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MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE THROUGH DANCE?

REVIEW OF DANA MILLS' BOOK ENTITLED *DANCE AND ACTIVISM. A CENTURY OF RADICAL DANCE ACROSS THE WORLD*

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Abstract

This is a review of the latest collection of passionate essays by Dana Mills, in which left-wing ideologies, the intellectual legacy of Marxism, and movement radicalism are combined with the ethereal but physical and sensory world of dance.

Keywords: book review, dance and activism

The study of movements for social change is a major intellectual trend and research topic in the social sciences worldwide. These movements seek to represent the interests of groups, typically those perceived to be negatively discriminated against, vulnerable, or disadvantaged, in various spheres of social life, intending to make their voices heard and to promote positive changes in their circumstances. In recent years, the literature on activism has placed greater emphasis on left-wing, solidarity-based movements, and Dana Mills' collection of passionate essays is part of this intellectual lineage.

Born in Israel, Mills is a dancer and committed left-wing political activist, and her book reflects this dual perspective. She is currently the acting director of *Peace Now*, an Israeli NGO that has been working for decades to promote a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through social pressure.

But how can left-wing ideologies, the intellectual legacy of Marxism, and movement radicalism be linked to the ethereal but sensory world of dance? This question may evoke memories from older generations in the former state-socialist societies of Eastern Europe; moreover, historical studies of dance phenomena in the societies of this region have pointed to the interconnections between the political ideologies of state socialism and stage dance productions (e.g., Deres, 2021; Diószegi, 2014; Péter, 2021) and specific dance community practices (Könczei, 2009; Taylor, 2023) in several performing-arts contexts.

The issue of dance as activism is closely related to the politics of dance, a topic that has been the focus of an increasing amount of research over the last decade and a half. Several dance researchers in Hungary have also addressed similar questions (e.g., Kavecsánszki, 2014). The works cited by Mills, mainly from the North American context, link concepts such as human rights, social justice, gender equality, and the

fight against racism with dance. One of the central questions of the volume, already formulated in the preface, is what radicalism means in the world of dance and how new forms of 21st-century activism relate to the activities of 20th-century dance activists.

Reflecting on her socio-ideological engagement, the author presents case studies from different parts of the world to illustrate the movement of social activism through dance. Her fundamental point of departure is the personal and professional conviction that dance can make the world a better place. The case studies span the century between the 1920s and the present, although each period is not equally represented, with a greater emphasis placed on American dance history in the first half of the 20th century and on cases from recent decades that highlight the role of dance as a means of social change in today's globalized and technologically advanced world.

Of the seven chapters in Dana Mills' book, the first introduces the central message of the work, which, in the author's words, explores the potential of achieving social justice through dance. Mills' work is driven by two key assumptions. On the one hand, she argues that dance can be a form of activism; on the other, she believes that the movement of the body is a lived ideal. The conceptual structure of her work was particularly inspired by Martha Graham, who explicitly understood dance as a form of social action, and whose 1936 work *Chronicle* was a major influence on Mills' approach, not only as a choreography and stage dance piece, but also as a form of social practice. The two central Marxian concepts of Mills' thought are alienation and solidarity, both arising from dance as a bodily and communal praxis. Her work explores alienation as a practical problem in the context of activism. Mills drew inspiration for her understanding of alienation and solidarity from the work of Eleanor Marx, the youngest Marx girl, as presented in her biography by Rachel Holmes published in 2014. Born during the family's emigration to London, Eleanor was a socialist-feminist activist who fought for women's equality in the second half of the 19th century. Perhaps the most important aspect of Eleanor Marx's vision, from Mills' perspective, was her desire to promote social change through culture in a practical way. One example of how she achieved this was Eleanor's pioneering translation of Ibsen's play *A Doll's House (Nora)* into English. The first public reading of the play in England took place in Eleanor's home with the participation of playwright G. B. Shaw, who shared her ideals.

The second chapter discusses in detail the work of three politically conscious pioneers of American modern dance who sought to effect social change through their stage performances and choreography using the tools of artistic expression. Martha Graham, Anna Sokolow, and Pearl Primus, in a close professional relationship with one another, revolutionized modern stage dance through their extraordinary social sensitivity and became pioneers and leading figures in dance activism. Mills repeatedly emphasises the importance of the aforementioned *Chronicle*, which for her is perhaps the most important Graham piece. This five-part dance production reflected, through a radically renewed language of dance, on the grave social consequences of the Great Depression of 1929, the rise of fascism in Europe, and the looming shadow of a second world war. Mills vividly portrays the social context of poverty in America in the 1920s and 1930s that was successfully addressed by this

new dance form, and also discusses the social aspects of Graham's critical reception. The role of Anna Sokolow, who was a decade and a half younger than Graham, is also a central focus of Mills' book. Sokolow's origins as an Eastern European Jewish immigrant, her feminism, and the fact that she approached dance from the position of the urban manual labourer are among the highlights of her life and dance. The audience for her first performances, we learn, were members of workers' unions. The central theme of her 1955 choreography *Rooms* was the increasing alienation of people in modern society. The chapter's third protagonist, the African-American Pearl Primus, who not only made a name for herself as a brilliant dance performer and politically active communist but also earned a doctorate in anthropology at nearly 60, had a unique career. Her life and work reflected the struggles and challenges of life in Afro-American communities. Besides American modern dance, Primus drew on the movements of African dances in her work, but in doing so, she initially earned the disapproval of her own community for drawing inspiration from a 'shameful' past, while throughout her career she struggled to resist her critics' use of racist terms to describe her art and her energetic, impulsive movements, labelling her as an 'African dancer of color'. Her life's work has been instrumental in the movement against discrimination towards African Americans. Inspired by a poem about the lynching of a black man, her influential 1945 work *Strange Fruit* used the language of modern dance to draw the attention of contemporary society to the inherent injustice and violence faced by African Americans in their daily lives.

The next four chapters in the volume link more recent dance phenomena, mostly from the 21st century, to possibilities for social activism, suggesting that it is not only the language of modern dance that can become a tool for radical social action. Mills convincingly demonstrates that the traditional practice routines of classical ballet, often considered more conservative, serve as a kind of ritual that unites very different dance communities around the world. In the third chapter, through examples from South Africa, Israeli-Palestinian territories, and Syria, she shows how the classical form of ballet with its traditional aesthetic world has facilitated radical change in the relationship between black and white South Africans during the apartheid era through the *Johannesburg Youth Ballet* institution, which integrated both groups; or how, for children growing up today in the alienating conflict conditions of the Gaza Strip, regular ballet classes represent normal everyday life and project a vision of a viable future.

The role of modern technologies in dance education is also discussed in the fourth chapter, which focuses on the story of an Iraqi breakdance and hip-hop dancer, Hussein Smko, who learned his first hip-hop dance moves from a US soldier stationed in Iraq in the early 2000s. In the chapter, Mills traces in detail the professional career of a young artist fleeing a country ravaged by violence, who experienced solidarity and connection with others and found a home in a new country through dance.

The fifth chapter of the volume discusses the potential role that events of a very different genre play in social change, the title of which, *Steps in the Street*, is borrowed from Martha Graham's work *Chronicle*. The author reviews and analyses situations involving political demonstrations and flash mobs from Chile, Argentina, Poland, France, Israel, Sudan, and South Africa, in which dance has been used as a means of street protest. Unlike in the previous chapters, the focus is placed on the dance

of activists rather than the activism of dancers. Mills raises a number of interesting issues in this regard, such as the role of dance in activist demonstrations, the nature of the relationship between dance on stage and dance during protests in public spaces, and how these dance events can lead to new forms of social solidarity. In the sixth chapter, through a recollection of Edward Said's reflections and an analysis of two choreographies dealing with forced migration experiences, Dana Mills explores the role that dance can play in addressing the challenges and difficulties faced by those fleeing their homelands. In her final, seventh chapter, she returns to Martha Graham's *Chronicle* and revisits the potential of social activism in dance today, drawing on the experiences of dancers who have worked with Graham's piece in recent times.

To provide the empirical grounding for the volume, the author conducted interviews, carried out participant observations at dance community events, and conducted historiographical and archival research. Although it is not specifically mentioned among the methods used, the author also analyzed visual content available online.

The case studies in her chapters propose different interpretations of alienation and solidarity, the central concepts of the volume, and how dance practice mediates between the two. Each of the dance activists in the volume offers unique contexts for unraveling new layers of meaning in these core concepts.

Although it was not the author's intention to develop a comprehensive theory of activism, Her basic premise is that dance endows dance practitioners (and receptive spectators) with a special power of meaning beyond words. This intriguing assumption is related to the notion of '*embodied knowledge*' widely used in dance literature. The uniqueness of dance, in relation to activism, is that it does not directly formulate and communicate a message through the power of rational arguments but rather through the body, conveying information through non-verbal communication. This affects the spectator through the senses and by evoking emotions, and it affects the dancer or performer through the bodily experience, that is, the message expressed in the body and represented by the body's movement. Exactly what is meant by *embodiment* and the often-mentioned term '*bodily memory*' and how this concept can be operationalized in the study of the sociality of dance phenomena are not discussed in detail in Mills' book, although they are key aspects of her argument.

However, despite the passionate arguments of the author and the moving ideas of the text, it is unfortunate that there are repetitions in the text that disrupt the flow of the reading. Perhaps partly because of the nature of the empirical material presented, the case studies of the more recent dancers and dance events are not as elaborated and lack the ethnographical depth of the older topics discussed in the text. In addition, some chapters, such as the case study on Hussein Smko, may have benefited from a further round of editing.

In her volume, Mills deals only with what she considers to be socially progressive dance activism, although she indicates that nationalist, anti-internationalist, or exclusionary strands of social activism through dance can and do exist. She also does not claim that all dance is also an act of activism.

In her analysis in the individual chapters, the author presents a whole arsenal of contemporary performers and dance events. Thanks to modern technologies and

social video-sharing sites, readers can watch the featured dancers, performances, and dance events on film while reading. These complement and support the thought process of the book; nevertheless, it is a pity that the publisher Bloomsbury Academic prefers endnotes to footnotes, separated into chapters that force the reader to turn pages constantly.

Dance and Activism takes its audience on an extensive and exciting journey, highlighting the intriguing activist side of the work of dance classics such as Martha Graham, Pearl Primus, and Anna Sokolow from a novel perspective. While reading, it is well worth checking out the videos of the people and events mentioned in the book, whether it is watching *Ballet Black's* duo at *Stormzy's* 2019 *Glastonbury concert*, Anna Sokolow's retrospective interviews, or the flashmob choreography against sexual abuse that started in Chile and turned into a global phenomenon.

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