Government or Grassroots: Political Transformation in Latin America

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The end of military dictatorship in Latin America and the "transition to democracy" in the 1980s and 1990s formed the background for the explosion of grass-roots protest and popular movements in many countries of the region. The new regimes were unable or unwilling to resist the blandishments of the "Washington Consensus" and its neo-liberal economic policies: privatization; cuts in social services; and deregulation among others. With unemployment skyrocketing and what passed for the welfare state, including labor rights, dismantled, poverty increased dramatically. And not just poverty but exclusion and dispossession. The newly insurrectionary subjects were excluded from society — made redundant, useless. (A continuation of a process that predated the 1990s.)

The intensification of the rebellions produced major political upheavals throughout Latin America and toppled governments in Bolivia, Argentina and Ecuador. The protesters rejected neo-liberal governments but did not embrace the Marxist, orthodox, left with its centralized leadership and other verticalist practices. The "old" left was too vanguardist and too removed from the daily life and experience of the new political subjects — the poor and marginal who were without work, without union representation, without land, existing on the periphery of society in general and urban life in particular. These groups insisted on a more participatory politics; all voices heard; all decisions arrived at democratically. In addition, the new subjects wanted to create territorial, neighborhood-based communities in place of the

disappearing union movement, workplace organization and solidarity.[1] As the factory floor lost its salience, the sphere of everyday life became a central site of struggle.

Equally important was the renunciation of state power — something that both Marxists and non-Marxists consider central.[2] Along with that went a thoroughgoing disgust with political parties and political institutions. As a member of an Argentinian neighborhood assembly put it: [There was] "this inability to trust officials; the feeling that all the leaders were corrupt precisely because they were leaders; . . . they had abandoned you, and were totally out of touch with your problems and needs."[3]

The rebellions of the last 15 years have sprung from the margins or "basement" of society ("desde de sótano," in Subcomandante Marcos' phrase). And they have been constituted, and for the most part, led by the poorest and most powerless. Not only have these movements, and the older activists who joined them, broken with the "old" left; they have also distanced themselves from the "new social movements" (NSM) — of women, gays, environmentalists and so on — of the 1980s and 1990s about which so much has been written in recent years.[4] The similarities are several: anti-authoritarianism; distrust of state power; insistence on autonomy, especially with respect to vanguard parties; and rejection of class, i.e., the

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[1] By now the new politics has been analyzed by many observers. One of the most astute is Uruguayan sociologist and journalist, Raúl Zibechi, "Subterranean Echoes: Resistance and Politics 'desde el sótano'," *Socialism and Democracy: The Reawakening of Revolution in Latin America,* ed. Gerardo Enrique, 19 (November 2005), 13-41.

[2] Considerable overlap exists between current movements and anti-statist anarchists of the 19th and 20th centuries. On this, see Stephanie Ross, "Is This What Democracy Looks Like: The Politics of the Anti-Globalization Movement in North America," *Socialist Register, Fighting Identities: Race, Religion and Ethno-Nationalism*, (2003), 281-305.

[3] Quoted in *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*, ed. Marina Sitrin, Edinburgh (2006), 48-49.

[4] Zibechi, *Socialism and Democracy* (November, 2005), 15. A useful set of essays on the new social movements is *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy and Democracy*, ed. Arturo Escobar and Sonia Alvarez, Boulder, (1992).

industrial proletariat, as the basic category for practice and theory. The new actors are heterogeneous: peasants, the indigenous, migrants, women, students. But the politics of the marginal differs from the new social movements in significant ways. Class composition sets them apart. First, NSM may be multiclass, but they typically do not speak for the poorest and most disenfranchised of the population. Secondly, they do not totally break with traditional political institutions despite a commitment to autonomy.[5] Finally, the recent insurrections, unlike the NSM, turn their backs on the state as a mechanism for social change.

The Grass Roots

A brief description of two of the recent rebellions illustrates the new politics at the grassroots. Among these are the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil and the *piqueteros* and their allies in Argentina. This section forms the background for a consideration of strategies and goals of the social movements.

In the 1990s, the MST, founded in 1984 as a response to the plight of those who had been pushed off the land by the capitalist modernization of agriculture — unemployed rural workers and small farmers — became more confrontational.[6] It carried out mass mobilizations and land takeovers. After Lula's election in 2002 as a left-leaning president, it refused to become part of the government. At the same time, the MST continued to push from below for agrarian reform and the right of the poor to own land.

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[5] An example with which I am best acquainted is the Autonomous Women's Movement in Nicaragua, which backed the presidential bid of former FSLN leader Herty Lewites, before his death in July, 2006.

[6] For a history of the MST, see Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for the New Brazil*, Oakland, CA, (2003).

The movement insisted on independence from the state. "We always insist that the MST and other social movements have to be autonomous in their relations with political parties, the government, the state," said Pedro Stédile, one of the MST's founders.[7] In addition, it broke with the hierarchical way of organizing. A national coordinator explains: "We could not have a union-style leadership . . . It would not work. That is why we formed, in opposition to the old model, collective leadership. Our whole organization is collective."[8]

The MST is emblematic of the type of organization that flourished in Latin America in the 1990s. Specific to Brazil was a political ethos that was heavily influenced by the Brazilian Catholic Church and by Paulo Freire's educational work. Liberation theology and ground-breaking educational practices combined to create an anti-authoritarian political culture.[9]

In contrast to the *piqueteros* in Argentina and other movements in the region, the MST has not been co-opted or divided by the left-center government. Not has its militant, oppositional stance been diluted over time.[10]

Neo-liberal economic reforms also hit Argentina in the 1990s, creating a surge of unemployment. From the neighborhoods of the unemployed and otherwise disadvantaged came uprisings in Buenos Aires and elsewhere. Among various groups such as neighborhood associations and ex-workers who took over factories, the *piqueteros*' (road picketers')

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[7] Harry E. Vanden, "Brazil's Landless Hold Their Ground," *Report on the Americas*, 38/5, March/April 2005), p. 24.
[8] Quoted in Ann-Laure Cadj, "Brazil's Landless Find Their Voice," *Report on the Americas,* 33/5, (March April 2000), p. 32.
[9] Daniela Issa, "Praxis of Empowerment: Mistica and Mobilization in Brazil's Landless Workers Movement,". *Latin American Perpectives*, (March 2007), 124-139.
[10] For the dangers and opportunities for Latin American social movements under leftist governments, see Raúl Zibechi, "New Challenges for Radical Social Movements," Report on the Americas, March/April 2005, 36/5, 14-21.

actions were the most dramatic. Road blocks interrupted the flow of goods and access to cities. Blocking highways also enabled protesters to defend their own autonomous spaces, which in turns reinforced the territorial aspect of their struggle.[11]

As unrest grew, reaching a peak in December, 2001 with the financial melt-down of the country, protesters created all kinds of organizations to replace traditional and corrupt institutions — in which they had, with good reason, no faith: picketer organizations, barter clubs, self-managed assemblies, unemployed associations. There was disillusionment with everything that involved the system. As one member of a neighborhood assembly remarked, "The unemployed, in particular, reached a point where they said OK, we organize or we'll die . . . They had no one to trust but themselves."[12] A now-famous slogan that reflected this sentiment, "Que vayan todos" (they all should go) expressed the disgust with authorities of all kinds.

As with other mobilizations of the marginal, verticalist and vanguardist practices were jettisoned in favor of non-hierarchical organization. Over time, movement participants came to use the word "horizontal" to describe the new forms of organization.[13] The theory and ideology of horizontalism came later.

Despite the belligerence and creativity of popular rebellions, the movements were large co-opted and demobilized under Kirchner's

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[11] The multiple meanings attached to roadblocks is explained by Zibechi, *Socialism and Democracy*, (2008), 33-34. An overview of the social movements in Argentina is Robert Villalón, "Neoliberalism, Corruption and Legacies of Contention: Argentina's Social Movements, 1993-2006," *Latin American Perspectives,* (March 2007), 139-156.
[12] Quoted in Sitrin, *Horizontalism*, p. 32.
[13] Ibid, 3-4, 41,

government after his election in 2003.[14] This development led some observers to question the efficacy of "power from below." (More on that later.)

Indigenous revolts in Chiapas, Mexico, Bolivia and elsewhere exhibit characteristics similar to these insurrections. Likewise, the World Social Forum and the anti-corporate-led globalization movement have abandoned the statist model of social change.

The Case for Horizontalism

We next turn to the theorizing around the new movements by activists and writers North and South. Their orientation can be summed up in John Holloway's well-known adage "Change the world without taking power." The terms "autonomism," "self-organization" and especially "horizontalism" are used at the grass roots and by observers to categorize the political posture of the mobilizations.[15] Horizontalism refers to decentralized decision-making, participatory democracy without hierarchy or vanguardism. It represents a break with the idea of "power-over."

Both the practice and idea of horizontalism are rooted in the everyday experience of the marginalized: the failure of all forms of authority, of government, party leaders, union organizers, bosses and managers, to meet their basic needs; the consequent importance of neighborhood and

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[14] Emilia Castorina, "The Contradictions of Democratic Neoliberalism in Argentina" A New Politics from 'Below'"? *Socialist Register*, ed. Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, New York, (2008), 265-281. Arguments in favor of "power from below" in Argentina are Raúl Zibechi, *Genealogia de la Revuelta, Argentina, Sociedad Movimiento*, Buenos Aires, (2003) and Ana Dinerstein, "The Battle of Buenos Aires, Crisis, Insurrection and the Reinvention of the Political in Argentina," *Historical Materialism*, 10/4 (2003).

[15] In Argentina, the word "horizontalidad" (horizontalism) was first used in the crisis of December 19 and 20, 2001. "It wasn't part of the political vocabulary until then . . . and then it rapidly transformed into a concept everyone uses, knows," said a neighborhood assembly member. Quoted in Sitrin, *Horizontalism*, p. 48.

geographical space, rather than the factory, as the foci of uprisings and organizing. Experience, practice and theory interacted as ideas migrated back and forth between protagonists and writers. It is important to remember here, as activist and anthropologist David Graeber reminds us, that academics usually overestimate the role of intellectuals in the production of ideas when actually the process is a two-way street.[16] An Argentinian activist put the back-and-forth process this way: "Before the rebellion, only a few circles discussed the idea of the state and read things by people like John Holloway and Antonio Negri about old concepts of power. The [old] idea was to take power. There was a reaction of the extreme opposite, that is, forget about the state and build territorial power."[17]

Many who write about these new movements champion their commitment to "politics from below." Winning control of the state apparatus as the fulcrum of social change is rejected not only because Latin American governments could not deliver economic and social benefits to the poor, but also because all states and political parties, whether vanguardist or parliamentary, are regarded by this camp as inherently hierarchical and authoritarian. The post-Marxist dislike of verticalism and preference for autonomy, together with a participatory process, is important for understanding the new movements. It predisposes many observers (some of whom cut their teeth on Marxist analysis) to uphold the idea of change from the bottom up. The notion of "power over," in some cases, even the idea of

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[16] Graeber, "The Globalization Movement and the New Left," *Implicating Empire: Globalization and Resistance in the 21st Century*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz and Heather Gautney, New York (2003), p. 337. An example, relevant for these movements, is the debt that Antonio Negri, a leading theorist of the new politics, owes to social movements in Italy in the 1970s and beyond. For this particular story, consult Keir Miburn, "Return of the Tortoise: Italy's Anti-Empire Multitudes," *Globalize Liberation*, ed. David Solnit, San Francisco (2004), 469-481.

[17] Quoted in Sitrin, *Horizontalism*, p. 8.

power at all, is seen as hostile to self-determination and solidarity.[18] Parties and governments on the left are as suspect as others. They still are tainted with the logic of domination.

Both activists and scholars write in this vein. Some texts are rooted in particular movements, such as Marina Sitrin's book on uprisings in Argentina, aptly entitled *Horizontalism*; and Raúl Zibechi's study of Bolivia's rebellion, *Dispensar el Poder: Los Movimientos como Poderes Antiestatales*. And the Uruguayan sociologist Zibechi's other writings have also made important contributions to this discourse.[19] In addition, two theoretical works have been very influential among post-marxist writers and activists: *Change the World Without Taking Power* by John Holloway (2002) and *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000).

Both theoretical contributions have been widely discussed in the North and South. (Holloway, a Scotsman, teaches at the Autonomous University in Puebla, Mexico.) Using the Zapatista rebellion as a model, *Change the World* situates itself within the "open marxism" of Negri and others.[20] Thus, Holloway moves beyond the traditional working class to include peasants, women, students — indeed all of those oppressed by capitalist society (which turns out to be almost everyone) as agents of revolution. In addition, he rejects not only state power but the whole notion of "power over" as opposed to "power to" in his reworking of Marxism.

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[18] Unlike old anarchist groups, who championed a society without power, the movements "desde de sótano" typically seek to build power from a base in civil society. For an analysis of this process, see Pablo Gonzáles Casanova, "The Zapatista 'Caracoles': Networks of Resistance and Autonomy," *Socialism and Democracy*, (November, 2005), 82, 89.

[19] Zibechi's writings in English are at http://americas.irc-online.org/ and at http://www.counterpunch.org/. A recent history that is indebted to him is Benjamin Dangl, *The Price of Fire: Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia*, AK Press (2007).

[20] *Change the World Without Taking Power*, London, (2002), pp. 166-175.

The weakening of the state that supposedly accompanies globalization is the starting point of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. The process of globalization is the rationale for their contention that control of state is superfluous. Because empire, in contrast to the imperialism of the 20th century, has no center of power and by-passes national sovereignty.[21] It is a supranational, non-territorial network of power (with the U.S. admittedly at the forefront). Hardt and Negri do not deny that empire is coercive, but they argue that "the insurgent multitude," once it is politically organized, can and will resist the new forms of capitalist domination. Although the concept of the multitude is not a synonym for civil society here, it is close enough to give theoretical fuel to the non-statist arguments for systemic change that have appeared inside and outside the academy in recent years.

The Case Against Horizontalism

The third part of this essay presents some critiques of "anti-power" and "politics from below." The Zapatista model has inspired millions in Latin America and elsewhere. Since its 1994 uprising, however, the Zapatistas have not stopped the march of global capitalism in Chiapas or any other part of Mexico. The same can be said for the *piqueteros* in Argentina. In addition, the latter have been largely co-opted by the Peronist Government of Nestor Kirchner and then Christina Kirchner.[22] This criticism is a historical one: grassroots movements, even the most belligerent, have not been able to effect (so far) large-scale, systemic changes. The Zapatistas

[21] Michael Hardt and Antonion Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA, (2000), xii-xiii.
[22] William I. Robinson, "Transformative Possibilities in Latin America," *Socialist Register,* (2008), 152-154. Castorina, "The Contradictions of Democratic Neoliberalism in Argentina. A New Politics from 'Below"'? *Socialist Register*, (2008), 275, 277, 279.

in Chiapas and the *piqueteros* in Argentina exhibit this political weakness (though proponents of horizontalism would not necessarily see this as a limitation).

Then there is a theoretical argument: in comparison with the state, civil society does not have, indeed, cannot have, the power and scope to alter social relations on a national or global scale. Horizontal networking cannot effectively challenge structures of domination like world-wide capital or elite-run political systems. This theoretical stance is only partly rooted in empirical observation of the popular movements and their shortcomings, real as these are.

Also important, it seems to me, is an often residual, theoretical commitment to Marxist analysis that privileges the state. In this argument, only the capture of state power can lead to wide-ranging structural change because only the revolutionary state has the ability, the reach, to transform the system. This bias in part explains the critiques of the movements for their strategic shortcomings: their ideological and organizational incoherence; their unrealistic belief that state power is both unnecessary and undesirable. The notion of "changing the world without taking power" is, in their view, a utopian daydream.[23]

There are many analyses of the drawbacks of Hardt and Negri's thesis. A not atypical one is "Global Capital and Its Opponents" by Stanley Aronowitz, in *Implicating Empire*. Not only does Hardt and Negri's book, *Empire*, downplay the role of the state in his opinion; it also elevates the "insurgent multitude" and "global citizenship" to primary roles in resistance,

[23] Alex Callinicos' unsparing dissection of the anti-globalization movement is a case in point. Activist and writer Naomi Klein has compared the movement to a "swarm" that can't remove the "boulder" of a capitalist state, so walks around it. But what happens, Callinicos asks ". . . if the boulder doesn't meekly stand there and allow its opponents to walk around it? What if it goes out to get them?" Alex Callinicos, The Anti-Capitalist Movement After Genoa and New York," *Implicating Empire*, 138.

ignoring more organized forms of struggle like parties and unions.[24] A similar critique appears in Emilia Castorina's analysis of Argentinian politics from "below." Holloway, Hardt and Negri and other proponents of "open Marxism" are taken to task for underestimating the strength and flexibility of the neo-liberal state under the aegis of Peronist politics. At the same time, she contends, they overestimate the revolutionary potential of the new political subjects in general, and of those in Argentina in particular. As she notes, "The case of the *Piqueteros* raises the key questions regarding . . . the viability of autonomous strategies, the extent to which the new politics from 'below' is a politics of social transformation rather than mere survival."[25] Castorina goes on to ask whether even a survival strategy can be viable as long as the old power structures continue to constrain choices.

For almost all left observers of the political scene, the mobilization of civil society is important. And this in at least two respects: as a catalyst for change at the state level; and as a way to keep up the pressure on leftist governments once they are in office. Though critics of "power from below" typically do not marginalize popular struggles — at least not explicitly — they nonetheless privilege the state. For example, William Robinson in a recent essay on Latin America, seems to give civil society its due. He then explains further. No emancipatory project is possible "without addressing the matter of the power of dominant groups, the organization of that power in the state (including coercive power) and the concomitant need to disempower dominant groups by seizing the state from them, dismantling it, and constructing alternative institutions . . . without some political hammer, the popular classes cannot synchronize the forces necessary for a radical

[24] Aronowitz, 179-195.
[25] Castorina, *Socialist Register*, (2008), 280-281.

transformatory process,"[26] as he thinks may be happening in Venezuela.[27] For many on the left, the matter of power should not and cannot be evaded. The corollary — that popular movements do just that — is implied if not said directly (though the question of what constitutes "evasion" needs to be examined more closely). In the final analysis, the question of power must be addressed because "you can pretend to ignore power, but it will not ignore you. . . . experience shows that it will not hesitate to take you in the most brutal fashion."[28]

This said, the jury is still out on which strategy, or combination of strategies will work best in bringing a new order to Latin America.

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[26] Robinson, Ibid, 153-154. A like argument is put forth by Samir Amir, *The World We Wish to See: Revolutionary Perspectives in the Twenty-First Century*, New York, 2008.

[27] Ibid., 150-151. Robinson calls the Bolivarian revolution the first radical, socialist-oriented revolution since the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Pointing to division in the U.S. solidarity movement between advocates of the state versus civil society, National Co-ordinator of the Nicaragua Network and Interim Coordinator of the Venezuela Solidarity Network Chuck Kaufman endorses the statist position. He quotes approvingly Chavez' admonition to the 2006 World Social Forum to have state power as a goal and not to be "just a debating society." Keynote address to Managua Solidarity Conference, May 13-15, 2007, Nicaraguan *Monitor*, 2007, p. 5. As for Nicaragua itself, the discourse has shifted since the election of Daniel Ortega in 2007. Defenders of the government are pitted against those who regard the social movements, however, weakened, as a bulwark against Ortega's authoritarianism. Alejandro Bendaña, "Nicaragua: Between Left Rhetoric and Right Reality," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, March 10, 2008; Orlando Nuñez, "Navigating the Contradiction between Democracy and Social Justice," *Envio*, (April, 2007).

[28] Quoted in Jeffrey R. Webber, "Empire, Religion and the Politics of Liberation," Review of the *Socialist Register,* (2008), *Against the Current*, July/August 2008. XXIII, 33. For an answer to this caveat, see Holloway, *Changing the World without Taking Power*, 237-238.