

#5 DECEMBER 2009

MEMORIAL  
IDEAS FOR MOVEMENT

And now for  
something  
completely  
different?



## ABOUT US

*Turbulence* is a writing and publishing project made up of seven people based in four countries and on three continents. We first encountered each other within the counter-globalisation movement. Our hope was to provide an ongoing space in which to think through, debate and articulate the political, social, economic and cultural theories of this 'movement of movements', as well as the networks of diverse practices and alternatives that surround it.

We didn't want to become yet another journal claiming to offer a 'snapshot of the movement'. Instead we hoped to carve out a space where we can carry on difficult debates and investigations into the political realities of our time - engaging the real differences in vision, analysis and strategy that exist among us.

David Harvie, Keir Milburn, Tazio Mueller, Rodrigo Nunes, Michal Osterweil, Kay Summer, Ben Trott.

## DIGITAL TURBULENCE

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To find out about new publications, translations of articles published in *Turbulence*, or events we're involved with, subscribe to our low-traffic e-Newsletter via our website.

This issue of *Turbulence* is illustrated by the series 'Flat Horizon', by Sao Paulo-based Brazilian photographer Marcos Vilas Boas. He has photographed seascapes since 1994, and started this series of pictures of nocturnal images of maritime horizon lines in 1997. Apart from the theme, what they have in common is the use of long exposure, which turns even the subtlest changes in weather conditions or physical movements into elements producing the unique moment - of reflection, observation, and assimilation of the weather and the landscape - captured in each. These long-exposure images serve as a good metaphor of the kind of renewed attentiveness to subtle transformations that this issue proposes: their limbo-like stillness is underlined by the 'millionaire contribution' of a myriad small variations.

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## SO WHO IS THIS AIMED AT?

The short answer is: anyone wanting to think about how to change the world. That is, potentially everybody. But doing so isn't straightforward. This isn't a collection of lowest common denominator writings aimed at some abstract 'public' whose common sense we can second-guess. Even if we could, we'd much rather undermine it. To go through the experience of thinking differently - in a different way or from a different perspective - creates new possibilities. And perspectives aren't different takes on a same thing, but each one a world in itself. Likewise, words aren't different 'clothes' for one object, but can create their own objects. So thinking differently involves engaging with ideas that seem alien because they go against some of our assumptions about the world, or come from within contexts we are unfamiliar with. Some of the writing here might seem difficult or abstract - we have tried to contextualise pieces and explain technical jargon - but each article is open to anyone prepared to make the effort of reading it. Reading is a two-way violence: a text can change us to the extent that we are willing to appropriate it to our own ends. It's the same wager as love: if you jump in, you won't come back to the same point (and may regret it, or be disappointed); but if you don't jump in, how can you know what you're missing?



## WHY TURBULENCE?

Turbulence is the disruption caused by movement through a non-moving element, or an element moving at a different speed. Consider the flow of water over a simple smooth object, such as a sphere. At very low speeds the flow is laminar. In other words, it is very smooth, though it may involve vortices on a large scale. As the speed increases, at some point the transition is made to a turbulent - or, 'chaotic' - flow. You can see the same thing when you turn on a tap.

While a full understanding of turbulence remains one of the unsolved problems in physics, this chaotic flow is enormously productive. Insects fly in a sea of vortices, surrounded by tiny eddies and whirlwinds that are created when they move their wings. For years, scientists said that, theoretically, the bumblebee should not be able to fly, as its wings are so small relative to its body's mass: an airplane built with the same proportions would never get off the ground. For conventional aerodynamics, turbulence is a problem to be controlled and eliminated. But once we take turbulence into account as a productive force, then it's easy to see how bumblebee wings produce more lift than predicted by conventional analyses. The aerodynamics are incredibly unsteady and difficult to analyse - but it works!



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# Life in limbo?

**W**e are trapped in a state of limbo, neither one thing nor the other. For more than two years, the world has been wracked by a series of interrelated crises, and they show no sign of being resolved anytime soon. The unshakable certainties of neoliberalism, which held us fast for so long, have collapsed. Yet we seem unable to move on. Anger and protest have erupted around different aspects of the crises, but no common or consistent reaction has seemed able to cohere. A general sense of frustration marks the attempts to break free from the morass of a failing world.

There is a crisis of belief in the future, leaving us with the prospect of an endless, deteriorating present that hangs around by sheer inertia. In spite of all this turmoil – this time of ‘crisis’ when it seems like everything could, and should, have changed – it paradoxically feels as though history has stopped. There is an unwillingness, or inability, to face up to the scale of the crisis. Individuals, companies and governments have hunkered down, hoping to ride out the storm until the old world re-emerges in a couple of years. Attempts to wish the ‘green shoots’ of recovery into existence mistake an epochal crisis for a cyclical one; they are little more than wide-eyed boosterism. Yes, astronomical sums of money have prevented the complete collapse of the financial system, but the bailouts have been used to prevent change, not initiate it. We are trapped in a state of limbo.

## CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE

And yet, something did happen. Recall those frightening yet heady days that began in late 2008, when everything happened so quickly, when the old dogmas fell like autumn leaves? They were real. Something happened there: the tried and tested ways of doing things, well-rehearsed after nearly 30 years of global neoliberalism, started to come unstuck. What had been taken as read no longer made sense. There was a shift in what we call the *middle ground*: the discourses and practices that define the centre of the political field.

To be sure, the middle ground is not all that there is, but it is what assigns the things in the world around it a greater or lesser degree of relevance, validity or marginality. It constitutes a relatively stable centre against which all else is measured. The farther from the centre an idea, project or practice is, the more likely it is to be ignored, publicly dismissed or disqualified, or in some way suppressed. The closer to it, the more it stands a chance of being incorporated – which in turn will shift the middle more or less. Neither are middle grounds defined ‘from above’, as in some conspiratorial nightmare. They *emerge* out of different ways of doing and being, thinking and speaking, becoming intertwined in such a way as to reinforce each other individually and as a whole. The more they have become unified ‘from below’ as a middle ground, the more this middle ground acquires the power of unifying ‘from above’. In this sense, the grounds of something like ‘neoliberalism’ were set before something



was named as such; but the moment when it was named is a qualitative leap: the point at which relatively disconnected policies, theories and practices became identifiable as forming a whole.

The naming of things like Thatcherism in the UK, or Reaganism in the US, marked such a moment for something that had been constituting itself for some time before, and which has for the past three decades dominated the middle ground: neoliberalism, itself a response to the crisis of the previous middle, Fordism/Keynesianism. The era of the New Deal and its various international equivalents had seen the rise of a powerful working class that had grown used to the idea that its basic needs should be met by the welfare state, that real wages would rise, and that it was always entitled to more. Initially, the centrepiece of the neoliberal project was an attack on this ‘demanding’ working class and the state institutions wherein the old class compromise had been enshrined. Welfare provisions were rolled back, wages held steady or forced downwards, and precariousness increasingly became the general condition of work.

But this attack came at a price. The New Deal had integrated powerful workers’ movements – mass-based trade unions – into the middle ground, helping to stabilise a long period of capitalist growth. And it provided sufficiently high wages to ensure that all the stuff generated by a suddenly vastly more productive industrial system – based on Henry Ford’s assembly line and Frederick Taylor’s ‘scientific management’ – could be bought. Bit by bit, the ferocious attack

on the working classes of the global North was offset by low interest rates (i.e. cheap credit) and access to cheap commodities, mass-produced in areas where wages were at their lowest (like China). In the global South, the prospect of one day attaining similar living conditions was promised as a possibility. In this sense, neoliberal globalisation was the globalisation of the American dream: get rich or die trying.

Clearly, neoliberalism also relied on a ‘deal’ of some kind. But the word here has a different meaning; its mode of attraction/incorporation was quite unlike that of Fordism/Keynesianism. The latter involved visible, constituted *collective forces* through the likes of trade unions or farmers’ organisations; the former worked more as a buyout from the original deal, addressing individuals *directly as individuals*. It was a middle

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ground that emerged out of ‘deviant’ desires, discourses and practices that looked for ways out of the existing one (the fear that unions had become too powerful, dissatisfaction with the drab uniformity of everything, para-statal practices of corruption that compensated an over-regulated life), and as such were very much about individualisation. Indeed, it aimed to create a certain *kind* of individual, an atomised self-entrepreneur whose collective social ties are subordinated to the search for private gain.

## CRISIS OF THE COMMON

Today, the neoliberal deal is null and void; the middle ground has crumbled away. We’ve gone past the era when cheap credit, rising asset prices and falling commodity prices could compensate for stagnant wages. Those days are over but no new middle ground has cohered. Nobody has ‘agreed’ any replacement ‘deal’. That’s why we find ourselves in a state of limbo.

Mind you, deals and middle ground don’t necessarily go hand in hand. A new middle ground *might* result from a deal, explicit (like that of the New Deal of the 1930s) or implicit (like neoliberalism) – indeed, it will be firmer, more stable, if this is the case. But a new centre of the political field can also emerge without one. A middle ground does not *require* the degree of consent implied by a deal; it’s a sufficient but not a necessary condition. It does, however, always involve a process of attraction and incorporation of forces that could threaten it – the extent of which is defined by the terms of each emerging middle ground itself.

Striking a deal is like agreeing – consciously or otherwise – to a (temporary) truce following a fierce battle. But a middle ground could establish itself in the midst of a period of ongoing conflict and contestation – a more protracted struggle of attrition. From our current vantage point, much is unknown. We certainly can’t predict the duration or outcome of the struggle over what becomes the new political ‘common sense’. Moreover, the sides aren’t even clear. Finding out who your allies are only really happens once a fight has been picked. So who will be fighting whom and about what? What will be the *common ground* among movements in the new struggles and those further down the line?

Our concept of ‘common ground’ is, like middle grounds, a theoretical tool. We use it to name the intersections and resonances of diverse struggles, practices, discourses, targets and referents. In the previous alter-globalisation movement, the common ground was the shared ‘One No’ – against the monopolising logic of neoliberalism (along with the acceptance that there were ‘Many Yeses’ – the multiplicity of alternative notions of economy, commons and sociality). For many years, many movements could meet and recognise one another as kindred on this common ground of rejection of neoliberalism – without denying their difference. But the shattering of the middle ground means a common ground rooted in antagonism to it now lies in ruins.



## FROM MADNESS TO MAINSTREAM?

Until recently, anyone who suggested nationalising the banks would have been derided as a quack and a crank, as lacking the most basic understanding of economics and the functioning of a 'complex, globalised world'. So strong was the grip of 'orthodoxy' that such an idea would have been disqualified without the need to offer a counter-argument. Yet over the past year, governments around the world have effectively nationalised large parts of the financial sector, while handing over dizzyingly large amounts of public money to those institutions that remained in private hands. Similar moves into the mainstream have taken place with the discourses around climate change and commons. Every 'serious' politician must at least appear to be concerned about global warming. And the 'commons', long an exclusive focus of the left, has also entered the vocabulary of centrist intellectuals and politicians: from widening recognition of the 'public benefits' of access to cheap drugs and other intellectual property, to cautiously approving comments in *The Economist*, and the economics professions' faux Nobel prize going to Elinor Ostrom for her work on commons. Put these together and some might argue that the centre of gravity of public discourse has shifted to the left.

Yet it cannot escape notice that the recent nationalisations were argued for precisely on the grounds that they are necessary to *save* financialised capitalism, not as part of a social democratic programme of redistribution, let alone a strategy for a socialist transition. Likewise, the new green economy that is now on politicians' public agendas aims to *maintain* a big-business, productivist model of development by marrying it to more environmentally sustainable energies and processes.

So things *have* changed, but, trapped in limbo, the extent of change is by no means obvious. Let us be clear, then, about where things have started to happen. Perhaps the most obvious change is at the level of *what can be said* – what can be accepted as valid argument, rather than being consigned to a wilderness inhabited by raging ideologues, and the ignorant. In its heyday, neoliberal ideology was effective in banishing all other thought because it posed as non-ideological, as merely the 'reasonable' application of the 'science' of utility. Today, however, it is possible to see (and say) that the presuppositions of these reasonable decisions were, of course, ideological. The market *does not* tend toward equilibrium, the maximisation of self-interest *can* override instincts of self-preservation and lead to sub-optimal outcomes, and in times of crisis any trickle down *is* reverted into the upstream splurge of bailouts. The premises of those supposedly non-ideological arguments – such as the transformation of 'the market' into a natural given governed by scientific laws available to *ortho-dox* ('correct opinion') but not to *hetero-dox* ('other opinion') economists – have now been debunked. Hardcore neoliberal ideology will cease to shape the space of politics by defining its terms, what is good and bad (*investment* rather than *public spending*, *efficient private* versus *inefficient public*, *markets not planning*), and pulling the centre of gravity of the debate towards itself. Neoliberal orthodoxy no longer forms the middle ground of politics in regard to which all other opinions have to position themselves.

## ZOMBIE-LIBERALISM

But does the disappearance of the

# Shifting grounds



ideological middle ground mean that the neoliberal era is *actually* over? Or is this just a pause, a kind of radical diet to shed inefficient capital and institutions, in order for neoliberalism to emerge leaner and meaner at the other end? On the one hand, rather than the banking system being restructured, and financial capital being subordinated to political direction, the recent bailout mania has simply been a massive robber-baron-style plunder of public resources, exacerbating 30 years of neoliberal upward redistribution of wealth. On the other, this major heist has lost its ideological justification, and been revealed as just that: theft. Neoliberalism has always had two sides. It was both a counterattack by elites against social gains won by workers' and other movements from the 1930s onwards, an attempt to shift wealth back up the social ladder; *and* an ideological project claiming to rid 'the markets' of unwarranted intervention by governments and their ilk.

What remains of neoliberalism once the ideological padding comes off? It is no longer a (relatively) coherent politico-economic programme: it has become the plunder of a retreating army, a way of booby-trapping the political system before it has to relinquish control over it. But these booby traps, even if stripped of their ideological camouflage, are dangerous and deadly. In all the countries that have seen bailouts and/or financial crises, the

**A zombie can only act habitually, continuing to operate even as it decomposes. Isn't this where we find ourselves today, in the world of zombie-liberalism? The body of neoliberalism staggers on, but without direction or teleology**

enormous government deficits created are now being used by exactly those social forces that most benefited from them (in absolute terms) to argue that they should be paid off through yet more rounds of austerity and spending cuts. By handing over control to some 'safe hands' outside any form of accountability, neoliberalism gets locked in. A neat trick: the financial sector uses the debts incurred bailing it out to secure continued control over policy.

The picture is confusing, and gets even more so. As credit dries up and food and

energy prices rise, workers are left underpaid and, in the North, over-indebted – a so-called recovery that doesn't massively increase wages and/or cancel personal debt will not change that. Deal's off, as it were. But if there is no more deal, and no more ideology, what of the social basis of neoliberalism – the neoliberal *power bloc*? In short, it is in disarray, if not totally shattered. There is no longer any social group that can credibly claim 'leadership' in society, politics, culture or the economy. 'The centre cannot hold', the middle ground is broken, leaving behind a confused and vicious army, institutions no longer guided by a coherent framework, political parties still vying for power but without any real programmes.

So if the power bloc is weak, engaged in obvious, large-scale looting of the system it used to run, and if – above all – the ideological core of neoliberalism is gone, why is a new middle ground failing to emerge? Why is the apparent discursive shift to the left not paying off in practical terms? The answer lies at least partly in the fact that the neoliberal project relied a lot less on ideology than its critics tended to think. Theories and ideologies are used to create neoliberal ideologues and activists, but persuasion through argument isn't how it transforms our subjectivities and the limits of what we perceive possible. These changes are brought about more operationally than ideologically, that is,



through interventions into the composition of society. Neoliberalism re-organises material processes in order to bring about the social reality that its ideology claims already exists. It attempts to create its own presuppositions.

Rather than being *persuaded* by the power of neoliberal arguments, people are *trained* to view themselves as rational benefit-maximisers, those elusive creatures of economic theory. This training takes place through a forced engagement with markets, not just in our economic activities, but in every sphere of our lives: in education, health care, child care, you name it. Take the school system in Britain. An army of government inspectors and statisticians compiles mountains of data on schools' performance; parents, for their part, are expected to use this information to make the best decision regarding school choice. Education is seen as preparing bodies for the labour market, so 'rational choice' is invoked to justify the channeling of certain students into vocational training from an early age. Meanwhile, many 'middle-class' parents attempt to maximise their offspring's chances of 'getting the best start in life' by engaging private tutors or dragging themselves to church every Sunday morning (Anglican faith schools having the best reputation).

Effectively, people are forced to become human capital, little enterprises locked in competition with others – an isolated atom entirely responsible for itself. In this context, accepting the individual 'deal' offered by neoliberalism made sense. Neoliberalism isn't – or wasn't – just about changes in global governance or how states should be governed: it is about the management of individuals, about how you should live. It set up a model of life, and then established mechanisms that shepherded you towards 'freely' choosing that manner of living. The dice are loaded. Today, if you want to participate in society, you have to behave as *Homo economicus*.

In many ways it is this neoliberal coding, not just of public institutions and policy programmes, but of our very selves, that keeps us trapped in limbo. Neoliberalism is dead but it doesn't seem to realise it. Although the project no longer 'makes sense', its logic keeps stumbling on, like a zombie in a 1970s splatter movie: ugly, persistent and dangerous. If no new middle ground is able to cohere sufficiently to replace it, this situation could last a while. All the major crises – economic, climate, food, energy – will remain unresolved; stagnation and

long-term drift will set in (recall that the crisis of Fordism took longer than an entire decade, the 1970s, to be resolved). Such is the 'unlife' of a zombie, a body stripped of its goals, unable to adjust itself to the future, unable to make plans. A zombie can only act habitually, continuing to operate even as it decomposes. Isn't this where we find ourselves today, in the world of zombie-liberalism? The body of neoliberalism staggers on, but without direction or teleology.

Any project that wants to slay this zombie will have to operate on many different levels, just as neoliberalism did, which means that it must be tied to a new manner of living. And it must start from the here and now, the current composition of global society, large parts of which are still in the grip of the neoliberal zombie. This is the greatest challenge facing those advocating a New or Green New Deal. It isn't a case of simply changing elite thinking or dabbling with government spending: it requires a more fundamental change. Not just a change of consciousness at the head of society, but a transformation of the social body.

#### THE MIDDLE AND THE COMMON

We can detect many symptoms of the waning of the old middle ground. In a way, this is where the significance of the Obama phenomenon lies: a political project that comes to power on a tide of vague promises of 'hope' and 'change' speaks less of the strength of its own ideas than of the weakness of others. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, we have seen the collapse of the parliamentary left in a number of recent elections. Whether in or out of power, Europe's centre-left parties have been punished at the ballot box, while the vote for the right has generally held up better. Many have been mystified as to why the centre-left has taken the blame for the economic crisis, but the left that embraced neoliberalism became the truest of believers: it was they who came to see it as a progressive force that could bring development even to the world's poor. (There is never a greater zealot than a convert.) It is the obliteration of this illusion that has led to the neoliberal left's collapse.

So does that mean that the many left-wing critics of neoliberalism (and, sometimes, capitalism), from the radical left parties to the alter-globalists of Seattle and Genoa, can now simply bask in a self-satisfied glow? They can now claim to have been *right* all along in opposing

not only the neoliberal triad of financialisation, deregulation and privatisation, but also the Blairite Third Way? We count ourselves amongst these critics, and we have certainly been right about some of these things – the instability of the neoliberal credit system, say. But one of the worst mistakes we could make right now would be to assume that old answers and certainties are still valid. With the disappearance of the old, anti-neoliberal common ground, and the emergence of new struggles, we must not only revisit the question of who 'we' are (or were). We must also *construct* a new 'we'. We need a new attentiveness to emerging responses to the present conjuncture. We need a

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capacity to recognise at what levels these responses communicate and an active effort to identify the points where they overlap and reinforce each other. In other words, we need – collectively – to create, identify and name new *common grounds*.

The work of naming a common ground is for the most part analytic: it seeks to identify the components and directions of different trajectories, and to act back on them to strengthen commonalities, work through tensions that can be resolved, recognise the sources of those that can't. Of course, the act of naming something as a common ground always entails proposing a partial synthesis; but this synthesis can only be as effective as the depth of the analysis that underpins it. It only works to the extent that what

it names means something to those to whom it speaks.

Common grounds, like middle grounds, have a double character. On the one hand they have an 'objective' side: diverse practices, subjectivities, struggles and projects may share common aspects, or even resonate with one another, even if the one is unaware of the other. On the other hand, common grounds may have a subjective side, which requires a certain self-awareness and the ability to recognise what's common in other struggles or projects. The 'one *no*' rejection of neoliberalism is an obvious example of a self-aware, subjective common ground. It takes an active effort to identify common grounds, but identifying and maintaining them helps make them more effective. This self-awareness creates a feedback loop that can allow the common ground to gain consistency and exceed the established middle ground's ability to contain it. Common grounds contain an element of autonomy, asking their own questions on their own terms.

This leads to the next question: how do common grounds *affect* middle grounds? To begin with, this often occurs in ways that are *invisible*, as centrifugal forces countering the middle ground's centripetal pull. They are new practices and ways of living and thinking that deviate from the synthesis; they spread out without necessarily becoming a visible challenge to the middle. Think of the many hidden struggles of factory or office workers that slow down the pace of work without organising a strike; the impact on society of gays and lesbians carving out of niches for their desires; of the syncretic religions of Latin America and Africa, where indigenous and slaves practised their traditions right under the nose of the colonisers. Think of the advent of the pill and the way it gave women more power over their own bodies, producing mutations in sexual relations, in social roles and identities.

Such phenomena become visible when they rub up against the middle ground, coming into conflict with existing institutions and practices. Common grounds problematise the way that the middle ground has composed the world, posing problems that it can't get to grips with. The effects of such unnamed common grounds and the mutations they produce can still be limited, and are often accompanied by some form of disqualification or repression. Common grounds become more powerful and their effects more pronounced when they are



#### ANALYSE THIS!

What were we wrong about ten years ago, when our mass direct action shut down the Seattle WTO summit? I'd say we missed articulating and sharing lessons, and allowed our movement of movements to be narrowly defined and contained.

After those protests many of us went full steam into the next round of organising. We did not take the time out to analyse what had worked, what had not, and why. And now, a long and ongoing series of mass actions in the US is missing the lessons that hundreds of organisers could have provided. As radical researcher Paul de Armond writes in his outsider analysis of the 1999 week-long battle, *Black Flag Over Seattle*,

*Law enforcement, government authorities, and even the American Civil Liberties Union have conducted instructive after-action analyses of the Battle of Seattle. By way of contrast, none of the protest*

*organisations has rendered an after-action analysis of the strategies and tactics used in Seattle, even though the Internet teems with eyewitness accounts. In all forms of protracted conflict, early confrontations are seedbeds of doctrinal innovation-on all sides.*

Many movements and networks converged in Seattle and, as they swarmed around the WTO in their *ad hoc* and accidental alliances, they opened up a space. But we allowed this space to become narrowly defined as the 'anti-globalisation' or 'global justice movement'.

There is no global justice movement. At best, 'global justice' is a common space of convergence – a framework where everyone who fights against the system of corporate globalisation (or capitalism,



Empire, imperialism, neoliberalism, etc.) and its impacts on our communities can recognise a common fight and make those efforts cumulative. The concept of a single 'movement' focused on the 'issue' of corporate globalisation is used by the corporate media, as well as left

writers, often in an attempt narrow the movement of movements, to marginalise its ideas or to declare the movement dead.

The same is now true of the 'climate justice' movement of movements – the current space of convergence against the system. It can become a space of convergence for all of us who fight the doomsday economic and political system that creates climate change (and offers false solutions to it). Or we can let it become narrowed into a movement focused on the 'issue' of climate change.

In 1999 **David Solnit** organised in Seattle with the Direct Action Network. He is currently active with Mobilization for Climate Justice West. He edited *Globalize Liberation* and co-edited/co-authored (with Rebecca Solnit) *The Battle of the Story of the Battle of Seattle*. He is a member of *Seattle WTO People's History Collective*. [www.realbattleinseattle.org](http://www.realbattleinseattle.org)



both *made visible* and *named*. This is when their centrifugal force is turned into open antagonism.

But this antagonism is not simply an end in itself. During the 1990s, when the neoliberal middle ground was at its strongest, its most 'hegemonic', it was necessary to name and maintain an antagonism that remained at a distance to the middle ground precisely because one of neoliberalism's dogmas – the 'end of history' – had proclaimed the end of all antagonism. Today, the situation is different. Globally, the left appears to be weak, but the simultaneous and equivalent weakness of the middle ground gives 'us' a unique ability to intervene into the shaping of the new middle ground. The work of *naming* new common grounds is at the same time the work of increasing our power to shape the outcome of the many global crises, by influencing the way they are dealt with.

We should be aware, however, that the emergence of a common ground that unsettles a middle ground is not necessarily a good thing. We could think here of the genesis of neoliberalism itself. The Mont Pelerin Society, founded by Friedrich Hayek in 1947, studied free-market ideas throughout Keynesianism's 'golden age', as did that circle of admirers that gathered around Russian-American writer and philosopher Ayn Rand in the 1950s. The Mont Pelerin Society's members included George Shultz and Milton Friedman – Shultz went on to serve in the Nixon and Reagan administrations and, at the University of Chicago, both men trained the 'Chicago boys' who liberalised Latin American economies in the 1970s and '80s. The young Alan Greenspan, who later became Chairman of the Federal Reserve, was a member of Rand's circle. These free-market thinkers and activists articulated a common ground that profoundly unsettled the Keynesian/Fordist middle and went on to destroy it.

#### TOWARDS NEW COMMON GROUNDS?

But while we might appear to be trapped in limbo, history is still being made. In the last few years we have seen the eruption of a multiplicity of struggles, some more visible than others. In parts of the global North a direct action movement against climate change and for climate justice has emerged and grown rapidly. There's been an increase in political activity around universities – such as the wave of occupations and strikes across Italy against the country's Education Reform Bill, and mass protests against the raising of tuition fees and job losses at the University of California. In some cases, protest movements have emerged around issues directly connected to the financial crisis, for example, in Iceland, Ireland, France (remember 'bossnapping?'); or, as in Greece, they have tapped into the widespread social malaise concerning the lack of prospects for the '700-euro generation'. In Latin America, surely the part of the world where left forces are most ascendant, there have been explosive indigenous struggles around the control of natural resources. Indigenous people in Peru successfully confronted the government and its army to prevent the destruction of forests and livelihoods in the pursuit of new sources of oil. Elsewhere, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta has fought the Nigerian army to a standstill and disrupted several of Shell's operations in the area. In South Korea, sacked workers occupying the SsangYong car plant in Seoul fought pitched battles with the police and army, only to be dislodged after a massive security operation.

While the list could go on and on, it is hard to avoid the impression that these struggles have remained relatively separate from each other. By and large, they have not resonated sufficiently to constitute new common grounds. But: we can be certain on a few points and, from

## Allowing a new common ground to emerge involves a moment of grace, a stepping back from the assumptions, tactics and strategies of the anti-neoliberal, counter-globalist protest cycle of the turn of the century. The common ground constructed and maintained from that period must be recomposed through the prism of our contemporary situation

here, it may be possible to identify some emergent tendencies. First and foremost, we know that in an epochal crisis such as this one, both new middle and new common grounds will initially have to emerge around the *problematics* that brought the old era to its knees.

Take again the crisis of Fordism. By the 1970s, not only had persistently high wages led to a crisis of profitability, there were also widespread fears that unions had become too strong, the state too expansive and too bureaucratic, life too uniform. The success of the neoliberal project, at least in its Anglo-American heartlands, lay partly in the fact that it effectively tackled these problems, that it captured previously 'deviant' desires, discourses and practices by promising individuals the ability to realise them. When neoliberalism crushed the unions, shrank the welfare bureaucracy, ended stagnation and beat inflation, it on the one hand effectively addressed the problems that brought the old New Deal to its knees, and on the other, laid the groundwork for a new set of systemic problems to emerge.

The first, most immediately obvious, problematic apparent in the crisis of neoliberalism appears very different, depending on where you are standing. What from the top looks like an 'economic crisis' (not enough growth, not enough profits, not enough demand) is experienced, from below, as a 'crisis of social reproduction'. Unemployment is soaring and national deficits are placing ever-greater constraints on social security. The zombie-liberal response has been ultimately self-defeating: bail out the banks and some well-connected industries (but at huge cost to governments, increasing deficit spending), try to re-inflate the bubble of cheap credit, and hope that someone will borrow the money that is made available. Alas, there is no source of mass demand, no consumer of last resort, no new large-scale investment opportunities. Along this road lies nothing but future ruin.

These two perspectives on the same crisis obviously call forth two different 'logical' responses. While the reaction of zombie-liberalism makes sense according to its own (undead) logic, the logical response to the crisis of social reproduc-

tion is perhaps a strategy of *commoning*. This would be a defence, creation and expansion of resources held in common and accessible to all: expanding public transport, socialising health care, guaranteeing a basic income, and so on. This type of strategy would achieve two linked and essential goals. First, it would address our immediate fears of losing our livelihoods – because it would create spaces where social reproduction becomes possible outside the crisis-ridden circuits of capital. Second, it would counter the atomisation caused by three decades of neoliberal subjectivation in markets – just as engaging in market-based interactions tends to create market-subjects, engaging in commoning tends to create 'common-istic' subjectivities. And if another, equally 'logical', response to the economic crisis is the attempt to *exclude* certain people from collective resources, then the creation of open commons as a response to the crisis of social reproduction would counteract this, too. Open commons would undermine the nativist, racist politics that are gaining ground, certainly in Europe, and in parts of Africa and Asia.

A second central problematic is that of the *biocrisis*, of the many socio-ecological crises that are currently afflicting the world as a result of the contradiction between capital's need for never-ending growth and the fact that we live on a finite planet. Again, the biocrisis has two faces. From the perspective of governments and capital, it looks like an emerging threat to social stability. Climate change is undermining livelihoods, which increases the number of people forced to secure their reproduction through extra-legal means. Large-scale movements of 'climate refugees' are feared by many governments. Piracy is a response by Somali fisherfolk and others to over-fishing off the Horn of Africa. But states and capital also perceive precisely these threats to social stability as opportunities to re-legitimise political authority, to expand government powers and to kick-start a new round of 'green' economic growth, fuelled by uranium and austerity.

But the biocrisis, as the name implies, is one that threatens life; and disproportionately the lives of those who have done the least to cause it. Increasingly, the movements coalescing around this contradiction – between capital and life, growth and limits – are doing so around the notion of *climate justice*: the idea that responses to the crisis should undo rather than exacerbate existing injustices and imbalances of power, and that their construction should involve the direct participation of those affected.

Of course, we cannot be sure that new middle and common grounds will emerge around either of these issues – the economic crisis/crisis of social reproduction and the biocrisis – but we are convinced that any *successful* new project will need to address both.

#### FROM COMMONS TO CONSTITUTIONS

Allowing a new common ground to emerge involves a moment of grace, a stepping back from the assumptions, tactics and strategies of the anti-neoliberal, counter-globalist protest cycle of the turn of the century. The common ground constructed and maintained from that period must be recomposed through the prism of our contemporary situation.

The counter-globalisation movement was suspicious of – often even opposed to – institutions *per se*, *constituted* forms of power. This suspicion was obvious, for example, in the tension within one of its most institutionalised forms, the World Social Forum (WSF). The reason

#### IMAGINATION AND ALTERNATIVE PATHS

We were at a crossroads, the end of an era. But people don't jump blindly into the unknown, into uncharted territory, unless they have hope. We were unable to nourish their hope, perhaps blinded by the power of our ideas.

Hope is the very essence of popular movements. We took for granted that everybody would see with us the nakedness of the Emperor. We were thus unable to see that he is still clothed, because many people believe that they see the clothes constructed by politicians, intellectuals and the media.

We lacked practical examples of alternative paths and we lacked imagination.

**Alternative paths.** In 1996, at the end of the Intercontinental Encounter, the Zapatistas told us that to change the world is very difficult, perhaps impossible, but it is feasible to create a whole new world. We did not listen. We were postponing the creation of worlds – a world in which many worlds can be embraced. And we were thus unable to present real alternatives, illustrating what we think. Most people are no longer interested in another discourse, another critique; they need to see that other worlds are possible and necessary.

**Imagination.** Trapped for 100 years in the ideological dispute between capitalism and socialism, we stopped thinking. We were unable, ten years ago, to imagine the alternative. We were so concentrated on the critique of what is wrong in the world (the world we don't want and is falling), that we were unable to imagine, live, and share with others the new world beyond it.

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for the counter-globalisation movement's scepticism was, of course, well founded: the result of the generalised recognition that neoliberal ideology had successfully colonised most social democratic parties and trade unions.

But when the crisis of neoliberalism irrupted, it became apparent that this mistrust of institutions had translated into an inability to consistently shape politics and the economy. Antagonism against institutions as an end in itself is a dead end. The power to vacate institutions leaves a void that politics, which abhors vacuum, tends to cover up with the calculations of piecemeal cooptation. Moments of antagonism are either part of ongoing processes of building

autonomy and constituting new forms of power, or they risk dissipation, or even worse, backlashes. Today, it is necessary to have more than the sporadic show of strength: we need forms of organisation that start from the collective management of needs, that politicise the structures and mechanisms of social reproduction, and build force from there. What form could these take in the present climate? Campaigns against foreclosures, around the cost of utility bills, private debt, energy resources...?

In any case, what is needed are interventions that start from shared life and acquire their consistency there; that employ moments of antagonism in order to increase their constituent power, rather than as ends in themselves.

If a decade ago, with the neoliberal doctrine at the height of its power and most institutional roads well and truly blocked, outright rejection was a credible tactic, the brittle ground of today presents us with very different problems.

We do, in fact, have some present examples of important transformations that have managed to inscribe themselves in institutional forms. The most remark-

able are undoubtedly the constituent processes in Bolivia and Ecuador, which have resulted in political constitutions that represent radical innovations not only in relation to the countries' histories, but to constitutional law itself. First of all, because they give a form to a new arrangement of forces in which, for the first time in their history, the vast majority of the population actually has a voice, and some degree of representation. More than that, however, in instituting *pluri-nationality* as a principle of the state, both of them signal a remarkable break with modern notions of sovereignty by recognising multiple, autonomous sovereign forms within the state itself, as well as acknowledging the

'end of history' doctrine. While emphatically opposing the doctrine, the alterglobalist cycle seemed to accept the premise in inverse form: institutions were not subject to change. But rejecting institutions as such does not follow necessarily from rejecting institutions-as-we-know-them.

But these constitutions can only be a beginning, and in a certain way, it is after they are written that the real constituent process begins: that of filling the letter of the text with real transformation. This, indeed, is the real test that the Latin American 'Pink Tide' will have to confront very soon: it is not so much in an increasingly organised backlash (see Honduras), but in the future of its own most-vaunted

'success' stories, that the question mark lies. Of course, this is also a matter of new middle and common grounds: a question of how far from the old middle ground these processes can move, and what new common grounds will have to be constructed in order to affect them. The recent experiences in Latin America have been, and remain, contradictory: the recognition of 'the rights of nature' and 'the good living' goes hand-in-hand with a resurrection of 'developmentalism', increased exploitation of natural resources, and a renewed emphasis on primary commodity exports. The

question is: has the constituent power of existing movements been entirely spent in this process? Is the coming time one of consolidating gains instead of raising the game – of tactical rearguard manoeuvres rather than strategic movements? In Brazil, as in Bolivia, Venezuela etc., will new dynamics below the state level rekindle the transformative energy that created the present situation, or will we see its cooling off and crystallisation?

How relevant are these processes, and these questions, to those of us outside

Latin America? In many ways the continent, with institutional actors responsive to social movements' common ground, seems like an anomaly. Indeed its anomalous status is perhaps a symptom of neoliberalism's breakdown. Most of the world faces very different symptoms and a different set of questions: If zombie-liberalism is an ongoing form of governance, then how can social movements affect the wider world? If there is no dominant middle ground for emergent common grounds to rub up against then how are struggles made visible? How do we form an antagonism against an incoherent enemy? If neoliberal subjectivities continue to be reproduced then how do we interrupt this process and create new subjects with expanded horizons?

However, many current struggles are also premised on the idea that zombie-liberalism won't persist and a new middle ground will emerge. Just think of the movements around climate change where the battle is not only against inaction but simultaneously against the manner in which the problem is being framed and the solutions being offered. From this perspective the Latin American anomaly can seem like an outpost from a potential future and its problematics can suddenly seem timely. This is the true difficulty of acting in a crisis. When the future is so unclear we must operate in many different worlds at once. We must name a common ground, while keeping it open to new directions. We must look for institutional interlocutors while accepting that, in part, we will have to create them ourselves. We must set the conditions for a new middle ground to emerge while not getting trapped by it.

These are all, of course, difficult tasks but it is this new 'we' is constructed. The smallest step may seem near impossible now, but we should remember that once a new common ground begins to take shape, things can move very quickly. Such is the fragility of the current state of things that a little movement could have a dramatic effect. It may not take too much to tip a world gripped by entropy into a world full of potential.

**Turbulence**  
December 2009

## The recent experiences in Latin America have been, and remain, contradictory: the recognition of 'the rights of nature' and 'the good living' goes hand-in-hand with a resurrection of 'developmentalism', increased exploitation of natural resources, and a renewed emphasis on primary commodity exports

historical debt of the colonisation process. In the case of Ecuador, in fact, it is not only pluri-nationality, but also the indigenous concept of 'the good living' (*sumak kawsay*) and the 'rights of nature' that are made into principles. The latter, a unique invention in legal history, follows directly from the former: 'the good living' necessarily involves the environment in which one lives – not as the source *from which*, but as the medium *in which*, one subsists. The idea that, in the modern parliamentary state, the world had found a definitive, non-perfectible form, was central to the

### FROM HORIZONTAL TO DIAGONAL

In 1997 I was intoxicated. The ice age was thawing. 1789, 1848, 1871, 1917, 1968... Now it was our turn. We were swarming. And then suddenly... we vanished. Were we just a dream?

In a short article, *Network, Swarm, Microstructure*, cultural theorist Brian Holmes identifies two preconditions for swarming. First, 'the existence of a shared horizon - aesthetic, ethical, philosophical and/or metaphysical - which is patiently and deliberately built up over time', a 'making worlds' that enables members of a group to recognise each other. And second, the 'capacity for temporal coordination at a distance', via the communication of information and affect. Intoxicated by the discovery of the second, we took the first for granted. Our shared horizon was like a dream. What had induced it?

Firstly, the perceived demise of interstate rivalry seen in the triumph of the neoliberal consensus evidenced by the World Trade Organisation (WTO),



agreements on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and so on. The political hype of the time was around corporations ruling the world: the enemy had started to look like a fused bloc. Secondly, a literally millenarian enthusiasm about our new capacity for 'temporal coordination at a distance'. In the different movements and networks, the most persuasive voices were those most enthralled by the possibilities of this new communication. Thirdly, the amazing story of the Zapatista rebels - and, in particular,

Subcomandante Marcos' poetry - offering a fresh and open concept of collective action.

Back then I naively believed that all we needed to do was work on Holmes's second precondition ('coordination at a distance'); the first ('shared horizon') would look after itself. Provide forums, computers, email lists, opportunities for exchange and joint action, and the thing will just take off by itself: multiplication, not addition. Partly this was a response to the history of the left and the understanding that sclerotised identities and sectarian deformations are

among our biggest hindrances, coupled with the idea that taking (especially direct) action together with others was the perfect antidote to it.

Maybe that dream was a premonition come early. In any case the problem of coordination at a distance now seems straightforward - the work rather is around constructing a shared horizon.

One *no*, many *yeses*; patchworks of minorities; networks of networks; horizontal exchanges... All these lack punch when the enemy disaggregates itself, when it's no longer a fused bloc, and

when it's not self-evident how or why we are in this together, or who 'we' even are.

French philosopher Alain Badiou associates 'we' with that which is most common, most generic, most shared in our situation, but which is at present invisible, uncounted and unnamed. Inside, but excluded. How can we act - here and now - to affirm this common, this generic, this shared aspect of our situation? How, acting locally, is it possible to find a universal address, to demonstrate and enact the equality without which we are simply another interest group? How is it possible to name this common part and paint our horizon with the aesthetic, ethical and metaphysical colours that will render us visible to each other?

Then my question was: how to network local activisms and facilitate global exchange? Now my question is: how to forge a militant universalism and construct a generic will? Organising perhaps not on the *horizontal* plane, but on the *diagonal*? **Phil McLeish** was an activist with *Reclaim the Streets* in London in the 1990s. In 1997 his mind was permanently altered by the second *Zapatista encuentro* - held in the territory of the Spanish state - and subsequent emergence of *Peoples' Global Action*. After hiding in fatherhood for a few years, he became involved with the *Climate Camp* in the UK from 2006 onwards

# Crisis in California: Everything touched by capital turns toxic

The United States' most populous state, California is the world's eighth largest economy. The state has some of the planet's most productive farmland and in the 1990s enjoyed an extensive real-estate boom. But intensive, industrialised agriculture has polluted much of the environment and now, with more foreclosed homes than anywhere else in the world, it is also home to a growing number of tent cities. **Gifford Hartman** takes us on a road trip through California's Central Valley to witness the toxicity of mortgages and ecosystems, houses, drugs and human relations.

I should be very much pleased if you could find me something good (meaty) on economic conditions in California... California is very important for me because nowhere else has the upheaval most shamelessly caused by capitalist centralisation taken place with such speed.

— Letter from Karl Marx to Friedrich Sorge, 1880

## SHANTYTOWN USA

In California toxic capitalist social relations demonstrated their full irrationality in May 2009 when banks bulldozed brand-new, but unsold, McMansions in the exurbs of Southern California.

Across the United States an eviction occurs every 13 seconds and there are at the moment at least five empty homes for every homeless person. The newly homeless are finding beds unavailable as shelters are stretched well beyond capacity. St. John's Shelter for Women and Children in Sacramento regularly turns away 350 people a night. Many of these people end up in the burgeoning tent cities that are often located in the same places as the 'Hoovervilles' – similar structures, named after then-President Herbert Hoover – of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The tent city in Sacramento, California's state capital, was set up on land that had previously been a garbage dump. It became internationally known when news media from Germany, the UK, Switzerland and elsewhere covered it. It featured in the French magazine *Paris Match* and on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in the US. Of course this publicity necessitated that Arnold Schwarzenegger, California's governor, and Kevin Johnson, mayor of Sacramento, shut it down. When we visited in March 2009 to investigate, we met Governor Schwarzenegger and Mayor Johnson there by chance. Johnson told us the tent city would be evacuated, saying, 'They can't stay here, this land is toxic.'

Almost half the people we spoke with



had until recently been working in the building trades. When the housing boom collapsed they simply could not find work. Some homeless people choose to live outside for a variety of reasons, including not being allowed to take pets into homeless shelters or to freely drink and use substances. But most of the tent city dwellers desperately wanted to be working and wanted to be housed. In many places people creating tent encampments are met with hostility, and are blamed for their own condition. New York City, with a reputation for intolerance towards the homeless, recently shut down a tent city in East Harlem. Homeowners near a tent city of 200 in Tampa, Florida organised to close it down, saying it would 'devalue'

their homes. In Seattle, police have removed several tent cities, each named 'Nickelsville' after the Mayor who ordered the evictions.

Yet in some places, like Nashville, Tennessee, tent cities are tolerated by local police and politicians. Church groups are even allowed to build showers and provide services. Other cities that have allowed these encampments are: Champaign, Illinois; St. Petersburg, Florida; Lacey, Washington; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Reno, Nevada; Columbus, Ohio; Portland, Oregon. Ventura, California, recently changed its laws to allow the homeless to sleep in cars and nearby Santa Barbara has made similar allowances. In San Diego, California, a tent city appears every

night in front of the main public library downtown.

California seems to be where most new tent cities are appearing, although many are covert and try to avoid detection. One that attracted overflowing crowds is in the Los Angeles exurb of Ontario. The region is called the 'Inland Empire' and had been booming until recently; it's been hit extremely hard by the wave of foreclosures and mass layoffs. Ontario is a city of 175,000 residents, so when the homeless population in the tent city exploded past 400, a residency requirement was created. Only those born or recently residing in Ontario could stay. The city provides guards and basic services for those who can legally live there.

## TOXIC TOUR ALONG HIGHWAY 99

And so, for all the bravado about the state's leading industry [agriculture] – about the billions of dollars that it adds to the economy and the miracles of production and technical ingenuity that it has accomplished – California's farming is on the way out, as the rising value of its soil produces more in [real estate] lot sales than in cotton, cattle, or almonds. A linear city of shopping malls, housing developments, and office parks spreads from the Bay Area to Sacramento and beyond, and another along Highway 99 from Sacramento to Bakersfield on the east side of the San Joaquin [Valley].

— Gray Brechin, Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream

California's Central Valley is 720km long and 80km wide, sitting between the Sierra Nevada and Coast Range mountains. Its two main rivers are the Sacramento and the San Joaquin, which run through the northern and southern parts, giving their names to the valley's two sections. The two rivers join in a massive delta that flows into the San Francisco Bay. It is the most productive agricultural region in the world where, since the 1970s, developers have been paving over fertile soil to build massive tract-style suburban and exurban housing.

For years, the monocultural practices of highly centralised agribusiness have been polluting ecosystems with a toxicity that spreads environmental damage beyond the region. More recently, the mortgages financing the new homes have become the toxic assets polluting social relations. In the midst of the world's richest farmlands, the Central Valley probably has more foreclosed homes than anywhere else in the world. Historically, some parts of the Valley have had the lowest wages in the US and some of the highest rates of unemployment outside the Midwestern 'Rust Belt'. The Valley competes with the Los Angeles basin for the worst air quality in the US. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the town of Arvin – immortalised in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* for the government-funded migrant workers camp called 'Weedpatch' – has the dirtiest air in the country.

Interstate 80 is the second-longest highway in the United States, traversing the country from San Francisco in California's Bay Area to the suburbs of New York City. Driving east along Interstate 80 from the Bay Area, chaotic, unplanned suburban sprawl has replaced farmland for nearly all of the 140km to Sacramento. There are a few breaks when the terrain is hilly and a few crop fields have survived, but otherwise all you see are long strips of suburbia: shopping malls, endless rows of tract homes, automobile and recreational boat dealerships



(many now just empty lots), office parks and billboards.

Running south of Sacramento, through the heart of the Central Valley, is Highway 99. For decades the towns and cities of the Central Valley have been amongst the fastest growing in the US, and as you drive along the highway you pass through all these places that until recently had all the garish optimism of boom towns. The first big city you reach after Sacramento is Stockton, home to a deep-water sea port that connects major rivers with the San Joaquin Delta, the Bay and trans-Pacific trade. In the earlier years of the decade, Stockton was at the centre of the speculative housing bubble. In 2008 it had the highest rate of foreclosures in the country. It also has one of the highest unemployment rates and *Forbes* magazine recently rated it the 'most miserable city in the US'. Further south there is more of the same American consumer culture: shopping malls surrounded by massive parking lots and a huge Christian high school in the town of Ripon. In places railroad tracks and changing yards run alongside 99, but many of the tall grain silos and food processing facilities have been abandoned. The next big city is Modesto – the number one city in the US for car thefts and number five on *Forbes*' 'most miserable' list. Here the fertile farmland has been concreted over to build 'affordable' housing for commuters, some of whom endure a two-hour each-way drive to the Bay Area. Continuing south through Merced – with the second highest 'official' unemployment rate of any US city – there's yet more malls and chain stores, but also reminders of the agricultural industry: a few orchards and livestock pens along the highway, as well as dealers in tractors and other farm machinery. You can also see the plentiful irrigation canals that move water from the wet north to the Valley's dry southern end. What is striking is how much of the industrial and agricultural infrastructure appears to be rusting away. Many plants display huge 'For Sale' signs.

Two hundred and seventy kilometres south of Sacramento, you reach Fresno, California's fifth largest city, with a population of half a million. Fresno is the hub of the San Joaquin portion of the valley and it always seems to be in a haze of brown smog, especially during the stiflingly hot summer months. It is the 'asthma capital of California', a result not only of vehicle and industrial pollution, but also the airborne pesticides and other toxic chemicals used in agriculture. Fresno County is the most productive and profitable agricultural county in the US. Until recently it was also home to three large downtown tent cities, as well as other smaller encampments scattered throughout the city and along the highways.

The first tent city, on Union Pacific railroad property, was evicted in July 2009. It was literally toxic: sludge was discovered oozing out of holes in the ground in the summer of 2008, possibly due to the site's previous use for vehicle repair. 'New Jack City' – after the 1991 film about violent crack-dealing urban gangs – earned its name because two murders have already occurred there. The third tent city is more like a shantytown because many of the living spaces are built with scavenged wood. It is called 'Taco Flats' or 'Little Tijuana' because of its many Latino residents. These are mostly migrant agricultural labourers, unemployed because of the economic crisis and because a three-year drought has severely reduced the number of crops being planted.

Farm work has always been seasonal and unstable, and it has relied on migrant

labour since the Gold Rush of 1849. Right now 92% of agricultural workers are immigrants. Chinese workers – often derogatorily referred to as 'Coolies' – were brought in to build the railroads. Once the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, they worked in mining until racism and declining yields drove them off. Many ended up labouring in the fields until the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prevented further immigration, and also resulted in many Chinese being driven out of rural areas and into urban ghettos. Growers then turned to Japanese, Filipino, Armenian, Italian and Portuguese immigrants, as well as Sikhs from the Punjab region and beyond. During the Great Depression of the 1930s they employed 'Okie' and 'Arkie' refugees from the Dust Bowl – native-born white migrants, mostly former sharecropper or tenant farmers from Oklahoma and Arkansas. Mexican immigrants have also been used for this work and they, along with Central Americans, have become the overwhelming majority of agricultural workers today.

### ONE BIG UNION

Fresno also has a history of struggle. It's where the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or 'Wobblies') waged a successful six-month Free Speech Fight in 1910–11. The battle attracted several hundred Wobblies and other migratory workers from up and down the West Coast to support the right to organise on public streets and to 'soapbox'. The guiding force was IWW organiser Frank Little, who arrived from a free speech fight in the agricultural area around Spokane, Washington. (Little, who was half-Indian, was lynched in Butte, Montana in 1917, whilst helping organise a copper workers' strike and arguing that working men should refuse to fight a World War on behalf of their oppressors.) At the time, Fresno called itself the 'Raisin Capital of the World' and at the end of each summer, 5,000 Japanese workers and another 3,000 hobos would arrive in Fresno for the grape harvest. Much like the tent cities today, workers camped out downtown and looked for work in what was known as the 'slave market'. The Japanese were often very united and willing to strike for higher wages and better conditions. Knowing that the IWW tried to organise all workers, regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, gender or sector, the local elites were terrified that the Japanese might align themselves with the IWW. They resorted to violent harassment and mass arrests of IWW soapbox orators, frequently using vigilantes. The struggle continued in the courtroom where the Wobblies took up as much time as possible, seeking to make their trials political and agitating for class struggle. This fight for free speech was victorious, although its main effect was Fresno's political leaders and local farm owners becoming more tolerant of the conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its attempts to organise farm workers.

The next major IWW confrontation took place in 1913, in the Sacramento Valley's hop-growing region. The Durst Hop Ranch in Wheatland advertised in newspapers throughout California the need for 2,700 workers. In fact they needed only 1,500. The intention was to create a surplus of workers to push down wages. The advertisements eventually drew 2,800 workers of 24 ethnicities, speaking two-dozen languages. It was extremely hot, there was no clean water and there were only nine outdoor toilets. People had to sleep in the fields if they

## Across the United States an eviction occurs every 13 seconds and there are at the moment at least five empty homes for every homeless person

did not want to pay Durst for a tent and, without clean drinking water, the only alternative was paying Durst's cousin five cents for lemonade. Stores in town were forbidden to come to the ranch to sell to the workers, forcing them to buy supplies at Durst's own store. With no garbage removal or sanitation, many workers became sick. Durst withheld 10% of wages until the end of the harvest, hoping that the filthy conditions would drive many to leave without collecting them.

A hundred or so of the men had some connection to the IWW and they quickly called a meeting, more to discuss the deplorable living conditions than the pitiful wages. About 2,000 people gathered to hear the Wobbly organisers speak, but the meeting was broken up by the sheriff and his men. Four people were killed in the resulting riot, two workers and two from the sheriff's posse. Most of workers fled the Durst Ranch and scattered. A reign of terror then began. All over California radicals were targeted in the hunt for the Wobblies judged responsible for inciting the riot. But the state's investigation of the unhealthy conditions at the ranch that followed led to new laws to improve the living conditions of agricultural workers.

Even so, fifty years later almost nothing had changed concerning the creation of a 'reserve army of labour', or the use of racism to keep workers divided and weak. The appalling conditions under which workers continued to labour, as many still do today, encouraged Cesar Chavez to lead a farm worker organising drive in Delano in the San Joaquin Valley in the 1960s. It resulted in the formation of the United Farm Workers union.

### GOLD, GREEN GOLD, BLACK GOLD: CALIFORNIA'S CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT

Gold was discovered in California in 1848. The Central Valley grew with the rest of the state as capitalism appeared seemingly out of nowhere, practically overnight. California gold enabled the world economy to recover during the age of revolution in Europe and it fired the rapid urban industrial expansion across the United States. The San Francisco Bay Area became one of the most dynamic regions of capitalist accumulation in the late 19th Century, a role that the area of Southern California around Los Angeles continued to play throughout the 20th. California's later expansion was based on 'green and black gold': agricultural commodities and oil. From the early 20th Century, several counties in California began to lead the US in the production of both.

Agriculture is much like any other form of capitalist production. With increasing mechanisation, the concentration of capital and centralisation of production (and now with the use of genetically modified crops), higher yields can be achieved with fewer workers, who labour on a smaller number of larger farms. California's Central Valley was the first region in the US to develop this system of industrial agriculture on a mass scale:

*agribusiness*. As capital tightened its control of farm work – in a move from its 'formal' to 'real' domination over labour – the resulting highly productive agricultural sector was able to take advantage of advances in transportation to sell its products on the world market. This in turn threw weaker producers into crisis. In Europe, millions of peasants were driven off the land, and many were forced to emigrate to places like the US. Globally, cheaper food meant workers could feed themselves and their families more cheaply, allowing wages to fall, even as working class living standards – in some countries – rose.

The novel *The Octopus: A California Story*, by Frank Norris, paints a vivid picture of this process of the proletarianisation of the Central Valley's agricultural labour force in the 1880s. A generation later, John Steinbeck described the completion of the process in *The Grapes of Wrath*, as internal migrants – the dust bowl refugees – trekked from Oklahoma to the Central Valley during the Great Depression seeking work. This agribusiness system of market-driven, centralised production resulted in the violent and brutal industrial exploitation of agricultural workers. These conditions are still apparent today, as an army of mostly Mexican and Central American farm and ranch workers roam throughout California toiling for low wages and under equally precarious conditions. The main difference is that the increasing reliance on petrochemicals in agri-



### POLITICS, MOVEMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Ten years ago, I had the greatest hope in the movements that would shortly afterwards come together in the organisation of the World Social Forum (WSF). The 'scream of Chiapas' had just been heard, and the strength of peasant movements such as the MST and mobilisations like the one in Seattle made it possible to launch a global opposition to the WTO. In the WSF, it seemed that the ensemble of forces that could lead the process of overcoming neoliberalism was becoming organised. However, we ran up against the hegemony of NGOs and a limited, reductionist concept of 'civil society'. The protagonists of the passage from the phase of resistance to that of building hegemony turned out to be political (rather than movement) forces and governments – starting with Hugo Chávez's election as Venezuelan president in 1998, and then spreading across Latin America.

Social movements did not realise this and lagged behind, clinging to a narrow conception of the 'autonomy of social movements'. They became weaker and some have practically disappeared. Those, on the other hand, that found a rearticulation with institutional politics (Bolivia being a clear example) now have an active participation in the construction of 'another possible world' – something to which the presence of five Latin American presidents at the last World Social Forum (in Belém, Brazil, 2009) bears witness.

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culture exposes farm workers to a wider variety of deadly toxins.

Water has become a commodity critical for California's development. Most rain falls in the state's northern part, but 80% of the agricultural and urban demand is in the south. An enormous, now creaking infrastructure of interconnected canals, dams, reservoirs and pumps moves water from sea level in the north to an elevation of 150m in the south, allowing vegetables, fruit and nuts to be grown in the San Joaquin Valley. But California's development has always been rooted in an ideology of endless growth and the idea that soil is real estate. From the 1980s onwards, water distribution across the state has become more deregulated, whilst influence over the bureaucracies managing water has shifted from agribusiness to property developers. As farmland has been paved over, water once used to irrigate crops has become available to property developments as far afield as Orange County in southern California, Las Vegas in Nevada and Phoenix, more than 1,000km away, in Arizona's rapidly developing sunbelt. Water, freed from its obligations to Central Valley agribusiness, was part of the fuel that fired the massive housing boom throughout California and the south-western US. But as demand for water outstripped supply, the conditions for future droughts were created.

At the same time as much farmland has made way for development, other farms and ranches have centralised and concentrated even more as they have shifted to a narrower range of more lucrative cash crops and livestock production. Between 1996 and 2006, dairy production increased by 72% and almond acreage by 127%. An amazing 80% of the world's almond crop comes from 250,000 hectares of orchards in the Central Valley. This form of monoculture has its toxic effects. There are simply not enough bees in the Valley to pollinate all the almond trees, so over 40 billion of them are brought in for the three weeks the trees are in bloom in February: some are trucked all the way along Interstate 80 from New England and others are flown from as far away as Australia. *En route* the bees are fed what amounts to insect junk food: high-fructose corn syrup and flower pollen imported from China, causing Colony Collapse Disorder. As many as 80% of bees have left their hives, never to return. Since bees pollinate nearly two-thirds of plants that end up as food, this could have disastrous consequences for humans.

The 'rationalisation' of agriculture, coupled with property development, has already had disastrous consequences for humans in Mendota, a town 50km due west of Fresno. Mendota's population is just under 10,000; 95% of its residents are Latino and most work in agriculture. Mendota claims to be the 'cantaloupe capital of the world', but the crop requires irrigation and the drought has prevented planting, putting many people out of work. The town now has a second title as the 'unemployment capital of California', with a 41% jobless rate. As alcoholism runs rampant and the social fabric breaks down, the nearby Mendota Federal Prison offers one of only a few future employment possibilities. Budget problems mean the prison is currently only 40% finished, but President Obama has pledged \$49 million of stimulus money towards its completion. Once built, it should provide 350 jobs. Prisons are a growth industry in California, where one in six prisoners is serving a life sentence.

At the end of the 19th century, oil was discovered in Kern County, in the

southern, San Joaquin part of the Central Valley. Kern County contains three of the US' five largest oil fields. With all the refineries in the area adding to the toxic mix, the air is heavy with ozone and other forms of particle pollution. Exposure to industrial chemicals, especially in the workplace, is listed in various reports as a major cause of toxicity in the region. *Women's Health* magazine listed Bakersfield, the County seat, as the country's most unhealthy city for women.

This southern end of the Valley was merely a desert until the irrigation projects brought water. But the soil also contained salt and alkalis from an ancient seabed. A plan was devised for a master drain through the centre of the Valley that would dump these wastes in the San Francisco Bay from which they could be flushed out into the Pacific Ocean. Environmental protests prevented the completion of the project and the drain instead ended up dumping into the Kesterson Reservoir, site of a refuge for migratory birds. In the early 1980s, birds began to die in large numbers, chicks were born with deformities and cattle grazing nearby became sick. The cause was discovered to be selenium, a naturally occurring trace element common to desert soil, toxic in high concentrations. The area became another human-made toxic hotspot, the reservoir was drained and capped with soil, and the wildlife sanctuary closed.

But the poisoning of land, people and animals is not limited to mistakes like Kesterson. Concentrated, high-yield farming is chemical-intensive. A result of this is rapid soil-depletion, salinisation, desertification and outright toxic contamination – by metals such as lead, and salts like selenium. These chemicals include carcinogens that cause cancer, teratogens that cause birth defects and mutagens that cause genetic changes. In 1988, the United Farm Workers union demanded that five toxic pesticides used by grape growers – dinoseb, methyl bromide, parathion, phosdrin and captan – be banned.

#### TOXIC HOUSING, TOXIC SELF-MEDICATION

California's housing boom, like that of the US more generally, was fuelled by the creation of collateralised debt obligations (CDOs) that were based on readily available subprime and other risky mortgages. CDOs rapidly became 'toxic assets' when the bubble burst. The notion of 'toxic assets' is of course something of a metaphor, but the housing boom created hundreds of thousand of homes that are *literally* toxic. It began with the confluence of the national housing boom and the rebuilding of New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana, Florida and Texas in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Massive quantities of drywall – also known as plasterboard or gypsum board – were needed. Builders, especially developers of large-scale housing tracts like Lennar Corporation, the second biggest home-builder in the US, imported 250,000 tons from China. Although this Chinese drywall mostly ended up in Florida and Louisiana, much of it also found its way into Central Valley developments. The material gives off carbon disulfide and carbonyl sulfide, which corrode copper pipes, electrical wiring and appliances like air conditioners. Worse still, people have suffered nosebleeds and rashes, whilst children have been afflicted by ear and respiratory infections.

Owners wishing to sell these toxic new homes are legally required to reveal that they have Chinese drywall, resulting in house prices falling as low as \$19,000.

## California gold enabled the world economy to recover during the age of revolution in Europe and it fired the rapid urban industrial expansion across the United States

Some of the bigger builders, like Lennar, are ripping out the drywall and repairing some of the homes they built. But others have gone bankrupt, or are on the verge of collapse, and have done nothing. Most banks have refused to renegotiate or adjust loans on these toxic homes, leaving their buyers trapped.

Beyond these doubly toxic walls lie the Fresno tent cities, which are plagued by a high level of drug use, particularly meth-amphetamine, commonly called 'meth' or 'crystal meth'. Across the working class areas of Fresno, the use of this addictive psychostimulant drug has been defined by local health workers as having reached 'epidemic' proportions. The Central Valley was the birthplace of the modern illicit form of this drug, originally produced and distributed by biker-gangs like the Hell's Angels. The biker drug networks were mostly broken by the police in the early 1990s, only to be replaced by Mexican drug cartels using even more rationalised international systems of production and distribution. The Central Valley around Fresno is key to meth production not only because of the large-scale operators, but also the tens of thousand of smaller producers, all of whom use the rural setting to operate clandestine labs and super-labs on farms and ranches. The plague of this commodity of immiseration is growing across the US. As social order breaks down due to the crisis, many turn to self-medicating themselves with this toxic substance.

Social problems in the Central Valley once again attracted international media attention in August 2009, when the BBC aired the documentary, *The City Addicted to Crystal Meth*. Filmed in Fresno, it details how social breakdown has been accelerated both by the urban sprawl during the housing bubble and by the unemployment and mass foreclosures that have accompanied its inevitable collapse. The resulting desperation spread meth to the working class beyond the Central Valley, making it one of the most popularly abused drugs in the world today. The documentary features meth-users decrying 'cookers', those who actually mix the toxic chemicals to produce the drug, as being 'brain damaged'. Meanwhile, many admit their own brains have been damaged by use of the drug which is sometimes consumed by those as young as 11. Some families contain multigenerational users, and many have been destroyed with increased incidences of domestic violence, incarceration and premature death.

The chemicals used to produce meth are not only highly toxic, but highly flammable too. Many meth labs have exploded as a result, killing the cooks and burning down nearby buildings. Some cooks produce meth on the run and have ended up burning down whole motels when their rooms have exploded due to inadequate ventilation. Beyond its immediate costs, one of the worst aspects of the manufacture of methamphetamines is the waste.

Each kilogram of meth produced results in five to seven kilos of waste. Inevitably, this frequently gets dumped in remote rural areas, such as the parks and forests in the foothills enclosing the Central Valley.

#### AN IMAGE FROM OUR FUTURE?

Commonplace though it may be: the economic crisis is global. So why focus on California's Central Valley? Because, to return to Marx, '[t]he country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.' Because the upheaval most shamelessly caused by capitalist development in California has continued unabated, perhaps even gaining speed. Because the wasteland of devastated ecosystems and toxic lives that we encounter there, where capitalism has contaminated every aspect of human social relations it has touched, may be what lies in store for all of us.

In the Preface to the first German edition of *Capital* in 1867, Marx suggests we observe 'phenomena where they occur in their most typical form'. In his day that meant 'production and exchange' and the conditions of 'industrial and agricultural labourers' in England. If we do this, he said we can confront those who say that in their own country 'things are not nearly so bad'. In our day, the United States – particularly California – has replaced England as the world's most advanced capitalist economy. Here we see that violent exploitation of humans is linked to the abusive treatment of the land. That toxic housing, toxic mortgages and the abuse of toxic drugs complement each other. And, in almost impossibly rarified form: the full irrationality of toxic capitalist social relations.

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#### AFTER THE END OF HISTORY

In 1999, we were situated differently than many US activists involved in the 'counter-globalisation' movement. While some of our comrades focused on injustice overseas, our point of departure was the alienation of our daily lives as workers or lumpenbourgeois. This gave our revolt a certain immediacy, but it also meant we started with little long-term vision or global perspective. We set out to discredit the myth of bourgeois happiness and contentment that kept both workers and managers on their treadmills. This may have been a sound strategy in the 1990s, but we were unprepared when the exaggerated placidity of the ruling order was ruptured by a series of disasters and 'the end of history' began to look more like the end of the world. We had banked on stasis as an essential aspect of domination, not predicting that domination could also be perpetuated through crisis. **A CrimethInc. ex-Worker.** CrimethInc. ex-Workers' Collective is a decentralised anarchist collective composed of many cells which act independently in pursuit of a freer and more joyous world. [www.crimethinc.com](http://www.crimethinc.com)





# What would it mean to lose?

## On the history of actually-existing failure

Bini Adamczak and Anna Dost

**In the hour of defeat, the Soviet Union scores one final applause. In the moment of its failure, in foregoing revenge and unnecessary bloodshed, it renews one last time that peaceful and humanist utopia that forms the core of Marxist ideology and that has been so besmirched by the Bolsheviks during their time in power.**

– Rainer Bohn, 1991

**M**easured against their promise to end exploitation and oppression, and to enable everybody to lead a life without hunger or identity cards, they all failed – the lefts.

First of all, those who – usually rather furtively – reneged on this promise, or betrayed it. That is, social democrats of all hues: red, green or something in between. And no matter whether they were organised as a party, a trade union or a pipe smokers' club. Then, all those who could feel betrayed at all by this, because they had remained true to the promise of at some point turning the world, as a whole, to the left. Council communists and anarcho-feminists, republicans and communards, all the principled militants who bravely scaled the barricades – and stayed there. That is, if they were not, in the end, finished off by those whose success was precisely their failure, those who took over the world and neglected to change it. Those, in other words, who won themselves – but first, all the others – to death: Leninists, (post-)Stalinists, state socialists.

They all failed, and now nobody wants to own up to it. Not the social democrats,

because they never really wanted to win – and so they couldn't really lose either. Not the anarchists, because the (moral) responsibility for their failure lay not with themselves, but only and exclusively with their enemies. They failed, but it wasn't their fault. Nor the communists, because their actions could not yet be judged in the present, but only from the perspective of the communist future. This future was, of course, hitherto entirely unknown – save for the fact that it accepted even the most heinous means, if only they led to that most hallowed end – namely this very future.

From this vantage point, the enormous sigh of 1989–1991 can also be understood as proclaiming not only the abdication of an empire but also that of its and – according to its universal promise – our future. Suddenly the communists, who had always trusted in the laws of progress, had nowhere else to go. There was no 'forward' anymore. Where previously there had been a chain of events, in hindsight there was only one single catastrophe, a mountain of debt that ceaselessly piled bill upon bill, until suddenly they all became due 73 years later.

To be sure, towards the end of the 1980s, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was already on the brink of economic insolvency because of high levels of government debt. Around 1987, researchers at the Institute for Economics at the Academy of Sciences had calculated that there were not enough resources for the subsidies of the daily means of subsistence – bread and milk, pasta and shoes, rents, energy and train tickets – to

continue beyond two years. It was thus obvious that the strategy Reagan had embarked on in 1981, of defeating the Soviet Union in the arms race, would soon be successful. Given that the Eastern Bloc states could barely cope with the required investments in high technology, and that even constructing a conventional tank required twice the effort – Soviet labour productivity being half that of the United States – the economic defeat of actually-existing socialism was already on the horizon years before the eventual collapse.

The defeat, yes, but not the failure. For socialism – which, as we know, defines itself primarily not through the development of the forces of production, but through the revolution of the relations of production – had failed much earlier still. Socialism had failed with the sacking of the councils, the bureaucratisation of the economy, the giving up of workers' control, the suppression of the trade unions. In 1921, with the prohibition of Workers' Opposition and the crushing of the Kronstadt uprising – neither of which had done much more than recall the socialist promises of the October Revolution – the goal of the classless society had already died. The years 1989–1991 thus simply marked the final becoming apparent of this death that had occurred seven decades before, and that had been masked only by the lipstick of propaganda.

In 1989–1991, anti-communism won over its many diverse and divided enemies. But it was not communism that failed – but at most the last, entirely feeble attempt at its rescue. From this perspective, the date becomes part of the chain of attempted

reforms that took place after Stalin's death, from the uprising in Hungary in 1956 to the Prague Spring of 1968. Just as it had after Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' of 1956, hope once again came from above, from Gorbachev's *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, from the tentative attempts to break open the incrustations of bureaucracy that began in 1987. Only four years later, in August 1991, Yeltsin proscribed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, thus accelerating the foreseeable end of the USSR. Another window had closed out of what the (anti-)German journalist Wolfgang Pohrt called the 'very old and ultimately dull game, whose variations are called exploitation, oppression and war'.

In his *User Manual for the Past*, Enzo Traverso pointed out that the 'end of history' also transforms the politics of memory and history. In the GDR, those who had been persecuted by National Socialism were divided into two groups, one scorned and the other feted: the victims of fascism and the fighters against fascism. The fighters were – after the fact – declared winners in the 'antifascist state'. However, the demise of this state did not mean that it was now their turn to be 'the defeated'. For the discursive figures, popular not only on the left, of victors and vanquished, of those who win and those who are defeated, had already been replaced by a different pair of perpetrator and victim.

It is within this historical movement that the concept of failure makes its appearance. Just as the figure of the *victim* has pushed aside that of the *defeated*, so the psychological discourse of *failure* coincides with the disappearance of the political term *defeat*. There is good cause to suggest that the question of failure is always bound up within the de-politicising strategy of neoliberalism. By means of a whole new technique of subjectivation, neoliberalism disappears both society and its struggles. At the same time, however, the neoliberal *dispositif* opens up its own peculiar perspective on history, which shall be sublated in the moment of its fall. Because for those who suffer it, defeat is inflicted from the outside, and by a superior opponent. Those who want to learn from defeat, learn that next time they should deploy better tactics, more thorough analysis and, most of all, a larger mass.

Failure, on the other hand, goes deeper. It is – ideologically ignoring all external conditions – always a failure of ourselves. What we learn from it is the following: why even under *different* (even under optimal) *conditions*, the *same politics* would not have achieved the desired success. Or, in materialist terms: how a *different politics* could have been snatched from the *same pitiful circumstances*.

Translated by Tadzio Mueller & Ben Trott

Bini Adamczak is an unstable alliance of every-day reproduction modes, unwanted heritages and quarrelsome spectres, such as deconstructivist feminisms and the orthodox critique of value. She's a performer, visual artist and independent author of borderlining texts and books on such subjects as communism for children and yesterday's tomorrow. Anna Dost is a lawyer. In her leisure time, she deals with (left) histories of the Soviet Union and other East European Countries, focusing on anti-semitism and Stalinist phenomena as well as gender issues and feminism. Tadzio Mueller and Ben Trott are editors of *Turbulence*.

This is a translated and edited version of the article 'Willkommen im Club der linken Versager: Zur Geschichte des realexistierenden Scheiterns' in *arranca!* Issue 40, Summer 2009



# Green New Deal: Dead end or pathway beyond capitalism?

A Green New Deal is on everybody's lips at the moment. Barack Obama has endorsed a very general version of it, the United Nations are keen, as are numerous Green parties around the world. In the words of the 'Green New Deal Group', an influential grouping of heterodox economists, Greens and debt-relief campaigners, such a 'deal' promises to solve the 'triple crunch' of energy, climate and economic crises.

**Frieder Otto Wolf**, an eco-socialist and early member of the German Green Party, argues that the challenge for the global movements is to hijack the Green New Deal, rather than reject it. **Tadzio Mueller**, an editor of *Turbulence*, and involved in the Climate Justice Action network, begs to differ. He looks instead to an emerging movement for 'climate justice'. *Turbulence* sat the two of them down for a chat, and kicked off the debate by suggesting that a Green New Deal might actually offer a weak looking global left a great opportunity.

**TADZIO MUELLER** Before we start looking at the crisis of the (global) left, and whether or not a Green New Deal might be an opportunity for its rejuvenation, I think there is a more important question to be answered first. Namely: to what extent is such a project a great opportunity for the rejuvenation of *global capitalism*? Profit rates (with the possible exception of those of bailed-out banks) are at rock bottom. And there is currently nothing – no sector (like cars), no technology (like

IT), no process (like 'globalisation') – that is promising to push them back up again in the near future. Capital, in other words, is in crisis, and, as Nicolas Stern, author of a report on the costs and opportunities of climate change for the British government, argues, it needs 'a good driver of growth to come out of this period, and it is not just a simple matter of pumping up demand'.

At the same time, we're in the midst of another extremely serious crisis, the *biocrisis*: far from climate change being

the only devastating socio-ecological crisis tendency currently affecting the planet, we are also facing a serious loss of biodiversity (some scientists refer to this as the 6th great extinction in Earth's history), a growing scarcity of useable fresh water, overfishing, desertification, destruction of forests, and so on. There are specific processes driving each of these crises (the destruction of specific ecosystems; too much CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere...), but ultimately they are all the result of one central contradiction: that between the expansion of capitalist production and the requirements of human life in relatively stable eco-social systems. The biocrisis is a crisis of our life (*bios*), of our collective survival on a *finite* planet, which is driven by capital's need for *infinite* growth.

Now, the point about *any* kind of 'green capitalism', Green New Deal or not, is that it does not *resolve* this antagonism – because it can be resolved as little as the antagonism between capital and labour. Rather, a Green New Deal attempts to *internalise* it as a 'driver of growth'. Examples of such 'drivers' include supposedly 'green' cars and 'energy-saving' technologies. But electric cars today

**Of course, it is theoretically possible to conceive of a capitalism whose economic growth is powered by carbon-neutral fuels. But in the world of actually-existing capitalism, growth has always meant more energy use, more greenhouse gases, and more environmental destruction**

still get their energy from burning fossil fuels – this time coal at the power plant, not gas in the tank. Also, so-called energy saving technologies are, first, frequently enormously energy-intensive to produce, whilst, second, their energy savings get eaten up as the 'saved' resources are reinvested in yet more energy-consuming activities – the so-called 'rebound effect'.

Of course, it is *theoretically* possible to conceive of a capitalism whose economic growth is powered by carbon-neutral fuels. But in the world of *actually-existing* capitalism, growth has always meant





more energy use, more greenhouse gases, and more environmental destruction. Take the issue of climate change: the last 30 years have seen only two cases of *significant* reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. First, the collapse of the growth-oriented, state-socialist economies of Eastern Europe – greenhouse gas emissions from the Soviet economy fell by 40%; and second, the current global recession, which is reducing the consumption of oil and gas, and resulting in a 5% fall in global emissions levels. I am not saying that an uncontrolled collapse of the world

economy, with all the social upsets that this might bring with it, is desirable. But I am certain that it is impossible to solve the biocrisis without moving beyond the growth imperative. So I do not believe that supporting a Green New Deal is a good opportunity for the left, because this project is fundamentally about restarting capitalist growth – and it is this growth that is the problem in the first place.

**FRIEDER OTTO WOLF** The current debates on the left about whether or not to support a Green New Deal are so controversial and difficult because they

remind us of two unfinished issues. First, the old but never resolved question of the ‘socialist transition’, the transformation process from the historical epoch of capitalism to that of communism. Second, they continue a more recent debate about the relevance of green issues in leftwing politics. In this complicated context, I think that Tadzio’s perspective on the multiple proposals that are currently on the table is far too simplistic. In fact, the basic idea of the Green New Deal is pretty much irrefutable as a political proposition, and impossible to attack from



### LOST DECADE

Ten years ago, Brazil was living the heyday of neoliberal policies. The Cardoso government had used its first term to do the dirty work; the hegemony of finance and privatisation was imposed on the working class *manu militari*. It was the period of the army’s intervention against the oil workers’ strike and of two massacres of peasants, in Corumbiara (nine murdered) and Eldorado dos Carajás (21 dead). Significant sectors of the intelligentsia and the institutional left, in the universities, civil society organisations and even some so-called leftwing parties, adhered to neoliberalism.

At the time, we underestimated the new hegemony. Dazzled by the size of our defeat, we still gambled almost everything on Lula’s possible electoral victory in 1998, when not even he believed it could be done.

This stopped us from undertaking a serious and deep critical appraisal of the pervasiveness of neoliberalism and its consequences, and we failed to meet the process of privatisation with a decisive response. We failed to organise our social base in building our own means of communication, and deluded ourselves about the importance of the odd small space in the bourgeois media. We were wrong in not prioritising the formation of new militants and cadre that could analyse the new context of class struggle. As a result, we lost almost everything that had been achieved in the previous upsurge in social mobilisation (1979-1990). We thus lost a decade in which the hegemony of capital became consolidated, the left fell into fragmentation, the trade union movement became weaker and the social movements had no strength to react.

Maybe we can still learn from these mistakes and, today, invest again in social struggles, in forming cadre, in building our own means of communicating, in debating a popular project for the country. We might then be prepared for a new historical moment of ascension of mass movements, without which it will be impossible to change the correlation of forces – something that, fortunately, can already be seen in some neighbouring countries.

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the left. It consists of, first, the obvious statement that the present constellation of crises presents a historical chance, call it a 'window of opportunity', for real social change; and, second, the very plausible proposition that our best chance for seizing this opportunity is to combine the economic (employment creation) and social (expanding public services) dimension of the original New Deal with a new, 'green' dimension that addresses the ecological crises already mentioned. This basic idea, in turn, has generated a wide range of different policy proposals that are not yet conclusively defined – additions and modifications are still possible.

The left should understand the proposals for a Green New Deal as a package of emergency measures to be judged according to how effective they are in addressing the immediate problems raised by the current crises; while at the same time developing a capacity to explicitly develop their potential as transitional demands and policies. This means distinguishing between the specific measures proposed, and the ideologies they are supposed to support and to advance.

Let me give some concrete examples against Tadzio's very general argument. State intervention into banks may very well be needed in order to avoid a catastrophic crisis of capitalist finance, with all the negative consequences that might imply, like the loss of pensions or savings – but it's quite another thing to bail out private investors at the cost of the taxpayer, while not achieving any effective regulation of the system. Similarly, using a pricing system as a tool for the planned reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to an acceptable level might be a good idea – while installing an emissions-trading system based on fire-sale prices and introducing a plethora of 'offset'-mechanisms is quite a different matter. State intervention in order to regulate some specific markets, or to define precise ecological limits, is in no way equivalent to creating

## Historically, then, the project of the Green New Deal has not necessarily been one of capitalist renovation. It has also focused on introducing concrete improvements, and on building broad alliances around these policies, while at the same time continuing to search for ways of overcoming the domination of the capitalist mode of production in our society

something that could be called 'green capitalism'. Fighting unemployment by increasing government spending is something quite different from perpetuating the madness of permanent economic growth.

**TM** But the question is not whether we support or reject this or that specific policy in any of the multiple proposals currently making the rounds. The question is how these specific policies are articulated into a wider politico-economic project that can fill the space left by the at least ideological implosion of neoliberalism. Any such project has to make a reasonably credible claim to addressing the crises that brought the old era to its knees. And in this situation, the function of the Green New Deal is to allow the 'need' to restart capitalist growth to be reconciled with the reality of the biocrisis. Why else would the *Financial Times Deutschland* have endorsed the German Green Party before the 2009 European elections, describing the party's Green New Deal-project as a 'market-friendly engine of innovation'?

Even the most progressive version of the Green New Deal, that of the *Green New Deal Group*, is guilty of two crucial omissions. First, it misrepresents the 'old' New Deal as a technocratic gentlemen's agreement between the 'genius' economist Keynes and the 'can-do' politician

Roosevelt. In fact, that deal was fought for by a powerful workers' movement that forced the US-government's hand on many socially progressive measures – the New Deal was the outcome of bitter and frequently violent struggles. Second, it misrepresents (surely against the authors' better intellectual judgement) the relationship between capitalism and the biocrisis. According to the *Green New Deal Group*, it is not industrial, or fossilistic, capitalism that is to blame, but 'the current [i.e. neoliberal] model of globalisation'. Forgotten is the environmental destruction wrought by Fordism/Taylorism; ignored is the fact that the environmental movement that arose to fight this devastation predates neoliberal globalisation.

These omissions are far from accidental: they are symptomatic of the political aims of the project. First, to focus on the environmental devastation wrought by neoliberalism obscures the irreconcilable antagonism between the need for infinite growth, and the fact that we live on a finite planet. As a result, restarting capitalist growth suddenly seems like a good idea. Second, the absence of struggle in this account allows its proponents to once again tell the fairytale of a capitalism that is somehow able to harmoniously integrate all its internal contradictions, producing a win-win-win-win situation: for capital (which can turn a profit), the state (which gains legitimacy), labour (which gets good, 'green' jobs), and the environment (which is 'saved'). But when Roosevelt's New Deal temporarily stabilised the class antagonism, it was the environment (which was destroyed), the Global South (whose resources were siphoned off), and women (whose domestic labour and bodies were ever more tightly controlled) who had to pay. The Green New Deal obscures the fact that, in capitalism, there is always someone or something that is exploited.

**FW** Tadzio criticises the Green New Deal Group for telling fairytales and for forgetting history. So, first of all, it might be useful to provide some *more* historical perspective. I'd like to clarify something that seems to get lost in all this critique of the idea of a Green New Deal as 'growth-oriented' and ignorant of the role of struggle and antagonism. The first time the idea was used, it came from the left! When it became clear – around 1989 – that the Gorbachev project of *perestroika* was failing to provide a democratic, social and ecological alternative within Soviet socialism, a number of eco-socialists began thinking about a '*perestroika* in the West'. This was then translated – with a number of concessions, to be sure – into the first 'red-green' project in what was then Western Germany: an attempt by the Social Democrats and the Green Party to enter into government together.

This original proposal for a 'Green New Deal' made no declarations of faith in green capitalism, but concentrated on proposing specific policies that would address the problems of unemployment, environmental degradation, and of a powerfully menacing arms race by way of a number of simultaneous and synergetic measures. Strategically, the focus was on developing an alliance between the existing labour movement and the new social movements that sprang from the rebellion of the 1960s. The eco-socialists behind these proposals hoped to open fields of debate and of struggle which would in turn open windows of opportunity for a deeper, and ultimately socialist transformation of German society, which would avoid the historical dead-end of Soviet-type state socialism.

Historically, then, the project of the Green New Deal has not necessarily been one of capitalist renovation. It has also focused on introducing concrete improvements, and on building broad alliances around these policies, while at the same time continuing to search for ways of overcoming the domination of the capitalist mode of production in our society.

This in turn means: we need to hijack the Green New Deal, not reject it. After all: what else is there? In the current situation, rejection could only mean one of two things, both of which are impossible to defend today. Either, that there should be no 'green' elements in any package of immediate emergency measures. Or, that we go directly for socialism, and not support any so-called 'transitional demands'.

Concerning the question of overcoming capitalism, there is an old debate on the

### New Deal

The name given by US President F.D. Roosevelt to a 1933–1935 package of economic and social policies. They included social security and job creation, as well as massive state investment in infrastructure and the imposition of tight regulations on the banking sector. The Deal, which afforded workers a greater freedom to organise in order to demand and win higher wages, was meant to provide immediate relief to the masses that had been impoverished in the Great Depression, and to begin to pull the country out of the economic slump. In his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama describes the New Deal as FDR's attempt at 'saving capitalism from itself'. While the Deal was later often associated with the ideas of economist John Maynard Keynes, the latter published his programmatic *General Theory* in 1936, some years after the programme had been initiated. In fact, it was largely as a result of pressure from workers' and other social movements that industrialists and politicians were forced to pass these progressive policies.

### 'WE'LL MAKE IT THROUGH!'

We were among those who realised in the 1990s that neoliberalism, while promoting the free circulation of capital and consumer goods, sustains migration policies that control and criminalise the circulation of people, especially those of the most impoverished and discriminated ethnicities and groups.

Today, we continue to recognise international migratory movements as a strategy of resistance to neoliberal economic policies imposed on the global South. But the political risks of generalisation have led us to distinguish between two kinds of protagonism. The first, non-intentional kind configures an individual strategy of response to the structural dynamics of violence and exclusion. Although it is ambivalent



and has a reduced reach – since it aims at inclusion and the transformation of individual situations – it is still an important sign of resistance in the international context. The second type, critical and conscious, incorporates practices of intervention in the symbolic and political spheres, a strategic fight against racism and different forms of discrimination, and the formulation of alternatives. It too can

be ambivalent and have a reduced impact. But this does not make it any less relevant, as it implies taking an antagonistic ethical and political stance that exposes discriminatory structures and makes migrants appear as protagonists rather than victim.

In time, however, this distinction would itself show its limits: in striving to make migrants visible as protagonists, conscious protagonists risk speaking on behalf of those who are constituted by the discourse of representation. Radical counter-discourses can often practice this violence, which silences those it would supposedly represent. Today, our critical attitude is directed not only at the so-called hegemonic elites but, in a self-critical gesture, towards migrant activists and intellectuals in European territory.

One thing has not changed. Despite restrictive measures and discriminatory laws, despite deaths off the European

coast, despite the collaboration programmes with Southern governments to stop migration, despite the violence and precarity that the *sans papiers* are exposed to, people keep on coming to Europe. Once here, many manage to stay. The European Commission estimates the number of new migrants every year at somewhere between 350,000 and 500,000.

Some time ago, I watched a TV report showing Black men, their hands and feet tied, who had been captured by police around Ceuta and Melilla. One of them, interviewed by a reporter, stared straight into the camera and, speaking with a firm voice, said: 'They can build as many fences and walls as they like. We'll keep on trying, and we'll make it through!'

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left that was a response to the fact that the expected social revolutions of the mid-19th century did not come to pass. On the one side, 'maximalist' or 'anti-political' positions emphasised the notion of a final 'general strike' which would sweep away capitalism; on the other, defenders of 'transformist' or 'political' stances advocated a politics of transition. Since the 1890s, this older debate had been reframed, in the internal debates of Social Democracy, as a confrontation between the advocates of 'reform' (as peaceful gradualism) and the adherents of 'revolution' (as a violent overthrow of the established powers). This second phase of the debate was again renewed after the successful October Revolution in Russia, and the idea of transitional demands turned out to be a central concept for defining more specifically what Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin alike had proposed as 'revolutionary *Realpolitik*'.

The idea behind 'transitional demands' was to articulate positions that were, on the one hand, demands for specific improvements, for the righting of particularly pressing wrongs – one example would be the struggle for a shorter working day. But, on the other, where the struggle for those (very 'reasonable') demands would acquire a revolutionary momentum, calling into question the very relations of power upholding capitalist class domination, and initiating a process of further radicalisation among the masses. Incidentally, it was with these kinds of ideas in mind that parts of the radical left in the US were active during the time of the New Deal – both within Roosevelt's administration, and among those involved in the upsurge of working-class organisation linked to the emergence of the radical umbrella union, CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations). Mostly, they did not labour under the illusion that this was *already* a process of socialist transition, but they did believe that New Deal politics might open a path towards it.

To reject the Green New Deal in its entirety means not learning any of the lessons that we on the left should have learnt by now. It is bad politics, and repeats an unfortunate tendency on the left to disdain mere 'improvements', such as those achieved by what was scathingly called 'trade-unionism', while being

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entirely out of touch with historical reality.

**TM** Of course Frieder is right that it is not enough, particularly amidst the currently acute social and ecological crises, to simply dismiss something because it is 'capitalist', without providing any alternatives. But that is not what the emerging global movement for climate justice is doing. In the mobilisation towards the climate summit in Copenhagen, the network Climate Justice Action has articulated a set of positions that we hope will function much like transitional or directional demands. Examples include: 'leave fossil resources in the ground'; 'recognise and make reparations for ecological debt'; 'strengthen community control over resources and production, be it food or energy'. The demands can be summarised under two broad headings. The first is *climate justice*, by which we assert that there is no way to solve the biocrisis without a massive redistribution of wealth and power – which in turn implies that the biocrisis can only be solved through collective struggle. The second is, currently for want of a better word, *degrowth*, which refers to the need for collectively planned economic shrinkage.

These are not just demands that are presented to a government or international institution (which is not to say that government action will not play an important role). They are also issues around which multiple movements and positions can coalesce (they can have

so-called *compositional* effects). They provide an antagonistic vision that will prevent the immediate cooptation of global movements (as happened in 2005 with the G8 Summit at Gleneagles and the Make Poverty History campaign). And, finally, our struggle over these demands will actually increase our collective power to achieve them.

**FOW** But calling the transition towards socialism by a different name – whether it is 'degrowth' or 'climate justice' – does not solve the fundamental problem of the current constellation of social forces. In short, there is no political subject in sight that has any plausible capability of effectively starting a process of socialist transition in any of the relevant countries dominated by

### Green New Deal

Although the idea emerged in German eco-socialist discussions during the early 1990s, today the term refers mostly to proposals that aim to solve the 'triple crunch' (i.e. the combined economic, energy, and climate crises) by way of a large-scale programme of investment in 'green technology' and 'green jobs'. The political orientations of the proposals vary, from those on the right that see it largely as a possibility to ecologically modernise contemporary capitalism, to those on the left – such as the British Green New Deal Group – who see it as an opportunity to achieve a significant realignment in global power structures and advance a number of progressive agendas. A Green New Deal: Joined-Up Policies to Solve the Triple Crunch is available at [www.greennewdealgroup.org](http://www.greennewdealgroup.org)

the capitalist mode of production.

**TM** I agree with your assessment that – with the possible exception of Latin America – left social forces are pretty weak right now. But I don't understand how, starting from the fact of our weakness, you can arrive at the conclusion that we need to start picking and choosing between the different aspects of different Green New Deals, selectively supporting some and rejecting others. (Given the powerful social forces already arranged in the field, our support might be pretty much irrelevant anyway.) Surely the effectiveness of our opposition will depend on the degree of collective power we can build in the current situation? And building collective power, I would argue, requires the construction of an antagonistic subject, or subjects, which can only be done by marking a clearly oppositional position to the proposals currently on the table.

In this process it is important to remember the lessons of the alter-globalisation movement, where much of the conceptual/ideological inspiration for a global cycle of struggles came from Southern movements, not Northern think tanks. I believe that something similar is happening today. The concept of 'climate justice' was coined in the global South and a movement is emerging around this slogan. Currently it is based around a coalition of Southern movements, including the Indigenous Environment Network, and the global small and landless farmers' movement Via Campesina, alongside Northern autonomous activist groups such as the UK's Camp for Climate Action, but it's rapidly growing beyond these constituencies. Or put another way: the global movements, at the end of the cycle of anti-neoliberal struggles, are beginning to coalesce around the problematic of the biocrisis. We don't yet know where these movements are heading, and what the new cycle of struggles will look like. But although it might take time, this is where I believe the greatest potential for a social and ecological transformation out of the current crises lies, rather than in supporting a Green New Deal that actively aims to restart the madness of capitalist growth.

**FOW** If I understand you correctly, you seem to be suggesting that the climate crisis, or the 'biocrisis', as you call it, is essentially derivative



### POLITICAL BODIES vs. BODIES POLITIC

Ten years ago, some certainties traversed us. That doing politics was something for more than a handful: we had to connect to many others. That we lacked names with which to account for our experience: we wanted to draw cartographies that would re-situate what happened to us (our lives, precarity, the privatisation of the world, mobility). That politics could not be a question of identity: it had to pass through the elaboration of situations shared with different others. (We then asked: what is there in common between what happens to us and what goes on in other parts of the world? What is the relation between the various worlds that compose the world?) That to grasp the complexity of global transformations opened the possibility of producing a response and, above all, new questions.



That investigation was in itself a form of action. That bodies could not be at the margins of politics: they are part of the field of operations of power and of multiple struggles. That feminisms and post-colonialisms were our allies.

We had left the *okupas* [squats] to build open and heterogeneous social centres, but we had not really broken away from identity and the ghetto. We started to understand ourselves within global processes and the global movement opened a new sense of the destiny imposed by neoliberalism, momentarily displacing fear and catastrophe. And on returning home we still wished to give names to the miseries of daily life and to break with isolation and silence. We thought precarity as an existential condition, and thought of it not only in its negative form, but also in its potency and positivity. We left the social centres

and threw ourselves into the open space-time of the city.

On the one hand, we thought that naming things would allow for their immediate transformation; on the other, we thought that if we filled precarity with potency, joy and desire, we would connect to people's experience from a different side. Neither happened. We ran up against the proliferation of infinite narratives, dispersion and the difficulty of delimiting a territory: an experience that seemed impossible to take in and didn't become translated into new rights or new spaces. Besides, our 'positive' idea of precarity didn't connect with the social malaise. Paradoxically, we started idealising others.

We threw ourselves into concrete alliances and lost along the way the 'starting from oneself'. In a way, the alternative to classic politics, ideologies, ready-made formulas, was to be found in others more than in ourselves: we failed to successfully articulate the starting from oneself with the encounter with others, and fell into the gap between life and politics, between experience, the body and the idea. On one side, the proper thing, what is done with (and for) others, the

truly political. But in separating life – the other side – from politics, politics becomes, materially and affectively, unsustainable. And an encounter without bodies is an abstract, unreal idea.

Ten years ago, we thought in terms of the potency of the desire of the mobile and changing subjectivity that constitutes us. Today we think that this potency unfolded on a plane over and above life, others' and our own. How to stay alert in the face of politics' claims to transcendence, if we are to stop it from becoming unsustainable? What is there of life – the real one, which allows us to connect to others in equality, rather than moral superiority or the abandonment of oneself – in the politics that we make? How to go on encountering others, outlining common problems? And above all: what is the point of a politics today that doesn't think through these questions?

The group **Precarias a la Deriva** was formed in Madrid in 2002. Since 2005 they have been mutating towards the construction of a laboratory of female workers, called the 'Todas a Cien' Agency for Precarious Matters, with its headquarters in the women's public space, *Eskalera Karakola*



## Without the capability of effectively indicating a significant and achievable first step, radical visions remain impractical, nothing more than a pie-in-the-sky ideal sustaining your hopes for a better future

of the generalised crisis of capitalism. But is this really true? Are we 'just' confronted with a crisis of capitalism, as you seem to be arguing, or 'just' with an ecological crisis, as some in the more mainstream green movement seem to think? I would argue that humanity is in fact facing a *plurality of synchronous crises* that are irreducible to each other. If this is indeed the case, then it would be a grave historical and political error to see the ecological crisis as just a crisis of capitalism, and to focus on fighting the latter while ignoring the specificity of the former.

To clarify: pointing out that the ecological crisis has to be distinguished from the crisis of capital accumulation is not intended to greenwash capitalism. There are good grounds for affirming, as US-based scientist and activist Joel Kovel does in his recent book of this title, that capitalism is indeed the 'enemy of nature' – *in the last instance*. The question to be answered by concrete analysis, however, is whether there is a really distinctive 'materiality and contradiction' to be found in the present manifestations of a global crisis of the ecology of humankind. In short, does the ecological crisis have a relatively autonomous existence from the ups and downs of capitalism? This global ecological crisis is so significant that some experts see it as ushering in a new geological age, the *Anthropocene*, where human activity is the single most important cause of global environmental changes. Whereas Tadzio seems to think that it would be madness to support a Green New Deal, it is in fact in his denial that there is a proper logic, for example, of climate change, or of the dramatic

decrease of biodiversity, that the madness lies.

Most importantly, the dynamics of the ecological crisis bring about two new aspects that any meaningful contribution to present strategic debates must pay attention to. *One*, the notion of irreversibility, and – therefore – *two*, the notion of a specific urgency to be met within a determinate (in fact, rather short) span of time. Climate change – due to the very different temporalities it involves in comparison to the cycles of politics or the cycles of capital accumulation – threatens to create an irreversible situation in which the very basis of human culture will be destroyed. Therefore, any politics of 'the worse, the better' – where the progressive worsening of the situation is seen as the main motive and guarantee for effective revolutionary practice – would be plainly irresponsible, and will be (rightfully) rejected by the multitudes at each level of politics. There is thus no time to be lost in the difficult task of getting the left to accept, by way of strategic political debate, this basic point: If decisive measures are not introduced within something like the next ten years, very little will remain that can be saved at all – which means that providing immediate relief and buying time must be our priorities in the present historical situation.

**TM** By focussing on the question of capitalism and capitalist growth, I am not at all denying the fact that the climate crisis – and more generally the biocrisis – has its own internal dynamics that are not reducible to the dynamics of capital accumulation. Obviously, climate change is forcing the radical left to rethink the timeframe of its political practices. Humanity, however

much it is exploited, oppressed and trodden upon, has an amazing capacity to (almost) always regenerate itself. Add to that a pinch of Hegelian conceptions of history, and you get a teleology where Communists knew that ultimate victory would be theirs. Once the climate system is pushed beyond its current stable state, however, returning to that state will be impossible – so waiting for some 'victory' in some 'final battle' simply won't do. In short: yes, there is an urgency surrounding ecological crises, and this urgency requires us to rethink some things. But where we disagree is the question of what it is that needs to be rethought.

To start with, invoking urgency is essentially a politically indeterminate move. By this I mean that anyone who invokes urgency generally does so to explain why their particular programme should take precedence over others, over the 'normal' course of things. As a result, calls for 'urgent' action should not be dismissed, but treated with a healthy degree of scepticism.

Next, Frieder is suggesting that by conflating the climate crisis with the crisis of capitalism I am avoiding the complex chain of mediation that stands between the two phenomena. This, he implies, allows me to focus on capitalism at the expense of steps that could realistically, and in 'good time', address the enormity of the climate crisis. However, the fact that, to date, *only* reductions in economic growth have led to noticeable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions shows that capitalism is the enemy of nature not just in some mythical 'last instance', but each and every day, very immediately. And how complex can the chain of mediation really be if, to take one example, a 40% collapse in the Soviet economy led to a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions over the course of the 1990s?

Finally, from a pragmatic perspective, why spend lots of time looking for ways to reduce emissions (witness the amazing attempts to make carbon trading 'work') that are unproven if we already *know* that there is a way? So for me, urgency points towards rejecting a Green New Deal, as it is fundamentally a project for restoring necessarily destructive capitalist growth. On this question, it is the anti-capitalist 'radicals' that have realism on their side, while it is the moderates whose position is mere wishful thinking. In the world of actually-existing green capitalism, what we are likely to get is more carbon trading (which some are already predicting will bring us the next subprime bubble) and more carbon 'offsets', i.e. the ability to pay dodgy companies to generate emissions reductions that allow the North to continue to pollute – a process that has often entailed the destruction of indigenous communities, while having almost no positive environmental impact. To provide 'immediate relief' in terms of the climate means to start leaving fossil fuels in the ground, means starting to move towards a global system of food sovereignty, means breaking intellectual property rights, means transforming the global trade and transport system, means maintaining a zero-growth economy.

**FOW** To me, what is really at stake in this debate is expressed in a nutshell by

a Chinese saying used by Mao Zedong, 'A voyage of 10,000 miles begins with the first step.' Without the capability of effectively indicating a significant and achievable first step, radical visions remain impractical, nothing more than a pie-in-the-sky ideal sustaining your hopes for a better future. And such visions and hopes far too often provide the basis for a 'revolutionary quietism', which prefers doing nothing (except writing theoretical treatises), in order to avoid getting one's hands dirty in the vicissitudes of actual political practice. Accepting this idea of the first step in no way obliges us to refrain from elaborating our socialist, eco-socialist and eco-feminist visions more concretely. On the contrary, no significant advances ever occur within theoreticopolitical debates without an underlying urgency. It is precisely now that we find ourselves confronted with the productive challenge of deepening our ecological,

**Invoking urgency is essentially a politically indeterminate move. Calls for 'urgent' action should not be dismissed, but treated with a healthy degree of scepticism**

feminist, and socialist/communist vision. Only by way of such a deepening will we be able to critically distinguish positive first steps from *false steps*. False steps function to foreclose any further options for more radical change and structural transformation and lead to our losing time in dead ends, like the proposal for reliance on first-generation agrofuels as a way of mitigating the 'energy crisis'. Such fuels actually exacerbate the global food crisis, and their carbon balance is often just as bad, or even worse, than that of fossil fuels. Positive steps, on the other hand, not only make actual improvements and buy

more time – they also create openings for deeper changes which will be capable of putting the issues of societal transformation on the historical agenda. An example of this is the proposal for 'greening' the existing stock of houses and dwellings, which both creates (green) jobs *and* reduces greenhouse gas emissions, while opening a broad range of possibilities for local and co-operative initiatives which will be capable of touching the everyday life of many people.

Therefore, we should not reject the *problematic* underlying present proposals for a Green New Deal, even though we will have to prevent them being functionalised by Green parties as something over which they hold a quasi-monopoly. Instead, we should struggle to make them our own. At this point in time, hijacking the idea of a Green New Deal is our best, and only, shot at putting the world on the path towards an eco-socialist transformation.

**Frieder Otto Wolf** is an eco-socialist and an early member (1982) of the German Green Party. Between 1984 and 1999 he represented the party in the European Parliament; he was defeated in the 1999 election. He has also been active as a political philosopher and has concentrated on teaching philosophy and working within political networks since 2000. Further details see, [www.friederottowolf.de](http://www.friederottowolf.de) Tadzio Mueller is active in Climate Justice Action ([www.climate-justice-action.org](http://www.climate-justice-action.org)) and author of several articles on green capitalism and the Green New Deal, including 'Another Capitalism is Possible?' (in Abramsky, K., ed., *Sparking a World-wide Energy Revolution: Social Struggles in the Transition to a Post-Petrol World*). He is an editor of *Turbulence*

### TO ADVANCE ONE INCH...

My face was in South African newspapers around September 1999. I had 'dared' to challenge the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), by questioning its privatisation programme. I was ANC regional leader and ward councillor for my area in Soweto.

The press projected me as a victim of the ANC's lack of democracy at a time when its hegemony was more or less unassailable. I did my best to use the attention to spread the message against neoliberal policy. I won public sympathy and maintained my immediate local support base.

But I failed to use the commotion to go back to the 200 or so ANC branches in the region and explain to ordinary members why I was opposed to neoliberalism as a socialist ANC leader. I should have gone there the same way I used to go there to build the ANC. I should have called meetings, visited people in their homes, distributed pamphlets, engaged in public debates and so forth. Instead I let the media tell my story while the ANC leadership did its damage control. I was catapulted from ANC leadership ranks into becoming the famous face of the then emergent anti-globalisation movement in South Africa. On reflection I should have ducked the fame and concentrated on advancing a thousand ordinary workers one inch, rather than the heady 10 mile revolutionary advance of myself and a few radical comrades. I was hero and centre of my political universe. I should have worked harder to make the masses their own liberators.

**Trevor Ngwane** was active in the ANC as an anti-apartheid activist in Soweto. He was later expelled from the ANC for opposing the privatisation of public services. Today, he continues the struggle in post-apartheid society





# It's all about potatoes and computers

## Recipes for the cookshops of the future



In the early eighties, Swiss author **p.m.** – the most common initials in the Zurich telephone directory – published *Bolo'Bolo*, 'a field guide to organising utopias', in the words of one reviewer. 'Replete with maps, drawings, a new lexicon and universally recognised symbols, and "a planetary menu for subversion", the text could be considered a political nerd's version of one of Tolkien's fantasies, but its references to real events and reflexive tone give the book a kind of crackpot sense of real possibility.' A quarter-century later, p.m. is still planning.

### ACCESS TO LAND AND KNOWLEDGE

The coming centrality of 'the commons' – based on the principle of the unconditional survival of all human beings on a decent basis – is obvious at this historical moment. At first they appear to be a 'fall-back-option' for a system that is unable to allocate, use and distribute social assets in a rational way. But sustaining a social metabolism on the basis of obscure 'laws' of values, profits and interests was never a good idea and is now revealed as a catastrophic one. (It has never really been just an *idea*, but an instrument of oligarchic power. That's the dirty family secret of it.)

The future commons really boils down to two elements: access to land (i.e. food,

fuels) = bites; and access to knowledge (the capacity to use and improve all means of production, material or immaterial) = bytes. It's all about potatoes and computers.

With regard to both of these aspects, we see numerous movements that are struggling for – or, partly, already constituting – a new global commons. Whereas the principles are more or less uncontested and self-evident, the forms and necessary institutions are still unclear.

The commons cannot be based on some law of value. Land and knowledge should be shared according to needs. Everybody should have an equal say in everything. Nobody should be excluded

on whatever grounds. Human fragility should be respected.

A commons without a *consciously constituted* community is unthinkable. Common usage must be based on reliable and equal communication and anti-oligarchical forms of organisation ('democracy'). Without such a social consensus, an unregulated commons will end in tragedy, given that this planet has ecological limits. Democracy is necessary since, without it, a ruling sub-group will always lack the motivation and responsibility necessary for efficient planetary stewardship. When the community suffers, the planet suffers.

The population of the whole planet earth is *one* community – simply for lack

of outsiders. However, communication on practical, everyday matters on this scale is difficult – even with the help of email, Facebook and all other kinds of tools. Although it may sound a bit grandiose to speak about planetary planning at the present moment, some kind of institutionalised planetary allocation of resources will have to be achieved. Our oil, water, fertile soils, minerals, hunting and fishing grounds cannot be the exclusive domain of those who happen to be sitting on top of them by virtue of historical accident. If History must end – a good idea! – we must together discuss the terms of this ending.

Obeying Warren Buffett's motto of only investing in what we understand, I suggest we start our discussion of the global commons by considering our immediate neighbourhoods.

### MICRO-AGRO: NEIGHBOURHOODS AND BOROUGHES

Ultimately the whole output of the complex planetary economic machine ends up as commodities that we use in our homes and neighbourhoods. If our everyday lifestyles can be redefined to respect general ecological (=healthy biosphere) and psychological (=happiness) limits, the rest will fall into place. At the moment, the world is divided: an 'affluent' 20 percent consume 80 percent of the resources, whilst a poor 80 percent share the remaining 20 percent. If we consider the whole planet as one community, the prospects of living together peacefully look bleak indeed if we cannot overcome this chasm. There must be an understanding of a 'good life' on a planetary basis: creating ways of us earthlings living together. The trust and cultural solidarity needed for the collective and sustainable use of resources can only be established on the basis of *justice*. Climate and geographical circumstances can be taken into account – we do not all have to live the same way – but our demands on the ecosystem must roughly be the same. Thanks to scientific advances, there is no reason why we should not all lead a decent life with plenty of spare time for our hobbies. Technical productivity is so high at the moment that capitalist 'value' has problems catching up with it.

Now, what might a good neighbourhood life look like in, let's say, Switzerland, my accidental home country? A **neighbourhood** of about 500 members will not be purely urban, but linked to a piece of land of about 100 hectares (247 acres), situated within a perimeter of 15 to 80 kilometres (10 to 50 miles), depending on local conditions. Inhabitants of the urban community merge into one cooperative with those who farm the linked land. The International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), which published a report on global agriculture comparable in scope to that published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, recommends mid-sized agricultural units as the global solution to feeding the 9 billion or so people who will be living a few decades in the future. (Given fossil fuel inputs, the net caloric output of large agro-industrial production is negative and therefore has no future if we are to tackle carbon emissions and climate change.) The only feasible way of doing agriculture on this planet is intensive, mixed-crop, largely organic production: permaculture. This form of agriculture is hopelessly unprofitable under current conditions – so a new type of cooperation between consumers and producers must be found. In fact, the very distinction has to be abolished, transforming agricul-





tural work into a part of housework for everybody. I call this system of 'global reruralisation' **micro-agro**.

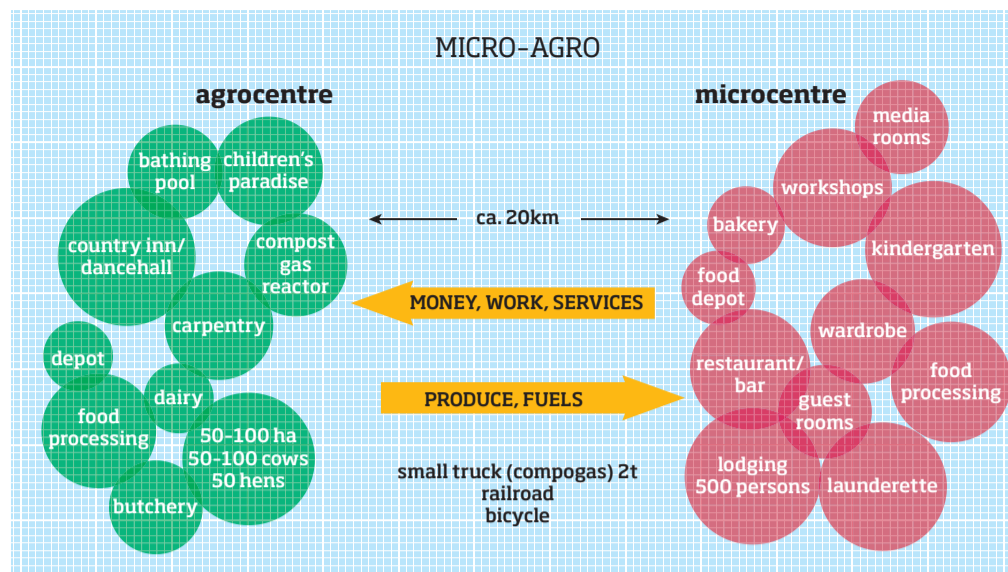
Micro-agro links two nodes: an urban microcentre and a rural agrocentre. A microcentre is a cluster comprising a food depot, communal kitchen, lounge, and restaurant – it's a service centre catering to all of the neighbourhood's 500-odd members. About 400m<sup>2</sup> are required for the shop or food-depot (similar in size to a small supermarket). Here, food is stored, prepared, processed and cooked to guarantee a basic supply of nutrition.

If we calculate 1.8kg (4lb) of foodstuff per person per day, this generates a transportation volume of 900kg per day, let's say 7 tonnes a week. With deliveries three times per week, this means 2.3 tonnes each time – a small truck, theoretically. As the heaviest of the produce (potatoes, cereals, oils, legumes, etc.) is only delivered seasonally and in large quantities, this will allow more energy-efficient means of transportation (train, boat) a few times a year, delivering to a large number of adjacent microcentres at the same time. So, a smaller truck is sufficient for the every-other-day deliveries. This truck can be fuelled by the biogas produced from consumer waste. (Biogas trucks already exist.)

The agro-centre is internally diversified and can produce all of the main types of food: milk, cereals, vegetables, fruits, berries, eggs and so on. This diversification is technically feasible within relatively large units (100ha). In fact, it's necessary for the mixed-crop system to work. Exchange with neighbouring microcentres can further increase the diversity of foods.

Some products – salt, sugar, oils, coffee, wine, spices, etc. – cannot reasonably be produced on single-neighbourhood or even regional levels. Their production and distribution will remain territorial, continental or even global.

At the level of **boroughs** or **small towns** (roughly 40 neighbourhoods of 20,000 persons), additional distribution centres are necessary. This could be a 2000m<sup>2</sup> supermarket, specialising in territorial or global products that are exchanged on



the basis of fair contracts. (As an example, in our house we can drink coffee bought directly from farmers in Chiapas via the Rebelia cooperative.) This supplementary supermarket would be located in the town centre – no more than a kilometre away – along with schools, administrative offices, special stores, cinemas, and so on. Called **MiCo**, these supermarkets could be territorial cooperatives (like the Migros supermarkets in Switzerland) and would be associated with territorial production and distribution centres – bakeries, breweries, sugar factories, etc.

The whole circuit of food production, distribution, preparation, consumption and waste re-use can be democratically managed under direct control of the people concerned. This is an important element of food sovereignty, and ultimately also of political power. People who can feed themselves are less prone to being blackmailed and exploited on other levels. Only on the basis of such global subsistence can supplementary systems of division of labour and cooperation (industry, research) remain anti-oligarchic and also ecologically sound.

#### INDUSTRIAL SUBSISTENCE: REGIONS AND TERRITORIES

The capitalist industrial basis of our society is in crisis at the moment. Some

### Micro-agro links two nodes: an urban microcentre and a rural agrocentre. A microcentre is a cluster comprising a food depot, communal kitchen, lounge, and restaurant - it's a service centre catering to all of the neighbourhood's 500-odd members

of it must be got rid of, because it is not sustainable. The car industry, for instance. If we want a global commons based on justice, our power output can never exceed 1,000 watts and this, in most contexts, precludes the use of private cars. Trains, buses, tramways and boats were and are viable alternatives. Some of the industrial capacity used for cars and aeroplanes can be dedicated to the development and

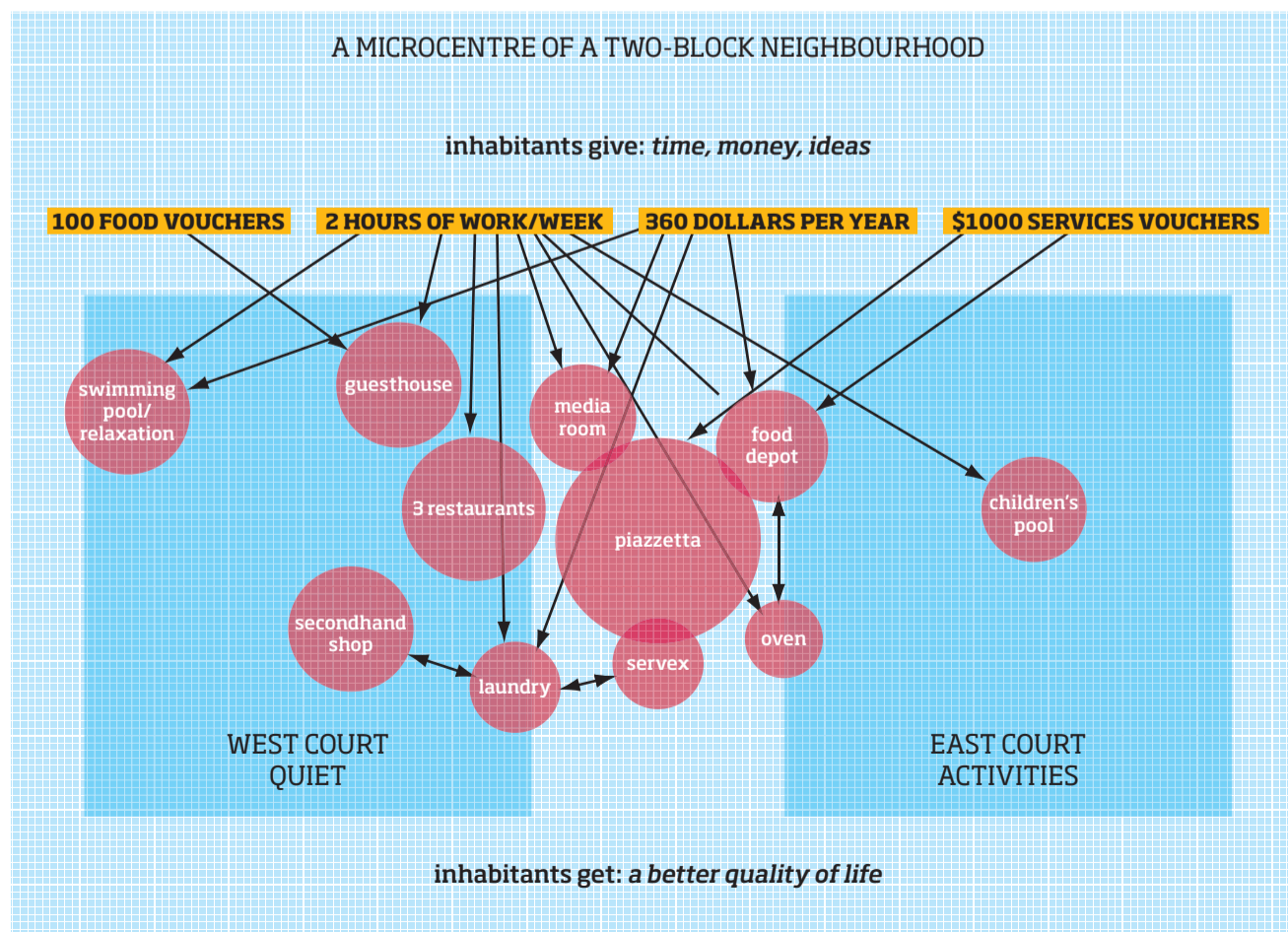
production of such means of transportation. Jobs, qualifications and technological know-how would not all be lost. Whatever we do, the overall volume of transport must be reduced, be it 'private' or 'public'. This can be achieved by reintegrating as many functions as possible into neighbourhoods and boroughs (see above).

How can our industrial basis be managed differently? At the moment, the way out seems to be nationalisation. As bankruptcies become more frequent, the state can acquire factories at cheap prices. Nationalised industries have a bad track record, and not just because of the neoliberal propaganda against them. The old nation state with its opaque institutions is not capable of managing an entire industrial base in the interests of the people. The opaque 'trust' must be transformed into a system of democratically organised *general services*. Ever since E.F. Schumacher wrote *Small Is Beautiful*, we have known that inefficiency arises if the size of organisations doesn't correspond to their optimal range of operations. 'Economies of scale' can also mean a smaller scale. So the *general services* must not form one big company, but rather exist as an articulated network of subsidiary, semi-autonomous entities. Why don't we call this system **industrial subsistence**?

Without a certain degree of direct inter-personal communication, there can be no democracy. But before we try to invent brilliant new systems of industrial democracy, we should start with what is already there. I have mentioned two 'levels' of democracy, the neighbourhood and the small town or borough. The neighbourhood is not a branch of *general services*, but rather a kind of collective household managed by its members. This form of direct democracy has been tested in innumerable cooperatives in countless forms all over the world. It has its limitations and problems, but there is no alternative unless you want to hand over control over your everyday life to anonymous organisms that 'know better'.

Things look different on the level of towns or boroughs (20,000 persons), especially if they're lumped together into larger cities. Here, existing public services can be augmented, perfected and democratically supervised. A borough is a kind of 'basic municipality' and could be the first branch/agency of the *general services*, providing water, energy, transportation, schools, a polyclinic, street maintenance, security, justice, housing/building, a fire brigade, communication media and so on. Already, prices for these services are 'political' – there's no market. In Zurich, for instance, the city has decided to lower water prices and the city owns its own electricity supply – it is the only city in Switzerland where electricity rates have been stable in recent years. Other cities have foolishly privatised these services, and the price of electricity has risen drastically.

At the level of small towns, public supervision of the management of services still works pretty well. Prices and rates can be set by democratic referendums. If we want to pay less for tram tickets, we can decide to do so. The goals are not profit or competition, but political: the welfare of the town's inhabitants, as well as ecological concerns. There is neither anonymous regulation nor the market's 'invisible hand', but conscious collective choice. As the private sector is collapsing, this model can be extended accordingly. Building companies can be taken over, clothes or furniture exchanges can be established, repair companies





of all kinds can become public services (plumbers, roofers, electricians), media can become freely accessible (the bytes!), local industries can become 'public workshops'. In this way, existing public services can be extended into all industries through *vertical integration*. Public transport enterprises can take over the construction of trams, the school system can take over print shops, paper factories, furniture factories, construction companies, etc.

At the next level – **regions** of hundreds of thousands of people, or seriously big cities (New York, Shanghai, Moscow) – additional services and industries exist. These include hospitals, universities, power plants, concrete factories, opera houses, zoos, museums and ice rinks. They too can be democratically managed. Such urban services have a long tradition, but in a new situation, new services and enterprises can also be created. A **cooperatory** – not to be confused with a cooperative – is a platform where agents of social productivity interact. In such places, 'innovators' of all kinds meet 'the public' and arrange finance from regional banks. The idea of the bank here is to facilitate the pooling of resources for large-scale enterprises. The 'anticipation of necessary future resources' (communal planning) is also integrated into these institutions. Decisions would not be taken by obscure boards of directors, but in public assemblies. From the point of view of communication, it's an ideal 'market'; from the point of view of the commons, it's a democratic council. When you have an idea nowadays, you have to consult a whimsical bank employee, in the future you'll go to your regional cooperatory.

Cooperatories are also places where bytes are shared. Knowledge becomes a common stock on which anyone can build. The internet can function as a global on-line *cooperatory*, supporting the network of off-line *cooperatories*. But purely virtual cooperation will never work properly, because personal interaction is infinitely richer in channels of information (including body language). Ideas are not just ideas – you also have to see what a person looks like when she has an idea. Thus the internet and face-to-face gatherings of real people must complement one another.

A **territory** is an area in which most places can be reached by train in one or two hours. Thus daily interaction is possible and ecologically sound. Not too many services should be produced on this level – far fewer than nowadays – but some will have to be. Territories on this scale include present-day small nation-states (e.g. Estonia, Switzerland, Sri Lanka, Liberia, Ireland), regions (Brittany, Andalusia, Lombardy) or states (Iowa, Saxony, Andhra Pradesh). They are ideal for general services of many kinds: education, building materials, transportation, justice. Typically having between two and ten million inhabitants, territories allow for a mix of direct (referendums) and indirect (parliamentary) democracy without the risk of overly grandiose nationalisms. At the same time, strong territories are the best means of dissolving traditional states like Britain, France, Germany, Russia or the US with their exaggerated power politics. The condition for this political healing process is the existence or creation of effective general services in these territories.

At the next level of organisation of general services are **continents** or **subcontinents**, composed of networks of relatively autonomous territories. Long-distance railway lines, river and

| SPHERE                 | GENERAL SERVICES           | CREATIVE ENTERPRISES                     | AGRICULTURAL SUBSISTENCE  |
|------------------------|----------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| <b>SECTORS</b>         | industry, social services  | crafts, light industries, services, arts | agriculture               |
| <b>FORM OF CONTROL</b> | indirect democracy         | free association                         | direct democracy          |
| <b>NUMBER</b>          | 350,000 'branches' (towns) | indefinite                               | 14,000,000 neighbourhoods |

Table 1: The trinity of the commons

sea transport, energy, technology and research, and the exchange of 'natural resources' can all be organised at this level. With the disappearance of cars and most trucks, there will be a renaissance of trains and boats on canals or along coasts. A kind of industrial subsistence is possible in this area – steel, aluminium, machine modules, chemical substances, electrical appliances, transport systems, communication networks etc. High-tech elements produced on a continental or global scale make regional production an option again. Like Lego blocks, these modules can be combined and adapted to local needs. A truly ecological design with no short-term profit constraints can be realised, allowing an increase in energy efficiency by a factor of 10.

Industrial subsistence also means a technological leap. Numerous innovations have not been developed or been repressed because they do not promise profits. Much ecological design is already technologically feasible and available. The Product Life Institute ([www.product-life.org](http://www.product-life.org)), for instance, stresses durability, adaptability, modularity and reparability in its designs. These aspects make them incompatible with capitalist profitability and control: they save work and resources, they do not imply large-scale production, they're intrinsically use-value oriented and are unfit for the production of surplus-value or for authoritarian command structures. The decentralised production of energy (not just solar, but from a wide range of sources) in the hands of communities affords a material autonomy that is much more reliable than a politically constructed one. (Actually, 'material autonomy' is just another way to say 'subsistence'.)

Ultimately, the planet as a whole is the commons. With the help of the internet *bytes* can be shared without limit. Information has already gone beyond all limitations imposed by the law of value. If people's livelihoods are guaranteed by subsistence and general services at all levels, free sharing of intellectual production is possible without endangering the survival of its producers. (It isn't easy to talk about shareware if you have nothing to share.) The planet can become a sphere for the free exchange of knowledge and ideas. Ultimately, these knowledge commons also have an impact on physical production – blueprints for machines and all manner of products are freely available.

In addition to these intellectual commons, a material commons must be constituted to establish a just distribution of resources. Burning fossil fuels, for example, cannot be considered a local or national concern. Carbon dioxide doesn't recognise borders. So there must be a global agency (perhaps constituted out of a transformed United Nations) that limits the amount of fossil fuels that can be taken out of the ground and that makes sure that what is extracted is distributed fairly.

A prerequisite for the creation of a truly democratic organisation at a global level is subsistence and democracy at all the levels below: neighbourhood, borough, region, territory and (sub)continent. At the moment the constituency of planetary organisations are nation states of very

unequal political power and different levels of democratic decision-making. The global commons cannot be managed under the supervision of superpowers or regional groupings. What we need are two converging movements: first, the dissolution of large nations, along with the empowerment of territories, and second, the creation of effective and legitimate planetary institutions. The first process is actually under way, although sometimes with very unsavoury motivations – new micro-nationalism, ethnic exclusivism, short-sighted oligarchic or 'tribal' interests (small can also be ugly). Maybe this step back to small-scale ethnic/tribal/micro-nationalisms might be needed as a stepping stone that breaks up larger powers, which in turn spurs two steps forwards towards planetary-scale institutions – think of Uiguria or Tibet.

### THE TRINITY OF THE COMMONS

The commons have three spheres: **general services, creative enterprises and agriculture**. Each sphere is an aspect of a comprehensive global commons, but they operate differently, both materially and institutionally.

General services can only be managed by delegation, from the bottom up, with strict rules ensuring fair play, non-exclusivity and democracy. Even so, there's a risk of compartmentalisation, of re-oligarchisation, of the 'authority of the steam-engine' (as Engels called it), or put another way, there can be no democratic

discussions in the cockpit of an airplane. Technological constraints can also give rise to certain delays in accountability. The use of such technologies can be minimised (no nuclear power plants, fewer airplanes, fewer risky technologies, prohibition of toxic substances) and their management can be made more transparent with democratic supervision. But there remains an intrinsic risk of some misuse of power. Therefore it is essential that the other two spheres have different material power bases, with different institutions and constituencies.

Diversity of social organisation is important for stability, just as natural diversity is for the biosphere. Agricultural subsistence is the ideal counter-balance to the general-services sphere: it's tactically independent, managed by directly democratic entities (neighbourhoods) and it operates on different rhythms (those of nature). The creative enterprises – that permeate all sectors – also act as a counter-balance to general services. Such enterprises have the most diverse organisational structures (from a one-person venture to a global cooperative) and they may operate with market systems, with money, bartering, gifts or just when there is occasional demand.

The trinity of the commons corresponds to the political wisdom of the separation of powers, of checks and balances. It represents material democracy and structural prudence: do not put all your eggs in one basket! Do not trust yourself. This trinity can be summarised – see table 1.

In traditional ideological terms, this system could be defined as a compromise between communism/socialism, anarchism and communitarian subsistence.

Table 2 is – alas! – not the definitive blueprint of post-capitalist planning. It merely serves as a



| LEVEL/PERSONS  | GENERAL SERVICES  | CREATIVE   | AGRICULTURE   |
|--|---|--|---|
| <b>Planet</b><br>6.9 billion   | fossil fuels, energy, communication, pharmaceutical drugs, global bank, steel, emergency aid, space travel, scientific research, means of transportation, electronic components, weapons, synthetic materials | software, music, literature, film, fashion, cosmetic products, computers, games, musical instruments   | emergency aid, seed banks, spices, coffee, tea, cocoa, spirits, tobacco, coca                                 |
| <b>Subcontinent</b><br>0.5 to 1 billion  | vehicles, boats, canals, water supply, energy grids, machinery, engines, paints, chemical products, electric parts, continental bank  | clothing, cosmetic products, software, circus, household items, music, theatre groups                  | wines, olives, canned goods, cereals, cheese, fish, condensed milk, dried mushrooms and beans, nuts, truffles |
| <b>Territory</b><br>10 million   | energy, trains, buses, tribunals, metal products, university, ceramics, glass, paper, territorial <b>cooperatory</b> and bank   | local textiles, bags, cups, bicycles, carpets, literature, brushes, music                              | cereals, potatoes, sugar, beer, salt, wine, cheese, sausages, oils  |
| <b>Region</b><br>0.1 to 1 million  | water, energy, hospital, public transports, concrete, police, sewage recycling, theatre, regional <b>cooperatory</b> and bank   | furniture, wood, straw, leather products, hats, special vehicles, jewellery, stationery, pots, casinos | milk products, fruit, meat, eggs, poultry, vegetables, herbs, sausages, hams, chocolate, fish                 |
| <b>City</b><br>0.1 to 1 million (can coincide with a region or even a territory) | water, energy, opera, museums, ice rinks, swimming pools, public transportation, sport stadiums, parks, <b>cooperatory</b> (and bank)   | cabarets, restaurants, clothing, shoes, meats, sweets, spirits, cigars, beer                           | urban gardens, bees, berries, nuts, rabbits, chickens   |
| <b>Borough/town</b><br>20,000  | primary school, high school, health centre, dentist, energy, plumbing, police, <b>cooperatory</b>   | accessories, belts, ties, computers, cookies, beer, furniture  | herbs, take-away meals, pasta, lemonades, flowers   |
| <b>Neighbourhood</b><br>500  | water, energy, building maintenance, sewage, kindergarten   | clothing, washing, cleaning, repairing, child care, housework  | bread, yoghurt, herbs, berries, urban gardening, pizza  |
| <b>Individual</b><br>1   |   | personal hygiene, gifts, mutual help, clothing, individual enterprises, massages                       | meals, urban gardening, herbs in balcony pots, digestion  |

Table 2: The three spheres of the global commons







**Today, the neoliberal deal is null and void; the middle ground has crumbled away. We've gone past the era when cheap credit, rising asset prices and falling commodity prices could compensate for stagnant wages. Those days are over but no new middle ground has cohered. Nobody has 'agreed' any replacement 'deal'. That's why we find ourselves in a state of limbo.**



reductionist illustration of a very complex web of production, levels of organisation, fields of activities. The three spheres should not be seen as isolated, but as interactive, within and across organisational levels. The services, products and enterprises are only examples. Similar products can appear in all three columns.

### PLANNING? WHAT PLANNING?

The excesses and blunders of state planning in the old socialist countries have given planning a bad name. In fact, planning just means thinking about the future and making the necessary adjustments. It is understandable that the ruling oligarchs do not want to think about the future, and even want to forbid thinking about it. As their system is unsustainable, they even flirt openly with its ruin to keep everybody on their toes. Without risk there is no profit, or only a very small one. Confronted with the present crisis the attitude towards planning seems to be getting more relaxed, more pragmatic – if markets are dysfunctional, maybe some planning could help. Profits are down anyway. In countries like France, that have always known a certain level of planning, the impact of the crisis is felt less, and the 'French Model' seems to be the darling of *The Economist* at the moment. It was not planning that got the socialist countries into trouble, but *bad* planning.

A postcapitalist household system is in principle demand-oriented. Instead of dumping commodities onto a market, goods that are needed are ordered by the consumers (who in turn are organised democratically on various levels). The producers (the same people wearing different hats) try to match these orders with the available resources (including their capacity or willingness to produce them) and give feedback to the ordering persons/institutions, who in turn modify their orders. This system of *iterative planning* seems clumsy, but computer programmes that can support it already exist. According to Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell's *Towards a New Socialism*, there is no amount of complexity that such planning algorithms couldn't handle. Even if consumer/producer iterations go back and forth numerous times, the specifications can be calculated and recalculated within seconds. So almost unlimited planning is possible. And it should be used, because it is the most just and the most

ecologically sound procedure. (Markets are terribly wasteful!)

But before we begin to establish such planning mechanisms, we have to answer the question of what it is that should be planned. There is no pressure to minimise planning from the technical point of view – the idea that you'd need skyscrapers full of calculating bureaucrats is completely obsolete. But the principle of leaving people as free as possible to communicate directly is sound. Planning can lead to distortions and can create unwelcome power-bases that must be counter-balanced. Planning should not be a fetish, but merely a system of support, when interpersonal communication becomes too complex.

It is obvious that all the activities in the first sector or sphere, general services, must be planned at a global level. Already, most of these services are planned. However, once we have gotten away from present-day systems – which will need planning – subsistence agriculture requires minimal planning. The actual production of most food in agrocentres is left directly to the neighbourhoods. Agriculture operating on the level of territories, (sub)continents or the planet (producing salt or spices say) can be planned with the same mechanism as the general services. The third sector or sphere represents a very necessary counter-weight against a possible

planning frenzy in the first.

The creative sphere, too, only needs minimal planning. The diversity of goods and services produced in this sector is so large and the activities so ephemeral that detailed planning could only happen after the event, which means it wouldn't be much different from what we now call the market. What this sector needs is a certain pool of resources (sourced from the other two sectors and from more basic branches of its own) that it can play with, without endangering social or ecological equilibria. This sector will be a mix of

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### **The infectiousness of small commodity production?**

*Is there a risk that capitalist relationships could arise again out of small-scale monetarised production, spreading from the sphere of creative enterprises? (This is a big concern in some parts of the left which demand completely moneyless exchange.) I think that there is no danger of this happening.*

*Firstly, the two other spheres both operate beyond commodity-exchange and the 'law' of value and they provide full existential security, so that any blackmailing with 'jobs' is impossible.*

*Secondly, there is no historical evidence that modern industrial capitalism automatically arises out of small commodity production. If that were true, capitalism would have originated in China, India or the Near East, where such conditions existed for thousands of years (much earlier than in Europe). Modern capitalism emerged with the creation of territorial states at the end of the 15th Century, and with their need for a cannon-building industry, which in turn was financed by the emerging banking systems of Florence, the Netherlands and Germany. Only these state-run enterprises were able to break down traditional small-scale commodity production, whose stagnation had been successfully guaranteed by guilds for hundreds of years. Shoe factories do not grow out of the neighbourhood cobbler's shop!*

*Thirdly, small commodity production need not be completely unregulated and can be contained within healthy limits. Ecological regulations must certainly apply, as well as minimum-wage conditions. Small commodity producers must also pay compensation ('taxes') for the use of communal goods and services, so that they don't turn into a parasitical 'free enterprise sphere' for extra-profits of informal oligarchies. As everybody's survival is amply cared for by subsistence and general services, a sphere of free association can really be a domain of free expression, not a sector where the law of the jungle applies. As we know, free enterprise is not free for those who must take any job just to survive: it's just the ideology of the exploiters and oppressors. Maybe even some elements of the guild system can be reactivated.*

supply- and demand-oriented enterprises that use all kinds of regulation, including markets, free distribution and planning. The attempt of some of the state-capitalist bureaucracies to plan or regulate the area of small businesses led to some of its most depressing and ridiculous results. (Cockshott and Cottrell are optimistic that even this sector, down to the improvised lemonade stand at the street corner, could easily be planned within a few minutes. They also suggest, that – unfortunately – socialist planning came too early to be feasible. And when it began to look feasible in the 1960s, the bureaucrats stopped computerised planning because they were afraid of losing their hold on power and privileges. The planning bureaucracy itself had now become one of the major sectors of the economy.)

Iterative, democratic and permanent planning, as described above, is very different from current capitalist and defunct socialist planning. There is no separate planning authority – planning is not a command-structure – but it is one of the general services that are at everybody's disposal. Most of it is already in existence. If we had to re-invent and re-establish all the current patterns of supply which have evolved historically, this would in fact be a Herculean effort. But all we have to do is to feed the existing supply webs into the computer and then simply modify them according to the new requirements of the commons. (To do this, the existing bar code system is useful.)

### **ELEMENTS OF A (GREEN) NEW DEAL OF ECO-SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION**

Currently there isn't sufficient awareness of the necessity for a comprehensive social, economic and political restructuring of our global system. By definition a crisis is a turning point in the capitalist project: we could get further exploitation and oppression, or we could move beyond capitalist domination. It is difficult to discover how strong and how prepared the forces of radical change really are. Assuming that such forces exist, some provisional, but plausible, proposals for specific action can be made.

Such proposals must be based on the present situation, not on imaginary revolutionary leaps. So they are reformist and gradual proposals that won't immediately change the capitalist system. They might

### **GAMBLING WITH SOCIAL CURRENCIES**

In November 1999 – at the same time as the awakening of the intelligent multitudes in Seattle – a number of researchers and activists from nine countries gathered in Buenos Aires. They participated in a meeting at which the Latin American Network of Solidarity Socioeconomy (RedLASES) was created. Everyone had come to see how our barter clubs worked, to gain first-hand knowledge of that 'social currency' we had created with the (naïve?) intention of steering the fate of desperate entrepreneurship and two-digit unemployment rates towards a radicalisation of democracy...

*It is true, we didn't manage to do it. We were wrong in thinking that capitalism's paradigm of scarcity could be overcome simply through the abundance represented by the barter fairs with social currencies. We mistook what we thought and believed in for what we needed people to believe in. We forget that Marxian truth that, in a class society, the dominant ideology is*



that of the dominant class. People wanted to have money in order to have things, to improve their standard of living – a legitimate desire. Without access to the mass media, we invested in academia as a means to diffuse our ideas – never a good bet for new ideas! We ended up fighting over minor questions, when the important thing was to show we were gambling on another model of development, a model which was not at all utopian, if one understood the importance of emitting and distributing another currency. Under pressure to present a 'model system', we were slow to absorb lessons coming from

other experiences. We failed to convey the systemic dimension of the crisis, and thus the need for a systemic solution. We failed in producing a real-time articulation between the social currency, on the one hand, and other initiatives such as self-managed cooperatives, fair trade and ethical consumption, micro-credit and participatory budgets, on the other.

But to say that we were 'wrong' would be even more naïve. We have undertaken an important process of evolution. We have learnt many lessons, and today the micro-credit/social currency nexus is still making history in the everyday lives of many collectively organised entrepreneurs, hand-in-hand with public policy. *This is no small feat.*

Our strategic gambles for the future lie in showing that solidarity economy will only be the *development model* that we hope for if we manage to bring together everything that is presently disconnected: self-managed cooperatives, fair trade, responsible consumption, participatory budget-making, solidarity finances and social currencies. We must gamble that *social currencies* will become

an instrument in the radicalisation of democracy; or else they won't change how we relate to each other in any significant way.

To that end, we have to overcome the cognitive obstacles that arrest the process of social transformation that our time demands. These obstacles include: the lack of comprehension that there is an *abundance* of available resources – for any purpose and practice – made inaccessible by the artificial scarcity in which we live; our resilient incompetence in finding modes of articulating differences in synergy, accepting the other and their practices as legitimately other; and, our limited concept of responsibility, which we need to abandon so as to recognise that *we are always responsible for our part and the whole.*

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even appear to be solutions to soften its contradictions and problems.

Evidently, postcapitalist change must begin at the centre of capitalist globalisation, in the United States. It is inconceivable that comprehensive postcapitalist exclaves can coexist with an intact power structure of global capitalism. Of course, elements can be developed, tested and prepared in certain niches (Europe, Japan, South America), but they must be tentative and temporary. They must be abandoned before they get mutilated and perverted by the debilitating pressure of world capital. As soon as they are forced into a defensive position, they will degenerate and ultimately be re-absorbed by the hegemonic system. At the same time they will have set a discouraging example and will reduce the chance of a definite breakthrough.

In the US the postcapitalist era will probably take on the – historically false, but who cares? – name of a ‘(Green) New Deal’. It is obvious that the Green New Deal, as proposed by Obama and some Green parties, is only meant to be Plan B for the rescue of capitalism. It’s not even meant to be a deal, i.e. a bargaining proposition for unions, state and bosses, but just a list of measures. But it’s still in its soft phase and can be defined in different ways – if there is enough pressure. Why not hitchhike on this vehicle and make it greener, newer and fairer? It will basically establish state management of an almost-stagnant ‘capitalism’, with a profit-rate below one percent. The stronghold of the old oligarchies of capital will slowly be eroded and their companies will be integrated into the *general services*. From the current 50 percent, the share of Gross Domestic Product allocated by the state will rise to 70 percent or more, and so determine the strategic factors of development.

This benign strategy (scenario A) is based on the ability of the working classes to make the other option – aggressive exploitation, steep rise of the profit rate, ecological and military risk-taking – less appealing for the global oligarchies. The new French style of class struggle – taking managers or owners as hostages, threatening to blow up factories, riots – plus global rigidity on salaries, could help to convince them. An additional strategy of discouragement, of an anti-economical war of attrition, could comprise the following behaviours:

- refusal to buy the new (energy-efficient, hybrid) cars, for there is no such thing as an ecological sustainable car – an electric car is also a nuclear car, or a coal-powered car;
- insisting on ecological products, standards and services;
- refusal to replace unnecessary household goods;
- refusal of suburban segregation – instead moving together to urban centres;
- making connections with farmers and building up subsistence networks, boycotting supermarkets and small grocers alike;
- creating territorial subsistence (‘transition towns’);
- refusal of additional work, slowing down work rhythms;
- insisting on free social services (education, health, transport, income);
- boycotting shopping centres;
- watching DVDs in neighbourhood centres (microcentres), preferring inner-city cinemas and boycotting multiplex cinemas in shopping malls;
- slow food, slow work, slow travel;
- reduction of commercial consumption, substituted by communal sharing;

- exchange of goods for free.

These mostly individual activities cannot replace collective action, but they can become a nutritious side dish and keep the ‘movement of discouragement’ (of economic recovery) alive in periods of relative social tranquillity. Collective action is dependent on a logic of events: it is path-dependent, and not all events are possible at any given time, even if theoretically correct and necessary. (Maybe at this point Shakespeare could be more helpful than Marx.) But we can be confident that many opportunities soon will arise for effective collective action. All of this could lead the capitalist machine into such a quagmire that scenario A would look relatively appetising.

The following proposals are all based on scenario A. Scenario B – a global showdown – could be forced upon us, though. The winning of which seems very improbable to me. The costs would be immense. It’s the old question: *socialism or barbarism?*

A Green New Deal would bring the state, the capitalists and the unions to a table. The central item of the Deal would be the ecological and social reconstruction of the US. The population of the United States is roughly 300 million, so we’d *theoretically* be dealing with 600,000 neighbourhoods, 15,000 boroughs or towns, 300 regions and 30 territories. As the territorial distribution of the population isn’t homogeneous and various geographical factors come into play, the effective numbers will be somewhat different. The creation of 600,000 sustainable neighbourhoods based on micro-agro subsistence might cost \$5 million each (not including the costs of resettling suburbanites), totalling \$3.6 trillion. The establishment of lively town centres might cost \$20 million each, another \$300 billion. (In some towns, almost no investment would be necessary, in others hundreds of millions.) All in all, we’re talking about \$4 trillion that must be invested over a number of years. Additional investment should go into the reanimation of the (sub)continental train-system. The creation or relocation of regional and territorial industries alongside train tracks would also cost billions of dollars. The insulation of buildings, local energy plants, eco-design of industrial goods would create a final micro-industrial boom before terminal stagnation. This promise could be important to get some of the more enlightened (green) capitalists on board.

As costs of living could be reduced by these schemes without any loss of quality of life, the Green New Deal programme could easily be financed out of current wages – let’s say ten percent. Of course, it could also be financed by taxes or the national debt, but this would only distort the situation, defer payment and trigger inflation. In a sense, the proletariat of the US would found a virtual cooperative that would be able to determine the use-value aspect of capitalist development. The organisation of this cooperative would be the existing state, or the tripartite Green New Deal Board running the programme of ecosocial reconstruction – in real-political terms this is the state. The annual wages of the 100 million US workers currently total \$3.7 trillion, so ten percent of this would be \$370 billion a year. Within ten years, the programme could be financed without creating a new debt bubble and risking runaway inflation. Realistically, the programme would start out with a three percent contribution from current wages, increasing annually thereafter until it reaches 20 percent or

more, after ten to twenty years. Industry, of course, would profit from lower wages – but it would have to accept social direction regarding what it produces (no more cars, but trains, buses, micro-agro trucks, cheap medicines etc.).

At the same time, a part of the Green New Deal fund would have to go towards similar projects in poor countries (in Africa, South America, Asia) to reduce the planetary divisions within the working class – the only hope for forming planetary-scale institutions for living harmoniously. At least \$100 billion would have to be paid in ‘reparations’ each year in return for the flow of resources from global South to North over the past 500 years (in addition to current foreign aid of \$20 billion). This figure seems insufficient, but if we assume that all other nations follow the US-example, poverty on the planet could be eradicated within a few years. What the currently poorer countries need, however, must be worked out more concretely.

The idea at the heart of the Green New Deal is that the goose that lays golden eggs should not be killed before it has laid its last egg. This follows Marx’s insight that the basis of a new form of society must always be created within the old. We cannot postulate an instant alternative to capitalism, jumping over the old mechanisms from one day to the next. Revolutions are just not feasible any more in our complex social systems. So, the Green New Deal programme outlined above must have the *form* of a genuine inter-class compromise: (small) profits will be made, wages will be earned, a green business-cycle is engineered. It is obvious that we (waged workers, farmers and so on) lay all of the golden eggs, but at the moment we are only able to lay them under the existing conditions, not under some imaginary non-value conditions. The Green New Deal is largely non-confrontational, laws are mostly obeyed and expropriations few and far between. Property, as long as it doesn’t self-destruct (as is happening in the current financial crisis), is respected. The future is not conquered, but bought. The *content* of the Deal – and only this makes it an interesting deal for the working class – is the construction of the material bases of a postcapitalist global society. For the capitalists it’s a desperate Deal, but considering the other options, it could still be their best. They always said that they’d be dead in the long run. And who knows how it’ll really turn out? It could still happen that we chip in those three percent or ten percent and get ripped off. There’s that risk in any real deal.

At the end of the programme, the ex-working classes would have the material basis of the three spheres of the commons at their disposal. We can throw off the chains of waged labour, the law of value and the rule of the oligarchs (as persons, they can be absorbed into the general population and live happily ever after)... *If all goes well*, of course!

I can understand that my proposal of *real dealing* as opposed to *staunch resistance* looks like a form of defeatism. This is not the case. It presupposes a position of strength. To get into such a position seems optimistic, at the moment. But: *there is no alternative*.

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### WALKING A NEW PATH

*What’s to come? No one can know.*

– Billy Bragg

Beginning in 1986, in Bolivia and neighbouring countries, economic structural adjustment was initiated by multilateral financial institutions, resulting in the privatisation of public companies.

In 1999, the Bolivian government privatised the water system of Cochabamba, Bolivia’s third largest city, and applied that policy nationwide. Over several months, we, the people, fought this policy under the umbrella of The Coalition for the Defence of Water and Life. People mobilised in the streets; the government responded with violence. In April 2000, after days of confrontations, the company was expelled and the law changed. The Water War, as it became known throughout the world, was the first popular victory in 18 years of neoliberalism in Bolivia, and it changed history.

Public management of the water company was then instituted in an attempt to clarify what ‘public’ means. However, our belief that we could manage our water resources better was naïve and mistaken. We couldn’t build a self-managed public company within a global context of privatisation. The Water War became not just about water but about what neoliberalism deprived us of: our right to participate in decision-making.

Throughout Bolivia and Latin America, people are working hard to replace the neoliberal system with new systems of government. Free-market philosophy has such a stranglehold on global economic development that new approaches are thwarted everywhere. We believe that one of our mistakes in re-visioning economic policies is that we always frame a ‘global economy’ when the people are building a different economy, one based on life’s realities, not capital. The media does not report these initiatives, so, they do not ‘exist’ in the formal world, but they are happening nonetheless. We are walking a new path that has many problems, both known and unknown. While we have made mistakes about what could be done, we know that our life of the past 20 years is not the way forward.

**Marcela Olivera** and **Oscar Olivera** are water-commons and labour activists based in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Oscar is author of *¡Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia*



**IMPASSE: TIME SUSPENDED**

We speak of an *impasse* in order to characterise the current political situation. It is an elusive image, hard to theorise but greatly present in the different situations we are experiencing. As a concept we wish to construct, it requires a *perceptive* practice that takes us beyond the representations used by the language of politics, essay, philosophy or social sciences; and a sensibility that will drive us towards this *suspended* time, in which all acts waver, but everything that must be thought of once again occurs.

The notion of *impasse* aspires to naming a reality whose signs are not evident, and it is put forward as the key to comprehend the atmosphere in which we live. In doing so, we recur to a set of conversations that aim at investigating what articulations of the discursive, affective and political imaginary order enable activity *in* the present. A present that, as we said, is revealed as *suspended* time: between the irony of the eternal return of the same and the infinitesimal preparation of an historical variation.

*Impasse* is above all an ambiguous temporality, where the dynamics of creation that have stirred up an increasing social antagonism since the beginning of the 90s – whose implications can be witnessed in the capacity to destroy the main machinery of neoliberalism in large parts of the continent of Latin America – have apparently come to a halt.

We talk of an *apparent* halt because, as we shall see further on, it is not true that the antagonistic perspective has been absolutely dissolved, neither is collective dynamism paralysed, not by far. On the contrary: in *impasse*, elements of counter-power and capitalist hegemony coexist, according to *promiscuous* forms that are hard to unravel.

Ambiguity thus becomes the decisive characteristic of this period and manifests itself in a double dimension: as a time of crisis with no visible outcome; and as a stage where heterogeneous social logics are superimposed, without any single one imposing its reign in a definite way.

The truth is that the feeling that political activity from below (as we came to know it) is stagnating and lying somewhat dormant acquires a whole variety of meanings when we regard reality in Latin America and a great part of the Western world. The complexity of situations, that do not cease mutating due to the global crisis, urges us to consider this *impasse* as a concept – perhaps momentary, maybe lasting – that is open to all possible shades and drifts.

In *impasse*, time passes by without faith in progressivism and indifference to all totalisation. *Suspension* corresponds to a feeling of immobilisation/incomprehension of time, of an incapacity to seize the possibilities of a time hounded by all kinds of question marks. It is a time moved by a dialectics with no finality. However, while it rejects the argument that we stand before a new *end of history* (as was promoted a decade ago), there spreads a mood in which the *exhaustion of a historical sense* coexists with a splendid rebirth of the *already-lived*.

In what sense do we speak of historic exhaustion? In that possibilities seem to multiply to infinity, but the *meaning of an action* becomes unfathomable, it dissipates. The possibility of opening (the opening of possibility) that is presented ‘as close at hand’, this attempt at an *absolute* question (a kind of *and why not?*), turns, in the *tempo* of *impasse*, into a dynamics of stagnation.

Finally, what do we mean when we speak of a return of the *already-lived*? A phantasmatic economy that drapes



# Disquiet in the impasse

*Disquiet in the Impasse is an exclusive extract for Turbulence from a text of the same name, prepared by Colectivo Situaciones for their forthcoming edited volume, Conversaciones en el Impasse [trans. Conversations in the Impasse] (Tinta Limón, 2009). The text is part of a dialogue with those who are interviewed in the book: Suely Rolnik, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, León Rozitchner, Sandro Mezzadra, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Toni Negri, Peter Pál Pelbart, Santiago López Petit, Michael Hardt and Arturo Escobar. The excerpt published here, however, also functions as a stand-alone text which can circulate far and wide; not as a way of producing a 'group statement' separated from the threads of other conversations that permeate it, but as a response to a need for spaces for collective elaboration over a present that seems depotentialised whenever it does not acknowledge the value of the struggles of the last decade and a half. Here, Situaciones propose impasse as a concept with which to read the present Latin American situation. An ambiguous, promiscuous moment where the 'victories' of social movements in de-instituting neoliberal governance has not managed to replace it with something new, but created a confused grey zone where transformative power and conciliation, emancipation and recuperation go hand in hand. A limbo present where the past and potential futures become so entangled that it takes a special work to identify the vectors that might lead out of it.*

the present in memory, so that the past returns as pure remembrance, tribute or commemoration. This *return of the same* as memory presents itself as a *closure* in the face of a question that *opened a new time* and was, nevertheless, left disfigured. Disfigured in the sense that one tried to close it with the historical answers of the already-thought, neutralising it as a space of problematisation. And, yet, it persists, latent or postponed as unresolved tension. Thus, an incessant game of frustrations and expectations emerges in the *impasse*.

**GOVERNMENTALITY AND NEW GOVERNANCE**

From dictatorship to the triumph of neoliberalism – as part of a process that

can be perceived across Latin America – we are experiencing, in Argentina, the establishment of a new type of government, whose operation no longer depends on the unique and pre-existing sovereignty of the state, but rather overflows in infinite instances of management originating from contingent couplings that can intervene in any hypothesis of conflict. The *novelty* resides in a permanent invention of political, legal, market, assistance and communication mechanisms that are articulated each time in order to deal with specific situations. Foucault calls this form of rooting of the government in society *governmentality*. It is the incorporation of monetary mechanisms, of mechanisms of administration and public opinion, media

influence and the regulation of urban life that renders neoliberalism a form of immanent control over lives, their calculation and their market disposition; while, at the same time, it takes the development of liberties and initiatives as a supreme value. However, in Latin America this new government regime presented a singularity: forms of counter-insurgent terror between the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s had a definitive role in its instauration. From that moment, the state is no longer the most consistent sovereign synthesis of society and blends in as an actor amongst us, inside the operation of more complex mechanisms of government (*governmentalisation of the state*).

We believe that due to the collective experiences that emerged in the context of social movements from the beginning of the 1990s until the early years of the new century – and subsequently caused a displacement of the ways of governing in many of the region's countries, in the sense that they forced the interpretation of certain critical nuclei manifested by these new insurgencies – a point of inflection inside the paradigm of neoliberal governmentality was generated.

We will call this inflection *new governance*. It is formed by the irruption of the social dynamics that questioned the legitimacy of hardcore neoliberalism and the subsequent coming to power of ‘progressive’ governments in the Southern



Cone. Governments that were determined, in different ways and intensities, by the impact of the *new social protagonism* in the alteration of the purely neoliberal regime. Here we must stress the sense of sequence: it was the de-instituting power of these movements that challenged and brought to crisis the financial mechanisms, mechanisms of subordinated social assistance, unlimited expropriation of resources and consolidated racisms (of neoliberal governmentality); and that, in turn, allowed, in one way or the other, the coming to power of 'progressive' governments. The new governance can be explained by this conjunction of dynamics.

**By the neologism de-instituting we have tried to convey the meaning of the Spanish *destituyente*. A power which is, in a way, the opposite of instituent: that doesn't create institutions, but rather vacates them, dissolves them, empties them of their occupants and their power.**

Amidst this crisis, the movements and experiences of a new radicalism also questioned the neoliberal administration of labour and all things common (resources, land, public possessions, knowledge, etc.). These dynamics brought about an attempt at a – however partial – social crossing of the state (as an apparatus, but even more as a *relation*); a state that is already a form-in-crisis. Far from constituting new political models to be copied, the innovations that were put to practice appeared – where they had the opportunity to grow – as what they are: tactical sizing-ups in a dispute for the redefinition of the relation between power and movements.

Because, if amongst us 'hardcore' neoliberalism was able to define itself as the effort to channel and synthesise the social in the sphere of the market (through the general privatisation and marketisation of existence, nature and the state and institutions through outsourcing), the new social protagonism and its de-instituting vocation dealt with the violence of this synthesis, returning to the public sphere the political density that the purely mercantile treatment amputated from it, determining the expansion of a true *difference* in the political scene.

So, the new governance presupposes the increasing complexity of the administration of the social, installed since the end of the dictatorship. However, its novelty lies in that social movements aim – with varying success – at *determining* norms, orientations and dynamics of government (state and non-state), in a space that is also permanently disputed. We cannot achieve a definite and irreversible positive assessment of its actions from such a novel character. Rather, we realise that the plasticity and ambiguity of these processes is enormous, for they are subordinated, by nature, to the ups and downs of political struggle.

From this point on, we are interested in analysing what happens regarding this new governance, the specific processes that limit and/or broaden its democratic dynamics each time. For that, we must take into consideration two dimensions. On one hand, the 'crisis of social movements', that was formulated at an early stage by the collective *Mujeres Creando* [Women Creating], was translated to a great extent as a difficulty to favour and deepen innovative policies in the institutional sphere and the dynamics of movements themselves. On the other, the new governance insinuated in this encounter of heterogeneous dynamics was based on

the partial and paradoxical recognition of the collective enunciations that emerged in the crisis. As a result, these expressions were recoded by institutions as mere demands, defusing their disruptive and transforming aspect.

The excess produced by the more novel social experiences of the last decade has not found enduring modes of *public autonomous expression*. However, a modality of this surplus of invention persists under premises that could possibly be taken into account by various current instances of government. In this sense, the postulate that has inhibited political repression in various countries of the continent becomes comprehensible; likewise the hypothesis that it is not worthwhile to keep appealing to the discourse of adjustment and privatisation. Although both can be considered 'negative statements' insofar as they translate as prohibition what had emerged as a de-instituting opening, at the same time they display the enduring character of their implications when they manage to be perceived as inevitable axiomatic principles.

Thus, the marks that the crisis (with its main actors) has inscribed in the institutional tissue are still visible today, amidst a process of normalisation and weakening of the movements themselves. And this persistence is presented as a game of *partial recognitions* with variable effects (reparatory, compensatory, confiscating) that, nevertheless, exclude the specific perspective of the *social reappropriation of what is common* that has emerged from the agenda of movements on a regional scale.

Let us repeat: this moment is characterised by ambiguity. The democratic statements that survive the circumstances from whence they emerged are left submitted to new interpretations by the disputing forces, to the point that their deployment no longer depends on the subjects that conceived them, but on whoever presently acquires the capacity to adjust them to their own purposes. Thus, the scene is like a game of mirrors, in which we all question the fate of such premises, while the positions never cease to multiply. For example, we cannot compare the experiment of the Single Party of the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela with the dilemmas that Morales faces with the reactionary counter-offensive; just as situations as fragile as that of Paraguay do not resemble those of other countries – such as Ecuador – that have achieved constituent processes. Neither can we put on an equal footing the military and paramilitary advance in Chiapas, the incapacity of the Brazilian Workers' Party to create a candidacy that is not Lula's, or the narrowing down of the number of interlocutors that leave the political scene of Argentina completely hollow, inside as well as outside the government.

The weakening of the more virtuous tendencies that characterise the new governance has determined the blocking of its spirit of innovation, thus giving way to the time of stagnation in which we are submerged: the impasse.

#### NEW GOVERNANCE AND GOOD GOVERNMENT

With the slogan 'rule by obeying' (*mandar obedeciendo*), the Zapatistas sought to redefine, in a fair way, the relation of power from below with the instances of government, once the occupation of the state as a privileged means of social change had been dismissed. 'Rule by obeying' thus turned into a synonym of another formula: that of 'good govern-

ment'. They were also the first ones to attempt a dialogue with the local and national government following the armed uprising in Chiapas, with the San Andres Dialogues. Under the impression of this failure, the Zapatistas manifested their distrust towards the more recent wave of so-called 'progressive' or 'left-wing' governments in the region, and relaunched, with the *Otra Campaña*, their calling to those below, and to the social and autonomous left. What were the implications of the fact that Evo Morales finished his inaugural address by saying that he intended to 'rule by obeying'? What did the use of this political slogan in a situation as different as the Bolivian one mean? Firstly, it pointed out the weight of the social movements that, in their mobilising and destabilising power, forced a 'beyond' to representative forms of government. However, secondly, it highlighted the paradox that those same movements that have turned disobedience into their platform of political action, are now the basis of a new governance that has been in formation since then. In Bolivia, 'rule by obeying' was applied to the project of coexistence between, on the one hand, those powerful social movements that have been confronting neoliberalism and racism for decades and, on the other, a set of transnational corporations and political actors that are relevant in the struggle over the exploitation of key (natural-social) resources for Bolivia's participation in the world economy.

So, the content of 'rule by obeying' emerges from the interplay between the 'new governance' and the Zapatista idea of 'good government' that is deployed in the Councils of Good Government. Rather than being two opposed hypotheses, both try to think of the issue of government in relation to constituent power from below, when they are not crystallised as irreconcilable polarities. And they are proof of how a communitarian element such as 'rule by obeying' has turned into an element that is radically contemporary when reflecting on new political hypotheses.

However, the Zapatistas have realised that, in Mexico, this dialectic between governments and movements could not work; this failure thrusts movements into a new phase of silence and, some times, a substantial reconversion of their strategies.

What happens when certain tendencies to 'rule by obeying' allow for a new attempt to permeate the state, inaugurating a dynamics of 'new governance'? We said that social movements (and now we are referring more precisely to specific subjects, organised around embodied experimental struggles) were left without an 'autonomous public expression'. The transversal plane of political production and elaboration that emerged during the more street-located phase of the crisis does not exist any more, or can only be verified fleetingly, impeding the construction of pragmatics that would deploy the conquered premises in an emancipatory way.

So, in impasse we observe the exhaustion of a certain modality of antagonism, be it in its multitudinous and de-instituting version, or in its capacity to inspire new (post-state) institutions. This decline in antagonistic tension allowed for the relegation of a set of dilemmas formulated by struggles regarding waged labour, self-management, reappropriation of factories and natural resources, political representation, the forms of deliberation and decision-making, the ways of life in the city, communication, food sovereignty,

struggle against impunity and repression. This can be considered a sign of the relative incapacity of the 'movements' (that means, *us*) to play in a versatile way in the new situation. Versatility that not only (or fundamentally) refers to an eventual participation in the 'political/conjunctural' game, or to insisting on a clash with no destination (in the sense that it lacks anchorage), but above all to the possibility of creating independent areas from which to read the process in an autonomous way. To this end, only the political maturity of the movements can provide the tactical capacity to render autonomy a lucid perspective during moments of great *ambivalence*, and put its multiple dimensions to play. However, the democratising potential of social movements has remained suspended, a prisoner to the canons of *economicism* (that consider the increase in consumption as the only element to be taken into account) or confined to a strictly *institutionalist* dimension, with which the new governance has often been identified.

However, the impasse is also constituted by another kind of indefiniteness that emerges from the exhaustion of the inherited forms of domination and the confirmation of certain invariants that underpin domination as such. Particularly, the repositioning of forms of neoliberal administration of labour under a developmentist narrative, which not only impedes the better use of the balance that movements have deployed on this issue, but also de-problematizes narratives that coexist very well with new dynamics of accumulation that inhibit the broadening of the democratic possibility of the use of collective goods.

## The excess produced by the more novel social experiences of the last decade has not found enduring modes of public autonomous expression

#### LATIN AMERICA: TRAVERSING THE CRISIS

Thus, the current situation in Latin America makes two contributions to the critical reinterpretation of the crisis that affects the global scene. On the one hand, the overflow of images that anticipated the now generalised disaster of neoliberalism (especially in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina); and, on the other hand, having exposed the way in which the constitution of a political subjectivity from below allows for the possibility of a 'democratic traversing' of the crisis.

However, this interesting duplicity has been translated in a *neo-developmental* way by many governments of the continent who, while assuming the scenario of crisis, extract from it arguments that promote the reinstatement of a state-national imaginary plagued by the regressive yearning for *wage* forms. (The explicit or implicit critique of the control exercised by the wage over social reproduction being, in our opinion, one of the richest characteristics of the revolt.)

The lack of subtlety in the discourses that shape the current representatives of the ruling party in Argentina can be attributed to their insistence on abstractly opposing elements that are actually not antagonistic: 'liber-



alism or national development', 'market or state', 'economy or politics'. Although it provides immediate legitimacy and distributes the roles in each scene, this way of expressing conflict entails the risk of re-establishing 'political' neoliberalism by evading all critical reflection on the ways in which institution and competition, private and public, democracy and consumption are articulated. The refusal to construct a singular diagnosis and the incapacity to create original interpretations of the nature of the contemporary crisis lead to policies that cannot describe the current challenge.

Thus, impasse is superimposed on the world crisis of capitalism: while capital tries to redefine new alignments for its reproduction, the global dimension of the debate seems to be focusing on the evaluation of the implications of a renewed policy of state intervention. The renewal of this old binarism implies the absence of rationalities that manage to express the power resulting from successive and recent cycles of struggle.

### MYTHOLOGUES

The struggles fought against neoliberalism in Latin America during the past long fifteen years are inconceivable without the development of movements that readopt or reinterpret an indigenous world, native cultures and a myriad of mythological elements that, having been subordinated for centuries to the colonial West, form part of a broader potential to *fabulate* the present.

The ambivalent existence of those mythological elements is given by the fact that they simultaneously nurture the imagination with new forms of administering everything common and the autonomy of the social; and, also, they operate – in *reverse* – as a way of subordinating populations to the national developmental paradigm. Neo-developmentalism stimulates an imagery of reconstruction of the social ties linked to full employment, and at the same time it has sustained itself through precarious labour: many mythological elements participate today in complex hybrids that render them functional to these dynamics.

What to conclude from the repositioning of forms of labour regarding economies, such as that of textiles, which are supported by the so-called 'slave labour' of clandestine workshops that mix cooperative relations and methods coming from the native cultures of the

Bolivian altiplano with criteria of capitalist valorisation? Or the exploitation of the skills and customs of the *quinteras* and *quinteros*, Bolivian migrants that produce a great part of the fruit and vegetables that are consumed in the metropolis of Buenos Aires today?

Are these communitarian (linguistic-affective) elements, in a post-modern (post-communitarian?) assemblage, *reversed* and used as a source of new hierarchies and forms of exploitation? What happens when these same mythical-cultural elements form part of the dynamics of creation of stereotypes and stigmas that justify the policy of the city's social division in new ghettos and areas of labour over-exploitation? Or is it directly included in the calculation of the *cheapening* of labour?

So how do these communitarian traditions coexist with the *modern*, ever strong – and today omnipresent – Argentinean myth of the 'glory years' of import substitution, when at the same time the labour market is currently recomposed by elements that are both precisely *not modern* (hierarchies formed by race and skin colour, etc.) and *post-modern* (such as those mobilised in large parts of the service economy)?

In response to the multiplicity of attempts opened by social experimentation faced with crisis, the glorification of labour after the currency devaluation interprets the 2001 Argentine uprising, and the open situation of 2002–2003, as a catastrophe that must be exorcised, and once again turns unemployment into a threat and an argument of legitimisation in view of the possibility of a new devaluation.

We mentioned that the refusal of labour and the recovery of mythological elements constitute, among others, the ingredients of a political and conjunctural capacity to *fabulate*. Included as displaced tension in the ambiguities of the present, they form part of processes of constituting subjectivity in the impasse.

Today, that *refusal of labour* (its politicisation, its rupture-creating materiality, its other image of happiness) is a vague texture in the peripheral neighbourhoods (those who are in the city centre as well as in the old 'industrial cordons'). It is included in the urban calculation of many who would rather participate in more or less illegal and/or informal

networks than get a stable job. It can be seen in many of the strategies of the youth who do not imagine the possibility of employment, but indeed so many other ways of subsisting and risking their lives. For others, it still persists as a search for self-managing or cooperative solutions in order to solve everyday existence. Likewise, de-getthoising and de-racialising tendencies integrate the city's liveliest communitarian and counter-cultural moments. They are *minority* components of an extended diffusion, an active compound that demands great attention.

### THE CRAFTS OF POLITICS

So, within the promiscuity that characterises the impasse's muddy terrain, what is happening with radical politics?

Although the most explicit merit of the practices and enunciations that were spread in Argentina at the beginning of this century (autonomy, horizontality, street confrontation, insurrection) was to

reveal the inconsistency of the previous political institutions, there was another, equally decisive

side to that new social protagonism: the opening of a broad field of experimentation, permeated by all kinds of questions and assertions. That is why today, when we ask ourselves about the present situation of politics, it is essential to keep in mind the extensive process of recoding the social that has caused the relative closure of said experimental space.

One of the layers that form the impasse, perhaps one of the hardest ones to analyse, implies the existence of discursive and identitarian fragments that belong to the memory of struggles with which we have learned to conjugate the verb to *do* politics. This appealing to certain formulas and symbolologies of traditions of combat (even the more recent ones) has contributed to the reorientation of processes of extreme conflictuality (openly untameable) according to polarising dynamics that underestimate the sensible richness of antagonism, reducing the horizon of collective invention. When political difference is reconstituted in terms of binary options, the constituting experience ends up being replaced by a codified representation of the same.

Even so, we can distinguish moments of decodification and attempts at autonomous interpretation parting from efforts of relative subtraction that perforate the

polarising calling. They are not experiences to be idealised, but rather active situations that, producing their own languages, create lateral drifts that try to evade the dominant code, the one that is articulated with the paradigm of government and establishes the monolingualism of capital.

We refer to processes in which the coexistence of a plurality of elaborations of meaning, living territories, and significant ties, lead to unique and unyielding compositions. In this sense, the production of intelligibility overflows the field of discourse and opens up to a much broader diagram (affective, imaginary, bodily), which can be observed at the level of great public and media visibility, as well as on the streets, in domestic-informal economies, and even in our physiological organs (eyes, brain, kidneys).

Antagonism has not disappeared. It has been led to polarisation, but at the same time it has been dispersed in mud and promiscuity, to the point of being played as a possibility in every situation. That is why we can insist on the true political value of collectives (the more inadequate they are in relation to the surrounding discourse, the greater this value is) that refuse to dissolve in the common sense that is articulated in the polarising process.

If it is so hard for us to figure out what political intervention is today, it is because of the ambiguity and the vertigo that make any categorical assertion impossible and render the exercise of evaluation even more complex. We must not react with conservatism, restoring the certainties that remain standing but, rather, immerse ourselves in this ambivalent medium, filled with very real potentialities that never manifest themselves but impede the definite closing of 'reality'.

Perhaps politics is, more and more, this inflection through which we give consistency to the situations in which we find ourselves, discovering the capacity to *fabulate* on our account. This labour requires a delicate craft.

Translated by Anna-Maeve Holloway.

■ Colectivo Situaciones [trans. Situations Collective] are a Buenos Aires-based militant research collective with a long track record of intervention in Argentine social movements, including work with the unemployed workers' movement of Solano; HJJS, the organisation of children of the military dictatorship's 'disappeared'; and Creciendo Juntos, an alternative school run by militant teachers. [www.situaciones.org](http://www.situaciones.org)

## Antagonism has not disappeared

### HOW MUCH IS THAT BLACK SWAN IN THE WINDOW?

Asked to reflect on how I got it wrong ten years ago, my first thought was to go back to my youthful certainty thirty years ago. Back then Jimmy Carter was US president, and my radical friends and I were sure that he was so far to the right the country couldn't possibly go any further. There was no way Ronald Reagan could possibly be elected president! We figured Carter would coast to re-election, and then some kind of social democratic quasi-left, probably green, would challenge the Democrat/Republican duopoly in 1984... We got that seriously wrong.

We started *Processed World* magazine in 1981 and imagined we'd be part of an upheaval of workers at the point of



circulation. Bank workers, office temps, claims processors, secretaries and programmers would somehow concur that the work we all did was utterly pointless and self-defeating, and through widespread tactics of disinformation and disruptive sabotage, help scuttle the capitalist system. Wrong again.

Chastened by misdiagnosing the rightward march of US politics, never anticipating the collapse of the USSR or anything big that happened in the past quarter century, I stopped prognosticating long before ten years ago. Still, I went to Seattle for the WTO protests, pretty sure it wouldn't amount to much, and got that wrong. Afterwards I went to Washington DC for the 2000 IMF/World Bank protests, but didn't expect it to be too effective – and got that *right!* I

didn't have high hopes for the new anti- or alter-globalisation movement, even if I was a cautious participant and supporter.

I never expected 9/11 – but when it happened, I wasn't surprised, and not nearly as horrified as most people I knew. Immediately, I recalled a novel by Harvey Swados, *Standing Fast*, which follows an ultra-left group (loosely based on CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya's Johnson-Forest Tendency) from some internecine struggles in 1934 all the way to 1963, when JFK is assassinated. One of its most compelling themes is the function of war in disrupting and dispersing social networks that have become crucial backbones of struggle. When the US entered World War II, a great number of people were in active unions, parties, groupuscules; the war had the effect of taking all those social groups and throwing them in the air like confetti. When they fell to the ground everyone was in a new place: having to start all over again, but on new terrain (geographically, politically and psychologically).

Similarly, in 2001 there was a great deal of ferment globally. Though 'another world is possible' was far from a coherent political agenda, it was gathering steam before being temporarily derailed by the recharged imperial belligerence of a wounded beast.

In 2009 global climate change is happening apace, and the Big Crisis of capitalism is here, but it's not here either. Can capitalism muddle along for another year, another century? It's easy to say the sky is falling (it probably is), but we can't know the future. We especially cannot know the efficacy of our own behaviors, our own choices. Without certainty of 'success', we still have to engage. History is ours to make, one day, one year, one generation at a time.

**Chris Carlsson** is a San Francisco-based writer and activist. His most recent book is *Nowtopia: How Pirate Programmers, Outlaw Bicyclists, and Vacant-lot Gardeners are Inventing the Future Today*. [www.chriscarlsson.com](http://www.chriscarlsson.com)



'Everything must change so that everything can remain the same'

## Notes on Obama's energy plan



The Bush administration's energy policy, with its evasions and invasions, has led to poverty, war and environmental destruction. But will Obama's policy really be substantially different? Will this be change we can believe in? *Turbulence* asked **George Caffentzis**, a seasoned analyst of energy politics, to investigate.

Is President Obama's oil/energy policy going to be different from the Bush Administration's? My immediate answer to this question will be a firm *No*, followed by a more hesitant *Yes*. The reason for this ambivalence is simple: the failure of the Bush Administration to radically change the oil industry in its neoliberal image has made a transition from an oil-based energy regime inevitable, and the Obama Administration is responding to this inevitability. We are, consequently, in the midst of an epochal shift and so must revise our assessments of the political forces and debates of the past with some circumspection.

Before I examine both sides of this answer, we should be clear as to the two sets of oil/energy policies being discussed.

The Bush policy paradigm's premise is all too familiar: the 'real' energy crisis has nothing to do with the natural limits on energy resources, but it is due to the constraints on energy production

imposed by government regulation and the OPEC cartel. First, energy production must be liberalised and the corrupt, dictatorial and terrorist-friendly OPEC cartel dissolved by US-backed coups (Venezuela) and invasions (Iraq and Iran). Then, according to the Bush folk, the free market can finally impose realistic prices on the energy commodities (which ought to be about half of the present ones). This in turn will stimulate the production of adequate supplies and a new round of spectacular growth of profits and wages.

Obama's oil/energy policy, during the campaign and after his election, has an equally familiar premise. As he presented on January 27, 2009, 'I will reverse our dependence on foreign oil while building a new energy economy that will create millions of jobs... America's dependence on oil is one of the most serious threats that our nation has faced. It bankrolls dictators, pays for nuclear proliferation and funds both sides of our struggle against terrorism.' In the long-term, this policy includes: a 'clean tech' Venture

**Obama treats oil in a mercantile way, as the vital stuff of any contemporary economy, similar to the way gold was conceptualised in the 16th and 17th centuries**

Capital Plan; Cap and Trade; Clean Coal Technology development; stricter automobile gas-mileage standards; and cautious support for nuclear power electricity generation.

The energy policy he outlined in his budget proposal is supportive of a peculiar 'national security' autarky. (This emphasis on self-sufficiency is all the more peculiar when it comes from an almost mythically pro-globalisation figure like Obama.) Its logic is implicitly something like this: if the US were not so dependent on foreign oil, there would be less need for US troops to be sent to foreign territories to defend the US' access to energy resources. Obama treats oil in a mercantile way, as the vital stuff of any contemporary economy, similar to the way gold was conceptualised in the 16th and 17th centuries. Yet mercantilism has long been definitively abandoned as a viable political economy. In effect, he is calling for an autarkic import-substitution policy for oil while he is leading the main force for anti-autarkic globalisation throughout the planet.

### A FIRM NO

In Obama's paradigm the key question for oil policy is US dependency on foreign resources. Such a prism obscures the consequence of the present system of commodity production. A failure to start from the simple fact that oil is a basic commodity and the oil industry is devoted to making profits leads to two significant misrecognitions. Firstly, the US government is essentially involved in guaranteeing the functioning of the world market and the profitability of the oil industry and not access to the hydrocarbon stuff itself. Secondly, energy politics involves classes in conflict and not only competing corporations and conflicting nation states.

In brief, it leaves out the central players of contemporary life: workers, their demands and struggles. Somehow, when it comes to writing the history of petroleum, capitalism, the working class, and class conflict are frequently forgotten in a way that never happens with oil's earthy hydrocarbon cousin, coal. Once we put profitability and working class struggle into the oil story, the plausibility of the National Security paradigm lessens, since the US military would be called upon to defend the profitability of international oil companies against the demands of workers around the world, even if the US did not import one drop of oil.

US troops will have to fight wars aplenty in the years to come, if the US government tries to continue to play – for the oil industry in particular and for capitalism in general – the 21st century equivalent of the 19th century British Empire. For what started out in the 19th century as a tragedy, will be repeated in the 21st, not as farce, but as catastrophe. At the same time, it is not possible for the US government to 'retreat' from its role, without jeopardising the capitalist project itself. As his efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan initially indicate, Obama and his Administration show no interest in leading an effort to abandon this imperialist, market-policing role.

Thus Obama, along with the other supporters of the National Security paradigm for oil policy, are offering up a questionable connection between energy import-substitution and the path of imperialism. As logicians would say, energy dependence might be a sufficient condition of imperialist oil politics, but it is not a necessary one. This is Obama's dilemma then: he cannot reject the central role of the US in the control of the world market's basic





commodity; whilst at the same time, inter- and intra-class conflict in the oil producing countries is making the US's hegemonic role impossible to sustain. Therefore, as is implied in his approval of a troop 'surge' in Afghanistan and the hunkering down of the US military in huge bases outside of Iraqi cities, Obama's oil policy will be quite similar to Bush's.

#### A HESITANT YES

Up until now my argument has been purely negative, i.e., though Obama's oil policy and Bush's are radically different rhetorically, they will have much in common in practice. Obama's goal of 'energy independence' will not affect the military interventions generated by the efforts to control oil production and accumulate oil profits throughout the world. These interventions will intensify as the capitalist crisis matures and as the short-term, spot market price fluctuates wildly from the long-term price, and geological, political and economic factors create an almost apocalyptic social tension.

I do, however, see a major difference between Bush and Obama. The former was a *status quo* petroleum president, while the latter is an energy-transition president. In other words, Obama is in charge of a capitalist energy transition. It is similar to the successful one that, under Roosevelt, substituted oil and natural gas for coal in many places throughout the productive system in the 1930s and 1940s, and the unsuccessful one, under Carter, that failed to (re-)substitute coal, solar and nuclear power for oil and gas in the US of the 1970s.

Eighty years ago, capital began to realise that coal miners were so well organised that they could threaten the whole machine of accumulation. This was an experience felt in the British General Strike of 1926 and the coal mining struggle in the US of the 1930s that led to the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Miners had to be put on the defensive by the launching of a new energy foundation to capitalist production. Then, forty years on, President Carter despaired of putting the struggle of the oil-producing proletariat (especially in Iran) back in the bottle.

In the face of the failure of the Bush Administration's attempt to impose a neoliberal regime on the oil producing countries, the Obama Administration must now lead a partial exit from the oil industry. It will not be total, of course. After all, the transition from coal to oil was far from total and, if anything, there is now more coal mined than ever before. Likewise, the transition from renewable energy (wind, water, forests) in the late 18th century to coal was also far from total. Indeed, this is not the first time that

capitalist crisis coincides with energy transition, as a glance at the previous transitions in the 1930s and 1970s indicate. It will be useful to reflect on these former transitions to assess the differences between Bush's and Obama's oil policies. The different phases of the transition from oil to alternative sources include:

- (1) repressing the expectations of the oil producing working class for reparations for a century of expropriation;
- (2) supporting financially, legally and/or militarily the alternative energy 'winners';
- (3) verifying the compatibility of the energy provided with the productive system; and
- (4) blocking any revolutionary, anti-capitalist turn in the transition.

These phases offer the kind of challenges that were largely irrelevant to the Bush Administration, since it was resolutely fighting the very premise of a transition: the power of the inter- and intra-class forces that were undermining the neoliberal regime. Consequently, they will provide a rich soil for discussion, debate and planning in this period.

The title of this piece applies to the 'Firm No' side of my argument in a quite simple sense: the interests of the world market and the oil/energy companies will be paramount in the deployment of US military power. It also applies to my 'Hesitant Yes' argument though this time less directly – for the ultimate purpose of the Obama administration is (*pace* Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck) to preserve the capitalist system in very perilous times. It just so happens, however, that the 'everything' that must change is more extensive than had ever been thought before.

In regards to the first phase of the transition, we should recognise that there will be inter-class resistance to it from those who stand to lose. Of course, most 'oil capitalists' will be able to transfer their capital easily to new areas of profitability, although they will be concerned about

## Let's remember that the last period when capitalism was operating under a renewable energy regime, from the 16th to the end of the 18th century, was hardly an era of international peace and love

the value of the remaining oil 'banked' in the ground. This transition has been theorised, feared and prepared for by Third World (especially Saudi Arabian) capitalists ever since the first oil crisis of the 1970s. But what is to be done with respect to the oil producing workers? After all, the 'down side' of Hubbert's Curve could, potentially, enable payback after a century of exploitation, forced displacements and enclosures in the oil regions.

The capitalist class as a whole is unwilling to pay reparations to the peoples in the oil-producing areas whose land and life has been so ill-used. Oil capital's resistance to reparations is suggested by its horror, for example, at paying the Venezuelan state oil taxes and rents that will go into buying back land for *campesinos* whose parents or grandparents were expropriated decades ago. Capital wants to control the vast transfer of surplus value being envisioned in these discussions of transition, and without a neoliberal solution it is not clear that it can. Moreover, will the working class be a docile echo to capital's concerns? Shouldn't reparations be paid to the people of the Middle East, Indonesia, Mexico, Venezuela, Nigeria and countless other sites of petroleum

extraction-based pollution? Will they simply stand still and watch their only hope for the return of stolen wealth snuffed out?

As far as the second phase of transition is concerned we should recognise that alternative energies have been given an angelic cast by decades of 'alternativist' rhetoric contrasting them with blood-soaked hydrocarbons and apocalypse-threatening nuclear power. But let's remember that the last period when capitalism was operating under a renewable energy regime, from the 16th to the end of the 18th century, was hardly an era of international peace and love. The genocide of the indigenous Americans, the African slave trade and the enclosures of the European peasantry occurred with the use of 'alternative' renewable energy. The view that a non-hydrocarbon future operated under a capitalist form of production will be dramatically less antagonistic is questionable. We saw an example of this kind of conflict of interest in the protests of Mexican city dwellers over the price of corn grown by Iowa farmers that was being sold for biofuel instead of for 'homofuel' (fuel for *Homo sapiens*).

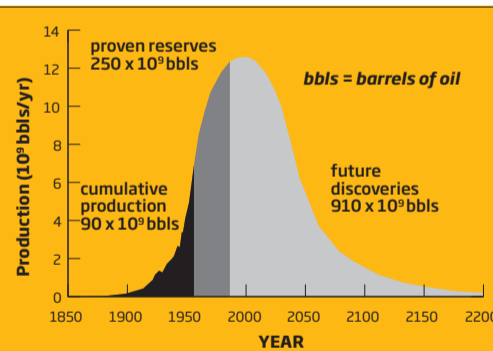
In terms of phase three, we should remember that every energy source is not equally capable of generating surplus value (the ultimate end-use of energy under capitalism). Oil is a highly flexible form of fuel that has a wide variety of chemical by-products and mixes with a certain type of worker. Solar, wind, water and tide energy will not immediately fit into the present productive apparatus to generate the same level of surplus value. The transition will ignite a tremendous struggle in the production and reproduction process, for inevitably workers will be expected to 'fit into' the productive apparatus whatever it is.

Finally, phase four presents the nub of the issue before us. Will this transition be organised on a capitalist basis or will the double crisis opened up on the levels of energy production and general social reproduction mark the beginning of another mode of production? Obama's energy policy is premised on the first alternative; we've examined some of the unpleasant prospects that follow. The scale of what is at stake requires us to keep the second alternative open. When we investigate the possibilities before us we must endeavour, with all our energy and ardour, to break with the premise that leads to 'everything remaining the same'.

George Caffentzis is a member of the Midnight Notes Collective and co-editor of *Midnight Oil: Work Energy War 1973-1992* and *Auroras of the Zapatistas: Local and Global Struggles in the Fourth World War*

#### Hubbert's Curve

Hubbert's Curve is a graphical representation of the peak oil thesis. It is based on the observation that the amount of oil under the ground is finite, and the rate of discovery of new deposits increases to a 'peak', and then decreases, as new places to extract oil become rarer. During this decline the remaining oil becomes more valuable and could, if oil workers were in a strong enough position, be used to increase wages and pay reparations to the communities that have suffered during its extraction. Any demands to 'make hydrocarbon fuels history' must take this potential into consideration.



#### THE RIGHTEOUSNESS AND INEFFECTUALITY OF VICTIMHOOD

Ten years ago we underestimated the power of neoliberal culture and its unconscious impact on our collective self-esteem.

We thought an opening for resistance would create new spaces for trade unions to mobilise and reach beyond defensive and cooperative postures with the bosses. We would embrace and learn from indigenous struggles, from peasants, farmers, the poor, immigrants and refugees. Some



barriers would come down. There would be more gender equality in our structures and

practices. Strategic planning and a culture of permanent resistance, in whatever form, would result. Hoping that we would take the offensive again and again, I underestimated how reactive we were to remain.

We underestimated how pervasive a culture of victimhood was in our practices. To this day, we spend more time talking about the results and impact of neoliberalism and capitalism than we do confronting, surrounding and isolating it wherever we can. Being a victim is righteous, but it changes little.

This has had an impact on how effectively and honestly we respect different kinds of intelligences, practices

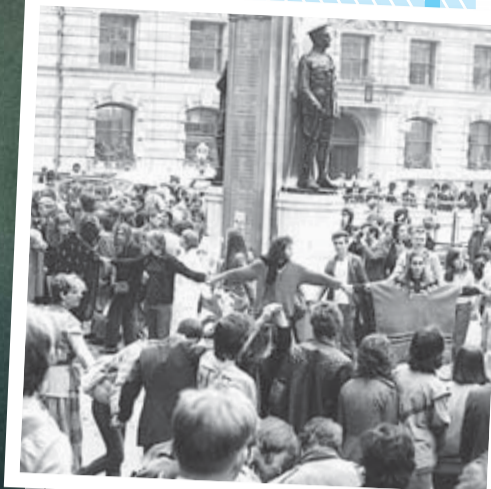
and roles for working together in struggle from diverse places. Victimhood ultimately hinders our collective capacity to hear immigrant and refugee voices, to move beyond charitable approaches to a place of real solidarity. In the end, it reproduces the hierarchy that continues to paralyse us with many of the same voices, no matter how well-intentioned, doing the talking. I was wrong about how those precious moments and the different complementary roles we have to play would be celebrated and nurtured.

Love could still fill us up with respect, energy and collectivity; it's a key ingredient of any true liberation.

**Dave Bleakney** is National Union Representative of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and was active in Peoples' Global Action



# The communal and the decolonial



## MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN

'We tried that back in the early eighties... It'll never work... For this reason, this reason and this reason.' Sometime in the middle of 1998, a few people starting broaching the idea of an action in the heart of London's financial district. It was easy for us to dismiss the idea. We'd been there and done it. Old cynical heads, we remembered the Stop the City demonstrations of 1983 and '84 and we pooh-poohed the enthusiasm, the naivety, of younger bodies.

Of course, the 'Carnival Against Capital' - 'J18' - turned out to be a significant event. In Britain, newspaper headlines screamed 'anti-capitalist' and the worldwide demonstrations that day built the momentum for the Seattle shutdown five months later.

Sometimes it's hard to escape your own shadow. Analysis and past experience provide essential illumination, but they also cast a shadow that distorts or obscures optimism and openness. In particular, 'sound judgement' and healthy cynicism can blind you to the fact that situations change. Why was J18 a success, why did it resonate, when Stop the City did not? Because the context had changed: 1999 was not 1983. You can't step in the same river twice.

The river has flowed some more. We don't know what the important moments of 2010 or 2011 will be. Events will happen. And events will always exceed analysis. The question is: how will we recognise them? Whilst we're focused on the potential and contradictions of struggles around climate change, will we appreciate the importance of a refinery workers' strike - also messy, also full of contradictions? Sometimes you need to suspend your judgement, rein in cynicism. Our analysis always has to remain permeable to events.

In the 1990s members of **The Free Association** were active in the UK-based Class War Federation. They were part of a faction that tried to dissolve Class War in 1997. They then helped organise MayDay'98, a conference that sought to bring together an older generation of anti-capitalists with the burgeoning radical environmental and counter-globalisation movements in the UK. They write together at: [www.freelyassociating.org](http://www.freelyassociating.org)

In recent years, many on the left, including those in global social movements, have looked towards the 'pink tide' in Latin America as a new bastion of hope. We are talking of that wave of countries from Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil, to Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, whose recently elected, left-leaning governments have broken with the neoliberal policies of the 'Washington Consensus'. But is there really an affinity between Latin American indigenous revolutionary visions or projects and those of 'the left'? **Walter Mignolo** suggests that while indigenous concepts like 'the communal' may, superficially, seem very similar to the leftist notion of the commons, they have important differences. By overlooking these differences, or reading them from within leftist and European logics, we perpetuate forms of violence and coloniality that indigenous movements have been fighting against.

Imagine the world around 1500. It was a polycentric and non-capitalist world. There were many civilisations, from China to sub-Saharan Africa, but none of them were globally dominant. At about this time, a radical change took place in global history that we can summarise in two points: the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit, and the fact that the

West began to control the writing of global history. Between then and now, Western civilisation, in the sense we understand it today, was founded and formed.

There was no such thing as Western civilisation before the European Renaissance. Greece and Rome became part of the narrative of Western civilisation then, not before. With the Renaissance,

a double movement began. First, the colonisation of time and the invention of the European Middle Ages. Second – with the emergence of Atlantic trade – the colonisation of space and the invention of New and Old Worlds. This separation, seemingly so natural today, is obviously historical: there could be no Old World without a New





one – America. (Later, the Old World would be divided into imperial – Atlantic Europe – and colonial – Asia and Africa.)

The first civilisations to suffer the consequences of the formation and expansion of Western civilisation were the Inca, the Aztec and the Maya. One of these consequences was the dismantling of the *communal* system of social organisation that some indigenous nations in Bolivia and Ecuador today are working to reconstruct and reconfigure. From the European perspective, the communal may sound like socialism or communism. But it is not. Socialism and communism were born in Europe, as a response to liberalism and capitalism. Not so the communal system. The communal systems in *Tawantinsuyu* and *Anahuac* (Inca and Aztec territories, respectively), or societies in China before the Opium War, eventually had to deal with capitalist and (neo-)liberal intrusion, as well as European responses to such intrusions; but they themselves pre-existed the capitalist mode of production.

A recent proposal to re-inscribe (not to recover or to turn back the clock on) the communal into contemporary debates on pluri-national states is *El sistema communal como alternativa al sistema liberal* [The Communal System as an Alternative to the Liberal System], by Aymara sociologist Félix Patzi Paco. There are others as well. Bolivian president Evo Morales's speeches are full of references to the communal, as are Nina Pacari's, former chancellor of Ecuador, who has been recently appointed secretary of foreign affairs. So, too, is the collective work of the National Council of the *Ayllus* and *Markas* of Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ), a representative body of the indigenous peoples of the Bolivian highlands. They feel no need to explain these references, just as the Jacobins or the Paris Commune require little elaboration for the European left.

#### THE COMMON AND THE COMMUNAL: THE LEFT AND THE DE-COLONIAL

This is a crucial point, as it highlights the difficulty of equating *the communal* and *the common*. The latter is a keyword in the reorientation of the European left today. And that should be no surprise: the idea of 'the common' is part of the imaginary of European history. Yet the communal is an-other story: it cannot be easily subsumed by the common, the commune or communism. (Though this does not mean they cannot be put into conversation with one another.)

It would have been mistaken, when Evo Morales was elected president of Bolivia in 2005, to simply assume that an *indianismo* or an indigenous left had joined forces with the 'Latin left'. Even vice-president Alvaro García Lineras wrote about the *desencuentro* (mismatch) between *indianismo* and Marxism, 'two revolutionary projects'. Not only would the reverse seem a more accurate description, but one cannot assimilate what ultimately are two very different projects with a common enemy:

the local, pro-neoliberal elite that had been running the country since the mid-1980s, when Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada was Minister for Planning, primarily responsible for economic affairs, and Jeffrey Sachs one of his advisors.

The 'Latin left' (led by *criollos* and *mestizos*, that is, 'white' Bolivians) is grounded in the genealogy of European thought. Broadly speaking, however far it may have branched out, its trunk is Marxism-Leninism. Their present 'recognition' of, and alliances with, indigenous struggles is obviously a sign of a convergent trajectory, but a different trajectory nonetheless. Their trajectory drinks at the source of other experiences and other genealogies of thought – as is evident, for example, in their recourse to 'the commons'. From an indigenous perspective, however, the problem is not capitalism alone – it is Occidentalism, which includes both capitalism and Marxism. The Indian leader, Fausto Reynaga (1906–1994), was a great admirer of Marx – whom he referred to as 'the genius Moor' – but he despised the Bolivian left of his time, drawing a clear distance between his book *The Indigenous Revolution* and Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. According to Reynaga, Marx confronted the bourgeoisie from the perspective and interests of the working class and proposed a class struggle within Western civilisation. The indigenous revolution, however, is against Western civilisation as such, including the left, which originated in the West. This is why I would rather refer not to an 'indigenous left', but an *indigenous de-colonial*.

The communal is not grounded on the idea of the 'common', nor that of the 'commune', although the latter has been taken up in Bolivia of late – notably, not by Aymara and Quechua intellectuals, but by members of the *criolla* or *mestiza* population. The communal is something else. It derives from forms of social organisation that existed prior to the Incas and Aztecs, and also from the Incas' and Aztecs' experiences of their 500-year relative survival, first under Spanish colonial rule and later under independent nation states. To be done justice, it must be understood not as a leftwing project (in the European sense), but as a *de-colonial* one.

De-coloniality is akin to de-Westernisation, which was a strong element of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and remains an active ideological element in East and Southeast Asia. De-Westernisation is neither left nor right: it questions Occidentalism, racism, a totalitarian and unilateral globality and an imperialist epistemology. The difference is that de-coloniality frontally questions the capitalist economy, whereas de-Westernisation only questions who controls capitalism – the West or 'emerging' economies.

#### ONE VERSION OF THE COMMUNAL

Félix Patzi Paco is a controversial figure in Bolivia, but an important voice in the current process of thinking and working

toward a pluri-national state. Many *criollo* and *mestizo* intellectuals suspect that he works towards the hegemony of the Aymara people. They argue that his project is *not* pluri-national: first, its aim is to reverse the white (*mestiza/criolla*) hegemony; and second, it ignores the many nations that currently exist in the state of Bolivia, including other indigenous nations, as well as organised peasant communities. The objection cannot easily be dismissed, for it comes not from the right-wing of the low lands, but from many leftist voices (generally whites, by South American standards) who are seriously engaged in the construction of a pluri-national state. This suggests a serious tension between the left, with its ingrained European traditions, and de-colonial indigenous voices, which have a long history of confrontation with European traditions. This tension has everything to do with the differing genealogies of thought and practice from which concepts like 'the commons' and 'the communal' originate.

Patzi Paco's proposal, published in 2004, aims at a re-conceptualisation of a 'communal system' as an alternative to the liberal system. For Patzi Paco, *sistema liberal* refers to what subsists from the advent of the modern/colonial state in Bolivia (and other regions of the non-Western world), through the republics resulting from independence from Spain (controlled by an elite of *criollos* and *mestizos*), up until the election of Morales in December of 2005.

One of his motivations was to redress the image of indigenous nations prevailing among social scientists, in Bolivia as elsewhere. He sought instead to provide a vision of indigenous societies and nations that comes from the history, knowledges and memories of indigenous people themselves. As a sociologist, he is not rejecting the social scientific disciplines, and particularly not sociology, but rather inverting his role in their discourse. Instead of listening to the dictates of sociology, he uses sociology to communicate and organise his argument. The result is a clear case of *border epistemology*: the ability to speak from more than one system of knowledge. This is important because the social sciences have been instrumental in producing the marginalised conception of the indigenous. Being able to speak in and from both systems of knowledge and language is not a rejection of one in favour of the other, but an act of pluralising epistemologies.

Patzi Paco's main objection to disciplinary studies of indigenous nations is that they limit their investigations to the common culture, the language and the territorial space. What is usually bypassed or ignored, then, is what for him is the 'core' of communal organisation – in the case of the Andes, the *ayllu*, which we will examine later. In other words, most of what we know about the Aymara and Quechua in Bolivia concerns their 'context' or 'environment' (*entorno*), rather than the 'core' of their socio-economic organisation. This is a critical distinction that Patzi Paco extends to the uses of identity made by *indigenistas* (pro-indigenous non-indigenous) and *indianistas* (indigenous engaged in a form of identity politics, identifying with indigeneity through clothes, long hair and rituals). Both *indigenistas* and *indianistas* operate at the level of the *entorno*, rather than that of the two basic, core nodes of the communal system: economic and political organisation. When they refer to the *ayllu*, it is as 'territorial geographic organisation'

(which is a state conception), rather than to the communal systems of economic and political management.

It is on the latter that Patzi Paco's proposal focuses. Its initial question is: how to solve the paradox between the denial of indigenous identity, on the one hand, and its reinforcement, on the other? He mentions some positions among *indianistas* and *indigenistas*, who argue that a mental revolution among Westernised indigenous people is necessary to solve the paradox. Patzi Paco's opinion is that this position is utopian, since it is impossible to reverse the process when nations are traversed by global flows (music, television, cinema, videos, internet, etc.). And it is not necessary to reverse the transformation of the *entorno*: indigenous people can use mobile phones and blue jeans in the same manner that white Europeans can wear indigenous hats and costumes. No French or US tourist or scholar who goes to the Andes and returns with indigenous paraphernalia changes their identity and renounces capitalism in the process. So why should the indigenous remain 'indigenous' in the way Westerners expect them to be? What is crucial is not the changes in the surface (the *entorno*),

#### The Aymara and the Quechua

The Aymara and the Quechua have lived in the altiplano (high plains) of the Andes in Chile, Bolivia and Peru for thousands of years. In Bolivia, the Aymara and Quechua constitute two of the largest indigenous nations, nations which themselves are comprised of heterogeneous communities. Aymara is recognised as one of Bolivia's official languages; it must be taught in schools and is used on public television and radio. Six million people – in Bolivia and elsewhere in the Andes – speak various dialects of Quechua. In recent years, indigenous movements have played pivotal roles in popular struggles, such as the Bolivian 'Water War' of 2000.



#### MUSCLE AND BONE

Ten years ago, we were still in the shadow of the fallen Wall, the 'end of history'. The most radical network to

appear at the time called itself 'Peoples' Global Action against "free" trade and WTO'. It was the *de facto* space of coordination for Northern and Southern groups with anti-capitalist instincts, but 'anti-capitalism' only became a hallmark in 1999. Even the Zapatistas only called for a revolt against 'neoliberalism', not capitalism itself – although their intentions were clear enough to launch a new cycle of struggle worldwide. This timidity wasn't necessarily 'wrong' in context, but shows how 'wrong' the political context was at the time.

Today in France the 'New Anticapitalist Party' runs successfully in mainstream politics. But how much flesh (not to speak of muscle!) does 'anti-capitalism' have on the slogan's bones? Isn't it generally still a preamble for social-democratic demands?

Ten years ago, criticisms of neoliberalism were correct, but no one predicted this major crisis. We severely overestimated capitalism. It had put the crisis off so long that even we were doubting our Marx. And now, faced with literally 'a chance in a lifetime', we are amazingly unprepared.

And if we're talking of 'muscle', ten years ago most of us thought that our real ideological victories could produce concrete gains and change – radicalise unions, parties, etc. The system revealed itself immensely more rigid, desperate and terrorist than that. Meanwhile, the (Northern) masses remain passive. Perhaps they, or we, are awaiting credible visions and forms of organisation...?

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#### National constitutions and pluri-nationality

Both Ecuador and Bolivia have recently introduced radically new constitutions, in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Central to the Bolivian document is the proclamation of its status as 'a social unitary state of pluri-national and communal law, free, independent, sovereign, democratic, intercultural, decentralised and with autonomies'. The recognition of Bolivia and Ecuador as states composed of numerous distinct nations, each with its own political, legal, cultural forms of organisation, and the right to self-determination – along with the new Ecuadorian constitution's own commitment to pluri-nationality – has raised a great deal of excitement and controversy both within the two countries and internationally. It is, undoubtedly, both a recognition of the political clout that indigenous movements have acquired, and a recognition of the differences that colonial domination and the independent state created in its wake have not managed to erase. Félix Patzi Paco was the Bolivian minister of education from 2006 to 2007, during which time he conceptualised a programme for the 'decolonisation' of education.



but the persistence of the core: the economic and socio-political and family organisation of the *ayllus*.

That is what is at stake in Bolivia today in the construction of a pluri-national state. The question is not one of who wears what clothes or who gets to have phones. It's about the conflictive co-existences of several basic socio-economic organisations. These include: a *mestizo* and *criollo* (liberal or Marxist) Western conception of the state; Aymara and Quechua *ayllus/markas* (which CONAMAQ is working on), which exist both in the country and in the city; other indigenous organisations in the lowlands; various peasant organisations that are neither liberal, nor Marxist, nor *indianistas*.

There is, according to Patzi Paco, an incongruence between the attention paid to surface symbols of the indigenous (whether or not they have cell phones or adapt symbols of non-indigenous culture), on the one hand, and the lack of interest in the *ayllu*, on the other. Few have questioned the fact that the *ayllu* has changed, but nevertheless remained as *ayllu* throughout three hundred years of Spanish colonialism and two hundred years of Bolivian republic. This would serve as indication that, while they may have incorporated technologies and practices brought by Western modernisation, many indigenous do not wish to become 'modern' in the sense of abandoning their ways of living in harmony with the environment and in mutual respect for their dignity.

So what, then, is the *ayllu*? It is a kind of extended familial community, with a common (real or imaginary) ascendancy that collectively works a common territory. It is something akin to the Greek *oikos*, which provides the etymological root for 'economy'. Each *ayllu* is defined by a territory that includes not just a piece of land, but the eco-system of which that land is one component. The territory is not private property. It is not property at all, but the *home* for all of those living in and from it. Remember: here, we are not in a capitalist economic organisation.

The separation between 'core' and 'entorno' is essential for Patzi Paco, and applies to all systems alike, including the liberal and the communal. At their core, they are both organised and consolidated around two pillars: economic and political/administrative management. The difference lies in the type of economy and the political organisation, both constituted by two types of *entornos*, or contexts, described as 'internal' and 'external'. The internal *entorno* is generated within the system itself, liberal or communal. For example, in the 21st century mobile phones are intrinsic to the liberal economy and way of life, while indigenous people 'adapt' them. Conversely, the culture of Andean textile is internal to the communal system, and the non-indigenous 'adopt' it. The problem emerges when the *system* – its core – rather than the *entorno* is being affected by the incorporation of elements from other systems. This is the case of the 'indigenous bourgeoisie', which adopts capitalist principles concerning accumulation and the organisation of labour. This indigenous bourgeoisie abandons the *ayllu* system and starts exploiting the labour of other indigenous people. Because of the power differential between them, the *ayllu* system is more easily affected by the liberal system than it in turn affects the latter.

Crucial here is how both the system and the *entorno* are 'coupled', according to the concepts of *operational and structural coupling*. Through operational coupling, a

system, communal or liberal, can appropriate elements from the *entorno* of other systems. Thus, actors living by the rules of a communal system can appropriate elements of the *entorno* of the liberal system, such as technology. The liberal system can, by means of operational coupling, appropriate elements from the communal, and include them alongside the elements of the *entorno* internal to the liberal system. Acknowledging this could help dispel the myth, among *criollos* and *mestizos*, that contemporary indigenous societies are homogeneous. In fact, there are all sorts of professional and class distinctions among them, and there are indigenous proprietors who exploit indigenous labour. In a society where the communal co-exists with the liberal system and a market economy, industry owners have re-functionalised Andean reciprocity in order to obtain longer working hours for low salaries – 12 hours a day instead of eight.

If all social organisations consist of a core and an environment (or *entorno*), state multiculturalism's rhetoric of 'inclusion' can be explained as an attempt by the Bolivian state to co-opt the *environment* of the *ayllu* while ignoring (or actively excluding) its core, that is, its political and economic management. During the neoliberal government of Sánchez de Losada in the 1990s, the state spoke of the 'pluri' and the 'multi', meaning pluri-lingual and multicultural. Patzi Paco's book was published in 2004, before Evo Morales was elected president. However, I suspect that a similar critique of discourses of inclusion and 'multiculturalism' could be applied to the 'Latin left' in power today. This is certainly CONAMAQ's critique of Evo Morales, that is, of the left that now predominates in the Bolivian government. The reconstitution of *ayllus* and *markas*, which is CONAMAQ's project, is precisely in response to the danger of being co-opted. Here resides the second strong motivation to bring to the foreground the *communal system* and to confront it as an alternative option to the liberal system.

But what *exactly*, then, is the communal? Patzi Paco refers to collective rights to the use and management of resources, at the same time as he speaks of the rights of groups, families and individuals to share in the benefits of what is collectively produced. He makes clear that, while the communal has its ancestral foundation in agrarian societies in the Andes, these characteristics have survived and adapted well to contemporary conditions. The communal system is open to 'persons', indigenous or not, as well as to different types of 'work': in a communal system the distinction between owner and waged worker, as well as boss and employee in administrative organisations (banks, state organs, etc.), vanishes. To understand the scope of this proposal, it is necessary to clear our heads of the 'indigenous = peasants' equation that the coloniality of knowledge has imposed upon us, alongside the rhetoric of 'salvation'. Moreover, the notion of 'property' is meaningless in a vision of society in which the goal is working to live and not living to work. It is in this context that Evo Morales has been promoting the concept of 'the good living' (*sumaj kamaña* in Quechua, *sumak kawsay* in Quichua, *allin kawsaw* in Aymara or *buen vivir* in Spanish). 'The good living' – or 'to live in harmony' – is an alternative to 'development'. While development puts life at the service of growth and accumulation, *buen vivir* places life first, with institutions at the service of life. That is what 'living in harmony' (and not in competition) means.

Patzi Paco's conceptualisation of the communal system cannot be thought of as a replacement of the current modern/nation-state – that would result not in a pluri-national state, but only a mono-national state with a different configuration. The proposal is not to replace the Bolivian liberal/(neo-)colonial state founded after independence from Spain with the Incan *Qullasuyu*. Yet the reconstitution of the *ayllus* and *markas* of the Qullasuyu is fundamental to understanding what a pluri-national state – the idea of which is already inscribed in the new constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador – may mean. The crucial difference here lies in the fact that the de-colonial project – to decolonise the state, education, language and economy – not only has a different genealogy of thoughts and memories to that of the 'European' (or, colonial) left of non-European regions; its way of transforming reality is also distinct.

This idea of a communal system as an alternative to the (neo-)liberal system today, which emerged from the memories and lived experiences of Andean communities, has a global scope. This does not, however, mean that the *ayllu* system should be exported in a manner similar to other, previous models (Christian, liberal or Marxist). Rather, it is an invitation to organise and re-inscribe communal systems all over the world – systems that have been erased and dismantled by the increasing expansion of the capitalist economy, which the European left has been unable to halt. If *ayllus* and *markas* are the singular memory and organisation of communities in the Andes, then it is the other memories of communal organisation around the globe which predate and survived the advent of capitalism which make possible the idea of a communal system today – one not mapped out in advance by any ideology, or any simple return to the past. The Zapatista dictum of the need for 'a world in which many worlds fit' springs to mind as we try to imagine a planet of communal systems in a pluri-versal, not uni-versal, world order.

It is for this reason that Patzi Paco's proposal of the communal should figure in the discussion for a pluri-national state. The left, with its European genealogy of thought, cannot have the monopoly over the right to imagine what a non-capitalist future shall be. There are many non-capitalist pasts that can be drawn from, many experiences and memories that perhaps do not wish to be civilised – neither by the right nor by the left. The progressive left's ignoring of Patzi Paco's proposal may end up as an excuse to prevent indigenous and peasant leaders and communities from intervening in de-colonising the current mono-cultural state – which the white (*criolla/mestiza*) right and left continue to fight over. A pluri-national state must be more than just the left in power, with the support of the indigenous, against the right, with its support from the international market.

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#### Andean reciprocity and the marka system

*In the marka system individuals work for one another around the year, in an arrangement which initially seems almost serf-like: the one provides labour, the other accommodation and food. But this arrangement is also reciprocal: after somebody has come to your common to help you work it, you must reciprocate by working on their common.*



#### UNPICKING JAPAN'S FABRICATED HOMOGENOUS SOCIALITY

Japan already experienced a financial meltdown in the mid-1990s. At that time, people realised that every dream they had been given by the post-war regime was entirely bogus, and they began to nurture a deep scepticism of capitalism itself. Since then we have sensed that sooner or later it would also happen on a global scale. But now that it is really happening, we, the anti-capitalists, recognise after the event that we failed to grasp the full implication of that early crack that opened between then and now. We recognise that we missed the chance to act.

First of all, we were still haunted by the failure of the New Lefts, the failure of their authoritarian vanguardism, which ended up destroying the impetus of mass militancy and resulted in a general state of inertia with a stifled pacifism. Such conditions prevented us from developing creative strategies and tactics necessary for drawing the possibilities from the crisis and organising an anti-capitalist sociality in the Japanese context.

Such organising must have multiple dimensions, involving the entirety of our social lives: workplace, school, family, and every stretch of urban space. Most importantly, it cannot happen without undoing the fabricated homogenous sociality of Japan, which is tightly netted and highly controlled by the dominant informatic machine of the state/media conglomerate. With the double financial crises, however, the basis of Japanese sociality – including the secure workplace, decent education, and conventional family hierarchy – is crumbling. Thus the target of our organising should be ex-workers, ex-students and ex-mamas/papas/children ousted/released hereby.

Also crumbling is the myth of Japan as an *insular nation* consisting of a pure race. This is why we need to build solidarity with migrant workers and a coalition with movements in other East Asian territories. By so doing we must concretise Japan as a borderless *archipelago* contiguous to the Asian continent. The global solidarity which the secluded Japanese movement has long dreamt of can be initiated only along with the revolutionary current of East Asia.

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## 'GLOBAL COMMONS' AND CLIMATE CHANGE

During the heyday of neoliberal globalisation, amidst its assault on all forms of public and common ownership of resources – the era the 'new enclosures' – an increasingly vocal part of the left started to conceptualise alternatives to neoliberalism and sometimes even capitalism in terms of *commons*: non-commodified forms of social cooperation and production. At the time commons seemed to offer a way out of the impasse between free-market capitalism and Eastern bloc-style state-capitalist planning.

In the last few years, however, the field of forces within which old and newly emerging commons operate has changed quite significantly. Increasingly, the idea of the commons seems to function less as an *alternative* to capitalist social relations, and more like their *saviour*. One example of this is the way the issue of climate change is being framed within a discourse of 'global commons'. Influential neo-Keynesian economist Joseph Stiglitz asserts that global commons are threatened by a 'tragedy of the commons'; that is, they are being overused because no one is charged for using or abusing them. Put simply, if polluting does not cost money, companies and individuals have an incentive to pollute. For Stiglitz, the problem cannot be solved by first assigning property rights, such as certificates that allow their owners to emit a certain amount of greenhouse gases, and then allowing markets to operate accordingly. This is the traditional neoliberal approach, but it won't work for two reasons: first and primarily, because such enclosures often engender resistance; and, second, because they create incentives to pre-empt them by even more rapacious resource extraction. Stiglitz therefore proposes a global tax on carbon emissions to make people pay for the costs they impose on others through their polluting activities. This carbon tax – if set at an 'appropriate rate' and effectively enforced – would enable markets to be 'efficient' and would reduce emission to agreed targets. Stiglitz then argues that such a tax would create strong incentives for innovation in terms of energy efficiency and other 'green' technologies, enabling states to govern capitalist globalisation and promote virtuous, 'sustainable' growth.

This platform of management of the global commons is based on one key assumption: that capitalist disciplinary markets are a force for good, if only states are able to guide them onto a path of environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive growth. What this view forgets is that there is little evidence that global economic growth could be achieved with lower greenhouse gas emissions, in spite of increasingly energy-efficient new technologies, which in turn implies that alternatives might just be necessary to stop climate change. This raises the question of how we disentangle ourselves from the kind of conception of commons offered by Stiglitz, which allow solutions based on capitalist growth.

### COMMON INTERESTS?

Commons also refer to common interests. To stay with the example of climate change, if there is any chance of significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions – without this implying some form of green authoritarianism – it is because there is a *common* interest in doing so. But common interests do not exist *per se*, they have to be constructed, a process that has historically proven to be riddled with difficulties – witness the feminist movement's

# The tragedy of the capitalist commons

After several decades of relentless neoliberal enclosures, the idea of 'commons' is enjoying a renaissance amongst some neo-Keynesian economists and commentators, while political scientist Elinor Ostrom has just been awarded the Nobel prize 'for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons'. **Massimo De Angelis** explains why capital's commons will always be distorted – because they are based upon social injustice – and why we can only reclaim the commons from capital by constructing common interests.

attempts to construct a 'global sisterhood'; or the workers' movement's project of a 'global proletariat'. This is partly the case because capitalism stratifies 'women', 'workers' or any other collective subject in and through hierarchies of wages and power. And therein lies the rub, because it is on the terrain of the construction of common *global* interests (not just around ecological issues, but also intellectual commons, energy commons, etc.) that the class struggle of the 21st century will be played out. This is where the centre of gravity of a new politics will lie.

There are thus two possibilities. Either: social movements will face up to the challenge and re-found the commons

on values of social justice in spite of, and beyond, these capitalist hierarchies. Or: capital will seize the historical moment to use them to initiate a new round of accumulation (i.e. growth). The previous discussion of Stiglitz's arguments highlights the dangers here. Because Stiglitz moves swiftly from the presumed tragedy of the global commons to the need to preserve and sustain them for the purpose of economic growth. Similar arguments can be found in UN and World Bank reports on 'sustainable development', that oxymoron invented to couple environmental and 'social' sustainability to economic growth. Sustainable development is simply the sustainability of capital. This approach

asserts capitalist growth as the *sine qua non* common interest of humanity. I call commons that are tied to capitalist growth *distorted commons*, where capital has successfully subordinated non-monetary values to its primary goal of accumulation.

The reason why common interests cannot simply be postulated is that we do not reproduce our livelihoods by way of postulations – we cannot eat them, in short. By and large, we reproduce our livelihoods by entering into relations with others, and by following the rules of these relations. To the extent that the rules that we follow in reproducing ourselves are the rules of capitalist production – i.e. to the extent that our reproduction depends



on money – we should question the operational value of any postulation of a common interest, because capitalist social relations imply precisely the existence of injustices, and conflicts of interest. These exist, on the one hand, between those who produce value, and those who expropriate it; and, on the other, between different layers of the planetary hierarchy. And, it is not only pro-growth discourses that advocate the distorted commons that perpetuate these conflicts at the same time as they try to negate them. The same is true of environmental discourses that do not challenge the existing social relations of production through which we reproduce our livelihoods. Given that these assertions are somewhat abstract, let us try to substantiate them by testing a central environmental postulate on subjects who depend on capitalist markets for the reproduction of their livelihoods.

Imagine I am a coal miner, or an oil worker. An environmental postulate tells me that 'our' common interest is to keep coal, or oil, in the ground because of long-run trends in greenhouse gas emissions. But this does not take into account that my family and I need food, shelter, clothing, etc. now and in a year's time, *as well as* in the long run. In order to satisfy those needs in the shorter term, I need to keep working as a coal miner or oil worker. Those making this postulation may or may not themselves have alternative sources of income from working in other industries; or they may even have chosen not to extract coal or oil for environmental reasons. However, their urging me to subscribe to this common interest by forfeiting my livelihood demonstrates that my livelihood is not a matter of *common* interest. An environmental discourse not tied to questions of forms of livelihoods alternative to capital's loops is one that regards my livelihood as expendable. Here we have an example of 'distorted commons', a common that is based on some form of social injustice. Ultimately, all environmental recommendations made without reference to the question of social justice and reproduction are arguments for distorted commons.

#### CAPITAL AND 'DISTORTED COMMONS'

Capitalism as a socio-economic system has a schizophrenic relationship to the

commons. On the one hand, capital is a social force that requires continuous enclosures; that is, the destruction and commodification of non-commodified common spaces and resources. However, there is also an extent to which capital has to accept the non-commodified and *contribute to its constitution*. The degree to which it does so, and how it does so, is fundamental for its own sustainability and preservation. But it also has fundamental consequences for the sustainability and preservation of the planet and of many communities. Capital has to reconcile itself to the commons to some degree precisely because capitalism – as the set of economic exchanges and practices mediated and measured by money and driven by self-interest, economic calculus and profit – is not all-encompassing. Capitalism is itself a subsystem of far larger systems necessary for the reproduction of life. This in turn implies that capitalism always finds itself trapped within a shell that constitutes its presuppositions, whether ecological or in terms of non-commodified life practices (non-remunerated childcare, education, etc.). Capital constantly strives to escape this entrapment, to *overcome the barriers that constitute it* and, through this, to preserve and reproduce itself through perpetual growth.

For capital to now reconcile itself to the commons in order to overcome barriers to its own development, it has to strategically (driven by peoples' economic and political calculus) intervene and actively participate in the constitution of things shared. In other words, the forces of capital must participate in the constitution of the commons. And this is where capital's troubles, and everybody else's, begin.

Let's take an example. That capital has to engage with the realm of the shared, the non-commodified, is demonstrated by the fact that even the capitalist factory – the paradigmatic site of exploitation, struggle and the imposition of capital's measure – is a form of common. Those individuals who go to work there have to be *recombined* with one another and with elements of nature in order for commodity production to occur. Here we encounter three elements that are constituent of any commons. First, a pooling of resources: workers do not need to engage in

## Ultimately, all environmental recommendations made without reference to the question of social justice and reproduction are arguments for distorted commons

commodity exchanges with one another when accessing tools and information. Second, the social cooperation of labour: at the assembly line, each worker's labour depends on the actions of the one before her. Third, a 'community' that creates rules and regulations and defines those of entry and exit: factory gates don't just open for anyone, and not every kind of behaviour is allowed within them. But we also know that these three constituent features of any commons – pooled resources, social cooperation of labour and community – apply to the capitalist factory in very specific, 'distorted' ways. The fact that resource-pooling and the social cooperation of labour are functional to the production of commodities implies the subordination of other aspects crucial for human reproduction (dignity, solidarity, ecological sustainability, happiness) to one ultimate aim: the accumulation of capital.

#### RECLAIMING COMMONS

So what about the problem of climate change? Changes in climate patterns are certainly going to impact on people across the globe, although these impacts are to a large extent graded by power and monetary affluence. In this sense, climate change transforms the pool of resources available to humanity to go about its social reproduction. For example, there will be less land available as sea-levels rise: communities in Bangladesh will be destroyed. As a result, climate change brings with it the need to change the social cooperation of labour at the general, planetary level, and also the modalities of labour in partic-

ular places. This because its currently highly destructive effects will have to be curbed, and because the resources (e.g. energy) that enable the contemporary organisation of labour might become scarce. Whether this will be an adaptation to the effects of climate change *based on* our dependency on capitalist loops, or whether we disentangle our reproduction from these loops and constitute our social cooperation on a *new common* basis, is a question that will be resolved on the open terrain of struggle. And, following on from this, climate change reveals the problem of what constitutes a 'global community', of who speaks for it, who decides for it. Will it be governments promoting green technologies and economic growth? Or will it rather be social movements demanding that planetary ecological sustainability be achieved through re-distributive justice, food sovereignty and grassroots empowerment?

The capitalist factory and many solutions to global climate change – although rather different examples – need to be understood in terms of distorted commons. Distorted because of the obvious problems generated by capital's drive towards self-preservation in constituting the underlying commons (cooperation in the factory and the biosphere), and the resulting social injustice. But they are commons nevertheless, because despite their distortions they are the product and presupposition of our doing and being in common. Recognising them as commons is crucial, because it constitutes a declaration of common ownership, hence of stewardship, responsibility and personal, as well as communal, 'investment'. It is a first step towards reclaiming them. Critically, this practice of reclaiming is complicated by the fact that we reproduce our lives through many distorted and 'non-distorted' commons simultaneously. Which is where we return to common interests: we need to do more than simply postulate them – we need to construct them *in struggle*.

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#### BEYOND THE SPECTACULAR

In the late '90s, a movement emerged that was ready to name global capitalism as the enemy and employ large scale mobilising and direct action methods to challenge its agenda. It was not without political limitations but, at its best, it linked with movements of resistance in the oppressed countries and took its fight into communities under attack.

This development provided impetus to many social movements including those fighting poverty. In retrospect, as we reaped the benefits in our organisation, we underestimated the resilience of conservative misleadership in unions and social agencies, and their ability to contain resistance or divert it into safe forms that do not pose a threat to capitalism. 'The long retreat is over', we announced in 2001 as we tried to spark a generalised resistance to the hard right-wing Ontario Government of the day. We have gone on fighting and even won victories but, as we watch major unions brokering austerity for workers in the present economic crisis and see networks of NGOs reducing resistance to polite 'constructive engagement' with governments, we need to realise that the mechanisms of containment are a tougher nut to crack than we thought.

Capitalism is in great crisis and the conditions are emerging to challenge it decisively, but a spectacular but relatively thin radicalisation will not be enough. We must advance demands and employ strategies that open up the prospects of creating a real mass movement that rejects the 'solutions' of this system and fights for social transformation.

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#### GREAT EXPECTATIONS

It seems quite a huge request to ask for the mistakes and errors we have made over the past ten years. I won't assume a speaking role for the socialist left, diverse and fragmented as it is, but here are two points to contribute to the group therapy session.

Expectations were certainly very high. When so many people swarmed across the continent from the UK to Genoa, I saw a movement forming that would be greater and more powerful than anything since way before 1968. That was just two months before 9/11, Globalise Resistance was in its infancy and played a role in mobilising the biggest number of people to an overseas demonstration in the UK's history, followed two years later by the biggest protest ever in the UK. But the move from issue to issue wasn't as smooth as perhaps it may have been, the explanations we (as a whole movement) offered explaining the link between the corporate take over of the world and militarism weren't as strong and as clear as they may have been.

The international demonstrations were certainly inspiring and exciting, and they served to invigorate the movement. But I think we concentrated too much on those mobilisations and didn't build local groups of self-sustaining activists adequately.

**Guy Taylor** is a member of the Socialist Workers' Party and a founder and spokesperson of Globalise Resistance





# Falling together

In this exclusive extract from her new book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, **Rebecca Solnit** provides an alternative to the dominant narrative of human responses to disaster. Far from unleashing a Hobbesian war of all against all, unwelcome catastrophe can allow a welcome return to community, altruism and solidarity.

**W**ho are you? Who are we? In times of crisis, these are life and death questions. Thousands of people survived Hurricane Katrina because grandsons or aunts or neighbours or complete strangers reached out to those in need all through the Gulf Coast, and because an armada of boat owners from the surrounding communities and as far away as Texas went into New Orleans to pull stranded people to safety. Hundreds of people died in the aftermath of Katrina because others, including police, vigilantes, high government officials and the media, decided that the people of New Orleans were too dangerous to allow them to evacuate the septic, drowned city, or to rescue them, even from hospitals. Some who attempted to flee were turned back at gunpoint or shot down. Rumours proliferated about mass rapes, mass murders, and mayhem that turned out later to be untrue, though the national media and New Orleans's police chief believed and perpetrated those rumours during the crucial days when people were dying on rooftops, elevated highways and in crowded shelters and hospitals in the unbearable heat without adequate water, without food, without medicine and medical attention. Those rumours led soldiers and others dispatched as rescuers to regard victims as enemies. Others were murdered as a result, but not by the people the media scrutinised. Beliefs matter – though more people act beautifully despite their beliefs than the reverse.

Katrina was an extreme version of what goes on in many disasters, where how you behave depends on whether you think your neighbours or fellow citizens are a greater threat than the havoc wrought by a disaster or a greater good than the property in houses and stores around you. ('Citizen', here, means members of a city or community, not people in possession of legal citizenship in a nation.) What you believe shapes how you act. How you act results in life or death, for yourself or others, like everyday life, only more so. Katrina was, like most disasters, also full of altruism: from young men who took it upon themselves to supply water, food,

diapers, and protection to the strangers stranded with them, to people who sheltered neighbours, to the uncounted hundreds or thousands who set out in boats – armed, often, but also armed with compassion – to find those who were stranded in the stagnant waters and bring them to safety, to the two hundred thousand or more who volunteered to house complete strangers, mostly in their own homes, via the Internet site [hurricanehousing.org](http://hurricanehousing.org) in the weeks after, more persuaded by the pictures of suffering than the rumours of monstrosity, to the uncounted tens of thousands of volunteers who came to the Gulf Coast to rebuild and restore.

In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky or regressively savage human being in times of disaster has little truth to it. Decades of meticulous sociological research on behaviour in disasters, from the bombings of World War II to floods, tornadoes, earthquakes and storms across the North American continent and around the world have demonstrated this. But belief lags behind, and often the worst behaviour in the wake of a calamity is on the part of those who believe that others will behave savagely and that they themselves are taking defensive measures against barbarism. From 1906 San Francisco to 2005 New Orleans, innocents have been killed by people who believed that their victims were the criminals and they themselves were the protectors of the shaken order. Belief matters.

'Today Cain is still killing his brother' proclaims a faded church mural on wood siding in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans that was so devastated by the failure of the government levees. In quick succession, the Book of Genesis gives us the creation of the universe, the illicit acquisition of knowledge, the expulsion from Paradise, and the slaying of Abel by Cain, a second fall from grace into jealousy, competition, alienation and violence. When God asks where

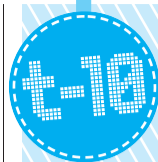
his brother is, Cain asks back, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' He is refusing to say what God already knows: that the spilled blood of Abel cries out from the ground that has absorbed it. He is also raising one of the perennial social questions: are we beholden to each other, must we take care of each other, or is it every man for himself? Most traditional societies have deeply entrenched commitments and connections between people, families, and groups. The very concept of society rests on the idea of networks of affinity and affection, and the freestanding individual

exists largely as an outcast or exile.

Mobile and individualistic modern societies shed some of these old bonds and vacillate about taking on others, particularly those expressed through economic arrangements – particularly provisions for the aged and vulnerable, the mitigation of poverty and desperation – the keeping of one's brothers and sisters. The argument against such keeping is often framed as an argument about human nature: we are essentially selfish, and because you will not care for me, I cannot care for you. I will not feed







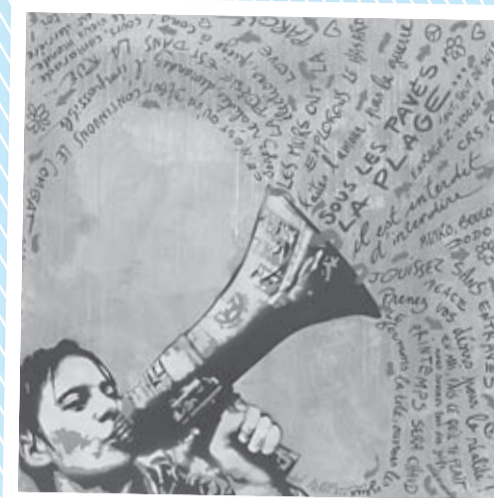
## ON MULTIPLICITY, DECISION AND THE COMMON

Both our strengths and our weaknesses are the product of our world-historical imagination. Without really knowing it, we have inherited the dilemma which, around May 1968, separated the New Social Movements from the old. The latter concentrated on the problem of the central front, thus affirming labour and hence state power. The New Social Movements, on the other hand, placed their trust in the multiplicity of fronts, affirmed the right of non-labour and hence the anti-power of minorities. We think both of these positions together, and thus call ourselves movement of movements. Our weakness is that we have not taken this thought to its conclusion. We do not yet know how what is common to all fronts can be articulated and organised. We do not yet know what the power of anti-power is. The inevitable affirmation of multiplicity obscures the inevitability of a strategic decision.

We have not even understood, that *this* is in fact our problem, and that we have to solve it. The beginnings of a solution lie in the question of how we can create a party and a state without being simply a party or dissolving into the state.

On this, three suggestions. 1) A real problem is something that has to be solved like a riddle. It entails a moment of grace, hence openness for a result. 2) If there is a dialectic of the three sequential movements, then the point is not their synthesis, but something entirely new, something entirely different. This does not exclude but rather include specific negations. 3) John Holloway articulates not our strength but our weakness and lends philosophical credence to an *exaggeration of Zapatismo*, rather than trying to make a philosophical contribution to the *further development of this important yet limited political innovation*.

**Thomas Seibert** is an activist in ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens) and the Interventionist Left. His latest publication is *Krise und Ereignis: Siebenundzwanzig Thesen zum Kommunismus* [Crisis and Event: Twenty-Seven Theses on Communism]



limits the possibilities. Changing beliefs could fundamentally change much more. Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, the realm in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire and are each our sisters' and brothers' keepers.

I landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, shortly after a big hurricane tore up the city in October of 2003. The man in charge of taking me around told me about the hurricane – not the winds at more than a hundred miles an hour that tore up trees, roofs, telephone poles, not the seas that rose nearly ten feet, but the neighbours. He spoke of the few days when everything was disrupted and lit up with happiness as he did so. In his neighbourhood all the people had come out of their houses to speak with each other, aid each other, to improvise a community kitchen, make sure the elders were okay, and spend time together, no longer strangers. 'Everybody woke up the next morning and everything was different,' he mused. 'There was no electricity, all the stores were closed, no one had access to media. The consequence was that everyone poured out into the street to bear witness. Not quite a street party, but everyone out at once – it was a sense of happiness to see everybody even though we didn't know each other.' His joy struck me powerfully.

A friend told me of being trapped in a terrible fog, one of the dense tule fogs that overtakes California's Central Valley periodically. On this occasion the fog mixed with dust from the cotton fields and created a shroud so perilous that the highway patrol stopped all traffic on the highway. For two days she was stranded with many others in a small diner. She and her husband slept upright, shoulder to shoulder with strangers, in the banquettes of the diner's booths, food and water began to run short, and they began to have a marvellous time. The people gathered there had little in common, but they all opened up, began to tell each other the stories of their lives, and by the time the

## Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what is seen there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times, and in other extraordinary times

road was safe, they were reluctant to go, but they went onward, home to New Mexico for the holidays. There everyone looked at them perplexedly as they told the story of their stranding with such ebullience. That time in the diner was the first time ever her partner, a Native American, had felt a sense of belonging in society at large. Such redemption amid disruption is common.

It reminded me of how many of us in the San Francisco Bay Area had loved the Loma Prieta earthquake that took place three weeks before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Or loved not the earthquake, but the way communities had responded to it. It was alarming for most of us as well, devastating for some, and fatal for sixty people (a very low death count for a major earthquake in an area inhabited by millions). When the subject of the quake came up with a new acquaintance the other day, she too glowed with recollection about how her San Francisco neighbourhood had, during the days the power was off, cooked up all its thawing frozen food, held barbeques on the street, how gregarious everyone had been, how people from all walks of life had mixed in candlelit bars that became community centres. Another friend recently remembered with unextinguished amazement that when he traveled

you because I must hoard against starvation, since I too cannot count on others. Better yet, I will take your wealth and add it to mine – if I believe that my wellbeing is independent of yours or pitted against yours – and justify my conduct as natural law. If I am not my brother's keeper, then we have been expelled from paradise, a paradise of unbroken solidarities.

Thus does everyday life become a social disaster. Sometimes disaster intensifies this; sometimes it provides a remarkable reprieve from it, a view into another world for our other selves. When

all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up – not all, but the great preponderance – to become their brothers' keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness brings joy even amidst death, chaos, fear and loss. Were we to know and believe this, our sense of what is possible at any time might change. We speak of self-fulfilling prophecies, but any belief that is acted on makes the world in its image. Beliefs matter. And so do the facts behind them. When it comes to human behaviour in disaster, the gap between common beliefs and actualities



the several miles from the World Series baseball game at Candlestick Park in the city's southeast to his home in the central city, someone was at every blacked-out intersection, directing traffic. Without orders or centralised organisation, people had stepped up to meet the needs of the moment, suddenly in charge of their communities and streets.

When that earthquake shook the central California coast on October 17, 1989, I was surprised to find that the person I was angry at no longer mattered. The anger had evaporated along with everything else abstract and remote, and I was thrown into an intensely absorbing present. I was more surprised to realise that most of the people I knew and met in the Bay Area were also enjoying immensely the disaster that shut down much of the region for several days, the Bay Bridge for months, and certain unloved elevated freeways forever – if enjoyment is the right word for that sense of immersion in the moment and solidarity with others caused by the rupture in everyday life, an emotion graver than happiness but deeply positive. We don't even have a language for the emotion of disaster, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear. Not for everyone – this is not a simple or straightforward phenomenon, but it happens, and it matters. We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological.

For weeks after the big earthquake of 1989, friendship and love counted for a lot, long-term plans and old anxieties for very little. Life was in the here and now, and many inessentials had been pared away. The earthquake was unnerving, as were the aftershocks that continued for months. Most of us were at least a little on edge, but many of us were enriched,

rather than impoverished overall, at least emotionally. A more somber version of that strange pleasure in disaster emerged after September 11, 2001, when many Americans seemed stirred, moved, and motivated by the newfound sense of urgency, purpose, solidarity and danger they had encountered. They abhorred what had happened, but they clearly relished who they briefly became.

What is this feeling that crops up in so many disasters? After the Loma Prieta quake, I began to wonder about it. After 9/11, I began to see how strange it was

that, they matter as we enter an era when questions about everyday life outside disaster, about social possibilities and human natures every day, arise again, as they often have in turbulent times.

When I ask people about the disasters they have lived through, I find on many faces that retrospective basking, as they recount tales of Canadian ice storms, midwestern snow days, New York blackouts, about heat in southern India, fire in New Mexico, earlier hurricanes in Louisiana, an economic collapse in Argentina, earthquakes in California and Mexico, and a strange pleasure overall. It was the joy on their faces that surprised me. And with those whom I have read rather than spoke to, it was the joy of their words that surprised me. It should not be so, is not so, in the familiar version of what disaster brings, and yet it is there, rising from rubble, coming out of ice, of fire, of storms and floods. The joy matters as a measure of otherwise neglected desires, desires for public life and civil society, for inclusion, purpose, and power.

Disasters are, most basically, terrible, tragic and grievous, and no

matter what positive side effects and possibilities they produce, they are not to be desired. But by the same measure, those side effects should not be ignored because they arise amid devastation. The desires and possibilities awakened are so powerful they shine even from wreckage, carnage and ashes. And the point is not to welcome disasters. They do not create these gifts, but they are one avenue through which the gifts arrive. Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what is seen there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times, and in other extraordinary times.

Most social change is chosen – you want to belong to a co-op, you believe

in social safety nets or community-supported agriculture. But disaster doesn't sort us out by preferences; it drags us into emergencies that require we act, and act altruistically, bravely, and with initiative to survive ourselves or save the neighbours, no matter how we vote or what we do for a living. The positive emotions that arise in those unpromising circumstances demonstrate that social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding. The very structure of our economy and society prevents these goals from being achieved. The structure is also ideological, a philosophy that best serves the wealthy and powerful but shapes all of our lives, reinforced as the conventional wisdom disseminated by the media, from news hours to disaster movies. The facets of that ideology have been called individualism, capitalism and Social Darwinism, and have appeared in the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Thomas Malthus, as well as the work of most conventional contemporary economists, who presume we seek personal gain for rational reasons and refrain from looking at the ways a system skewed to that end damages much else we need for our survival and desire for our well-being. Disaster demonstrates this, since among the factors determining whether you will live or die are the health of your immediate community and the justness of your society. We need ties to survive, but they, along with purposefulness, immediacy and agency, also give us joy – the startling, sharp joy I found in accounts of disaster survivors. These accounts demonstrate that the citizens any paradise would need – the people who are brave enough, resourceful enough, and generous enough – already exist. The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise nowadays arises in hell, it's because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way.

My exploration of disaster has led me from an investigation of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco to the

**'There was no electricity, all the stores were closed, no one had access to media. The consequence was that everyone poured out into the street to bear witness. Not quite a street party, but everyone out at once – it was a sense of happiness to see everybody even though we didn't know each other'**

and how deeply it mattered. After I met the man in Halifax who lit up with joy when he talked about the great hurricane there, I began to study it. After I began to write about the 1906 earthquake as its centennial approached, I started to see how often this particular feeling arose and how much it remade the world of disaster. After Hurricane Katrina tore up the Gulf Coast, I began to understand the limits and possibilities of disasters. My book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, is about that emotion, as important as it is surprising, and the circumstances that arouse it and those that it generates. These things count immensely as we enter an era of increasing and intensifying disaster. And more than

## NATURAL LAWS, SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND THE LIMITS TO GROWTH

In the 1990s, I thought that climate change, in the following decade, would become further discernable from background climate variability – but would translate into a relatively slow and distant problem for humanity. I thought the current mass extinction of species, the sixth in Earth's history, would pose more immediate problems for larger numbers of people. It turns out that, like many other scientists and activists, I underestimated both the *shorter-term magnitude* of the impacts of increasing the concentration of greenhouse gases (like carbon dioxide) in the atmosphere and the *rate* at which such changes are taking place. This was, in part, because of pervasive under-predictions of the sheer quantity of fossil fuels that would be burnt globally: current emissions are higher than even the most pessimistic scenarios suggested back then. In addition, we've discovered that ecosystems, and the people who depend most directly on them, are actually highly vulnerable to relatively small climatic changes, often with devastating consequences. Conversely, ecosystems appear relatively resilient to the loss of individual species, because

other functionally similar ones often fill their roles.

However, there is a grander narrative of how wrong environmental scientists, such as myself, have been over the recent past. We largely gave up talking about the *limits* to infinite economic growth on a planet of *finite* material that can be transformed into useable resources – and the limits to the subsequent processing, by the environment, of waste materials generated by their transformation. In 1972 the

Club of Rome's (in)famous *Limits to Growth* study – the first scientific model spanning economics and the environment – was immediately challenged by free-market economists. This challenge was epitomised by the wager between economist Julian Simon and scientist Paul Ehrlich on the price of metals. Ehrlich bet the price of selected metals would *rise* as their scarcity increased. Simon, on the other hand, said market mechanisms would cause a *fall* in

prices. And indeed, they fell. The outcome of this wager further aided the ascendance of a neoliberal ideology which held that the intelligence of the market alone could guide social progress around any environmental limits.

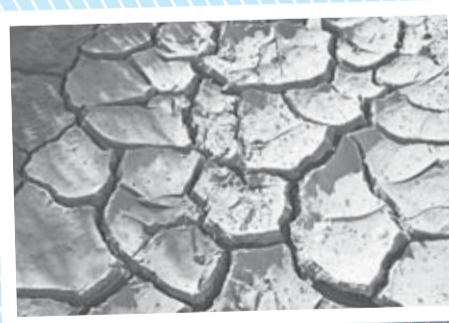
Yet, 'the greatest market failure in history', is how climate change has famously been described by the ex-World Bank Chief Economist Nicholas Stern. Environmental scientists are now back to where we were in the 1970s, having to argue that limits are real and that safety cannot be found in the invisible hands of *laissez-faire* economics.

Ehrlich lost the wager because he failed to understand that prices *are* responsive to technological breakthroughs which can increase supply, and demand can alter as new materials can sometimes be substituted if prices rise. Yet, Simon was fundamentally wrong: markets can extend environmental limits but cannot abolish them. In 2008 researcher Graham Turner analysed the real data on economic growth, population, food production and so on,

between 1970 and 2000, and compared these with the Club of Rome's predictions for the same period. Their business-as-usual ('standard run') forecasts compare 'favourably' with what actually happened in the real world. The bad news is that this model predicts that while economic growth continues through the early 21st century, as does population, and food production keeps pace, there is increasing environmental stress due to long-lived pollutants, leading to a global collapse – drastic economic activity, food production and human population reductions – by the middle of the century, as environmental limits are breached.

Our socio-economic system is constructed by *people* and doesn't obey 'natural laws' of economics akin to those of physics. However, it *is* a sub-system within the biosphere, and this certainly *does* operate according to physical laws. Without a more widespread acknowledgement of these facts, we are likely to soon see the extent to which we can destabilise our societies by ignoring our impacts on the Earth system.

**Dr Simon Lewis** is a Research Fellow at the Earth and Biosphere Institute, University of Leeds, where he is investigating how humans are changing the Earth's workings as a system. He is also involved with Climate Camp in the UK





hurricane and flood in New Orleans ninety-nine years later. In between came the Halifax explosion of 1917, the extraordinary Mexico City earthquake that killed so many and changed so much, and the neglected tale of how ordinary New Yorkers responded to the calamity that struck their city on September 11, 2001. In and around these cases, I've encountered stories of the London Blitz, of earthquakes in China, Japan, and Argentina, of the Chernobyl meltdown, the Chicago heat wave of 1995, the Managua earthquake that helped topple a regime, smallpox in New York and a volcano in Iceland. Though the worst disasters in recent years have been in Asia – the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the 2008 earthquake in China and typhoon in Burma – they have not been my main focus. They matter immensely, but language and distance as well as culture kept these disasters out of reach for me. What I am after is what arises from the shattering of the status quo and routine of industrialised parts of the world where philosophies of competition and individualism prevail, a certain degree of everyday alienation is ordinary, and natural and political rather than religious explanations for disaster form the basis for response (though fundamentalist Christians in the United States remain fond of claiming divine causes for selected calamities).

Since postmodernism reshaped the intellectual landscape, it has been problematic to even use the term *human nature*, with its implication of a stable and universal human essence. The study of disasters makes it clear that there are plural and contingent natures – but the prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathic and brave. The language of therapy speaks almost exclusively of the consequence of disaster as trauma, suggesting a humanity that is unbearably fragile, a self that does not act but is acted upon, the most basic recipe of the victim. Disaster movies and the media continue to portray ordinary people as hysterical or vicious in the face of calamity. We believe these sources telling us we are victims or brutes more than our own experience. Most people know this other human nature from experience, though almost nothing official or mainstream confirms it.

But to understand both the rising from the ruins that is the ordinary human response to disaster, and what hides it, there are two other important subjects to consider. One is the behaviour of the minority in power, who often act savagely in a disaster. The other is the beliefs and representations of the media, the people who hold up a distorting mirror to us in which it is almost impossible to recognise these paradises and our possibilities. Beliefs matter, and the overlapping beliefs of the media and the elites can become a second wave of disaster – as they did most dramatically in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These three subjects are woven together in almost every disaster, and finding the one that matters most – this glimpse of paradise – means understanding the other forces that obscure, oppose and sometimes rub out that possibility.

This social desire and social possibility go against the grain of the dominant stories of recent decades. You can read recent history as a history of privatisation, not just of the economy, but of society, as marketing and media shove imagination more and more toward private life and private satisfaction, as citizens are redefined as consumers, as public partic-

## The language of therapy speaks almost exclusively of the consequence of disaster as trauma, suggesting a humanity that is unbearably fragile, a self that does not act but is acted upon, the most basic recipe of the victim

ipation falters and with it any sense of collective or individual political power, as even the language for public emotions and satisfactions withers. There is no money in what is aptly called free association: we are instead encouraged by media and advertising to fear each other and regard public life as a danger and a nuisance, to live in secured spaces, communicate by electronic means, and acquire our information from media rather than each other. But in disaster people come together, and though some fear this as a mob, many cherish it as a taste of a civil society that is close enough to paradise. In contemporary terms, *privatisation* is largely an economic term, for the consignment of jurisdictions, goods, services and powers – railways, water, policing, education – to the private sector and the vagaries of the marketplace. But this economic privatisation is impossible without the other privatisation of desire and imagination that tells us we are not each other's keeper. Disasters, in returning their sufferers to public and collective life, undo some of this privatisation that is a slower, subtler disaster all its own. In a society in which participation, agency, purposefulness and freedom are all adequately present, a disaster would be only a disaster.

Few speak of paradise now, except as something remote enough to be impossible. The ideal societies we hear of are mostly far away or long ago or both, situated in some primordial society before the Fall or a spiritual kingdom in a remote Himalayan vastness. The implication is that we here and now are far from capable of living such ideals. But what if paradise flashed up among us from time to time – at the worst of times? What if we glimpsed it in the jaws of hell? These flashes give us, as the long ago and far away do not, a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become. This is a paradise of rising to the occasion that points out by contrast how the rest of the time most of us fall down from the heights of possibility, down into diminished selves and dismal societies. Many now do not even hope for a better society, but they recognise it when they run into it, and that discovery shines out even through the namelessness of their experience. Others recognise it, grasp it, and make something of it, and long-term social and political transformations, both good and bad, arise from the wreckage. The door to this era's potential paradises is in hell.

The word *emergency* comes from *emerge*, to rise out of, the opposite of *merge*, which comes from *mergere*, to be within or under a liquid, immersed, submerged. An emergency is a separation from the familiar, a sudden emergence into a new atmosphere, one that often demands we ourselves rise to the occasion. *Catastrophe* comes from the Greek *kata*, or down, and *streiphen*, or turning over. It means an upset of what is expected and was originally used to mean a plot twist. To emerge into the unexpected is not always terrible, though these words have evolved to imply ill fortune. The word

*disaster* comes from the Latin compound of *dis-*, or away, without, and *astro*, star or planet; literally without a star. It originally suggested misfortune due to astrologically generated trouble, as in the blues musician Albert King's classic 'Born Under a Bad Sign'.

In some of the disasters of the twentieth century – the big northeastern blackouts in 1965 and 2003, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area, 2005's Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast – the loss of electrical power meant that the light pollution blotting out the night sky vanished. In these disaster-struck cities, people suddenly found themselves under the canopy of stars still visible in small and remote places. On the warm night of August 15, 2003, the Milky Way could be seen in New York City, a heavenly realm long lost to view until the blackout that hit the northeast late that afternoon. You can think of the current social order as something akin to this artificial light: another kind of power that fails in disaster. In its place appears a reversion to improvised, collaborative, cooperative and local society. However beautiful the stars of a suddenly visible night sky, few nowadays could find their way by them. But the constellations of solidarity, altruism and improvisation are within most of us and reappear at these times. People know what to do in a disaster. The loss of power, the disaster in the modern sense, is an affliction, but the reappearance of these old heavens is its opposite. This is the paradise entered through hell.

## If paradise nowadays arises in hell, it's because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way

Excerpted from *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* by Rebecca Solnit, published with permission of Viking, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., © 2009 Rebecca Solnit.

Rebecca Solnit is a writer, historian, and activist who lives in San Francisco. She is the author of twelve books, including *Hope in the Dark*, a 2004 book rethinking how history and popular power work, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* from 2000, and *Savage Dreams*, a 1994 book investigating the nuclear and Indian wars of the American west and the reasons for their invisibility. A regular contributor to the site *Tomdispatch.com*, she writes about the ways culture and politics shape each other, the interior life of public events, and public consequences of beliefs and desires, as well as about landscape and the environment



### MYTHS vs. MACHINES TO PROBLEMATISE LIFE

I don't know if the problem was that I was 'wrong' as such. I believe it is more the case that I hadn't made a discovery yet: the revelation of the (common) potency of thought. French philosopher Jacques Rancière calls it 'the good news', and it is certainly an event that presents a break, a cut, a before and after. We truly think when we truly confront our true problems.

Before this encounter, what I was interested in above all were forms of 'soft propaganda'. The creation of myths - *mythopoeisis* - was a sort of white magic to oppose to the black magic of the system, its web of images and discourses. In the end, however, it was magic nonetheless, aspiring to cast a spell and enchant; that is, it played on the edge of social engineering. It is no coincidence that the problem then was above all to 'create movement'. Propaganda assembles, proposes models and solutions, synthesises and simplifies, assigns identities.

Today, I only see strength in a thought that is not a machine of counter-histories, but a machine to problematise life. Propaganda is like a voiceover: it comes from nowhere (however much it may talk about subjectivity). It is a word of pure exteriority. This is exactly why it can't move, it can't affect. Only the word of someone who thinks from their own life is believable - a life that always moves on many planes (rather than the cut-up self of activism). This is the word one can truly answer, be responsible for.

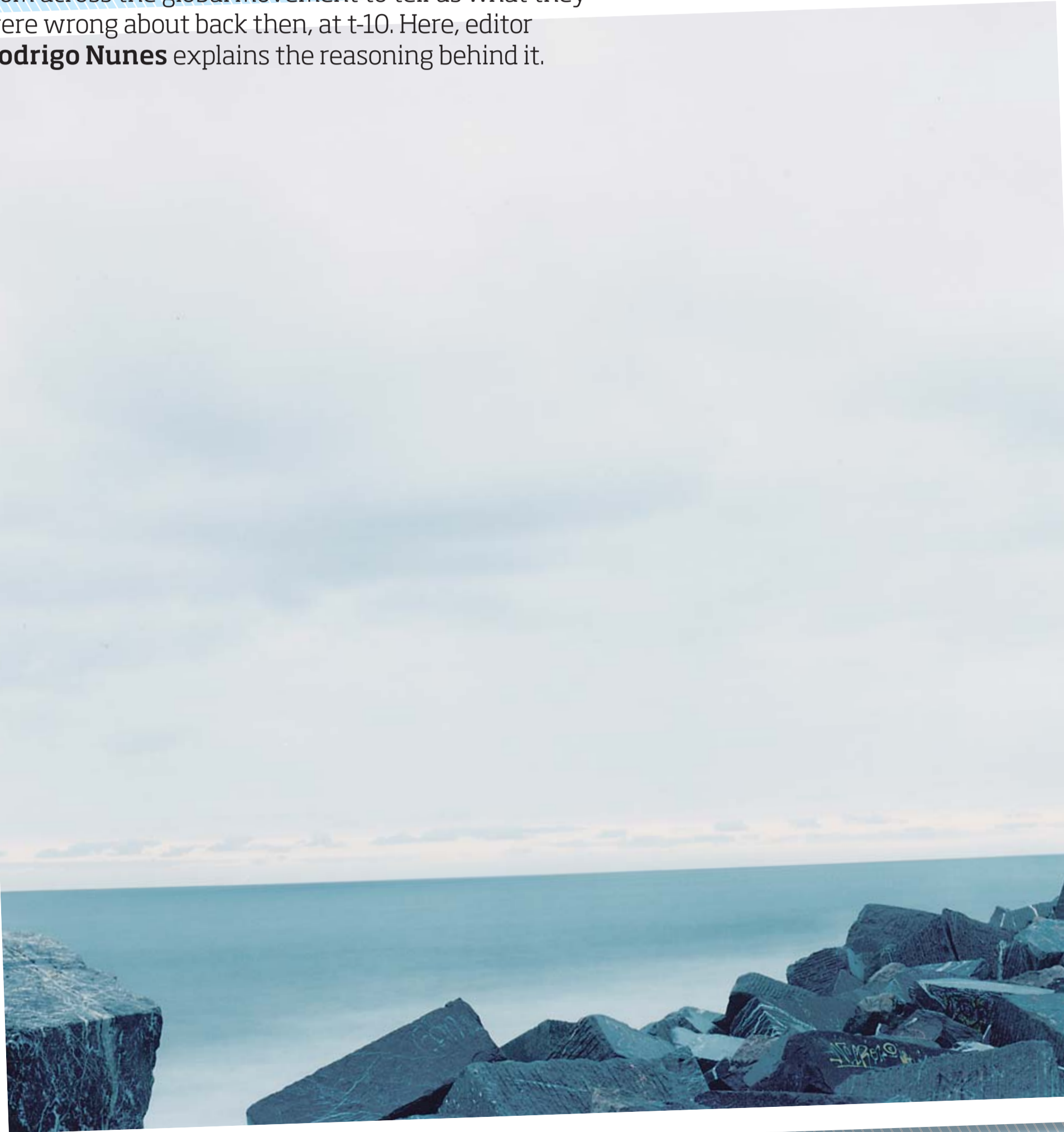
Propaganda desires hegemony, it competes. This is why its word generates refusal. Behind it there is always a position accumulating representative power. The critical word, if it wishes to circulate, must constitute itself as a common place, an empty space that can be infinitely reappropriated, resignified... Ten years later, the question haunts me: what if struggling didn't have to pass through de-problematizing or convincing? What then?

**Amador Fernández-Savater** was an active participant in some initiatives of the 'global wave', such as *Indymedia Madrid*. Today he investigates new forms of politicisation from different spaces. One place where his current production can be followed is in the Público newspaper: [blogs.publico.es/fueradelugar](http://blogs.publico.es/fueradelugar)



# What were you wrong

Ten years after the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, *Turbulence* invited people from across the global movement to tell us what they were wrong about back then, at t-10. Here, editor **Rodrigo Nunes** explains the reasoning behind it.





# about ten years ago?

The year 2009 will go down in history as the time of the greatest capitalist crisis in almost a century; it will perhaps also be recorded as the period when the ecological crisis definitively established itself as a widespread concern, even if one that means very different things for different groups. It is also the tenth anniversary of the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, which made of 1999 the year when the 'anti-' or 'alter-globalisation' movement, or the 'movement of movements', or the 'global wave' became a visible phenomenon across the world.

Clearly, one of the reasons for the lack of anniversary celebration is the lack of much to celebrate. If anything, the problems highlighted then seem more pressing now, the threats they pose more acute. And while the danger grows, the redeeming power seems to recede. It is symptomatic that, as Olivier de Marcellus says in this issue, 'faced with literally "the chance of a lifetime", we are amazingly unprepared'. The mobilisation that was widespread in the years immediately preceding and following Seattle, the wealth of different experiences, the inventiveness, determination and hope of those days seem much weaker now. We are at a moment when it would be tempting to look back on the debates of a decade ago and say that time has proved *we were right*; the problem is it is difficult to find that 'we' from which to speak.

For this issue, *Turbulence* invited individuals and groups who were active in various ways at the time of the 'global wave' to respond to one question: 'What were you *wrong* about ten years ago?' Some have treated this as a question concerning that cycle as a whole,

in its global dimension. Others, as one concerning local or national realities, or the practices of certain groups and movements, they were involved in – or even as a truly individual question.

To say 'active in various ways' is more than the usual, obligatory reference to the diversity of the social composition of that cycle. It advances one hypothesis about the period: that it was not a *movement*, but a *moment* – and that perhaps one of its problems was the confusion between the two. This distinction implies that what happened then was that globalisation itself made it possible, for the first time, for different social forces all over the world to be aware of the simultaneity of their struggles, their overlaps, mutual effects and differences (in terms of immediate targets, tactics, organisational forms, strategic

horizons), and communicate in ways that allowed them to both support and learn from each other and converge at common points.

It is not, then, that 'the movement' is dead: 'the movement' never existed. It was a mirage, produced in a moment of hugely and rapidly increased capacity of communication and coordination, and wide-eyed astonishment at a just-discovered capacity to produce moments of convergence whose collective power was much greater than the sum of its parts. What ended up becoming tagged as a 'movement', then – mostly the cycle of summit protests and counter-summits – was nothing but the tip of the iceberg. It was a much deeper, wider web of connections, both direct (as when groups engaged in communication and coordination with each other) and indirect (when a story or experience inspired something somewhere else) that produced those convergences. And these connections existed among initiatives that were sometimes very local, sometimes very different, and sometimes even contradictory.

To speak of a mirage is not to dismiss some very real effects. Every convergence fed back into these initiatives creating and reinforcing connections, and above all strengthening what was most unique about this moment: the fact that it posed itself as global *as such*. There had been other cycles of struggle that had spread across the world – those

only the most visible side of what was happening all over the world was *effectively* the movement – and so treated more and more as the 'real deal', an end in itself rather than a strategic tool and a series of tactical moments in what should be the constitution of 'another world'.

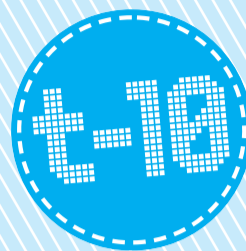
The problem is that it is impossible to *inhabit* this global dimension as such. Firstly, because such convergences do not a movement make. However crucial it may be to maintain open the potential to focus activity on singular times and places, such potential exists only as a *consequence* of capacity built at the local level, not as its substitute. Communication at a global level is possible only to the extent that there are active local struggles. Secondly, because privileging convergences often saps resources from local capacity-building, when the point should be precisely that the former *reinforce* the latter. If they do not, this ultimately means that antagonism, rather than being the necessary other half of building autonomy, replaces it; and in doing so, it loses the grounds on which it can find support.

As a consequence, many made the choice of disengaging from the 'global' dimension altogether, directing their energies back to the local level. In other cases, investment in the 'global' at the expense of the local would lead to a disconnection between 'politics' and 'life' (as both Amador Fernandez-Savater and the former members of Precarias a la Deriva describe), with the danger of either burn-out, or a replacement of slow-built consistency for the quicker, wider, but also (often) less sustainable effects of engaging with the media (as Trevor

Ngwane points out).

Treated in this way, convergences would end up operating largely on the *representational* level (even if despite themselves): *expressing* a dissent that had no way of *enforcing* itself. This kind of dissent, of course, has some effectiveness in a parliamentary democracy, provided it corresponds to a large enough constituency to constitute a relevant electoral variable. This highlights another reason why the global is uninhabitable, at least for politics' antagonistic aspect: in itself, it allows little space for strength to be shown or demands to be placed, since there is *no-one to directly address*.

Of course, as some respondents highlight, there is another, very specific reason why this global dimension would become increasingly inviable: the landscape in which that moment unfolded changed significantly after 9/11 and the onset of the 'War on Terror'. Not only was the main focus of conflict moved



elsewhere – 'good' versus 'rogue' states, 'fundamentalism' versus 'democracy', 'Islam' versus 'the West' –, it was also displaced to a level of confrontation no movements were willing or able to occupy: state apparatus versus 'terror'. What is more, the combination of a constantly reinforced atmosphere of alarm, and the spread of legislative and policing measures that crept into all spheres and served to criminalise social movements, had the subjective impact of reinforcing isolation, fear and feelings of impotence. The joy that had been discovered in collective action (even at a distance), and which had been one of the most important glues keeping that moment together, became harder to attain. The hangovers from earlier moments of excess became tinged with darker, more anxious hues.

The criticisms and questions levelled here are retrospective. Speaking of the cycle fizzing out, as though that were purely the result of its internal difficulties, or imagining how things could have been different in other circumstances, might all seem rather speculative. We should be concerned with the present, not the past.

Why, then, ask the question: 'What were you *wrong* about?' Precisely because it is one way to bring out what is distinctive about the present. We must avoid turning the fact that 'we' have been confirmed right in so much of our analyses into an opportunity for simply turning back the clock and assuming we must have been right about everything else. The worst possible result of this would be to allow the resurrection of sterile oppositions and false dichotomies, the re-entrenchment of positions and identities, the pre-emption of discussions that need to start again. The return to a 'we' whose disappearance (or problematic existence, at the very least) it is necessary to question and work through; whose narcissistic resurrection could eventually ward off the constitution of a new one. In short, everything that could hinder the emergence of a new common ground.

What we are proposing could then, perhaps, be described as a therapeutic exercise: one that enables a collective evaluation of what has changed in our movements and in the world in these past ten years, and opens up the possibility of a new vulnerability that is the pre-condition for new dialogues. In more senses than one, this is an analytic exercise, or the beginning of one. A difficult, but necessary, attempt to transform the work of mourning the struggles of the last decade into a joyful affirmation of the persistence of their promise in the present.

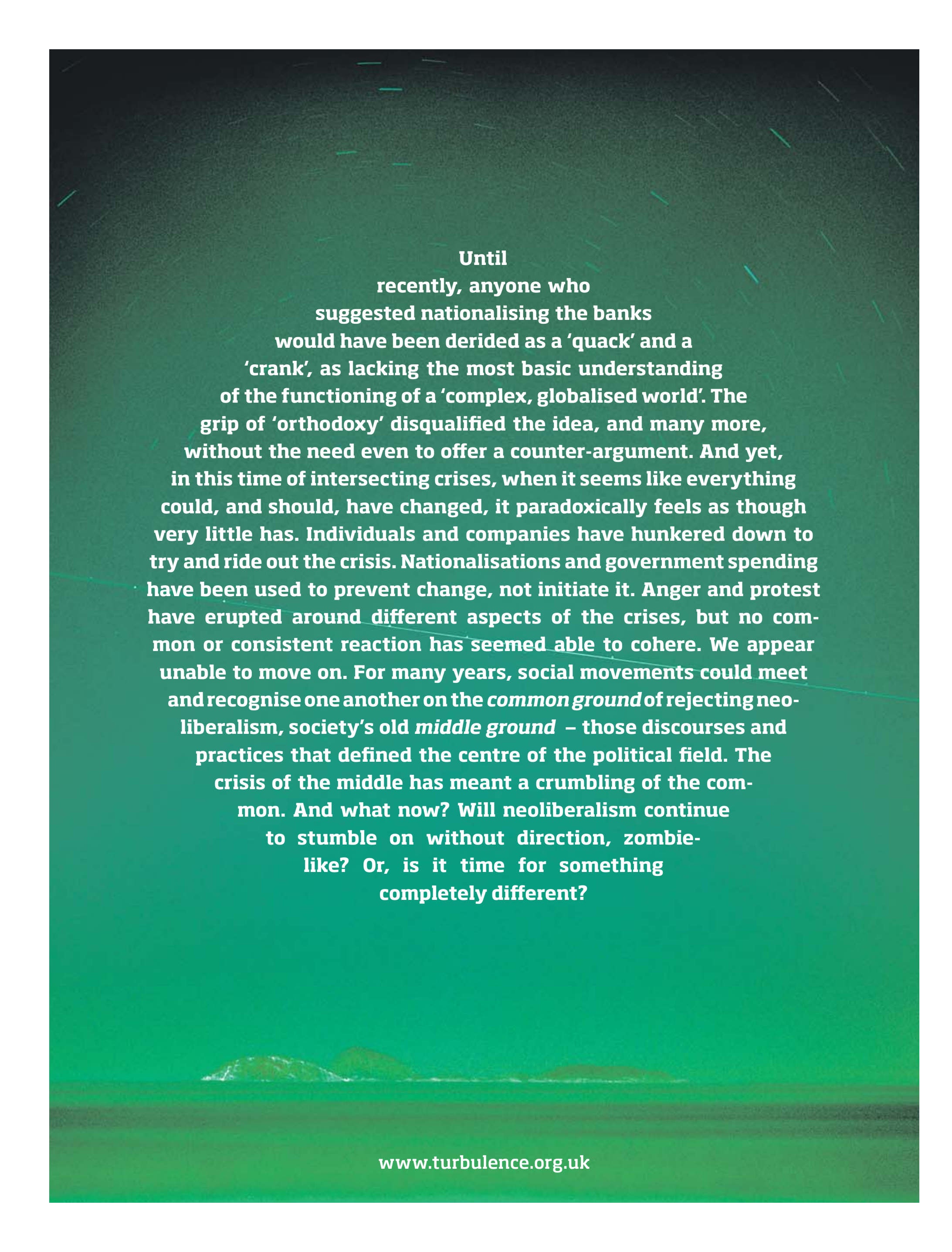
Rodrigo Nunes, philosopher, was doing local organising ten years ago, until he stumbled upon a 'global movement' when the World Social Forum moved into his backyard in Porto Alegre. Today he is back in Brazil, after many years in the UK. He is a member of the editorial collective of *Turbulence*

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of the 1840s and late 1960s, to name only two. What was unique about the cycle that started ten years ago was how the increased potential for exchange and production of commonality resulted in an expanding awareness of the different impacts of neoliberal globalisation, their interconnectedness, the forms taken by resistance to them, and the ways in which the latter could be placed in relation.

This strength, however, would reveal itself as also a weakness. The 'we' of that period became progressively stabilised as corresponding to the 'we' of the summit protests and counter-summits. A multitudinous, diverse 'we', no doubt, but one which managed to sustain itself largely because of the temporally limited nature of those convergences, their externally, negatively given objects, and the positive feedback produced by their own mediatic, spectacular strength. More problematically, it generated the illusion that what was





**Until recently, anyone who suggested nationalising the banks would have been derided as a 'quack' and a 'crank', as lacking the most basic understanding of the functioning of a 'complex, globalised world'. The grip of 'orthodoxy' disqualified the idea, and many more, without the need even to offer a counter-argument. And yet, in this time of intersecting crises, when it seems like everything could, and should, have changed, it paradoxically feels as though very little has. Individuals and companies have hunkered down to try and ride out the crisis. Nationalisations and government spending have been used to prevent change, not initiate it. Anger and protest have erupted around different aspects of the crises, but no common or consistent reaction has seemed able to cohere. We appear unable to move on. For many years, social movements could meet and recognise one another on the *common ground* of rejecting neoliberalism, society's old *middle ground* – those discourses and practices that defined the centre of the political field. The crisis of the middle has meant a crumbling of the common. And what now? Will neoliberalism continue to stumble on without direction, zombie-like? Or, is it time for something completely different?**