

‘Dancing with Dynamite’

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LATIN AMERICA HAS NOT ONLY dealt blows to imperialism but also raised the banner of socialism on a global scale. It is of strategic importance for those fighting for a better world, especially at a time when capitalism is in systemic crisis.

Latin America’s landscape of powerful social movements, left governments of various shades, revolutionary insurrections, and growing expressions of indigenous resistance and worker control, provides a perfect scenario for leftists to learn about, and debate, revolutionary strategy and tactics.

Of late, burning dispute has opened up, mostly among those writing from an anti-capitalist orientation: a debate over the complex relationship between social movements and states in Latin America.

‘Dancing with Dynamite: States and Social Movements in Latin America’ is Dangl’s second book.

‘Dancing with Dynamite’ is a much more explicit polemic, developing some of the ideas first outlined in history book ‘Price of Fire’. Dangl’s introduction to ‘Dancing with Dynamite’ says: The discussion surrounding the question of changing the world through taking state power or remaining autonomous has been going on for centuries.

As the title suggests, Dangl comes out strongly for remaining autonomous from state power.

Whatever one might think of this thesis, Dangl’s book is an important contribution to the debate that should be read for at least two reasons.

First, it is written by the founder of Upsidedownworld.org, one of the most influential English-language websites on the left for information and analysis about Latin America. Anyone who follows this website will have some sense of the politics put forward in the book. The focus, as in Upsidedownworld.org, is very much on the social movements and struggles unfolding within each national context.

Second, Dangl not only sets out to analyse the movements in Latin America, but also to examine what lessons activists can extract from the struggles south of the border. In essence, while his views on the various governments and their character differ, each chapter tends to portray a similar picture.

Citing Emma Goldman, Noam Chomsky and John Holloway, author of the polemical book *Change the World Without Taking Power*, Dangl argues that in each country he studied, while

social movements are constantly on a tightrope walk between cooptation and genuine collaborations, more often than not, cooperation with the state leads to demobilisation.

The dance between state and social movements can be deadly, because the state and governing parties is, by its nature, a hegemonic force that generally aims to subsume, weaken or eliminate other movements and political forces. Faced with this dangerous dance, Dangl reaches the same conclusion as Raul Zibechi, Uruguayan activist and author of *Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-State Forces*.

If the state is in danger of falling into the hands of fascist groups; Zibechi says, should do all people can to prevent that from happening, including participating in the elections, in a direct form or in support of other connected groups.

But everybody knows that there, in this field, in this space, what is central to future is not being fought over. People will not put their best forces in this terrain because they know that what is fought over there, usually, is not decisive in terms of changing the system.

This is why, according to Dangl, Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's President Evo Morales and Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva-demonstrate important parallels.

If one wants to look for a real alternative, Dangl says one won't find them in Venezuela or Bolivia, where many of the movements bow down to politicians and parties during campaign seasons, and then prostrate themselves for government handouts or positions.

Instead, he says, one should look at the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil (MST), which doesn't wait for the state, it acts according to its own logic and needs.

The MST best encapsulates the correct approach of both pressuring the state and empowering their own territories from below.

Dangl uses the terms government and state interchangeably, confusing two different things. Second, his ideal of dispersing power (while pressuring the existing state), as opposed to creating an alternate state power, leads to some contradictory conclusions.

On the one hand, he argues that by their nature states coopt and ultimately destroy social movements. Yet, Dangl also argues that while working for a better world without a state a viable strategy could be supporting state-based programmes, if they indeed help people achieve their long and short term goals.

VENEZUELA

The chapter on Venezuela best highlights what Dangl means.

Correctly pointing out that the old, existing state replicates the inequalities and challenges found in many other nations, Dangl also notes that this state is attempting to, in the words of

Sara Motta, create a new set of state institutions that bypass the traditional state, and distribute power in a democratic and participatory manner.

The explanation for this seeming contradiction is simple.

First, Dangel confuses the difference between a movement in this case the Bolivarian movement winning government and controlling the state.

When Chavez was first elected in 1998, he was elected as the head of a capitalist state. However, he and the movement very quickly realised that this state had not been created to benefit the majority, and that instead it was necessary to give power to the people to tackle poverty.

To shift the rules of the game more in its favour, the Bolivarian movement convoked a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution.

But to make this, and the government social and economic programmes, a reality, it was necessary to gain real control over the state, and in particular PDVSA, the state oil company.

It was the attempt by the Chavez government to move forward on this front that triggered an intense reaction by elites, who saw it as a direct attack on them.

The intense class battles of 2002 the struggle to defeat the April military coup and then the December-January 2003 lockout of the oil industry led to the emergence of a number of important social movements (particularly the workers' movement) and a break of capital's control over the armed forces.

These forces were crucial to the survival of the government, but also shifted the balance of class forces in favour of the poor majority and their government, which only now had the power to move forward on a number of its social programmes.

And more importantly, they helped in the creation on the new state institutions that Dangel and Motta refer to.

Since then, the Bolivarian movement has worked to stimulate the self-activity of the masses to create new organs of popular power—workers' councils, communes and people's militias as the bedrock of the new communal state.

By operating within the old state to destroy it, and working to build a new state from below at the same time, the Bolivarian movement has been able to advance.

Bringing together revolutionaries to build an independent movement of workers and oppressed sectors and confront and destroy the old state helps to overcome these obstacles.

The alternative, that focuses solely on building local power, but refusing to destroy the capitalist state, can only lead on the one hand to support for pro-capitalist forces and the demoralisation of social movements on the other.

By downplaying the political struggle, reducing it to electoral terms, Dangi ends up lending support to the idea of voting for politicians like Obama. If the political struggle is not important, then why not just support the lesser evil rather than build a political independent movement of the working class?

Similarly, by refusing to create an independent working class party to help cohere and orientate local struggles not only to resist, but take power, the struggle can be led down the path of demoralisation and defeat. □□□

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