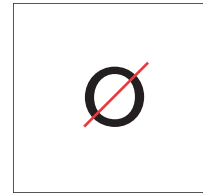


ROAR

BUILDING POWER Issue #0 - Winter 2015

David Harvey ★ Marina Sitrin ★ Michael Hardt
John Holloway ★ Janet Biehl ★ and many more





Issue #0

Building Power

*We lived amidst the ruins.
Until we picked up the stones,
and we began to build.*

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EDITORIAL

Building Blocks

All around us lie the ruins—remnants of an old left and a bygone era of revolutionary aspirations. Some of the decaying structures remain, to be sure, but everywhere the wreckage of the labor movement is now apparent: its traditional organizations lie in shambles, the smoldering debris strewn across the depoliticized landscape of our “post-ideological” societies, while its emancipatory ideals have long since given way to capitalist monstrosities—totalitarian and technocratic alike—that make a mockery of the movement’s origins in the great workers’ struggles of the 19th century.

Seemingly devoid of people or power, the ruins have become a testament to a world-historic and largely self-inflicted defeat. Capital now rules these lands, and, like it or not, it is the desolation and debris we have inherited as our own. Amidst this rubble we must now discover the building blocks for a different kind of left and a new anti-capitalist politics, both to counter the relentless assault on our common future and to construct other possible worlds in the process.

Thankfully, events of recent years appear to hail a reawakening of revolutionary aspirations across the globe, accompanied by the resurgence of specters old and new. Powerful forces are stirring below the surface, lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike and shake the world of capital to its very foundations. It is upon us to ensure that, by the time the next wave comes around, we are adequately prepared to rise to the challenge of our times.

ROAR was founded in 2010-‘11 with this sole purpose in mind: to reflect on the tide of popular revolt as it ebbed and flowed from Tahrir to Rojava and beyond. Now, as our movements mature and we look to new horizons, ROAR is about to embark on an exciting new adventure itself.

This free (digital-only) inaugural issue marks the launch of our new website and of ROAR’s transformation into a quarterly journal of the radical imagination. Packed with visionary perspectives from leading thinkers and influential activists alike, we believe the struggles and ideas recounted within these pages constitute some tentative theoretical and practical building blocks for the construction of a radically democratic anti-capitalist politics for the 21st century.

In the spring, we will be releasing our first proper print issue—*Revive la Commune!*—to follow up on some of the themes discussed here. We warmly invite you to support this important activist publishing project by subscribing to the magazine:

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We are acutely aware that the construction of a new world is far more than an academic exercise. We do not harbor any illusions about the “Eternal Truths” of radical theory and we certainly do not aim to write any blueprints for a post-capitalist future. We simply write to learn from each other’s struggles, to share our common dreams and aspirations, and to amplify our collective powers—so that one day we may be able to recount the story of our struggle to future generations:

**Yes, we lived amidst the ruins.
Until we picked up the stones,
and we began to build.**

ROAR COLLECTIVE





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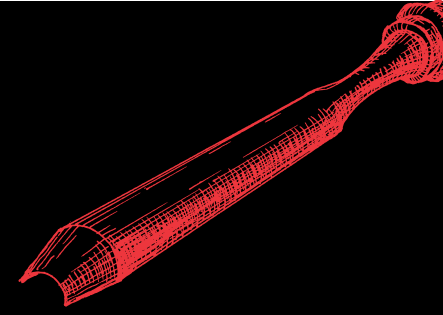
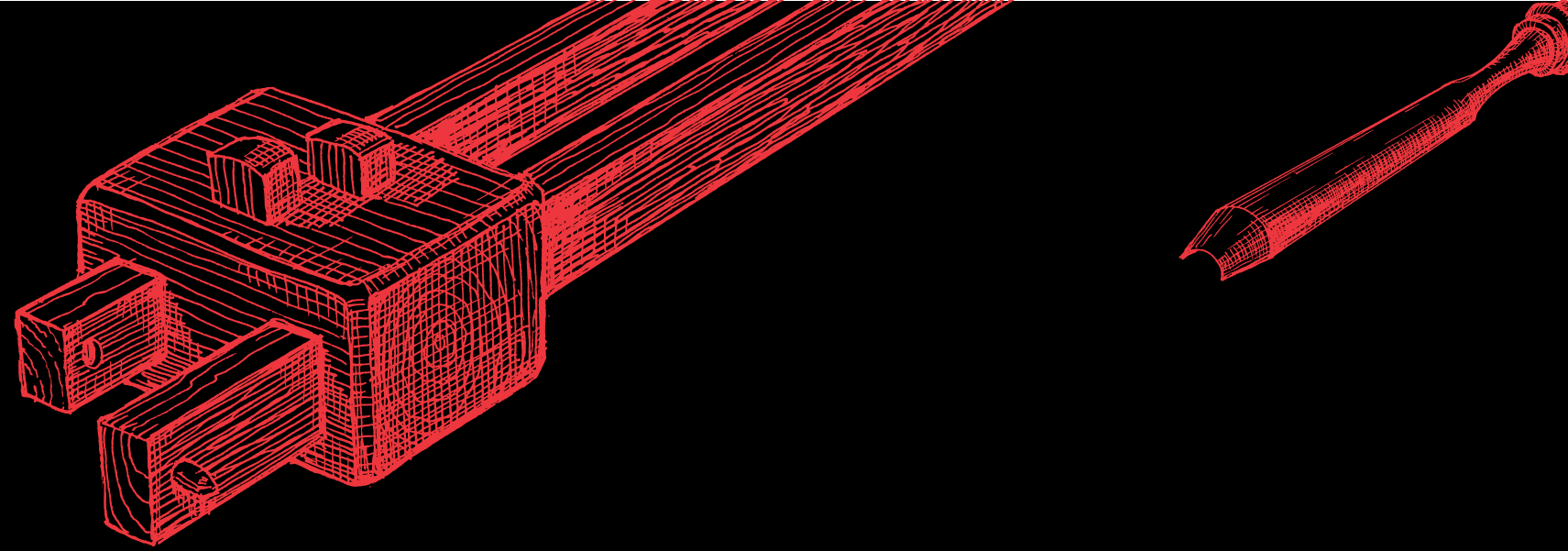
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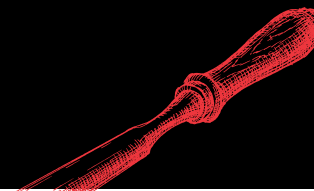
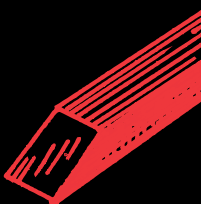
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THE RUPTURE

CONFRONTED WITH OUR CONTEMPORARY WEAKNESS, WE NEED TO MUSTER THE COURAGE OF OUR OWN ABSURDITY—THE COURAGE SIMPLY TO SAY “NO” AND TELL CAPITAL TO GO TO HELL.

John Holloway

No. Oxi. Simply that.

No, No, No. Three No's. Three dates: July 5, 2015; December 6, 2008; September 15, 2008. Three ruptures.

Start from there, from the ruptures. The walls of the world are closing in upon us and we must fight to keep the windows open, the windows that open out to another world, other worlds, different realities: real worlds that exist in our refusals, our struggles, our dreams, our experiments, our ability and determination to do things differently.

Worlds in which people are not locked up in a stadium and repressed by police just because they flee from war, in which ports and airports and water are not handed to the rich so that they can become richer, worlds in which the future of humanity is not sacrificed to capital's insatiable hunger for profit. Sensible worlds, obvious worlds, worlds not based on money, worlds that today are repressed and ridiculed, worlds that exist in the mode of being denied.

The worlds we want to create, and are creating, are worlds-against, worlds that go against the horrors of existing society, their grammar is negative. That is why we must start from No, from No, No, No.

Not an empty optimism, for each opening has been followed by a closing, each

No has been followed by a Yes, but the No is never completely extinguished, the opening pushes back. Nothing worse than acceptance, nothing worse than the inane "well, they did their best, didn't they? What more could they have done?", nothing worse than the pathetic "courage of hopelessness" advocated by Žižek in a recent reflection on the Greek situation.

I. JULY 5, 2015

The first No is that which still resounds in the air: the great Oxi of July 5, a night when all the world danced in the streets. An absurd, ridiculous No, a No of hope, a No of dignity.

Writing in 1795, William Blake imagined the reactions of the Kings of Asia to the revolutionary upsurge in Europe. He imagined the Kings calling on their counsellors:

— *To cut off the bread from the city,
That the remnant may learn to obey,
That the pride of the heart may fail,
That the lust of the eyes may be quenched,
That the delicate ear in its infancy
May be dull'd, and the nostrils clos'd up,
To teach mortal worms the path
That leads from the gates of the Grave.*

The prolonged period of negotiation between the Eurozone governments and SYRIZA was that: not just a negotiation but a humiliation, an attempt to kill the pride of the heart, to teach mortal

worms the path that leads from the gates of the grave. The No of July 5 was a No to the humiliation: a flaring of the nostrils, a sharpening of the ears, an awakening of the lust of the eyes, a cry that shouts to the four winds "with no disrespect for the worms, we are more than that and there is more to life than the march to the grave."

The great No of the referendum did not lead anywhere, perhaps it could not lead anywhere. The governments (including the SYRIZA government, joining now with the other eighteen) replied just over a week later: "Sorry (very sorry, in the case of SYRIZA), but we do not understand what you say, you are speaking the wrong language, using the wrong grammar. What is this word 'No'? You are speaking Nonsense. You live in a world of make-believe. The Reality of the world is that the choice in the referendum was between YES and YES. The Reality is that there is no option other than conforming."

The No of the Greek referendum remains our starting point, the point from which we try to understand the world.

A No drowned, a hope smothered. And yet it remains our starting point, the point from which we try to understand the world. In that No we recognize ourselves, in that No we look for our humanity. That No is our language, our grammar. The great Oxi still resonates in the air, just as a kiss hangs in the air after the lovers have gone home. It resonates profoundly, filled with the echo of that earlier No, that earlier nonsense, the great rupture of almost seven years ago: December 2008.



— “ —

The December revolt of 2008 was one of the loudest screams of No that has been heard in this century. It was a roar of fury against the state and all it stood for.

II. DECEMBER 6, 2008

The shooting of the 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos on December 6, 2008 provoked one of the loudest screams of No that has been heard in this century: No to police violence, No to discrimination against the young, against migrants, against women, No to a system built on frustration, on frustrating the lives and the potential especially of the young but of all, No to a system that dulls our senses, closes our nostrils, through unemployment and, sometimes worse, employment, No to a system built on the meaninglessness of money. No too to the stale traditions of working class struggle.

There were no demands made of the state, just a roar of fury against the state and all it stood for. Rage was interlaced with hope, but the relation was fragile and there was no institutional mediation. It was certainly not a hope that change would come through the next election, but there was an underlying hope that the world could be different, that it might be possible to bring down the world of capital and repression and injustice.

There was a hope, but a desperate hope, a hope tinged with despair. One of the many manifestos circulating in the streets of Athens in those days gives an feeling for the movement:

The revolt was, in fact, a revolt against property and alienation. Whoever did not hide behind the curtains of their privacy, whoever found themselves in the streets, knows this very well: shops were looted not to re-sell the computers, the clothes, the furniture but for the enjoyment of the catastrophe of that which alienates us—the phantasmagoria of the commodity. [...]

The pyres that heated the bodies of the insurgents in the long nights of December were full of products of our labor liberated, disarmed symbols of a once powerful imaginary. We simply took that which belongs to us and threw it on the fires together with all that it signifies. The great potlatch of the previous days was a rebellion of desire against the imposed canon of scarcity.

This revolt was, in fact, a rebellion against property and alienation. A revolt of the gift against the sovereignty of money. An insurrection of anarchy, of use value against the democracy of exchange value. A spontaneous rising of collective freedom against the rationality of individual discipline.

(Flesh Machine/Ego Te Provoco)

This statement is not necessarily “representative” but it does give a feeling for the movement of December 2008 and the years that follow. It is a language that does not fit, a nonsensical language from a world of make-believe, the language of a world that does not yet exist, that exists not-yet in our revolts.

Years of marches and protests and riots followed, and violent repression too. The anger pushed beyond the protests to calls for a radically different society, rage led on to the search for other ways of living, through the creation of social centers, community gardens, factory occupations, local assemblies—both as ways of tackling immediate practical problems of survival and creating the basis for a different world.

“
Rage led on to the search for other ways of living, through the creation of social centers, community gardens, factory occupations and local assemblies.”

But the protests and the experiments brought their difficulties and frustra-

tions. The hundreds of protests, both by the traditional and the anti-authoritarian left, made no impact at all on government policy, already subject to the dictates of the Troika of creditors (EU, IMF, ECB). A particularly significant date was February 12, 2012, when hundreds of thousands demonstrated in the streets, more than fifty buildings were burnt down in the center of Athens, police cars were set on fire, tear gas was used far beyond the legal limits, the Parliament was surrounded by a police guard and the deputies voted to approve another package of austerity.

It was on this ground that the spectacular rise of SYRIZA took place. SYRIZA succeeded in giving these expressions of rage-and-hope a focus. “Vote for us and we shall really make things different, we shall break with the austerity policies imposed by so many governments, we shall stop the repression and the corruption.” Six years of rioting and creative alternatives had made little difference: the politicians had voted to accept the austerity measures. Now it was time to make that hope effective, to give it a realistic way forward.

The rise of SYRIZA was the result of the fact that the years of anti-state, anti-party militancy had not led to any clear results. Of course many of those who voted for SYRIZA had never taken part in the movement of 2008 or the riots and experiments of the years that followed; but many of those who had taken an active part certainly voted for SYRIZA in January of 2015.

The rise of SYRIZA was the result of the fact that the years of anti-state, anti-party militancy had not led to any clear results.

SYRIZA inherited the legacy of those years of militancy and focused it, and in the process transformed it.

SYRIZA inherited the legacy of those years of militancy and focused it, and in the process transformed it. It changed the grammar of the protests and brought it back to, or at least closer to, the grammar of orthodox politics. The protests of 2008 and after moved on the edge of impossibility and invention. They were a de-totalizing movement, an angry breaking of the system. The hope was always on the edge of hope-less despair, but it was a hope that refused to come to terms with the existing system, a hope that could only be an absolute call for a different world and a rejecting of this one.

The enemy was the world-as-it-is (what we might call capital, but many did not use that term) and there was no demand that could meaningfully be made of that world. If we think of it as a game, it was a game in which the rules either did not exist or were being invented in the process of playing. There was no possible dovetailing with the party-political system.

The rise of SYRIZA gave a definition to hope, but in the process it narrowed it down. The enemy now was not capital, but neoliberalism, understood as the dominance of a particularly aggressive form of capitalist politics. The demand was for the ending of austerity. The end of capitalism was set aside as being entirely unrealistic. As Varoufakis explained in a talk in Zagreb in 2013, the end of capitalism might be desirable in the long term, but the aim now must be to fight for changes within the system. This was to be a politics of the possible, a realistic politics. Hope was a central rallying-call, but hope was to be the realistic call for a change of politics and the ending of austerity.



An important and inevitable consequence of focusing dissatisfaction-and-hope on the state was that it acquired a clear territorial element, which was not there before, or certainly not to the same extent. The riots and marches of the years after 2008 were directed against the Greek government and against the system: although the austerity policies were clearly linked to the pressures from the European Union, the struggle did not present itself in national terms. In the words of the pamphlet quoted, this was a rebellion of use value against value, not of Greece against Germany: the language of the riots is an international language.

Once SYRIZA came to power the conflict came to be redefined as one between Greece and the other countries of the Eurozone. The conflicts move from the cities to the state, from the streets to the closed rooms of inter-state negotiation. Greece itself is constituted in the transition, as a subject, as a concept. And with it, “the Greek people,” and indeed democracy itself, the rule of the Greek people.

This is not necessarily the result of a conscious decision by any of the actors: it is already inscribed in the existence of the state as a territorially defined unit. If we note that the rise of SYRIZA coincided in time with the rise of Golden Dawn, this is not to say that SYRIZA was to blame but simply that both are connected to the redefinition of the conflict in territorial terms, a shift that is truly frightening in its implications.

It is important to underline the importance of this transition, precisely because the implications are so enormous and because it is simply taken for granted and without question by the overwhelming majority of discussion, on the left as much as on the right. The movement from seeing the state as the enemy to seeing it as a possible site for

change inevitably brings about a redefinition of conflict in terms of territorial or national conflict which can have fateful consequences. It is not just that the state does not work, that it bureaucratizes and demobilizes, but that it *territorializes*, transforms social conflict into national conflict.

“
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The overwhelmingly negative grammar of 2008 was replaced by a positive, territorial grammar aimed at concrete change. Obviously both perspectives continued to be intertwined, but it was the realistic-positive definition of hope that was louder. Hence the great shock, the great joy of the referendum of July 5: the No was an echo of the language of December 2008. It did not share the same grammar as the SYRIZA government. It was a return to the nonsensical language of world of make-believe.

The result of the referendum did not point to any particular answer, did not lead anywhere definite. Even if many felt that Grexit, the departure of Greece from the Euro, was desirable, this was for many not really an alternative policy proposal (as it was and is in the eyes of some left-wing politicians) but rather a different way of throwing a rock through the window of a bank: an act of revolt.

“
The Realism of the SYRIZA government proved to be completely unrealistic. SYRIZA still dreamed of a fairer capitalism, and fought for months for a realistic dream that was mere phantasy.”

The Realism of the SYRIZA government proved to be completely unrealistic. It led the anger-hope of the previous years on to the path of realism, but it did not go far enough to meet the real world. SYRIZA still dreamed of a fairer capitalism, and fought for months for a realistic dream that was mere phantasy.

This ended in the tragic-farcical reversal of the referendum and the total capitulation of the hope promised by SYRIZA to the reality represented by Angela Merkel and the other politicians of the European Union. “Grow up!” they said, “get real! There is no hope, just reality. There is no such thing as a fairer capitalism. Keynes is dead, long dead.” SYRIZA pushed to the limits of state action: they pushed their phantasy as far as they possibly could within the state-form, and failed.

After months of playing the game of negotiation and just when it looked, after the referendum, as if the Greek government might pull off a victory of some sort, Merkel and the Europeans announced “checkmate!” And the Greek government saw that it was so and fell to its knees. The endgame was lost. The endgame of what? Of the radical phase of the SYRIZA government certainly. Of the new left parties in Europe (particularly Podemos) probably. Of the euro and even the European Union very possibly. Of humanity, conceivably.

Checkmate. Yes, certainly, but if we remember, remember December 6, then it is very clear that we’re playing a different game. Your Reality has won just now, but

ours is a different reality, a reality that exists in the mode of being denied. Our reality is the reality of the world that exists not yet, that exists in our potential, that which exists in-against-and-beyond the commodity-form, our reality is the rebellion of use value against value. (But can we eat it?)

To understand what is the “Reality” that confronts us and now stands triumphant, let us remember another date, another rupture.

III. SEPTEMBER 15, 2008

A No of a different kind. Perhaps not a No of rage, simply a “No, it doesn’t work, capitalism doesn’t work.”

A rupture certainly. The collapse of the Lehman Brothers bank, the biggest bankruptcy in the history of capitalism, on that day brought panic to the world of finance and the world of politics. Lehman Brothers was followed the next day by AIG, the world’s largest insurance company, and more followed. Tim Geithner, later US treasury secretary, said “The United States risked a complete collapse of our financial sys-

tem,” and Canada’s finance minister said afterwards that the world economy had hovered on the edge of “catastrophe.”

The collapse was eventually prevented by the Great Bailout of banks. Throughout the world there was a massive nationalization not of the banks themselves, but of the banks’ debts. Worldwide, about twenty trillion (20,000,000,000,000) dollars were transferred to the banks in order to keep them in business: the twenty trillion dollars of bank debt assumed by the states now became twenty trillion dollars of public debt, of sovereign debt.

Whereas previously it had become clear that the banks would be unable to pay their debts (hence the Lehman collapse), it now became clear that it was likely that at least some states would be unable to pay the debts they had now acquired. The massive amount of debt assumed by states made it necessary for these states to do everything possible to pay the creditors (the banks) by adopting policies of austerity,

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different from the
reforms that are being
implemented in most
parts of the world.*”

that is, by cutting welfare payments and selling off state-owned assets.

Thus, according to David McNally, writing in 2010, “In response to market reactions to its debt, Latvia has fired one third of all teachers and slashed pensions by 70 per cent, Ireland has chopped wages of government employees by 22 percent, the state of California has cut health insurance for nine hundred thousand poor children.”

Greece is not so special. The measures that the SYRIZA government has been forced to accept are not very different from the reforms that are being implemented in most parts of the world: labor reform (reductions in the rights of workers), reduction of pensions, cuts in the welfare systems, privatization of state resources previously considered to be of strategic importance, the open subordination of state decisions to the requirements of the banks, the hollowing out of democracy, and so on and on.

The Zapatistas have suggested that a terrible storm is blowing against the world and that the urgent task of theoretical reflection is to understand this storm and how to combat it. This was the theme of the seminar they organized in May 2015. Seen from this perspective, Greece is important because it is in the center of the storm, but what is happening there can be understood only if we try to understand the storm as a whole.

To speak of the present turmoil in terms of Greece against Germany actively closes the possibility of understanding what is happening in terms of a deeper problem in the present organization of the world.

To speak of the present turmoil in terms of Greece against Germany or the Eurozone actively closes the possibility of understanding what is happening in terms of a deeper problem in the present organization of the world that affects Mexico or Puerto Rico or Detroit as well as Greece.

The problem is not (or rather, only superficially) Germany or indeed the Eurozone. The many analyses that discuss it in these terms take as their starting point what was the result of the transition from 2008 to 2015, that is, the positivization of the struggle that was part of focusing it through the state. By doing so, they feed easily into nationalist analyses and they fail to see the connection with the worldwide storm.

The problem is not this state or that state, but capital—that is, the way in which relations between people are currently organized: the subjection of human activity to the pursuit of profit (in other words, the subjection of use value production to value, of useful activity to abstract labor, of wealth to the commodity).

This form of organization is inherently antagonistic: it depends on the subordination of people's activity to an alien logic, a logic that they do not control. The antagonism also signifies instability: capital depends on being able to subordinate us to its logic, to its demands. Our possible lack of subordination always stands as threat to capital, as potential crisis.

The collapse of Lehman, and the conversion of bank debt into sovereign debt, not only explains the intensification of capitalist aggression (the “storm”) in all the world, but also shows dramatically that this aggression is grounded in the fragility of the system, in the desperation of capital. Behind the aggressive stance of the European leaders (and now of the neo-liberal SYRIZA government in Greece)

is the question: “how do we ensure the reproduction of the capitalist system and our place within it?”

That has to be their preoccupation simply because their position prevents them from even imagining that there might be another way of organizing society, however much we scream at them the obvious: that capitalism has failed, that it is destroying the necessary preconditions of human life on earth, that we desperately need to organize social relations in a different way.

Capitalism is dying, but it is not yet clear whether we will all die with it, or be able to create something else before it brings us down. The near-collapse of the banking system in 2008 and the attempt in the agreement of July 13 (and the corresponding measures in so many other countries) to impose a fierce restructuring of social relations in order to reduce the massive overhang of debt indicate, firstly, that capitalism as a system continues to be very unstable, and, secondly, that it is understood (at least by the capitalists) that *we* are the problem.

We are the ones who need to be restructured, remoulded. *We* are the crisis of capital. The important thing for capital to survive is to impose its discipline on the way that we work and the way that we live. For capital it is necessary that we should learn to obey, that the pride of our heart should fail.

Capitalism is dying, but it is not yet clear whether we will all die with it, or be able to create something else before it brings us down.

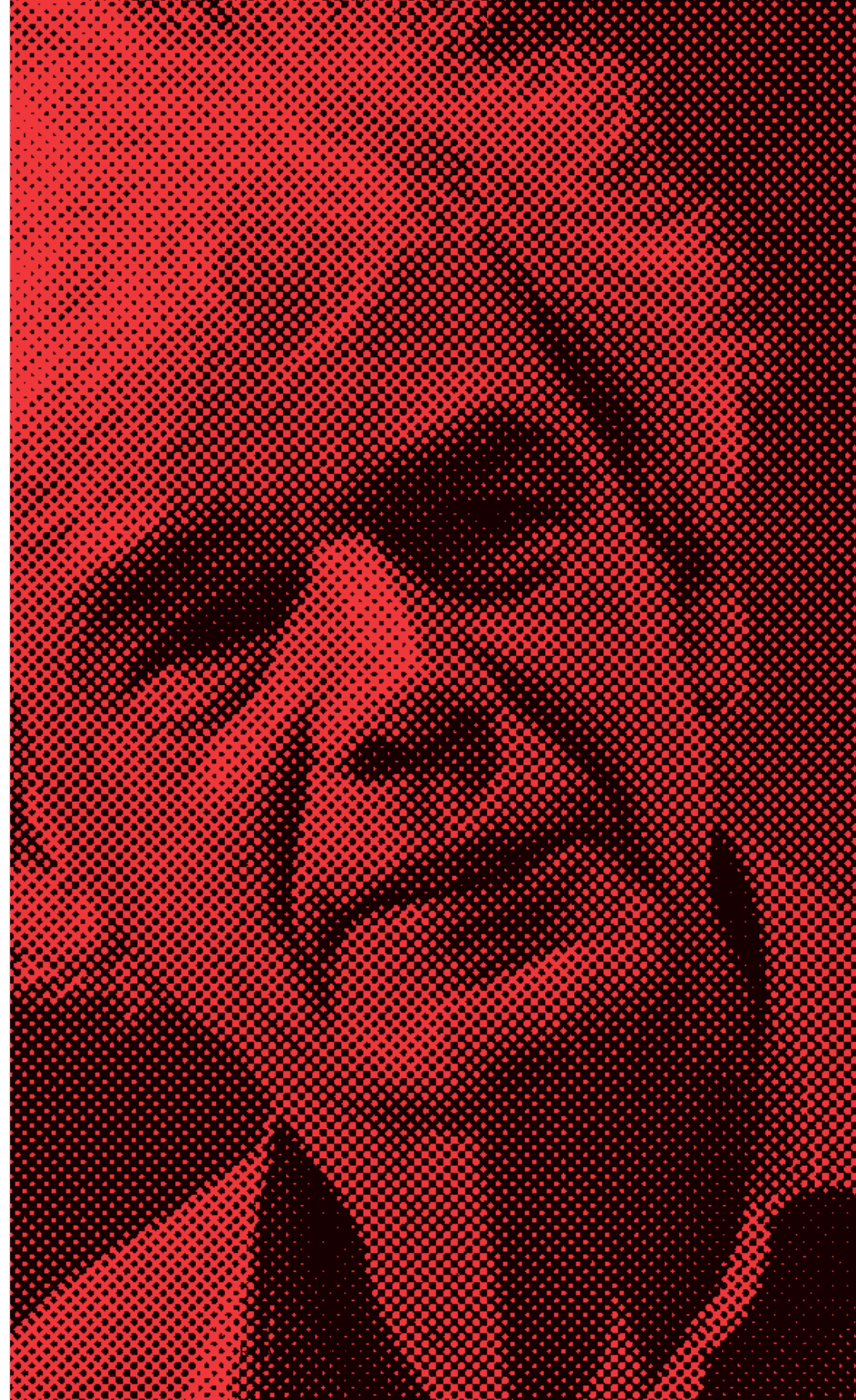


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Capital's problem is not just that it depends on us, but that it depends on the constant intensification of our subordination.

Capital's problem is not just that it depends on us, but that it depends on the constant intensification of our subordination. That is the significance of Marx's critique of value as a social relation. It is not just that money rules, but that the rule of money has a dynamic that forces capital to make us produce things more and more quickly, more and more efficiently.

Capital cannot stand still: in order to survive it has to constantly intensify its subordination of every aspect of human life to its logic. Unlike any other form of domination, it is constantly driven by its own inadequacy. Its difficulty in achieving the degree of subordination that it demands is reflected in the long-term growth of debt.

Debt is essentially a game of make-believe: it is capital saying “if we cannot make the workers produce the profits we require, if we cannot impose the submission that we require, then we shall pretend that we can: we shall create a monetary image of the profits we need.” Philip Coggan comments:



— *In the last forty years, the world has been more successful at creating claims on wealth than it has at creating wealth itself. The economy has grown, but asset prices have risen faster, and debts have risen faster still. Debtors, from speculative homebuyers to leading governments, have made promises that they are unlikely to meet in full. Creditors who are counting on those debts to be repaid will be disappointed.*

The difficulty of reconciling the social pressures that arise from the humanity of humans with capital's need to dehumanize us and make us into machines for producing profit is reflected in the ever-expanding breach between the creation of debt and the creation of wealth. This creates a fierce scramble, a vicious and bloody game of musical chairs as creditors fight to make sure that the debts are paid, debtors fight to try and push the burden of the debt on to other debtors and all together try to impose greater discipline, greater productivity and lower costs on the population of the world.

“
Neoliberalism is not a policy chosen by governments, it is simply the violence of the world in which they exist.

Neoliberalism is not a policy chosen by governments, it is simply the violence of the world in which they exist, the viciousness of the game that they play and must play simply by virtue of being states dependent on the reproduction of capital in their territories.

Any state, in order to secure its own existence, must try to promote the reproduction of capital within its boundaries: the fierce game of musical chairs between creditors and debtors that results from the enormous expansion of debt at the world level reproduces itself both within states as the competitive drive to provide the best conditions for capital accumulation, and between states as each tries to make sure that the roof (which is bound to collapse somewhere) falls somewhere else and not on it; that it should fall in this case not in Berlin or Frankfurt but in Athens and Thessaloniki.

The euro and indeed all monetary regimes are ways of playing this game: what distinguishes the euro from other currencies is that, having been created in the era of overwhelming debt, there is a specific aggressiveness written into its rules of functioning.

The violence of the capitalist game is not the same as it was fifty years ago, when the conditions created by fascism, the slaughter of about 100 million people and perhaps the fear of communism had created a space for some sort of welfare capitalism. It would seem that this is no longer viable, and certainly this seems to be the message being spelt out by the European politicians in the negotiations.

The negotiations were a long-drawn out lesson in which Merkel and Schäuble taught Tsipras what it means to lead a state in today's capitalism. They had to explain to him patiently over and over again: "Keynes is dead, long dead. Forget about creating a benevolent capitalism or a fairer system. There is no room for that. As the leader of the state, you must implement aggressive, neoliberal policies in order to attract capital and satisfy the money markets."

Their pupil was very slow, but at last he learnt, and now the SYRIZA government is committed to being a neoliberal government, just like all the others.

Grexit, the exit of Greece from the Eurozone, would probably make little difference in this respect. Its merit would be to prolong and magnify the cry of No to the capitalist attack, but as a policy its implications would be not so very different from those imposed through the negotiations. If Greece is to remain a capitalist society, and whether or not there is a default on the debt or part of it, it has to provide conditions that are attractive to capital and that almost certainly includes introducing labor reforms, cutting back on the welfare state, reducing pensions, privatizing state-owned assets and so on.

It is hard to see that Greece's direct subordination to the money markets would be very different from the same subordination mediated through the euro. It could perhaps provide the basis for an alternative capitalist restructuring, but even if it did, there is little reason to think that this

would be less aggressive than the Agreement of July 13, 2015. Greece probably does not have the natural resources to exploit that might provide a way of softening such a restructuring, as was the case in Argentina.

This third No is certainly a "No, it doesn't work," but it is also related to the earlier No's in the sense that the chronic expansion of debt arises from people in all the world saying, often quietly, "No, we will not become robots, No, we are not willing to, or perhaps we are not capable of, satisfying the demands of capital."

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The near-collapse of the banking system is an expression of our strength, but it is an expression that is often difficult to recognize as such.”

In that sense the near-collapse of the banking system is an expression of our strength, the strength of our everyday lives and habits, but it is an expression that is often difficult to recognize as such. The capitalists are right to blame us for capital's crisis. We must respond: "Yes, we are the crisis of capital. And we proud of it."

IV. THE NEXT TIME

Three No's, each one followed by a positive reintegration into the system. The No of the referendum of July 5 was converted immediately into the Agreement of 13 July. The great No of December 2008 was gradually institutionalized and territorialized into the rise of SYRIZA. The near-collapse of the banking system in October 2008 was overcome through the conversion of the banking debt into sovereign debt and the implementation of austerity policies throughout the world.

Each positivization presents the image of hard reality: that is the way the world is, there is no other way. And yet the three No's bear testament that it is not so. This world of capitalist reality is not only a catastrophe for humanity, it is also very antagonistic, very unstable, very fragile. Most commentators agree that the agreement between Greece and the Eurozone will not work: the government may succeed in introducing its measures of austerity, but it is very unlikely to be able to meet its debt repayment obligations.

It is also very unlikely that the austerity policies introduced in all the world will be enough to restore a more sustainable relation between debt and wealth creation: it is very likely that there will be more near-collapses, or indeed total collapses, of the financial system.

It is also clear that capital has not succeeded in its ambition of crushing completely the pride of the heart and that there will be many more explosions of

of rage-hope-dignity both in Greece and elsewhere. What we need is not the miserable “courage of hopelessness,” but the courage of our own absurdity.

The Greek experience suggests that the only way out of this is to tell capital to go to hell. There is no middle ground. We must liberate our creative potential (our productive forces) from the domination of money, of profit, to the point where we can tell capital that we are not interested in it, that we do not need to attract it to our territory or area of activity, that we do not need employment by capital, that we are quite happy without it and that it should take itself off to hell.

There are millions of people pushing in this direction in all the world, out of choice and out of necessity or a combination of the two. There are millions of cracks in the domination of capital, millions of experiments in other ways of living, in creating a common well-being that is not driven to profit. How-

ever, the Greek experience suggests that we are not there yet, that there is still a long way to go before we can say that we do not want to attract capital, that we do not need capitalist employment.

The drama of the last few months confronts us with our own weakness. If we cannot say No to capitalist employment then we must attract capital. To do this, we must create optimal conditions for capital profitability. To do this we must adopt aggressive (neoliberal) policies to strengthen the rule of money and the subordination of people. The only way out is to say goodbye to capital. Can we do that? Interstitially certainly, but probably not completely.

The only way forward is to accept the contradictions that this situation entails, contradictions that cut through each and all of us, and at the same time to do everything we can to say No and No and No to the capitalist aggression and to liberate our creative potential to create ways of living in-against-and-beyond capital. There is no closure. ★

JOHN HOLLOWAY



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The Greek experience suggests that the only way out of this is to tell capital to go to hell. There is no middle ground.



AFTER SYRIZA

Chronicles of a Defeat Foretold

Theodoros Karyotis

SYRIZA'S CRASH LANDING
HAS EXPOSED BROKEN
PROMISES, LOST
OPPORTUNITIES AND A
BITTER DIVORCE WITH
THE MOVEMENTS.



When viewed from the outside, the relationship of the SYRIZA party with the grassroots movements that have been resisting austerity on the ground in the past five years can easily be idealized. After all, both were responses to a barbaric attack on the Greek popular classes, and both aimed to put an end to neoliberal structural adjustment. A closer examination, however, demonstrates the fundamental differences between the two projects, and can reveal that their confluence was a mere marriage of convenience that ended in a bitter divorce.

Does this engagement of the grassroots with political power always have to end in disappointment? Is there anything a “progressive” government can do to expand the field of action for emancipatory efforts through the promotion of social self-initiative? Is the state an appropriate instrument of social change for those who seek to transform everyday life and social relations from the bottom up?

CRASH LANDING

The crash landing of the once meteoric SYRIZA project has been a traumatic event not only for the Greek middle and lower classes, which had deposited a lot of their hopes on the promises of the party to reverse the Troika’s nefarious austerity measures, but also for the European left, which envisioned a change of course for the project of European integration, and saw in the face of ambitious Alexis Tsipras a leader who would be up to the task.

It is now painfully clear that, despite the Greek government’s intentions, the strategy of pursuing a reversal in the terms of austerity without breaking with the institutions of neoliberal domination—the EU, the Eurozone and the IMF—has backfired. Its negotiation tactic, that is, to use mere force of argument to try to convince the hardened ideologues of the EU and the IMF that austerity in Greece has not only created recession and misery, but has also failed to make the sovereign

debt any more manageable, has utterly failed. The real agenda of said institutions is the continuation, at any cost, of a set of policies that facilitates the penetration of capital in all spheres of life.

This is because European capitalist elites are facing a crisis of their own—a crisis of profitability, provoked by the race to the bottom among capitalist superpowers. The preferred way out for the European capitalist class is to maintain their levels of profitability by turning their own crisis into a social and environmental crisis: on the one hand, to lower production costs by compressing wages and externalizing the cost of social reproduction (resulting in precarization as well as the dismantling of public healthcare, education, benefits, and so on), and on the other hand to create new opportunities for accumulation by commodifying ever more spheres of the social and natural world (again, through the privatization of healthcare, education, infrastructure, but also of water, energy, land and minerals).

In this respect, there is no better excuse to bring about this transformation than to capitalize on the sovereign debt crisis. The structural adjustment of the Greek economy is a prelude to the transformation of social relations across the whole continent in favor of capital. The outcome of the negotiations is a reminder that governments cannot simply “opt out” of this process.

It is now painfully clear that the strategy of pursuing a reversal in the terms of austerity without breaking with the institutions of neoliberal domination has backfired.



PHOTO BY JAN WELLMAN, VIA FLICKR

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

The terms of the Greek government's surrender to the neoliberal forces in Europe are humiliating. Not only were there no concessions made to the new government, but the "partners" went out of their way to make sure the measures would be punitive and disproportional. Some analysts even argue that the current program is designed to fail, creating further pressures for adjustment and holding the people of Greece hostage.

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Tsipras' main priority is that the “first-ever left-wing government” holds on to power, even at the cost of having to implement a thoroughly right-wing structural adjustment program.”

Not only has the SYRIZA-led government foregone the totality of its electoral “Program of Thessaloniki” to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, but it was forced to enact a series of harsh measures designed to further dispossess the middle and lower classes through horizontal cuts and unjust taxation, privat-

ize major public infrastructure—ports, highways, airports, water and energy companies among them—and hand over political sovereignty to the institutions of the Troika.

In an ironic turn of events, the government has disregarded the overwhelming popular rejection of austerity in the July referendum and adopted the exact same arguments of the previous administrations to push through a set of measures that are disastrous for the social majority, all the while maintaining the rhetoric of social justice and opposition to the oligarchy. Tsipras' main priority is that the “first-ever left-wing government” holds on to power, even at the cost of having to implement a thoroughly right-wing structural adjustment program. What we are witnessing, then, is a renewal of the political elite without a considerable change in the underlying politics.

Tsipras' newly-adopted “responsible stance” and “pragmatism” is now applauded by the most unlikely allies: the European elites and the right-wing opposition in Greece. And the European hawks have plenty of reason to celebrate: it would be unthinkable to impose such a far-reaching austerity package under the previous, fragile and isolated right-wing government. It took a new, progressive government with enormous reserves of political capital to be able to do that.

AUSTERITY WITH A HUMAN FACE?

SYRIZA's new political project, that of being a more benign administrator of capitalist barbarity, signifies its transformation into a moderate, centrist, social-liberal force: the party has completed in only a few months the rightward trajectory that European social democratic parties took decades to complete. This development is attested by the split of the party's left-wing and its molding into an anti-eurozone, anti-austerity force that goes by the name “Popular Unity”—intentionally reminiscent of Allende's front of the same name in 1970s Chile.

These developments also put into question the basic programmatic premises of the entire European left: has the fight for “less austerity” and “more growth” become the insurmountable horizon of emancipatory politics today?

Has the fight for “less austerity” and “more growth” become the insurmountable horizon of emancipatory politics today?

Indeed, of all of SYRIZA's mistakes and betrayals, this one is the most damaging for the cause of social emancipation: in its quantum leap from anti-austerity left to social-liberal centrism, Tsipras and his team of pragmatists have imposed a peculiar “End of History” on the Greek population: neoliberal adjustment is viewed as something inevitable, much like a natural disaster, which needs a heroic and determined public administration to alleviate its effects on the people, to manage the misery and destruction it causes.

And although Tsipras still has a good chance at winning the general elections—imminent at the time of writing—the phrase “there is no alternative” sounds absurd when uttered by politicians who nominally belong to the radical left. Yet it sounds even more absurd as an argument directed at a society that has for several years now been proposing and implementing countless radical alternatives from below.

*Syriza's hegemony
within many social
struggles came at
a great cost for the
movements.*



A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

Throughout the years of resistance to the neoliberal assault, two conceptions of politics played out within the social movements: on the one hand, politics as “the art of the possible,” related to the growing influence of SYRIZA in social struggles; on the other hand, politics as an exercise of radical imagination and experimentation, put forward by the commons-based alternatives.

Since 2010, the severe crisis of legitimation of the political system and its satellites—parties, trade unions, and so on—brought forward new political subjects and innovative projects that aimed to challenge the state and the capitalist market as the dominant organizing principles of social life, to propose new avenues towards social and economic wellbeing. Movements based on equality, solidarity, self-management and participation, which proposed innovative models of collective use and management of the commons.

Even when they do not explicitly state so, these movements are deeply anti-capitalist, as they aim to cut off the lifeline of European capitalism by weakening the market’s grip on society (through workplace occupations, solidarity economies, barter networks, food sovereignty, and the like) or by resisting attempts to commodify the natural commons (through movements against mining and water privatization, for instance).

Despite the admirable efforts of innumerable people across the country, these new commons-based movements failed to produce a political expression—and by political we should not necessarily understand electoral, but rather a unifying force to gather the disparate experiments in social creativity and bring them together into a coherent proposal of wholesale social change. SYRIZA took advantage of this shortcoming in the movements, allowing it to ride the wave of social mobilization in Greece and construct a solid hegemony within many social struggles in the past five years.

This hegemony, however, came at a great cost for the movements. By its nature, SYRIZA is much more understanding of the type of struggles that envision a stronger state as the mediator of social antagonisms. This has resulted in the curtailment of demands that did not fit into a coherent program of state management—including most projects that revolve around popular self-management of the commons.

Starting in 2012, the meteoric electoral rise of SYRIZA put an end to the crisis of legitimation, since it produced a long awaited institutional response to the crisis. With it came a relative demobilization, and a desire of institutionalization of the struggles. This desire was not peculiar to the Greek context: Spain is another country where powerful grassroots mobilization gave way to a desire to “storm the institutions” (“*asaltar las instituciones*”).

Important theorists who championed and celebrated the horizontal movements of 2011 soon found themselves seduced by the electoral rise of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, and advocated for alliances between the grassroots and the rising left-wing parties that fought for control over the state—or in Negri’s terms, between constituent and constituted power.

CONSTITUENT AND CONSTITUTED POWER

Negri’s theory undercuts a lot of the analyses arising amid the post-squares hangover. As expressions of constituent power, the movements aim to transform social reality and propose alternatives from the bottom up. The party, by capturing the heights of the constituted power—the state and its institutions—is responsible for bringing about widespread social change, based on the social creativity of the constituent power.

While a small part of (the old) SYRIZA has always had a grassroots mentality, from 2010 onwards the party has invested quite a bit of effort in consolidating its influence within grassroots struggles. Despite having only a negligible presence within trade unionism—a sphere traditionally dominated by the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the now near-extinct PASOK—SYRIZA steadfastly established its presence within all grassroots social struggles.

A strategic part of this was the founding of Solidarity4All, a party-funded organization which, despite having its legitimacy as a facilitator or mediator called into question repeatedly by many grassroots groups, has had a remarkable presence and activity among the endeavors in social and solidarity economy in Greece. Its organizational capacity, its ability to have full-time paid organizers, its access to funds and the media, and a promise of political solution to conflicts, allowed SYRIZA to establish a conflictive but lasting hegemony within the social movements.

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Despite the centripetal influence of SYRIZA, the Greek grassroots movements have in the past five years molded themselves into a genuine constituent power.”

Despite the centripetal influence of SYRIZA, the Greek grassroots movements have in the past five years molded themselves into a genuine constituent power, using their radical imagination to bring into being new institutions, new social relations and new approaches to the organization of social life. The occupation and self-management of the Vio.Me factory in Thessaloniki; the self-management by



PHOTO BY JAN WELLMAN, VIA FLICKR

its own employees of ERT, the national broadcaster shut down by the previous government; the dozens of solidarity clinics; the proliferation of workers' co-operatives; the proposal of Initiative 136 in Thessaloniki to bring the city's water provider under citizens' control—these are just a few of the more visible efforts to transform society through social self-initiative.

Has SYRIZA also fulfilled its part in the implicit bargain, that of the administrator of a “constituted power” that will turn these experiments in social self-determination into legitimate institutions? Has SYRIZA's capture of state power been an opportunity for the movements to achieve institutional recognition of their demands and struggles?

THE “CONQUEST” OF STATE POWER

Quite the contrary: it soon became obvious that SYRIZA's state project does not quite dovetail with the demands of a society that is exploring ways to govern itself, but also that SYRIZA is unwilling or unable to deliver on its own electoral promises. This realization has led to a bitter divorce between SYRIZA and its former allies within the movements, and has largely lifted the veil of illusion regarding top-down solutions to social, environmental and class conflicts.

Of course it is evident today that the national government represents only a tiny

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It has become obvious that SYRIZA's state project does not quite dovetail with the demands of a society that is exploring ways to govern itself.

part of real power. There are parts of the Greek state that are permanently out of reach of the government, especially the deep state of the judicial power, which is by its nature very conservative; the armed forces, which are penetrated by the extreme right; and the state's entrenched bureaucracy. There is also, of course, the all-pervading power of the mass media and the oligarchy that controls them.

SYRIZA does not only seem incapable of confronting these powers; what is more, elements within the SYRIZA-led government (such as the influential Deputy Prime Minister Yannis Dragasakis) have actively aligned themselves with the domestic and international elites, thus guaranteeing the continuation of the policies of the previous governments in many areas.

This is not only a weakness inherent to SYRIZA: it is an indication of the inadequacy of modern representative democracy. Vast areas of real power are completely out of reach of democratic control, even for the flimsy democratic control afforded by the institutions of representation. Prime Minister Tsipras spent months reiterating that “we have the government but not the power.”

However, his vision for the active involvement of society goes as far as organizing impromptu pro-government demonstrations, as was the case during the recent debt negotiations and the mobilizations ahead of the referendum. This conception of “popular power” as an accessory to governmental power is simply a caricature of what a real popular democracy would look like.

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Many people hoped that SYRIZA could use its power to help expand the spaces of action of the popular movements and side with the weak in their fight against the powerful.

BROKEN PROMISES AND LOST OPPORTUNITIES

So, what can a government that has a financial gun against its head do to deserve its “progressive” or “left-wing” credentials? Many people, both within the government and the movements, hoped that it could use its power to help expand the spaces of action of the popular movements, help safeguard the conquests of the popular struggles, side with the weak in their fight against the powerful.

Rather than raising a criticism of the government’s approach in the field of Greece’s relation with its creditors, a criticism which seems to be the main concern of the new Popular Unity party and most of the left-wing opposition, let us focus on lost opportunities and broken promises: let us look into some examples where the SYRIZA government, instead of ratifying what the popular struggles have conquered, has—by action or by inaction—sided with the old regime against those who have nominally been its “allies” in the previous years.

— ERT:

Until it was shut down by the previous government in 2013, ERT was Greece’s national broadcaster. Many of the workers became unemployed and some found work at NERIT, the new public broadcaster set up exclusively on partisan criteria. A great number of militant media workers, however, occupied the ERT buildings and kept broadcasting in a self-managed way, with all decisions taken in a horizontal manner, and with the citizens playing a protagonistic role in shaping the broadcaster’s programming.

The workers thus set the blueprint for a new kind of public—or common, in this case—radio and television. They repeatedly described their vision in detailed proposals for the operation of ERT. SYRIZA was involved in the struggle and promised the broadcaster’s reinstatement and a victory for the proposals of the workers.

However, the new law passed by the SYRIZA-led government in May totally disregards the period of self-management. It reinstates the workers under the same top-down structure and imposes a CEO of questionable intentions, with no provision for society’s involvement in content creation. The new management went as far as cancelling the shows of the media workers who heroically kept ERT open for two years as “too radical.” All in all, the government ignored society’s proposal to create a new model of broadcasting as a commons, and it reinstated the pre-crisis model of corporatized public television.

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The government ignored society’s proposal to create a new model of broadcasting as a commons.

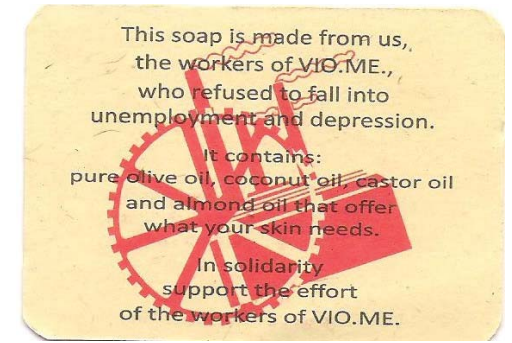
— **VIO.ME:**

Vio.Me was a building materials factory in Thessaloniki. As so many other companies in Greece, the owners abandoned the workplace leaving millions in unpaid wages. The workers of the factory, with the support of a vibrant solidarity movement, seized the means of production, and have been manufacturing and distributing ecological detergents out of the

the main creditors of bankrupt Vio.Me) to ensure the continuation of production.

This mechanism, which has been used with significant success in Argentina, presupposes that employment, the continuation of production and society's efforts to reactivate the ailing economy are valued higher than the private interests of those who want to see through the destruction of this experiment in popular

legal battle against the recuperated factory to anticipate any political solutions to the conflict. Despite the imminent threat of liquidation, the nominally “left-wing” government lacked in political will to side with the workers against capital.



www.viome.org

recuperated workplace through horizontal and collective procedures.

However, the state-appointed trustee, in collusion with the ex-owners and powerful business interests, are trying to liquidate the premises, and thus create the legal ground to evict the Vio.Me cooperative. Through militant action and continuous struggle, the workers demanded a political solution to the conflict: that the state activates legal mechanisms of expropriation (since the state is one of

industrial self-management. That is, it presupposes the political will to put the interests of the many over the interests of the few.

However, despite the initial commitment of the government to push forward a political solution and create an adequate legal framework, the corresponding ministers kept silent, and the promises to use governmental power against economic power remained unfulfilled. All the while, the trustee is stepping up the

Promises to use governmental power against economic power remained unfulfilled. The nominally “left-wing” government lacked in political will to side with the workers against capital.

— **THESSALONIKI WATER COMPANY:**

In 2011, the government announced the privatization of the water and sewerage company of Thessaloniki. Democracy activists who were at the moment deliberating in the squares united with the water workers to propose an innovative model of water self-management as a commons. They created Initiative 136, with the aim of participating in the public tender to claim the water company in the name of the citizens, and bring it under social control through local non-profit cooperatives, inspired by the Bolivian water committees—briefly discussed in this issue by Oscar Olivera.

Politicians linked to the SYRIZA party upheld the state management of the company and, totally unfamiliar with the vocabulary of the commons, tried to marginalize the plan of Initiative 136 and defame it as “popular capitalism”, despite the obvious absence of a profit motive.

Notwithstanding the internal divisions, Thessaloniki’s water movement organized to confront the common enemy, in the face of the transnational water company Suez. After a non-binding grassroots referendum that demonstrated the overwhelming opposition of Thessaloniki’s inhabitants, as well as a decision by the constitutional court that upheld the public character of water, the privatization process was paralyzed.

It is ironic that the party that claimed hegemony within Thessaloniki’s water

movement will now oversee the partial privatization of the company: according to the terms of the new memorandum, a considerable part of the water company’s shares is up for grabs. Although the majority has to remain state-owned, in line with the court ruling, this partial privatization of the water company is only a preamble to capital’s assault on this vital element. The water movement now has to rise up against its former ally and today’s administrator of neoliberal policies.

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Politicians linked to SYRIZA, totally unfamiliar with the vocabulary of the commons, upheld the state management of the Thessaloniki water company, and the party that once claimed hegemony within the water movement will now oversee its partial privatization.



— SKOURIES GOLD MINE:

In Skouries, Halkidiki, a gold mine is in development by the Canadian company Eldorado Gold in collaboration with AKTOR S.A., Greece's "national contractor", owned by Giorgos Bobolas, the personification of Greek oligarchic power. The local population has waged a long and radical struggle against the environmentally disastrous mine, which is built among the region's old-growth forests, and which will poison the aquifers that provide irrigation and drinking water to an area of 500km², endangering the local flora and fauna and putting on the line thousands of jobs in agriculture, bee-keeping and low-intensity tourism.

All the while, the mining company, despite having acquired the mining rights in a scandalous deal with corrupt politicians that was condemned by the European courts, uses the language of "progress" and "investment", utilizing the miners as a human shield, effectively promoting a civil war climate in the area.

SYRIZA took a central role in the struggle while it was in opposition, but it always pushed for a "political" solution and it opposed the more radical actions of the

movement and its efforts to coordinate and mobilize outside of formal institutions. While in government, it proved incapable of opposing the plans of the mining company. Instead of delivering on its electoral promise to cancel the mine, it engaged in a small-scale "bureaucratic war" with the mining company, revoking and re-examining permits, all the while

reassuring the miners that their jobs are not in danger.

Even the halting of Eldorado's activity in August 2015—perfectly timed with the announcement of national elections — does not seem to be aimed at stopping the mine, but rather at

obliging the company to "adhere to environmental regulations"—seriously degraded by five years of structural adjustment. Prime Minister Tsipras declared that he cannot "destroy 5,000 jobs" by shutting down the mine—a gross overestimation of Eldorado's real number of staff. This stance has already sparked mass resignations of party members in the area.

The anti-mining movement is now well aware that the strategy of the government is to gain political time, without

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While in government, SYRIZA proved incapable of opposing the plans of the Eldorado mining company for the gold mine in Skouries modernization.

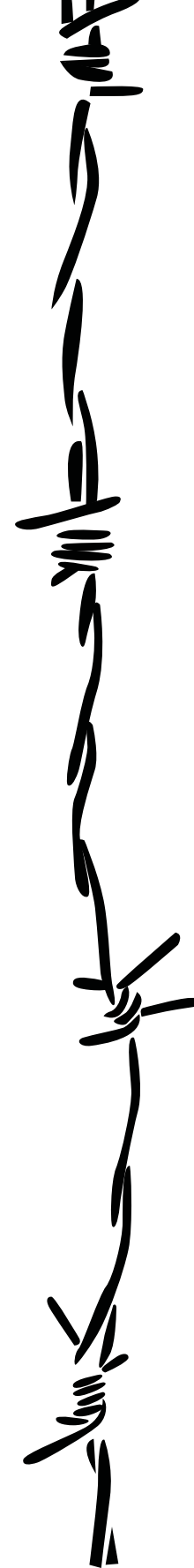
planning to confront national and transnational capital in the area. Trusting SYRIZA's "political solution" now looks like a lot of wasted time, while the police keep violently repressing all protest and the judicial powers go on criminalizing the struggle and prosecuting local residents in the hundreds.

— POLICE REPRESSION:

Another important source of discontent within the movements relates to the issue of police repression. Before its ascent to power, SYRIZA members were part of the protesters who were systematically beaten, tear-gassed, persecuted and framed by the forces of order. It is common knowledge that the Greek armed forces and police are penetrated by supporters of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party, and have been involved in appalling incidents of power abuse in the past years.

In spite of SYRIZA's electoral promises, however, the Minister of Interior appointed by Tsipras did not even try to root out the fascist elements from the police. On the contrary, he appeared determined to justify the ongoing cover-up of investigations of police brutality, and he declared—much the same as his predecessors—that the main problem of public order is 'anarchist violence'.

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In spite of SYRIZA's electoral promises, the Minister of the Interior did not even try to root out the fascist elements from the police.



— CIVIL RIGHTS:

At home, the only field where the SYRIZA-led government proved to be effective is in the field of individual civil rights. It granted citizenship to second-generation immigrants, it reverted a handful of—but not all—repressive laws passed by previous governments to criminalize popular resistance, and it has extended the right of civil union to same-sex couples.

Without underestimating the importance of such social advances and the struggles required to bring about such progressive reforms, we should point out that it seems peculiar how a “radical left” government has limited its field of action to an area that constitutes the province of liberalism *par excellence*.

It is peculiar how a “radical left” government has limited its field of action to an area—individual civil rights—that constitutes the province of liberalism par excellence.

Indeed, since the European left wholeheartedly embraced the capitalist economy as the insurmountable horizon of our times, thus precluding the possibility of collective social emancipation, it has taken up the historical cause of liberalism as the champion of individual liberties and human rights, without challenging the underlying economic and power relations, or questioning the farcical nature of representative democracy.



NOSTALGIA-DRIVEN MODERNIZATION

There is, moreover, a fundamental oxymoron at the heart of SYRIZA's political project. On the one hand, its conception of social change, as simply a defense of the pre-austerity "golden years" of Greek capitalism, is making it advocate for policies that are oddly in line with those of the old political regime. On the other hand, it could be argued that SYRIZA's real project, a lot like that of European social democracy in the post-war period, is not the gradual overcoming of capitalism, but its rationalization and modernization.

In reality, SYRIZA dreams of turning a feudal, parasitic and colonially-minded Greek oligarchic upper-class into a real agent of production, investment and employment, which would promote economic growth as a precondition for prosperity. At the same time, it aspires to be the political force that guarantees this capitalist modernization.

Let us take an example that has been talked about a lot in the Greek context—that of the radio frequencies. The Greek oligarchic mass media, in their rentier mindset, consider the airwaves their "birthright". They occupy them arbitrarily, emitting as they please without paying a cent for their use. What would be

the alternative models of allocation of this common resource?

The traditional communist left would nationalize the radio frequencies—i.e., bring them under state control—and allocate them according to a set of criteria of perceived 'public interest'. In a commons-based or post-capitalist approach, by contrast, the users would self-manage the radio frequencies, collectively setting the rules and limits of use, thereby permitting the existence of community media, now driven to extinction by commercial TV and radio stations.

So what is SYRIZA's much-advertised position? To auction the use of the radio frequencies to

the highest bidder, thus imposing the law of supply and demand onto this field. By what perverse twist of logic is enforcing the laws of the market considered a "left-wing" policy when it comes to crushing oligarchic power?

Although the rationalization of a corrupt and clientelist state can be a welcome change, we should never confuse this with the move towards a post-capitalist future, which has been the *raison d'être* of emancipatory politics ever since its inception in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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SYRIZA aspires to be the political force that guarantees capitalist modernization.”

Unfortunately, the only place the commons have in the plans of the Greek left is as a “safety net”.

At the same time, we should also be cautious about celebrating the state-centric “Plan B” of national economic reconstruction outside the Eurozone, advocated by the left-wing opposition, which includes SYRIZA's splinter party Popular Unity, led by former Energy Minister Lafazanis. Popular Unity represents another top-down perception of politics, which aims to guarantee growth and jobs through the reassertion of national control over fiscal and monetary policy.

This conception still envisions sovereign Greece as a competitive economy in the international markets, without challenging the underlying assumptions of a “return to growth” and the expansion of production, consumption and credit. And arguably, being competitive today invariably means to attract investment by compressing the living standards of workers in favor of capital, while “growth” can only be achieved through environmental and labor deregulation, the commodification of nature, and a continuous reliance on the fossil fuels that are heating up our planet.

A reasonable alternative course of action would have been to envision a form of political decentralization, food autonomy, an alliance with the forces of society against capital, and a promotion of the commons as an alternative source of prosperity. Unfortunately, the only place the commons have in the plans of the Greek left is as a “safety net”, a method of social containment which will prevent eruptions of popular discontent and will give the government an inexpensive instrument to exercise social policy while at the same time dismantling the welfare state.

Is the left nowadays prohibited of dreaming of a world beyond capitalism? Has the desire for productive reconstruction, growth-fueled prosperity and the welfare state as a mechanism of social inclusion become the horizon of emancipatory thought today?



To approach self-determination, organized society should find creative ways to constitute itself as a counterpower, without becoming absorbed within the existing institutions of power.

THE STATE AS VEHICLE OR AS OBSTACLE?

It is true that in this cycle of mobilization against capitalism's mutation into an all-pervading totality, an old debate within the emancipatory movements has been reheated, and two different—and seemingly incommensurable—conceptions of the state and its relationship to social change have come to the fore.

On the one hand there is the conception of the state as the last frontier of democratic control, the last bastion of power accessible to the common man, before we enter the uncharted territory of corporate domination and opaque centers of power imposing their rules on social life. Much of the contemporary left is plunged into a nostalgia of the European post-war settlement, where the state mediated class conflicts and established the necessary consensus for capitalist domination. That arrangement is taken as the yardstick by which to judge social progress in present-day Europe.

While we should resist the idea that we can somehow “smash the state,” we should also reassess the idea that we can simply ignore state power.

Despite the failures of the 20th century left—reformist and revolutionary alike—in turning the state into an instrument of social emancipation, a vision still persists that the conditions of our emancipated future, the new social relations that will shape our post-capitalist life, can be regulated into being through the seizure of state power.

On the other hand there is the opposite perception, which suggests that even in its more benign forms the state is an instrument of domination and of the professionalization of politics, effectively usurping society of the ability to govern itself. Advocates of this vision propose to either fight against the state or act despite the state.

While we should resist the idea that we can somehow “smash the state”—the state is a social relation rather than a thing, so

simply “smashing” it entails a host of practical problems—we should also reassess the idea that we can simply ignore state power; that building our new social realities in the shell of the old world suffices to eventually do away with the structures of domination altogether.

THE QUESTION OF POWER REMAINS UNRESOLVED

Although the bottom-up transformation of social reality is a *sine qua non* for overcoming capitalism—a fact too easily overlooked by the institutional left—the question of the capitalist totality, of resisting, subverting and confronting the powers that be, is too complex to be addressed by a disparate and unconnected assortment of grassroots post-capitalist endeavors. The debate on political organizing, on collective action, on transgressing the dominant institutions, on confronting power, is as timely as ever.

The state is neither the fount that social relations spring from—as much of today's left-wing thought seems to imply—nor a force we can simply ignore or destroy. And, given the token nature of representative democracy, the state is not something that can simply be “captured” either.

To approach self-determination, organized society should find creative ways to constitute itself as a counterpower, without becoming absorbed within the existing institutions of power. There is

no doubt that the movements' relationship with the state, even with a nominally “progressive” government, should remain autonomous, confrontational and antagonistic. However, militant and creative ways of penetrating and subverting the institutions have been proposed by many emancipatory traditions, most prominently libertarian municipalism.

It is not the objective of this article to establish a doctrinal one-size-fits-all approach regarding the relationship between movements and institutions. Each movement, according to its territorial and historical circumstances and the conjectural correlation of forces, can decide on a strategy of subversion, overriding, infiltration, cooperation, confrontation or penetration in regard to the dominant institutions.

However, we should beware the transformation of the party, initially approached as an “instrument” of the movement, into an organizational and discursive center point. Confronting the social power of capital calls for the permanent mobilization and involvement of society; getting sucked into the discourse of state administration and electoral politics entails a visible danger of incorporation of movements into the dominant political order.

Indeed, the ordeal of the Greek left has demonstrated the limits of the state-centric approach to social change. The social imaginary of a return to a fair and inclusive capitalism lies in tatters. This can lead to a long winter of depression for the people under attack by the forces

of capital, but perhaps this stage of collective disillusionment is inevitable. Sooner or later, the field will be open for the real agents of social change: tangible, everyday collectives and individuals rooted in concrete struggles at the local level, disrupting the flow of power and bringing forward alternatives.

This is the real constituent power, and it has to be independent of the dominant order, not subdued to state and party priorities. Eventually, as the divorce between SYRIZA and the social movements is being consummated, we have to accept that social transformation will be a conflictive and contradictory process—not simply the outcome of bringing all social forces under the hegemony of a progressive political party.

If we are to avoid the mistakes of the past and prevent the emergence of another messianic electoral force, we should place emphasis on organization, communication and linking our disparate proposals and groups into a coherent counterpower. The antagonistic movement should mold itself into the diverse and broad prefigurative project of a transition beyond capitalism, extending its reach into all areas of social life, to confront on the ground the enormous social power of capital. ★

THEODOROS KARYOTIS



Theodoros Karyotis is a sociologist, translator and activist participating in social movements that promote self-management, solidarity economy and defense of the commons. He writes on autonomias.net.



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If we are to avoid the mistakes of the past and prevent the emergence of another messianic electoral force, we should place emphasis on organization, communication and linking our disparate proposals and groups into a coherent counterpower.

THE DEMAND FOR A RATIONAL SOCIETY SUMMONS US TO BE RATIONAL BEINGS—TO LIVE UP TO OUR UNIQUELY HUMAN POTENTIALS AND CONSTRUCT THE COMMUNE OF COMMUNES.

Janet Biehl

BOOKCHIN'S REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAM

The lifelong project of Murray Bookchin (1921–2006) was to try to perpetuate the centuries-old revolutionary socialist tradition by renovating it for the current era. Confronted with the failure of Marxism after World War II, many, perhaps most radical socialists of his generation abandoned the left. But Bookchin refused to give up on the aim of replacing capitalism and the nation state with a rational, ecological libertarian communist society, based on humane and cooperative social relations.

Rather than abandon those ideas, he sought to rethink revolution. During the 1950s he concluded that the new revolu-

tionary arena would be not the factory but the city; that the new revolutionary agent would be not the industrial worker but the citizen; that the basic institution of the new society must be, not the dictatorship of the proletariat, but the citizens' assembly in a face-to-face democracy; and that the limits of capitalism were ecological.

Moreover, Bookchin concluded that modern technology was eliminating the need for toil (a condition he called "post-scarcity"), freeing people to reconstruct society and participate in democratic self-government. He developed a program for the creation of assemblies and confedera-

tions in urban neighborhoods, towns, and villages that, at various points in this life, he called eco-anarchism, libertarian municipalism, or communalism.

In the 1970s, new social movements—feminism, antiracism, communitarianism, environmentalism—emerged that raised hopes for the fulfillment of this program, but they ultimately failed to generate a new revolutionary dynamic. Today, in 2015, the concept of radical citizens' assemblies is gaining renewed interest among the international left. For this new generation, I propose to lay out the basic program as Bookchin developed it in the 1980s and 1990s.

LIBERTARIAN MUNICIPALISM

The ideal of the “Commune of communes,” Bookchin argued to many audiences and readers, has been part of revolutionary history for two centuries: the ideal of decentralized, stateless, and collectively self-managed communes, or free municipalities, joined together in confederations. The *sans-culottes* of the early 1790s had governed revolutionary Paris through assemblies. The Paris Commune of 1871 called for “the absolute autonomy of the Commune extended to all localities in France.” The major nineteenth-century anarchist thinkers—Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin—all called for a federation of communes.

For Bookchin, the city was the new revolutionary arena, as it had been in the past; the twentieth-century left, blinded by its

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engagement with the proletariat and the factory, had overlooked this fact. Historically, revolutionary activity in Paris, St. Petersburg, and Barcelona had been based at least as much in the urban neighborhood as in the workplace. During the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37, the anarchist Friends of Durruti had insisted that “the municipality is the authentic revolutionary government.”

Today, Bookchin argued, urban neighborhoods hold memories of ancient civic freedoms and of struggles waged by the oppressed; by reviving those memories and building on those freedoms, he argued, we could resuscitate the local political realm, the civic sphere, as the arena for self-conscious political self-management.

Much of social life today is trivial and vacuous, he pointed out, in a modernity that leaves us directionless and uprooted, living under nation states that render us passive consumers. By contrast, libertarian municipalism, standing in the tradition of civic humanism, offers a moral alternative, placing the highest value on active, responsible citizen participation. Politics, it insists, is too important to be left to professionals—it must become the province of ordinary people, and every adult citizen is potentially competent to participate directly in democratic politics.

Libertarian municipalism was intended as an expression of this tradition. Rather than seeking to form a party machine to attain state power and institute top-down reforms, it addresses the question that Aristotle asked two-thousand years ago, the central problem of all political theory: What kind of polity best provides for the rich flourishing of communal human life? Bookchin's answer: the polity in which empowered citizens manage their communal life through assembly democracy.

Assembly democracy is a civilizing process that can transform a group of self-interested individuals into a deliberative, rational, ethical body politic. By sharing responsibility for self-management, citizens come to realize they can rely on one another—and can earn one another's trust. The individual and the community mutually create each other in a reciprocal process. Embedding social life in ethical ways of life and democratic institutions results in both a moral and a material transformation.

Where assemblies already exist, libertarian municipalism aims to expand their radical potential; where they formerly existed, it aims to rekindle them; and where they never existed, it aims to create them anew. Bookchin offered practical recommendations as to how to create such assemblies, which in 1996, in collaboration with him, I summarized in a primer, starting with self-education through study groups.

The process may involve running candidates for elective municipal office on programs calling for the devolution of power to neighborhoods; where that is impossible, assemblies can be formed extralegally and strive to achieve vested power through moral force.

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In large cities, activists may initially establish assemblies in only a few neighborhoods, which can then serve as models for other neighborhoods. As the assemblies gain real *de facto* power, citizen participation will increase, further enhancing their power. Ultimately city charters or other constitutions would be altered to legitimate the power of the assemblies in local self-government.

DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL LIFE

In a typical assembly meeting, citizens are called upon to address a particular issue by developing a course of action or establishing a policy. They develop options and deliberate the strengths and weaknesses of each, then decide by majority vote. The very process of deliberating rationally, making decisions peacefully, and implementing their choices responsibly develops a character structure in citizens—personal strengths and civic virtues—that is commensurate with democratic political life.

Citizens come to take seriously the notion that the survival of their new political community depends on solidarity, on their own shared participation in it. They come to understand that they enjoy rights in their polity but also owe duties to their community, and they fulfill their responsibilities in the knowledge that both rights and duties are shared by all.

Reasoned civility is essential to a tolerant, functional, and creative democratic participation. It is a prerequisite for con-

structive discussion and deliberation. It is indispensable for overcoming personal prejudices and vindictiveness, and for resisting appeals to cupidity and greed, in the interest of preserving the cooperative nature of the community.

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One thing direct democracy does not depend on is ethnic homogeneity: neither its practices nor its virtues are the exclusive property of any one ethnic group. A rational democratic polity provides the public spaces where mutual understanding among people of different ethnicities can grow and flourish: its neutral procedures allow members of ethnic groups to articulate their specific issues in the give-and-take of discussion. In this shared

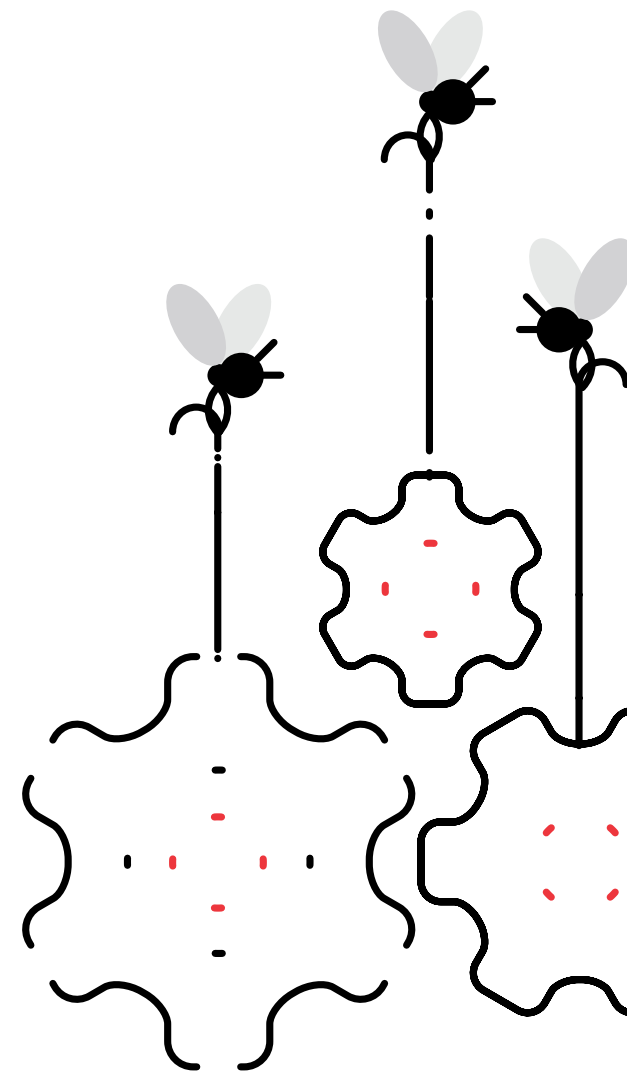
context, people of all cultures may develop modesty about their own cultural assumptions and achieve a common recognition of a general interest, especially based on environmental and communal concerns.

The assemblies' decisions, it is to be hoped, will be guided by rational and ecological standards. The ethos of public responsibility could avert the wasteful, exclusive, and irresponsible acquisition of goods, ecological destruction, and human rights violations. Citizens in assemblies could consciously ensure that economic life adheres to ethical precepts of cooperation and sharing, creating what Bookchin called a moral economy as opposed to a market economy.

Classical notions of limit and balance would replace the capitalist imperative to expand and compete in the pursuit of profit. The community would value people, not for their levels of production and consumption, but for their positive contributions to communal solidarity.

DECENTRALIZATION AND CONFEDERATION

To support democratic self-government, municipal political life would have to be rescaled to smaller dimensions; large cities will have to be politically and administratively decentralized into municipalities of a manageable size, into neighborhoods. The city's physical form could be decentralized as well. By decentralizing cities and rescaling technological re-



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sources along ecological lines, libertarian municipalism proposes to bring town and country into a creative balance.

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Consciously formed to express and accommodate interdependence, ensuring that power flows from the bottom up, confederal councils embody the revolutionary dream of a “Commune of communes.”

Decentralization, however, does not presuppose autarky. Any given individual community, for the means of life, needs more resources and raw materials than are contained within its own borders. Municipalities are necessarily interdependent, especially in economic life. Economic interdependence is a function not of the competitive market economy or capitalism, but of social life as such—it is simply a fact.

Organized cooperation is therefore necessary, and Bookchin argued that mak-

ing this possible requires the institutional form of a confederation, a lateral union in which several political entities combine to form a larger whole, such as the city or the region. The democratized neighborhoods do not dissolve themselves into the confederation but retain their distinct identity while interlinking to address their shared municipal or regional life.

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

The economic life that libertarian municipalism advances is neither nationalized (as in state socialism), nor placed in the hands of workers by factory (as in syndicalism), nor privately owned (as in capitalism), nor reduced to small proprietary cooperatives (as in communitarianism). Rather, it is municipalized—that is, placed under community “ownership” in the form of citizens’ assemblies.

All major economic assets would be expropriated and turned over to the citizens in their confederated municipalities. Citizens, the collective “owners” of their community’s economic resources, formulate economic policies in the interest of the community as a whole. That is, the decisions they make would be guided not by the interests of their specific enterprise or vocation, which might become parochial or trade-oriented, but by the needs of the community. Members of a particular workplace would thus help formulate policy not only for that workplace but for all other workplaces in the community; they participate not as workers, farmers, technicians, engineers, or professionals but as citizens.

The assembly would make decisions about the distribution of the material means of life according to the maxim of nineteenth-century communist movements: “From each according to their ability and to each according to their need.”



The assembly would make decisions about the distribution of the material means of life among all the neighborhoods in a municipality, and among all the municipalities in a region, where it can be used for the benefit of all, according to the maxim of nineteenth-century communist movements: “From each according to their ability and to each according to their need.” Everyone in the community would have access to the means of life, regardless of the work he or she was capable of performing. The assembly would rationally determine levels of need.

Economic life as such would be subsumed into the political realm, absorbed as part of the public business of the confederated assemblies. If one municipality tried to engross itself at the expense of others, its confederates would have the right to prevent it from doing so. Neither the factory nor the land could ever again become a separate competitive unit with its own particularistic interests.

Today, Bookchin long argued, productive technologies have been developed sufficiently to make possible an immense expansion of free time, through the automation of tasks once performed by human labor. The basic means for eliminating toil and drudgery, for living in comfort and security, rationally and ecologically, for social rather than merely private ends, are potentially available to all peoples of the world.

In the present society, automation has created social hardships, like the poverty

that results from unemployment, because corporations prefer machines to human labor in order to reduce production costs. But in a rational society, productive technologies could be used to create free time rather than misery. It would use today’s technological infrastructure to meet the basic needs of life and remove onerous toil rather than serve the imperatives of capitalism. Men and women would then have the free time to participate in political life and enjoy rich and meaningful personal lives as well.

CITIZENS’ MILITIAS

As more and more municipalities democratized themselves and formed confederations, Bookchin observed, their shared power would constitute a threat to the state and to the capitalist system. Resolving this unstable situation could well involve a confrontation, as the existing power structure would almost certainly move against the self-governing polity. The assemblies, he believed, would have to create an armed guard or citizens’ militia to protect their newfound freedoms.

In this respect, he followed the longstanding recognition by the international socialist movement that the armed people, citizens’ militias as an alternative to standing armies, was a *sine qua non* for a free society. Bakunin, for one, wrote in the 1860s: “All able-bodied citizens should, if necessary, take up arms to defend their homes and their freedom. Each country’s military defense and

equipment should be organized locally by the commune, or provincially, somewhat like the militias in Switzerland or the United States.”

A citizens’ militia is not merely a military force but also manifests the power of a free citizenry, reflecting their resolve to assert their rights and their commitment to their new political dispensation. The civic militia or guard would be democratically organized, with officers elected both by the militia and by the citizens’ assembly, and it would exist under the close supervision of the citizens’ assemblies.

It is possible that armed confrontation would be unnecessary, Bookchin observed, as the very existence of direct democracy could “hollow out” state power itself, delegitimizing its authority and winning a majority of the people over to the new civic and confederal institutions. The larger and more numerous the municipal confederations become, the greater would be their potential to constitute a dual power (to use Trotsky’s phrase) or counterpower to the nation-state. Expressing the people’s will, the confederation would constitute a lever for the transfer of power.

With or without armed confrontation, power would be shifted away from the state and into the hands of the people and their confederated assemblies. In Paris in 1789 and in Petrograd in February 1917, state authority simply collapsed in the face of a revolutionary confrontation. So hollowed out was the might of the seemingly all-powerful French and Russian monarchies that when a revolutionary people challenged them, they crumbled.

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Crucially, in both cases, the ordinary rank-and-file soldiers of the armed forces crossed over to the revolutionary movement. Today too, Bookchin thought, it would be crucial for the existing armed forces to cross over from the side of the state to the side of the people.

SEIZING THE REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT

Bookchin emphasized repeatedly in his later years that for a revolution to succeed, history must be on its side. Success is not possible at every moment; in addition to the will of individuals, large social forces must also be at work.



But too often, when a revolution is on the horizon, people are not ready for it. At “revolutionary moments,” as Bookchin called them, when a social or political crisis explodes, people pour into the streets and demonstrate to express their anger—but without the existence of revolutionary institutions to embody an alternative, they are left wondering what to do. By the time a revolutionary moment occurs, it is too late to create them.

It is impossible to predict, Bookchin insisted, when social crises will take place, so emancipatory institutions must be consciously created well in advance of the revolutionary moment, through painstaking, molecular work. He urged his students to begin to create the institutions of the new society within the shell of the old, so that they will be in place at the time of crisis.

The architects of the Rojava Revolution understood this point clearly. In the early 2000s, even as the brutal Assad regime proscribed political activity, the women’s union Yekitîya Star and the PYD began organizing clandestinely, in accordance with the new PKK ideology of Democratic Confederalism. In March

2011 the Syrian uprising began, allowing for more overt organizing, and they plunged ahead in full force: the People’s Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK) created councils in neighborhoods, villages, districts, and regions.

Citizens poured into these alternative institutions, so much so that a new level was created, the residential street, which became home to the commune, the true citizens’ assembly. By the time Rojava’s revolutionary moment occurred in July 2012, when the Assad regime evacuated the region, the process had been underway for over a

year, and the groundwork had been laid: the democratic council system was in place and had the people’s support.

The next challenge will not only be to survive in the war against the jihadists, but to ensure that power continues to flow from the bottom up. For the rest of the world, the Rojava Revolution offers an important lesson about the need for advance preparation. While Western activists often face repression, they face nothing like the brutality of the Assad dictatorship, and they have the relative

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freedom to begin to create new institutions now.

THE QUESTION OF POWER

In movements today, Bookchin found to his frustration, many activists regard power itself as a malignant evil, something to be abolished or avoided as morally impure. He vehemently opposed this notion, late in life, insisting that power is neither good nor evil—it simply is. The pertinent issue is not whether it will exist (it will, always) but whether it is in the hands of elites or in the hands of the people, and the purposes and interests for which it is exercised.

He illustrated this point by telling a story from the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37. In the preceding decades, Spanish anarchists had built a strong revolutionary institution, the CNT (National Confederation of Labor)—the world's largest anarchosyndicalist trade union. On July 21, 1936, as Franco's generals were overrunning much of Spain with the intention of destroying the Spanish Republic in favor of a military dictatorship, the workers of Barcelona, organized by the CNT, formed armed militias, and in some places—especially Catalonia—succeeded in pushing back the reactionary Francoists.

When the dust settled, the workers and peasants held *de facto* power in Catalonia. They had collectivized workplaces in factories and in urban neighborhoods; in the countryside, they collectivized

the land; and they established a network of self-governing committees to handle defense and supplies and transportation. These bottom-up institutions constituted a true revolutionary government. Through them, workers and peasants did not destroy power—by virtue of their self-organization and their military success, they *held* it. It was, Bookchin thought, one of the greatest revolutionary moments of the twentieth century, indeed in all revolutionary history.

For guidance on how to manage that power, the workers and peasants turned to the CNT, which on July 23 convened an assembly or plenum near Barcelona to discuss the matter. Some delegates argued passionately that the CNT should approve the collectives and committees as a revolutionary government and proclaim *comunismo libertario*. But others argued that such a move would constitute a “Bolshevik seizure of power.” Instead, they urged the CNT to join with all the other antifascist parties—bourgeois liberals, socialists, and even Stalinists—and form a regional coalition government in Catalonia.

The CNT plenum lost its revolutionary nerve and chose the second course. Tragically, it in essence transferred power from the *de facto* self-government to the coalition government—which really was a new regional state. Thereafter this Catalan state consolidated its power, restoring the old police forces and even giving the Stalinists a free hand. Within a few months, the Stalinists suppressed the workers' and peasants' committees, demolished the revolution, and arrested its supporters.

Bookchin, of course, thought the Catalan anarchists of 1936 should have proclaimed *comunismo libertario* when they had a chance. But anarchist theory had taught them to reject all power as malignant rather than embrace popular power that was grounded in the people. The Friends of Durruti, whom Bookchin admired, attributed the failure of the July 1936 revolution to its lack of “a concrete program. We had no idea where we were going. We had lyricism aplenty; but when all is said and done, we did not know what to do with our masses of workers or how to give substance to the popular effusion which erupted inside our organizations. By not knowing what to do, we handed the revolution on a platter to the bourgeoisie and the Marxists.”

The pertinent issue, Bookchin argued, is not whether power will exist (it will, always) but whether it is in the hands of elites or in the hands of the people.

With libertarian municipalism, Bookchin sought to provide just such a libertarian theory of power as was needed in 1936-37; so does Öcalan's Democratic Confederation. Armed with libertarian theories of power, we may hope that in the future such revolutionary moments will not once again be tragically lost.

RADICALIZE THE DEMOCRACY!

The nation state and the capitalist system cannot survive indefinitely. Around the world, the divisions between rich and poor have widened into a yawning chasm, and the whole system is on a collision course with the biosphere.

Capitalism's grow-or-die imperative, which seeks profit for capital expansion at the expense of all other considerations, stands radically at odds with the practical realities of interdependence and limit, both in social terms and in terms of the capacity of the planet to sustain life. Global warming is already wreaking havoc, causing rising sea levels, catastrophic weather extremes, epidemics of infectious diseases, and diminished arable land.

To Bookchin, the choice was clear: either people would establish a democratic, cooperative, ecological society, or the ecological underpinnings of society would simply collapse. The recovery of politics and citizenship was thus for him not only a precondition for a free society; it was a precondition for our survival as a species. In effect, the ecological question demands a fundamental reconstruction of society, along lines that are cooperative rather than competitive, democratic rather than authoritarian, communal rather than individualistic—above all by eliminating the capitalist system that is wreaking havoc on the biosphere.

Bookchin thought that the desire to preserve the biosphere would be universal among rational people; and that the need for community abided in the human spirit, welling up over the centuries in times of social crisis. As for the capitalist economy, it is little more than two centuries old. In the mixed economy that preceded it, culture restrained acquisitive desires, and it could do so once again, reinforced by a post-scarcity technology.

The demand for a rational society summons us to be rational beings—to live up to our uniquely human potentials and construct the Commune of communes. In many places, he argued, old democratic institutions linger within the sinews of today's republican states. The commune lies hidden and distorted in the city council; the sectional assembly lies hidden and distorted in the neighborhood; the town meeting lies hidden and distorted in the township; and municipal confederations lie hidden and distorted in regional associations of towns and cities.

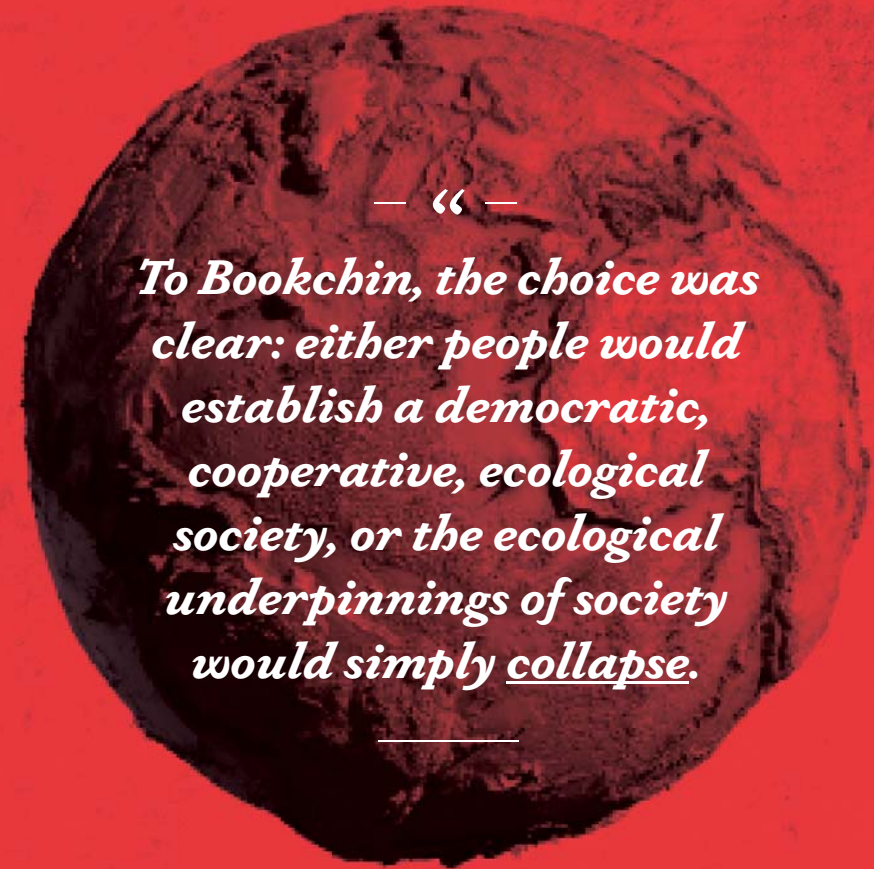
By unearthing, renovating, and building upon these hidden institutions where they exist, and building them where they do not, we can create the conditions for a new society that is democratic, ecological, rational, and nonhierarchical. Hence the slogan with which he closed so many of his inspirational orations:

“Democratize the republic! Radicalize the democracy!” ★

JANET BEIHL



*Janet Beihl was Murray Bookchin's companion and collaborator for his last 19 years. She is the author of *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin*, published by Oxford University Press in October 2015.*



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Towards a New Anti-Capitalist Politics

IF THE LEFT IS TO TRULY RECLAIM THE FUTURE AND CHART A WAY OUT OF CAPITALIST BARBARITY, IT WILL HAVE TO FIRST REINVENT ITSELF.



Humanity finds itself at an inflexion point. On the one hand, global capitalism is producing and aggravating a series of existential crises that may well undermine the very preconditions for a dignified human life—or *any* form of human life—on this planet. On the other, the only political force that could possibly do something to counter this inexorable drive towards catastrophe—the international left—has long since been run into the ground by a four-decade neoliberal offensive, leaving its social base fragmented and atomized, its organizational structures in tatters.

In the wake of this world-historic defeat, we are confronted on a daily basis with the devastating consequences of our contemporary powerlessness. Far from retreating in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008–'09, neoliberalism has intensified its war on democracy and doubled down on the structural violence of austerity and dispossession. Meanwhile, we look on helplessly as wealth and power continue to be concentrated in ever fewer hands, while common goods and public services are mercilessly sacrificed at the altar of the marketplace.

We stand defenseless as high finance and big business mount an all-out offensive

against the last-remaining vestiges of the welfare state, while mass surveillance and state control are expanded across the board. We are powerless as barriers to capital are knocked down in secretive trade deals while national borders are militarized and new walls erected everywhere to keep out the unwanted other. We feel paralyzed as families are evicted from their homes, protesters brutalized by police, and the bodies of drowned refugees continue to wash up on our shores.

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We may continue to speak of a crisis of capital, but what really confronts us is a crisis of the left.”

Amidst the growing uncertainty of a hyper-competitive 24/7 information economy, in which indebtedness, unemployment and precarity are rapidly becoming the generalized conditions of life

for the majority, we are overcome by exhaustion, depression and anxiety. At the same time, a sense of existential gloom is settling in as global temperatures and sea levels continue their seemingly unstoppable rise, while planetary life-support systems are being destroyed at a truly terrifying pace. From Hollywood blockbusters to best-selling books, late-capitalist culture knows all too well how to wax poetics about the collapse of civilization—yet its critics seem to have lost all capacity to imagine even the most moderate reforms to prevent this dystopian fiction from becoming reality.

For all its tragedies and failures, at least the old left was once driven by hopes and visions of a better future. Today, all such aspirations seem to have been abandoned. As Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi has astutely put it, the future has been cancelled—and the left, unmoored from its post-capitalist imaginary, has been cast hopelessly adrift in the process. In this conjuncture, we may continue to speak of a crisis of capital, but what really confronts us is a crisis of the left.

THE DUAL CRISIS OF THE LEFT

This crisis is of a dual nature: on the one hand, it is a *crisis of collective agency*, marked by the left’s utter incapacity to rise to the challenge of our times, or even to capitalize on the brief window of opportunity opened up by the financial crash of 2008; and on the other it is a related *crisis of imagination*, marked by the left’s total inability to even conceive of a world beyond capitalism. The two reinforce one another, pulling the opposition down in a vicious cycle of endless defeat.

As a result, today’s disoriented and unimaginative left has largely ceded the ground to the uncontested reign of zombie neoliberalism: an undead system that—impossible to either save or kill, yet desperate to counteract its own decay—feasts ever more parasitically on the collective fruits of our precarious labor, relying increasingly on direct rent extraction and the outright dispossession of humanity’s common wealth to prop up its faltering profit rates. It is a nihilistic

order that, incapable of offering a positive image of the future, has resorted to framing its hegemonic discourse entirely in negative terms, with an unflinching mantra repeated religiously by its stubborn acolytes: “there is no alternative.”

This successful suppression of the radical imagination, which has seeped deep into the very fabric of advanced capitalist society and has been internalized fully within the existing body politic, turned out to be the death-knell of all creativity and change among the institutional left. Meanwhile, the fragmentation, atomization and isolation of the traditional working class have thrown up seemingly insurmountable barriers to concerted action and enduring organization on the part of the new social movements, which—in response to the overwhelming odds that are now stacked against them—have largely retreated into a defensive and self-limiting localism.

And so we are left, on the one hand, with the ossified and bureaucratized remnants of a defunct 20th century socialism, wholly subsumed within the stultifying boredom and counter-revolutionary circuitry of bourgeois parliamentarism; and on the other with a disoriented multitude full of revolutionary passion, yet struggling to channel its intense collective outrage and its immense social creativity into a coherent and transformative political project.

Faced with the overwhelming power of capital and the escalating violence of the state, stuck between the institutional

inertia of the old left and the ephemeral spontaneity of the new, the opposition remains impotent and confused. Evidently, it is not the “historical inevitability” of the capitalist law of value, but the left’s own lack of internal coherence and the conspicuous absence of visionary post-capitalist perspectives that keeps it stuck in an endlessly repeating present.

As the future collapses in on itself and the left’s revolutionary aspirations wither on the vine, it is the weakness of our clenched fist and the paucity of our collective imagination, far more than the “natural laws” of their invisible hand, that now makes the end of the world appear more likely than the end of capitalism. It has become painfully clear that, if the left is to truly chart a way out of capitalist barbarity, it will have to first reinvent itself.

LET THE DEAD BURY THEIR DEAD

What could such a “reinvented left” look like? Clearly, it will not come falling out of the sky, nor can it be conceived on paper by the high priests of radical theory. Rather, its political imaginary, organizational forms and strategic orientations will all have to be constructed through collective processes of political agitation and firmly rooted in the structural contradictions and periodic crises of contemporary capitalism; in the material conditions and lived experience of ordinary working people, oppressed minorities and marginalized communi-

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ties; and in the concrete materiality and revolutionary potential of actually existing struggles.

Most importantly, the reinvented left will have to abandon its longing for a romanticized past and be boldly forward-looking in its perspective. To paraphrase Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the social revolution of the 21st century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future: “it must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.” Only by forgetting its native tongue, Marx noted, can the social revolution appropriate a new language and begin to articulate the nature of its struggle on its own terms.

We are all familiar with the poetry of the past: historical hymns still recount the glorious promises of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the withering away of the state, the leading role of the vanguard party, and countless other state-communist clichés long due for an ignominious burial. Lest we forget, Lenin’s corpse has been lying in state for almost a century now—it is high time to give the old man a final resting place! The social revolution of the 21st century

will be anti-authoritarian and radically democratic, or it will not be a revolution at all.

Social democracy, that other great project of the 20th century left, has not stood the test of time much better. Across Europe, center-left parties that once dominated the national political scene have long since devolved into the servile lackeys of capital and the submissive technocratic handmaidens of the reactionary right. Reduced to the status of junior partners in grand coalitions and European institutions whose overarching vision of the future appears to be one of permanent austerity, social democracy has been so thor-

roughly hollowed out as to fundamentally undermine even its own prospects of survival—the specter of “Pasokification” now looming large over most center-left parties.

Democratic socialism, by contrast, appears to have been staging a cautious comeback in recent years, especially in its various left-

populist forms. Buoyed by the collapse of social democracy and the constituent impulse of recent mobilizations against neoliberalism and austerity, a raft of

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leftist forces has been on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic—ranging from the progressive governments of the Latin American Pink Tide to the radical left parties in Greece and Spain, on to the self-declared “socialist” candidacies of Bernie Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom.

The defeat (and subsequent cooptation) of the radical left in Greece and the gradual receding of the Pink Tide in Latin America clearly reveal the limits of “21st century socialism”.

But while the emergence of electoral alternatives to neoliberal cynicism certainly marks an advance compared to the shallow theatrics of electoral politics prior to the crisis, the defeat (and subsequent cooptation) of the radical left in Greece and the gradual receding of the Pink Tide in Latin America clearly reveal the limits of the once-vaunted model of “21st century socialism”, whose dependence on global capital and international financial institutions remains woefully undiminished.

Insofar as the aforementioned left-populist forces have anything new to offer, it is mostly new to a millennial generation that grew up at the End of History and that has been weaned for decades on a “post-ideological” diet of elite-consensus politics. When it comes to their actual political content and policy proposals, even the staunchest of state-socialists have long since made a headlong retreat into a moderate left-reformism, expressed in economic programs that can best be described as Keynesianism-lite. And as Syriza’s recent experience has tragically confirmed, even that is unlikely to be tolerated by the capitalist powers of the day.

THE FORECLOSED ALTERNATIVE

What we are witnessing with this emerging left-populism, then, is the halting resurgence of an old left much more than the birth



TWO RIOTERS IN THE STREETS OF ATHENS - WIKIMEDIA COMMONS CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Spiros>

of a new anti-capitalist politics as such. The political poetry of left-populism may rhyme nicely with the language of the movements and resonate strongly with a public mood that is increasingly indignant at the inequities of financial capitalism and the corruption and unresponsiveness of the political elite—but it still remains the poetry of the past, embedded within a political imaginary that is wholly out of sync with the latest trends in capitalist development and the emerging forms of class struggle.

It should be noted, in this respect, that the relative successes of 20th century state-socialism were always limited to a very brief historical window in the immediate postwar decades and always depended on a set of very specific circumstances, including mass engagement with left parties, a powerful and militant labor movement, and soaring social, ideological and geopolitical tensions. During the “Golden Years” of the Keynesian compromise, the left’s political horizon largely reflected these structural conditions, with demands and struggles for full employment, higher wages and better working conditions taking center stage.

The capacity of the left to pursue such a productivist welfare program in turn hinged fundamentally on the Bretton Woods regime established at the end of World War II, which effectively kept finance and industry “captive” within national boundaries. By greatly increasing the relative autonomy of individual capitalist states and there-

by creating policy space for large-scale public investment, progressive taxation and a range of redistributive policies, the Bretton Woods system turned out to be a fundamental prerequisite for the emergence and survival of the welfare state. Its breakdown greatly boosted the structural power of capital and limited the left’s room for maneuver.

In short, the material gains and political achievements of the old left depended on a very specific set of circumstances whose reproduction—irrespective of whether or not it would be desirable—is simply no longer possible today. With the liberalization of capital flows and trade, the globalization of production, the financialization of the world economy, the revolutions in transportation, information and communication technologies, the demise of the unions and the workers’ movement, the evaporation of the communist threat, and the wholesale withdrawal

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of the masses from party politics, that route has now been foreclosed.

This is not a development that can be magically reversed by going back in time. As Peter Mair notes in the powerful opening statement to his last book, *Ruling the Void*, “the age of party democracy has passed.” Today, we are witnessing nothing less than “the final passing of the traditional mass party.” Of course this should not be taken to mean that these parties will just wither away, or that the state should simply be ceded to the capitalists. But it does indicate that the kind of enthusiastic popular engagement with

politics that once sustained the relative successes of the labor movement is not going to come back—unless the left revolutionizes itself from below by inventing a new anti-capitalist politics for the 21st century.

FLASHPOINTS OF A NEW POLITICS

It is in this light—of the historic demise of the traditional mass parties of the left—that we must read the most recent cycle of struggles. While the impressive protests and popular uprisings of the last years have clearly centered on the inequities of

financial capitalism and the authoritarian tendencies of the capitalist state, the more immediate significance of the mobilizations lay in the urgent political message they sent to the left: evolve or die. Either build on the creativity and dynamism of the movements, or fade away into political irrelevance.

The Greek riots of December 2008, the mass protests against austerity in Southern Europe, the Occupy movement in North America and the UK, the student mobilizations in Canada and Chile, the mass demonstrations in Turkey, Brazil, Mexico, and countless other countries of the Global South, the urban uprisings against anti-black police brutality in cities like Ferguson and Baltimore—each of these brief “insurrectionary” episodes constitutes a flashpoint in the emergence of a new politics, offering a collective vision of a radically different future that is being imagined in the very process of struggle.

Seen in this light, it becomes clear that the intense collective outrage and the immense social creativity expressed in these mobilizations is already breathing much-needed new life into a moribund left. As

John Holloway argues in his contribution to this issue, the financial crash of 2008 and the popular uprisings of the post-2011 period can be seen as a rupture that has changed the very texture and content of contemporary struggles. Even if the movements do not yet seem to know the exact way forward, and even if the initial mobilizations themselves petered out relatively rapidly, it is self-evident that there can be no way back.

There can be no way back because—in the over-developed and deindustrialized societies of the Global North at least—the productivist and welfarist horizon of the traditional left has simply lost all connection with the social realities of ordinary working people and the concrete materiality of actually existing struggles on the ground. In this respect, the most recent wave of popular protest tells us something very important about the changing nature of capitalism and the evolving forms of class struggle under conditions of financialization; changes which in turn necessitate innovative new ways of thinking about anti-capitalist organizing and the transition to a post-capitalist world.

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Sadly, those who remain versed in the poetry of the past have struggled to understand the unfamiliar language of the movements. Incapable of detecting anything new in them, many have ended up reducing the political essence of recent mobilizations to what they *do* understand: the struggle against inequality and unemployment, the opposition to austerity and the defense of the welfare state, and so on. While such traditional leftist grievances were certainly there, what was largely obscured in this mainstream narrative—also among large parts of the institutional left—was the deeper political content.

EMERGING FORMS OF CLASS STRUGGLE

The only way to uncover the deeper political content of recent mobilizations would be to tune into the movements themselves and try to understand contemporary struggles on their own terms, while at the same time recognizing the embeddedness of each individual struggle within the context of the global political economy. Only by exploring the dialectic between the movements' own subjectivities and the material conditions in which they arose can we begin to elucidate the common elements and the intimate interconnections between them.

In this light, some of the main themes we can identify in the latest cycle of struggles include:

- 1 The primacy of everyday life and questions of social reproduction;
- 2 The centrality of the commons;
- 3 The expression and enactment of a strong desire for democracy.

The traditional left has proven to be extremely poorly equipped, both theoretically and practically, to grasp these points—precisely because they go against some of its main ideological tenets.

1) THE PRIMACY OF EVERYDAY LIFE:

For one, the traditional left has long upheld the primacy of waged labor and struggles within the sphere of production. As a result, it has historically paid much less attention to the more fundamental forms of unwaged labor—including heavily gendered housework and care—that constitute the sphere of social reproduction; a point that has been powerfully developed by Italian autonomist theorists and Marxist feminists like Silvia Federici. Reproduction is always prior to production, as the latter simply cannot continue without the former.

All class struggles under capitalism must therefore start from the most elementary question of social reproduction: how to make a living and reproduce the “general conditions of life” without direct access to the means of subsistence. As Manuela Zechner and Bue Rübner Hansen show in their contribution to this issue, the recent transformations and crises of capita-

lism have pushed this question to the heart of contemporary movements: How do we sustain ourselves under conditions of austerity, precarity and unemployment? How do we provide care (personal, medical, psychological) in the face of a crumbling welfare system? How can we build social power by increasing our reproductive resilience?

Another way of approaching the same problem would be to shift attention back towards the related struggles taking place within the sphere of realization. As David Harvey has repeatedly argued, including in his interview in this issue, the left's over-emphasis on Volume I of *Capital* at the expense

of Volume II has led it to narrowly prioritize struggles over wages and working conditions at the point of production, while largely ignoring struggles over everyday life and living conditions at the point of circulation and consumption. “For conventional Marxists,” Harvey writes, “this poses the problem of how to wage class struggle against, say, the merchants, the bankers, currency traders and the like.”

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While the productivist bias of the traditional left has long plagued and stunted broad-based popular struggles, its limitations become even more acute under neoliberal capitalism, which is marked—in the over-developed countries of the advanced capitalist core—by a decisive shift away from the productive sphere (which is increasingly being automated or outsourced to the Global South) and towards the sphere of realization; a development that is exemplified by the rising power of financial institutions like Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank, the emergence of new merchant mega-corporations like WalMart and Amazon, and the return of the rentier in the guise of the multi-billionaire Silicon Valley mogul.

This broad shift towards redistributive conflicts over realization is progressively taking class struggle in the Global North out of the workplace and into the city at large, where it unfolds directly onto the terrain of everyday life. Interestingly, contemporary social movements turn out to be much more

attuned than the old left to the dramatic consequences of this shift for the material conditions, lived experience and day-to-day concerns of working people and urban dwellers. This, in turn, has led them to be much more actively engaged in ongoing struggles over debt, housing, gentrification, transport, police brutality and the cost of living.

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Urban space, in short, becomes a key battleground in the emerging forms of class struggle; a point that heterodox radicals like Henri Lefebvre and Murray Bookchin were already insisting on in the 1960s. More recently, Hardt and Negri have even wagered that “the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class.” Explosive urban uprisings like the Gezi Park protests in Turkey and the bus fare rebellion in Brazil are some of the clearest contemporary expressions of this development, as are smaller-scale struggles over housing, gentrification and transport in places like London and San Francisco.

2) THE CENTRALITY OF THE COMMONS:

The primacy of everyday life and social reproduction in contemporary forms of class struggle is in turn closely connected to the centrality of the notion of “the common” (or “the commons”)—defined by Silvia Fede-

The centrality of the common is yet another important point setting the movements apart from the old left, which has tended to reduce its conception of class struggle to a simple tug-of-war between the public property of the socialist state and the private property of the capitalist market. What was somehow lost over the course of the 20th century

duction, the notion of the common has often been derided as little more than a relic from a pre-capitalist past, closely tied to the somewhat dismissive category of “primitive communism.” This is not how Marx himself saw it—and it is certainly not how today’s social movements see it. For Marx, the ultimate objective of communism was always to establish a society in which the means of

same time he was also engaged in another, lesser known study of the Russian peasant communes, starting with his reading of Chernyshevsky’s *Essays on Communal Ownership of Land*. “In the form of the Russian peasant commune,” Ross writes, Marx “saw the traces of the primary communism he had observed in the Paris Commune: ‘individuals [who] behave not as laborers



What was somehow lost over the course of the 20th century was an appreciation of the liberatory and transformative potential of the “common in communism”; that which is held indivisibly and self-managed democratically by all members of the community.

rici and George Caffentzis as “autonomous spaces from which to reclaim control over our life and the conditions of our reproduction, and to provide resources on the basis of sharing and equal access; but also bases from which to counter the processes of enclosure and increasingly disentangle our lives from the market and the state.”

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For the Jacobin left, eternally agitating for greater state centralization and public control over the means of pro-

duction were to be held in common, leading him to develop a strong interest in existing forms of communal ownership in later life.

As Kristin Ross recounts in her new book, *Communal Luxury*, Marx spent his final years working on two big projects: the first, of course, was his well-known study for *Capital*; but at the

but as owners—as members of a community which also labors.”

Just a year before his death, in a move that marked a clear break from his earlier writings on the law-like progression of capitalist development, Marx decided to add a direct reference to the common in the final paragraph of his 1882 foreword to the Russian edition of

The Communist Manifesto: “If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West,” he wrote together with Engels, “the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.” In Marx’s own latter-day view, then, the notion of the common lies at the basis of the social revolution.

While they may not necessarily self-identify as communist, today’s movements are once again placing the notion of the common back at the heart of broad-based popular struggles, ranging from the creation and maintenance of common spaces (like the protest camps at Sol, Syntagma and Zuccotti), to the defense of the urban commons (like Gezi Park) and common resources (like struggles against water privatization in Bolivia and Italy), on to conflicts over the enclosure of the creative commons (like patent and copyright regulation in the TTIP trade deal) and movement support for recuperated workplaces (like Vio. Me) and other self-managed co-operatives in which the means of production are held in common.

Again, we can discern a clear connection here between the emerging forms of struggle and the systemic tendencies in

neoliberalism. As Harvey has famously noted, the latter increasingly operates through “accumulation by dispossession,” or various forms of state-backed plundering of public goods and common wealth. Neoliberal state policies like austerity, privatization, bank bailouts, resource extraction and regressive taxation dispossess society of its ability to reproduce itself, leading to the enclosure and commodification of spheres of life that had previously been held firmly outside of the logic of the market.

Naturally, just as the commoners in early-modern England fiercely resisted the enclosure of their pastoral lands, and just as the levelers in the English Civil War struggled firmly for the common ownership of land, today’s neoliberal forms of enclosure and dispossession are unleashing a new wave of resistance across the globe. Essentially, what is being rediscovered in these ongoing struggles is something as old as the notion of communism itself: the powerful and “dangerous”

idea that ordinary people are perfectly capable of collectively self-managing their own affairs by holding the land, the city and the means of production in common—without capitalist oversight or state interference.

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— 3) THE DESIRE FOR DEMOCRACY:

The overarching theme that can be distilled from all the above is the strong desire for democracy; a desire that has both been *expressed as a demand* (“real democracy now!”) and *directly enacted in practice* (in the assemblies). Again, the contrast between the emerging forms of struggle and the old left is stark here. Against the hierarchical, centralized and bureaucratic institutions of 20th century socialism, the movements are counterposing their own dynamic, horizontal and decentralized forms. Against the constituted power of the Jacobins, they have aligned themselves firmly with the constituent power of the *sans-culottes*.

The concept of constituent power is foundational in this respect. As Michael Hardt writes in the foreword to his translation of Negri’s *Insurgencies*, “constituent power ... is the essence of modern democracy and modern revolution. [It] names the democratic forces of social transformation, the means by which humans make their own history.” As such, it is “the locus of social creativity, political innovation, and historical movement.”

In contrast to the old left, narrowly concerned with seizing the constituted power of the state, the emerging anti-capitalist politics finds it much more worthwhile to think in terms of “building power” and cultivating the social creativity, collective imagination and democratic aspirations of society as such.

In contrast to the old left, narrowly concerned with seizing the constituted power of the state, the emerging anti-capitalist politics is not necessarily opposed to the idea of taking power, but finds it much more worthwhile to think in terms of *building power* and cultivating the social creativity, collective imagination and democratic aspirations of society

as such. It recognizes that the left cannot simply “take” power without first building it—democratically—from below.

While the latest cycle of struggles never really posed a threat to the constituted order as such, the real significance of the movements lies precisely in this: in their creative capacity to constitute new forms of organizing through an experimental, educational and embodied democratic praxis. As Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini put it in *They Can't Represent Us*, “the mobilizations we have seen are laboratories for democracy.” The Greek WWII resistance hero and left-wing political activist Manolis Glezos once put it to ROAR in similar terms: “The assembly at Syntagma Square was not democracy; it was a *lesson* in democracy.”

In this respect, the desire for democracy and a new constituent process expressed in the latest cycle of struggles is indicative of an expanding political imaginary on the part of the movements that demands ever greater popular participation in (and direction of) processes of social transformation. As Hardt notes, constituent power is defined by “the inseparable connection it demands between revolution and democracy.” Just as the revolution of the 21st century must be democratic in nature, so the democracy of the 21st century must be revolutionary in its horizon.

BEYOND INSULARITY AND FRAGMENTATION

It should be clear by now that the expansive and democratic political imaginary of the movements makes the latter cast their social net much wider than the traditional left. Struggles are increasingly situated within the urban terrain and cross a broad range of areas that may, at first sight, make them appear to be separate single-issue campaigns over concerns like housing, transport or student debt. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, such struggles often turn out to be connected in intimate and powerful, if not immediately obvious, ways.

The wide social net cast by today's movements—with their plurality of concerns and complicated interrelations—therefore



offers both exciting new possibilities for cross-sectional political agitation and at the same time throws up formidable new challenges to collective organizing. If it is not immediately obvious, for instance, how struggles over university tuition fees relate to urban uprisings against anti-black police violence or workers' demands for a fair minimum wage, it will be difficult to bring such disparate movements together beyond superficial lip-service to “intersectionality” or ephemeral expressions of solidarity.

The result is that many struggles within the sphere of realization and social reproduction remain relatively insular in nature and defensive in character, failing to cohere into a broader political movement capable of striking out at capital by mobilizing and coordinating the collective energies of different groups in the pursuit of a common objective. This in turn reinforces the overwhelming climate of political isolation among activists, further exacerbating the perceived weakness and sense of futility experienced by many.

One of the biggest questions facing the movements, then, is how to turn a seemingly endless variety of issues and an often fragmented field of struggles into a more or less coherent social counterpower capable of tackling the many separate conflicts at their shared root. This would require nothing less than a common project to contest, subvert and ultimately dismantle the power of capital at its various levels of operation: the local, the national and the global.

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The most pressing challenge is how to ensure the capacity of the struggles to spread, endure and become generalized. This requires us to think much more critically about the question of organization.



THE PROBLEMS OF EXTENSION AND SCALE

Here, however, we encounter another difficult problem. It is not just the “objective conditions” of late capitalism—with its fragmentation and atomization of the social fabric—that throw up barriers to collective agency; as Harvey points out, the movements have also in some respects locked themselves into a mirror image of capital, often (consciously or unconsciously) mimicking and idealizing its networked organizational properties without always subjecting them to proper scrutiny. The result, in Wolfgang Streeck’s words, is that “disorganized capitalism is disorganizing not only itself but its opposition as well.”

This has led, on the one hand, to ephemeral explosions of mass protest that strangely resemble the boom and bust cycles of capitalist credit creation; and on the other to a more enduring but mostly defensive retreat into the “small” and the “local”—or what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams refer to as “the political bunkers of immediacy and simplicity.” The movements still have to come to terms with the problems of spatial, temporal and social expansion, as well as the related problems of conceptual abstraction and systemic complexity.

The most pressing challenge, Michael Hardt points out in this issue, is how to ensure the capacity of the struggles to spread, to endure and to become generalized, which in turn requires us to think much more critically about the question of organization. We may dislike the traditional institutions of the left, Hardt notes, but we

have to recognize that at least they were capable of mobilizing a large cross-section of society and sustaining political action over prolonged periods of time to secure real material gains at the level of working conditions and social rights. We need to learn from this historical experience.

Today, by contrast, movements thrive on a powerful form of political spontaneity that closely parallels the affective economy of social media: their outreach is potentially unlimited and dissemination almost instantaneous, feeding into patterns of resonance that allow specific struggles to spread like “viral” memes. But once the collective self-expression of public grievances has exhausted itself or a degree of social recognition has been secured, the latest “status update” on the popular mood of the day swiftly recedes from view as the timelines and newsfeeds of the multitude of spectators move on to other pressing concerns.

Again, there are both opportunities and challenges here. While the movements have unprecedented access to technology, information and direct pathways of communication, the organizational capacity to transform our expressions of collective outrage into tangible material gains has yet to be developed.

OVERCOMING SELF-LIMITATION

Unfortunately, the absence of large-scale and long-term organizational capacity has—in some circles, at least—become fetishized as a political objective in and of itself. Even if most movement participants

do take the organizational challenges seriously, there appears to be a certain self-limiting quality to many forms of contemporary activism that militates strongly against the type of concerted political action that would be required to confront the immense power of capital at its higher levels of abstraction—like crushing the state-finance nexus or dismantling the prison-industrial complex.

More specifically, the strong emphasis on political process and strictly horizontalist modes of organizing imposes a raft of new rigidities and unnecessary restrictions that may actually stunt the development of the movements and limit their capacity to scale up, endure and extend into the social fabric. In this sense, the movements’ apparent difficulty in taking the “next step” following a period of spontaneous mass mobilization can be seen at least in part as a result of some of the ideological narratives circulating among a new crop of activists.

While many activists today rightly take inspiration from libertarian socialist struggles like the project of indigenous autonomy in Chiapas or the construction of democratic confederalism in Rojava, one crucial factor behind the successes of such struggles often tends to be overlooked: both the Zapatistas and the Kurds practice direct democracy, but neither movement has ever limited itself to a pure horizontalism. Indeed, the EZLN and PKK both originated in, and to some extent continue to function as, highly disciplined armed forces with inspirational leader figures—even if they have long since abandoned their Marxist-Leninist methods.

In contrast to the long-term projects of the Kurds or the Zapatistas, more loosely organized movements elsewhere—lacking a disciplined nucleus of militants like the EZLN and PKK—have not been able to develop a concrete project of their own. As a result, the ruptures they generated left behind a political vacuum for other, more organized forces to fill: reformists like Syriza at best; reactionaries like Sisi at worst. In an ideal insur-

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rectionary situation, this space would have to be occupied by the organized forces of the social revolution, which would in turn require extensive organizational groundwork and advance preparation.

Of course none of this means that the latest cycle of struggles has been in vain—far from it. As we have already seen, its historical relevance resides principally in the creative impulse it has given to the broad left. The mobilizations of the post-2011 period should be seen in this light, not as failures or defeats, but as tentative first steps in a long-term process of reinventing and reconstituting the social opposition; a common political project that must ultimately build towards the creation of a broad-based anti-capitalist movement for the 21st century.

TOWARDS A COMMON POLITICAL PROJECT

The notion of a “political project” should be understood in the broadest possible sense of the term here: neither simply as the creation of an ordinary political party in the pursuit of state power, nor as the construction of another coalition of social forces, but more generally as the development of a set of *convergence points* for various pre-existing struggles to rally around and organize upon.

These points of convergence would have to be inserted directly into the deepening contradictions and crisis tendencies of financialized capitalism and situated firmly in the lived experience of working people and urban dwellers. Most importantly, they would have to build on the transformative potential of ongoing struggles. Only on that basis can the movements begin to formulate a shared narrative, political imaginary and transformative project rooted in the social reproduction of everyday life, animated by strong popular desires for democracy, and geared towards the collective self-management of the common.

In many ways, this is both the most important and at the same time the most difficult task confronting the left today: how to generate political coherence out of a field of struggles full of

This is both the most important and most difficult task confronting the left today: how to create political coherence out of a social field of struggles full of contextual particularities—and how to do so without sacrificing the richness of a plurality of struggles.

contextual particularities—and, more specifically, how to do so without sacrificing the richness of a plurality of methods. The only sensible way forward would be to actively build on the diversity of tactics, multiplicity of strategies and ecology of organizational forms that presently exist within society and that will undoubtedly be further expanded in future years.

The minimal prerequisites to make such a convergence point work would be to name the *common enemy* (capitalism), identify the *common terrain of action* (everyday life in the city) and develop a *common project* (the construction of a social counterpower geared towards the eventual establishment of a democratic post-capitalist society) that can unify the struggles through a shared narrative, with participants neither clinging on to their narrow individual identities, nor giving up their unique particularities under the aegis of a single hegemonic force.

More concretely, the convergence point would have to take on an organizational form of its own; one that can accommodate the wide ecology of other organizational forms without imposing itself on them. The social movements in Spain have embarked on an interesting project, in this respect, by developing city-specific “confluence platforms of popular unity” that have fielded “citizens’ candidates” in municipal elections. The confluence platforms bring together a wide array of movement activists, party militants and public personalities without developing the “organic internal life” of an ordinary political party.



The political objective of such convergence points would be dual: first and foremost, to generate a confluence of social forces capable of exerting collective power through unity in action; and second, at a deeper and much more radical level, to actively transform the identities of individual participants in the very process of collective mobilization—broadening political horizons, overcoming sectarian divides and opening particular struggles up onto the wider social terrain. In this sense, the construction of confluence platforms opens up a raft of new opportunities to act in common and build our social counterpowers from below.

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The construction of municipal confluence platforms opens up exciting new opportunities to act in common and build our social counterpowers from below.

A NETWORK OF REBEL CITIES

To insert themselves directly onto the terrain of everyday life, the confluence platforms would have to be urban or

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Once multiple municipalities are brought under the control of the movements, their respective confluence platforms would have to confederate into a national (and eventually international) network of rebel cities.

metropolitan in scope and would ideally be rooted in and responsive to a confederated structure of neighborhood and workplace assemblies—just as Bookchin envisioned it. Among their ranks, the platforms would include a broad ecology of autonomous movements, social unions, neighborhood organizations, popular initiatives, issue-based campaigns and even radical parties, as long as the latter remain on equal footing with the movements and are never allowed to hegemonize the platforms.

Beyond creating new capacities for mutual aid, dynamic coordination and

collective mobilization, the platforms would field citizens' candidacies (ideally in the form of recallable delegates) in municipal elections, as in Spain, with the short-term objective of taking back the city and putting it under movement control. Since public provisions like social security, social housing, refugee reception and public transport in many countries are administered by local municipalities, the “rebel cities” could begin to roll out pilot projects with basic income, free transit, refugee sanctuaries and cooperative housing; although they will initially lack the resources and powers to fully develop such schemes.

This is why, once multiple municipalities are brought under the control of the movements, their respective confluence platforms would have to confederate into a national (and eventually international) network of rebel cities. The newest municipal platforms in Spain, for instance, have recently banded together to form the Network of Cities for the Common Good. These networks could in turn decide to create higher-order confluence platforms fielding citizens' candidates in national elections. The latter would aim to oust reactionary elites and establish defensive positions in the state apparatus, especially in relation to the forces of order and the concentrated power of finance and big business.

Here we should immediately note that the capitalist state is unlikely to ever become an active agent of popular empowerment and social transformation, and the left should therefore always guard against tendencies to prioritize the state as the primary site of struggle. As Marx famously put it in his reflections on the Paris Commune, "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." Even with the left in government, capital continues to be a *social* power, not just a personal one. It will operate on and through the state even when it is nominally in the hands of the movements.

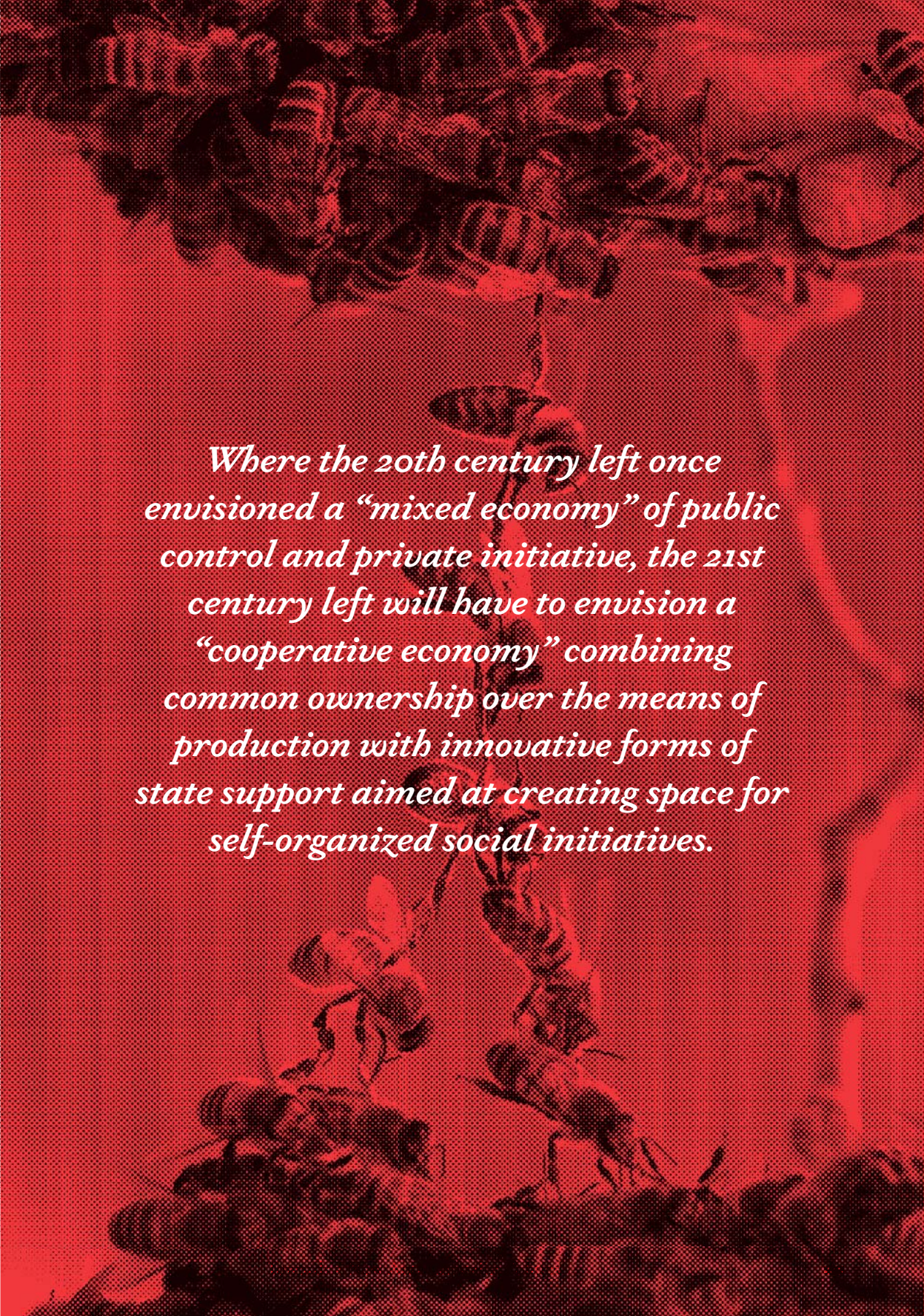
The long-term objective of any meaningful revolutionary process should therefore be to dismantle the "ready-made machinery" of the centralized capitalist

state and replace it with a decentralized confederation of communes. The state, however, is not simply a "thing" that can be declared out of existence by the assembled multitude. Like capital, the state is a *social relation* that can only ever be dismantled through a complex and prolonged destituent process rooted in popular struggle. The coordinated network of rebel cities we speak of here could serve as a short-term stepping-stone towards that ultimate post-capitalist horizon

A POLITICAL PROGRAM OF THE COMMON

On the basis of this stepping-stone, the movements could begin to formulate a coherent political program of the common, pushing for substantive reforms geared towards increasing the reproductive resilience of society. What would set such "substantive" reforms apart from a more traditionally reformist agenda would be their transformative political horizon: rather than seeking to reform capitalism, they would aim to expand and consolidate the power base of the opposition, allowing it to launch future attacks on capital from higher ground while generating new openings for the intensification and radicalization of the struggle.

The list of such transformative reforms is potentially endless. It could include the devolution of power away from the central state and towards the rebel cities, the socialization of finance and the democratization of money, the institu-

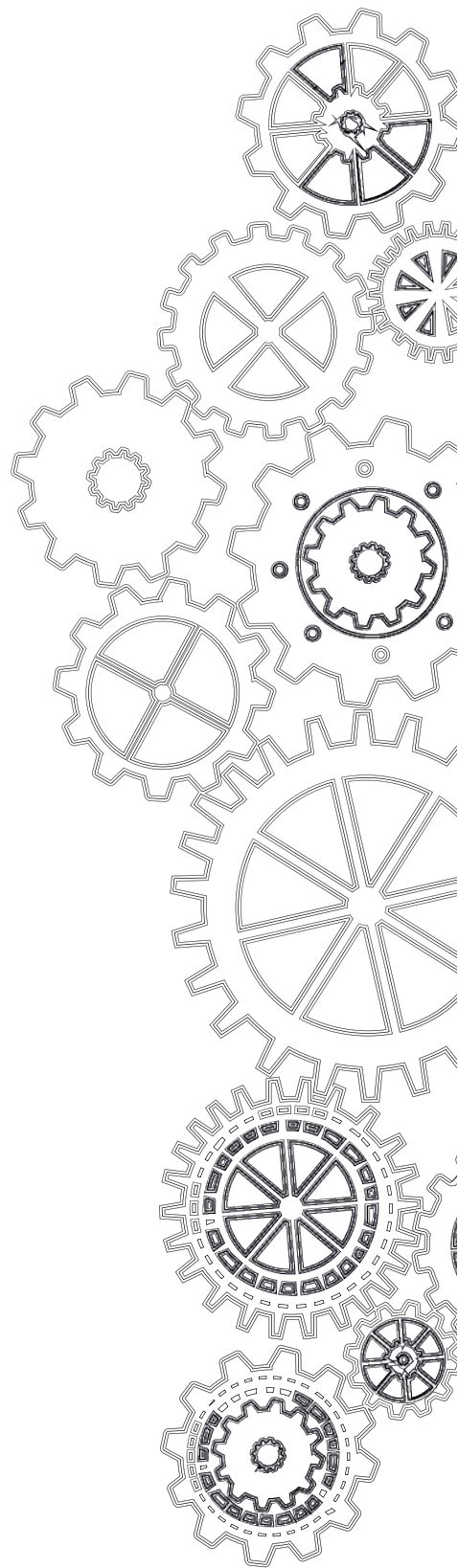


Where the 20th century left once envisioned a "mixed economy" of public control and private initiative, the 21st century left will have to envision a "cooperative economy" combining common ownership over the means of production with innovative forms of state support aimed at creating space for self-organized social initiatives.

tion of a universal basic income and universal citizenship, working-time reduction, access to cooperative housing and healthcare, the introduction of radical pedagogy into school curricula, the decentralization of energy systems, legal recognition of workers' councils, and the declaration of a "charter of the commons" to enshrine open access to communal property into law, protecting it from enclosure and liberating new spaces for non-commodified social relations to prosper.

Where the 20th century left once envisioned a "mixed economy" of public control and private initiative, combining state regulation with market distribution to allow for the private accumulation of capital within a framework of political constraints, the 21st century left will have to start building a "cooperative economy" combining common ownership over the means of production with innovative forms of "hands-off" state support aimed at *creating space* for autonomous circuits of social reproduction and self-organized social initiatives, ranging from legislation in support of workplace recuperations and worker self-management to the provision of interest-free credit to cooperative enterprises.

Crucially, all of the above would have to emanate from the constituent power of the movements and be channeled directly through the democratic processes of the confluence platforms. Since the basic outline sketched out here would be fiercely contested by those who



retain their concentrated forms of economic power and privileged access to key nodes in the administrative apparatuses of the state, nothing will be given up for free. The conflicts will be fierce. Even with our friends in power, the movements can only ever win something like a "charter of the commons" through the concerted mobilization of autonomous counterpowers.

In the end, the construction of social power cannot be pursued in isolation from the *consolidation* of the power that has already been accumulated. As Bookchin put it, "social revolutionaries, far from removing the problem of power from their field of vision, must address the problem of how to give power a concrete and emancipatory institutional form." That institutional form—the ultimate objective of the social revolution—would be the "Commune of communes."

EXPANDING THE HORIZONS OF POSSIBILITY

Needless to say, we are still very far from the kind of pre-revolutionary situation outlined above—let alone the post-capitalist society it should eventually give rise to. The moment we put down our readings and get on with the difficult task of organizing ourselves on the ground, we find that same capitalist barbarity still staring us in the face. The sheer scale of the task ahead of us is daunting. Not only do we have to devise innovative new ways to defend

ourselves from, and ultimately destroy, the voracious appetite of capital; we also have to reinvent the left and the very meaning of revolution in the process.

By necessity, then, we are in it for the long haul. The common project of the 21st century left will inevitably unfold over the course of decades. It is therefore more fruitful to think of revolution as a *protracted process* rather than a singular event with a clear beginning and end. This is not about storming the Bastille or the Winter Palace; we need to set our sights much further than that. No one has ever won (or survived) a marathon by sprinting to the finish line. In many respects, we will have to free ourselves from capitalist time and set our own political pace.

Unfortunately, however, there are some things that simply cannot wait. Pressing concerns like climate change and the refugee crisis compel us to act now, simply to save human lives and the planetary life-support systems on which they depend. This is another reason why a dynamic and versatile left capable of rising to the challenges of our times will need to rest on a broad ecology of organizational forms—each with their own strengths and weaknesses, and each operating according to their own particular temporalities. At this point in history, obtuse left-wing sectarianism may quite well prove to be the end of humanity.

Yet it often seems that the future is trapped between the internecine squabbles of two

seemingly irreconcilable “lefts”: an old one centered narrowly on taking power, and a new one still struggling to come to terms with its own potential. Beyond the haughty impotence of the former and the apparent perplexity of the latter, the theory and practice of *building power* offers fertile and expanding political ground for a new anti-capitalist politics. We must now explode the tensions between them into a common project that can begin to give a concrete and democratic form to the restive constituent potential that is craving to assert itself from below.

As we gather force and move along the process of construction, we will gradually notice the horizons of possibility expanding: the higher we rise, the farther we see.

As we gather force and move along the process of construction, we will gradually notice the horizons of possibility expanding: the higher we rise, the farther we see; until, one day, all that meets the eye is the glorious sight of rebel cities everywhere rising up against the common enemy, humanity resolving at last to “throw its revolutionary broadsword into the scales.” Until then, you will find us in the streets: preparing the ground, laying the foundations—building power.

JEROME ROOS



Jerome Roos is founder and editor of ROAR Magazine.



WHY WE STILL LOVE THE ZAPATISTAS

Leonidas Oikonomakis



INSPIRATION FROM CHIAPAS

THE CONSTRUCTION
OF A NEW WORLD IS
MUCH MORE THAN AN
ACADEMIC EXERCISE.

Primero de enero 1994. 3:00am.

The Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has gone to bed happy that towards the end of his mandate Mexico joins the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. Goods, capital and services will now move freely between Mexico, Canada, and the United States of America. Of course the agreement mentions nothing about the border wall between Mexico and the US. Free movement of goods, capital, and services, we said—not of people.

At the same time, the removal of trade protectionist measures practically opens up the Mexican economy to Canadian and American goods that are produced more cheaply and in greater quantities (in some cases even genetically modified). Bad news for the Mexican farmers, that is, who also find a “for sale” sign hanging on their *ejidos*—the communal land which had until then been protected from privatization by the Mexican Constitution. The government propaganda machine, however, can “sell” the agreement with plenty of fanfare, praising the president for this “triumph”: Mexico is finally joining the First World!

Riiiiing, riiiiing, riiiiing!!!!

The man who awoke Carlos Salinas from his “First World dreams” was his secretary of defense, General Antonio Riviello Bazán, who announced that there had just been a rebellion in Chiapas. Thousands of masked armed men and women had occupied several cities of the southeastern Mexican state. They were calling themselves Zapatistas, and their army the EZLN.

“APOLOGIES FOR THE INCONVENIENCE BUT THIS IS A REVOLUTION!”

For Mexico, Latin America and the international left, what emerged from the Chiapan mist along with the Zapatistas was the specter of revolution with a capital R—something the Mexican autocracy of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the PRI, believed it had killed a long time ago, in the late 1970s.

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What emerged from the Chiapan mist along with the Zapatistas was the specter of revolution with a capital R.

Ever since the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968, a few days before the opening ceremony of

the Olympic Games in Mexico City, Mexico’s youth had stopped believing in the possibility of social change through protests and elections. Some of them influenced by the Cuban revolution, others by Maoist thought and praxis, they took to the mountains and the cities of the country with the idea of organizing a rebel army that would overthrow the PRI government and bring socialism to Mexico. According to Laura Castellanos, in her book *México Armado*, more than 30 urban and rural guerrilla groups were active in the country between 1960 and 1980.

The Mexican state launched a war against its youth, who were killed, tortured and disappeared systematically in a dark period that became known as *la guerra sucia*: the dirty war. Thousands are still missing, others were found dead in mass graves, and thousands more were tortured and imprisoned in military barracks. With the amnesty and the new electoral law of 1978 the government thought it was done with the revolutionaries, with their *foquismo* and their prolonged people’s wars.

Well... not with all of them!

LAS FUERZAS AND ZAPATISMO

One of those guerrillas of the late 1960s and early 1970s was a group called the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional, or FLN. It was neither the most well known nor the best organized, and it never attracted large numbers of recruits. The FLN was, in fact, a very *otherly* guerrilla group. It never engaged in bank robberies, kidnappings or other spec-

tacular actions to make a name for itself, as was customary among revolutionary groups at the time.

Perhaps it was their strategy of staying and acting underground that allowed them to survive at a time when other groups were being uprooted by the state—even though they themselves also came close to extinction more than once, with the most exemplary cases being the discovery of their main safe house in Nepantla and the assassination of most of their leading cadres in their training camp in Chiapas, near Ocosingo, in 1974.

However, through painful trial and dramatic error, the FLN managed to not disband like most other groups. They rejected the Amnesty of 1978 and finally installed a rebel army in Chiapas in 1983; an army that would be embraced by the indigenous Tsotsiles, Tseltales, Choles, Tojolabales, Zoques and Mames of the region during the 1980s, and that would take Mexico and the world by surprise on January 1, 1994. That army was the EZLN.

Of course, in the period leading up to the uprising of 1994, the EZLN had also become very *otherly*. What began as the armed branch of a Castro-Guevarist, vanguardist and strictly hierarchical organization soon found its theories crushed by the indigenous reality and the will of the people they had come to “enlighten” deep in the mountains and jungles of the Mexican southeast. The vanguardism of the FLN was at odds with the assemblyist customs of the indigenous populations of Chiapas, which also owed in part to relevant previ-

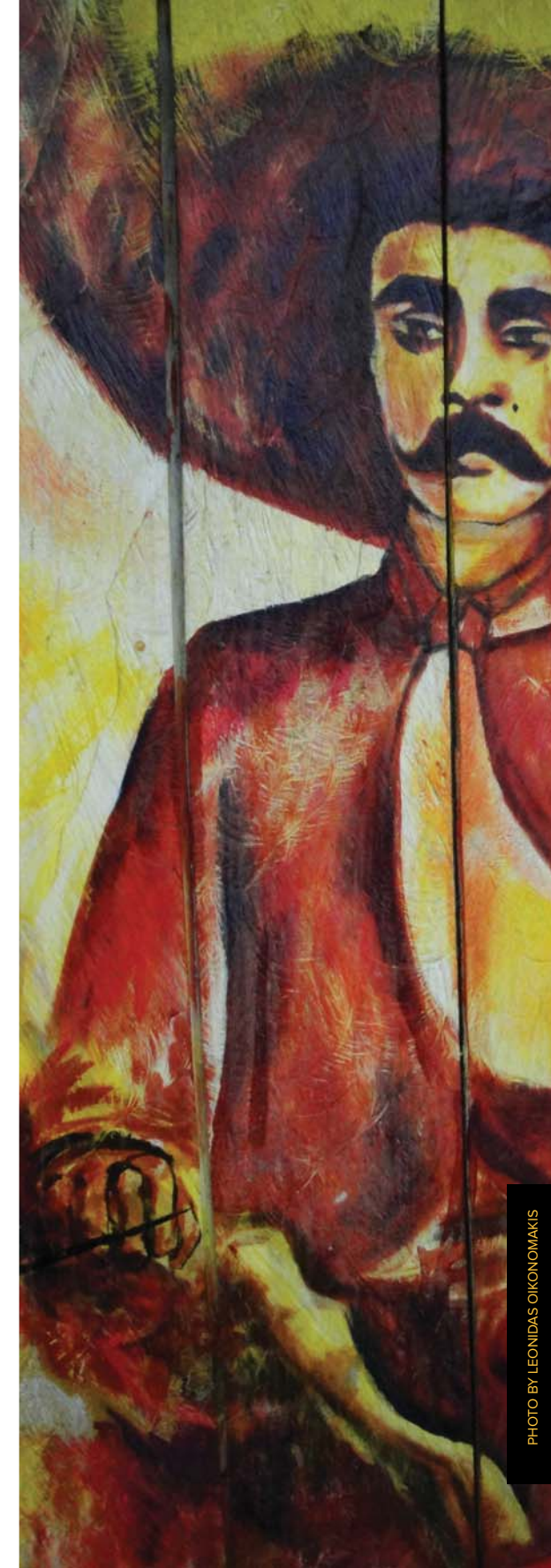


PHOTO BY LEONIDAS OIKONOMAKIS



What began as the armed branch of a vanguardist and strictly hierarchical organization soon found its theories crushed by the indigenous reality and the will of the people they had come to “enlighten.”

ous work done in the region by liberation theologians and Maoist militants.

Soon the EZLN realized that if it was to be successful, it would have to change. It chose to break with its outmoded vanguardism and adopted a more assemblyist organizational form and decision-making structure. Years later, it would set off to “march all the way to Mexico City,” as the First Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle put it.

However, things did not really turn out exactly as the Zapatistas had expected them to. Their call to arms was not answered by the Mexican people, who—instead of taking to the mountains—took to the streets to demand peace and to stop the Mexican army from exterminating the EZLN.

Peace negotiations followed and the San Andrés Accords were signed, practically granting autonomy to the EZLN institutionally, only for the agreement to be abruptly dishonored by the government. After this, the EZLN announced that they would continue down the road of autonomy—*de facto* and not *de jure* this time—and that is exactly what they have been working on ever since: creating new pathways and opening up new horizons of the imagination far beyond the impasses of the traditional left.

CRITICISM FROM THE LEFT

As a result of their *otherly* strategies—and thanks, of course, to the sharp pen of Subcomandante Marcos (now renamed Galeano)—the Zapatistas became an em-

blematic reference point for the international left, and a visit to Chiapas and the intercontinental *encuentros* of the EZLN became a necessary pilgrimage for activists in the alter-globalization movement. However, especially in recent years, the Zapatistas have also become the target of criticism from those on the more traditional and institutional left.

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The Zapatistas have also become the target of criticism from those on the more traditional and institutional left.”

Take, for instance, a recent article by Bhaskar Sunkara, in which the editor and publisher of *Jacobin* depicts the Zapatistas as a sympathetic but rather unfortunate role model for the international left.

Apart from the obvious errors of his piece, apparently the result of limited familiarity with the case (the FLN were not Maoist and did not vanish “as quickly as they had appeared,” but rather lasted longer than any other guerrilla group of their time; Subcomandante Marcos was not amongst the founding members of the EZLN’s first camp in 1983 but rather took to the mountains a year later), Sunkara’s is an effort to discredit the Zapatistas on ideological terms, mainly because—in his view—they became the inspirational reference point for movements that simply negate and do not create.



PHOTO BY JULIAN STALLABRASS, VIA FLICKR

Sunkara also argues that the influence of the Zapatistas is unjustified as Chiapas actually remains a deeply impoverished region “without much to show for almost two decades of revolution.” In Sunkara’s view, representative to some extent of the old left, we loved the Zapatistas because we were “afraid of political power and political decisions.” And he argues that the Zapatistas—and those inspired by them—did not achieve much. The only meaningful way forward, it seems, is an organized working-class movement in the Marxist-Leninist tradition.

WITHOUT MUCH TO SHOW FOR?

In defense of his argument, Sunkara offers some statistical data on Chiapas illustrating that the region has not changed much in the past 20 years: illiteracy still stands at over 20 percent, running water, electricity, and sewage are still non-existent in many communities, and mortality rates are still extremely high.

These statistics are correct—but statistics do not always tell the whole truth.

If Sunkara had actually researched his case a little better, he would have found out that his statistics, which are presumably derived from the Mexican state’s National Statistical Agency (the source is not mentioned in the article), mainly refer to the non-Zapatista communities. Chiapas is an enormous region, roughly as big as Ireland, and out of the 5 million people who inhabit it, between 200,000 and 300,000 are actually Zapatistas.

Furthermore, most of the Zapatista communities, the so-called *bases de apoyo*, are not depicted in any official data since they do not allow access to state authorities: they are autonomous. And while Sunkara is right in that social transformation “can be examined empirically,” his article—relying on a narrowly developmentalist logic of statistical change—fails to do precisely that.

— EMANCIPATION!

Take the following story, which is characteristic of the emancipatory social change that has been taking place in the Zapatista communities of Chiapas over the past 20 years; a story that is not visible in any official statistics.

A Basque friend I met in Chiapas a couple of years ago told me that what had impressed him the most during his last visit to the Zapatista communities was the position of women. The Basque comrade had come to Chiapas for the first time in 1996, two years after the uprising, and he could still vividly remember that women used to walk 100 meters behind their husbands, and whenever the husband would stop, they would stop as well to maintain their distance. Women would be exchanged for a cow or a corn field when they were married off—not always to the man of their choice. The situation has been very neatly depicted in the Zapatista movie *Corazon del Tiempo*.

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*Women would be
 exchanged for a cow or a
 corn field when they were
 married off. Today,
 almost 20 years later,
 half of the EZLN’s
 commanders are women.*”

Almost 20 years later, my Basque friend returned to Chiapas for the first grade of the *Escuelita Zapatista*. This time he would freely dance with the *promotoras* after the events, while some of the highest-ranking EZLN commanders—or to be more precise for the lovers of statistics: 50 percent of the Commanders of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee—are actually women.

In addition, women are now forming their own cooperatives contributing to family and community income; they are becoming the promoters of education (teachers, that is), nurses and doctors; and they serve as members of the Good Government Councils, or *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, and as *guerilleras*.

Let me give you another example that speaks for itself: In one of the Zapatista *caracoles*, there is now a music band called *Otros Amores* (“Other Loves”). *Otros Amores* is the phrase the Zapatistas use for the members of the LGBTQ community. All this in a previously deeply conservative, machista region (and country). Just try to imagine something similar in the rest of Mexico—or wherever you may be coming from!

— EDUCATION!

At the same time, since the subject of education came up in Sunkara’s piece, it should be noted that—in an area where schools were an unknown word and teachers a very rare phenomenon—to-day there is not a single Zapatista com-

munity without a primary school, while secondary boarding schools now exist in the *caracoles* as well. This is a Zapatista achievement. These schools would not have existed without them.

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Today there is not a single Zapatista community without a primary school. This is a Zapatista achievement.

Of course, the Zapatista autonomous rebel schools have nothing to do with the state schools: they are bilingual (Spanish and Tsotsil, Tojolabal, Tzeltal, Chol, Mame or Zoque, depending on the region); they teach local indigenous history; and their syllabuses have been designed from the bottom up, with the active participation of the students and the communities, and are fully tailored to their specific needs.

— PARTICIPATION!

Participation is a key concept when it comes to the social transformations that have been taking place in the Zapatista communities over the past twenty years. We are talking about deeply impoverished regions, where large estate owners used to rule over land and people, with the governors and the army of the—generally absent—federal state on their side.

The relationship between the “bosses” and the “workers” was a rather slavish, almost feudal one, in which the bosses even had the right to the “first night” of their peasants’ wives (the so-called *derecho de pernada*). Some say that large *finqueros* like Absalón Castellanos Dominguez fathered numerous children with the wives and daughters of the workers of their ranches.

When it came to the expression of their democratic rights (which had until the 1994 uprising been limited to participating in elections), their votes were regularly exchanged for some pesos, some food, or were simply subject to the will of their ranch owner. Not surprisingly, the PRI was receiving over 90 percent of the vote in these lands.

Today, every time I enter the offices of one of the Good Government Councils, I see different faces, very diverse age- and occupation-wise, who rotate in the administrative council every one to eight weeks, depending on the zone and *caracol*. I have seen old *campesinos*, 16-year-old graduates of the Zapatista schools, and young mothers breastfeeding their babies. They are all sent there by their communities for a given period in order to act as delegates in the collective self-administration of their lands.

In the communities themselves, regular assemblies are organized from the bottom up to discuss local concerns and movement-related affairs, and to decide horizontally and directly on the issues that affect their everyday lives.

Participation is a key concept when it comes to the social transformations that have been taking place in the Zapatista communities over the past twenty years.



PHOTO BY SHANNON, VIA FLICKR

COMMUNITY, MUNICIPALITY, ZONE

The Zapatista communities—contrary to the army, the EZLN—have a horizontal structure. A given number of communities form an autonomous municipality (*municipio autónomo*), and a given number of autonomous municipalities form a zone (*zona*). The “administrative center”, which is also the office of the governing council of every zone is the *caracol*—which means snail.

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Decisions are taken at the community level, in assemblies, with the participation of everybody who has completed their twelfth year of age.

The *caracol* is a very important symbol in the indigenous worldview and everyday practice of the Mayas, since it has traditionally been used to call the community to an assembly or to inform and communicate with other communities. For that reason, the snail represents “the word” (*la palabra*).

There are five *zonas* and five *caracoles*, each with varying numbers of communities and municipalities. The Zapatista communities that administratively belong

to each *caracol* do not necessarily hail from the same ethnic group. For example, the zone of Los Altos (“the Highlands”) is mainly ethnically Tsotsil, although it also includes some Tseltal communities.

The decisions are taken at the community level, in assemblies that take place either at the school, at the basketball court, or at the church (yes, they exist) of the community, with the participation of everybody who has completed their twelfth year of age. Each and every member of the community has the right to express their opinion and to vote on every single issue discussed. Every community selects its own representatives to the municipality, and each municipality selects its own representatives to the zone, who will eventually rotate in the Good Government Council.

The Good Government Council is responsible for all the issues that have to do with the self-governance of the areas and the communities that belong to it: justice, politics, administration of natural resources, education, health, and so on. The *caracol* is also the place where seminars and gatherings with national and international civil society are organized. It is, in other words, the “entry point” through which those interested can enter Zapatismo, as well as its voice to the outside world.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

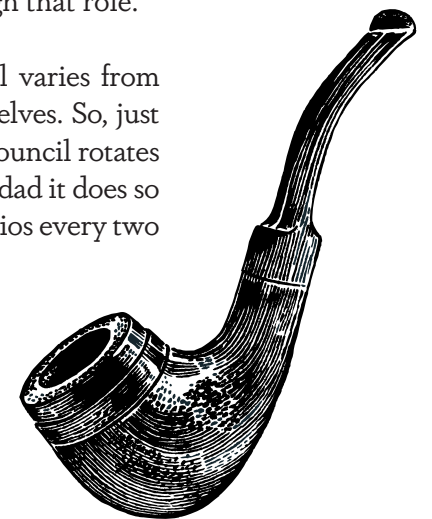
The seven principles that define Zapatista self-government are the following:

- 1 — To obey and not to command.
- 2 — To represent and not to supplant.
- 3 — To move down and not upwards (in the sense of denying power-over).
- 4 — To serve and not to be served.
- 5 — To construct and not to destroy.
- 6 — To suggest and not to impose.
- 7 — To convince and not to conquer.

To avoid the professionalization of politics and the formation of leading oligarchies, each and every member of each and every Zapatista community has the right and the obligation to represent his or her community in the region and the zone once, for a very specific time period. Once his or her mandate is over, he or she cannot assume the same right and responsibility again until all the *turnos* have been completed: until all the members of the community have been through that role.

The mandate of each Good Government Council varies from zone to zone and is set by the communities themselves. So, just to give an example, in the *caracol* of Oventik the council rotates every eight days, whereas in the *caracol* of La Realidad it does so every two weeks and in the *caracol* of Roberto Barrios every two months.

All the above is a product of the Zapatista movement, and would not have existed if the movement had opted for a more traditionally leftist organizing structure.





"THE ONLY THING WE PROPOSED
WAS TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

THE REST WE HAVE
IMPROVISED."

OPENING UP NEW PATHWAYS

What is probably the greatest contribution of the Zapatistas to the international left—apart from reminding us that History had not really ended just yet—is the fact that they managed to go beyond the usual recipes of the revolu-

tionary cookbooks, re-inventing revolution with a “small r” and opening up innovative and autonomous pathways of democratic self-government. But, of course, the Zapatistas did not start out that way.



What began as the armed wing of a Castro-Guevarist, post-Tlatelolco revolutionary group did try—but eventually abandoned—the strategy of the *foco guerrillero*, and later switched to the Maoist prolonged people’s war. All of this did indeed bring about an attempt at the long-awaited Revolution with a capital R. However, when that Revolution failed as well, after guerrilla groups elsewhere in Mexico failed to join the 1994 uprising, the Zapatistas actually had to open up new pathways. Through walking.

While they could have easily taken the beaten path of other armed revolutionary groups—going back to the jungle, that is, and keep attacking the army from there—they surprisingly opted for what has been called “armed non-violence” instead.

The Zapatistas went back to their indigenous communities, consulted them, and decided to self-organize in an autonomous way. Without the Great Leaders, the all-powerful and all-controlling Parties, or the top-down vanguardist structures that the indigenous communities of Chiapas had already rejected a long time ago.

“DON’T COPY US!”

I had the opportunity to participate—together with hundreds of other activists—in the Escuelita Zapatista (the “little Zapatista school”) of August 2013. There, we spent time living and working together with several families of

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The greatest contribution of the Zapatistas to the international left is the fact that they managed to go beyond the usual recipes of the revolutionary cookbooks.

the Zapatista support bases in their own houses and communities, experiencing first-hand what freedom and autonomy according to the Zapatistas looks like.

The most important lesson of the Escuelita, however, was the farewell message to the students: a plea not to copy the organizational structure of the Zapatistas and their particular form of self-governance, but rather to rush back to their own lands and try “to do what you will decide to, in the way you decide to do it.” As they put it: “We cannot and we do not want to impose on you what to do. It is up to you to decide.”

That was the humble message of those proud and dignified people who “cover their faces in order to be seen, and die in order to live.”

WHY WE STILL LOVE THE ZAPATISTAS

Today, more than 20 years after the 1994 uprising, the Zapatistas are still there. Those previously illiterate, marginalized, exploited indigenous peoples of Chiapas are actually constructing a new world in the way they themselves have imagined it. Without revolutionary cookbooks and step-by-step theories of social change; without central committees, oligarchic Politbureaus or armchair intellectuals. Without hierarchies, revolutionary prophets or electoral politics—without too many resources either.

The poorest of the poor, the most ignored of the ignored, have taught us a crucial lesson: that the construction of a new world

is much more than an academic exercise. It is a matter of opening up new paths through walking.

That is what the international activists see in the Zapatista struggle, what they admire, and what they are inspired by. And of course, by rejecting the Party—in the traditional sense—as an organizational form, and representative democracy as a political system, they do not only “negate” in some kind of nihilistic approach.

They also create new, autonomous and direct democratic structures: from the *piqueteros* and the occupied factories of Argentina to the Coordinadora por la Defensa del Agua y la Vida in Bolivia; from the occupied squares and the social clinics, producers’ cooperatives and other bottom-up solidarity economy projects in Greece, Spain and Turkey, all the way to the polyethnic revolutionary cantons of Rojava—autonomous movements are building power everywhere.

“Asking we walk,” say the Zapatistas. And they do what they know best: to organize from below (and to the left), to imagine and create their own autonomous and democratic structures, and to be a shiny little light in the capitalist darkness. I personally see no harm in admiring them for that, and in trying to follow their example by imagining and creating similar structures in our own lands, tailored to our own needs, and shaped by our own dreams—without, of course, considering them to be yet another revolutionary recipe to copy. ★

LEONIDAS OIKONOMAKIS



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Building Power

IN A CRISIS OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Manuela Zechner & Bue Rübner Hansen

RADICAL CARE

IN THE CURRENT CRISIS, SOCIAL REPRODUCTION CAN BECOME A CRUCIAL FIELD FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A COLLECTIVE FORM OF SOCIAL POWER.

SYRIZA took power through elections—not so much on the basis of a movement that could embolden or depose it. Now it is back to fighting power for many Greeks. But beyond the taking and fighting of power, there is the question of *building power*.

How do we build lasting relations and infrastructures for struggle and change? How can we think of building power—in social networks, in the everyday, in organizations, in institutions—in the midst of the ongoing European debt crisis? It starts with the question of social reproduction, of how to gather forces and generate resistance constructively and sustainably.

The context of crisis and generalized vulnerability opens onto a myriad of struggles around social rights, resources and survival, all of which put life at their

center. Everyday life, bodily survival, collective life: the problem of human needs touches most in the crisis, and colors any form of engagement—and not just the employed workers who can still go on strike.

All of this goes to the heart not only of the crisis, but of the long-term tendencies towards precarity, welfare retrenchment, structural unemployment and surplus population. The politics of reproduction addresses this issue and makes it a site for the construction of collective power.

To build social or collective power sustainably and concretely, we must clear some pathways for thinking approaches and strategies within this domain. We must ask: how do struggles around reproduction relate to the politics of representation, particularly in view to contemporary electoral openings within the crisis?

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE CRISIS

The viewpoint of social reproduction is central to the question of building power today. Social reproduction is a broad term for the domain where lives are sustained and reproduced. It relates to the ways we satisfy our needs and to the often hidden material basis for pursuing our desires.

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Now the problem of reproduction touches the lives of millions with urgency. The breakdown of the integrating mechanisms of welfare and neoliberal management has opened the way for new approaches to thinking about how we

sustain our lives, individually and collectively. It involves the crisis of certain institutions and structures—state, market, family, waged labour—as well as singular modes of community and relations of interdependence.

This is the opening of a new cycle of struggles around social reproduction. These struggles happen at different levels: at the level of social relations of care, at the level of spaces and inhabiting, at the level of production and distribution of resources, and at the level of institutions.

In this conjuncture it is clear that taking power is the same as administering the crisis—unless it is done on the basis of a genuine form of social power. As more and more people are no longer fully integrated into capital and the state, social reproduction can become a field for reorganizing social relations, for building social power.

REPRODUCING WHAT?

Those attempting to profit from the crisis know that this situation is not without risks and opportunities. The opportunities are well known: crisis legitimates the destruction of welfare and support systems, creating unemployment to drive down wages, privatizing public assets and commons to increase profits in the great competition game. Crisis is good for new rounds of primitive accumulation (commodifying the not-yet commodified), for reshaping and domesticating productive

forces while realizing further “transitions” into the logics of inequality, debt, finance.

But those administering the crisis locally or translocally need to play the reproduction card cleverly if they are to keep face and at the same time profit from the situation. One aspect of this is to impose or maintain a certain level of scarcity and chaos—just enough to legitimize tough change, maintain labor supply and avoid rebellion.

This in turn requires certain strategies to keep people alive and docile: either by putting them on the drip-feed of charity (through food banks or NGO support, for instance) or by making them self-organize their survival through neo-communitarian policy frameworks like the Big Society in the UK, as well as through precarious forms of employment and entrepreneurship.

The “art” of managing the crisis from above attempts to combine mechanisms that individualize, isolate and create competition, with controllable forms of cooperation and community. These strategies, however, are always half-hearted and weak.

This domestication of the social is accompanied by the reinforcement of conservative family policies (like nuclear paternalism, patriarchal laws and domesticated labor) as well as policing and repression (in the form of gag laws and the criminalization of protest and self-organization). The “art” of managing the crisis from above attempts to combine mechanisms that individualize, isolate and create competition, with controllable forms of cooperation and community.

These strategies, however, are always half-hearted and weak. When we organize and build infrastructures from below, our relations, knowledges and capacities to manage are much stronger because they are shared.

COMMON STRATEGIES FROM BELOW

Under certain conditions, collective projects to reorganize how we meet our needs can provide alternatives more powerful than charity, communitarianism and individualized survival. Starting from a shared need, these conditions include the emergence of murmurs that discuss alternatives in the streets, squares, homes and workplaces; the building of shared relations of conversation and trust; and with this the creation of spaces for meeting and finally for organizing. Struggles that address everyday ways of sustaining life can build power in sustainable ways—rather than just relieving misery—for a series of reasons.

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Struggles around sustaining life in common are contexts where alternative visions for institutions and mutual support structures are built. In a time that clamors for alternatives, they also produce new political imaginaries.

First, by building autonomous circuits of self-reproduction, such struggles ensure the collective power needed to sustain a fight for change. Being able to temporarily opt out of dominant forms of access to resources—be it via labor strikes, road blocks or boycotts—generates a huge increase in collective bargaining and

blockading power. These are powerful antagonistic or agonistic agents vis-à-vis the state and market because, by allowing people to partially withdraw from hegemonic circuits of self-reproduction, they provide the basis of an actual oppositional power.

Only with strategies of care and self-reproduction—from mutual legal aid over collective kitchens to strike funds—can social movements engage in sustained blockade, protests and strikes. The Black Panther Party’s 15 years of highly popular militant activity must be related to its combination of self-defense strategies and survival programmes, which allowed it to work and resist in the context of the violence and social disintegration inflicted on black communities.

When embarking on a defense of welfare rights, social struggles often subvert this statist horizon, and end up producing concrete political projects that supply and care even where the state does not. The Spanish indebted homeowners’ movement PAH, for instance, which has done much campaigning for the right to

housing, has also occupied many empty bank-owned buildings and reclaimed them as communal housing.

In Greece, the creation of solidarity clinics responded to a withdrawal of state-guaranteed health provision, but in the process it has become a powerful experiment in the provision of free healthcare, in a way that often overcomes the classical hierarchies and separations between doctors, nurses and patients, and develops new notions of health.

Such struggles around sustaining life in common are contexts where alternative visions for institutions and mutual support structures are built. In a time that clamors for alternatives, these struggles also produce new imaginaries, demands and knowledges around the social management, supply and organization of collective care and provision. Despite their clear limitations—the lack of resources and a clear legal basis make it difficult to provide for all those in need, let alone for society as a whole—they function as laboratories that can become the basis for new claims on institutions.

The retrenchment of welfare and employment gives way to the development of solidarity economies, which build collective resilience by creating new ways of distributing and sharing resources. This means not just the creation of local instances of social reproduction, but also of translocal networks of trade and exchange. This is important not just from a geopolitical point of view, but also from an ecological perspective. It implies the

emergence of new visions and practices of economy beyond the capital-E global capitalist one.

Most recently, the debate over Greece’s place in the euro illustrated the importance of such forms of collective distribution. It was clear that both Grexit and continued Eurozone-enforced austerity would spell more death and misery—as well of the strengthening of church and NGO-based charities and ethnicity-based fascist food distribution programmes.

The possibility of Grexit depended to a very large extent on the strength and resilience of local self-reproduction, as well as larger and smaller translocal trade networks and geopolitical agreements, from the trade of olive oil to the import of cheap petrol.

THE POLITICS OF CARE AND SOLIDARITY

Within the framework of collective management and mutual support, the politics of care and solidarity are key elements. Relations of interdependence come to be negotiated in a collective setting and can thus be politicized beyond patriarchal and paternalistic models. Social reproduction struggles provide alternative survival and care spaces to the traditional and biological family, and can create deep and lasting relations of trust and support.

The ways in which the people of the



PAH are welcomed and practice mutual aid and counseling, for example, provide strong emotional support and friendship. The ways in which *piquetero* communities in Argentina accompanied their fight against the state with collective infrastructures such as community gardens, health centers and social spaces allowed for the creation of strong networks of support. Such networks, with their range of formal and informal relations, allow for the building of systems of care and kinship whose collective memory is also one of struggle for equality.

Struggles around social reproduction allow for a renegotiation around what is considered work, or what is valued as such. When the wage becomes secondary in the face of self-organized infrastructures, reproductive and domestic work can come to be seen for what it is: crucial life-sustaining labor that runs across all domains. The social organization of work can come to be subverted via a growth of cooperativism, countering the individualizing pressures of entrepreneurship and building other pacts and cultures around the wage.

All these are forms of building power which go beyond the classical trade union movement's limited perspective on wages and welfare as mediators of social reproduction. After its early-twentieth-century attempt to become a broad social movement with sports clubs, soup kitchens, choirs, housing provision, adult education, and so on, this movement became happy to merely organize waged workers and let the state care for the rest.

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The politics of reproduction, on the other hand, proceeds through a broader form of social composition, which aims to build relations in many different domains of life. By bringing together individuals and breaking down narrow separated units of family and community, it builds those basic relations of conviviality, trust and common struggle that make up social forces.

THE PLAYING FIELDS OF SOCIAL POWER

Building power is a process that articulates different social forces towards the capacity to intervene in a given dominant order. This means enacting decisions and

creating effects at any relevant level (from blockading a road or eviction to blocking a law or trade agreement).

Power is the moment when an articulation of forces becomes performative, that is, capable of creating effects in a given context. As such it passes through struggles and the development of a series of “minor” powers: the power to decide, to articulate, to negotiate, to create effects, and so on.

Social reproduction is a strong factor in the question of building power. Struggles in this sense can take different forms and exist across different playing fields—they can be to do with small care networks or communities, with housing or healthcare, with resources, spaces, infrastructures and also institutions.

Social reproduction is a strong factor in the question of building power, as a practical horizon concerned with the sustaining of relations, spaces, forms of organizing and institutions.

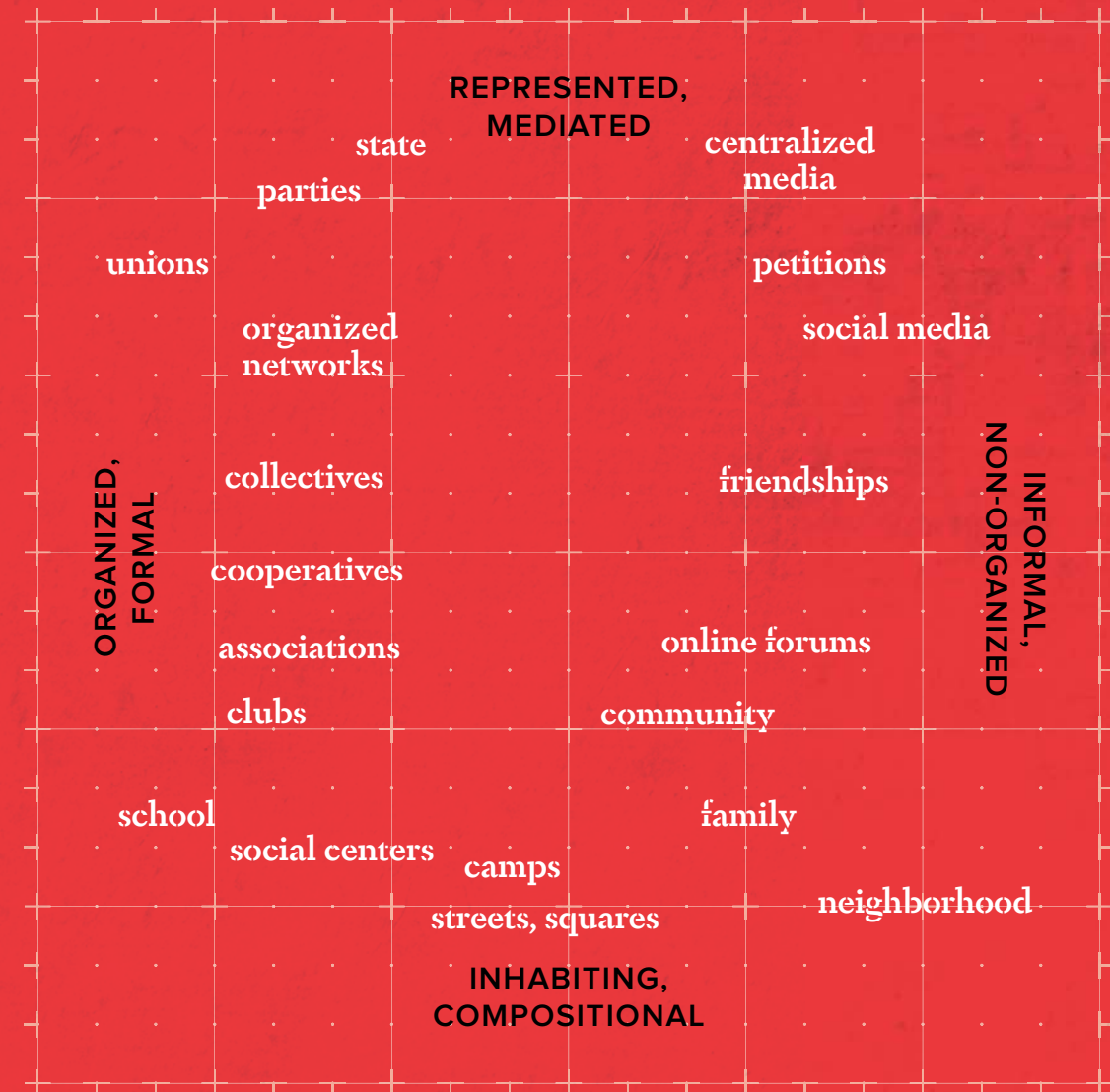
Social reproduction is not a label but more of a practical horizon, in this sense, one that is concerned with the sustaining of relations, spaces, forms of organizing and institutions. This focus on instances that last through time and provide continuity, that build power, is not meant to suggest that campaigns, actions or projects are not important for fighting power and building movements.

Below, we share a diagram of social reproduction as divided according to pragmatic fields in order to evaluate the tactics and interplay of different forms of struggle within each field. This diagram should not be taken as a sociological map but rather as a tool that can be useful in orientating our thinking around building power.

We propose to visualize the basic terrain of social reproduction struggles as constituted by four overlapping fields:

- 1 — **The non-organized social of informal relations:** the extended family, friendships, informal communities, loose networks;
- 2 — **The inhabiting social, where the organizing principle is space:** neighborhoods, homes, social centers, assembly spaces, distribution points;
- 3 — **The organized social, with protocols and formal divisions of work:** unions, associations, institutions, clubs, cooperatives, organised networks;
- 4 — **The representational, whose organizing principles are governance and mediation:** institutions, welfare and legal systems, parties, the media.

Visualised domain relations:



The horizontal axis that runs across this diagram is formal (left) vs. informal (right) relations, while the vertical axis is embodied (bottom) vs. representational (top). Few initiatives sit exclusively in one domain or the other; rather, these are four tendencies in which specific initiatives partake to different extents.

According to the general political and social conjuncture, initiatives might veer more towards one or the other strategic terrain, or indeed breach out into all directions. Similarly, there may be few or many transversal connections across struggles in these fields, at different moments.

Let us first go into each domain and then analyze some broader principles of orientation.

— 1. THE INFORMAL SOCIAL:

This is the field of individuals and groups engaging in unstable, temporary and ad hoc relations. The power that lies in this domain is that of encounter and relation, of affective contagion and of forming networks. Encounters, social media and meme-like expressions allow for the creation of an empathic, contagious power starting from individuals that are not connected by organizational bonds and outside the sphere of established media.

The mobilizations of the post-2011 era are largely based in such compositional power, stemming from relatively spontaneous social media-based calls for mobilization that did not come from existing organizations and had no representational claims. The rejection of representation and the imminent claims for the elites to step down gathered masses of bodies in the streets and squares, eventually leading to the building of inhabiting power.

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— 2. THE INHABITING SOCIAL:

This is where the politics of care, of feminist as well as family and community-building politics starts from, where “grassroots” or “radical” practices in the sense of being locally rooted are strongest; where there is work on terrain and space, in neighborhoods and workplaces.

This domain requires the creation of common spaces and times of conviviality and debate, and also a capacity to overcome the compartmentalization of populations into ethnic groups or of social activities into the political, and leisure or entertainment. This field involves struggles for land, housing, neighborhood organizing, squatting and food production, as well as the neighborhood assemblies that develop or demand forms of local self-determination.

Continuing the story of the 2011 protests, we may say that they developed their relational power towards a powerful compositional power via the use of space. Assemblies, camps and occupations created the space-times for social relations to deepen and take on an everyday dimension from which specific working

and discussion groups emerged. Those groups, incipient forms of organizational power, we may say, allowed for transversal relations between different actors to assume continuity on the ground.

Space is a crucial factor here, for enabling meetings and socializing as well as the production, storing and distribu-

tion of resources. It also becomes a common asset to care for and defend. The affective power of the imaginaries and slogans produced in these spaces then flowed back into the non-organized social, and became ways in which individuals, for instance, could signal their desires and indignation on social media, vastly strengthening

the non-organized contagion of affects and ideas by shaping them from embodied experience, and transforming them from mere sentiments to statements explicitly referring to the material, collective power under construction in the squares.

However, the collective power constructed in the squares always threatened to dissipate into a cacophony, or to flounder under police pressure and the exhaustion of the participants.

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Assemblies, camps and occupations created the space-times for social relations to deepen and take on an everyday dimension from which specific working and discussion groups emerged.”

— 3. THE ORGANIZED SOCIAL:

This is where the capacity to mobilize and organize is channeled into the creation of systems of production, distribution and management of material as well as immaterial goods and symbols. It encompasses the institutional layer on the one hand, and the spatial layer on the other, as it draws strongly on sites.

Organization happens through the establishment of organized networks (like the PAH, the Genuino Clandestino food network or the Refugees Welcome web platform), or through the construction of formal organizations (like cooperatives or unions). In many cases, the building of formal organizations is a necessity to gain certain forms of legal and symbolic recognition as official interlocutors of institutions, and in order to increase the consistency and continuity of the social power that is being built.

While the passage into organization can be necessary to give consistency and duration to a movement, it often negates some of its spontaneity and richness.

Organizations starting in a context where few spatial, face-to-face connections have been made rarely become more than proselytizing gatherings of the already-convinced, or business-like representatives of the self-interest of their members.

Within the organized social, very specific protocols and demands come to be developed which can interpellate the state for change. By providing practical examples of alternative organization and incipient institutionality, this domain plays a powerful role in giving consistency, legitimacy and bargaining or mediatic power to social movements in matters of social reproduction.

If enough power is built on this level, alternative organizations come to appear highly plausible and can give way to claims on institutions and higher functions of management—thus this domain can be a stepping stone towards electoral processes. When this is based in grassroots social power that links the organizational to the inhabiting and relational domains, it can give way to profound transformations at the institutional level.

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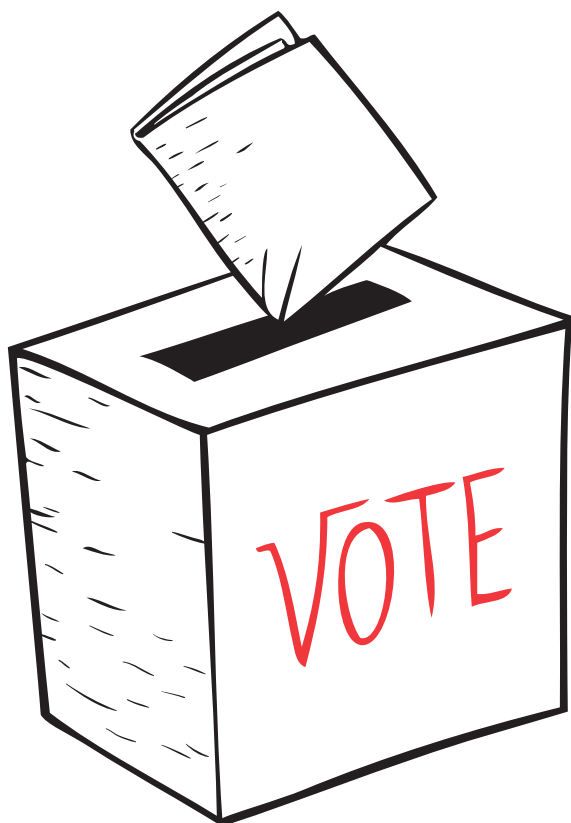
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— 4. THE REPRESENTED SOCIAL:

This is the playing field of capital-P politics and of representation, territory, media and parties. It is in dialogue with the organized social (unions and the like) as well as networks (think tanks, alliances). If such forms of politics develop from alternative organizations and institutions as built through social movements, they can operate through an understanding of the need for counter-hegemony, the electoral wing of a social power.

While the high stakes of power and the complexity that representational politics must face up to will tend to inhibit change, this does not mean that innovation in this domain is impossible.



However, they can also turn on their constituencies, and the question of how to maintain the autonomy of the other levels is crucial, as well as the capacity for listening in relation to movements at the three other levels.

This is the challenge currently faced by the municipal movements in Spain—one more easily approached via the territory of the city and its inherent links to the inhabiting social, as well as local organizations and networks—and by new parties such as SYRIZA and Podemos, or whatever might follow in their footsteps. It is a level often scorned for being inherently fraught by the radical left.

While it is true that the high stakes of power and the com-

plexity of interfaces and interlocutors that representational politics must face up to will tend to inhibit change, this does not mean that innovation in this domain is impossible. The interplay between municipal, regional, national and international politics is something we are bound to learn much about in the coming months and years, as social power in different contexts builds towards this level.

BUILDING POWER ACROSS DIFFERENT DOMAINS OF STRUGGLE

While politics in these fields can be communitarian and exclusive, patriarchal, clientelist, and so on, we are interested in the ways in which they can form the basis for building and sustaining power and the collective capacity to resist.

The four domains stand in different relations of tension, as they stand for different modes of creating relations, and are linked to different resources and tactics. Struggles around social reproduction can take place on all levels of this diagram: at the levels of self-production, self-supply and auto-reduction; at the levels of building organizations to defend interests and manage resources; at the level of building networks or alliances and developing forms of collaboration and communication; and at the level of contesting for representational power within institutions that can distribute social wealth from either the bottom up or the top down, and which command the socially legitimated use of violence.

The closer to the “ground” these struggles are, the more they have to deal with anti-repression campaigns and self-defense. The closer to the spheres of representation they are, the more they have to deal with mediatic attacks and seduction into the games of top-down power, and navigate the contradictions between the state as a workplace and provider of useful public goods, and the state as the monopoly of violence and caretaker of capitalist accumulation.

We have to understand these organizational-compositional tendencies as playing fields with their own strategic merits. The social is a field of forces wherein these tendencies push and pull, and the more intelligence movements build at multiple levels, the more likely it is that large-scale change can be sustained.

Since social power is organized across different fields, the abandonment (or dominance) of one field tends to limit the ability of the social power to resist.

Of course the configuration and thus relevance of each domain for producing change varies in every local and histori-

cal context, and sometimes—for instance in situations of urgent self-defense—very one-sided organizing can be needed. But since social power is organized across all these fields, the abandonment (or dominance) of one field tends to limit the ability of the social power to resist.

Further, single actors or strategies can be useful and powerful at given moments, but cannot hold together the tensions on different levels over a long time: society changes, so must its compositional strategies. While no meta-organization can hold these domains and their initiatives and dynamics together in homeostasis or harmony in the long run (the “revolutionary” ideal) we must learn to ask how this balance of forces can be sustained from within the social.

It appears to us that the current crisis opens a scenario wherein social power can be built in ways that encompass and articulate relational, habitational, organizational and institutional-representational power.

Strategizing is always situated. The question “what is to be done now” is often posed in an abstract sense, suggesting that we all need to rally around one strategy, and start from the same point of action. However, for strategy to be concrete, the group of people who strategize need to start from their concrete positions within networks, spaces, organizations and institutions, and ask what connections exist and what can be made, and what resources and capacities we have, and what can be built.

SITUATING INITIATIVES AND ANALYZING CONJUNCTURES

Most political groups, spaces, movements and organizations are focused on building one form of power, while they might draw on the tactics of others. Their strategic horizons might coincide, but the ways of composing relations, of building consistency, communication and coordination within these fields differ significantly.

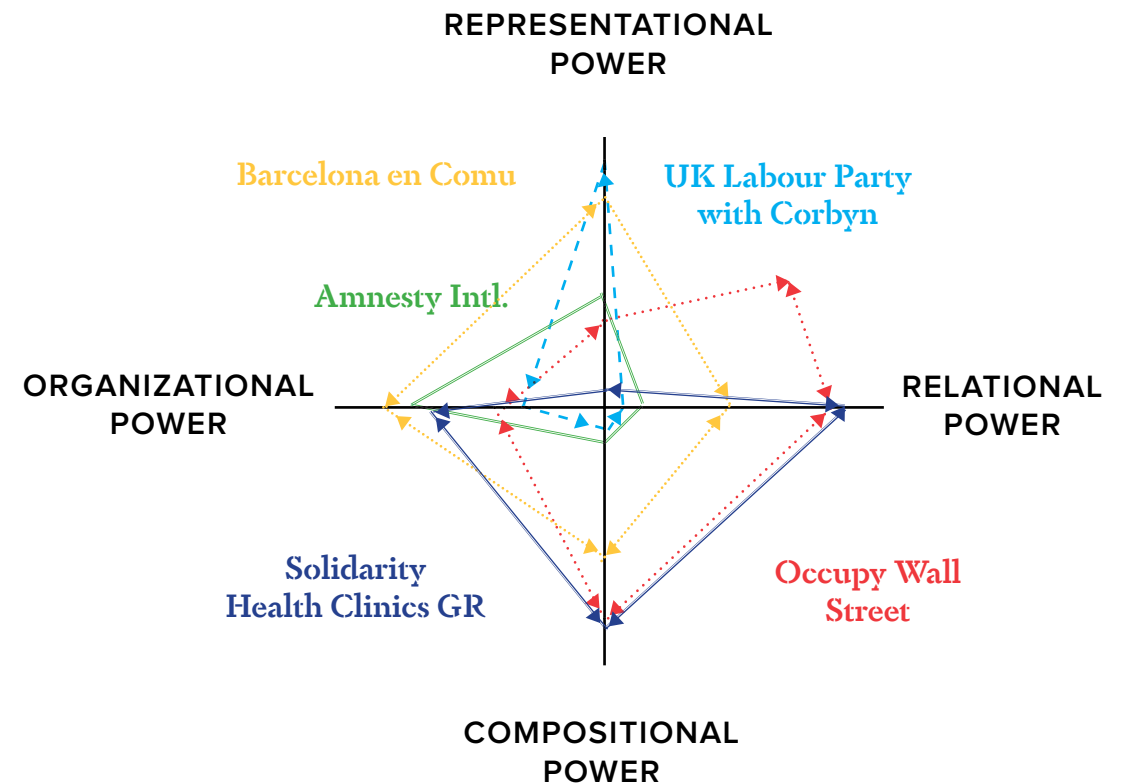
Under what conditions and how does it become possible to establish transversal connections across the social? Of course, any answer must be situated as there is no general formula. We can however say that in the scenario of crisis, cracks appear across the dominant logics of all domains, opening spaces for new struggles and alliances. High capacity for dialogue is required in order to build social power through strong heterogeneity.

Under certain conditions—often to do with the absence of strong positions across the fields—single initiatives can also come to grow into the different domains, building a certain level of hegemony. In such scenarios of unitary struggle, where few organizations have or claim hegemony, the logics of sectarianism and leaderism tend to be strong.

The growth of multifaceted initiatives, however, is not mutually exclusive with a scenario of transversal power, nor does it necessarily hamper heterogeneous social power. The challenge for such initiatives

is to find ways of coexisting with other struggles without absorbing or quenching them, to maintain high levels of internal and external heterogeneity and dialogue.

Some examples of mapping specific initiatives onto this diagram might look as follows (of course, their positionings change and are subject to debate—this is the purpose of such mapping):



Here, building power for us means reading situated and historical context in a way that allows us to understand the interplay of forces and the compositional strategies that can strengthen overall social power and resilience.

It means valuing the potential of social reproduction to transform relations at different levels, and moving towards a transversality of struggles, overcoming isolationism as well as sectarianism.

This means adopting a somewhat more pragmatic, dialoguing and tactical approach that lets go of moralism, purism and identitarianism. It does not imply getting rid of antagonism between actors in different fields or within one field. The question is rather how to make disagreements and contradictions productive, respecting the relative autonomy of struggles at different levels.

The lesson from SYRIZA's defeat is that building power is necessarily multifaceted. It concerns the creation of networks of affect, ideas and trust that will encourage people to speak up and engage in actions. It concerns the building of popular resilience that can make confrontation with existing powers a matter of collective struggle and collaboration rather than chaos and misery. It concerns the building of an organizational capacity that goes beyond old organizations, and which creates a leverage beyond the trade union horizon. And it concerns the building of an institutional capacity to break with the policies of neoliberalism, and give meaning to taking power, elsewhere as much as in Greece.

Together, these can constitute a power that could both strengthen our collective capacity for a break with the Troikas and the oligarchies of the world, and our capacity to embolden or break with any government according to our wishes. ★

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Building power for us means valuing the potential of social reproduction to transform relations at different levels, and moving towards a transversality of struggles, overcoming isolationism as well as sectarianism.

recuperating

work and

LIFE

**ONE SELF-MANAGED
WORKPLACE MAY NOT
END CAPITALISM, BUT
THE EXPERIENCE HELPS
FLEX THE COLLECTIVE
ANTI-CAPITALIST
MUSCLE.**

Marina Sitrin

As the economic crisis deepens and governments — instead of providing support — respond with more austerity, people throughout the world are not only resisting but increasingly creating their own solutions in multiple spheres of life. Work is an especially difficult area around which to organize if the government refuses to aid the unemployed or underemployed, and yet it is also one where some of the most innovative solutions are arising.

One alternative to the prospect of never-ending unemployment is the recuperation of workplaces. No longer making demands on governments that have turned their backs on the population, people are turning to one another. Workers are taking over abandoned workplaces and making them function again, getting rid of bosses and hierarchy while developing democratic assemblies, equal pay remuneration, job rotation and more ecological production practices.



FEELINGS OF POWER AND DIGNITY

Workers in Europe have begun to recuperate their livelihoods, together with the support of the communities around them, following the lead of Argentina after the 2001 economic collapse. There are currently at least a dozen such workplaces in Europe, over 350 in Argentina, and many dozens more in other parts of Latin America.

I have visited a number of recuperated workplaces in Europe over the past two years, and I regularly spend time in Argentina. The stories of these initiatives are all quite similar to one another, as are the feelings of power and dignity that emanate from each and every one of them as soon as you enter the worker-controlled space.

The newer recuperations in Europe do not only take the lead from their sisters and brothers in South America, but have often received direct support and encouragement from workers in Argentina in particular. And in almost

every case, the workers, when deciding whether or not they could take back and run their workplace, reflected that it was something “they” do, in Argentina, or that it is a cultural thing happening only in Latin America—not imagining that worker-occupied and horizontally-run workplaces could catch on in Europe.

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And here we are, with workplaces occupied, democratically self-managed, and producing under workers’ control in countries like France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Croatia and Slovenia. One of the most emblematic of the recent European recuperations, discussed in detail here, is Vio.Me in Greece. Others that have received international recognition include Ri-

Maflow outside Milan and Officine Zero in Rome, as well as Kazova in Istanbul, Fralib in Gémenos and La Fabrique du Sud in Carcassonne (France).

OCCUPY, RESIST, PRODUCE!

The difference between a traditional workplace occupation and a recuperation is generally that an occupation

comes together with a list of demands on the owners, for things like back pay or a reopening of the workplace. In a recuperation, by contrast, the workers first occupy and then apply the formula of the Argentine movements: ‘Occupy, Resist, Produce’—a phrase the Argentines, in turn, had borrowed from the landless movement in Brazil, the MST.

To recuperate is to take back and put into production a workplace that is seen as collectively already yours. The need to resist is self-evident, as recuperations almost always face repression from former owners and the government. And in all cases, there is a massive turnout of people in the community; both in the political community and in the surrounding neighborhoods, where people tend to be very understanding of the implications of unemployment and often personally know the workers involved.

It is this community, made up of neighbors and the wider society, that comes together with the workers to defend the workplace from attempted evictions. I have heard story upon story of people who had never thought of themselves as political or faced off with police coming out to defend workers who wanted to run their workplaces themselves.

And then, if the resistance is successful, production begins. In many ways, this is often the most difficult phase, though one that the workers know best and fear least. Different from the oc-

cupation and resistance phases, which are new to many workers, production in their own workplace is not. However, what often happens is that, when the owners and managers abandon the workplace, they do not only leave behind a massive debt to the workers in the form of back wages and compensation, but they often owe tremendous amounts to their suppliers and energy companies as well.

Moreover, in those cases where the workers are not able to immediately occupy the workplace, the owners come in and sell off parts of the machinery used for production. As a result, when workers recuperate a workplace it is often a shell of the factory or enterprise it used to be, deeply in debt with no supplier willing to sell to them.

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To recuperate is to take back and put into production a workplace that is seen as collectively already yours.

Here again is where the solidarity of the community—together with the imagination and innovation of the workers—comes into play, finding ways to obtain machinery and inputs or change the type of goods produced.

WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY AND ECOLOGY

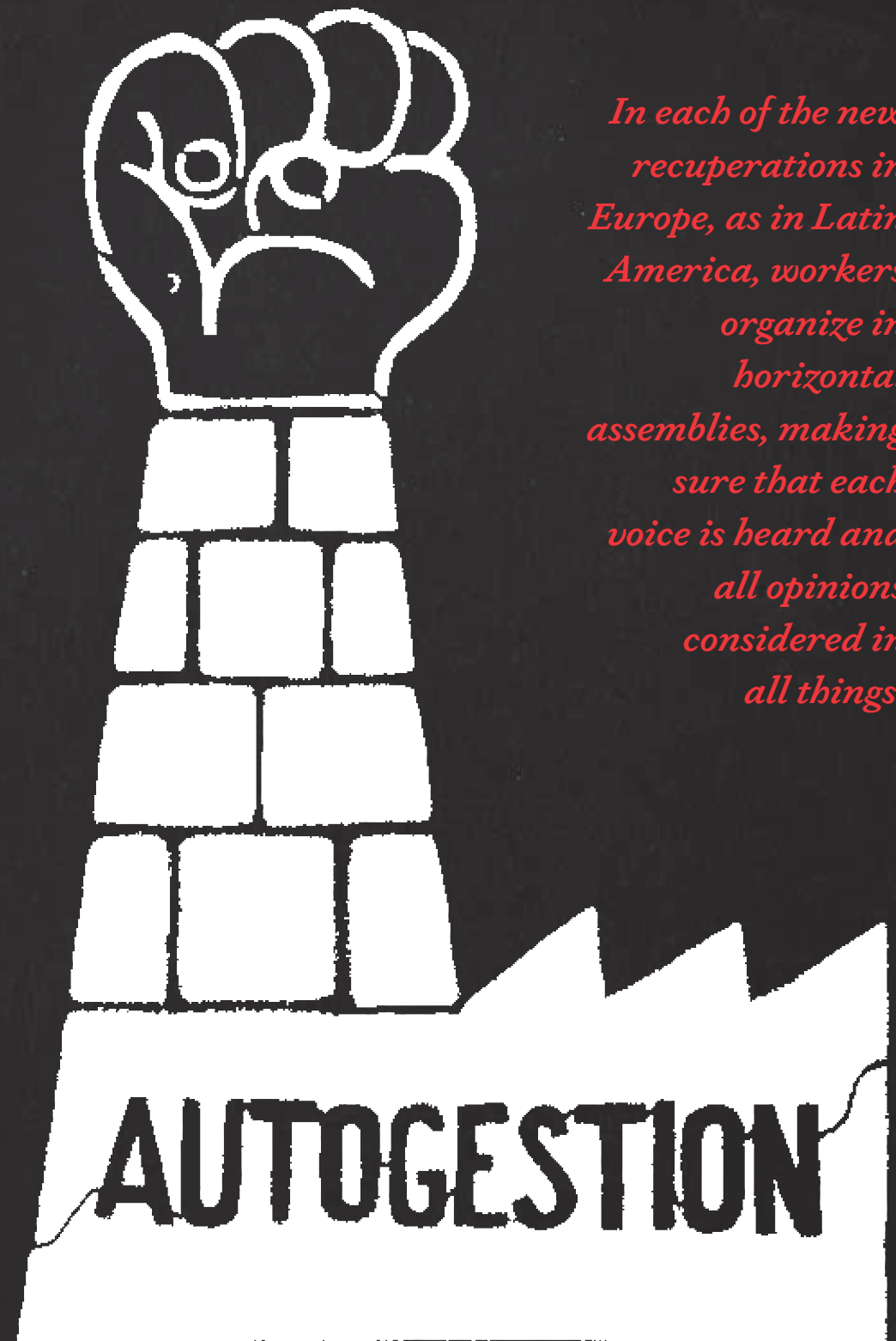
In each of the new recuperations in Europe, as in Latin America, workers organize in horizontal assemblies, making sure that each voice is heard and all opinions considered in all things. While there are spokespeople, they are just that: voices representing the decisions of the assembly, not individuals who make decisions or speak for the other workers.

Increasingly, with the newer recuperations around the world, one of the first decisions made is to change what is produced and how production takes place so as to be more ecological. In the case of Vio.Me, the factory had long been producing industrial glues and cleaners, but after many discussions amongst themselves, the workers—together with their families and supporters—decided that they did not want to either use or produce toxic material. They now only produce organic material, with products that they obtain locally, including lavender and olive oil-based cleaners and soaps.

Ri-Maflow, a former producer of car parts, now—after the occupation and recuperation in 2012—refurbishes electronics, from computers to washing machines, seeing the importance of a more ecological form of production and upcycling. They also host a regular massive flea market together with supporters and make RiMoncello, a lemon liquor (*limoncello*) with organic lemons they trade with local producers.

Officine Zero, formerly RSI (Rail Service Italy), a train car repair factory, occupied their workplace in 2012, and—after demonstrations and demands for back wages and against permanent closure—met with their neighboring social center, which suggested they recuperate it, using the example of Argentina as a concrete reference point.

After recuperation, the workers and supporters decided to shift production. Drawing on their particular skills, they continue to use the workplace to do such things as welding, carpentry and upholstery, only instead of doing so for train cars or new



In each of the new recuperations in Europe, as in Latin America, workers organize in horizontal assemblies, making sure that each voice is heard and all opinions considered in all things.



26th June: Actions around the world in support of the struggle of the workers of Vio.Me. for self-management.

production, they engage in upcycling—taking used products and, through the process of changing them, giving them a higher value, yet less of an ecological imprint.

After a long struggle and final victory, Fralib—a tea-producing plant in France—went from producing tea for such companies as Lipton to now producing organic herbal teas with a direct relationship to the organic farmers in the region where they are located. Again, as with the others, the workers at Fralib are making the conscious choice to break with industrial-

chemical and non-ecological production and to make something else instead—both in terms of how they produce (horizontally) and what they produce (environmentally-friendly goods).

While sales and salaries are still relatively low in most of the workplaces—Fralib and Fabrique du Sud being the exceptions—almost all are beginning to make a living. The survival of most of these recuperated workplaces is in no small part due to the support they receive from people in the community, who see their fates tied to that of the workers.

VIO.ME: LESSONS FROM ARGENTINA

Vio.Me is probably one of the best and most concrete examples of South-North relationships between recuperated workplaces. It is also one of the most innovative recuperations with regard to the relationship with the wider community and new visions of collaboration and production. In part, this innovation stems from lessons learned from Argentina.

In 2012, after having unsuccessfully tried to obtain 1.5 million euros in back pay and compensation owed by their bosses and facing a totally unresponsive government, the workers occupied the workplace—in this case meaning a number of buildings and a few hectares of land.

When the workers first occupied the factory they had not yet decided that they would be putting it back into production. It was hard to imagine at first what that might look like in a country like Greece, in the absence of any recent precedents to guide them. But the workers also knew that the bosses and the government would never respond to their demands. They had heard of the experience in Argentina, but as they explained, that all seemed so distant.

Vio.Me is probably one of the best and most concrete examples of South-North relationships between recuperated workplaces

Fortunately the workers of Vio.Me were connected to a global solidarity network, and the Greek movements (the basis of what later became the Vio.Me Solidarity Initiative) raised the funds to allow a worker from Argentina—who had already gone through the process of recuperation—to meet with the Greek comrades. As the workers at Vio.Me now reflect, meeting with Lalo, from a factory that had gone through the same experience they were going through—a factory that now was producing—

helped them imagine more concretely what it would entail to do something similar in Greece.

It was the final push of confidence they needed to make their decision.

THE SOLIDARITY INITIATIVE

As soon as the workers of Vio.Me occupied their workplace, support poured in from all sectors of society. As with the experience of the Argentines, however, many trade unions and left-leaning political parties did not originally support the process. Using the same argument made around the globe by the more traditional left, many unions complained that the occupation was an anti-union action since it did not go through them. The Communist Party and some inside SYRIZA even argued that recuperation would make the workers owners (*petit bourgeoisie*, to be exact) and thus capitalists—clearly not something to be supported.

In many ways, this was a fortunate rejection as it opened the path for a solidarity initiative that did not involve groups vying for

leadership. The workers are the ones who lead the initiative, and many thousands are now working in support of their effort. Solidarity is expressed in many ways, from people physically being present at the workplace to help defend it against eviction attempts, to the coordination of assemblies—together with the workers—where the community can have a voice in the decisions that affect them.

Like their Argentine counterparts, the workers of Vio.Me are clear that the main reason the struggle has been able to succeed is because of its close relationships with the movements and the community. As the workers were deciding what to do, the local community and the social movements immediately began to come together. What resulted from their meetings was mass rallies and concerts in support of the recuperation, at times numbering in the thousands—as well as the formation of the Solidarity Initiative.

The Solidarity Initiative is an assembly-based community group that works together with the workers from Vio.Me.

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Like their Argentine counterparts, the workers of Vio.Me are clear that the main reason the struggle has been able to succeed is because of its close relationships with the movements and the community.
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One of the co-founders of the Initiative describes their functioning as follows:

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Self-management is an idea that brings together different ideologies from the left. What the Solidarity Initiative does is to help the workers organize and carry out the campaigns of Vio.Me—though now it has less and less responsibilities since the workers are taking more and more into their own hands.



At first we helped a lot with foreign language communications and helped organize political campaigns, like marches, writing texts, and so on. Of course we did this with the workers and the workers had a final say.

It is important to be clear that we are two different entities, so sometimes, for example, the workers write a text on an issue and the Solidarity Initiative writes a different text. But again, the workers have a final say—the Solidarity Initiative always has at least five workers in the assemblies, and they have significant influence over any decision.

BEYOND RESISTANCE

Many still argue that the experience of recuperating workplaces is not an alternative to capitalism. And perhaps, in and of itself, it is not. However, workers who would have been unemployed are no longer. Recuperation is therefore successful in resisting part of the consequences of economic crisis. But it also goes beyond that: these same workers, rather than feeling depressed and having their dignity crushed, are instead leading the way for others to take back control over their own lives.

As Makis, the spokesperson for the assembly of Vio.Me explains, it is not that one recuperated workplace will end capitalism, but the experience is a sort of flexing of the collective anti-capitalist muscle, building towards a broader experience of worker self-management that can eventually lead to a community-based self-administration of society. The vision is one that goes beyond resistance, towards the development of new forms of social relations.

The experiences of the recuperations are vast and profound, challenging capitalist value relations and creating something new in the process. The challenge consists first of all in reclaiming private property and making it something collective, cooperative and common—challenging the very foundation of the capitalist economy.

Second, and perhaps even more important, is the creation of new values and value systems, distinct from the relationship to values and value under capitalism. Around the world there are many tens of thousands of workers directly involved in recuperations and hundreds of thousands more involved in the process at one level or another. This is already creating new relations on multiple levels, as most of these initiatives function through assemblies and horizontal forms of organization, creating alternative ways of relating and less exploited and less alienated lived experiences among those involved.

While these new relations break with the rules of capitalist production, they are simultaneously creating a new value-based relationship to production. Their rule—the rule of those in the movements—is not the accumulation of capital surpluses, but of affect and networks of solidarity and friendship. This new value is experienced at the subjective level, in the changes taking place inside people and their relationships to one another, but also, concretely, in the new ways of living based in these relationships.

As described by Ernesto Lalo Paret from the recuperated workplace Cooperativa Unidos por el Calado, the Argentine worker who visited the workers of Vio.Me:

This process has all of the problems you could imagine, but it has made factories viable that for their previous owners were not viable. Also, what is viability in a society so full of shit? An economist might tell me about the worth of something in terms of cash flow, but it is the person who is recovering their self-esteem, recovering their self-worth and self-confidence, who puts the factory back to work.

MARINA SITRIN



*Marina Sitrin is a writer, lawyer, teacher, organizer, militant and dreamer. She is the author of *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism & Autonomy in Argentina* (Zed, 2012) and co-author, with Dario Azzellini, of *They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy From Greece to Occupy* (Verso, 2014).*

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The experience of recuperating a workplace is a sort of flexing of the collective anti-capitalist muscle, building towards a broader experience of worker self-management that can eventually lead to a community-based self-administration of society.





Spaces for

the Left

“WE ARE IN A PERIOD WHERE THE QUESTION OF ORGANIZATION IS MOST CENTRALLY ON THE AGENDA.”

INTERVIEW

Michael Hardt



ROAR: *This fall marked the fourth anniversary of Occupy. In hindsight, the movement appeared like a kind of flash-mob: it took everyone by surprise when it first arose, and then it quickly dissipated back into the social fabric. What do you think is the reason for this? And what is the main challenge that movements face in moving beyond this initial phase of mobilization?*

Michael Hardt: I have two contradictory things to say on this. The first is that it is important to recognize all the lasting effects of Occupy: the way it transformed a very wide sector of public opinion in the United States, the way it rendered visible the situation of inequality, the role of finance, and so on. In some ways Occupy profoundly transformed economic common sense in the United States.

Events like Occupy also leave traces in the activist memory, so that the next moment always takes up where the last one left off. So it's not simply a flash that's then forgotten, but rather like a leap that then, after a moment of pause, takes off again with another leap from that new space. So, on the one hand, I think it's important to ar-

ticulate the profound and lasting effects of Occupy in a country like the US, and of similar movements elsewhere.

On the other hand, and maybe this is the contradictory nature of what I was going to say, I do think that one of the most important challenges facing social movements today is how to construct continuity in time and also continuity or extension in space. The restriction on Occupy has not only been temporal, in that the encampments only lasted a few months, but it has also been spatial and social—in that the occupation of a square for a few months is not like occupying the whole city, let alone the national space.

This question of expansion—also of social expansion—is one of the things that struck me when talking with activists in Turkey on the one-year anniversary of the Gezi Park encampment. Despite the fact that there were quite a few different social components involved in the movement in cities throughout Turkey, Gezi didn't have that kind of expansion that would extend to traditional forms of labor, or towards the Turkish population as a whole. So there was a kind of social restriction also there.

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One of the most important challenges facing social movements today is how to construct continuity in time and also continuity or extension in space.
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These seem to me the most important organizational challenges that the movements face at present, and they are organizational challenges precisely because I don't believe that the traditional solutions would be successful here, let alone desirable. In other words, the formation of a traditional party structure, the operation of traditional union structures—I don't see these as solutions.

It's not only that I don't think these traditional solutions are desirable, that they go against some of the foundational democratic principles of the movements themselves; I also don't think that they would work. Some of the people who propose a return to traditional party structures might say—and some of them do say—'look, you have to accept this limitation on democratic participation because this is what it takes to be effective'—I just don't think that's true.

And that's precisely why this is such a large challenge to the movements today: because the traditional solutions have been disqualified and new, effective forms of organization must be invented.

One of the ways in which contemporary movements differ from these more traditional forms of organizing is in their horizontality. You seem to be quite sympathetic towards these horizontal forms of organization, but I have also heard you highlight the need for a kind of self-critique of horizontalism. Why? What do you consider to be the main shortcomings of horizontalism, and how can we move beyond them?

Some of the obvious limitations of the forms of horizontalism that we practice so far are the ones that you mentioned in the first question: the temporal, spatial and social limitations of the movements themselves. And I guess I'm taking for granted—and I'm not sure everyone would take for granted—the desirability of the struggles to become generalized; of them not to be minority experiences but rather to invest in the entire social terrain for the long-term.

I wouldn't say that this disqualifies horizontalism and it certainly doesn't disqualify democracy in movements, or the construction of democratic modes of participation. But it does pose a challenge that we have to confront.

Here's another way of approaching it: we—and I should implicate myself in this too—we have a tendency to insist on how we're winning, to always focus in a kind of compensatory way on what's been a success and what has potential for the future. Why do I say in a “compensatory” way? Because we're always bombarded with the notion that we've failed, that nothing is possible, that nothing will work, that nothing is happening.

But while you can recognize what people are already doing, and how they are already transforming their lives, that we're not so weak, you can also at the same time recognize the setbacks and obstacles you face—the many ways in which we're not winning. And that's what I mean by the need for a certain kind of self-critique of the practices of horizontalism: that we



have to recognize the limitations we have encountered so far.

I don't know what the result of that will be. I'm not someone who is sympathetic to those who would say that horizontalism has failed and therefore we need to retreat to the old forms of leadership and organization—I would argue against that solution.

But I do think one has to take seriously the qualities that those traditional forms of organization did carry for a while. We have to recognize that the traditional and hierarchical institutions of the left, however much we might hate them or criticize them, did in many historical situations act as an effective counterpower to the ruling class, they did operate continuously over a long period, they did bring a wide social population within.

So my reason for bringing up the traditional institutions of the left is not to say that we should return to them, but rather that we should recognize ways in which we could accomplish some of their effects by different means—maybe by horizontalism conceived or practiced somewhat differently.

I'm also not tied to horizontalism in a way that I feel dogmatic about it. If we can figure out other practices of democracy that would accomplish those results that the traditional leftist organizations achieved, that's precisely what I have in mind for this type of self-critique.

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Speaking of such alternative forms of democratic organization, maybe we could talk about the notion of “social unionism” you have been discussing within the Euronomade network of late. What is social unionism? And why does this concept gain relevance in our current context?

A starting point for me is to think of how the term social unionism has been used in the English-speaking world for the last decades, which sets up—both in a positive and in a negative sense—how we use the concept within Euronomade.

Positively, social unionism—sometimes called “social movement unionism”—was conceived in South Africa in the 1980s, and in the United States, Canada

and Britain, at the moment of the decline of the traditional trade unions and as an alternative to what could be called political unionism, which meant an alliance between party and union; one in which the union took political direction from the party. Instead, social unionism was conceived as a relationship in which the trade union makes alliance with the social movements—which ends up reinvigorating both.

On one hand, in such an alliance the social movement gains the organizational structures and lasting abilities of the trade union, and on the other hand the trade union is renovated by both the expansive social issues of the social movements, moving from labor to forms of life, but also by the antagonistic methods

of the movements—the forms of activism that are outside typical trade union activity.

That reasoning seems to me a positive basis for thinking of social unionism in our context today, but what seems to me fundamentally different is that the older notion of social unionism thinks of political and economic struggles as in some sense external to each other. The alliance between the trade union and the social movement is one of two separate and two differently structured organizations, whereas in the context of Euronmade we're trying to think of social unionism as an internal relationship.

This internal relationship passes in part through the notion of the common, which has also been central to our thinking, in that struggles over the common involve both economic struggles for the re-appropriation of the means of production and also more directly political or social struggles for the transformation of modes of life.

This fits with certain theorizations of recent social movements, for instance in Turkey and Brazil, in that we can conceive of these movements as struggles for the common—or struggles over the city, really, but conceiving the city as a common space, so that the struggle over transport in Brazil or the struggle over Gezi Park are really struggles to make urban space common, to make urban life common. And because we can conceive of them as both economic struggles and as political or social struggles, this poses an internal relation to what was traditionally conceived of as an external relation.



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R. GINO SANTA MARIA / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Over the past year, the Black Lives Matter movement has been leaving a clear mark on US politics. What do urban uprisings like the one in Ferguson last year or in Baltimore earlier this year tell us about the complex relationship between class and race in contemporary America? And where do you see this struggle going?

It's long been true in the United States, for at least the last 150 years, that one can't think class without thinking race, or understand racial dynamics without understanding class dynamics. One thing that Ferguson revealed was the kind of volcanic magma that's just beneath the surface, the willingness to rebel—when

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One thing that Ferguson revealed was the kind of volcanic magma that's just beneath the surface, the willingness to rebel—when the conflictuality that's normally held in check suddenly explodes.

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What isn't very clear are the possibilities of organization. Once again, with Black Lives Matter there are all kinds of voices on the left in the United States saying that they need traditional leaders. Like they said surrounding Occupy: 'without their Martin Luther King they'll never amount to anything.' And similarly with Ferguson and Baltimore there were calls for leaders in the black community to step forward, which often means religious figures like Baptist preachers.

We haven't solved our problems of organization yet, and that's precisely what's required at this point.

My feeling is that this is neither desirable nor effective, and it points toward the same situation we were talking about earlier, which is that we are in need of, I wouldn't necessarily call it new thinking about organization, but at least a recognition that we haven't solved our problems of organization yet, and that that's precisely what's required at this point.

I'm not satisfied with these periodic explosions and I feel the need—and I think this is a reasonably generalized feeling—for modes of organization that both allow for democratic expression but also for the establishment of long-lasting and effective counterpowers.

The Black Lives Matter movement, like many other struggles, points towards that. I wish I were in the position to say that I had the answer, although that would also be stupid. Rather, I think the only way such problems can be resolved lies within the movements themselves, through a kind of collective theorizing that goes on over a significant period of time. I think the best we can do—as people who write about these struggles—is to recognize that we're in a period where the question of organization is most centrally on the agenda.

Speaking of organization, what do you think of recent evolutions like the rise of Podemos in Spain? Is this simply a retreat into the old party-form, or is there something more to it?

I don't think Podemos is just the same old party. I see Podemos, together with the municipal electoral projects of Barcelona en Comú and Ahora Madrid, as experiments by the movements with new tactics.

They are a kind of wager on the part of activists coming out of the 15-M movement to see if they can enter the field of electoral politics and preserve the aspirations and dynamism of the movements. Whether they will ultimately succeed or fail, I don't know. Entering into electoral contests like that is always risky. If the electoral experiment fails it could be destructive for the movements, having invested so much energy in it.

On the other hand, if Podemos and the newly elected municipal governments could provide a kind of opening to the movements, that could be extremely important. It reminds me of something Deleuze said in his *Abécédaire* when he is asked about the left and he says: 'there's no such thing as a government of the left. There can be, perhaps, a government that opens spaces for the left.'

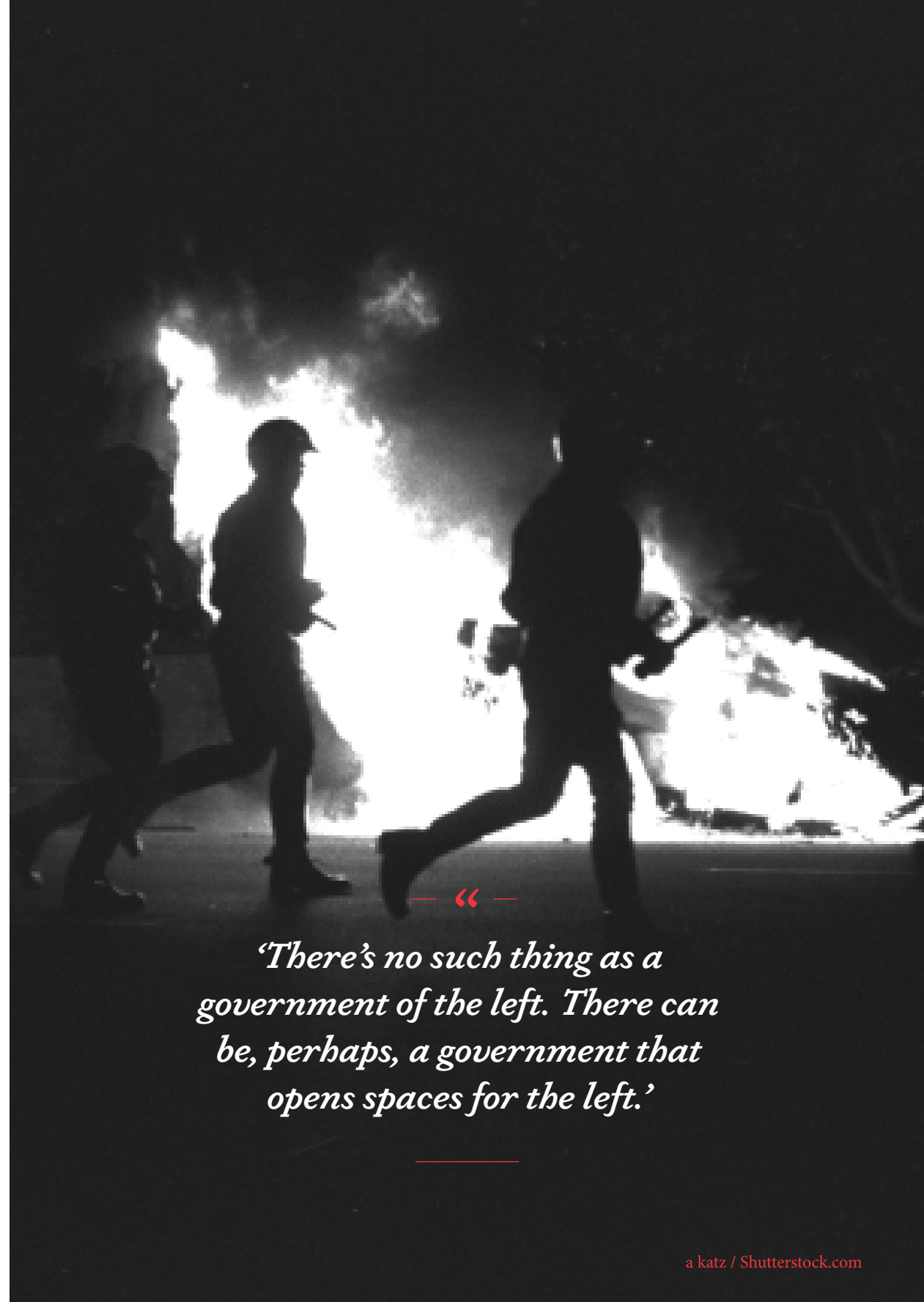
And that, I think, is what we can hope for. If we can think of Podemos as something like that, that could be a success—as long as it opens up new spaces for the movements.

Interview by Jerome Roos.

MICHAEL HARDT

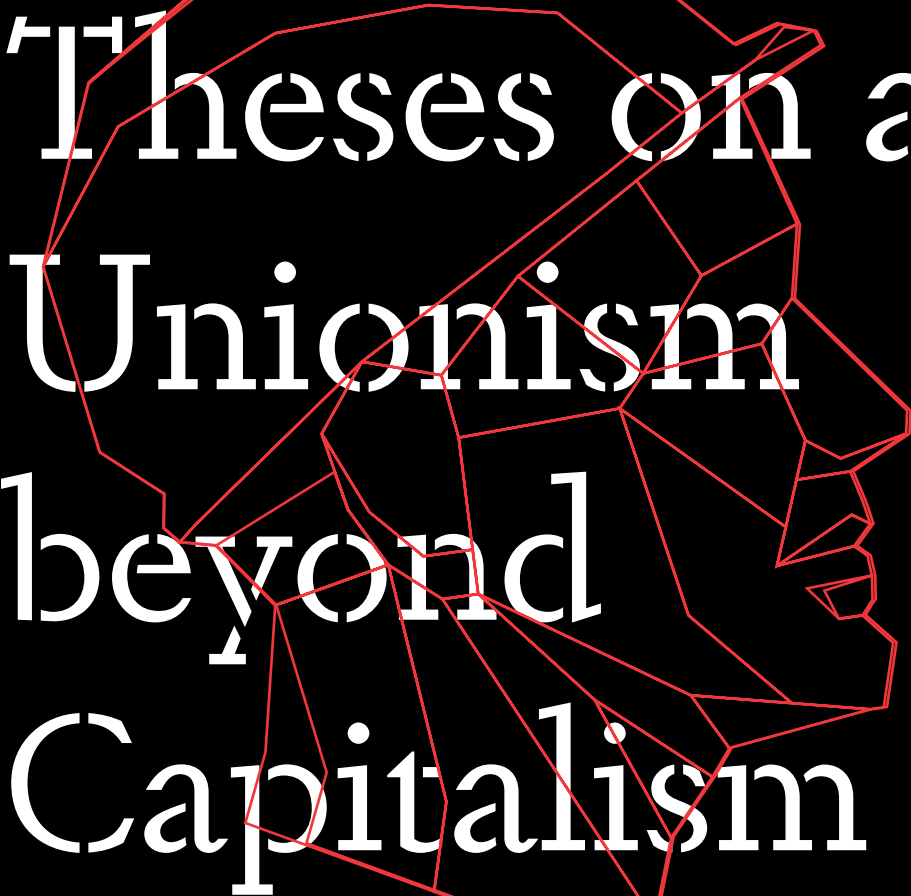


*Michael Hardt is an American literary theorist and political philosopher best known as co-author, with Antonio Negri, of the influential trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*. He is Professor of Literature and Italian at Duke University.*



“*There's no such thing as a government of the left. There can be, perhaps, a government that opens spaces for the left.*”

Theses on a Unionism beyond Capitalism



WITH TODAY'S RAPID TRANSFORMATIONS OF WORK AND CAPITAL, THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW FORMS OF LABOR ORGANIZING BECOMES THE MOST URGENT ORDER OF THE DAY.

Erik Forman

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At the dawn of industrial capitalism, the protagonists of the workers' movement saw in the ineluctable conflict between labor and capital a contradiction that would burst the integuments of class society asunder. Communism would enter the historical stage through the breach.

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Instead, a "negative dialectic" emerged, in which the contradictions of capitalism are sublimated and deferred into political mediation at the workplace and societal level through the institutions of trade unions and political parties, or submerged in bloody repression.

2

Fascism, social democracy, state socialism, and corporate liberalism were political responses to the economic contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production in the first half of the twentieth century. They were granted political currency by the credible threat of communist revolution. All of these systems were ultimately unable to resolve the contradictions of capitalism and instead displaced them into repression and inter-imperialist war.

3

The victory of the Allied powers in World War II was the victory of cor-

porate liberalism and social democracy in the advanced capitalist core, and the victory of state socialism in large swaths of the periphery.

4

In the period following World War II in the advanced capitalist core, labor unions developed into a pillar of a "social compromise" that granted "middle-class" prosperity to a large proportion of the working class, and stability to the organizational form of the labor union assured by the capitalist state.

5

The terms of the social compromise vary by country, but the contours of the agreement are always the same: labor peace and continued production in return for loyalty to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie at the level of production in the form of acknowledgement of "management prerogative" in the production process, and acquiescence to the foreign policy dictates of transnational capital.

6

This system was extended to the former Axis powers and areas occupied by the United States in the wake of World War II, encompassing the entire non-socialist world.

Within the socialist world, class struggle continued in state-owned enterprises, albeit against state bureaucrats instead of capitalist bosses, and amidst decommodification of much of the lifeworld.

Capital endorsed the social compromise primarily out of a need to compete for the loyalties of the working class with the socialist movement, including its state socialist exponents, and to realize surplus value by creating consumer demand for commodities by linking wage increases to increases in productivity. This was called “Keynesianism.” The social compromise had the effect of stabilizing capitalism in the core countries, freezing class antagonisms in place.

The labor unions developed into bureaucratic institutions staffed by a class of professional bureaucrats, seeking to mediate class conflict through legalistic means, reinforced occasionally by a strike. The professionalization and bureaucratization of class antagonism resulted in the disarming and disorientation of the unionized proletariat, which no longer had to fight its own battles.

The social compromise was predicated on multiple divisions within the working class, between (male) waged and (female)

non-waged labor, between the high-wage zones of the core and low-wage zones of the periphery, between the unionized industrial sector and largely non-union service sector staffed by young workers and women, between racialized workers and white workers, and between immigrant and native-born.

By the late 1960s, those excluded from the social compromise launched repeated challenges to the system, contributing to its signal crisis. Riots in American metropolises, wildcat strikes, women’s entry into the workforce and demand for wages, and postcolonial demands for higher prices for raw materials amplified pressures on the US-centered world system.

In the mid-1970s, increased competition from the rebuilt industrial centers of Europe and Japan, rising energy costs, and continued restiveness amongst the US working class exhausted the viability of the post-war American system.

To restore profitability, capital inverted the Keynesian model of development. While in the immediate post-war era, capital sought to compete for the loyalties of the global working class through a regime of unionized, high-wage industrial employment, it now sought to touch off



BY LIGHT BRIGADING, VIA FLICKR

competition between peripheral states for capitalist investment. Where capital had once competed for workers by offering a high price for labor, now states would compete for capital by cheapening the price of labor. The race to the bottom had begun.

In the advanced capitalist core, capital sought to reduce costs through outsourcing of production to the periphery, commodification of social goods (privatization), and concessionary bargaining or wholesale destruction of unions. Credit filled the role

once played by high wages in the first world, allowing for the realization of surplus value through debt-financed consumption.

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by defensive struggles to retain the guarantees of the post-war social compromise in the workplaces of the capitalist core. However, decades of collaborationist relationships with politicians and bureaucratization left workers unprepared for the open class war they faced. Unable and unwilling to mount a class-wide offensive, the labor movement began a long retreat.



16

In the periphery, the race to the bottom took the form of the proliferation of “special economic zones” or “export processing zones,” replacing the developmentalist strategy of import substitution with production for export for first-world consumption. Production in the periphery undercut first-world wages, due in large part to a sort of arbitrage where lopsided exchange rates allowed dollars to buy large quantities of third-world labor with profits reaped from first-world consumption of the products of that labor. This was capital’s “spatial fix” for the crisis of the post-war social compromise.

17

US client states have waged a permanent counterinsurgency in the periphery to stifle the emergence of third-world workers’ movements, primarily through targeted assassinations of militant union activists and sponsorship of collaborationist unions. This violence underpins the capitalist world system today.

18

The United States sought to drive a wedge in the socialist camp by integration of China into the capitalist world system beginning in the early 1980s through subcontracting of export-oriented production to its special economic zones.

19

The collapse of the Soviet Union and capitalist “opening and reform” of China signified the disappearance of any systemic alternative to global capitalism, creating the illusion of the End of History in liberal democracy.

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The absence of a systemic competitor led capital to abandon concerns of political stability and accelerate the inversion of the Keynesian system of high-wage employment and production in the core, and development through import substitution in the periphery. This inversion was represented by the cancellation of the post-war social compromise in wider areas of the core amidst a bonanza of debt-financed consumption, and ballooning export-oriented production in the periphery facilitated by free trade agreements and World Trade Organization policies.

21

Capitalist globalization is now leading to the transcendence of the “spatial fix” that began in the 1970s, with the equalization of exploitation in the core and periphery through intensified exploitation of the core working class, and a slow increase in living standards for a segment of the population in areas of the periphery that have successfully retained a portion of the surplus value generated in export-oriented production. The rise of a “middle class” in the periphery aligns

with the interests of global capital to develop consumption markets outside the traditional western core. But rather than a universalization of middle-class living standards, capital has only traded the old spatial fix for another one, constructing new core-periphery dichotomies between the monied centers of its global cities and their banlieues, favelas, suburbs, and hinterlands.

22

In the core, intensified exploitation has led to a return of conditions resembling the pre-war era, necessitating and enabling the rise of a new movement of the dispossessed. In the periphery, capital can promise increased standards of living, but only at the cost of lifetimes of exploitation in dirty, dangerous, and dull work and destruction of the living environment.

23

While the objective conditions for a return of a revolutionary workers movement are now in place, the subjective will, organized into a political force at the level of the workplace and society, has not yet fully crystallized—in the core or periphery.

24

Especially since the 2007 financial crisis, a new wave of struggles has escalated across the capitalist core due to increased attacks on what remains of the now-empty promises of the post-war so-

cial compromise. However, the decay of the labor movement, transformation of the production system, and *petit bourgeois* domination of social movements has largely vitiated the arrival of resistance where it is most powerful—the workplace.

25

The arrival of resistance in the workplaces of the capitalist core has been forestalled by a massive mutation in the system of production: the shift from manufacturing to service-sector employment. In 1939, the services-to-manufacturing employment ratio in the United States was 2.1-to-1. By 2015 it was 9.9-to-1. This seismic shift moved the earth beneath labor's feet. The working class has yet to fully orient itself on this new terrain.

26

The progressive shift from manufacturing to services results primarily from dynamics inherent in the capitalist mode of production. Marx's *Grundrisse*: "The increase of the productive force of labour and the greatest possible negation of necessary labour is the necessary tendency of capital... The transformation of the means of labour into machinery is the realization of this tendency." Capitalism tends toward replacing labor with automation, particularly in response to worker struggle. Tronti's *Strategy of Refusal*: "[capital] seeks to use the workers' antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor of its own development..." the Keynesian development pathway. In the absence

of a successful struggle for wages without work, capital's long-term response to class struggle is automation or outsourcing of manufacturing and the growth of service-industry employment.

27

In broad strokes, the shift from manufacturing to services in the core was a shift from concentration of workers in large workplaces to spatial deconcentration across small, networked production sites, from production to reproduction, hard industries to soft, masculine to feminine, full-time to part-time, high wage to low wage, direct employment to subcontracting and freelancing, stable to precarious, and unionized to non-union employment.

28

The progressive decimation of the industrial working class means a "death of the subject" of American corporate liberalism, European social democracy, and the socialism of their opponents. While socialism saw in the industrial workers the agents to capital's undoing, the Keynesian partisans of the status quo saw in the unionized, high-wage factory worker the missing link in capital's circuit of valorization. Capital's transition to service-sector employment has robbed the ideologies of the twentieth century of their protagonist. The prophets have lost their people, confusion and division have set in amongst the ruling classes and their opponents alike.

29

The rise of the service industry has led to the rise of a service class in the capitalist core. The industrial working class has been replaced by a post-industrial working class of cashiers, cooks, servers, and clerks at the low end, and teachers, nurses, programmers, and technicians at the high end. The post-industrial proletariat in the capitalist core is now an enormous class in itself; the task of labor today is to catalyze its coming to consciousness as a class for itself.

30

Where conflict was once mediated and deferred at the molar level of the social organism by political compromise and collective bargaining, capital has now dissolved all forms of collectivity, invading the molecular level of society through debt, human resources management, social media, and ever-more insidious manipulations of desire.

31

The development of consciousness and struggle amongst the service class is stymied by the far-flung production sites, high turnover rates, and unchecked power of the bosses characteristic of this sector, rendering it nearly impossible to achieve the increasingly global scale of organization required to inflict substantial economic pain on the multinational corporations that monopolize the service industry.

32

Supply chains are vulnerable to workers' direct action. However, the challenge facing the working class is not only to momentarily shut down the old system, but to take over and build a new one. This requires not only structural power of workers located in the key logistical nodes, but the associational power of the exploited millions across the low-wage service sector, creating new forms of labor and social organization that point beyond the shell of the old.

33

Rooted in the basic dynamics of the capitalist mode of production, the shift to services is the tendential direction of capitalist development. This is already clear in the post-industrial core, and will soon manifest in the rapidly industrializing periphery. Thus, a failure to find a development pathway out of capitalism that takes the service class as its point of departure means a true End of History.

34

The post-industrial proletariat has begun to gain consciousness of itself as a class, evidenced by the emergence of struggles in fast food, corporate retail, and other major subsections of the low-wage service industry. Yet most struggles in the capitalist core have been stunted by the remaining organizational forms and modes of activity of the bureaucratic apparatus developed to constrain and direct

worker resistance under the post-war social compromise. Struggles outside of this apparatus have been unable to develop a scale capable of confronting capital in its full stature.

35

The bureaucratic apparatus in the core consists of the remnants of the class-collaborationist labor bureaucracy, as well as a constellation of NGOs revolving around a set of philanthropic foundations that grew as appendages of the US State Department during the Cold War to buttress the hegemony of US capitalism.

36

The bureaucratic apparatus is largely unable and unwilling to grasp the task confronting the working class in either its global or systemic dimension, routing resistance into piecemeal reforms and single-issue campaigns that can easily be coordinated by the professionalized managers of worker struggle, and be assimilated by capital as non-structural reforms that do not threaten its hegemony.

37

Generally, struggles managed by the bureaucratic apparatus are successful to the extent that they are limited.

38

The piecemeal demands of the bureaucratic apparatus amount to a demand for





the return of the post-war social compromise—but social compromise is not on the agenda, and ironically, can only be put back on the agenda by a successful revolutionary struggle that breaks a large section of the world economy away from the capitalist world system, generating pressure on the remaining capitalist states to put political competition for the loyalties of the working class over economic drives for short-term profit.

————— 39 —————

In the periphery, the rise of an immense industrial sector has led to the rise of workers' movements resembling the insurgencies that once led to class compromise in the capitalist core.

————— 40 —————

The ruling class of China and other nations in the periphery have embarked on the politically treacherous but economically viable neo-Keynesian path of harnessing strike waves to boost wages in order to sponsor consumption in a bid to build a consumer center, reliant on a large service sector, that displaces the Western capitalist states as the core of the world system.

————— 41 —————

Wildcat strike waves in China and elsewhere in the periphery—though massive—and the class struggles fomented by the remnants of the labor bureaucracy in the capitalist core share a common limitation: foreshortened political horizons,

evidenced by purely economic demands.

————— 42 —————

Left electoralism, no matter how red its flag, is unable to transcend the limitations imposed by global capital. Until the working classes are organized as a political force capable of a credible threat of communizing the means of production, attempts to resolve the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism solely through fiscal and monetary policy will be futile. Any engagement with electoral politics must generate structural reforms in the system of production, or it will become the left wing of capital.

————— 43 —————

Accepting the leadership of the bureaucratic apparatus is suicidal, insofar as the bureaucratic apparatus accepts the leadership of capital. The working class must rupture with the practices of the class collaborationist bureaucratic apparatus if it is to transcend its role as the object rather than subject of history.

————— 44 —————

The present contains a future. The emergent new forms of worker organization must deliberately avoid repeating labor's mistakes of the twentieth century, or they will bring us only more of the same.

————— 45 —————

Where the bureaucratic apparatus professionalized struggle in order to man-

age workers in the long-term interests of capital, the new forms of worker organization must deprofessionalize and diffuse the skills of organizing throughout the working class. We must reject bureaucratic control in favor of the construction of direct-democratic organs where the exploited manage their own struggles.

————— 46 —————

We must reject "management prerogative" over the production process in favor of expansive struggles for workers' control to produce for the good of the entire planet and all its creatures. Where the social compromise was based on restriction of solidarity to isolated "bargaining units" defined by the walls of a factory or narrower job classification, a revolutionary workers' movement must generate a class-wide solidarity that overflows the walls of the workplace, uniting producers and consumers as one working class. Our campaigns must go beyond narrow wage demands in favor of the de-commodification and socialized distribution of the products of our labor.

————— 47 —————

In the place of the imagined community of nationalism and its bedfellows of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and other forms of oppression, we must construct a real community based on the material interdependence of all life on earth. In the place of capitalist states, administered by technocrats left and right, we must build and confederate assemblies and communes to exercise self-government.

But political autonomy is only as meaningful as it is possible to materially survive within it: there is no real autonomy without control of the means of production.

48

While a large-scale break with the fixation on recapitulating a Keynesian capitalism in the ascendant peripheral states and declining core states is unlikely in the short term, the decline of US hegemony and recurrent economic crisis has led to the emergence of areas of relative autonomy with greater liberatory potential: worker-run factories in Argentina, experiments in socialist democracy in Venezuela, Zapatista communities in Mexico, and the rebel region of Rojava in northern Syria, for example. While none of these present a clear systemic alternative to the capitalist world system, they may contain the seeds of a decommodified “workers’ economy.” The construction of the workers’ economy not as an

“alternative,” but as hegemonic world system is the only hope for averting the cataclysms of environmental destruction, war, and poverty which loom on the horizon in this period of world-systemic interregnum. We must defend the new world wherever it breaks through, rejecting the foreign policy of global capital in favor of a strategy of solidarity with regions that rupture with the capitalist system.

49

Breaking the negative dialectic of capitalist development means breaking humanity’s chains where they are forged—in the jaws of the means of production. Whether based initially in the workplace directly, or on the terrain of the community, the construction of organizations to wage an unmediated and uncompromising class struggle to seize the means of production and construct a global workers’ economy is the most urgent order of the day. ★

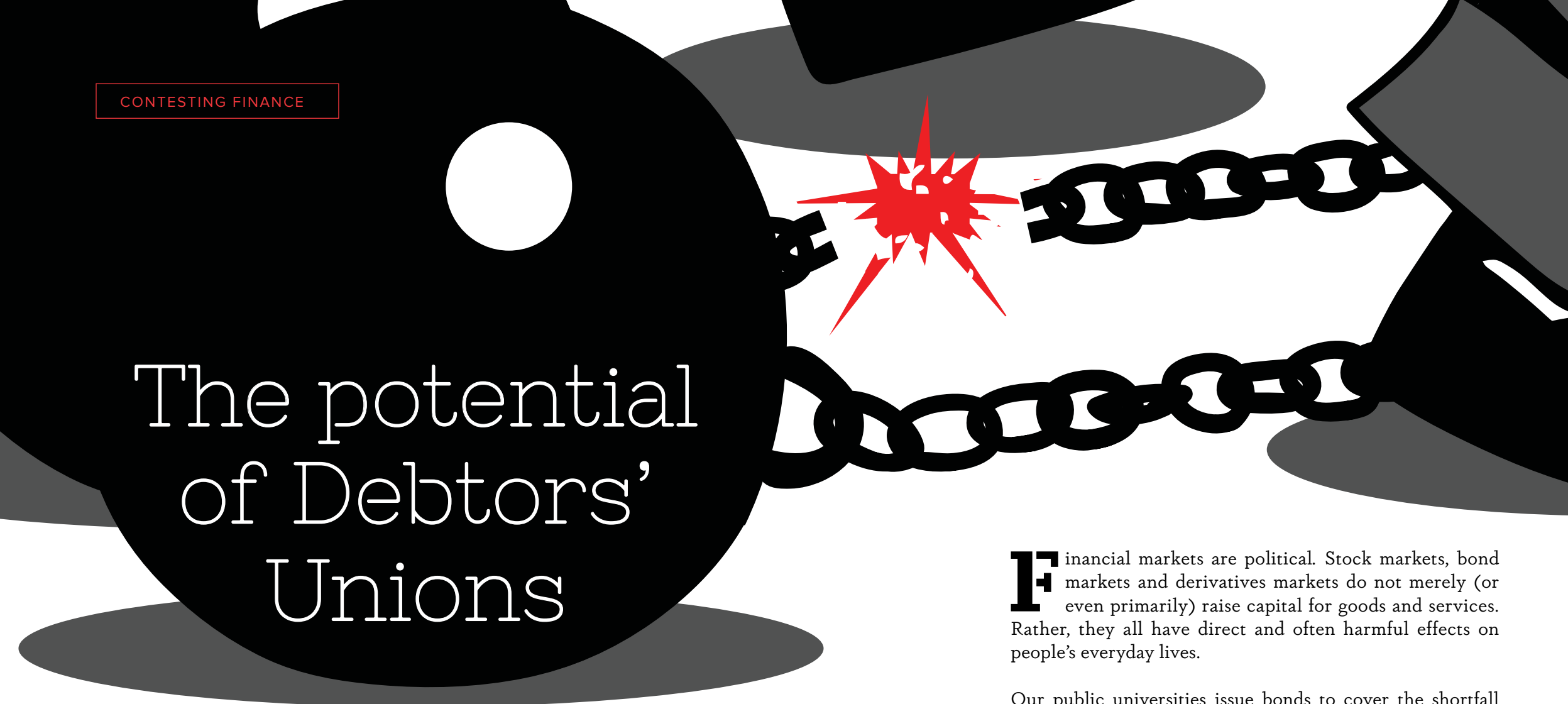
ERIK FORMAN



Erik Forman participated in groundbreaking unionization campaigns in the US fast food industry as a member of the IWW. He currently teaches in the New York City public schools and is active in the United Federation of Teachers and Movement of Rank-and-File Educators.

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The potential of Debtors' Unions

**AIMING TO BUILD COLLECTIVE POWER
IN AN AGE OF FINANCIAL ABSOLUTISM,
THE DEBT COLLECTIVE IS PILOTING
A NEW KIND OF ORGANIZATION:
THE DEBTORS' UNION.**

Debt Collective

Financial markets are political. Stock markets, bond markets and derivatives markets do not merely (or even primarily) raise capital for goods and services. Rather, they all have direct and often harmful effects on people's everyday lives.

Our public universities issue bonds to cover the shortfall from tax cuts and, in turn, use ever-rising tuition dollars as collateral. Our mortgage, car and credit card payments are all securitized into short-term, lucrative investments for banks and investors, while for us they are shelter, food, and merely getting by. The municipal bond and sovereign debt markets have had plainly disastrous effects from Detroit to Puerto Rico to Greece—but for some they have been spectacularly profitable.

If financial markets are political, how can we contest them and their effects? What does civil disobedience and collective power look like in the age of finance? The Debt Collective is attempting to answer that question by piloting a new kind of organization: a debtors' union.

YOU SAY FINANCE, WE SAY DEBT

Today, 75 percent of US households hold consumer debt. All indications are that for most Americans, debt has become a basic fact of life—a circumstance necessary just to get by.

Of indebted households, 40 percent use credit cards to cover basic living costs including rent, food, and utilities. Some 62 percent of personal bankruptcies in the US are linked to illness and health care costs. In the wake of the mortgage crisis, African American families lost 50 percent of their collective wealth and Latino communities have lost an astounding 67 percent of total wealth.

In households that do not use formal banking services, 10 percent of families' annual income goes to alternative financial services including revolving debts and exorbitant interest payments to check cashers and payday lenders. In 2015, US students graduated from college with an average of \$35,000 in debt, and defaults on student debt are now occurring at the rate of one million per year.

These experiences of mass indebtedness ramify through credit scores and reports,

which ensure that people with lower scores pay higher interest rates, have a harder time finding places to live, and in many cases are even denied opportunities for work, thus reproducing cycles of debt and inequality.

Cities, states and entire countries have also been remade in the current debt-finance nexus. While both municipal and sovereign bonds have been in use for centuries (to fund infrastructure, public education and war, among other state endeavors), municipal debt alone has increased 800 percent over the past thirty years. As tax receipts have plummeted, cities turn increasingly to Wall Street for money, and they have been met with LIBOR fraud, toxic swaps, and capital appreciation bonds with ballooning interest rates on the order of payday loans.

Massive bankruptcies in Jefferson County, Alabama and Detroit, Michigan, offer two recent examples of what happens when the finance industry decides where and how to invest municipal capital, always demanding a profit on "public" investment. And of course we all watched with baited breath as Greece took on its creditors in a protracted battle over control of a semi-sovereign state. The fight

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75% OF US HOUSEHOLDS HOLD CONSUMER DEBT



40%

USE CREDIT CARD TO COVER BASIC LIVING



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62%

PERSONAL BANKRUPTCIES LINKED TO ILLNESS & HEALTH



In 2015, US students graduated from college with an average of \$35,000 in debt, and defaults on student debt are now occurring at the rate of one million per year.

in Greece was only the most recent sovereign debt struggle in the era of finance, and was preceded of course by Argentina, Mexico, Indonesia, Mozambique, and most of the Global South in the era of structural adjustment.

Widespread municipal, state and sovereign austerity mean ever more virulent forms of individual indebtedness. According to a recently filed class-action lawsuit, the city of Ferguson, Missouri runs a modern debtors' prison scheme in which impoverished people are routinely jailed because they are unable to pay debts incurred in the "criminal justice" system. The lawsuit details how Ferguson families take money needed for food, clothing, rent and utilities to pay ever-increasing court fines, fees, costs, and surcharges. When they cannot pay, they are imprisoned.

DEBT, POWER AND EXPLOITATION

Needless to say, Ferguson is not alone. Across the United States, debt (along with outright state terror) often acts as a fearsome mechanism of racist social control—Jefferson County's and Detroit's bankruptcies must also be understood in this light. From Ferguson to Greece, debt is about power and subordination as much as it is about repayment at a profit. It is no coincidence that these forms of indebtedness have risen exponentially along with the rise of Wall Street. Since business leaders re-discovered a more confrontational and unified class-based politics from above, they have managed

to shrink wages and worker power while directing governments' budgets away from the provision of public goods and the anti-poverty measures of the post-WWII period. Yet business profitability depends on consumer demand—indeed, global capitalism during the neoliberal era has relied in large part on the power of US consumers' inclination to push their money back into the dollar-driven import-export cycle.

In the face of stagnant or declining wages, the obvious solution has been simply to lend consumers the money. More credit/debt means that an increasingly financialized business class actually gets paid (in the form of interest, fees and derivative profits) to provide the rest of us the money needed to keep demand inflated (until it pops!).

It is more profitable for the creditor class—in the short and medium term—to lend money at interest than to transfer it in wages. And as the government has off-loaded the costs of public goods including

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From Ferguson to Greece, debt is about power and subordination as much as it is about repayment at a profit.

medical care and education onto consumers, the demand for debt has only grown. In other words, credit has stepped in to “compensate” for falling wages, and debt thus becomes one of the central mechanisms of exploitation.

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What does this mean for us? As finance capitalism expands, so too do our debts: the financial sector has rapidly become the way we access many basic goods and services—food, shelter, medical care, education.

In this terrain of mass indebtedness, disempowerment, and debtors' prisons, what does collective action look like? What does civil disobedience look like in the age of finance? What forms of material and conceptual subversion can we imagine?

FINANCIAL DISOBEDIENCE

Debt fuels crises, taking power out of the hands of all but the financial capitalist class. Yet it also presents an opportunity for a new form of resistance to capitalist exploitation. The threat of crisis can be leverage for debtors.

Experienced alone, debt is isolating, frightening and morally laden with shame and guilt. Indebtedness is being afraid to open the mail or pick up the phone. But as a platform for collective action, debt can be powerful. Consider oil tycoon JP Getty's adage: “If you owe the bank \$100 that's your problem. If you owe the bank \$100 million, that's the bank's problem.” Student debt alone stands today at \$1.3 trillion. Together, we can be the banks' problem.

Let's think back for a moment to the mortgage crisis, when non-payment of mortgage debts essentially took down the global economy. We can learn several things from this catastrophe.



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First, it is a great illustration of the centrality of debt payments to capital accumulation and stability today. Second, these mortgage debts could never have been repaid in the first place. In the financial frenzy of mortgage-backed securities, reckless creditors interested only in short-term profit concocted wildly unsustainable lending schemes, selling borrowers mortgage packages they could never have paid off. The failure, in other words, was already baked in; the only question was, who would pay for it?

The bailout ensured that homeowners paid while banks, massive insurance companies, and bondholders were made whole. And homeowners did not lose equally. Quantitative data in the American Sociological Review shows that the mortgage crisis represents one of the largest destructions of the wealth of people of color in US history.

To be clear, it is not simply a matter of the crisis disproportionately impacting diverse populations. Rather, Black Americans have long been the target of economic violence, and 2008 was no exception. At the time, Wells Fargo loan officers devastated entire communities by pushing hundreds of Baltimore area homeowners (referred to as

“mud people” by banking staff) with good credit into high-interest subprime mortgages they called “ghetto loans.”

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***Imagine if the power of
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union.***

The aftershocks of these practices are still being felt, in Baltimore and beyond. The results of the mortgage crisis were so devastating in part because, while banks and their lobbyists were well-organized to fight for debt relief, the rest of us were not. (“They got bailed out. We got sold out.”) Imagine if the power of mortgage-holders—paradoxically, the power of their collective debt—had been deployed collectively and tactically to retain homes while forcing bondholders and creditors to sustain the losses. That is one potential of a debtors’ union.

DEBT RESISTANCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Aiming to build collective power through debt organizing, but rigorously cautious about the pitfalls, we in the Debt Collective have been nosing our way towards a debtors’ union for a few years. Many of us first started plotting on the streets of Manhattan during Occupy.

We educated ourselves about the nitty gritty of interlocking debt systems by collectively authoring a critical analysis *cum* financial literacy guide that we called the *Debt Resister's Operations Manual*. We gained some unexpected mainstream media attention with our first initiative, the Rolling Jubilee, through which we have now bought and abolished nearly \$32 million of medical and student loan debt on the secondary debt market for mere pennies on the dollar.

But these tactics were only preliminary— attempts to undermine two of the weapons in creditors' arsenals: obscurantism and promissory moralism. When, via the Rolling Jubilee, we chanced upon a portfolio of private student debt from what was then one of the biggest chains of for-profit colleges in the country, Corinthian Colleges Inc., we knew we had found an opportunity to see if a confrontational form of debtor organizing could work.

Higher education offers both an exemplary case study of financialization and fertile ground for contesting that process. During the administration of Governor Reagan in California, states and the federal government began dramatically defunding both public and private universities. That process continued through the 2008 financial crisis and beyond. Early on, defunding was partly a right-wing attack on the institutions that nurtured 1960s radicalism. More recently, it has become a bipartisan class politics and a hallmark of neoliberalism.

While lamenting state cuts to higher education, college administrators have used

the funding crisis to take on debt from Wall Street, frequently using tuition as collateral. This allows colleges to fund projects that have nothing to do with education, such as the construction of lavish stadiums and investments in real estate ventures. In league with Wall Street, the schools promise to pay off this debt by hiking tuition, forcing students further into the red.

In addition to turning ostensibly public universities into profit centers for the financial industry, student indebtedness has disastrous socio-cultural effects. Debt forces people to live lives focused on getting out of debt, rather than defining themselves or pursuing their curiosity and passion. Debt, again, becomes a successful disciplinary technique, eliminating life paths that don't produce for capital.

For-profit colleges take debt-financed higher education to its extreme. Their business model is to attract as many students disenfranchised by the mainstream educational system as possible, compelling them to mortgage their futures in return for subprime educations while funneling federal student loan money to executives and shareholders.

GETTING ORGANIZED

For-profit schools are notorious for running afoul of the law. Corinthian Colleges Inc., once the nation's largest for-profit educational chain, was no exception. The company has been ac-

Higher education offers both an exemplary case study of financialization and fertile ground for contesting that process.



cused of fraud and predatory lending by everyone from Attorneys General to the CFPB, gaming the federal student loan system to the tune of \$1.4 billion in federal grant and loan dollars in 2010 alone, more than the ten University of California campuses combined for that same year.

As Corinthian's many scandals grew increasingly public in the summer of 2014, a small group of former students had already begun to organize. Collaborating with these students, and enrolling technology experts and lawyers daring enough to take us seriously, we began to work closely with a group of 15 former Corinthian students who were ready to publicly declare their refusal to make any more payments on their federal student loans.

To broaden the reach of this action to all current and former Corinthian students, including those who would choose not to join the strike, we also put together an online legal tool (via what was then a little-known provision in the Higher Education Act known as Defense to Repayment) that allowed students to challenge their debts with the Department of Education.

In February of 2015, after an intensive retreat with the strikers that included legal advice, story sharing, and media training, the Corinthian 15 went public with their history-making strike. Requests to join the strike poured in from current and former Corinthian students across the country.

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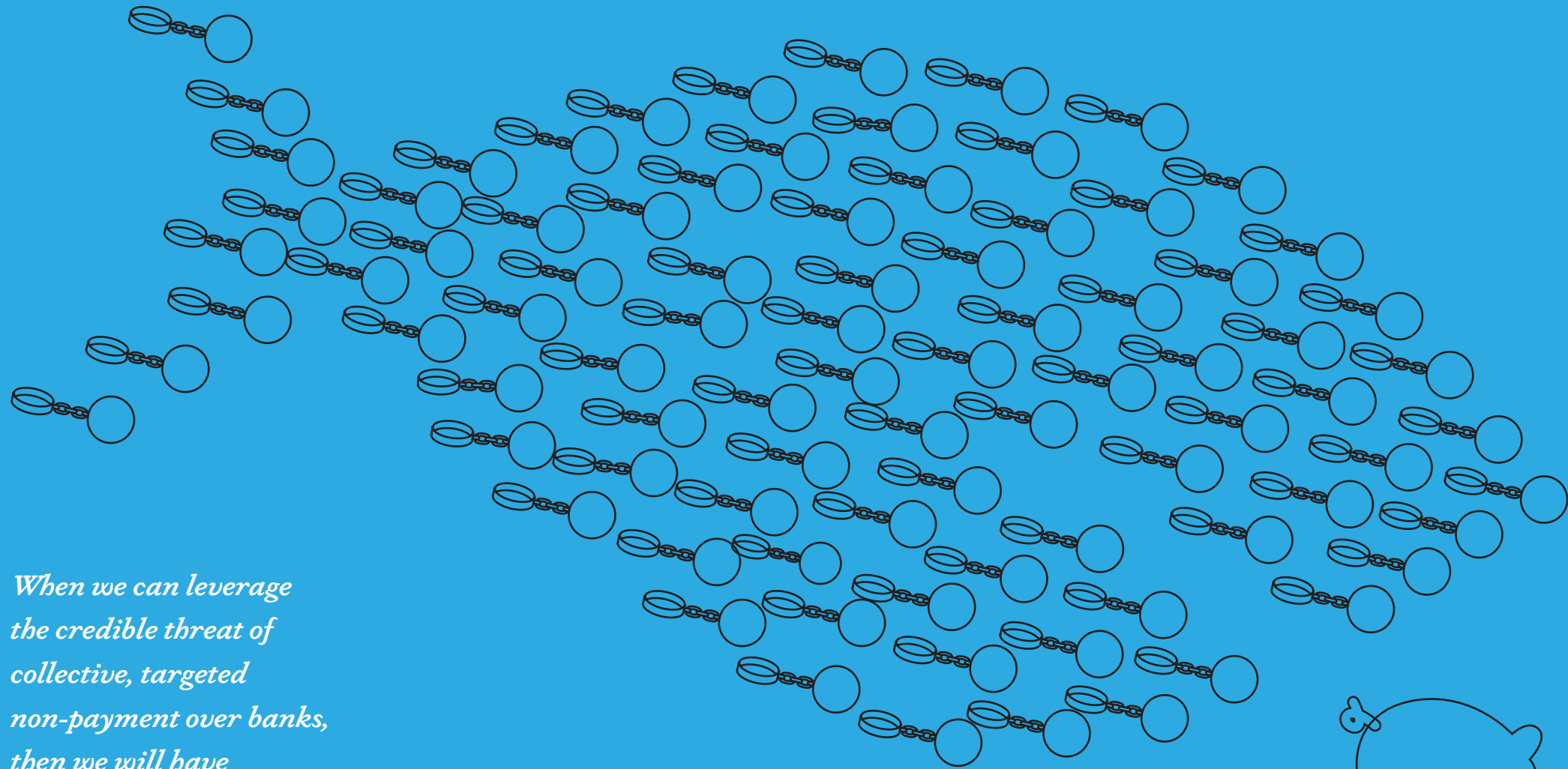
Organizing debtors is complex, and the barriers to organizing debtors' unions are high. There are no shared factory floors. People in debt to the same institution are often geographically remote and disconnected from one another.

Rather than merely mark down all of the thousands who wanted to join, we made sure that each potential striker understood the potential consequences of their act—a trashed credit score, wage garnishment, tax return garnishment, social security garnishment—phone call by phone call. Soon the strike had grown to 200 students, and their demand for debt cancellation had been endorsed by politicians and labor unions alike.

With the Corinthian 200 as our pilot union, we have begun to expand outward to other for-profit colleges working on the same model, including ITT Tech and Art Institutes. Organizing debtors is complex, and the barriers to organizing debtors' unions are high. There are no shared

factory floors. People in debt to the same institution are often geographically remote and disconnected from one another.

Many debtors don't know who profits when they pay their debts, or who stands to lose if they don't. Debtors struggle to distinguish originators, aggregators, guarantors, and servicers. For instance, most student debtors think they have Sallie Mae loans because Sallie Mae is their servicer. But many are actually in debt to Citibank, Chase, Deutsche or the Department of Education. And of course, once our student loans are pooled and tranced into asset-backed securities, their owners are dispersed further still.



*When we can leverage
the credible threat of
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non-payment over banks,
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To build collective power in these conditions, we know that we must work towards understanding Wall Street's role in mass indebtedness. That is to say that we must *politicize* the bond market.

As public institutions like the University of California effectively take orders from Moody's bond rating agency, we must ask: what is the effect on secondary markets of the Federal guarantee of student loans? Who is profiting from student loans? Who is profiting from unsustainable mortgage markets? Who is profiting from municipal debt that wreaks havoc on our communities?

When we can leverage the credible threat of collective, targeted non-payment over banks, when we can force the bond market to take losses, then we will have realized the power of debtors' unions.

In a way we find exciting, debt organizing and labor organizing have different targets, and thus different (and again, complementary) potential outcomes. Labor organizing targets the employer, workplace regulation and the means of distributing corporate surplus. The workplace's economic role in a worker's life is the payment of wages and benefits, so labor organizing naturally focuses on how we (don't) get paid.

Debt organizing, on the other hand, targets the creditor, the regulation of lending and the means of financing the good or service in question. Thus, debt organizing naturally focuses on how and by whom things we care about (education, health-care, housing) are paid for. This means that debtors' unions are not simply renegotiating debt but also forcing open questions that the era of finance seems to have foreclosed: how do we even pay for things in the first place?

BY NOT AN ALTERNATIVE, VIA FLICKR

The challenge is to build a politicized class of debtors who go beyond particular victories toward collective power writ large. One outcome of successful organizing could, of course, be a debt jubilee—perhaps better called a “fast bailout” in which bondholders take deep losses and the slate is wiped relatively clean. But we cannot stop there. A major debt jubilee would be a significant victory, but only if it was coupled with a deep, durable shift in the distribution of political and economic power.

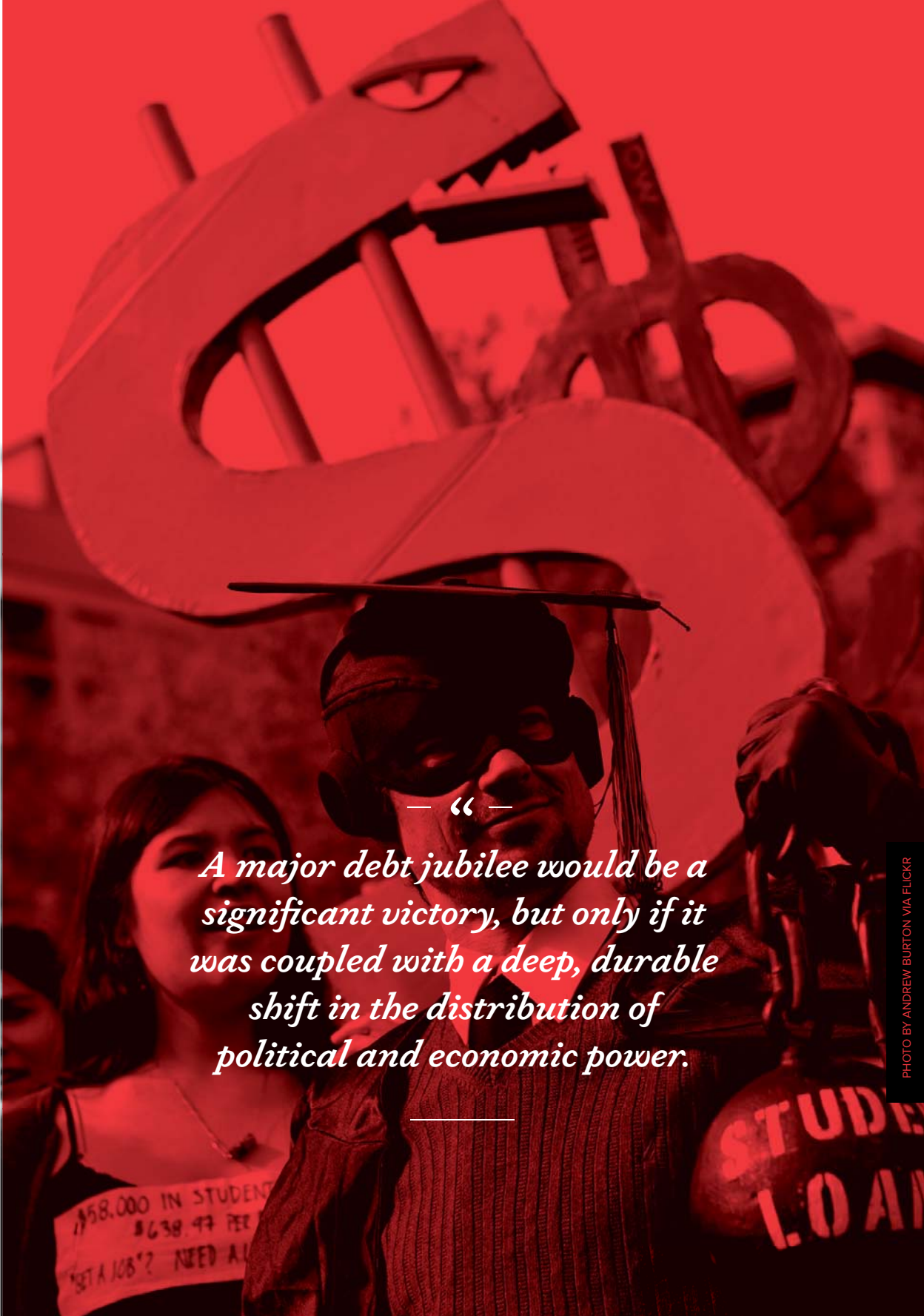
With this shift, both creditors and debtors would negotiate the terms of every contract, and, indeed, produce a world in which indebtedness is no longer required to finance life’s most basic needs. Were a jubilee to occur as a “benevolent gift” from creditors to debtors, without an accompanying power shift, crises of indebtedness would continue indefinitely because debtors would remain without a seat at the bargaining table. Moreover, if jubilee were to occur without a substantive reimagining of our economic system, and a collective reckoning with the way debt is and has been used as a mechanism of social control, we will have gained little.

What this new economic system might look like—the ways it would use socially productive forms of debt and credit, the ways it might enable a truly democratic society—remain to be seen. What we know is that debtors’ unions could give us a timely tactic through which to build collective power—and it is only through collective power that we will be able to answer these questions for the first time. ★

This piece was written by Laura Hanna, Alessondra Shackleton, Ann Larson, Hannah Appel and Luke Herrine.

DEBT COLLECTIVE

The Debt Collective leverages collective power by offering debtors a shared platform for organization, advocacy, and direct action. Find out more at debtcollective.org.



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A major debt jubilee would be a significant victory, but only if it was coupled with a deep, durable shift in the distribution of political and economic power.

PHOTO BY ANDREW BURTON VIA FLICKR

REBEL CITIES AND THE REVANCHIST ELITE

IF MUNICIPAL PLATFORMS ARE TO BECOME A STANDARD BEARER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY, AUTONOMOUS COUNTERPOWERS WILL HAVE TO BE DEVELOPED FROM BELOW.

Carlos Delclós

In a world flooded by news of fluctuating markets, stagnating economies, outraged multitudes and insurgent violence, it is as if anything can spark widespread revolt, whether it's a mall in Turkey, the price of a metro ticket in Brazil or a squat eviction in Barcelona.

The simultaneity of these events often obscures the voices in the crowds, reducing them to indistinguishable frequencies in a wall of noise. Yet, if we tune out of the broader context of global unrest and tune in to the local level at which protests are taking place, we can hear a common theme underlying them.

That theme is people seeing their ability to decide what kind of communities they want to live in perverted by faceless processes that are far removed from their reality and unaccountable to it. It is a situation Marco Revelli refers to as “the new disorder” of globalization, which refracts and diverts any attempt to trace a continuum over the uniform spatiality of the old world's great distances and national public spheres. Within this disorder, the city is once again emerging as the key terrain in the cartography of emancipatory struggle.

It was in a similar situation of social upheaval that Henri Lefèbvre defined the concept of “the right to the city.” In the wildcat general strikes and decentralized occupations of May 1968 in France, the sociologist saw a common demand for “a transformed and renewed access to urban life.” Years later, David Harvey revived Lefèbvre's idea, writing that:

“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.”

It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right, since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation.”

For Murray Bookchin, this collective power is embodied in the historical notion of the city, a notion that urbanization is ultimately at war with. In that war, the deliberative sociality of the politics practiced by the city is destroyed through the imposition of statecraft by a centralized power, subordinating the social organization of life to the technical logic of capital.

Revelli complements this idea when he claims that the massive infrastructures of highway, railroad, postal, electric, telegraph and telephone networks recode social space (i.e., the physical and non-physical spaces of human interaction) as a public space constructed and controlled within the borders of the nation state.

In both of these frameworks, public space is conceived by a sovereign power as the smooth space linking nodes in the global circuits of capital. The optimal state of that public space is one in which all of the value produced within its boundaries adheres to the norms that bind the capitalist order, while any alternative form of value is expelled.

Insofar as the nation state seeks to homogenize the diversity of its population under a single identity, it is the ideal institutional form for carrying out such a task. Yet the identity that sustains a nation state is a curious one: distant and abstracted from daily life in the local realities it seeks to encompass, it is ultimately local to nowhere. Herein lies the disruptive and emancipatory potential of a radical municipalist politics. Through

its proximity to the reality of city life, it confronts the statecraft of the sovereign.

CITIES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Since the *indignados* first burst onto the scene in 2011, Spain has been a laboratory for bottom-up organization and empowerment. The movement not only managed to set the political agenda by framing neoliberal austerity and structural adjustment as contrary to basic notions of democracy, but also generated countless neighborhood assemblies and amplified pre-existing assembly-based movements, such as the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (the PAH or Mortgage Victims' Platform).

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In Spain, 2014 saw the emergence of several radical municipalist electoral platforms that not only spoke the language of the post-2011 social movements, but also contained some of their most familiar faces.”

However, the ability of these movements to gather support from the vast majority of the country's population did not translate to much in the way of institutional change, despite their efforts to use all of the formal mechanisms at their disposal. As people grew increasingly frustrated with the indifference of the political class, many began to perceive an "institutional glass ceiling."

As a result, 2014 saw the emergence of several radical municipalist electoral platforms that not only spoke the language of the post-2011 social movements, but also contained some of their most familiar faces. Composed of prominent activists, community organizations and some political parties—but effectively dissolving the organizational logic of the latter—their goal was to activate citizen control through a bottom-up politics of proximity and direct democratic practices.

These "citizens' convergence" candidacies were remarkably successful in the 2015 municipal elections. In Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, Badalona, Santiago de Compostela, Iruña, A Coruña and the country's unemployment capital Cádiz, city governments are currently run by prominent social activists.

Perhaps the most notable example of the new municipal agenda is Barcelona En Comú, who spearheaded the wave of municipalist candidacies when Ada Colau, the popular anti-evictions activist, announced that she would enter elec-

toral politics if it entailed catalyzing a process of radical citizen participation.

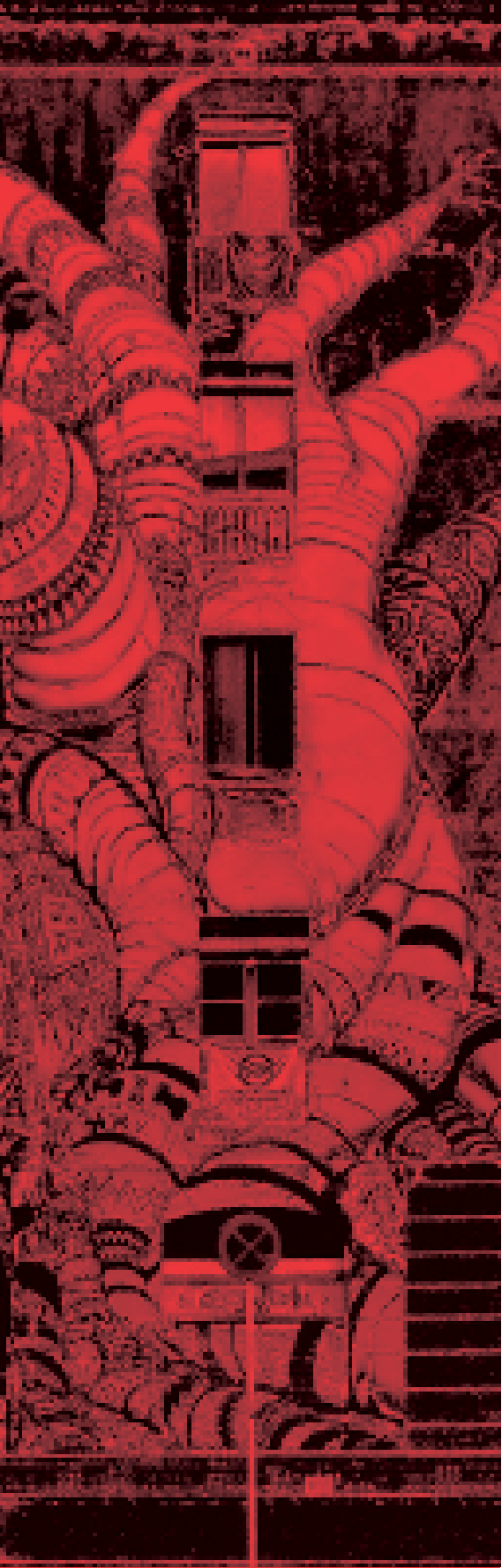
The first step was demonstrating popular support for the idea. Colau said she would run only if the platform (called Guanyem or "Let's Win" Barcelona at the time) gathered 30,000 signatures in support of the move, with half of those coming from residents of Barcelona and half coming from the rest of the Spanish state. The latter condition was intended to confirm the idea's resonance in cities beyond Barcelona.

In their first three months in office, Barcelona En Comú have already made a number of audacious moves with important political implications. The salaries of elected Barcelona En Comú officials were capped at €2,200 per month (just over three times times the minimum wage). For the first time, citizens were able to vote for individual district representatives. Monuments to notable figures with ties to the slave trade are being taken down and the King of Spain's likeness is set to be removed from city hall.

Steps are also being taken to pressure the regional and central governments to close the city's immigrant detention center, and a network of refugee cities is being established to confront Spain's scandalous refusal to let people in. Finally, the new city government has challenged the local hotel and tourism lobbies, whose power at the local level is difficult to overstate, by introducing a one-year ban on new tourist accom-

In their first three months in office, Barcelona En Comú have already made a number of audacious moves with important political implications.





modation as well as applying heavy fines to unlicensed tourist apartments and promoting their conversion into social housing.

Crucially, the new city governments are taking steps to avoid acting as mere islands of resistance in a hostile state. To mark their first one-hundred days in office, their mayors met in Barcelona for a two-day encounter and workshop called Cities for the Common Good: Winning by Sharing Experiences of Change. The event was attended by thousands and culminated in the decision to form a network that will not only work to resolve municipal issues but also confront other levels of government.

On the second day of the encounter, working groups were set up to tackle technical issues related to governing a municipality and opening up opportunities for systemic change, a necessary step given that the vast majority of the new representatives have little to no experience in institutional politics. The major themes of these sessions included fomenting citizen participation, social innovation, transparency and accountability through public hearings, popular consultations and citizen initiatives.

Participatory budgets were another major goal expressed by the representatives. “We need to turn excitement and common sense into concrete, specific actions,” said the mayor of Coruña Xulio Ferreiro, who argued that the rebel mayors should be “the pole of a political vanguard” that projects “the municipal vision on a global scale.”

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Against the reaction of the city’s revanchist elite, socially marginalized groups have practically no collective voice.

AN UPHILL BATTLE

The goals espoused by the radical municipal governments in Spain are certainly ambitious. Their first one hundred days in office have been characterized by a promising pragmatic approach to implementing a bold policy program coupled with the occasional flamboyant gesture, like José María ‘Kichi’ González replacing a painting of the King of Spain in the mayor’s office with one of Fermín Salvochea, the nineteenth-century anarchist mayor of Cádiz.

But the challenges facing city governments are many. Again, the case of Barcelona En Comú is illustrative. Less than a week after elections, the

upper ranks of the city police handed in their resignation. They were upset that one of the new city government’s main representatives is Jaume Asens, a prominent human rights lawyer who has helped prosecute Catalonia’s biggest corruption scandals, uncovered cases of torture by city police and frequently defended squatters, sex workers, anarchists, participants in the Gaza freedom flotilla and Guantanamo prisoners.

As a political move, it was remarkably similar to the New York police union’s actions against Mayor Bill De Blasio, whose relatively mild remarks regar-

ding the murder of Eric Garner were less flattering than what police have become accustomed to hearing from elected officials.

Moreover, they are also facing an intensely hostile media landscape dominated by media groups who clearly side with the establishment. The most widely read newspaper in Barcelona is the conservative daily *La Vanguardia*, which belongs to Spain's oldest media holding, the Grupo Godó. Primarily controlled by the family of the Count of Godó, the group also owns a tremendous portion of the Catalan television channels and radio stations.

The rest of the city's media landscape is distributed among the established Spanish media groups. Meanwhile, independent media outlets have small audiences fragmented by diverging opinions on the new representatives' decision to enter institutional politics.

Finally like most of the radical municipal platforms, Barcelona En Comú are currently governing the city from a minority position, meaning that many of their decisions must be approved by the other parties in order to be implemented. Though the radical left pro-independence Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP) is ostensibly an ally, they do not hold enough seats to make a majority. Thus, any decisions must count with the support of at least one establishment party.

All of these disadvantages were on dis-

play during a revealing dispute that took place during the summer of 2015. In the weeks following the new government's inauguration, Barcelona's main commercial and touristic areas saw an increasing presence of African street vendors, specifically in parts of the city where they were previously less visible. It is unclear whether this increase was simply due to a higher number of tourists (their main clientele) or if, as some street vendors have claimed, city police told them to sell in these areas.

Over the following weeks, the Grupo Godó ran daily reports portraying the situation as the result of a chaotic transfer of power. This was not the first time they had done this. The last time a left-wing coalition governed Barcelona, *La Vanguardia* ran a series of front-page stories depicting street vendors, prostitutes, homeless people and squatters as a problem of social hygiene and urban and moral decay.

Their narrative was a paradigmatic example of what the geographer Neil Smith refers to as "the revanchist city," a vengeful reaction of elites against the supposed "theft" of the city, characterized by "a desperate defense of a challenged phalanx of privileges, cloaked in the populist language of civic morality, family values and neighbourhood security."

Against this reaction, socially marginalized groups have practically no collective voice. To defend their interests,

they are forced to delegate political action and rely primarily on the protests and public statements of activists and NGOs, who are often distant from the social realities of the populations targeted by social cleansing.

Further complicating the situation, the lack of contact and enormous gap between the realities experienced by African street vendors and average citizens has allowed insidious myths to take root in society and proliferate unchallenged. The most pernicious of these is the idea that street vending networks are controlled by so-called "mafias," a notion that is frequently parroted in the media based purely on anecdotal claims. Coupled with their lack of self-representation, this makes it especially difficult for the street vendors and similarly marginalized groups to advance a counter-hegemonic narrative concerning their work, much less engage in meaningful collective bargaining.

Nonetheless, Barcelona En Comú responded to the conflict with a systematic effort to look for a "social response" to the problems faced by street vendors, as opposed to a "police response" to the problem of public order described by the media and the police. They convened a negotiating table that brought together city police, social organizations, activists, NGOs and street vendors to look for a just solution. It was the first time street vendors were recognized as legitimate interlocutors by the public administration. Their ef-

forts, however, were mostly drowned out by the hostile rhetoric of the establishment press.

When no agreement was reached at the negotiating table, the conflict dragged on. Then on August 11, a Senegalese street vendor named Mor Sylla died under questionable circumstances during a police operation in Salou. The conflict escalated dramatically and a riot broke out in the center of the touristic town.

Instead of responding to the tense social climate this generated by relaxing pressure on street vendors, Barcelona police continued to act aggressively, resulting in several clashes. Finally, when a scuffle broke out in a central metro station and some vendors responded by throwing rocks at the police, four police were injured, as well as four vendors and one bystander. Disappointingly, Barcelona En Comú responded by deploying riot police in the city center to dissuade the vendors from gathering in the areas where they had been working.

THE POWER OF SELF-REPRESENTATION

The success of the revanchist campaign against African street vendors outlines the real distribution of power in a major city. With no majority, a hostile media landscape and a status quo in which the dominant social norms sustain an unjust social order, even a government made up



The success of the revanchist campaign against African street vendors outlines the real distribution of power in a major city like Barcelona.

of social activists with years of experience in bottom-up organizing and civil disobedience can be pushed to make decisions that reinforce the order they seek to subvert.

Perhaps most unsettling is the ability of the police to condition the political agenda. The potentially disastrous repercussions of allowing the police to impose its own ideology on governing institutions cannot be overstated.

If Barcelona is to become, as Barcelona En Comú state in their program, a “standard bearer of social justice and democracy,” this cannot be achieved by decree. Autonomous counterpowers must be developed to challenge dominant cultural frameworks and force the city government to advance the interests of its most marginalized residents.

In the revanchist city, these residents are overwhelmingly those whose poverty is criminalized: sex workers, street vendors, the homeless, street artists, small drug offenders, addicts and so on. There is a pressing need for autonomous platforms that allow the aforementioned collectives to represent themselves without having to delegate their collective voice to others. A broader movement for the right to the city could also be a step forward. However, it is also possible that such a movement would end up absorbing marginalized voices in an attempt to link them with middle-class interests.

Another critical challenge is the media landscape. Independent media have been

successful in periodically breaking important stories. But they have not been so successful in promoting a counter-hegemonic narrative beyond their limited audiences. Such a narrative, or series of narratives, will need a much stronger foothold in the media landscape if they are to produce and sustain a cultural shift.

Thankfully, promising initiatives are emerging in Barcelona. The first is a self-organized network that watches over the areas most favored by street vendors, filming their interactions with police to prevent abuse and challenge dubious police reports. The second is a coalition of neighborhood assemblies and local migrants' rights collectives that is working to amplify the voices of the street vendors themselves through self-organized local events in the city center.

Independent media have been working with these platforms, dismantling the mainstream media's toxic narratives through rigorous investigative journalism. They have also received the occasional bump from Barcelona En Comú's substantial presence on the social networks and seen their message echoed in city hall by both Barcelona En Comú and CUP.

It is easy to be discouraged by the uphill battle of the new municipalist platforms. But it is important to keep in mind that the current situation was unimaginable in Spain four years ago. Today, expectations are high—and it is a good time to be audacious. ★

CARLOS DELCLÓS



Carlos Delclós is a sociologist, researcher and editor for ROAR Magazine. His research interests include international migration, social stratification, fertility, urban sociology, social movements and cultural theory.

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BLACK LIVES MATTER

Ending Anti-Black State Violence

WHAT WE NEED IS NOT JUST REFORM, BUT A
FUNDAMENTAL TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURE,
POLICY AND INSTITUTIONS TO ADDRESS THE ROOT
CAUSES OF STRUCTURAL RACISM.

Opal Tometi

In 1992, the world witnessed African American Rodney King being brutally beaten by Los Angeles policemen. In 1999, Amadou Diallo, an unarmed Black immigrant from Guinea, was shot 19 times by five New York City policemen outside his apartment. Sean Bell was shot to death by NYPD in 2006 on the morning of his wedding. And just in 2014, Officer Darren Wilson murdered Mike Brown in broad daylight in the city of Ferguson, Missouri.

All these incidents sparked an uptick in activism against police brutality. It was not until the murder of Mike Brown, however, that people actually stayed in the streets. Because of the courage of the people in Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter emerged as a formidable counter-hegemonic political force.

AN IDEOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

However, #BlackLivesMatter began more than a year before the events in Ferguson. The movement started in response to the 2013 murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his murderer, the white Latino vigilante George Zimmerman. It was in July 2013 that Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and I created #BlackLivesMatter as a political intervention and mobilizing project, making use of social media and taking action on the ground.

We created #BlackLivesMatter in the midst of a profound sense of love, grief

and rage on both the personal level but also communally, knowing fully that the trauma that Black people and allies of conscience in this nation were experiencing could be debilitating or catalyzing. We introduced #BlackLivesMatter into the lexicon not merely as language, but as a much-needed ideological intervention in a society that has systematically disregarded Black bodies and treated them as disposable ever since they were kidnapped from Africa and violently enslaved throughout the Americas.

It was with this depth of understanding and as trained leftists that the three of us took to creating a project to address structural racism. We are out to expose the fact that police brutality and extrajudicial killings are not outlier activities but part of a systematic attempt to keep Black people subjugated and bound.

It was as though our entire Black society was attempting to make sense of how, despite a mountain of evidence, a vigilante could stalk and murder Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, and still be let off. And so we embarked on a grand political project that, with the use of technology, we hoped would be visceral, because undoubtedly millions of people across the world had felt this same grief and outrage.

Many Black youth-led organizations emerged during this same period. So when approximately a year later, 18-year-old Mike Brown was gunned down by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, representatives from Dream Defenders,

We are out to expose the fact that police brutality and extrajudicial killings are not outlier activities but part of a systematic attempt to keep Black people subjugated and bound.



Black Youth Project, Millions Hoodies and #BlackLivesMatter were quickly dispatched to support the people and the protests in Ferguson. In particular, we responded to the retaliation that the courageous people of Ferguson were experiencing based on their righteous dissent.

A FORMIDABLE DECENTRALIZED NETWORK

It was in this period that #BlackLivesMatter emerged as a national and international rallying cry, as nearly 500 Black people mobilized to Ferguson at the urging of BLM leaders Darnell Moore, Monica Dennis and Patrisse Cullors. As a result of that convergence of Black people, activists returned home and formed dozens of chapters across the nation. In a short period of time, BLM emerged as not only a political platform and ideological intervention, but as a formidable decentralized network of chapters.

#BlackLivesMatter emerged as not only a political platform and ideological intervention, but as a formidable decentralized network of chapters.

Prior to Ferguson, the human rights organization Malcolm X Grassroots Movement had researched and reported the reality: every 28 hours a Black person is killed by a police officer, security guard or vigilante in the US. To be clear, this is not just happening to Black men in the US, but also to Black women and girls. We saw the video footage of a young Black woman, Tasha McKenna, being beaten, tased and suffocated by several corrections officers. And questions still linger about the death of Sandra Bland, a young Black woman who allegedly committed suicide in jail after a routine traffic stop.

These tragic stories have enraged millions of people in our nation and illustrated the profound need to shut down a system that relies on the criminalization of Black bodies. They make visible the ways in which Black lives are being brutalized in the material world, on a structural level.

THE NEO-CONSERVATIVE AGENDA KILLS

The levels of violence Black people are experiencing the US is a result of a neo-conservative political and economic agenda that is directly connected to efforts to systematically undermine the gains made by previous Black liberation struggles, particular the Civil Rights Movement.

During the 1980s, a neo-conservative agenda emerged under the leadership of Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr. This agenda was not strictly partisan. Other presidents, like Democrat Bill Clinton, further enshrined laws and policies that would systematically devastate Black communities. The War on Drugs, for example, embraced by successive Republican and Democratic presidents and Congresspeople, led to a legalized all-out assault on Black people.

The Broken Windows Theory was one of the outgrowths of the War on Drugs. It was originated by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in the 1980s and introduced at a time when the neo-conservative agenda was attempting to find its footing. The current NYPD Commissioner William Bratton was the first to implement the Broken Windows Theory in the 1980s in Boston, Massachusetts. Bratton concluded that cracking down on “disorder” or “petty crime” would prevent “violent crime”. And “pre-emptive” measures like racial profiling were a key feature of the implementations of the Broken Windows Theory.

This theory turns the relationship between poverty and crime on its head. Poverty causes crime; crime does not cause poverty. Broken Window policing continues to result in the criminalization of poverty, while being touted as a landmark of crime reduction. Such policies have led to high rates of disproportionate arrest, fines, incarceration and mistreatment of Black people at the hands of police, such as in the case of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old resident of Baltimore, Maryland who was detained for running from the police and who subsequently died from injuries he sustained at the hands of six police officers

Under the guise of improving the “quality of life”, hyper-policing of low-income neighborhoods has become a mainstay, coupled with the criminalization of non-violent acts of “disorder” such as jaywalking, having your feet up on a subway bench, or selling loose cigarettes. Very similar to Jim Crow laws in the US South, these policies identify actions to classify Black people as criminal, using the underlying racist ideology that Black people must be controlled with brute force. Thus, racialization and the criminalization of poverty are inextricably linked.

Black people, of course, have become the primary targets in every phase of the criminal justice system from arrest to prosecution, sentencing to administration of the death penalty. Only armed with the color of their skin, the murders of Rekiya Boyd, Islan Nettles, Aiyana Stanley Jones and Tamir Rice are consequently justified under the realities of structural anti-Black racism.



TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MOVEMENT-BUILDING

Despite the alarming rates of murder and brutality against Black people, the public outcry, mass mobilizations and extensive advocacy have led to only trivial reforms. Orwellian solutions such as body cameras, addendums to police training, the introduction of “community policing” strategies and the recruitment of more personnel have been the preferred response of lawmakers.

Sadly, all of these proposals and tactics fail to address the root cause of the violence that social justice advocates are working tirelessly to upend, and often offer so-called solutions that further entrench the ideas that policing and control are the answer to systemic human rights violations.

Though graphic videos of intense confrontations between riot gear-clad police and unarmed civilians have captured the most attention, police killings are not the only concern of Black organizers and activists. Blacks in the US are acutely aware that we are not a monolith, nor is the movement. And so an expansion of the framing of state violence has been key to understanding the ways in which diverse Black bodies are all vulnerable to oppression and explicit forms of violence from government forces and institutions.

Creating spaces that embrace diverse Black bodies is key to this movement period. In order to do this, an embodied

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Lawmakers’ proposals and tactics fail to address the root cause of the violence that social justice advocates are working tirelessly to upend.

practice that has emerged in the #BlackLivesMatter network is that of prioritizing the needs of those most marginalized. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter network has made the prioritization of Black trans- and cis-gendered women central to their political ideology and programmatic work, as these communities are often targeted by the state and experience interpersonal violence that must be stopped.

Other Black-led formations like the Black Alliance for Just Immigration and Black Immigration Network have been engaged in protecting Black undocumented immigrants from deportations, which happen in disproportionately high numbers due to racial and religious

profiling. These vulnerable and marginalized populations are often not seen as the typical Black persons targeted for violence, however, they are – and they arguably have always been.

BEYOND THE POLITICS OF “RESPECTABILITY”

The emerging movement is characterized by its disavowal of respectability politics that frames “Black issues” in a narrow, patriarchal frame centering on the aspiration to assimilate and obtain full citizenship for African-Americans. With great acknowledgement of the dramatic progress and gains made by the Civil Rights Movement and the

VESMATTER #BLACKLIVESMATTER #BLACKLIVESMATTER #BLACKLIVESMATTER



Black Power Movement, many unrecognized struggles were pushed by the way-side. A new politics is emerging among strategists that makes these marginalized people within Black communities and their issues of main importance in order to achieve improvements that will work for all.

As for its predecessors, taking non-violent direct action is a must for the current movement. Communities are tired of the status quo and know that in order to make visible the grievances of Black community members, these tactics are a necessity. From the shutting down of highways, train stations and sites of commerce, to rallies and actions in strategic places, multiracial, intergenerational people have been convening to interrupt the system and declare that there will be no business as usual until Black lives matter.

What is needed is not merely reform, but the fundamental transformation of culture, policy and institutions to address the root causes of structural racism. Campaigns such as Reparations for Torture Victim survivors in Chicago and Safety Beyond Policing in New

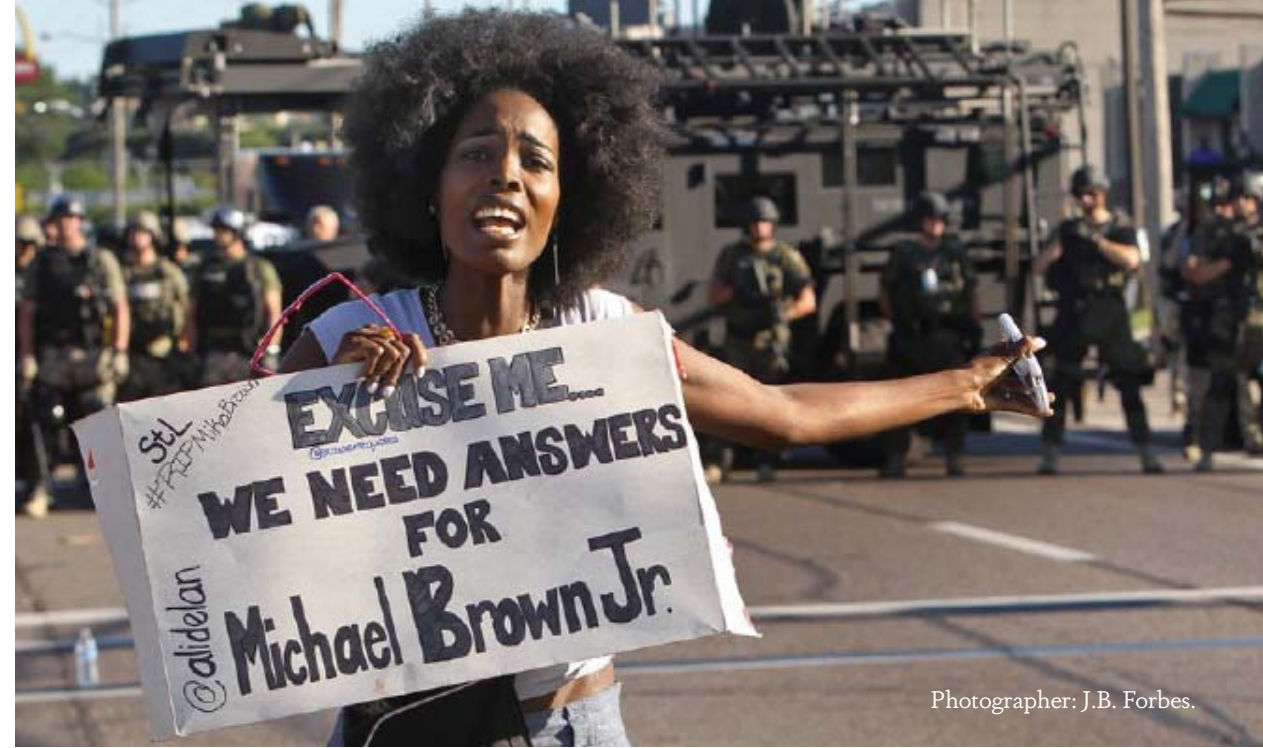
York are examples of visionary initiatives that make demands that would lead to the reconstituting of the public safety net.

There must be a divestment from the oppressive, punitive systems of policing and incarceration and an investment of resources to benefit those who need it most, those who have been systematically disenfranchised. Also important is establishing reparatory justice for those who are victims of brutality and the surviving family members of those who have been murdered.

Linking these efforts to campaigns that are pushing back against international trade

agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership are the new ways that Black communities are grasping at the root, like dear sister former-Black Panther Assata Shakur admonished members of our movements to do. And in focusing on root causes, the movement is necessarily raising real questions about the nature global capitalism and the displacement and criminalization that are key features of it.

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What is needed is not merely reform, but the fundamental transformation of culture, policy and institutions to address the root causes of structural racism.”



Photographer: J.B. Forbes.

TRANSNATIONAL COMMITMENTS TO UPEND GLOBAL CAPITALISM

Connecting to the international community is key to US-based Blacks winning some semblance of justice in the face of structural racism. However, any gains in this field will be short-lived if there is only one-sided solidarity. The reality is that Black communities across the globe have always connected for mutual support, and the beginnings of a similar practice are emerging today.

Communities from Kenya, Venezuela, Germany, South Africa, Brazil, Israel, Palestine and other countries have been demonstrating solidarity, and US-based activists have reciprocated. Building Black power across continents and nations is critical. Formations such as the Pan African Network in Defense of Migrant Rights, an Africa-wide network based in Kenya, #BlackLivesMatter and its chapters founded outside of the US, the European Network for People of African Descent and others, help materialize the possibility of a global movement to challenge neoliberalism and global financial institutions.

Black people in other regions like Europe and the Caribbean experience the systematic devaluation of Black life as well. Remnants of colonialism reinforce modern discriminatory practices, often coupled with practices exported from the US. From mass deportations to mass deaths in the Mediterranean Sea caused by Western nations that continue to prey on African countries and other economically depressed nations, forcing them into oppressive trade policies that cause families to make difficult decisions to migrate, it is imperative that our movements continue to take a visible stand against the injustice and decry abuse whenever governments put the blame on refugee and migrant populations.

Key flashpoints in history have often led to a reinvigoration of social movements, but the very nature of social movements is that the scope of work is beyond that of a singular issue. As Caribbean-American poet Audre Lorde aptly stated, “there is no such thing as a single issue struggle, as we do not live single issue lives.”

The hallmark of this movement is that there is not one issue. The movement is for racial justice that goes beyond one geographic community and one particular Black person. The struggle will always be for democratic societies that work for all of us. Truly, Black people and other marginalized communities have always struggled for transformational justice believing that another world is possible. But it is clear we will not get there until all Black lives matter. ★

OPAL TOMETI



Opal Tometi is a New York-based Nigerian-American writer, strategist and community organizer. She is a co-founder of #BlackLivesMatter and the Executive Director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), the only national immigrant rights organization for Black people in the United States.



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As Caribbean-American poet Audre Lorde aptly stated, “there is no such thing as a single issue struggle, as we do not live single issue lives.”

DEFENDING THE COMMONS

After the Water War

Oscar Olivera

WATER WAR MURAL IN COCHABAMBA BY MONA CARON

COCHABAMBA
TAUGHT US THAT THE
REAL ISSUE IS NOT
THE CAPTURE OF
STATE POWER, BUT
THE CREATION OF
NEW PATHWAYS FROM
THE GRASSROOTS UP.

In Latin America, the struggle for water as a common good is present in almost all environmental conflicts—sparked by extractive, industrial, highway and energy projects—but also forms part of the agenda of urban and labor movements rallying against privatization, shortages, sanitation problems, and so on.

This does not come as a surprise, since water—as a common good and as a human right—is an essential part of our lifeworld, of how we relate to the planet and to each other. Water to be consumed and managed by humans; water for the reproduction of life; water as a living entity that flows and evolves; water as a sacred being or territory: all the above are perceptions radically opposed to water as a commodity, to water as a “resource” or financial asset.

THE COCHABAMBA WATER WAR

Water privatization signifies not only the expropriation of a public good, but also the destruction of collectively managed community water systems. The consequences of this destruction extend far beyond the loss of physical property: the aim of these actions is the dissolution of people's power that was constructed around these organizations. This was one of the underlying motives that sparked the Cochabamba Water War in Bolivia in 2000.

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The historic Cochabamba Water War became a major point of reference for many movements in South America and around the world; movements that often achieved great victories against privatization.

Following a rise of more than 200 percent in tariffs, the expropriation of the self-managed water systems and the stripping away of their powers of deliberation and decision,

various social, labor, peasant and neighborhood organizations began to mobilize. After days of protest and coordination between the different organizations in struggle, the Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Water and Life (*Coordinadora por la defensa del agua y la vida*) was formed.

The Coordinadora was an innovative kind of organization at that time, as it broke with the logic of trade unionism (a current that is hierarchical and even authoritarian to a certain extent), to establish processes of decision-making based on direct democracy. Through councils and assemblies, the Coordinadora achieved a broad social legitimacy at all levels—even among the upper and middle classes—as it did not recognize any leaders or chiefs; it was constructed as a space with which everyone could identify.

In the end, popular resistance proved stronger than the government's resolve, so the latter had no choice but to terminate the contracts with the multinational water company Bechtel and prepare for the return of water to public hands. This historic event became a major point of reference for many movements in South America and around the world; movements that often achieved great victories against privatization. Prominent examples include Uruguay, Italy and France.

A WAVE OF RESISTANCE AGAINST NEOLIBERALISM

However, this is not the end of the story, as every popular revolt creates a “before” and an “after.” In the case of Cochabamba, we

can say that “we won the war but we lost the water.” Despite the great efforts of the Coordinadora to create a social, self-managed and truly democratic water company, the labyrinth of bureaucracy and the state institutions did not allow this to take place.

In the case of Cochabamba, we can say that “we won the war but we lost the water.” The water service became a public company again, just as inefficient and corrupt as it had always been.

The Municipal Drinking Water and Sewage Service, SEMAPA, became a public company again, just as inefficient and mired in corruption as it had always been. The autonomous water systems kept control of their water sources, without any support or public funding, only maintained through self-management. However, problems of sewage treatment, water quality and planning persisted.

Nevertheless, the war was won, and with it people's dignity and capacity to resist were reclaimed. Following the Water War, Bolivia was never the same; a wave of resistance against the neoliberal policies of dispossession spread throughout the country. Protests became an everyday phenomenon and successive governments felt the tide of popular unrest closing in on them.

A decisive year was 2003, when the Gas War broke out and social movements fought for reclaiming this resource from the hands of rapacious transnational corporations. The state was brought to its knees after a conflict that included nationwide road-blocks and hunger strikes, which left 80 protesters dead and the government in a state of collapse. In the end, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada was forced to flee the country. A new era had started for Bolivia.

Several years later, Evo Morales, a *cocalero* leader of indigenous descent, was elected president; soon after, a Constituent Assembly was convened to refound the country. This had been one of the objectives of the Coordinadora since the very start.



LATIN AMERICA'S PROGRESSIVE GOVERNMENTS

In the past decade, Latin America has experienced an era of hegemonic instability, with each country experiencing its own particular processes and each local revolt marked by its own distinguishing features.

In Bolivia and Ecuador, in particular, there was a discursive shift regarding the state and its relationship with society. These changes were the result of uninterrupted efforts of organization, resistance and mobilization of the popular classes during nearly 20 years of neoliberal imposition. It was they who made possible the emergence of “progressive” governments in their countries. In this context, the movements in defense of water achieved important legal victories, which had considerable—yet insufficient and limited—effects on society.

The continent’s progressive governments have achieved a certain economic stability through nationalizations, amendments to contracts with transnational corporations, strict control on government spending and good relationships with the financial institutions as well as the industrial and agro-industrial sectors.

On the other hand, a new political panorama has emerged, which utilizes a discourse and a set of symbols previously relegated to the periphery of the political center. Popular demands such as the recognition of indigenous rights, the na-

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Across Latin America, new imaginaries were born that challenge neoliberalism, colonialism and the cultural hegemony of the West—new discursive structures that have transformed the very way of doing politics.

tionalization of natural resources, the protection of Mother Earth, the self-determination of peoples or the promotion of *buen vivir* have been put on the political agenda.

At the same time, new imaginaries were born that challenge neoliberalism, colonialism and the cultural hegemony of the West; interculturalism, plurinationalism and decolonization are only a few of them. This new discursive structure has transformed the very way of doing politics.

In these contexts, new legal panoramas were created and constitutional reforms or new constitutions came into effect. These new legal frameworks expanded

rights and freedoms while protecting national economies and establishing welfare measures, benefits, and so on. This was made possible by reinstating public control of strategic enterprises like oil, mining, electricity, telecommunications and water.

CHANGE THE WORLD BY TAKING POWER?

But despite these changes at the political and economic level, a product of years of social struggles and popular organization, it has not yet been possible to create—and much less implement—alternatives to the capitalist world-system. Indeed, the most radical governments of South America

keep implementing policies that favor the hegemonic political powers and go against the interests of the population. But what are the limitations of the transformations that arise from the heart of the political center—in other words, from the state?

Here are some threads of analysis:

- ★ Systematic violation of the new social agreements established after the accession of the progressive governments. Plain and simple, governments are very skilled at taking away with one hand what they give with the other.
- ★ The move from private plunder to public plunder. In Bolivia, for example, the constitution recognizes water as a public good, stipulating its protection as an obligation of the state. As a result, laws that seek to expropriate the independent self-managed water systems are elaborated. In other words, there is a risk of reducing the ability of people to self-manage their needs.
- ★ The institutional framework does not allow for transformative change. Despite all the progress that we may have experienced on issues related to water, especially in reclaiming water as a “public” good, there is a gap between the expectations of the social movements and reality.

Practical changes that stem from an emancipatory perspective from below have crashed against an institutional framework inherited from neoliberalism, which aims to obstruct, confound and reorient social transformation. The pace of change of the institutions is a far cry from the pace of the people in struggle.

MOVEMENTS “IN” OR “AGAINST” POWER?

Some of the problems encountered by “democratic revolutions” such as those of Ecuador and Bolivia include the absence of a “legal framework” to implement social change, the outright and systematic violation of laws, and legislation that is slow to be approved,

Despite all the changes at the political and economic level, it has not yet been possible to create alternatives to the capitalist world-system.



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The problems, failures and shortcomings of the progressive governments should serve as a history lesson in our quest for constructing “other possible worlds.”

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that remains stagnant or that is negotiated behind society's back.

A perverted and callous state bureaucracy has aided in the generalization of a sense of frustration: expectations, which run too high according to some, always end up clashing with reality. In effect, institutional processes and their agents (deputies, senators, government officials) tend once more to replace the people in decision-making. All administrations end up, sooner or later, adopting this logic—with varying degrees of benefits for the population—and looking for ways to better connect with the global marketplace.

In fact, in Bolivia, social movements that at first directly influenced government policies have been largely co-opted and converted into mouthpieces of the official discourse, that is, mere instruments of legitimation of public policies which, it should be noted, are not necessarily beneficial to the population. In addition, social groups that rejected playing a part in this clientelist and corporatist relationship have now fallen prey to constant political harassment and intimidation.

At this point we have to point out that the problems, failures and shortcomings of the progressive governments should serve as a history lesson in our quest for constructing “other possible worlds.” The problems and contradictions do not only derive from bad decisions or betrayal of the revolutionary aims; rather, they are related to the very nature of the state apparatus as such.

In that sense, it is important to reflect on whether social movements can be “in power” or just “against power.”

Unfortunately, it is a fact that—just as nature does not permit places without life (we find microorganisms even in the harshest climates)—politics does not permit political power vacuums. For instance, when the 15-M movement in Spain called for electoral

abstention in Spain, it unwillingly contributed to the accession of Rajoy's proto-fascist right to power. We would be better off following what the Guarani people have proposed: “I prefer to *choose* my enemy.”

At the same time, we should stress the importance of self-management, of social control, of the creation of strategies that

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point towards the “social re-appropriation of what is public.”

THE LIMITS OF NEO-EXTRACTIVISM

In general, the discourse of South America's “left-wing” governments regarding the protection of Pachamama (Mother Earth) is in crisis, since they have not been able to implement initiatives that could explore alternative paths to the current situation, at least not in the short or medium term.

Development, and the related doctrine of neo-extractivism, represent for the moment the only path to follow. Under this scenario, attacks on Pachamama and indigenous peoples are justified as a sacrifice “for the benefit of the majority,” or even as a basis for achieving a “good life.”

On the other hand, a renewed “national consciousness,” promoted through state discourse in these countries, becomes an instrument for the legitimation of neo-extractivism, with the state taking a central role in its management, eventually creating new forms of wealth redistribution. Social programs, such as subsidies and benefits supported by the extractive activity, thus become a mechanism for reducing poverty and legitimating the state.

In short, the social-ecological consequences of this economic model are recognized, however, the belief that this is

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***Neo-extractivism may
be a feast today, yet
bring famine and
bondage tomorrow.***”

just a transitory stage until the consolidation of better living conditions prevails. This inevitably generates questions about the extent to which we can consider this model of development as a step towards better ways of life when it forms the basis of new institutional and social structures, in addition to a new relationship between state and society.

Neo-extractivism may be a feast today, yet bring famine and bondage tomorrow.

LESSONS FROM COCHABAMBA

The Water War has provided us with valuable lessons that become even more important in the present-day reality of Latin America. Preserving the independence of movements, creating ties between them and reclaiming politics are but some of them.

The social movements that fight in defense of water and life must maintain, at all costs, their autonomy from parties and their political independence. The reason is that the real issue is not the capture of

state power but the creation of new pathways from the grassroots up.

The state and the market economy exist, and they are not likely to disappear despite our best hopes and actions to the contrary; therefore, liberal democracy can run its course, electing bad rulers or better ones—this should not be a central issue in the agenda of social movements. An important issue, perhaps, but not a central one.

Our struggle is to consolidate our autonomy, to build tight-knit relations of solidarity, friendship and constant reflection, to come together in defense against the attacks of transnational capital and the state as its accomplice, to establish new ways of living that are not mediated by capital and to defend the existing ones—such as those bequeathed to us by our indigenous grandmothers and grandfathers. The social movements organize to change the world from the bottom up.

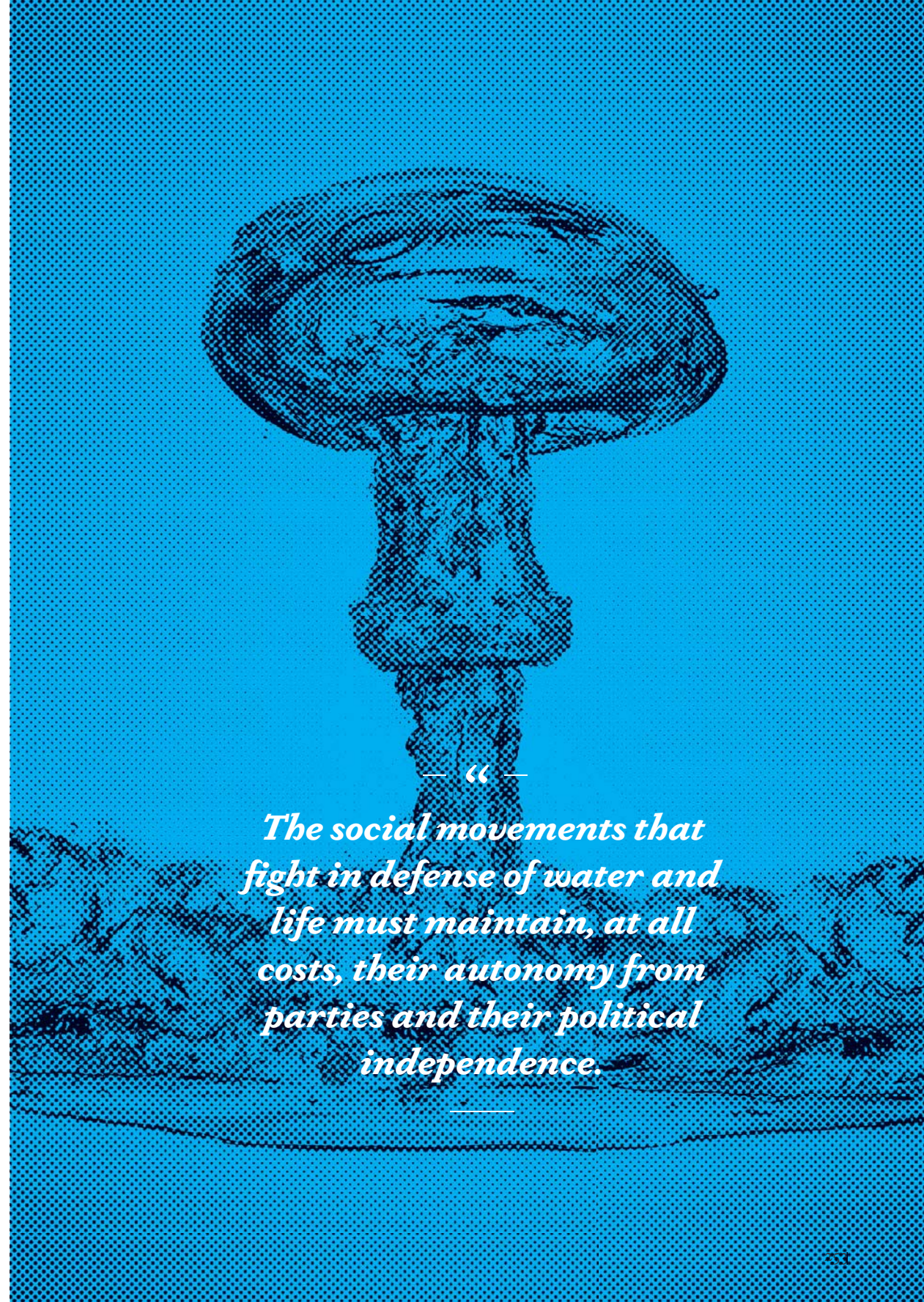
Politics resides in action, in everyday life, not in some institution. Who has the right to decide on our present and on the fate of the population, on the commons, on work, on living conditions? There can be only one answer to this question: the common people. We decide and we do, we discuss and we act. It is not enough to simply resist. We need to exist again, to build here and now the world in which we want to live tomorrow. ★

Translated from the Spanish by Theodoros Karyotis.

OSCAR OLIVERA



Oscar Olivera was one of the main leaders of the protesters against the water privatization in Bolivia, and subsequently became one of the main leaders of the protests in the Bolivian gas conflict. He was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2001.



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The social movements that fight in defense of water and life must maintain, at all costs, their autonomy from parties and their political independence.

Reopening the Revolutionary Question

BOOK REVIEW

THE INVISIBLE
COMMITTEE
PROPOSE TO
ACTUALIZE THE
POLITICAL
POTENTIAL OF
THE SQUARES BY
RECONSIDERING
REVOLUTION—
NOT AS AN
OBJECTIVE,
BUT AS
A PROCESS.

Seven years after publishing that paradoxical subversive bestseller that was *The Coming Insurrection*, the Invisible Committee's most recent book, entitled *To Our Friends*, starts by confirming that “the insurrections, finally, have arrived”: from the Arab Spring, 15-M and Syntagma Square to Occupy and Gezi Park.

From there it makes a wager: in the movements of the squares we could find early indications of a “civilizational mutation”—but one that still lacks its own language or compass, burdened by the weight of ideological legacies from the past and in the midst of great confusion.

1. EXPAND THE SQUARES

To Our Friends is a small event in the publishing world, not in the sense of being a sales or marketing success, but rather in the sense of being an anomaly in its form of writing and publishing. This is not a book by an author, another personal brand in a network of names, but comes signed by the fictitious denomination of a constellation of collectives and people who sustain that “the truth does not have an owner.”

This is not a book that arises simply from reading many other books, but also from a set of experiences, practices and struggles, that they consider important to think and tell to themselves. It is not a book that seeks to fuel a “sound of the season” or to convince anyone of anything, and therefore it is directed “to friends,” to those who in some way are already walking together even without knowing each other, proposing a series of signals, such as those indentations left by hikers for other lovers of long walks, with the difference that this path did not previously exist, but rather is made—collectively—by walking.

The starting point for the book are the potentialities and limitations of the movements of the squares—not understood as a scattered series of unconnected eruptions, but rather as a historical sequence of intertwined uprisings. These movements erupt and profoundly alter the contexts in which they operate, drowning legitimacies that seemed as solid as rock and redescaling reality. In the end, however, they seem to crash against the wall of macro-politics before entering into a gradual reflux, as happened in the cases of Occupy and Gezi.

It is here that the “hegemonic operation” appears, or can appear. Taking advantage of the rupture and the shift in common sense generated by the climate of the squares, it is about conquering public opinion, votes, and

institutional power, to force the limits of parliamentary democracy from within through a truly social democratic politics, as has happened with SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

Are there other options? Can we imagine a non-electoral or non-institutional expansion of the squares’ potential? Of course this question does not presup-

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Can we imagine a non-electoral or non-institutional expansion of the squares’ potential? The Invisible Committee propose their own alternative: to reopen the revolutionary question.”

pose a simple return to micro-projects, local struggles and the small in-group of the already-convicted. Between the revival of political verticalism and the temptation of nostalgia, how do we keep going—and go even further? If it is not hegemony we are aiming for, then what kind of politics can we imagine?

The Invisible Committee propose their own alternative: to reopen the revolutionary question. That is, to reframe the problem of the radical transformation of the existing; a project shut down by the disasters of twentieth-century authoritarian communism. To pursue a rupture with parliamentary democracy as the only possible framework and the emergence of a new form of life. To make the revolution, “not as an objective, but as a process.”

2. ETHICAL TRUTHS

The burning body of Mohamed Boauzizi in front of the Sidi Bouazid police station in Tunisia. The tears of Wael Ghönim during the televised interview after being liberated from secret detention by the Egyptian police. The nighttime eviction of 40 protesters in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol.

The scenes that in recent years have had the power to open up political situations do not oppose knowledge to ignorance. In these scenes, there are words and voices rather than speeches and explanations. There are common and anonymous people who say “enough!” There are bodies that courageously occupy space, doing what they should not be doing. There are gestures

that are crazy in the sense of being unpredictable and impossible, defying the state of things with bare life. There is the heavy police materialization of an odious order.

These are scenes that, for everyone, redefine and displace the threshold between what we tolerate and what we will no longer tolerate. Scenes that move us and that call for a break, a clash—between dignified lives and the lives unworthy of being lived.

The Invisible Committee asserts that if the movements of the squares have unseated the “lifelong activists,” it is because of this: they don’t start from political ideologies, from an explanation of the world, but from ethical truths.

How is an “ethical truth” different from a “truth” as we are used to thinking of it, as a statement and a thing? Well, the truth as a simple objective statement does not in itself possess the ability to shake up reality. A delegitimized power can continue to operate because it is not fundamentally sustained by our agreement and consensus, our belief or faith in their explanations, but rather by the subjection of bodies, the anesthesia of sensibilities, the management of the imagination, the logistics of our lives, the neutralization of action.

Ethical truths, by contrast, are not mere descriptions of the world, but *assertions* based on the ways in which we inhabit the world and conduct ourselves in it. They are not external and objective truths, but truths of sensibilities: what we *feel* about something, more than our opinion. They are not truths that we hold alone, but truths that connect

us to others who perceive the same thing. They are not declarations that can leave us indifferent, but they compromise us, affect us, require us. They are not truths that illuminate, but truths that burn.

If the Invisible Committee confirms that the political potency of the squares resides in their ethical truths it is because they take us away from individualism and connect us everywhere to people and places, to ways of doing and thinking. Suddenly we are no longer alone confronted with a hostile world, but interlinked. Affected in common by the immolation of someone similar, the demolition of a park, the eviction of a neighbor, disgust for the life that is led, the desire for something else.


We feel that one's destiny has to do with the destiny of others. The emotion of the words shared in the squares had to do with the fact that they were words magnetized by those truths that convey other conceptions of life.

Politics, then, consists of constructing—based on what we feel as a truth—desirable forms of life, capable of lasting and materially sustaining themselves: ethical truths giving themselves a world.

3. CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY

For the Invisible Committee, the demand for democracy—under any of its forms: representative, direct, digital, constituent—does not have to do with the ethical truths that emanate from the squares. On the contrary: the imaginary and the horizon of democracy fatally divert us, leading us onto a mine field. It clashes with the common sense of the movements of the squares, summarized in the famous slogan “real democracy now.”

In the democratic agora, rational beings argue and counter-argue to make a decision, but the assembly that brings them together continues to be a space separated from life and the world: it is separated, in fact, to better govern them. One governs by producing a void, an empty space (so-called “public space”), where citizens deliberate free from the pressure of “necessity.” The materiality of life—that which, disconnecting it from the political, we designate as “reproductive,” the “domestic,” the “economic,” “survival” or “everyday life”—remains outside, at the door of the assembly.



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The Invisible Committee's critique of direct democracy is not only a theoretical or abstract critique, but can be better understood as an observation of the impasses and blockages of the recent movements' assemblies: words that are distanced from action, putting themselves "before"; decisions that don't implicate those who make them, stifling free initiative and dissent; the fetishism of procedures and formalisms; power struggles to condition decisions; centralization and bureaucratization; and so on. For the Invisible Committee, none of this is "accidental," but rather "structural." It has to do with the separation instituted by the assembly between words and acts, between words and worlds of sensibilities.

For the Invisible Committee, the potential of the squares did not reside in the general assemblies, but in the encampments—that is, in the self-organization of life in common, through the creation of infrastructures, solidarity kitchens, childcare centers, medical clinics, libraries, and so on. The encampments were organized according to what the Invisible Committee calls the "paradigm of inhabiting," which opposes that of "government."

In the paradigm of inhabiting, there is no void or opposition between the subject and the world. Rather, worlds give themselves form. There is not a decree of what should be done, but an elaboration of what already is. It does not function based on a series of methodologies, procedures and formalisms, but as a "discipline of attention" to what happens.

For the Invisible Committee, the potential of the squares did not reside in the general assemblies, but in the encampments—that is, in the self-organization of life in common, through the creation of infrastructures, solidarity kitchens, childcare centers, medical clinics, libraries, and so on.

Decisions are not made, neither by majority nor by consensus, but rather they *ignite*; they are not choices between given options, but inventions that emerge from the pressure of a concrete situation or problem. And those who "invent" decisions apply them themselves—confronting them with reality, making every decision an experience.

Ultimately, democracy does not only form part of the paradigm of government, but it also does so in an insidious way, as it aims to confuse the governing and the governed. A cry like "they don't represent us" opens a scandalous breach, but it never takes long for a "true democrat" to arrive to assure us that, this time around, with him, there will be "a government of the people." And so the governed are reabsorbed into the governing again.

A power that is relegitimized this way, a power that is said to emanate from "the people in action"—for example, a "government of the 99 percent" emerging from the squares—can be the most oppressive of all. Who could question it? Only the 1 percent. The part is made to pass for the whole and it places the adversary in the position of a monster, a criminal, the enemy to demolish.

It is in this sense that the memory of 15-M will always be a dangerous field of dispute, as a "destituent tide" and the creation of "ungovernable" self-organized worlds, without a trace of "constituent power" or a "new institutionality" emerging from it. One becomes and remains ungovernable, then, by refusing to legitimate oneself by

reference to a superior principle; by happily staying forever naked like the emperor from the story, assuming the always local and situated, arbitrary and contingent character of any political position.

4. POWER IS LOGISTICAL

Surround, assault, occupy the parliaments: the sites of institutional power have bewitched the attention and desire of the movements of the squares—and, maybe because of this, the electoral route is their logical continuation. But is it certain that that is where power lies?

The Invisible Committee has a very different idea: power is logistical and resides in infrastructure. It is not of a representative and personal nature, but architectural and impersonal. It is not a theater, but a steel structure, a brick building, a channel, an algorithm, a computer program.

The Invisible Committee believes that government does not reside in the government, but that is incorporated into the objects and infrastructures that organize our everyday lives—the objects and infrastructures on which we completely depend. Any constitution is worthless; the real constitution is technical, physical and material. It is written by those who design, construct, control and manage the technical infrastructure of life, the material conditions of existence. A silent power, without speech, without explanations, without representatives, without talk shows on TV—a power to which it is totally useless to oppose a discursive counter-hegemony.



**For the Invisible
Committee, power is logistical
and resides in infrastructure.**

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For the Invisible Committee, it is not about “taking over” the technical organization of society, as if this were neutral or good in and of itself, and it were enough to simply put it in the service of other objectives. That was the catastrophic error of the Russian Revolution: distinguishing the means from the ends—thinking, for example, that labor could be liberated through the same chains of capitalist assembly. No, the ends are not inscribed in the means: each tool and each technique configures and at the same time embodies a certain conception of life, a world of sensibilities. It is not about “taking control” of the existing techniques, but subverting, transforming, reappropriating, hacking them.

The hacker is a key figure in the Invisible Committee’s political proposal. Or, better, the hacker spirit—in the broad, social sense, beyond the purely digital—that consists of asking, always while doing: “how does this work?”, “how can its operation be interfered with?”, “how could this work differently?”

The hacker spirit is concerned with sharing knowledges. The hacker spirit breaks the naturalization of the “black boxes” amongst which we normally live (opaque infrastructures that constrain our everyday gestures and possibilities), making the operating codes visible, finding faults, inventing uses, and so on. But this is not about substituting “a thousand hackers” for Trotsky’s “thousand technicians.”

To collectively become hackers involves thousands of people blockading an infra-

structural mega-project that threatens to devastate a territory and its forms of life. A becoming-hacker of the masses is thousands of people constructing small cities in the squares of large ones, capable of reproducing all parts of life for weeks on end.

5. THE COMMUNES

Classical politics propagated the desert because it is separated from life: it takes place in another site, with other codes, in other times. It generates the void—the abstraction of sensible worlds in order to govern—and therefore it expands it.

The revolution would be, by contrast, a process of repopulating the world: life surfacing, unfolding, and self-organizing, in its irreducible plurality, on its own.

As a political proposal, the Invisible Committee names the “commune” as the form that could be given to that self-organized unfolding of life. The French word “commune” has at least two meanings (along with its quite important historical evocation): a type of social relation and a territory.

The commune is, on the one hand, a type of relation: faced with the idea of existential liberalism that each person has their own life, the commune is the pact, the oath, the commitment to face the world together. On the other hand, it is a territory: places where a certain sharing is physically inscribed, the materialization of a desire for common life.

Does the Invisible Committee then propose the formation of tribes, gangs? Not exactly, because the commune is different from the community; it does not live closed off and isolated from the world—in which case it would simply dry up and die—but it is always attentive to what escapes and overflows it, in a positive relationship with the outside. Neither means for an end, nor ends in themselves, communes follow a logic of expansiveness, not of self-centeredness.

As a political proposal, the Invisible Committee names the “commune” as the form that could be given to that self-organized unfolding of life.

Are they talking about local, neighborhood politics? Again, not exactly, because the territory of the commune is not previously given, it does not pre-exist, but it is the commune itself that activates it, creates and draws it—while, in turn, the territory offers it shelter and warmth. The commune’s territory does not have bounded limits: it is a mobile and variable geography, in permanent construction.

A group of friends can be a commune, a cooperative can be a commune, a political collective can be a commune, a neighborhood can be a commune. The problem of organization is, therefore, the problem of thinking how the heterogeneous circulates, not how the homogeneous is structured. The challenge is to invent forms and apparatuses of translation, moments and spaces of encounter, transversal ties, exchanges, opportunities of cooperation, and so on.

The “universal” is not constructed by putting the particular (the situated, the singular) in parenthesis, but by deepening, by intensifying the particular itself. The entire world is already in each situation, if we give ourselves time to look for it. It would be difficult, for example, to think of an experience with greater capacity of interpellation, one that at the same time is so deeply inscribed in a very concrete territory, as Zapatismo. As the poet Miguel Torga says, “the universal is the local without the walls.”

The most important “organization” is, ultimately, everyday life itself—as a network of relationships capable of being activated politically here or there. The denser the network, the better the quality of those relationships, the greater the revolutionary potential of a society.

6. IN PRAISE OF TOUCH

Revolutions have also been thought and carried out from the paradigm of government: the subject against the world—the vanguard—that pushes it in a good direction; thought as science and Knowledge with a capital K; action as the application of that knowledge; reality as shapeless matter to model; the revolutionary process as the “product” or fine adjustment between means and ends, and so on.

In the paradigm of government, being a militant implies always being angry with what happens, because it is not what should happen; always chastising others, because they are not aware of what they should be aware of; always frustrated, because what exists is lacking in this or that; always anxious, be-

cause the real is permanently headed in the wrong direction and you have to subdue it, direct it, straighten it. All of this implies not enjoying, never letting yourself be carried away by the situation, not trusting in the forces of the world.

There could be another path. Learning to fully inhabit, instead of governing, a process of change. Letting yourself be affected by reality, to be able to affect it in turn. Taking time to grasp the possibilities that open up in this or that moment. It is in this sense that the Invisible Committee states that “touch is the cardinal revolutionary virtue.”

If revolution is the increase of the potentialities inscribed in situations, contact (*con-tacto*—“touch with”) is simultaneously that which allows us to feel where potential is circulating and how to accompany it without forcing it, with care. And it is this sensibility that we need more than a thousand courses of formation in political content.

“Strategic intelligence is born from the heart... Misunderstanding, negligence and impatience: there is the enemy.” ★

Translated from the Spanish by Liz Mason-Deese.



AMADOR FERNÁNDEZ-SAVATER

Amador Fernández-Savater is an independent researcher and co-editor of Acuarela Libros. He maintains the blog Interferencias for El Diario.

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“Strategic intelligence is born from the heart...”

Misunderstanding, negligence and impatience: there is the enemy.”

Consolidating

POWER

"THE LEFT HAS TO RETHINK ITS THEORETICAL AND TACTICAL APPARATUS."



AK Malaboca: *In the last forty years, the nature of capitalism has changed globally. What do these changes mean for the anti-capitalist struggle?*

David Harvey: From a macro-perspective, any mode of production tends to generate a very distinctive kind of opposition, which is a curious mirrored image of itself. If you look back to the 1960s or 1970s, when capital was organized in big corporatist, hierarchical forms, you had oppositional structures that were corporatist, unionist kinds of political apparatuses. In other words, a Fordist system generated a Fordist kind of opposition.

With the breakdown of this form of industrial organization, particularly in the advanced capitalist countries, you ended up with a much more decentralized configuration of capital: more fluid over space and time than previously thought. At the same time we saw the emergence of an opposition that is about networking and decentralization and that doesn't like hierarchy and the previous Fordist forms of opposition.

So, in a funny sort of way, the leftists reorganize themselves in the same way capital accumulation is reorganized. If we understand that the left is a mirror image of what we are criticizing, then maybe what we should do is to break the mirror and get out of this symbiotic relationship with what we are criticizing.

In the Fordist era, the factory was the main site of resistance. Where can we find it now that capital has moved away from the factory floor towards the urban terrain?

First of all, the factory-form has not disappeared—you still find factories in Bangladesh or in China. What is interesting is how the mode of production in the core cities changed. For example, the logistics sector has undergone a huge expansion: UPS, DHL and all of these delivery workers are producing enormous values nowadays.

In the last decades, a huge shift has occurred in the service sector as well: the biggest employers of labor in the 1970s in the US were General Motors, Ford and US Steel. The biggest employers of labor today are McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Walmart. Back then, the factory was the center of the working class, but today we

Why would we say that producing cars is more important than producing hamburgers? Unfortunately the left is not comfortable with the idea of organizing fast-food workers.

find the working class mainly in the service sector. And why would we say that producing cars is more important than producing hamburgers?

Unfortunately the left is not comfortable with the idea of organizing fast-food workers. Its picture of the classical working class doesn't fit with value production of the service workers, the delivery workers, the restaurant workers, the supermarket workers.

The proletariat did not disappear, but there is a new proletariat which has very different characteristics from the traditional one the left used to identify as the vanguard of the working class. In this sense, the McDonalds workers became the steel workers of the twenty-first century.

If this is what the new proletariat is about, where are the places to organize resistance now?

It's very difficult to organize in the workplaces. For example, delivery drivers are moving all over the place. So this population could maybe be better organized outside the working place, meaning in their neighborhood structures.

There is already an interesting phrase in Gramsci's work from 1919 saying that organizing in the workplace and having

workplace councils is all well, but we should have neighborhood councils, too.

And the neighborhood councils, he said, have a better understanding of what the conditions of the whole working class are compared to the sectoral understanding of workplace organizing.

We should look at the organization of neighborhoods as a form of class organization.

Workplace organizers used to know very well what a steelworker was, but they didn't understand what the proletariat was about as a whole. The neighborhood organization would then include for example the street cleaners, the house workers, the delivery drivers. Gramsci never really took this up and said: 'come on, the Communist Party should organize neighborhood assemblies!'

Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions in the European context where Communist Parties did in fact organize neighborhood councils—because they couldn't organize in the workplace, like in Spain for example. In the 1960s this was a very powerful form of organizing. Therefore—as I have argued for a very long time—we should look at the organization of neighborhoods as a form of class organization. Gramsci only mentioned it once in his writings and he never pursued it further.

In Britain in the 1980s, there were forms of organizing labor in city-wide platforms

on the basis of trades councils, which were doing what Gramsci suggested. But within the union movement these trades councils were always regarded as inferior forms of organizing labor. They were never treated as being foundational to how the union movement should operate.

In fact, it turned out that the trades councils were often much more radical than the conventional trade unions and that was because they were rooted in the conditions of the whole working class, not only the often privileged sectors of the working-class. So, to the extent that they had a much broader definition of the working class, the trades councils tended to have much more radical politics. But this was never valorized by the trade union movement in general—it was always regarded as a space where the radicals could play.

The advantages of this form of organizing are obvious: it overcomes the split between sectoral organizing, it includes all kinds of “deterritorialized” labor, and it is very suitable to new forms of community and assembly-based organization, as Murray Bookchin was advocating, for example.

In the recent waves of protest—in Spain and Greece, for instance, or in the Occupy movement—you can find this idea of “localizing resistance.” It seems that these movements tend to organize around issues of everyday life, rather than the big ideological questions that the traditional left used to focus on.

Why would you say that organizing around everyday life is not one of the big questions? I think it *is* one of the big questions. More than half of the world’s population lives in cities, and everyday life in cities is what people are exposed to and have their difficulties in. These difficulties reside as much in the sphere of the realization of value as in the sphere of the production of value.

This is one of my very important theoretical arguments: everybody reads Volume I of *Capital* and nobody reads Volume II. Volume I is about the production of value, Volume II is about the realization of value. Focusing on Volume II, you clearly see that the conditions of realization are just as important as the conditions of production.

Marx often talks about the necessity of seeing capital as the contradictory unity between production and realization. Where value is produced and where it is realized are two different things. For example, a lot of value is produced in China and is actually realized by Apple or by Walmart in the United States. And, of course, the realization of value is about the realization of value by means of expensive working-class consumption.

Capital might concede higher wages at the point of production, but then it recuperates it at the point of realization by the fact that working people have to pay much higher rents and housing costs, telephone costs, credit card costs and so on. So class struggles over realization—over affordable housing, for example—

So class struggles over realization—over affordable housing, for example—are just as significant for the working class as struggles of wages and work conditions. What is the point of having a higher wage if it is immediately taken back in terms of higher housing costs?



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In their relationship to the working class, capitalists long ago learned that they can make a lot of money out of taking back what they have given away. And, to the degree that—particularly in the 1960s and 1970s—workers became increasingly empowered in the sphere of consumption, capital starts to concentrate much more on pulling back value through consumption.

So the struggles in the sphere of realization, which were not that strong in Marx’s times, and the fact that nobody reads the damn book (Volume II), is a problem for the conventional left. When you say to me: ‘what is the macro-problem here?’—well, this is a macro-problem! The conception of capital and the relation between production and realization. If you don’t see the contradictory unity between both then you will not get the whole picture. Class struggle is written all over it and I can’t understand why a lot of Marxists can’t get their head around how important this is.

The problem is how we understand Marx in 2015. In Marx’s times, the extent of urbanization was relatively convenient and the consumerism of the working class was almost non-existent, so all Marx had to talk about was that the working class manages to survive on a meager wage and that they are



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very sophisticated in doing that. Capital left them to their own devices to do what they like.

But nowadays we are in a world where consumerism is responsible for about 30 percent of the dynamic of the global economy—in the US it's even 70 percent. So why are we sitting here and saying consumerism is kind of irrelevant, sticking to Volume I and talking about production and not about consumerism?

What urbanization does is to force us into certain kinds of consumerism, for example: you have to have an automobile. So your lifestyle is dictated in lots of ways by the form urbanization takes. And again, in Marx's days this wasn't significant, but in our days this is crucial. We have to get around with forms of organizing that actually recognize this change in the dynamic of class struggle.

Given this shift, the left would definitely have to adjust its tactics and forms of organizing, as well as its conception of what to organize for.

The groups that stamped the recent movements with their character, coming from the anarchist and autonomist traditions, are much more embedded in the politics of everyday life, much more than the traditional Marxists.

I am very sympathetic to the anarchists, they have a much better line on this, precisely in dealing with the politics of consumption and their critique of what consumerism is about. Part of their objective is to change and reorganize everyday life

around new and different principles. So I think this is a crucial point to which a lot of political action has to be directed these days. But I disagree with you in saying that this is no "big question."

So, looking at examples from southern Europe—solidarity networks in Greece, self-organization in Spain or Turkey—these seem to be very crucial for building social movements around everyday life and basic needs these days. Do you see this as a promising approach?

I think it is very promising, but there is a clear self-limitation in it, which is a problem for me. The self-limitation is the reluctance to take power at some point. Bookchin, in his last book, says that the problem with the anarchists is their denial of the significance of power and their inability to take it. Bookchin doesn't go this far, but I think it is the refusal to see the state as a possible partner to radical transformation.

There is a tendency to regard the state as being the enemy, the 100 percent enemy. And there are plenty of examples of repressive states out of public control where this is the case. No question: the capitalist state has to be fought, but without dominating state power and without taking it on you quickly get into the story of what happened for example in 1936 and 1937 in Barcelona and then all over Spain. By refusing to take the state at a moment where they had the power to do it, the revolutionaries in Spain allowed the state to fall back into the hands of the bourgeoisie and the Stalinist wing of the Communist

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That might be true for the Spanish state in the 1930s, but if we look at the contemporary neoliberal state and the retreat of the welfare state, what is left of the state to be conquered, to be seized?

To begin with, the left is not very good at answering the question of how we build massive infrastructures. How will the left build the Brooklyn bridge, for example? Any society relies on big infrastructures, infrastructures for a whole city—like the water supply, electricity and so on. I think that there is a big reluctance among the left to recognize that therefore we need some different forms of organization.

There are wings of the state apparatus, even of the neoliberal state apparatus, which are therefore terribly important—the center of disease control, for example.

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How do we respond to global epidemics such as Ebola and the like? You can't do it in the anarchist way of DIY-organization. There are many instances where you need some state-like forms of infrastructure. We can't confront the problem of global warming through decentralized forms of confrontations and activities alone.

One example that is often mentioned, despite its many problems, is the Montreal Protocol to phase out the use of chlorofluorocarbon in refrigerators to limit the depletion of the ozone layer. It was successfully enforced in the 1990s but it needed some kind of organization that is very different to the one coming out of assembly-based politics.

From an anarchist perspective, I would say that it is possible to replace even supra-national institutions like the WHO with confederal organizations which are built from the bottom up and which eventually arrive at worldwide decision-making.

Maybe to a certain degree, but we have to be aware that there will always be some kind of hierarchies and we will always face problems like accountability or the right of recourse. There will be complicated relationships between, for example, people dealing with the problem of global warming from the standpoint of the world as a whole and from the standpoint of a group that is on the ground, let's say in Hanover

or somewhere, and that wonders: ‘why should we listen to what they are saying?’

So you believe this would require some form of authority?

No, there will be authority structures anyway—there will always be. I have never been in an anarchist meeting where there was no secret authority structure. There is always this fantasy of everything being horizontal, but I sit there and watch and think: ‘oh god, there is a whole hierarchical structure in here—but it’s covert.’

Coming back to the recent protests around the Mediterranean: many movements have focused on local struggles. What is the next step to take towards social transformation?

At some point we have to create organizations which are able to assemble and enforce social change on a broader scale. For example, will Podemos in Spain be able to do that? In a chaotic situation like the economic crisis of the last years, it is important for the left

to act. If the left doesn’t make it, then the right-wing is the next option. I think—and I hate to say this—but I think the left has to be more pragmatic in relation to the dynamics going on right now.

More pragmatic in what sense?

Well, why did I support SYRIZA even though it is not a revolutionary party? Because it opened a space in which something different could happen and therefore it was a progressive move for me.

It is a bit like Marx saying: the first step to freedom is the limitation of the length of the working day. Very narrow demands open up space for much more revolutionary outcomes, and even when there isn’t any possibility for any revolutionary outcomes, we have to look for compromise solutions which nevertheless roll back the neoliberal austerity nonsense and open the space where new forms of organizing can take place.

For example, it would be interesting if Podemos looked towards organizing forms of democratic confederalism—because in some ways Podemos originated with lots of assembly-type meetings taking place all over Spain, so they are very experienced with

the assembly structure.

The question is how they connect the assembly-form to some permanent forms of organization concerning their

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upcoming position as a strong party in Parliament. This also goes back to the question of *consolidating* power: you have to find ways to do so, because without it the bourgeoisie and corporate capitalism are going to find ways to reassert it and take the power back.

What do you think about the dilemma of solidarity networks filling the void after the retreat of the welfare state and indirectly becoming a partner of neoliberalism in this way?

There are two ways of organizing. One is a vast growth of the NGO sector, but a lot of that is externally funded, not grassroots, and doesn’t tackle the question of the big donors who set the agenda—which won’t be a radical agenda. Here we touch upon the privatization of the welfare state.

This seems to me to be very different politically from grassroots organizations where people are on their own, saying: ‘OK, the state doesn’t take care of anything, so we are going to have to take care of it by ourselves.’ That seems to me to be leading to forms of grassroots organization with a very different political status.

But how to avoid filling that gap by helping, for example, unemployed people not to get squeezed out by neoliberal state?

Well there has to be an anti-capitalist agenda, so that when the group works with people everybody knows that it is not only about helping them to cope but that there is an organized intent to politically change the system in its entirety. This means having a very clear political project, which is problematic with decentralized, non-homogenous types of movements where somebody works one way, others work differently and there is no collective or common project.

This connects to the very first question you raised: there is no coordination of what the political objectives are. And the danger is that you just help people cope and there will be no politics coming out of it. For example, Occupy Sandy helped people get back to their houses and they did terrific work, but in the end they did what the Red Cross and federal emergency services should have done.

The end of history seems to have passed already. Looking at the actual conditions and concrete examples of anti-capitalist struggle, do you think “winning” is still an option?

Definitely, and moreover, you have occupied factories in Greece, solidarity economies across production chains being forged, radical democratic institutions in Spain and many beautiful things happening in many other places. There is a healthy growth of recognition that we need to be much broader concerning politics among all these initiatives.

The Marxist left tends to be a little bit dismissive of some of this stuff and I think they are wrong. But at the same time I don't think that any of this is big enough on its own to actually deal with the fundamental structures of power that need to be challenged. Here we talk about nothing less than a state. So the left will have to rethink its theoretical and tactical apparatus.

Interview by the activist group AK Malaboca

DAVID HARVEY



*David Harvey is a Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Geography at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). His most recent book is *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Profile, 2014).*

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The struggle is like a circle.
You can start anywhere but
it never ends.

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