



## A critical theory of hope

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### review of

Dinerstein, A.C. (2015) *The politics of autonomy in Latin America. The art of organizing hope*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (PB, pp. 282, £ 34.99, ISBN 978-1-349-32298-5).

### Latin American cosmologies of autonomy

*The politics of autonomy in Latin America. The art of organizing hope* published in 2015 by Argentinian scholar Ana Cecilia Dinerstein for the Palgrave series *Non-governmental public action* is an engaging book, relevant for researchers interested not only in social movements and critical social theory, but also for those working in the field of organization studies and political economy, and for everyone else interested in alternatives to the dominant socio-economic system that is capitalism. What makes this book so important is the ambitious theoretical framework that Dinerstein accurately unfolds throughout the entire volume, a framework that deploys the oft-contested concept of autonomy and depicts it as a tool for imagining alternatives to capitalistic production and reproduction systems. Autonomy, to Dinerstein, constitutes indeed a 'tool for prefiguration'. The book is composed of three main sections and follows a circular narrative for which the critical issues outlined at the beginning are fleshed out through the four stories examined

in the central part, and are contextualized in a holistic epistemological framework at the end of the book.

In the first section, *Theorizing autonomy*, Dinerstein explains that understanding ‘autonomy’ in the context of indigenous movements and struggles entails becoming aware of unique cosmologies where meanings of time, progress, and nature have been shaped by customs and traditions throughout the centuries. The encounter with Western radical-left debates on autonomy happened much later, in the Sixties and Seventies. For this reason, Dinerstein’s endeavor differs from the study of struggles for autonomy in other contexts. In her words ‘Latin American movements have tended to lead a “rebellion from the margins” rather than be part of the mainstream network of social movements’ [33].

The second section, *Navigating autonomy*, includes an in-depth analysis of four well-known cases of Latin American social movements and mobilizations that took place during the past twenty years. The Zapatista uprisings in Mexico, the ‘!Que Se Vayan Todos!’ protests for dignified work in Argentina, the indigenous mobilizations against the privatization of water and oil in Bolivia, and the Brazilian Sem Terra, a peasant-led movement organizing against land expropriation and fighting for food sovereignty. The third section, *Rethinking autonomy*, constitutes, at least for the reader, more a beginning than a conclusion. In this final section, Dinerstein delivers her ‘prefigurative critique of political economy’, a theoretical perspective that she will further develop in the edited volume *Social science for an Other politics. Women theorizing without parachutes* (2016). This represents the core of the book and probably its most pioneering part.

### **Beyond Marxist critique**

The point of departure is the realization that, on one side, Marxist scholars have rarely gone further than a mere critique of capitalism, and on the other, that anarchist scholars have been mostly focusing on alternatives to capitalism without properly engaging in a critique of political economy. However, as I have discussed in a recent article (Monticelli, 2018), it is worth noting that, especially after the Great Recession of 2008-2009, interest in

projects aiming at embodying alternatives to capitalism has been growing amongst Marxist scholars, as if the scope of contemporary critiques had finally broadened to include the analysis of possible alternatives. Erik Olin Wright's theorization of 'real utopias' (Wright, 2010) constitutes probably the most famous example.

Dinerstein's perspective attempts to tackle the limitations of both orthodox Marxism and anarchism by salvaging, we could say, the 'best of both worlds' and coming forth with a perspective that dissolves this long-established dualism. At this point, one could be tempted to relate Dinerstein's intellectual endeavor to the one pursued by *Autonomous Marxists* thinkers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. This is not the case since Dinerstein's critique does not spare some of Hardt and Negri's most acclaimed conceptualizations like 'multitude' or 'alter-modernity' (Hardt and Negri, 2004). Dinerstein explains that both these concepts are the result of a Western-centric vision of society and therefore ignore the forms of resistance and the cosmologies affecting the political imagination of indigenous populations: the main subject of the book.

For our purposes, it is enough to point out that Dinerstein belongs to the school of *Open Marxism*, a group of scholars, among which we find John Holloway, Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, whose goal is to 'emancipate Marx' (Bonefeld et al., 1995: 1) by emphasizing the unity between theory and practice, between philosophy and the human world. The aim of *Open Marxists* is to get rid of 'the massive deadweight of positivist and scientific/economistic strata' to find the true emancipatory vocation of Marxism (*ibid.*). This emancipatory aspiration and the willingness to surpass the dualism between capital and labor is the underlying red thread recognizable in the book and, more broadly, in Dinerstein's entire scholarship. Coherently with this intellectual mission, she finds in the writings of two humanist Marxists like Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin the foundational concepts for the construction of her argument. The art of organizing hope – prefiguration – is a process composed of four 'interlocked modes' [219]: negation (of the existing given), creation of a concrete utopia, translation/disappointment, and production of 'excess'.

The first moment is a negation, well exemplified by the Zapatista tenet ‘Ya Basta!’ (Enough is enough!) against the Mexican state. Negation is the fundamental and essential starting point for any prefigurative endeavor. To be truly prefigurative and going beyond mere resistance though, any moment of rejection needs to be followed by a creative one: the realization of a concrete utopia. The proclamation of a *de facto* autonomy from the Mexican state by the Zapatistas, the implementation of community projects and worker-owned cooperatives in Argentina, the self-management of water systems by the Aymara indigenous population in Bolivia, and the establishment of alternative modes of agrarian production in Brazil. These experiences all constitute concrete utopias.

### **Integrating change in the logic of power**

Embodying and realizing alternatives is far from being an easy endeavor. Dinerstein’s concrete utopias are, in fact, ‘deeply embedded in [the] capitalist/colonial/patriarchal power relations’ [223]. Any protest, mobilization or prefigurative project aiming at opposing the status quo – be it represented by authoritarian or repressive states, by unjust laws, or exploitative economic practices – eventually culminates in a moment of confrontation. This leads to the third mode of prefiguration as theorized in Dinerstein’s four-movement model: translation and, in many cases, disappointment. In her words: ‘My question [is] not whether autonomous organizing can produce radical change without taking the power of the state, but how do the state and capital ‘cope’ (mediate) with the radical prefigurative power of autonomous organizing’ [224]. A moment of integration in the ‘logic of power’ is thus inevitable, but the outcomes of it are uncertain. These outcomes can take the form of co-optation, repression, translation into (neoliberal and/or reformist) policy agendas or revolutionary appropriation. By consequence, this stage in the process of organizing hope can entail, in many cases, feelings of disappointment and unexpected, contradictory outcomes.

To Dinerstein, indigenous populations, differently than non-indigenous ones, are subsumed in capital *by exclusion*: indigenous cosmologies, practices, stories, and imaginaries are excluded by the universalizing and

‘totalizing’ force of capital valorization [217]. Dinerstein very effectively deploys the empirical cases in the book to illustrate different forms of translation. In the case of the Brazilian Sem Terra, for instance, claims for re-appropriation of land and food sovereignty have been translated into a neoliberal agenda through the implementation of World Bank-led policies and a constant process of renegotiation between the movement and the state over the agrarian reform. In the Bolivian case, struggles for autonomy brought to what Dinerstein calls a ‘revolutionary appropriation’ and the proclamation of a ‘plurinational’ state in 2009 under the presidency of Evo Morales.

The fourth stage, or mode, of the art of organizing hope, is the product of the ‘contradictory swinging movement between rebellion and integration’ [47]: a positive, surplus excess. What kind of shape does excess take in the case of Latin American indigenous struggles? To Dinerstein, this excess is not translatable since it is not legible by the lenses and the language of capital: ‘Autonomous organizing confronts value with hope, thus disputing the meaning of the not yet’ [226]. In this un-legibility, in this impossibility of subsumption or co-optation by capitalism, lies the emancipatory strength of prefigurative movements.

The final chapter of the book is entitled *Living in Blochian times: Opening remarks* and includes an overview of the four key concepts that Dinerstein adapts from the utopian thinker Ernst Bloch in her effort to ‘put autonomy in the key of hope’: the real as a process, concrete utopia, contradiction, and the not yet. These are the foundations of her theoretical infrastructure.

### **The art of organizing (and spreading) hope**

Dinerstein’s book paved the way, in the aftermath of the financial recession in 2008-2009, for the now flourishing scholarship on sociological alternatives. For this reason, the book is an essential read for any researcher interested in the study of prefiguration and it has the potential to offer insights for the study of struggles and emancipatory projects beyond the case of Latin American social movements. This book offers as well a universal toolkit for activists to help them critically reflect and frame their

ongoing actions and strategies. A recent project led by a European transnational network of European activists and cultural organizations working on several issues ranging from LGBTQ rights to urban commons, explicitly borrows the subtitle of the book "The Art of Organizing Hope" (TAOH). The idea that 'we can shape the not yet' was at the center of a three-day long forum held in the city of Ghent (Belgium) in November 2018. Dinerstein attended the event and engaged in discussions with activists, politicians and researchers. If we agree, as Dinerstein claims, that 'we are in the midst of a possibly terminal crisis of capitalism' (TAOH 2018: 3), the reflection on alternative forms of production, reproduction and organization should be placed at the core of the research agenda. Dinerstein offers a much-needed humanist, feminist and de-colonial perspective that goes beyond mere critique, but incorporates it, while focusing on the ontology of affirmative and creative action: a critical theory of hope (TAOH 2018: 6).

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