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ABSTRACT

I suggest in this essay that Latin American societies in movement are currently transcending the democratic framework to engage in autonomous paths to construct their new home, a world in which many worlds can be embraced, as the Zapatistas proposed years ago.

KEYWORDS

Autonomy; conviviality;
insurrection

We thought that we needed to reformulate the question of power, not to repeat the formula that to change the world you need to take power and once in power we will organize it in the best way for the world, that is, the best way for me who is in power. We thought that if we conceived the question of power affirming that we did not want to take it, this would produce another way to do politics, another kind of politician, other human beings doing politics in a different way to the politicians we suffer. (Subcomandante Marcos, EZLN, 1996, 69)

Progressive governments in Latin America: the end of a cycle

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the former president of Brazil, once proudly said ‘A metallurgical worker is producing the biggest capitalization in the history of capitalism’ (*Proceso*, 1770, 3/10/2010). He considered that his policies ‘(were) everything that the left dreamed of’ (*La Jornada*, 3/10/2010), but at the same time observed that, if you were in your sixties and still behave as a leftist, you needed a shrink. Such sentences may clearly illustrate the basic attitude of the so-called ‘progressive governments’ in Latin America. The strongly Marxist vice-president of Bolivia, Álvaro García Linera, openly declared that they were certainly promoting capitalism in the country and bringing in foreign corporations, but most of the surplus value was now distributed among the people.

All over the continent, the programmes designed by the World Bank to reduce extreme poverty, providing monthly allocations to the individualized poor, were widely celebrated by ‘progressive’ forces. Lula was extremely proud that 36 million Brazilians were incorporated into the middle-class and the American way of life. The left openly supported his Programme to Accelerate Growth and his alliance with capitalists and corporations.

Something similar is happening today with Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the current Mexican President, who appointed a very wealthy entrepreneur, formerly Pinochet’s banker, as his cabinet chief. His Minister of Agriculture was called ‘the Monsanto guy’ when he was in Congress. Corporations and bankers applaud and support his policies, and he has already announced megaprojects that will represent great profits for a few and devastation for the environment and the people. At the same time, many political forces and analysts are celebrating his electoral victory as a clear

sign of a new shift to the left in the region. The fact that he has never pronounced himself against capitalism is rarely considered. His orientation can be described as ‘leftist neoliberalism’. He seems committed to the main lines of the Washington Consensus, but instead of reducing the role of the government he will strengthen the public sector and use public resources for both social and development programmes.

Following the electoral victory of Hugo Chávez in 1998, and the subsequent arrival of several governments aligned with the left, there has been widespread belief in a profound social transformation in the region. This collection of ‘progressive’ governments, however, has failed to accomplish what they promised. The most serious indictment is clearly the corruption that plagues them.¹ These ‘progressive’ forces coexisted with many others, some of them very conservative and even reactionary (Gago & Sztulwark, 2016), falling into forms of centralization and paternalism (Meschkat, 2010), sacrificing environmental justice to a dogmatic extractivist developmentalism (Gudynas, 2015), and betraying their original purposes (Acosta & Cajas, 2015; Modonesi & Svampa, 2016). (See Lang, 2017, for a serious attempt to derive the pertinent lessons from the experience of what she considers a ‘leftist bet’.)

What seems to characterize the mood in Latin America is not another attempt at ‘progressivism’ in the governments. Rather than new social movements or the renewal of the old, we have ‘the other world in movement’, (Zibechi, 2017).

Alternative paths

We live at the end of an era. Yesterday’s rationalities, ‘truths’ and sentimentalities have become obsolete. The new ones do not as yet have a recognizable profile. What should be done? How can a return to any form of fundamentalism, either in theory or practice, be avoided?

In my world, a world of Indigenous peoples, *campesinos* and the urban marginal, there are a variety of reactions to the current horror. I would like to allude to one of them, involving an increasing number of people. It takes the shape of an insurrection, challenging the dominant system and following paths beyond patriarchy, modernity, capitalism, the nation-state and formal democracy. It already is the expression of a new world.

The ongoing insurrection is mainly expressed as *entramados comunitarios*,² to use an apposite expression coined by Raquel Gutiérrez (2017). It emerges in communities where strong and vigorous ‘we’s’ have existed from time immemorial, communities that resisted modernization and did not accept being construed as groups of individuals. These communities are the most solid and perhaps the most advanced of the insurrection. Some of them participate in well-known movements, like the Zapatistas in Chiapas, southern Mexico, or the Kurds in Rojava, northern Syria. Others affirm themselves within local and regional contexts. Sometimes they resist and rebel out of the sheer impulse to survive. At other times they struggle in defence of old ideals, renewed under the current conditions.

Increasingly, persons reduced to the individual condition, who have suffered the current horror until the horror itself and the individual prison became unbearable, participate in the insurrection. To discover that they could identify themselves as individuals, to think as individuals, to experience the world as individuals, since they had been constructed as such, but they could not *be* individuals, was a radical awakening. They discovered that they were – we all are – nodes in nets of relations; beneath the individual skin of a mammal there is always the node of a net. They started to weave themselves into new *entramados comunitarios*.

The insurrection has forced us to clear our vision and to escape from the multiple forms in which it has been contaminated. We have been forced to challenge the grotesque and paralyzing versions of

capitalism, particularly those constructed by the left. Capitalism is not almighty and omnipresent; nor is it the apocalyptic monster covering everything and can only be beaten by an equivalent force. It is not a giant with feet of clay, or a paper tiger. ‘Capital has conquered and subsumed the entirety of life; its hegemony is global’ (Negri, 2009). This expression still manifests the phantom-like and overwhelming silhouette of capitalism. Marx never used the word capitalism for very good reasons. It is true that social relations of the capitalist mode of production are no longer confined to factories or offices. It is legitimate to allude to the social factory, the social whole in which capitalist social relations are produced and reproduced. It is also true that such forms of social existence invade intimate life, including the bedroom. However, it makes no sense to transform capitalism into a deity. We need to derive the pertinent conclusions from the brilliant disassembly started by Gibson-Graham (1996) – that woman that was two until one of them died – in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, to disavow capitalism, to demonstrate that false images ignored the real situation, that capitalist hegemony cannot prevent the new world from being born, nor stop our insurrection.

The obsession to construct the new society’s image, the outline of the future, should also be cleared from our focus. We are not trying to create a state of things that should be implanted, or to formulate an ideal to which reality should be subjected. We are interested in the real movement nullifying and overcoming the current state of things. The idea is not to try to imagine the shape that future society might take, but to invent ways to leave the current society behind. We need to criticize what exists today without reservation, without fear of what can emerge or the conflict with established powers. However, in doing so we need to come back from the future, that man-devouring idol, rejecting projects that attempt to reach any kind of Promised Land, focusing instead on the real transformations in which we are engaged.³

We reject the separation of means and ends, which in the past made it possible to use all means, even the most abhorrent ones, in the name of high ideals, with an attitude that turns the present into an ever-postponed future. We believe that the struggle itself should take the shape of the outcome. There is a critical awareness, Illich (1971a) once said, which allows us to celebrate the fact ‘that we can make our life today the shape of tomorrow’s future’ (p. 19).

We are seizing the present, with a dialectic leap into the past, allowing us to recover tradition (Benjamin, 1940). As the late Subcomandante Marcos observed, we live in a historical moment when, in order to explore what is to come, we need to look back. Instead of breaking with the past, as modernity did, we capture its memory as it shines in the moment of danger. In that way we break the thread of history. That is revolution.

Recuperating the past allows us to ignite the spark of hope and to reclaim hope as a social force (Illich, 1971b, p. 106), while recognizing that hope is the essence of popular movements (Lummis, 1996) and hope ‘is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out’ (Havel, 2018). Constructing autonomy, as is being done in innumerable points of resistance around the planet, can clearly be defined as the art of organizing hope (Dinerstein, 2015).

With such experience, we have also recovered our prophetic capacity. A prophet is not someone with a crystal ball, but someone who knows how to read the present and discover in it deep trends.

The most difficult task we face is to reinvent gender and even make it disappear. Ivan Illich once wrote that ‘the break with the past, which has been described by others as the transition to a capitalist mode of production, I describe here as the transition from the aegis of gender to the regime of sex’ (Illich, 1982). For Illich, the loss of vernacular gender is the most profound transformation registered in capitalism and it is the condition for its rise. The regime of sex was introduced in its place, through

homo economicus, the possessive, genderless individual born in the West. Illich (1982, p. 4) writes: 'The fact that gender may be irrecoverable is no reason to hide its loss by imputing sex to the past, or to lie about the entirely new degradations that it has brought to the present.' Both gender and sex are social constructs: 'Sex can be discussed with the unambiguous language of science. Gender bespeaks a complementarity that is enigmatic and asymmetrical. Only metaphor can reach for it.' Illich does not offer any strategy or any cure. He seems convinced that a contemporary art of living can be recovered, 'so long as our austere and clear-sighted acceptance of the double ghetto of economic neuters moves us to renounce the comforts of economic sex' (Illich, 1982, p. 179). Apparently, we are at that point. We are now acknowledging, without nostalgia or sentimentality, that we cannot reconstruct vernacular gender, but we don't know yet the shape of the society that will prevent any form of sexual discrimination.

Postmodernity is not the epoch after modernity, but an aspect of the modern condition. Frustration with the failure of modern promises and disillusionment with the social project – characterized by Newton's physics, Cartesian reductionism, Hobbes's nation-state and the capitalist system – deepened previous doubts about that paradigm, born with modernity. Postmodernity would be the reflection of several generations of modern people who are extricating themselves from the truths they trusted, but have not yet found a new unitary system of reference. They are aware of the relativity of those truths, which are no longer compulsive, but they lack a paradigm of similar efficacy. Such condition can be seen as a mere loss of values and orientation, but it also anticipates a pluralist perception through which it is possible to construct a world in which many worlds can be embraced, as the Zapatistas proposed (Dietrich & Sützl, 1997).

This new pluralist frame of reference has already emerged. It did not come from academics and scientists looking for a new paradigm without breaking with the rules of the old. The radical departure of the Zapatistas or the Rojava Kurds, as well as many other groups, can be seen as a practice that in itself constitutes a theory not yet explicitly formulated.

Scientists and politicians dealt for many years with postmodern uncertainty, with the argument that additional doses of the same remedies postulated by modernity would be enough to achieve paradise on Earth. They advocated theories of development, progress, justice, democracy, technology and believed in general universal values and strategies, human rights, international law, structural adjustment, global ethics (Dietrich & Sützl, 1997). For the ongoing insurrection, all these look like dead ends.

We abandoned the superstitious veneration for 'the State' a long time ago. Transformed into a mere guardian of the dominant interests, particularly capital, it can no longer perform its function of political processing. For more than a century, despotic and centralized apparatuses still called 'the State' were models for all socialisms and all struggles with revolutionary fervour. To give them a supposedly democratic shape does not alter their despotic nature. As the political form of capitalism, 'the State' is only a mechanism of domination. For that reason the ongoing insurrection increasingly abandons the idea of 'seizing the State' to organize the revolution from there. It attempts instead to dismantle it every day. This is not done through a coup or any violent or non-violent attempt to occupy the rotten apparatuses of the State, for this has been found to be increasingly counterproductive. What we are doing is eliminating the need for the State apparatuses. Instead of trying to occupy the system of education, for example, or to struggle to change its orientation or practices, we are regenerating spaces and conditions to learn in freedom. We are substituting nouns – education, health, food, etc., which create a dependence on the services provided by the State – for verbs: learning, healing, eating, etc., thus reclaiming our autonomous agency. The opportunity is hence opened to construct a convivial society, within a material frame defined by rational and

political abolitions at the communal level, to establish clear limits to the technological characteristics of industrial products and the intensity of professional services (Esteva, 2015). Instead of being trapped in formal or participatory democracy, it constructs what begins to be called radical democracy (Lummis, 1996).

One of the most radical and important aspects of the current process is its rejection of work, transformed into an idol in almost all variants of the left and socialism, as in capitalism, which can be described as a regime which imposes work. The word in Spanish for work, *trabajo*, comes from *tripalium*, a tool for torture. It is in fact such a tool. No form of socialism has seriously proposed a critique of work itself. This is a task now undertaken at the grassroots, in the insurrection I am talking about, which attempts to forge communal agreements ‘on the technological profile of the common roof under which all members of the society want to live’, controlling politically the way to generate living conditions and its limits⁴ (Borremans & Illich, 2006, p. 761). Thinkers like Harry Cleaver, Anselm Jappe, Robert Kurz and Moishe Postone have recently been formulating a rigorous critique of work as a capitalist category. See, for example, Postone (1993), Jappe (2005), etc.

These kinds of communal agreements attempt to dissolve the first alienation in capitalism, when the fruits of our work become alien to us, are taken from us; as well as the second alienation, when creative activity itself becomes alien. They also begin to remedy the counterproductivity of all modern institutions, which beyond a certain size produce the opposite of what they intend. The idea is to recover a sense of proportion.

All this implies a rigorous and radical critique of the industrial mode of production, capitalist or socialist, following the conviction that industrial man failed in his pretension to be God, and the industrial mode of existence, which is clearly patriarchal, should be dismantled.

According to our experience, only through this deep insurrection can we resist the fatal swell destroying both the environment and culture, and begin convivial reconstruction. We look for convivial tools at the service of people, within *entramados comunitarios*, in conditions under which the people can control their tools, instead of being controlled by them.

The services and subsidies currently provided by the welfare bureaucrats continue to degrade people’s freedom and dignity. The welfare state created an unprecedented servitude to tools that recently became the enslavement to systems, when the people can no longer use the tools on their own terms. Designed by the World Bank, social programmes recently implemented by ‘progressive governments’ in Latin America have been individualizing poverty and generating a humiliating dependence on meagre monthly allowances. What is emerging from below, at the communal level, is a form of social life in which consensual norms ensure all persons more and freer access to community tools, on condition that they do not damage the freedom of access of others. There is an explosion of literature describing autonomous experiences in Latin America, which follow these lines in what Raúl Zibechi (2017) has recently described as ‘societies in movement’ (Dinerstein, 2015).

Millions of people are in movement. Governments are panicking at their mobilization. Power structures are ready to do anything to avoid losing their position. People’s initiatives take the shape of open insurrection. They keep resisting, and turn to disobedience. They are protesting, but they also open themselves to radical rejection. They question daily decisions, everyday abuses, the endless aggression, all those killed and imprisoned, all the environmental destruction, and at the same time challenge the legitimacy of the system itself, not only its operators. They refuse to give their consent and reject the notion that representation is still the synthesis of social consensus.

Class domination is prior to all other domination over people's conscience and their self-reliance. It is thus prolonged when change is reduced to mere change of leadership in a class society. Instead of looking for changes at the top of the capitalist society in crisis, we are concentrating our efforts on the construction of a social organization based on freedom ruled by the principles of customary law. At the grassroots level we are trying to rearticulate the old triad: person, tool and society, supporting all these on three classic pillars: friendship, hope and surprise.

The past twenty years witnessed an open movement to recuperate and regenerate the commons. The enclosure of the commons marked the beginning of capitalism. And it is now the main form of operation of a regime when it has ceased being a mechanism of production to be a mechanism of dispossession. We are resisting old and new enclosures, and recovering commons we had lost, regenerating those we were able to retain, and creating new ones.

Timidly, in the 1980s, we began to call all this process the 'revolution of the new commons' (Esteva, 1998). The Zapatista uprising allowed us to give it a new meaning, by demonstrating the feasibility and challenges of the endeavour. Instead of trying to put the dominant institutions at their service, the Zapatistas invert them or dissolve them. In their practices, they demonstrate that conviviality is not a futurist utopia, but is part and parcel of our present, even if we have been unable to notice it. It already has a place in the world – that is why conviviality is not a utopia. However, we are still unable to acknowledge its place (Steger, 1984).

This insurrection goes beyond development and globalization. It marginalizes and limits economic society, rejecting the premise of scarcity as the central principal of organization of social life. It reclaims *comunalidad*, in the face of dominant individualism. It adopts new political horizons, beyond human rights and the nation-state. It takes roots in radical pluralist forms of social and political organization, in which freedoms flourish, after rejecting the economy as the centre of social life and putting in its place politics and ethics. This is what is happening. This is the radical option we are talking about.

Notes

1. Most probably Lula is innocent of the crime for which he is in jail. But he cannot avoid responsibility for the generalized corruption in his government, even if he did not directly take part in it himself.
2. The expression does not have, in my view, an appropriate translation into English. '*Entramado*' can be translated as framework, but it alludes more to fabric, tapestry, the operation of weaving. '*Comunitario*' can or cannot be community. A few people can constitute an '*entramado*'; the qualification alludes to the communal spirit of the fabric.
3. In this paragraph I am using expressions used by Marx to allude to communism (Marx & Engels, 1845).
4. Capitalism has been the only mode of *production*. Neither before nor after should society be organized around *producing*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Gustavo Esteva is a grassroots activist and public intellectual. Author of many books and essays, he is a columnist in *La Jornada* and occasionally in *The Guardian*. He collaborates with Universidad de la Tierra en Oaxaca and many local, national and international organizations and networks. He lives in a small Zapotec village, in Oaxaca, in the South of Mexico.

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