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## On the Complex Relation between Knowledges and Emancipations

**W**e are at a moment of cultural upsurge that exceeds the limits imposed by capitalism. Conceptions about the world, about life, and about the relationship between nature and the cosmos have been shaken, forcing us to rethink all the theoretical structures with which we have organized our own visions. We question the capacity of those theories to address the complexity and richness of a cultural eruption that has altered both the parameters of thought and those of everyday life. The foundations on which the processes of domination—and also those of emancipation—are grounded cannot be understood from within a binary structure of thought. The chaotic complexity of reality requires complex explanations.

The nature of these phenomena is such that analysis must foreground the role of subjects. This gesture is particularly necessary in Latin American thinking, which must uncover the different layers that have enveloped us in a system of domination—a system that not only violated and subdued territories, the economy, and labor relations, but also culture, attitudes,

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ways of living, languages, social practices, and visions of the cosmos—and within which an intense and still unresolved battle was created. Latin American thought cannot avoid the long history of resistance and variegations [*abigarramientos*] that has emerged from a tense and uneven praxis—that is, from a contradictory process of societal confrontation and construction that has been led by diverse subjects of domination and resistance who encounter one another in various conflicts and *mestizajes*.<sup>1</sup>

It is the history of these confrontational and motley processes that holds the key to unlocking and understanding a contested—and defiant—Latin American reality.

### Knowledges of Emancipation

Like creatures in fables, children know that in order to be happy it is necessary to keep the genie in the bottle at one's side.

—Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*

Subjects are constituted in and through struggle, as both logic and empirical evidence demonstrate. The breadth of their visions, their sensitivities and missteps, their creative capacities, and their strategic directions are all nourished and constantly redefined in the school of life—that is, on the basis of conditions that are themselves modified in the process.

Our critical stance begins by recognizing the subject, in interaction and intersubjective relations, as a space where history is constructed and politics can be exercised. Our intellectual energy, then, focuses on the experiential space where subjects encounter and challenge each other. This space is of particular importance for us because it is in this space of conflict and intersubjective interaction (even if sometimes latent) that subjects come together to say: “Enough is enough!” [“Ya basta!”]. This space is where we can discern something akin to a threshold, a space where the rules of the game can be changed, a place of transgression and profanation. It is also a space for the playful creation of new subjectivities and relationships.

Michel Ragon, for example, explains a workers' strike this way: “This worker solidarity and class friendliness only help endure the grayness of proletarian life. The repetition of schedules and gestures, the pathetic salaries, all that would weigh too heavy if at other times the clearing of the strike were not opened. The strike is utopia. It is free time. It is time spent with friends. The salary is cut, discomfort moves in, but during a few days, a few weeks, the occupied workshop is a celebration.”<sup>2</sup> We find this soli-

darity deep in the Lacandon jungle, where rebels from all over the world united with Mayans armed with words and fire; we saw camaraderie in the staging of picket lines [*piquetes*] in Argentina; we experienced rebellious conviviality in the central plaza of Cochabamba, where the water wars prompted all sectors of society to fight and decide together the fate of a natural resource. Insubordination brews in the many acts of defiance that occur when the collective abandons the rhythms of daily life to create new and relatively free spaces.

In these dislocated spaces, rhythms are disrupted and the social roles imposed by the dynamics of domination are forgotten; street children, housewives, laborers, the unemployed, and domestic workers encounter each other as equals. Breaking the mold, even intermittently, and meeting without prejudice and without prescribed scripts allows for the creation of new links, new complicities, and new meanings. Being in the struggle allows invention and construction. Being in the struggle encourages a new form of learning: a kind of learning nourished by the experiences and sensibility of old fighters and by new ideas that desecrate the sanctuaries of power.<sup>3</sup> In the space of struggle, we can observe, from another angle (a desacralized angle), the opponent's attitude and actions in order to discern his or her intentions and dismantle his or her attacks. From this space we elude the opponent's traps and paradoxical hypnotic effects.

But opponents also learn through conflict. They measure their adversary's potential and weaknesses and study his or her customs and traditions so that they can counteract their adversary with the greatest certainty of success. They play with their sensibilities and defile their utopias. There are many examples of earnest strikers duped by employers or subdued through the mechanisms of cooptation, bribery, or harassment.

Conflict moves, is resolved, or becomes entrenched. Conflict can also be transfigured into new knowledges and political sensibilities; it can be transformed into the fundamental building blocks of new strategies and ways of living. Reality is made anew in and through conflict and struggle.<sup>4</sup> Reality is re-created in everyday battles and in times of insurrection, although with different intensities and potentials for rupture, enjoyment, and transformation. But reality is also recalibrated and strengthened through the recuperation and updating of history and in the process of reflection about oneself and the world.

## The Spontaneity of Revolt

History contains all senses and therefore is senseless.

—Elias Canetti, *The Agony of Flies*

Contrary to many scholars who dismiss spontaneity as an ephemeral form of struggle, I consider spontaneity to be an expression of a long-ruminated freedom: a space where what I am calling “unleashed subjectivities” unfold and come to fruition; a space that allows for the conjuring of utopias. Spontaneity is an essential ingredient of subjective constitution that in no way negates traditional forms of political organizing. It does, however, add new features and possibilities to the struggle. Spontaneity allows for the invention of mechanisms of defense and new forms of sociality on a basis of self-organized practices that strengthen common sensibilities and make the practice of struggle a patchwork where means and ends, realities and horizons, are interwoven.

I would like to emphasize this point given the widespread dismissal of popular uprisings or demonstrations that do not clearly articulate their political program or objectives or that do not adhere to institutionalized scripts and procedures. These offhanded dismissals implicitly assume a utilitarian assessment of what has been called “collective action” by Alberto Melucci.<sup>5</sup> When Ranajit Guha studies the history of the rebellions in India that many have characterized as merely “spontaneous,” he states:

These give lie to the myth . . . of peasant insurrections being purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs. The truth is quite to the contrary. It would be difficult to cite an uprising on any significant scale that was not in fact preceded either by less militant types of mobilization, when other means had been tried and found wanting, or by parlay among its principals seriously to weigh the pros and cons of any recourse to arms. . . . [The peasants] had far too much at stake and would not launch into it, except as a deliberate, even if desperate, way out of an intolerable situation. Insurgency, in other words, was a motivated and conscious undertaking on the part of the rural masses.<sup>6</sup>

A similar set of ideas is addressed in the work of James C. Scott. In his study of popular movements, Scott uncovers a number of creative but concealed acts that shape a situation of resistance—what he calls the “infrapolitics of the dominated”—that become visible as a riot or insurrection in special moments but are engendered through daily interaction.<sup>7</sup>

The deinstitutionalized character of collective subjectivities of resis-

tance does not weaken them. On the contrary, it lends them a radically corrosive capacity. Struggles that are built from other ingredients thus avoid structures of subjection while at the same time colliding with and questioning the very histories of oppression that fuel resistance.

Although deinstitutionalized revolt is usually triggered by particular events, most of these eruptions have their origin in long-standing historical circumstances. Water management problems, for example, make evident cultural differences, conceptions of the world, social relations, and relations with nature that may seem out of place from a contemporary or institutional perspective. However, for the people who engage in struggle and who possess a less detached vision of reality, disputes over water express a long-term structural problem.

Spontaneity can thus be defined as learning through invention. Nevertheless, and paradoxically, spontaneity almost always draws on a tradition that is prior to a situation of oppression and that precedes the immediate causes of a contemporary uprising. E. P. Thompson describes this process thus:

The characteristic fissures in that society do not arise between employers and wage-labourers (as horizontal “classes”) but on the issues out of which most riots actually arise: when the “plebs” unite as petty consumers, or as tax-payers or excise-evaders (smugglers), or on other “horizontal” libertarian, economic or patriotic issues. Not only was the consciousness of these plebs different from an industrial working class, but also their characteristic forms of revolt: as, for example, the anonymous tradition, “counter-theatre” (ridicule or outrage against the symbolism of authority), and swift, destructive direct action.<sup>8</sup>

Novel forms of revolt often repeat customs and traditions but in actualizing them incorporate new elements that then become part of that tradition while simultaneously questioning it. In other words, what we are dealing with here is a critical recuperation of tradition in which the community coheres. It is a process that reinterprets this tradition in light of present challenges. Inventiveness and ingenuity do not cancel out echoes of the past. Instead, these echoes are usually heard or expressed as anecdotes or accounts of past events through which new situations are measured and contemporary political limits are contested.

## Spaces of Resistance

A subjectivity is produced where the living being, encountering language and putting itself into play in language without reserve, exhibits in a gesture the impossibility of its being reduced to this gesture.

—Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*

E. P. Thompson, James Scott, Carlo Ginzburg, and Ranajit Guha have each discovered the ways and places in which popular resistance is organized and expressed. Their research has made us aware of the “invisible rules of action” that the “plebs” [*la plebe*] employ in defense of their customs, traditions, morals, and sense of life: the “invisible rules of action” that guide the form and content of their rebellion.<sup>9</sup> Their research has also taught us to decipher the hidden codes and discourses through which meaning is continually reconstructed. As I have been arguing, what emerges as spontaneous revolt is, more often than not, crafted in daily interaction and is autochthonous to the social spaces of the dominated: “It has been neither possible nor desirable to destroy entirely the autonomous social life of subordinate groups that is the indispensable basis for a hidden transcript. The large historical forms of domination not only generate the resentments, appropriations, and humiliations that give, as it were, subordinates something to talk about; they are also unable to prevent the creation of an independent social space in which subordinates can talk in comparative strategy.”<sup>10</sup> Plebeian private spaces in which a language that resembles an internal code or dialect is spoken are constitutive of the birth of insurgent subjectivities. Relatively outside of the purview of the overseer, these spaces can potentially reify power relations. Nevertheless, they can also—and often do—serve as places where shared historical meanings, everyday suffering, and the struggle for survival lead to the articulation of political forms of expression that do not always assume the language of conventional class struggle but rather that of a motley [*abigarrada*] class that is constituted in the struggle.

For Ginzburg, the space of freedom for Menocchio—his prototypical character—as well as for those mediocre beings that make up the plebs, is the bar or cantina.<sup>11</sup> In the cantina, people construct political programs and share resistance strategies. These are sometimes conveyed through pamphlets, which in an environment of almost total illiteracy often prove ineffective. But more significantly, the people who come together in the social universe of the cantina also share their political sensibilities through talk. In the oral sphere of communication there is a constant interweaving of

worldviews, and this exchange encourages intersubjective processes out of which emerges a collective subject that is strengthened in the anonymity of mediocre individuals.<sup>12</sup>

The dominated and the subaltern survive and resist because they find, or create, their own spaces and dynamics. Here they devise their own political strategies, or what Guha calls “the politics of the people”:

For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and the groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in the town and country—that is, the people. This was an *autonomous* domain, for it neither originated from elite politics, nor did its existence depend on the latter.<sup>13</sup>

These *other* spaces, loathed by the policies of power and built in its interstices by the dominated, are places for the construction of subjectivities of resistance and rebellion, where the dominated, according to Thompson, Scott, Ginzburg, and Guha, socialize freely, away from the supervision of the rulers.

The works of Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves, Raúl Zibechi, Álvaro García Linera, and Luis Tapia, among others, draw on the Latin American experience to explore these other spaces.<sup>14</sup> Porto-Gonçalves helps us to understand how the construction of territoriality—or the space of life—is the making of both a place of struggle, where the most substantial questions do not always have an explicitly political character, and a place of societal experimentation, which, in some circumstances, is a relatively liberating creation. Zibechi similarly explains how a space of painful encounter among mothers who lost their children at the hands of the Argentine dictatorship is transformed into a central referent for the recomposition of resistance. The defeat of the military dictatorship was a unifying symbol that gave moral strength to the struggle for the disappeared in spaces created, oddly enough, around tea or maté, that is to say, in a domestic sphere. García Linera and Tapia, untying the knots of meaning of the successive Bolivian revolts, have shown the force of the syncretic creativity derived from a multisocietal and, as Tapia indicates, following René Zavaleta, motley [*abigarrada*] society. Drawing on this work, I propose that both the spaces for the construction of territoriality, in the case of the *seringueiros* in the north of Brazil and the intersocietal spaces of the Bolivian experience, become places of dislocation and epistemological invention that are not

produced through spectacular events but are created on a daily basis. It is from such spaces that the new world springs.

If we do not understand the importance of these spaces and if we do not consider them as central elements in the construction of the moral economy of the dominated, says Scott, it is impossible to understand the relationship between hidden resistance and public rebellion, because these are the spaces where subaltern culture “can be nurtured and given meaning.”<sup>15</sup> In effect, there is a part of subaltern, collective life—contradictory or not—that scholars have overlooked in favor of historiography and political studies. As a result, they are surprised by the revolts of the dominated when they occur, and they categorize such revolts pejoratively as “spontaneous,” as if to detract from their significance.

Porto-Gonçalves, who has a sensibility for elucidating the elements for the construction of subjectivity in everyday spaces, comments:

Daily tasks are constantly crossed by the *cleavage* of domination, at least since 1492 (although the Mayas, the Quechuas and the Aymaras were also included in the “empire/states” of the Aztecs and the Incas). In doing, there is always a knowing—he or she who knows nothing, does nothing. There is a tradition that privileges discourse—speaking, not doing. All speech, as a representation of the world, intends to construct/invent/control worlds. But there is always a doing that might not know how to speak [itself]. Not knowing how to speak, however, does not mean not knowing. There is always a knowledge inscribed in action. Bachelard called attention to making a “material knowledge” that he opposed to a “formal knowledge,” a knowledge of the forms that, for that matter, were primarily a knowledge of vision, an “ocular knowledge,” an outside knowledge, a “bird’s-eye-view knowledge” as Hannah Arendt called it. Material knowledge is a knowledge of touch, of contact, of tastes and knowledges, a knowledge *with* (the knowledge of domination is a knowledge *over*). It is an inscribed knowledge [*ins-crito*] and not necessarily written [*es-crito*].<sup>16</sup>

It is paramount to inhabit such social universes because they reveal a great richness and also demarcate the lines that form resistance and insurrection. In other words, politics is a subject that must be traced in the realm of culture and traditions, in the knowledges and meanings that are constructed through living, in collective relationships, in territories, and in intersubjectivity. However, while it is crucial to recover the subjectivities constructed in the spaces away from power in order to discover the visions and epistemology of resistances, it is equally important to recover the other



subjectivities and perceptions that emanate from the relationships *with* power—that is, from the presence in those spaces of those who live with the powerful and with various symbols of power, of those that cross through power’s different mediations and mechanisms of reproduction—because it is largely in these spaces where the culture of dissidence and radical critique is forged. It is in these spaces where the contradiction, the humiliation, and the permanent expropriation against resistance become evident. In both cases, transformation of these spaces into spaces of freedom results from a process of construction; it is not simply a natural evolution.

### Experiences and Knowledges

We need not reiterate that the narrowing of the political is part of a process that opposes nature and society, where society is subdivided into hierarchal and seemingly exclusive spheres: the civil and the political. The cultural and the social are subsumed by the political, and the political, in turn, is subsumed by the economic (including the reproduction of life by the reproduction of value and geography by the economy). What is created is a split set that is then remade from the pinnacles of power and thus tends to flatten society<sup>17</sup> as part of a theoretical and political exercise that undergirds capitalist relations (not only as relations of exploitation but also as relations of domination, as relations of power that establish themselves in the spaces where subjects based in a specific materiality interact and struggle, a historically specific but also ever-changing space). The vision of the world and of the intersubjective relations that orient the behavior of subjects in action—despite the fact that they may be difficult to perceive, because they are not expressed openly or publicly—determines their direction and in turn modifies the starting point from which social relations and nature-society relations are defined.

Struggle, everyday life, survival, and all the different forms and spaces where social relations are expressed provide opportunities for learning and also for the construction or destruction of knowledge from multiple sources. Struggles are where people unlearn their community customs and the memories of time that reaffirm them, re-create them, and invent others, maintaining, in the last instance, the length of the roots but multiplying the complexities, *mestizajes*, and variations.

Certainly, much has been unlearned during the last five hundred years of the subjugation of the peoples of America, notwithstanding the preservation of community customs, cosmologies, modes of production, or the

uses of nature. Such a long history of domination might lead us to assume peoples' transformation to the point where they would lose their original identity. To effectively appeal to identities from five hundred years ago, as if they remained untouched, makes no sense because these identities are themselves made within historical processes, enriched by exchanges and with *mestizajes*, even if they are imposed (though these imposed relations create an impoverishment that stems from a loss of knowledge or a negation). That is, peoples go searching for those interstitial spaces through which they can surpass current obstacles, and in this searching they learn from the other so as to be able to face the other; at the same time they discover their own contradictions and tensions. There is neither a homogeneous and uniform *other*, nor can one assume that the peoples of America have been or are that other.

The lessons of recent times, after the fall of the Berlin Wall (even if no precise understanding of this emblematic event exists), have occurred in a world of uncertainty regarding the present. This uncertainty forces one to look for certainty in the historical: both in the traditions and customs (always re-created, as a space of intersubjectivity) and in territory that acts as a cradle for these traditions and customs and simultaneously conditions them—something like their historical-geographical referent.

Paradoxically, the more the processes of social valorization decline in favor of the preeminence of the financial sector and the more that the figure of production is blurred due to the fragmentation of the factory into home-based workshops, the more that the everyday clings to territory as a physical and symbolic referent of real life. Perhaps because of the importance of the processes that David Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession and because this dispossession has already penetrated the balance essential for life, the resistances of the beginning of the twenty-first century arise from profound memories that allow us to decipher organized worlds glimpsed from noncapitalist perspectives. In other words, these resistances are consolidated, restoring the wholeness of a process of creation and intersubjectivity, without divisions between nature and society or between the social and the political.

The depth of this subversion and the desire to reestablish this wholeness as a point of departure demands a complete recasting of society. Therefore, the contents of emancipation cover all grounds—from a reinterpretation of the world to a change in thinking—providing space for the creation of a new culture and a new materiality. It is increasingly clear that an emancipatory process requires not only the abolition of private property

and the reappropriation of the processes of production of material life but also fundamentally a disalienation of thought that allows one to conceive of life from different political and epistemological foundations.<sup>18</sup>

The experiences of struggle during this period have occurred against the traditions of struggle that marked nearly the entire twentieth century—traditions corresponding to the social dynamic introduced by Fordism. These experiences function more in the realm of reproduction, where collectives maintain some margin of control, than in that of production, which is completely foreign to them. Happiness does not arise for these collectivities as a result of progress but as the reconstruction of a relationship with the community, with the earth, and with nature—a return of the gaze to the local, although without abandoning a strange idea of the nation that, blurring the boundary lines, seems to revert in most cases (albeit in a confused manner) to pre-Colombian times.

These experiences of struggle and progress in the processes of emancipation can be understood in different ways, from distinct angles, and with various theoretical focuses. Here, we assemble them following the process of the construction of knowledge and the construction of community as elements of force and offering, of historical recuperation and invention, of a future that can recognize only the present as a present of struggle—that is, as elements for political construction.<sup>19</sup>

Speaking about and from these knowledges involves putting them, from the beginning, on a different plane from the practices of power that have condemned popular learning (either through the universalization of a sweeping discourse that does not allow any others to exist as anything but a testimony to something already relegated to the past, or through the reduction of alternative discourses, which are both ubiquitous in a Cartesian perspective on reason and understanding).

To speak of knowledges<sup>20</sup>—those constructed daily over longer periods of time—it is necessary to dislocate the planes, moving from a Euclidean plane to another (or to others) with multiple perspectives that break up and expand the dimensions of understanding, opening them to the penetration of other cosmologies.

The space of knowledge is a space of struggle; it is forged in resistance and feeds on searching and subversion. It is constructed in the process of resistance against all types of colonization, particularly in the face of those that attempt to alienate the self-generation of other visions of the world. The place of knowledges is a place of a sense of self and of daily life accompanied by traditions that also change through those daily practices.

To locate oneself in the field of knowledges or to attempt to explain their meanings and forms of struggle through the uncovering of the deep convictions of the people is to locate oneself in the field of their strategies and cosmologies. It is to locate oneself within that vital knot where all processes are entangled and untied. And in this knot we perceive the movements of subjects and their constituent and deconstituent flows.

In the field of learning and of the construction of renewed ways of knowing made in the recuperation of previous knowledges, traditions, and customs, which are revised and reformulated in light of new experiences that correct, enrich, negate, or affirm them in order to convert them into collective sentiments, I would like to highlight those that have modified the strategies of peoples' struggle after the fall of the Berlin Wall. That is, I want to highlight the changes in perception and strategy that are both the result of the planetary extension of the capitalist market and the social norms that constitute it, as well as the failure of socialism. While both of these share the symbolic date of the year 1989, in truth they have been felt ever since the late 1970s when capitalist restructuring and the neoliberal phase began.

### **The Lessons of Emancipation**

From my experience working with different social movements in various subregions of Latin America, there are some generalized *sensibilities* that have oriented their strategies and that, little by little, have been transformed into common sense. They seemingly emanate from tradition, but they are specific to the new conditions in which social relationships occur, at least in this area. Obviously, there is always a way to connect contemporary ideas with some reference to the past; such is the way the thread of history is woven. But thinking about emancipation today, without denying the intervention of the long historical memory of these peoples, must begin by recognizing the conditions under which the movements of our time are struggling.

Not in an attempt to generalize, but rather to highlight the various reflections and lessons that I have observed and shared with various Latin American movements and that point to a change in the culture and the perception of the world and of the strategies of transformation, I would like to point to five features that I believe signal a change in the quality of these struggles and, further, in the actual concept of emancipation.

## Self-Affirmation of the Sociality of the Excluded

For many of the people affected by this system of social organization, those who do not have clear and direct links to the industrial processes of exploitation, the identification of the problem is displaced onto the exercise of power that integrates the antagonisms of class, culture, race, and gender. This implies a much greater depth and complexity to the relations that these struggles seek to abolish, as well as to the spaces of subversion from which they act. Class struggle as such does not exist; rather, it appears intermingled with the affirmation of the sociality of the excluded, who become the most important referent of the struggle, capable of integrating within itself all other struggles. “We, the workers of the city and the countryside, simple people,” says the population mobilized in Cochabamba for the “defense of water and of life.” “This is *us* . . . behind our masks,” similarly say the Zapatistas; “behind these we are the same simple and ordinary men and women that are repeated in all *races*, painted in all colors, speak in all languages and live in all places. The same forgotten men and women. The same *excluded*. The same *intolerated*. The same *persecuted*.”<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, the dominators are identified as “the powerful” or “the gentlemen of money,” without distinguishing differences in levels or characters because the differences are negligible: as long as the masters of money exist, we cannot. This idea, which is repeated on every continent, was reflected in an important speech by the Zapatista spokesperson in 2001:

They say that up there above they think that money clothes and arranges everything.

But it is good for them to know, the gentlemen of money, that the times of yesterday will not be those of today, nor of tomorrow.

We will no longer silently listen to their insults.

Their threats will no longer go unpunished.

They will no longer humiliate those of us who are the color of the earth, which we are.

We have always had voice.

But it will no longer be a murmur that lowers its head.

Now it will be a shout that lifts the gaze and will oblige you to see us as we are and accept us as we are.

And so listen carefully:

We are the color of the earth!

Without us, money would not exist, and we know well how to live without the color of money.

And so lower your voice, gentlemen of money.<sup>22</sup>

The same could be heard in Cochabamba during the “water wars”: “the *generals*, the *deputies*, *ministers*, mayors, superintendents, and *businessmen* . . . of all the *neoliberal political parties*. The businesspeople, the corrupt and the politicians work together against the people.”<sup>23</sup>

Beyond the conceptual revisions implied by these discourses from varying locations, their effects on organizational practices are also of interest. The content and form of organization changes to include the distinctive manners of all of those recognized as part of the dominated, humiliated, plundered, denied, excluded, and, in doing so, enriches and multiplies the possibilities, as well as efficiency, of struggle by moving it to a realm not controlled or ordered by the powerful. In this way it celebrates, simultaneously, new opportunities for relationships among the dominated, occasions to create and learn together, and a comparative advantage against the powerful, who will be forced to learn the new rules of the game and the other places of emancipation.

With respect to this strategic move, it is worth recalling the words of an eloquent figure from the National Indigenous Congress of Mexico, in an appearance made at the request of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), defining the flexible format of the organization: “when we are together we are an assembly and when we are apart we are a network,”<sup>24</sup> neither one, nor the other, but both, and many others, simultaneously, to avoid being enclosed (including being enclosed by themselves). Instead of a “repertoire” of organizational forms and struggles, what I encounter in these movements is a transformative avalanche of multiple forms, which challenge the actions of the dominators with their high degree of inventiveness and unpredictability. The element of surprise is one of the most valuable tools in the struggle. As Sun Tzu taught us long ago, “Appear at points which the enemy must hasten to defend; march swiftly to places where you are not expected.”<sup>25</sup>

### The Shared Interest of Power

The people have learned that power is multifaceted and has large conveyer belts that transmit, reproduce, and control. Moreover, they link micro-scenarios to the centers of concentration and the exercise of macropowers.

In each situation of conflict, latently or tacitly, we can identify the local or particular personifications of power. Yet, while these belong to an articulated yet contradictory system, they are rarely the same. Power is embodied in an enormous variation of figures that are not necessarily connected and that, on many occasions, may even be opposed.

The Mapuche people from the south of Chile face dispossession of their land by mining companies, tourism, wool producers, companies in search of fresh water sources, loggers, hydroelectric plants, and land speculators, and they also face the state—in both Argentina and Chile—that does not recognize their claims to their land and that criticizes and criminalizes their protests. Their enemies are various and opposed, even to each other, because mining interests do damage to water companies who do damage to others. In general, these conflicts of interest continue and multiply in that they advance the private appropriation of territory. There is, however, an interest that they all share—against the original or ancestral possessors of these lands—a private interest in individual property oriented toward profit. The common interest of the diverse strata of power consists in making the market the location of general regulation over these territories and resources, which ignores the relevance of cultural, historical, and moral existences that form the basis of a social cohesion that is linked to widespread popular identities and meanings.

Other movements, each one in its particularity and in its universality, face situations that are distinct but similar. Their enemies are other businesses—or sometimes the same ones—and other, equally ineffective juridical systems. Their conflicts may or may not refer to the land and its riches, but they can always identify power in its multiple, local personifications. In Chiapas, where they declared war against nothing less than neoliberalism itself, the figures of power were the foreign looters—transnational corporations or various nongovernmental organizations (conservationists, those working for “sustainability,” and others)—as well as the local political bosses [*caciques*], coffee traders, large farmers, the regional elites, and the “usurping” [*usurpador*] and “treacherous” [*vendepatrias*] government.

The movements are learning that a many-headed monster must be decapitated multiple times. It is not enough to cut off one head, because its capacity to regenerate is immense. Rather it is necessary to occupy all of them, not losing sight of a single one, no matter how small. This allows one to recognize the importance of local struggles that, through the power of repetition, succeed in modifying the terms of the relation,

limiting the impunity of the powerful, and gaining space for collective self-determination.

The challenge to the idea of seizing state power, posed by the Zapatistas and many others who followed them, comes from everyday experiences that show how power can be discerned everywhere and how, even as it has points of concentration, it seeps through all of the pores of the social network. The transformation of the world and, more modestly, of the existing relations of power requires an action with multiple exits, corresponding to the kaleidoscopic nature of the moorings of power, which make it appear invincible. Even if the materializations of power are multiple, the movement can become ubiquitous by playing with its diversity and enormity.

### The National as Symbol of Freedom beyond Borders

The blurring of the national, political, physical, and symbolic frontiers promoted by neoliberalism revitalized the memory of a past in which these frontiers were imposed on the people, fragmenting and disrupting their organizational structures for material and spiritual reproduction. Almost all of the pre-Columbian societies were severed through the imposition of frontiers that then, little by little, came to demarcate national consciousness and identity.

After so many *mestizajes*—voluntary or forced—during these last five hundred years, there are many different referents related to the political and territorial symbols of social cohesion, which have arisen as much from impositions as from past struggles. In the case of Latin America, colonizations followed one after another, and the various wars—for independence, against specific invasions, and for self-determination—have shaped decolonial consciousness as national consciousness, transcending its state-associated meaning. The nation, read from the struggles of the people fighting to preserve what is theirs, includes customs and, of course, territory as a symbol of freedom and self-organization.

In this line of thinking, the nation is equivalent to a large community, but a political one, that emerges from struggle. It is a result of resistance, not of submission. Its boundaries, therefore, are expandable. It is not an isolated community but rather a potentializing one that can simultaneously claim its borders to protect against colonizing intentions or dissolve them in order to articulate itself with other people in struggle.

This ambivalence has allowed the movements to reverse the damaging character of the dissolution of frontiers promoted by neoliberalism.



By claiming rights and national sovereignty, while at the same time not only suffering but also taking advantage of modern nomadism as an opportunity for connection and growth, the movements remake the nation as something other than a place of confinement—a notion that is strengthened by the creation of binational or multinational communities, a product of the increasing flows of labor migration.

With capitalist globalization, it has become clear that in any part of the world, regardless of the differences in the levels of material well-being and civil rights, the condition of the dominated has a common origin, which can be transcended only through the weakening or elimination of the conditions of possibility for oppression—defeating the monster with a thousand heads.

This is one of the great lessons of our time. The planetary expansion of the system of power is being confronted by the planetary communalization of struggles, opposing unity with a festival of diversity and, above all, revalorizing the modest actions of each particular collective as part of a global process of rebellion and of the construction of a world that holds all worlds—another world that is possible in the here and now. Every small action and every small advance grow to become part of the enormous, collective global struggle.

### Building Self-Determination without Mediations

This rupture with the illusion of the state or the national as something closed and self-sufficient, if it indeed ever existed, helped both to reinforce conceptions of autonomy and to delegitimize the paternalistic desires of a state that lacked the capacity to enact its function to protect (or to represent) society.

Regaining self-determination without mediation, with all of the setbacks and difficulties that come along with it, is one of the fundamental sources of strength of different peoples, movements, organizations, and communities. Such strength is aided by the total crisis of an imposed political system that is not representative but rather usurpatory—the corrupt and worn-out one we endure today.

Daring to do otherwise, to think from other conceptual sources—at the very moment when the belief in the idea that there was no alternative prevailed—and daring to simultaneously confront the theories and practices of so-called revolutionary, socialist, or leftist thinking allowed the movements to recover critically the experiences of all their past struggles

and not only to build a freedom from other foundations, disrupting plans of thought and action, but also to recover integrally their life experiences. That is to say, they abandoned the narrow frame of production that has guided much of the Cartesian orientation of modern thinking, both on the right and on the left, for the construction of life. As Ret Marut had come to realize, “It is my generation’s crime: to hope for everything from the state, to want to achieve everything through the state.”<sup>26</sup>

### The Gentlemen of Money Cannot Survive without Us

The last important lesson that I would like to highlight, especially after a long century of capitalist intensification, is the knowledge that this system of social organization is not the only one possible, nor is it, of course, the most suitable one for humanity. Faced with the overwhelming images of capitalist omnipotence, it becomes more and more apparent that we are the strength of its base, and for this reason we must also hold the key to its collapse. We can survive without the gentlemen of money, says the Zapatista spokesperson, but the gentlemen of money cannot survive without us.

They take our lands and on them, for the bosses, we build airports, and we will never travel by plane, we build highways, and we will never have a car. We build entertainment centers that we will never have access to. We put up shopping malls, and we will never have money to shop in them. We build urban zones with all of their services and we will only see them from afar. We build modern hotels that we will never stay in. In short, we are putting up a world that excludes us, that will never accept us and that, nonetheless, would never exist without us.<sup>27</sup>

The lessons of Vietnam, those of a Cuba that perseveres despite everything, and now those of Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that the powerful cannot do everything. They can do even less if, following Ret Marut (B. Traven), we decide to do without them: “The Capitalists laugh at your strikes. But the day that you wrap your feet with old rags instead of buying socks and shoes, they will tremble with fear.”<sup>28</sup>

To change the world, it is necessary to subvert everything, relentlessly and without complacency. Today’s movements, more and more, know that there are no solutions within this system, that it is an unsustainable system that can lead only to catastrophe. We must subvert everything and rethink the world from its roots. We must question the perspectives inherited from that suicidal, inegalitarian, and exclusionary modernity that divides our

reality into an impossible jigsaw puzzle. We must recover a sense of the whole and modify our angle of vision so that we do not lose sight of any parts or their possible combination, as in a kaleidoscope that never ceases to move and therefore never ceases to propose new options. Between that Zapatista “world in which many worlds fit” and the *buen vivir* of the peoples of the Andes there is a path under construction that contains multiple possibilities and destinations. It is a rhizomatic, kaleidoscopic path, whose virtue is to gather the shattered pieces of a stunted society. Here, the reproduction of life once again emerges as an organizing logic of thought and practice, tearing down the false borders between society and nature, men and women, public and private, black and white, and those between politics, economy, and culture. Once we think beyond these borders there is no need to dominate nature. Given that politics can now be thought to begin with everyday life, all differences and diversities add potency to the source and project of emancipation. Subjection and subjectivation are the offenses committed by an abusive and immeasurable objectification that multiplies its own effects. But the road forks one thousand and one times—that is, as many times as the imagination enables us to approach utopias and push them forward, demanding from them a larger dose of fascination and hope.

In Latin America, utopias have changed by meeting our challenges at the level of imagination, creation, and practice. Developmentalism is a thing of the past, anachronistic and castrating. It is a site for the production of all the perversions and weaknesses of the current system of domination. Today, those emancipations that directly confront the suicidal and predatory nature of capitalism have taken flight in other directions. What is left for us is to prepare the conditions of possibility for a landing that would combine knowledge and imagination, prudence and daring. The force of profound and ancient roots—the wealth of those varied and fertile knowledges accumulated by the peoples of this continent—connect us to a world before capitalism. From them, a new magma of history is flowing that today covers the corners of the earth.

—Translated by Brenda Baletti

## Notes

This essay originally appeared as “De saberes y emancipaciones” (“Of Knowledges and Emancipations”), in *De los saberes de la emancipación y de la dominación* (*On the Knowledges of Emancipation and Domination*), ed. Ana Esther Ceceña (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2008).

- 1 Although *mestizaje* refers to a biological race mixture, particularly between Spanish and Indigenous people, here the author critically reappropriates the term in order to

highlight the unpredictable process of variation resulting from contact (even if in situations of domination) among different ways of living, be they racialized, political, or gendered.—Ed.

- 2 Michel Ragon, *La mémoire des vaincus* (*The Memory of the Vanquished*) (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), 362–63.
- 3 I am referring here to what Giorgio Agamben distinguishes as two opposing political operations: “the political secularization of theological concepts (divine transcendence as the paradigm of sovereign power) is content to transform heavenly monarchy into earthly monarchy, but it leaves its power intact. Profanation, on the other hand, implies a neutralization of that which it profanes. Once profaned, that which was not useful and remained separate loses its aura in order to be restored to usefulness. It is a question in both cases of political operations: but whereas the first concerns the exercise of the power that it guarantees in referring it to a sacred model, the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and restores to common usage the spaces that it has seized.” Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 96–97.
- 4 As Marxists claimed in a language that has fallen out of fashion, “Class struggle is the motor of history.”
- 5 Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 6 Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurrection,” in *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1–2.
- 7 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 183.
- 8 E. P. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class,” *Social History* 3, no. 2 (1978): 133–65, 145.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 85.
- 11 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- 12 Ginzburg justifies, in this way, his literary character as what allows him to discover the signs that reveal the resistance of his time: “in a mediocre individual who is lacking in significance and for this reason representative, it is still possible to trace, as in a microcosm, the characteristics of an entire social stratum in a specific historical period.” Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, 7; translation modified by author.
- 13 Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40.
- 14 For the sake of space and cohesion, I am omitting a large quantity of valuable contributions that address, in various ways, that which I would like to discuss here. Latin American thought, just as its movements and processes of social transformation, is in one of its most creative moments; and so is, more specifically, that thought that emerged in and with these movements, from which a number of very valuable contributions have come. See also Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves, *Geo-grafías: Movimientos sociales, nuevas territorialidades* (*Geographies: Social Movements, New Territorialities*) (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2001); Raúl Zibechi, *Genealogía de la revuelta* (*Genealogy of the Revolt*) (Buenos Aires: Nordan Comunidad/Letra libre, 2003); Álvaro García Linera, “Multitud y comunidad. La insurgencia social en Bolivia” (“Multitude and Community:

The Social Insurgence in Bolivia”), *Chiapas* 11 (2001), [www.revistachiapas.org/No11/ch11garcia.html](http://www.revistachiapas.org/No11/ch11garcia.html) (accessed December 2009); and Luis Tapia, *La condición multisocietal* (*The Multisocietal Condition*) (La Paz: Muela Del Diablo, 2002).

15 Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 20.

16 Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves, personal communication with author, December 2009. This point is elaborated further in his article “Meio ambiente, ciência e poder. Diálogo de diferentes matrizes de racionalidade” (“Environment, Science and Power: Dialogue in Different Matrixes of Rationality”), in *Ambientalismo e participação na contemporaneidade* (*Environmentalism and Participation in Contemporaneity*), ed. Marcos Sorrentino (São Paulo: EDUC/FAPESP, 2002). Porto-Gonçalves writes, “It must be recognized, definitively, that knowledge is inscribed in the act of living, and as such, the population is always, by definition, the bearer of knowledge without which the management of the environment becomes unfeasible. Imagine a forest inhabitant, an Indian, a *seringueiro*: if they cannot distinguish the odor, the pass of a cheetah; if they can’t distinguish the tracks, the marks in the ground, a snake that went by; if they can’t distinguish the colors, the different greens and coffees; if they can’t distinguish the sounds, they could die. About all of this knowledge, this detail, the common man, in general, cannot speak. To speak about it presupposes being outside of it (Heidegger already pointed this out). The practice of these common men and women is not spoken, which often leads us to believe that they do not know. But if they did not know, they would not do, because they only can do because they know. Knowledge is always inscribed in action. He who doesn’t know, doesn’t act. The fact that in the university we live by talking about what others know, gives the impression that it is we who know and that they do not. And of action, we know . . . how to speak about it. We can write a thesis about fishing and not know how to fish. This is perfectly possible. And we know how important our production and transmission of knowledge is. But we see that the fisherman who doesn’t know how to talk about fishing knows how to fish because the act of fishing presupposes a knowledge of fishing. We are the ones who confuse knowledge with knowing how to talk. The physicist and philosopher Gastón Bachelard distinguished between a *formal imagination* and a *material imagination*, the first is centered in the gaze, in the vision, with which we approach reality and represent it in Cartesian mathematic coordinates, and the second is a reason that involves the body, touch, smell and in the end, contact, whose tension makes us think of the body in its contact with other bodies. It is not to speak *about*. It is in relation *with*” (ibid., 149).—Trans.

17 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (New York: Verso, 1998), 66.

18 In her extensive research project undertaken in different localities in Mexico and Peru, Florencia E. Mallon traces the discursive patterns between the national, in the construction of a popular community imaginary, and the national, from the perspective of a liberal statist conservative thinking (which always ended up repressing or ignoring the popular sectors in their own coalitions, let alone those of the enemy). See Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

19 The details of Mallon’s studies about peasant communities in Mexico and Peru came to the conclusion that “the community as a political concept, then, was already the hegemonic outcome of previous struggles.” Mallon, *Peasant and Nation*, 65.

20 Scott uses the Greek term *metis*, which refers to knowledges that come from direct

- experience and that feed the beliefs, customs, and habits of the community in its relations both with the outside world and within itself, understanding within them that their relationships with nature are not something separate. See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 7.
- 21 EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), "Discurso de la Mayor Ana María en la inauguración del Encuentro Internacional por la Humanidad y contra el Neoliberalismo" ("Speech by Mayor Ana María at the Inauguration of the International Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism"), *Chiapas* 3 (1996), [www.revista-chiapas.org/No3/ch3anamaria.html](http://www.revista-chiapas.org/No3/ch3anamaria.html) (accessed June 9, 2011).
  - 22 EZLN, "Discurso del 10 de Marzo de 2001" ("Speech from March 10, 2001"), <http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/> (accessed September 2, 2011). EZLN, *Documentos y comunicados: La marcha del color de la tierra* (*Documents and Communiques: The March of the Color of the Earth*), ed. Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2003), 216.
  - 23 CDAV (Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida), "Documentos de la Coordinadora en Defensa del Agua y de la Vida" ("Documents from the Coordinator in Defense of Water and of Life"), in *La guerra por el agua y por la vida* (*The War for Water and for Life*), ed. Ana Esther Ceceña (Buenos Aires: Madres de Plaza de Mayo/América Libre, 2004), 126.
  - 24 Ramón Vera Herra, "Congreso Nacional Indígena: Un espacio de lucha en la Otra Campaña" ("National Indigenous Congress: A Space of Struggle in the Other Campaign"), *La Jornada*, July 17, 2006.
  - 25 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (El Paso, TX: El Paso Norte Press, 2005), 24, 156.
  - 26 Ret Marut (B. Traven), *En el Estado más libre del mundo* (*In the Freest State in the World*) (Barcelona: AliKornio, 2000), 76–77.
  - 27 EZLN, "Discurso del 10 de marzo de 2001."
  - 28 Marut, *En el Estado más libre*, 126.