassroots organizations created 'concrete utopias' in the midst of neoliberal restructuring, economic collapse and widespread social dislocation. Though the author highlights the power and imagination of these movements, she is careful not to simplify or romanticize them. The case of the Unemployed Workers' Organizations (*Organizaciones de Trabajadores Desocupados*) highlights the complexity of the struggle and brings the problematic relationship between state and social movements sharply into focus. While the organizations' acceptance of state funding was a clear threat to their autonomy, they were able to perform a prominent role in the administration of the funds at the local level and retain a degree of self-management.

The chapter devoted to Bolivia reveals similar tensions, especially in relation to the Neighbourhood Councils (*Juntas Vecinales*), which perform a prominent role in local politics in the highland city of El Alto.

Dinerstein explains how the neoliberal Law of Popular Participation (*Ley de Participación Popular*) trapped the organizations in a 'decentralisation/participation game' as the allocation of state funding and the restructuring of local politics threatened traditional organizational structures and practices (p.153). The chapter also highlights the strains in the plurinational project of the Evo Morales governments. Her analysis of the TIPNIS conflict reveals the tension between capitalist development and indigenous autonomy and calls into question the viability of what she correctly calls the 'plurinational-capitalist state' (p.148). One disappointing aspect of the chapter is its failure to explore the formation of 'autonomous indigenous governments'. Investigating this issue would have drawn attention to one of the tensions in the theoretical framework developed in the book: the clear line it draws between 'indigenous' and 'non-indigenous' forms of autonomy. The attempt to create autonomous indigenous governments has revealed the sharp cultural and political differences that exist between indigenous communities and the challenge of establishing common 'norms and procedures' among indigenous groups.[1] The process highlights the extreme diversity of Latin America's indigenous populations and the danger of grouping indigenous struggles under a single 'indigenous' umbrella.

The chapter on Brazil focuses on a single, if hugely significant, social movement: the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* [MST]). Here Dinerstein focuses on the autonomous mode of 'exceeding' or what she calls in this context 'venturing beyond the wire' (the metaphor relates to 'cutting the wire', the ritual the MST perform before occupying land) (p.177). The chapter analyses the movement and its long struggle to secure access to land and improve the livelihoods of the rural poor. Viewing this struggle as a process of organizing hope highlights the fact that MST activism cannot be reduced to land. It is intimately related to territory and the attempt to establish a new way of living. The MST therefore 'envisions and realises new conquests such as education, health, housing, democracy and cooperative work' (p.181). The chapter not only provides considerable insight into autonomy and collective action but also shines light on struggles over land reform in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America.

The intellectual scope of the book is impressive. The author plucks ideas and concepts from a wide range of sources and discusses them with passion and intelligence. In doing so, she introduces the reader to a diverse body of literature related to autonomy, social movements and grassroots organizations. Moreover, while the book contains a

few typographical errors, it is very well written and presented, making it accessible to a range of readers. The accessibility of the book is significant because it tells a very important story. The author makes a compelling case to explore the possibilities of the 'not yet' rather than wallow in the fatalism of the 'not ever'. Coming at a time when neoliberalism continues to dominate the global political and economic landscape, this is a timely and powerful message.

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Note

1 See, for example, J.D. Cameron, "*Bolivia's Contentious Politics of 'Normas y Procedimientos Propios*'," paper presented at the XXX Congress of Latin American Studies Association, San Francisco, May 23–6, 2012.