

REVIEW

Allen Wells, *Latin America's Democratic Crusade: The Transnational Struggle against Dictatorship, 1920s–1960s*

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In *Latin America's Democratic Crusade: The Transnational Struggle against Dictatorship, 1920s–1960s*, Allen Wells narrates the efforts of students, workers, and other reformers to overthrow autocrats in the Caribbean and Central America in the four decades after the end of World War I. Wells weaves a tale of insurrections and plots against US-backed dictators, especially on Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and his less long-lasting Cuban counterparts. He relies upon a treasure-trove of secondary sources (many published in local journals), memoirs and US diplomatic and intelligence files to discuss the networks of student leaders, intellectuals and politicians who forged region-wide networks to combat personalist dictatorship. *Latin America's Democratic Crusade*, as a result, examines US foreign policy toward these movements and support for anti-democratic governments and movements. Wells' brick of a book has a cast of hundreds, as his appendix on the 'Dramatis Personae' reveals (pp. 555–62).

Wells' story revolves around politicians who pledged to democratise dictatorships, redistribute land and protect national resources. Among the most prominent examples were Rómulo Betancourt of Venezuela (especially in Chapter 3) and José Figueres of Costa Rica (Chapters 11–12). Raúl Haya de la Torre of Peru gets a fair amount of attention, largely because he was a larger than life travelling salesman for anti-imperialism and reform of autocratic rule. But Haya de la Torre (Chapter 2) and the Cuban student opposition leader, Antonio ('Tony') Guiteras (Chapter 7), for example, remain on the outer fringes of Wells' wide-angle lens. Both are more insurrectionist than democratic reformer. Both flirted with Marxism, even if they came down in favour of organising urban-centred, multi-class coalitions of students, workers and professional politicians on the make. Wells, in comparison, only briefly discusses Communist parties, anarchists and populists who also struggled to reform undemocratic and conservative regimes. His book is instead an encyclopaedic history of mostly centrist leaders and their movements.

Wells traces the start of these movements to the highlands of Central America in Chapter 1. In Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, Froylán Turcios ran a bookshop, edited a literary and political review, *Ariel*, and acted as a go-between for Augusto Sandino, the Nicaraguan insurgent fighting the US occupation of his

homeland. It was there, in the late 1920s, that centrist movements, according to Wells, began. The next chapter chronicles the dissolution of the relationship; the more practical Sandino left the fighting in the hills to work with the Liberals, which Turcios saw as a sell-out of revolutionary ideals. Subsequent chapters see the emergence of intellectuals and politicians struggling to reform dictatorships, principally from Peru, Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

Wells ends the tale in the wake of the Cuban revolution, when military coups felled beleaguered democratic regimes. By this point, the democratic crusaders had lost their influence, even if Washington, after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, began to court them as part of its so-called centrist Alliance for Progress as an alternative to Communism and right-wing dictatorship. It was a small victory for movements that ignored President and Colonel Jacobo Arbenz for his embrace of Guatemalan Communism, especially when the United States supported the Right in its 1954 invasion and overthrow of its duly elected president (Chapter 12). The reformism of democratic crusaders remained too radical for oligarchs and officers while their anti-Communism made them unpalatable for the ascendant Left.

How democratic were these crusaders? It was not just Haya de la Torre who repeatedly conspired against governments, even after he lost the 1931 elections to Colonel Luis Sánchez Cerro, whom an assassin from APRA, the party founded by Haya de la Torre, finished off two years later. Figueres did not even compete in the 1948 elections in Costa Rica, but the success of his insurgency over their controversial results catapulted him to power in a de facto junta and the prominence to win an election five years later. But the observer of twentieth-century politics in Latin America will have little difficulty in identifying these non-Marxist and anti-dictatorial movements – and will be grateful for the trip Wells encourages us to take.

But the heterogenous behaviour of so many of these reformers requires an explanation. One is that they often struggled against US officials as much as regional strongmen. Making sure that the accusation of ‘Communist’ did not stick was a manoeuvre that many radicals could or would not do, which is why so many of them ended up marginalised (or even dead) if they did not accept US hegemony. Betancourt and other reformers in and outside of Venezuela witnessed how the US diplomats Sumner Welles and Jefferson Caffery blatantly intervened in Cuba 1930s to help convince an ambitious colonel, Fulgencio Batista, to overthrow the reformist government of President Ramón Grau San Martín in early 1934. An extreme case of US interference this was, and one that Wells ably chronicles in Chapter 7 of *Latin America's Democratic Crusade*.

Second, most of these regimes created difficult choices for their opponents. Throughout his book, Wells analyses the informal alliance that existed between dictators to counter the internationalist efforts of the crusaders. Chapter 9 provides a chilling portrait of Trujillo's methods, which were brutal, extensive (he sent assassins abroad to silence his critics), and involved bribery of regional politicians. We could have learned more about other such regimes (e.g. Manuel Estrada Cabrera [1898–1920] and Jorge Ubico [1931–44] in Guatemala or the Somozas of Nicaragua [1936–79]) and about hybrid systems that combined elections with autocracy in, for example, Cuba before Batista, Honduras, Nicaragua before the Somozas, El Salvador before and after General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez

(1931–44). And, understandably enough, the competitive systems in Colombia and Costa Rica hardly feature in Wells' book. But comprehending the behaviour of students, intellectuals and politicians – about why they chose, for example, sedition or elections in less than competitive systems – requires learning more about the constraints and opportunities these systems created for employment as well as for change.

The importance of Wells' panorama of the anti-dictatorial struggle of Central America and the Caribbean expands as the distance between us and the twentieth century increases. At one level, *Latin America's Democratic Crusade* is a tale of struggle, dreams and quixotic behaviour between individuals who sometimes fought among themselves almost as much as against the regimes they opposed. At another level, it portrays the international politics in northern Latin America, which is both a period and place about which we lack accounts as ambitious as Wells'. Future research will inevitably return to *Latin America's Democratic Crusade* for its detailed portrait of non-Marxist transnational movements against dictatorship in a region policed by the United States.