

*Subterranean Echos: Resistance and Politics “desde el Sótano”*¹

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The insurgency was a conscious initiative of the rural masses. The conscious aspect, however, seems to have received little attention in the literature on this subject. The omission is hidden in most accounts behind metaphors which treat peasant revolts as natural phenomena . . . Alternatively, an explanation is sought in terms of causes that unleash the rebellion as a kind of automatic response. In either case, the insurgency is considered as something external to peasant consciousness, and the Cause is presented as Reason in imaginary disguise.

Ranjit Guha (2002: “La prosa de la contrainsurgencia”)

A deplorable trait of the Western mind is its habit of relating expressions and actions to external or transcendent goals, rather than considering them as part of an immanent process based on intrinsic value.

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (1977)

In the last 15 years in Latin America, the movements capable of presenting important challenges to the system – revolts, uprisings and mobilizations that threaten elite domination – have been born on the “margins” of established society and have been led by the poorest, by those deprived of social and political rights. The movements of those “without” – without roof, without land, without work, without rights – have shown a degree of vigor that has placed them often at the center of the political stage.

These new protagonists have displaced the union movement in many countries from its traditional leading role as a force for social transformation. But the current movements have also displaced the left, especially during the moments of extreme crisis that occurred when the neoliberal model started to break up. This was seen quite clearly in the revolts in Argentina (1997–December 2001) and Bolivia (September–October 2003), and also in incipient form during the crisis in Uruguay in the winter of 2002. In all these cases, the poorest

1. [“From the basement” – an expression used by Subcomandante Marcos.]

sectors reacted to the passivity of the union movement by undertaking widespread looting.

These new actors have also provoked deep upheavals in other countries, notably Ecuador, Venezuela, Paraguay and Mexico. In Brazil “the excluded” (landless and, to a lesser extent, homeless) have presented serious challenges to successive governments, including that led by Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. What is certain is that the actions of the new protagonists – who include revitalized older activists along with the new poor produced by neoliberalism – have succeeded in changing the social and political map of the continent, putting the neoliberal model on the defensive for the first time.

Finally, as shown by the insurrections in Argentina and Bolivia, but also by the mobilizations in Peru, Venezuela and Ecuador, there is a new urban activism visible even in big cities, which up to now have been the spaces most favorable to the neoliberal model. The initial challenges came at the beginning of the 1990s from rural areas and small towns, where the social structure making resistance possible had not been dismantled. However, the more recent urban risings indicate that the most important struggles are now emerging from sectors which are more heterogeneous than the traditional working class.

That this set of challenges has emerged from the “margins”² (or from the *sótano* invoked by Subcomandante Marcos) has profound implications for social and political change, but also stimulates reflection within the movements and among those of us that follow them. On the one hand, the current movements have created new spaces of organization and resistance – the *caracoles*,³ ethnic territories, Aymara quarters – which set themselves up as *de facto* autonomous regions, whether explicitly or not.⁴ But these spaces are no longer limited to rural areas, since the poor are now creating profound urban transformations, notably in the Aymara city of El Alto (on the edge of the altiplano above La Paz) and in urban settlements created by the new poor in cities such as Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Asunción (to mention just those in the Southern Cone).

Who are these new protagonists? How have they moved from a situation of apparent passivity to the current one in which they can shape their own lives and can defy the powerful? Is this a third wave

2. I use the words “margins” and “marginality” in a merely descriptive sense. The term “exclusion” refers to persons or social sectors that were not granted social rights within the context of welfare state legislation.

3. [See Pablo González Casanova’s article in this issue.]

4. On the “ethnic territories” in Ecuador, see Ramón Valarezo (1993); on the Aymara quarters, see Patzi (2003).

of movements – a new category to add to the old and new movements of the poor and marginalized?

On the other hand, these new players not only challenge the state and the dominant classes; they also call into question not only the knowledge and practices of the old left but also the theories that resulted from the rise of the “new social movements” (despite traits which they share with the latter). They pose important questions about the future of social struggles. The welfare state and import-substitution industrialization allowed for the creation of a broad and well-organized union movement, in which left-wing parties had an active presence. The structure of these organizations was inspired by the unitary and centralizing logic of the states that were, in turn, the point of reference, object, and target of their action. Forms of struggle suited to increasing bargaining power (primarily strikes and demonstrations) were useful in order to win their demands, enabled them to bring workers together on the basis of class solidarity, and encouraged the birth of a pattern of instrumental action which brought good results.

What forms of organization and action are emerging in this new period? How will the new protagonists relate to the state and to left-wing parties? Will they give priority, as did the workers’ movement, to fighting to install governments sympathetic to their interests? Will they become institutionalized? In short, what is, or will be, the politics of those that are at the margins of the system, the “non-taylorized”? And, even more unsettling, what kind of politics can be pursued in fragmented societies, with nation-states in decline and for subjects who are in the “basement”?

I do not pretend to answer questions which only time and the intensification of social action can answer. I only claim to show the relevance of these questions, that is, to show that the new forms of struggle and organization will not necessarily be “carbon copies” of those employed by the union movement and the left in the 1960s. Up to now, we have recognized the possibility of a distinct path for the Zapatista communities in Chiapas⁵ and, to a lesser extent, for the other movements of Indian origin on our continent; but not for the new players, particularly in the cities, who have been produced by capitalism’s current phase of exclusion.

Underlying all this, perhaps little is new. Nevertheless, the crisis of the states and of the ruling circles and the strengthening of social move-

5. Subcomandante Marcos’s text “Un mundo nuevo” is a good synthesis of the Zapatista responses to these and other questions.

ments, in short, “the breaking up of the system combined with subaltern insurgencies, bring to light the accumulation of forces in that underground” which up to recently were invisible (Hylton & Thomson 2003: 17).

The creation of spaces

We are moving toward a new relationship between people and territories. In the period of hegemony of the workers’ movement, the concept of territory was vague as compared with the centrality of production relations. Once outside the factory, class seemed to fade away, despite the anchoring of working-class power in certain counter-hegemonic bastions in the peripheries of large cities (Lojkin 1999). At the same time, the discourse of equality – woven with the threads of citizenship which the welfare state offered in exchange for recognition of its legitimacy – hid a reality of latent (and disguised) differences which today emerge with their full disintegrative effect.

In a short time, profound changes occurred in the territorial basis of national states, local industries, and the classes that supported them. Deterritorialization (flight of capital, deindustrialization, crisis of the subjects and in the way of occupying their territories) led to massive emigration within national boundaries and in particular within the different urban networks, be it among cities or even within the same city.

In any case – and this is one of the most notable changes that have occurred in Latin America – the power emerging in the new insurgent bastions does not appear to be connected to the factory (which is non-existent, virtual, or part of the mechanism of exclusion) nor mediated by the municipality, which, although shaped in part by the new subjects, does not wish to integrate them and can no longer represent them, seeking at best to neutralize them by means of political patronage.

The new relationships between territory and subject emerge from the prior deterritorialization, which represents a wound in the urban fabric. The flight of capital, with regard to the working class, is a flight from the spaces in which territorially grounded working-class power limited its options. But in its flight, it leaves devastation in its wake, because “capital, by its nature, creates physical environments in its own image for the sole purpose of destroying them afterward, when it seeks temporary geographic expansion and displacement, in an attempt to resolve the crises of over-accumulation which affect it on a cyclical basis” (Harvey 2004). This devastation, in Latin

America, takes the form of unemployment, extreme poverty, and the out-and-out expulsion of millions of workers from the city toward inhospitable, fetid, often flood-prone outskirts. In the Southern Cone we have three relatively recent examples: the expulsion of 200,000 poor from the city of Buenos Aires to the periphery in 1977 by the military dictatorship; the expulsion of 24,000 miners and their families in 1985 in Bolivia, some of whom ended up in the city of El Alto and some, after an extensive journey, in el Chapare as coca farmers; and the expulsion, over two decades, of 17% of the population of Montevideo from their old working- and middle-class neighborhoods to the periphery, where 280,000 unemployed and under-employed live in shanty towns.

However, the habitat is the space in which culture is grounded, “where the social subjects are formed who shape the geographic space, appropriating it, endowing it with their meanings and practices, their senses and sensibilities, with their tastes and pleasures” (Leff 1998: 241). The spatial fracturing speaks to us of a cultural fracturing based on pre-existing differences, a matter that is of particular importance in countries we believed to be relatively homogenous such as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. Now we discover that their supposed social homogeneity concealed, under the mantle of a working-class culture which encompassed the popular sectors, a certain “extra something” which turns out to be similarly fragmented. So it is that the concepts we learned about “working-class culture” handed down to us by European and North American “social history” perhaps could not account for the peculiarities and differences of the working classes in this part of the south.⁶

Well, what happens to the subjects who are formed in the segregated territories? Reflecting on the trajectory of the *seringueiros*,⁷ Porto Gonçalves notes astutely that “new subjects emerge by instituting new territorialities” (2001: 208), a relevant consideration provided we recognize that we are talking not only of other territories but also

6. What is certain is that, as E.P. Thompson and other social historians have pointed out, cultural homogeneity never existed. But now we face an even bigger problem. The changes that have taken place in our societies are of such scope that traditional social history (working-class history, basically) cannot comprehend them. Everything indicates that we must now turn – even in countries and regions where the original populations have almost disappeared – to so-called “subaltern studies,” since the complexity of a society fragmented by “neocolonialization” calls for more appropriate analytic instruments than the ones we have up to now been using, at least in the Río de la Plata region.

7. [*Seringueiros* is Portuguese for the itinerant rubber tappers in Brazil’s Amazon forest.]

of other subjects – not the same subjects in a different form, changed to suit the new spaces and strategies for survival.

Non-citizens – those stripped of their citizenship (their spaces and places) in neoliberal society – are opening up their own spaces in a process of struggle in which they develop as subjects: spaces created, designed and controlled by these very sectors themselves. To understand this involves reversing one's perspective: rejecting the negative and state-centered viewpoint – which defines people by what they lack (needy, excluded, marginalized) – and adopting another way of looking which starts with *the differences that they have created* in order then to visualize other possible paths. In this way, the urban poor become part of the experience already lived through by the rural poor – both Indians and landless peasants – who in a prolonged process of struggle have created or broadened their spaces, seizing millions of hectares from estates and landowners, or consolidating the spaces that they already had (in the case of the Indian communities) by recovering control over their own communities.

The new occupants (*asentados*) have created forms of organization closely tied to territory: the basic unit for day-to-day purposes is the block (*manzana*), which elects a person responsible or *manzanero*; the *manzaneros* all meet as a body of delegates who then elect an executive committee. The assemblies of all the people in the settlement (*asentamiento*) meet to decide the most important issues. This type of organization involves “the existence of a whole communitarian movement where home life seemed to extend toward the community” (Merklen 1995). In this respect, the new urban movements are in tune with the indigenous and landless movements, operating with a very different logic from that of narrowly interest-based worker associations.

The challenges to the system are unthinkable without spaces beyond the control of the powerful. According to James Scott, the first condition for the subordinated groups to speak openly is “a separate social space where neither control, surveillance nor repression by the dominant forces can reach” (Scott 2000: 149). The spaces controlled by the oppressed are always “far from,” which guarantees a certain autonomy; they emerge and grow in “the weak links of a chain of socialization” (152).

Up to a few years ago the only social sector to enjoy autonomously controlled spaces was the Indian communities, particularly after consumerist society destroyed or disfigured classic working-class spaces such as the tavern, and after industrial reorganization neutralized opportunities for communication at the workplace. However,

the violent shocks caused by neoliberalism, in particular the accelerated internal migration of the last two decades, have widened the rifts and fissures in which the poor have been able to create new forms of sociability and resistance.

If we look closely at the more important challenges launched by the popular sectors, we will see that they all emerged from the “new” territories, which are more autonomous and more independently controlled than those that existed in previous periods of capitalism: El Alto, in Bolivia; the neighborhoods and settlements of the unemployed in Argentina; the camps and settlements of the landless in Brazil; the popular neighborhoods in Caracas, and the indigenous regions in Chiapas, Bolivia and Ecuador. Later we will see that the crisis of the old territorialities means, at the same time, a no less profound crisis in the systems of representation.

(Self)-affirmation through difference

We know that without difference there exist neither subjects nor social movements. However, difference is also one of the keys to social change, as the movements emerging in the last two decades have shown. In this period of capitalism the dynamic of class struggles seems to have been inverted. In the period of the welfare state the struggles had an integrative effect because, independently of any concrete demands that might be raised, the model of development could offer a place to the popular sectors. In that period, struggle was unthinkable without making demands on the state. The unions, with their state-centric structures, their rules and forms of representative democracy, reinforced that tendency, and those at the bottom learned to act as citizens. By contrast, in the present exclusionary period of capitalism, the social struggle of the excluded tends to reinforce the differences.

The distance between the old worker and unionist movement and the current players has two distinct dimensions: the relationship to territory and the relationship to reproduction. The first entails a progression from external control (*heteronomía*) to relative autonomy, evidenced in the insurrectionary disposition. The second, intimately connected to the former, involves a transition on the part of the subjects from dependence on capital to control of production and reproduction of their living conditions. Both involve a Copernican shift in the urban social movement and constitute, as I see it, the main difference between Latin American movements and those in the first world (Zibechi 2003a).

The territorial grounding and control of the new movements accounts for a number of their characteristics. One of the most notable is that “space is the site par excellence for difference” (Porto Gonçalves 2001: 45). Different uses of spaces produce different situations. Opposite the older city controlled by capital, where the design and construction of the working-class neighborhoods is directed by the state or through private initiative (with spaces for living, socializing and leisure governed by the rhythms of manufacturing and the logic of accumulation), there now arises a new city produced by the slide/movement/flight of a not insignificant portion of the working-class population toward spaces outside the control of capital, or at least where capital has a limited and distant presence.

Although such settlements (*asentamientos*) tend in formal terms to reproduce the structure of the consolidated city, they have their own characteristics, the most notable being perhaps that of building one’s own habitat, from the dwelling to public spaces and streets. Here we have a wide range of realities, shot through with differences: from the spaces within the home (where a large central family area predominates) compared with the classic working-class home (inspired by the functionality of small compartmentalized rooms, just like the middle-class home), to the urbanistic and architectonic peculiarities which in cities such as El Alto are translated into the birth of a mestizo Baroque style which some architects call “postmodern Baroque” (Limpías Ortiz 2002). The very design of the new settlements, where single-storey dwellings predominate, reflects a logic different from that of the big city: “While some huddle and pile together uncomfortably, others spread out generously. This difference marks different paths in urbanism and architecture as well as cultural differences” (ibid.).

In short, concentration versus dispersion. The use of “dispersed” space offers the new subjects other possibilities. Among the most important of these is to prevent panoptic control (which requires, necessarily, a certain degree of concentration of the population).⁸ While the city constructed in the image of capital – following the logic of concentration – negated the autonomy of the subjects, the dispersed city opens itself up to difference; but it is a difference rooted in social ties, which have a communitarian character (going beyond the

8. During the Bolivian insurrection of October 2003, the rebels destroyed pedestrian overpasses from which the military surveilled and fired on the population. To control the *asentamientos* – flat spaces spread out over wide areas – the repressive apparatus must now gain entry to the *barrio*, as there are no longer any “high points” from which it can keep watch.

traditional meaning of community). In any case, the territory makes possible a convergence of difference with communitarian ties, which may turn – particularly during moments of rebellion – into an exclusive (and exclusionary) political unity (Clastres 2004: 43–45).

In this sense the Argentine and Uruguayan states sought, in moments of crisis, to block the kind of exclusionary territoriality that developed successfully in El Alto. The settlements and poor neighborhoods on the periphery of Buenos Aires, in the context of December 19–20, were subject to a police operation aimed at setting one neighborhood against another, spreading rumors, acting through local leaders or directly through the police. The same was done in Montevideo on July 31–August 1, 2002, at the peak of the financial and social crisis. Still, I find enormous similarities between the insurrections in Argentina (2001) and Bolivia (2003), based on the considerations mentioned at the beginning of this section.

For now, I want to stress that subjects act by affirming and building on their differences. If the logic of the workers' movement was to negate difference ("externally" converting the worker into a citizen and "internally" reproducing in the organization the centralist and unitary logic of the capitalist state), the new subjects reject both attitudes. The trajectory covered has also been different: worker resistance within the workplace neutralized taylorism and dissolved it as a system of production and control; the consequent flight of capital, that is, the victory of the workers' insubordination, reflected the workers' flight from capitalist relations of production and subordination. This gave rise to a parallel dissolution of all spheres of control and discipline, from the family to the school. The destruction of the spaces created by capital, which caused its flight (Harvey 2004), freed the terrain for new forms of appropriation of space by the rebels, which meant a transition from the struggle for land (as exchange value and means of production) to the struggle to affirm a territoriality (territory as use value, as space to establish a culture). This re-territorialization, however, is no longer produced on the same bases but comes about in the opposite manner: it comes from within the subjects in formation, bearers of an "other" culture/way of life, which is forged in the process of resistance/insubordination.

The groups that emerge as movements do so by building new political and cultural identities. In this sense, the term "social movement" should be understood as a rejection of the assigned or imposed place in society – as a change in social place, as a sliding, in the strict sense, which causes "geography and sociology to mix" (Porto Gonçalves 2001: 198). But if a class is, as E.P. Thompson notes, a set of historical

relations, those “changes of place” implicitly involve changes in relations. Thus the different relations to territory contribute to generating, in each case, different subjects. But these subjects grow up affirming their differences, which leads – not in a linear but in a circular fashion – to increases in difference over time. The struggle is, therefore, different from the worker/union struggle, and it is so in the deepest sense: the struggle is by and for the defense and strengthening of difference.

Production of livelihood in the territories signals a second radical break from the industrial past. The popular sectors have erected for the first time in an urban space a set of independently controlled forms of production. Although these remain connected to and dependent on the market, vast sectors now control their forms and rhythms of production, and are no longer dominated by the rhythms of capital and its division of labor.

In an initial phase, the new poor concentrated their survival strategies on services, recycling materials discarded by consumerist society or taking advantage of openings in order to set themselves up in areas such as retailing via micro-enterprises or family initiatives. With time, they got as far as manufacturing. El Alto must be one of the cities most carefully analyzed by the state and non-governmental organizations. Seventy percent of the working population is engaged in family (50%) or semi-entrepreneurial (20%) undertakings.⁹ This type of undertaking predominates in the sales or restaurant sector (95% of those employed in that sector), followed by construction (80%) and manufacturing (75%). Young people predominate in these sectors: more than half of the employees in manufacturing are aged between 20 and 35, with women being in the overwhelming majority in retailing and restaurants in the family and semi-entrepreneurial categories. In El Alto the main protagonist in the labor market is “the family, whether as economic unit generating employment or as contributor of the greatest number of salaried workers” (Rojas & Guaygua 2003: 75). In these spaces a “new social and labor culture” arises, marked by nomadism, instability and changed work relations.

A qualitative investigation into the family units, where half of the active population of El Alto works, concludes that there is no separation between ownership and management. The division of labor in the workshop, even in those cases where merchandise spans various processes, is minimal; with few exceptions, all those who work can

9. Semi-entrepreneurial units have fewer than four workers, one or two of them being relatives, including the owner (who also works) and the other(s) being employed.

rotate without the production process being affected. In the family units non-remunerated family work predominates; in a good proportion of the cases studied, the members teach each other how to do the work, and the time taken for the task is left up to the person working, so long as deadlines for orders are met (Poveda 2003: 22f). In many cases, the study points out that some micro-businesses combine a large number of family units, but the “owner” who pays wages tends also to give the family “assistance” or “loans in times of need” (17).

In these workshops, Alvaro García Linera observes “a greater autonomy of work management” given that this is “a production activity which is not directly supervised by the owner” (García 1999: 118). He adds that these forms of production are non-capitalist (although “refunctionalized” by the market and capital), and insists that they are not transitory but are “the historic and medium-term form of expanded reproduction of capital in Bolivia” (201). I want to stress that the overwhelming majority of the workers in El Alto, and in the country as a whole, are not subject to the taylorist division of labor; they control production times and practice an almost undivided organization of labor, with the possibility of rotation among the different tasks. This young workforce, with a high proportion of women, very poor but educated (only 8% illiteracy in El Alto, and 52% with at least one year of secondary school), with a great deal of autonomy in their work, with a strong family presence, was the key protagonist in the insurrection of September–October 2003.

My question is whether there is some connection between this kind of autonomous family-based work and the fact that these same sectors were capable of mounting an insurrection without leadership or leaders. The relevance of this question lies in the fact that when workers formerly left the organization of their work to employers and the management of society to the state, they had to rely for their struggles on hierarchical and centralized structures, and depended on their leaders – union and political – to represent them and make decisions.

The autonomy of such persons *vis-à-vis* capital runs in tandem with their autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state. In fact, the most important problems of their daily lives, from the construction and maintenance of their environment (dwelling, water, sewage and streets) to essential aspects of education and health, have been taken in hand via an impressive network of basic organizations. In El Alto alone there are, according to different sources, between 400 and 550 neighborhood juntas, with one for every 1,000 inhabitants over the age of 10.

The Bolivian experience, in this regard, differs little from that of other countries of the continent (Zibechi 2003b). Even in a relatively

highly industrialized country like Argentina, the Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA) maintains that the changes on the work front have meant that increases in wages have reached only 19% of the active population, i.e. barely 8% of the total population. For this reason the CTA ensures that union action cannot be centered on wage issues: 60% of the active population are unemployed, self-employed, or informal unregistered wage-workers (Nochteff & Güell 2003).

In production the same logic of dispersion operates that we saw in the territorial construction of habitat. Dispersion should not be confused with decentralization, the latter being a state-based logic, which operates from the top and is external to the subjects. The logic of dispersion is an internal logic in which the sectors involved adjust their way of life by establishing a different relationship to territory. This internal logic suggests that, in order to survive, the subjects opt to deploy themselves in the territory on the basis of family/communitarian considerations.

There remain a series of questions as to how social, cultural and economic undertakings are carried out among the subjects living at the “margins” of the system. The most important factor seems to be the familial, structured around a new extended family. It seems clear that family-based or domestic logic extends to society and permeates the relations which people establish in their lives; but it also tends to mold the forms which the collectives adopt in order to defend themselves from attacks and to combat their adversaries. Do we see here a new mode of domestic production? Or new territorialities evolving which rely on a “domestic and productive space” (Porto Gonçalves 2001: 203), inducing new types of conduct in social space?

If, as I think, the latter is true, we are witnessing the creation of new situations marked by the deepening of differences. The unemployed from the popular sectors who live in *asentamientos* affirm their difference by turning themselves into picketers and later into autonomous producers. The route is very similar among other groups in the region that combine the flight from capitalist relations with the simultaneous creation of relations *within* the dispersion, as a way of affirming difference.

Politics from the margins

We have seen that during the period of industrial development, national sovereignty, and welfare states, it was the unions that occupied center stage. The social movement in that period had a unitary

and centralized apparatus; its demand was for the rights of workers as citizens, and it directed this demand at the state. The preferred forms of struggle were the strike, the demonstration, and in exceptional circumstances, insurrectional uprisings against a state which took on dictatorial contours. The union expressed unity of the workers against capital; class identity could superimpose itself over other identities, in the same way that national identity subsumed identities that existed within the limits of the nation-state. In short, these were societies of culturally homogenous citizens (in the official discourse at least) permeated by an irreconcilable class division which played out and dissolved in the political field.

In that society, which was assumed to be integrated and to have full employment, citizens spent their lives in spaces of control and discipline: from the patriarchal family to the school, from military service to the taylorist-fordist factory. Of course, not all the inhabitants were citizens but in formal terms the great majority were, while the “marginalized” pockets expected to reach at least the initial stages of the path toward citizenship. The last two decades, as we know, have reversed that tendency, generating the exclusion of about half of the population, at least in the continent’s Southern Cone. Moreover, the prospects of integration and equality have ceased to be tempting, since the socio-cultural tolls required to reach the status of citizen have proved to be too heavy for those who are “different”: they are required to give up their culture, which is precisely the factor on which their survival depends.

Will the eruption of those from below follow along the same lines as the workers’ struggles and revolts? How can we deduce or decipher the political methods of the excluded? The key moment which fleetingly illuminates the shadows (that is, the margins as seen from the point of view of the state) is the insurrection, the moment of rupture when the subjects deploy their strategies. Reflecting on the Bolivian insurrection, Silvia Rivera points to the contradiction between the space/time of capital (public and visible, patriarchal and colonial) and that of the subjects in rebellion (invisible, immanent):

If during the uprising it was mainly the women and young people of the most indigenous city of Bolivia who gave moral fire to the uprising and gave it a sense of collective dignity and sovereignty, when the time came to discuss solutions, it was once again only the men’s voices that were heard – western and educated . . . Meanwhile, that society and that democracy of women and men from below, which painstakingly organized the rage and broke the silence, is lost again in the *manqhapacha* (internal space-time), returning to the languages of symbol and ancestral idioms. (Rivera 2004)

In the daily life of divided societies, public time dominates the scene; the only audible voices are those of the economic, political and union elites. For this reason the Argentine insurrection was both “unexpected” and “spontaneous” to those elites, who could not hear the underground sounds, despite the fact that for more than a decade the voices had been echoing from below anticipating the approaching event.

Our task is not to state what the political action of the excluded should be (a task for party leaders or academics), but rather to deduce it from what in fact is happening among the social groups – comprising at least half of the population of the Southern Cone – that feed into the most active movements. Certainly some of those who become mobilized reproduce in their organizations and forms of action certain essential aspects of the capitalist system. However, if we focus our attention on the most critical moments – the Argentine and Bolivian rebellions, or the initiatives undertaken by some of the excluded in Uruguay during the crisis of July–August 2002, that is, the “the historical movement that is unfolding before our eyes,” according to Marx’s well-known expression – we will be able to observe that indeed in the margins there is politics.

I find four characteristics of political action from the margins which have been expressed with varying intensity. I don’t believe that there is a hierarchy in the traits that I shall outline, but I do find that they all appear interconnected in a non-linear way, without forming relations of cause and effect. And certainly, all this movement of the excluded takes place in spaces and territories where they re-produce their lives.

The **first** characteristic is the *politicization of social and cultural differences*, that is, of their ways of life. This is the key to carrying out a process which up to a certain moment is not conscious. It is what happened in Bolivia in connection with the Manifesto of Tiahuanaco¹⁰ (1973), where “ethnic differentiation clearly took on a political path” – politicization defined as “ethnic awareness” (Regalsky 2003: 115), that is, a fluid process of resistance involving territorialization and, at the same time, the structuring of political space by the rural communities and by the Aymaras and Quechuas who have emigrated to the cities.

10. [Gathering of representatives of Indigenous peasant, teacher and student organizations aimed at creating an autonomous peasant movement to voice both economic and cultural demands. To mark its distance from the officialist National Confederation they formed the *Centro Cultural Tupaj Katari* in memory of Julian Apaza, the leader of the 1871 Aya uprising who took the name of Tupaj Katari (resplendent serpent).]

In Argentina, the picketers politicize their social differences when, rather than going back to work for a boss for a miserable wage, they opt to form collectives of autonomous producers without division of labor (Zibechi 2003b); when they decide to take care of their health by trying to break their dependence on medication and on allopathic medicine; or when they deal with education using their own criteria and not those of the state (*Página 12* 2004). Even in Uruguay, where the excluded must follow a tortuous path in order to detach themselves from a powerful statism (of which the left is the greatest exponent), they have been able to create hundreds of community gardens, with organic products, and to manage them themselves (*Brecha* 2003).

Politicizing difference means becoming conscious of it. Collective self-awareness is what gives the community a vision of its role in the world. It is what Marx created for the working class. In this path of self-awareness (to understand and name what one is and what one is doing), popular education plays a pertinent role, given that without self-instruction one cannot overcome dependence. But there is something more. It also involves understanding that “nothing is irrational from the point of view of the person involved” (Wallerstein 1999: 29). This leads us directly to question the existence of some kind of universal rationality which might exist above concrete beings and mark out some path for them, even that of socialism. Hence the necessity, according to Wallerstein, to understand that “everyone is formally rational,” i.e. capable of combining the irreducible subjectivity of human conduct with lucid and intelligent choices. This affirmation has enormous implications if, as I believe, the excluded are building a new world (for them), neither better nor worse, but, above all, different. To think that the excluded “are not able” is to think that there still exists *one* formal rationality: that of the parties and the academy, i.e. that of the state.

The **second** characteristic of political action of the excluded has to do with the *crisis of representation* or the active presence of those represented. I do not intend to enter a debate that already has an extensive bibliography, but only to point out what exactly is happening in certain movements. On the one hand, we can confirm that “the breakup of inherited territorialities takes place through a deep crisis in the systems of representation” (Porto Gonçalves 2001: 51). Indeed, the flight of capital provokes a territorial crisis which is converted into a crisis of representation, given that the latter appears to be connected to territory.

Consider. The worker does not control the space in which s/he produces, but is controlled via the microscopic organization of work.

Deindustrialization, capital flight, involves destruction of the spaces in which the worker was controlled. Something similar might be said of the urban crises which accompany the emigration of capital (Harvey 2004). The urban structure, as panopticon, is broken up by this flight. In its place, we have seen, the popular sectors create new forms of self-organization in order to produce and to appropriate space. On one hand, the flight of capital is related to the emergence of subjects from whom it is fleeing: worker insubordination. On the other hand, the new players “insinuate themselves by setting up new territorialities” (Porto Gonçalves 2001: 208) in both urban space and productive space. Does this mean that they are carriers of new forms of representation? It is possible. But representation is a “structure of domination” (Weber 1993: 235) which, in the form in which we know it today, was created by capitalism and is integrated into the state-form, which is going through a profound crisis.

By contrast, some movements tend in practice to recover the figure of the delegate as alternative to the representative, which more and more social sectors reject (Williams 2000: 282). And the new habitat brings with it other forms of connecting and new cultural practices. In the spaces being created and occupied by the subjects in formation, encounters and relationships occur which may give rise to new possibilities. In short, the new territories are spaces in which relationships are formed which can displace old forms of representation. But that is not all. While old forms of mediation vanish, new ones appear. Thus, as Porto Gonçalves points out on the subject of the *seringueiros*, the movements are formed with tension and contradictions – “con/ contra” (with/against) – which challenge the powerful and the powers, but also “with/against the church, the unions, the political parties and their intellectuals” (2001: 215). This “with/against” dynamic involves the recognition that in the “below” there also exists an “above,” and that in this dynamic “their” new mediators – representatives or even delegates, that is, those that speak instead of them – should continue to be pressured, perhaps in ways different from those used to pressure the state. “In the case of those who by the nature of their activities are not given to speak or to write, their strength is greatly associated with their physical presence in space” (214). To be recognized, they need to occupy the space, to disturb the given order so as to gain visibility, to “make themselves present” in order to remove those who re-present them.

As we have seen, the crisis of representation is tightly linked to the “new social protagonism” (Colectivo Situaciones 2002: 145–162). In effect, representation is counterposed to expression, given that

“beneath the relations of representation – the classic ones of political subjectivity – there is an expressive dimension at work” (145). Whereas the logic of representation is separation and transcendence, that of expression is one of experience and immanence. So the categories of representation are: consensus, articulation, opinion, explicit networks, communication, and agreement. Expression is in every respect more diffuse and implicit; its key category is *composition* (146):

Expression works in terms of composition, that is, of constituting time, forms, and an *autonomous space in which to unfold one's existence*. Expression thus permits us to explain the production of the world as an “ethic without a subject,” i.e. as the process – unconscious and delocalized – of producing the values of a new sociability, *based on a multitude of experiences* which participate in the production of vital meanings *without any kind of conscious or voluntary coordination*. (my emphasis)

This is, we might say, a non-state-oriented reading, from within the movements that emerged in the Argentine insurrection of December 19–20, 2001. Social action undermines representation. The timing of the insurrection was linked to the proximity of Christmas, a period of bigger family expenditures which the popular sectors had to confront without resources because of the financial crisis. Similarly, Silvia Rivera locates the Bolivian insurrection in the annual cycle which begins in October, the *awti pacha* (“time of hunger, time of endurance”): “the moment in the annual cycle when people tighten their belts and *retreat* to a phase of non-consumption, falling back on reserves of potato starch, grain and dried meat which enable them to endure an austere survival until the time of abundance comes again” (Rivera 2004; my emphasis). In short, cyclical and interior time-lines shape the timing of insurrection, calling into question the monolithic – and virtual – time-line of representation.

It seems obvious that social action, when it takes the form of communitarian or solidarity ties, supersedes the relationship of representation. Representation reflects the logic of the state as “consummate sign of the division in society.” Its functioning depends on its being the expression of “a fragmented social body, a heterogenous social being” (Clastres 2004: 75). Representation operates in the absence of social ties. Finally, the expressive presence of social ties produces a rupture of the state panopticon. In its place, multiplicity develops. In other words, the emergence of the multiple – multiplicity of expressive space/times, which cannot be represented – breaks apart representation as state-centric synthesis: revolt against separation; autonomy, “rejection of submission” (76).

The **third** characteristic of political action in the *sótano* is that it is *non-statist*, that is, it not only rejects the state-form, but it *acquires a non-state-form*. Having destroyed the welfare state, the elites not only weakened their ability to maintain hegemony, but also weakened the state-form present at the heart of the social movement, among the oppressed and exploited, which facilitated the cooptation or neutralization of the dangerous classes. If indeed revolt illuminates power relations among the dominated, it is revealing that Latin America has seen a whole set of revolts without leadership, “without organizational memory or central apparatus” (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 26). Power relations within the space of the uprising tend to be based on other forms. The mortar which binds and drives those who are in revolt does not correspond to the state-form – vertical and pyramidal – but rather is based on a set of ties that are more horizontal but also more unstable than bureaucratic systems.

The best-known instance of this rejection of representation is the slogan “*que se vayan todos*” (“they all should go”) which emerged in the course of the December 19–20 events in Argentina. Both in the neighborhood assemblies and among the groups of picketers and in occupied factories, this general slogan has concrete expressions: “*entre todos todo*” (“among everyone, everything”), which is very similar to the Zapatista “*entre todos lo sabemos todo*” (“among everyone we know everything”). Both statements (which express the daily life of the groups that coined them) are directed simultaneously at non-division of labor and of thought-action, and also at there being no leaders who exist separate from the groups and communities.

Correspondingly, this *non-state-form* has a great deal to do with generational and gender rebellion. In El Alto, in October 2003 the insurrection had this profile:

The role of the women was absolutely crucial. By organizing in minute detail the daily quota of rage, by converting the private matter of consumption into a public issue, by making their art of gossip into a game to “destabilize” the repression, by re-introducing bartering networks and people’s kitchens for the marchers, they succeeded in morally defeating the army, providing not only physical sustenance, but also the ethical and cultural fabric which enabled everyone to remain furiously active (*tod@s activ@s*¹¹), the domestic wall having been broken down and the streets transformed into a space of collective socialization. (Rivera 2004)

This form of action has been defined, particularly among indigenous peoples, as “back seat driving,” a style which requires the existence of

11. [The @ symbol has come into use in Spanish to merge the masculine “-o” with the feminine “-a.”]

communities or compact groups carrying out a different form of doing politics, which is expressed, among other ways, “in the designation of representatives to go before ‘them’ (*ante ellos*), in the way of controlling these representatives and relating to them, and in the way of moving in a bloc which, from behind, guides and directs the steps of those that this group has placed up front” (Gilly 2003: 26).

Once again, notable similarities appear between distant places: the “back seat driving” seems to be the twin of the Zapatista “walking at the pace of the slowest.” But it would be a mistake to attribute these forms of action exclusively to the “indigenous movement” or to particularities of the cosmologies of native peoples. Similar forms are being practiced in very different social spaces. The common denominator which facilitates this kind of collective experience seems to be related to the re-construction of bonds of a communitarian nature (not necessarily communities in the narrow sense) by displaced protagonists (youth, women, the old and the new poor).

The tendency of some movements to eschew institutional forms – i.e. the weakening of the state-form within the world of the oppressed – manifests itself very unevenly in different countries and regions, and especially in different circumstances. Thus, in countries where the nation-state maintains an important presence (e.g. Brazil), the movements tend to form more stable and hierarchical structures. Conversely, in situations of acute disintegration of the state (Argentina 2001–2002 or Bolivia between February and October 2003), the tendency was for the *non-state* orientation of domestic spaces to extend as a form of action into very broad public spaces. The rupture of the “domestic wall” brought with it, to the surprise of the protagonists themselves, the novelty that public space was occupied using the articles and practices associated with domestic space (pots and pans in Buenos Aires; rumor-mongering in El Alto). Thus, in Buenos Aires neighbors came to the assemblies – in the local squares – with their domestic animals and with chairs from their houses, while in El Alto they watched over their dead in the dusty streets built by the community.

These brief examples (there are thousands in every demonstration that is not organized vertically¹²) illustrate the power that domestic

12. Ranajit Guha, referring to colonial India, compares the politics of the elite with “the politics of the people.” He points out that “mobilization in the sphere of elite politics was carried out vertically, while that of the subalterns was carried out horizontally.” He adds that the former was “more cautious and controlled,” whereas the latter was “more spontaneous” and was based on traditional territorial and kinship organization (Guha 2002: 37).

spaces are acquiring, at the precise moment at which statism (*estatalidad*) is going through phases of weakening with specific crises. I find great differences between the forms taken by union action in the period when the worker movement was central, and the current forms of protest by the so-called excluded. It seems very premature to draw conclusions on this, but the differences are notable: the activity of the worker movement was cloaked in the respectable guise of representative democracy, on the public stage, and was conditioned by acceptance of the rules of capital in the workshop, of patriarchy in the family, and of hierarchy in all spaces of social contact. The acceptance of hierarchical customs from below went hand in hand with submission to the state, and the forms of action (strike and street demonstration) were directed at propping up “a strategy of bureaucratic pressure to which the other forms of pressure were subordinated” (García 1999: 49).

By contrast, in the current period, marked by the weakening of the national states, I see the more disruptive movements acting in a self-defined way: from the election of representatives “*ante ellos*” to the adoption of self-affirming forms of struggle (Zibechi 2003b: 31). Comparing Bolivia’s recent “*guerra del gas*” with the peasant mobilization 20 years ago, it was said: “Now the Indians *do not ask for anything*, they demand sovereignty over a strategic resource, all under the heading of territory” (Mamani 2004, my emphasis). There is a new similarity between Bolivia and Argentina: the demand “that they all go away” amounts to asking for nothing, “only” *demanding* sovereignty (from a state whose legitimacy they do not recognize).

As can be seen, the non-state orientation (*no-estatalidad*) of political action opens a Pandora’s box. Struggles without a state, and not against the state; thinking without a state, and not against the state, involves placing ourselves in different coordinates, unheard of and unthinkable a short time ago. For now, we can consider the Bolivian revolt as “a revolt of common sense, as the upsetting of the invisible architecture of daily social interaction” (Rivera 2004) – a revolt with its own center, which depends neither on external schedules, nor on official agencies, nor on state-based political rationality. Revolts like this flow from internal needs and timings, which before “going out” into public space have followed an underground path. Indeed, the bold and sweeping acts which impress the authorities “were perhaps improvised on the public stage, but had been rehearsed at length in the hidden discourse of popular practice and culture” (Scott 2000: 264).

The **fourth** characteristic I find is that the most distinctive forms of struggle are connected with *the defense and affirmation of differences*.

The new forms of action – roadblocks, pickets, and communitarian uprisings – are “natural” for people who have made of their territories spaces in which they can re-produce their lives.

The roadblock (*bloqueo* for the Bolivians, *piquete* for the Argentines) – perhaps the most widespread form of action of the movements we are considering – started in Bolivia in a protest known as the “masacre del valle” of Cochabamba, in 1974. The action opened up a new phase of the peasant movement, in which the emergence of “a new generation of leaders with greater access to higher education and wider contacts” combined with the spread of the katarista current¹³ to form the “the axis of the autonomous reorganization of peasant unionism” (Rivera 2004: 144). The mobilization of the peasants of Cochabamba (harshly repressed by the Hugo Bánzer dictatorship) triggered the breakdown of the military–peasant pact which culminated five years later. In this mobilization, the roadblocks were incorporated into the repertory of forms of action, becoming henceforth the most important resource for rural mobilizations first, and then for urban actions after the “guerra del agua” in Cochabamba in April 2000.

In Argentina, the use of the roadblock or “piquete” likewise emerged from a transformative crisis with strong territorial overtones: in Cutral Có, a small town in the Southern province of Neuquén and in the northern town of General Mosconi, in 1996. In both cases the ex-petroleum workers (the activity which had provided employment and living to these towns) went from a “job for life” to absolute uncertainty, from a secure wage to poverty, and they transformed themselves from workers to picketers in the short period between 1992 (when YPF, the state oil company, was privatized) and 1996–1997 when the picketing was started. In both cases the appearance of this new form of action was part of a process of profound reshaping of social subjects.

The roadblock is a technique with multiple uses. It ranges from interruption of the flow of merchandise and protection of regions or cities to, in its “aggressive” version, a gradual fencing off with the threat of isolating the city or state installations. I believe that the breadth of scope attained by the roadblock is related to the territorialization of protest and of the social movement. The roadblock is the best way to defend spaces controlled by the new subjects, but at the same time it seems necessary to consider that in the great majority of cases

13. [Followers and activists that coalesced around the Centro Cultural Tupaj Katari with the goal of creating an autonomous indigenous movement. See note 10.]

it is of a defensive nature, not aggressive in the sense of being a tool to take power from the state. On the other hand, the roadblock as a method is changing, as is happening in Argentina and Bolivia.

The steps being taken by Zapatismo seem to confirm this analysis. The “military” activity of the EZLN has as its main objective the defense of the *caracoles*, the spaces of municipal and regional autonomy which the rebels have built up. In Argentina and Bolivia, in large regions of Ecuador, and less visibly in other countries of the continent, the result of a long decade of uprisings, revolts and mutinies has been the broadening of spaces of *de facto* autonomy, not institutionalized as in the case of Chiapas, but no less efficient in their daily functioning. The Bolivian region surrounding Lake Titicaca – where the Aymara headquarters were set up – and the town of El Alto itself; the “ethnic territories” in the Ecuadoran sierra, at an altitude of more than 3,000 meters, but also the conurbations of Buenos Aires (and in incipient form the periphery of Montevideo¹⁴), all present a form of territory where an implicit autonomy is practiced, in spaces where the national state has little or no impact (having been directly expelled as in the Bolivian case) or is being replaced by popular survival networks. The existence of these spaces is what has enabled the popular sectors to survive the destructive effects of neoliberalism, when everything would indicate – if we look to the economic indices and the decline in incomes – that “we should be seeing people dying of hunger in the streets.”¹⁵

The roadblock, based on solidarity and communitarian relations, is the main method chosen by the rebels in order to protect and defend the spaces which allow them to survive and maintain their differences, and also to use as platforms from which they can continue to launch formidable challenges to the powerful.

The hidden or underground agenda of the movements

The moments of crisis associated with popular uprisings shed a special light on the underground world. The uprising illuminates the inner creative spirit of the movements, which more often operates in the shadows, far from the eyes of the media. Certainly, not all risings

14. On the steps being taken by the “marginados” of Montevideo, see *Brecha* 2000, 2003.

15. Statement of Venezuelan economist Asdrúbal Baptista, cited by Moreno (2000: 173) to explain how the popular sectors can go on with their lives despite all predictions. For Moreno, the explanation is that “the people have their own forms of survival based on the system of relations centered in the family, which in turn has its own very distinct characteristics.”

have the same characteristics – not even consecutive uprisings with the same protagonists in the same space. The substantial differences among the half dozen uprisings led by CONAIE in Ecuador, since 1990, are proof of this. However, the revolt illuminates the hidden agenda of the different participants, even if only partially.

The terms “project” and “agenda” refer to a dimension of activity different from the traditional unionist/left concepts of “program” or “strategy.” An underground or implicit “project” becomes clear only after the fact and over time.¹⁶ By underground agenda or project we should understand the path which the oppressed must follow in order to survive. In a period of systematic disintegration this “project” has more chance of being successful, but this is never its most notable aspect, given that it is not an abstract construction, but the course that the popular sectors are pursuing as a consequence of a series of choices made over time, with the objective of staying alive.

It would be a serious mistake to think that the words “hidden” or “underground” refer to some deliberate concealment on the part of the protagonists, with the (rational) aim of deceiving their adversaries. The hidden aspect refers also to the perspective the protagonists themselves. Reflecting on the history of the Bolivian Peasant Confederation (CSUTCB), Pablo Regalsky points out that “the true movement of the people followed a hidden agenda, different from that imagined by the leaders *but also different from that imagined by the people themselves* when they started to act” (Regalsky 2003: 130; my emphasis). Making this visible requires, along with historical perspective, an understanding of the movement in its internal logic, in its immanence. This includes its changes and modifications in the long term (the only time-scale in which the immanence can unfold).

From this point of view, we can say that the long-term strategy of those living in the *sótano* is that of building a different world starting with the place that they occupy. In this sense, they refuse – now explicitly and consciously – to accept the role of subordinates or “excluded” that the system has reserved for them. Apparently the change in social position has already occurred. The most decisive moment of this change was the breakup of the welfare state, as the regime of Taylorism–Fordism gave way to that of globalization, with capital fleeing social insubordination, penalizing each wave of protagonists with

16. In the Ecuadoran case, the long-term underground project of the Quechuas of the Sierra was the “reconstruction of ethnic territories” (Ramón Valarezo 1993: 188–203).

deindustrialization, thereby pushing them into the *sótano* but at the same time feeding the latter's development.

Nor should we think that the popular sectors act in a blind or "spontaneous" fashion. Spontaneity does not exist in the long term. It is one of the ways found by the state (and especially by the left-wing parties) to judge the subordinates when they do not act as expected, according to the rational rules of cause and effect. They are often accused of not having a plan for replacing the current system. However, we can agree with Ranajit Guha that

The peasant knew what he was doing when he rose up. The fact that his action was directed especially at destroying the authority of the elite which stood above him and did not involve a detailed plan to replace that elite, does not place him outside the realm of politics. On the contrary, the insurgency affirmed its political character precisely through this negative act which tried to invert the situation. (Guha 2002: 104)

It is very likely that the underground project of the popular movements which are born in the "basement" is to break up the neocolonial and neoliberal state, and in fact to break up the state as such. But we will not find this out by placing a microphone before the protagonists because, as already suggested, not even they are formulating the project in this way, at least at the current stage of the struggles. We know, however, that "the movement which is unfolding before our eyes" (Marx) consists of a gigantic effort for daily survival by the oppressed, and that this effort involves strengthening the communitarian spaces and ties that they are constructing and re-creating. The logic of this "re-creation" of links in distinct spaces seems to consist of affirming differences, given that only in this way can the dominated survive. Or rather *they can only survive by being different (and through difference)*.

In the last two decades the movements have followed a series of paths which, in many cases, are pointing in similar directions. It is not a question of one movement, but of parallel tendencies. Not much more can be said. What we can confirm is that there are ways of following these non-unified paths, based on internal rather than external timings, without leaderships taking the movements in a pre-established direction.

The way in which the movements are following their paths is already in itself a social project. And this seems especially important. In other words, the way of walking the walk (*caminar los caminos*) tells us that there are elements of a new society in the movements. Whether these elements expand, deepen and strengthen, rather than weakening or disappearing, depends in good measure on the par-

ticipants of the movements being aware of their internal difference. It is in the way of walking/moving that they can develop (or not) their distinctive features. Although I postulate that the way of moving is the true “program” of the movements, this is not a model applicable to everyone everywhere. Correspondingly, there is neither a permanent nor a continuous path to follow, nor identical ways of following it. In some cases, paths are taken which seem to go nowhere; or there is simply no permanent path (external, visible) although there is always a flow (or silences instead of word and action, as the Zapatistas teach us).

We must trust that the oppressed are gaining experience; they are even learning to communicate without speaking, to walk without moving, to fight without fighting – all of which challenge our capacity for comprehension, which is anchored in binary and external concepts, and ruled by the linear time of capitalist production.

Among the many challenges we face is that of thinking and acting without the state. This involves thinking and acting as a movement; but movements, as we have seen, tend toward dispersion, with regard not only to the state but to any point of reference, resulting in a condition of fluidity which dissolves the subject. Perhaps this is what Marx meant, in the Manifesto of the International on the fall of the Commune, when he pointed out that we have “no ready-made utopia to introduce” but that we simply “set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.”¹⁷ “To set free”: to empower, to affirm, to expand, to shine a light on the new world that already lives within the world of the oppressed.

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