Profound transformations don’t start at the top or with epic and monumental events, but through movements, small in their shapes, that seem irrelevant for the politicians and the analysts at the top. Historical transformations don’t start in the plazas or with enraged crowds but in the organized conscience of groups and collectives that know each other and are mutually acknowledged, down and to the left, and construct another politics.

—SUBCOMANDANTE MARCOS (2007)

We live in times of change, of revolutionary change. And, within the tumultuous confusion of revolution itself, we find ourselves in a dangerous moment that requires us to deepen our commitment and speed up.

In this chapter, I explore the path described by Arturo Escobar when he perceived a postcapitalist, postliberal, and poststatist path embodied in some social movements in Latin America. These movements are beginning to theorize their own path. I want to explore his questions beyond modernity, when Europe is “displaced from the center of the historical and epistemic imagination,” and I ask, with him: “Can the emergent cultural-political subjects in Latin America reach an activated and stable condition of alterity capable of re-constituting socio-natural structures from within, along the lines of de-coloniality, relationality and pluriversality?”

Recovering a Sense of Proportion

Leopold Kohr, a teacher of Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, said long ago that economic fluctuations are not due to classic cycles but to the actual scale of the economic activity. Rather than simple economic cycles, these are
the same dimensions and scale of the political bodies involved. Economic integration and growth and the expansionary effect of government controls do not reduce or shorten these cycles; on the contrary, they magnify them.

Kohr offered clear evidence that John Maynard Keynes was right when he warned that his proposals would be adopted too late, and by then would be counterproductive. This is what is happening now: policy initiatives that bear his name worsen the problems instead of fixing them and are applied mechanically as if nothing had occurred.

If the problem currently faced is a matter of size, rather than an economic cycle, instead of increasing government controls to balance this new type of economic fluctuation, what needs to be done is to reduce the size of the particular political body that generates such devastating scale. The idea is to make the scale of the political body proportionate to the limited talent of those in government. The scale, and proportion, is also central in another aspect. Returning policy and ethics back to the center of social life can only be done in the midst of real entities, such as the community. Attempting to do this at the scale of abstract entities, such as the nation-state, is impossible and counterproductive. The case of peace and violence may illustrate the nature of the problem. Pax Romana signified a contract of domination: “I will not destroy you, as long as you accept my rules.” This tradition seems still valid in the West and defines the dominant notion of peace, as can be seen today in Iraq or Gaza. If we recognize the plurality of the real world and the postmodern condition—beyond the universalist paradigm and celebrating difference—we have to recognize the culturally rooted character of social functions that can be associated with what is called peace: there are peaces, not peace. At a national or international scale, “peace” is only a disguise for permanent war. What we need to construct is an agreement for the harmonious coexistence of the different, each of which—distinct culture—expresses its own notion of “peace” and its desire “to be left in peace.” Such an agreement corresponds to the world we are creating with the Zapatistas: a world where many worlds can be embraced.

The Ongoing Insurrection

An insurrection could be taking place. It is entirely evident but at the same time invisible: it would be under way right in front of our eyes, but we would not see it because of its novelty and the blinders and optical filters imposed by the ending era.
The recovery of verbs seems like the common denominator of the current initiatives taking place at the grassroots. The people replace nouns, like education and health, with the corresponding verbs: learning and healing. The former defines “needs” whose satisfaction depends on public or private entities that are increasingly incapable of satisfying them. The latter express the attempt to recover personal and collective agency and to enable autonomous paths of social transformation. To explore what is going on in the spheres of everyday life in which this takes place may make the character of this ongoing insurrection more visible.

EATING

We have reached a point, notes Eduardo Galeano, where those who do not fear hunger—a fear affecting an increasing number of people: a billion are going to bed every night with an empty stomach—have a fear of eating, given the growing consciousness and general awareness of the harmful ingredients offered by the market.3

People are reacting. Some struggles still attempt to change laws and government policies in order to regulate the operation of the handful of corporations that already control 80 percent of the world’s food trade and try to also control food production. More and more, however, people follow another direction.

First of all, on the basis of ancient traditions and in order to create alternatives to the market, people are forming new connections between the countryside and the cities. Urban consumers are associating themselves with local producers and are assuming responsibilities for the production itself, its characteristics, and risks. At times, this evolves into a commons with enormous potential. The contemporary design of these new units was apparently born in Germany, coming from Japan, but has spread like an epidemic in the United States (community-supported agriculture) and in Canada (community-shared agriculture). Tens of thousands of such groups already exist and are complemented by independent organic producers that directly sell in nearby cities and other initiatives of organizations like Family Farm Defenders. This relationship, conceived as a way to lose our fear of eating, has acquired such a dynamic that even Walmart is attempting to appropriate it.

Food production in the cities is becoming increasingly important. The most spectacular example is that of Cuba. During the so-called special period, the Cubans discovered that after thirty years of revolution they were
importing 70 percent of their food supply in addition to all of the chemicals required to support their highly industrialized agriculture. And they had no dollars with which to purchase these imported foods; on average, every Cuban had lost twenty pounds. There was hunger. Today, Cubans are the world champions of organic agriculture, Cuba is the only country reaching the requirements for sustainability, and its cities produce more than half of what the urban inhabitants consume. In the United States, such actions are spreading at an impressive speed. In Detroit, a universal example of the failure of industrial development, nine hundred community gardens thrive, most of them dedicated to local food production.

In the countryside, the struggle for land is spreading and intensifying. At times it takes the form of a silent occupation, more or less clandestine, like the one that recently took place in Peru: indigenous peoples recovered 1 million hectares, which are currently producing 40 percent of the country’s food supply utilizing traditional practices. In other cases a spectacular struggle with uncertain results is taking place, for example in Brazil the landless peoples’ movement: they have organized one of the most interesting social movements in the continent.

In recent years, this ancient struggle for land experienced a political mutation: it shifted to territorial defense and thus became an experiment in popular sovereignty and autonomy. These efforts express resistance to the aggressive actions taken up by corporations and backed by the governments to gain control of the land for mass food production as well as other purposes—from mining to ecotourism. The Mexican government, for example, conceded a substantial portion of its national territory, probably as much as 40 percent, to national and transnational corporations that received fifty-year mining concessions. Upon granting them, the government assumed the responsibility of displacing the people living in these territories to make them available for these corporations. In accordance with recent international agreements, corporations have a right to sue the state if deadlines are not met, opening up a new line of business: profits for doing nothing.

Those participating in this new struggle affirm that they are trying to weave collectively their efforts, knowledge and resistance in the defense of natural resources and territory, to oppose the big development projects, and to deepen the processes of local and regional organization. A growing number of communities are now resisting and increasingly warn that they will not be defeated by the new neoliberal offensive. At the same time, they affirm
the value of their community assemblies, the principle of public office as service, the communal ownership of land, and a reconstitution of peoples’ territories. The Quito Declaration, formulated in October 2009 by the International Commission of Integral Agrarian Reform, in the midst of the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform led by Via Campesina, illustrates well the attitudes that blame the Green Revolution and commercial policies for the food crisis and climate change and denounce the contamination and privatization of water by large corporations, while affirming the farmers’ struggles for agrarian reform and the defense of their territories.

New attitudes and initiatives express an increasingly relevant conceptual shift. In addition to the land itself, a specific relationship with it is claimed, in contrast with the relationship imposed by public and private developers for the past fifty years. This type of relationship expresses the collective will as an exercise of people’s sovereignty, which challenges government authority and power and generates de facto institutional arrangements: a growing number of people, especially campesinos, are in control of their territory and govern themselves in their own way.

All of this can be framed with the notion of food sovereignty according to Via Campesina, the largest organization of farmers in history, which now includes hundreds of millions of people from more than 140 countries. It is expressed in rather simple terms: to define for ourselves what we eat . . . and produce it on our own terms. The World Organization of Fishermen—the largest of its kind in history, now including more than half of the world’s fisheries, has taken the same path.

Given the current conditions of the world, with a large portion of the population having surrendered themselves to diets and eating practices imposed by capital and its production system, few proposals are as radical and complex as that of food sovereignty. It substantially transforms the traditional quest for self-sufficiency and gives it a more radical and political content.

LEARNING

The education system is in crisis; it marginalizes a majority of people and does not prepare them for work or life. The school system mostly produces dropouts, as more than half of the children who enroll in school this year will not attain the educational level considered mandatory in their respective countries. This will mean a permanent discrimination against them because they will lack this new kind of passport, essential for navigating throughout modern society.
Those who learn to consume this new merchandise called education accumulate twenty or thirty years of “ass-hours” for a solid diploma but are increasingly unable to find work. The majority of those graduating from Mexican universities will never be able to work in their chosen fields of study. The crisis of the education system is already well known around the world, and since the 1990s it has had as much visibility as today’s financial crisis.

Despite the obvious and well-documented failure of schooling and the experience of the damage it provokes, a general struggle for “educational access” persists. The majority have been educated with the idea that this is the only way they can “be somebody” and escape the discrimination exercised against the “nobodies.” Because production and distribution of education was included in the policy packages of the current era of development (i.e., since 1949), a UNESCO team of experts met in 1953 to diagnose the situation of education in Latin America. They concluded that the central educational problem was the indifference and resistance of parents to sending their children to school. Eleven years later the same experts modified their diagnosis, concluding that no country in Latin America could satisfy the demands for education. The campaign to convince parents to send their kids to school has been, and continues to be, successful. But there is no possibility of satisfying these demands, even though the World Bank and governments around the world carry the main message and programs of “education for all.”

People have been reacting, though, going in many different directions. Students, parents, and teachers are still attempting to reform and broaden the dominant educational system, and change its theories and practices, both public and private, from within. They dispute and challenge the unions entrenched in the system, as well as the state and corporations—all of which intend to aggressively transform it to serve their own interests. Other groups struggle inside and outside the state and market in order to drive forth different forms of “alternative education.”

A vigorous, growing movement advances in another direction. The practices of autonomous and liberated learning have become more popular than ever. The movement is generating its own institutional arrangements at the margins, against and beyond the system. Supported by their own theoretical apparatus, such practices go well beyond existing frameworks, reclaim ancient learning traditions, and introduce contemporary technologies in the ways to learn and study as free and joyful activities.
This is indeed a unique movement. It is possibly the biggest on earth, in terms of the number of people involved, perhaps billions. But it is basically invisible, and a large part of those participating in it do not feel like they are part of a social or political movement, in the conventional sense of the term, even though they love to find others like themselves and engage in horizontal relationships and share experiences with them. In general, they are very conscious of the significance of their actions: they fully experience the radicalism of breaking with all forms of education in order to learn and study in freedom.

The movement itself is generating new centers for the production of knowledge outside public and private research centers and conventional institutions. These centers are developing new technologies based on significant theoretical innovations that reformulate the world and introduce new methodologies to interact with it. As Foucault suggested, this is an expression of the insurrection of subordinated knowledge, which strengthens and deepens it. They are reclaiming the historical content buried or masked within functional coherences and formal systematizations. They are revaluing knowledge disqualified because it has been considered useless, insufficiently elaborated, naïve, or hierarchically inferior to scientific knowledge. For them, popular wisdom is not common knowledge, because it doesn’t imply unanimity. Such knowledge is specific, local/regional, differentiated. They are also juxtaposing and combining learned knowledge with local memory, erudition with empirical knowledge, to form a historical knowledge of struggle. This requires demolishing the tyranny of globalizing discourses with its hierarchy and privileges derived from the scientific classification of knowledge, which has intrinsic effects of power.

HEALING

The health-care system is increasingly inefficient, discriminatory, and counterproductive. The iatrogenic effect is increasingly documented: doctors and hospitals are producing more diseases than they cure. What caused great scandal when Ivan Illich published *Medical Nemesis* forty years ago has now become a common personal experience. The production, consumption, and distribution of health care is the second largest economic sector in the world and involves a growing number of people. The medical profession and health-care industry have taken control of every institutional apparatus: they formulate the norms, apply them, and punish those who violate
them. Each failure of this professional dictatorship offers the opportunity for the dictatorship to strengthen and expand. And the failures multiply every day.

People’s effort to face this situation intensifies through many different paths. As in the case of education, innumerable efforts are under way to reform the system, many of them frustratingly ineffective. For example: after a considerable effort, utilizing much of his political capital, President Barack Obama achieved the most important reform of the U.S. healthcare system in fifty years . . . Yet the system is still the most costly and ineffective in the industrialized world.

Similarly, there is a proliferation of alternative therapies that try to avoid the dominant system’s incompetency and most damaging effects. In most cases the results are counterproductive, deepening the pathogenic character of the search for health. More often, however, they become paths clarifying the idea of the inherent problems in the dominant health-care system and looking for authentic alternatives.

In any case, there are an increasing number of initiatives that openly defy the system and break with the dominant notions of sickness and health, including body and mind, all the while nurturing autonomous healing practices. Traditional therapies that have been marginalized and disqualified by the health profession are recovered and enable healthier behavior patterns and forms of humane treatment rooted in the home and community. These efforts are already shaping new institutional arrangements.

SETTLING

Disasters usually associated with public and private development projects are still proliferating throughout the world and increasing the number of homeless people. At the same time, mobilizations to stop them, to reformulate the urban environment and create different living conditions in the cities, are also multiplying and even reshaping the very notion of what a city is.

Efforts to consolidate and strengthen building practices by the people themselves (autoconstrucción) that have long defined urban expansion in the so-called Third World are enriched with contemporary technologies. Settling or squatting styles, typical of the so-called marginal communities, are extended to other social spheres.

The okupa movement is spreading, particularly in Europe, and with it efforts toward community regeneration and the creation of new commons. Struggles proliferate that bring to the cities the political mutation in the coun-
tryside and create coalitions of territorial defense against public and private developments such as an airport or a new highway. They tend to become seeds for establishing autonomous forms of government.

True, the conviction that the monstrous human agglomerations still called cities cannot survive as they are and must shrink considerably continues to spread, but in the meanwhile there are serious efforts to make them livable and sustainable, starting with fragmenting them into multifunctional barrios (neighborhoods) where inhabitants can live for the greater part of their lives.

EXCHANGING

Though the Walmartization of the world continues and a few corporations still widen their predatory capacity, causing all sorts of damages, a new era of direct exchange is spreading, outside the capitalist market. Markets where producers and consumers abandon their abstract condition to engage in direct interaction with other people prosper, next to local currencies that serve as means of payment and communal cement and facilitate bartering. Different methods of exchange earn various names, and many abandon the direct use of money as commodity and seek to replace the abstract market with nonexploitative relationships between parties who know and trust one another. In any case, these are initiatives that openly defy the fiction of the self-regulated market and attempt to escape from corporate domination.

This narrative of what’s happening in the world raises obvious questions. What are the possibilities and what is the character of this insurrection? What is its nature? Will it really be anticapitalist or will it be put in service of the dominant regime and prolong its agony? Why call behaviors that are initially seen as survival instincts, often-desperate actions with no obvious articulation, an insurrection? These are questions with no direct answers because they are about open processes whose path is yet unknown. Though the impulses that constitute these initiatives are clear, their result is still uncertain.

Beyond Development: Living Well

If there was an expression that could express the vibes of the social movements spreading throughout Latin America, it would be that of buen vivir, living well, usually complemented with crianza mutua, mutual nurturing. The horizon beyond living well looks to reconstitute political, social, juridical,
and economic power—but overall to reconstitute life itself, which has been severely damaged by Western projects. This emphasis generates all sorts of tensions and contradictions with governments across the whole ideological spectrum that tend to increasingly disqualify and criminalize these increasingly vigorous movements.

The definition of the good life, a traditional sphere of action and imagination of the civil society, was attributed to the government in the modern nation-state, which usually shared it with private corporations and the media, surrendering it to capital.

During the last fifty years, after Harry S. Truman coined the idea of underdevelopment and thus redefined the development enterprise as a new emblem for American hegemony, development operated as a universal definition of the good life, associated with the average living conditions in the developed countries and particularly in the United States. It soon became evident that the adoption of such a way of life, postulated as a general ideal, was not feasible in the areas called underdeveloped by Truman. The emphasis of development was thus pragmatically shifted to ensure the satisfaction of basic needs for everyone, but the universal definition of the good life was not abandoned for the construction of social ideals and even to define the basic needs. This orientation still defines development policies in Latin America, in spite of ideological differences that give more emphasis to the market or to the government in their implementation.

Such attitudes clearly belong to a typical Western tradition: the construction of One World—with different flags and pretexts. The westernization of the world would be the hidden agenda of development, under the assumption that the Western, developed countries represent the culmination of human evolution, guided by the arrow of progress. The arrow is currently broken, and the idea of progress itself seems ready for a museum. The cultural homogenization associated with the development enterprise finds increasing resistance everywhere. As the Zapatistas suggested in 1994, the time has come to celebrate the otherness of the other and to create a world in which many worlds can be hospitably embraced. Instead of continuing to dissolve peoples and cultures, to integrate every man and woman on Earth into a universal and uniform design, the exploration of ways to enable the harmonious coexistence of the different has become a priority. This attitude points toward a political horizon beyond the nation-state, reformulates the democratic struggle, and recovers autonomous definitions of the good life emerging from autonomous centers for the production of knowledge. It
challenges the dominant mood among governments, political parties, and experts—still associated with social engineering, the trickle-down effect, and other beliefs of the old development religion.

Almost twenty years ago, Paul Streeten rigorously documented for the International Labor Organization the perverse connection between economic growth and injustice. He demonstrated that greater growth corresponded to greater poverty, and that there is a relation of cause and effect between one and the other. He demonstrated as well that the famous “trickle-down effect”—the idea that concentrated riches spill out onto the majority generating well-being in their wake—is a perverse and unfounded illusion. Cultivating the obsession of economic growth implies writing a blank check to the market leaders or the state, so that they do their thing in the name of the well-being of the majority, a well-being that doesn’t come, and following that path, will never come.

We need to recover a sense of proportion that is simply another form of common sense: that sense that exists in community. To struggle against a culture of waste, disposability, destruction, and injustice, and the culture that has produced the global warming to which disasters caused by irresponsibility are now attributed, we can reclaim the sensible and responsible rejection of what is unnecessary in the name of socially viable goals, and discard forever the idolatry of economic growth.

The time has arrived to seriously propose the advantages of a negative growth rate, clearly specifying what we would continue to stimulate. For example, we might usefully support highly efficient, productive, and sensible economic activities, such as those that make up the majority of those in the much persecuted “informal sector.” This will imply a focus on strengthening the productive capacity of the majority, instead of supporting the inefficient giants. The economists’ nightmare, a drop in the GNP, could be a blessing for the majority.

The main positions in relation to development can be associated with three Sachs. Goldman Sachs would symbolize the dominant position in government, corporations, and international institutions: a sixty-year step back to when development was simply economic growth and private profits. Jeffrey Sachs, going back forty years (to the Basic Needs Approach of the World Bank), would illustrate a kind of philanthropic capitalism. Fully aware of existing poverty and degradation, this position acknowledges that the market cannot alleviate them and calls on the state and philanthropy to deal with them. Wolfgang Sachs and the Development Dictionary, which
he edited with friends of Ivan Illich, constructed the theoretical space for the innumerable initiatives looking for the good life, each in its own way, beyond the dogma of development and economic growth.5

Radical Pluralism

The new attitude in many social movements implies the abandonment of conventional universalism without falling into cultural relativism. It expresses in practice, based on local traditions and ancient experiences of resistance and liberation, what Raimón Panikkar conceptualized as radical pluralism.6 This position acknowledges the existence of human invariants but not cultural universals. In accepting cultural diversity as a precondition for harmony among peoples, and recognizing that no person may represent the totality of human experience, cultural relativity (not relativism) is assumed, which means that every view of the world is relative to its context and no one can hold a complete and absolute view of reality.

It does not seem feasible to incorporate radical pluralism into the design of the nation-state, formally based on a pact of homogeneous individuals (not heterogeneous people and communities [knots in nets of relations]), claiming full sovereignty over all of them, and based upon violence and the universal application of juridical norms. Constitutional reforms in countries like Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico are advances in the right direction: to recognize the very existence of Indigenous peoples and their autonomy, but to also make evident their limits.

Something similar happens with the questions of collective rights, those of “minorities” or Indigenous peoples. The nation-state may accept classifications of individuals, to grant them special rights: workers, women, children. In the same way, it may grant special rights to the individual members of “minorities,” tribes, peoples. What it cannot incorporate is the very idea of collective rights, the rights of the collectivity that is something more than and different from the individuals constituting it. Many Indigenous peoples, as well as other “minorities,” have successfully created de facto institutional arrangements expressing the reality of their collective will and existence, usually at odds with the governments of the countries within which they exist. It is increasingly clear that they conceive their reality within a new political and epistemological paradigm.

82 GUSTAVO ESTEVA
In 1996 Subcomandante Marcos clearly outlined the conditions of the current political conjuncture by pointing out that when the Zapatistas raised the point of not taking power they thought that another way of doing politics could thus take shape and another kind of politicians might emerge. For the Zapatistas, the question is not about who is in power or how that power has been attained, either by an individual, group, or political party (whether through elections or any other means), but the very nature of power itself. For example, upon distancing themselves from guerrilla warfare, the Zapatistas warned that the place of the people was always pending and uncertain. They stressed that one cannot create a new world or society with merely a dispute between competing hegemonies. In the Fourth Declaration of la Selva de Lacandona they suggested the creation of local committees dedicated to imagining and putting into practice everything that can be done without political parties or the government.7

The idea is not about changing the world without taking power, a lucid phrase that warns against Leninist manias. Rather than attempting to take the artificial power deposited in the state through elections, it is necessary that people exert their real power through the practice of transformation. Instead of losing that power and converting into its opposite—a mechanism of domination—the idea is to use it at the proper scale and to avoid its expropriation by candidates, parties, leaders . . . or the so-called factual powers (the media, the corporations . . .). In order to reclaim our real power, we need to rethink who we are. Throughout indigenous communities and local neighborhoods, the nets of real relationships constituting the person form a thick social fabric defined by *comunalidad*, a communal way of being, a collective we that forms the first layer of one’s own existence. This social construction starts in the cradle: the traditional rebozo or shawl that allows the baby to be symbiotically attached to the mother’s body for an extended period of time. From a young age, children learn to be with the world, not separated from it.

A growing number of those who are not connected to anything that can be called community are creating alternatives through the construction of a new commons. Some manage to physically form these communities, organizing a new communal way of life. Others generate these commons through more flexible means, much like those working in the midst of a huge city, and could engage with many of them. Most of these people are
not informed by a single ideology or theoretical formation. Friendship, with its characteristic component of gratuity and reciprocity, is the cement that brings people together and creates the point of departure for the new commons.

In the theoretical tradition articulated by Hegel, the economic society of individuals socialized as private property owners imposed their mercantile rationality over a communal rationality that stems from the “natural” society. This is how Hegel’s political premise was formulated in 1820: those competitive individuals cannot govern themselves, someone must govern them. This premise has dominated political theory and practice for the last two hundred years. The discussion is around how one must determine who will govern and how they should do it, whether democratically or through an authoritarian regime, through elections, a coup, or a revolution. Overall, the assumption is taken for granted and is now a general prejudice: the people cannot govern themselves.

However, millions of people, perhaps billions, have set forth a different conviction and act in accordance with it. They have always governed themselves with their own political procedures. Whether in the colonial era or among modern states, they have continued in opposition to the dominant system in the midst of all kinds of restrictions, tensions, and contradictions. They’ve managed to resist the attempts to dissolve their practices and are now moving from resistance to liberation, determined to create a political system adjusted to their own principles, not those of the modern states that are based on violence, the economy, and individualism.

If the people have the appropriate political bodies, they can govern themselves. They do not need to surrender their power to a person or an elite, for them to govern everyone. It is in this context that social relationships are constructed differently. The “power” then is not a relation of domination but an expression of solidarity and comunalidad. It is the relation among dignified men and women seeking the common good—that is what defines their political activity, not the search for “power” up there somewhere.

The political horizon being adopted by current social movements goes beyond the design prevalent since the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, when the modern nation-state was born. However, it is possible to recover certain terms from that era in order to articulate and describe present conditions, terms such as “nation” and “state,” since we have not yet come up with new terms. How to characterize, for example, the communities that were involved in producing the Achachi Manifesto in Bolivia? Thousands of commoners
from Omasuyo Province strived to make collective decisions based on the principle to lead by obeying (mandar obedeciendo). As Raúl Zibechi notes, this is a mobile and unstable articulation, one that is combined with the stability of a structure and the fluidity of change. Horizontally intertwined, these are powers not yet separated from their community and are also not state powers. The best example can probably be found with the Zapatistas, especially the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Councils), which demonstrate the actual possibilities of having effective democratic mechanisms, despite all the forces operating against them. This is clearly an example of the shape of the new society, in which a daily experiment of transformation is practiced.

Reclaiming the Commons

Since the 1980s, many peasants, urban marginal residents, and deprofessionalized intellectuals have been trying to disconnect themselves from the dominant institutions and to prevent their unavoidable interaction with them from affecting their ideas, hopes, and projects.

There is not a word to fully express the diversity of social struggles in Latin America attempting to create, at the grassroots, new ways of life and government. The commons have been called communes, wastes, open fields, usi civici, mir, ejido, Allmende, communaux, altepetl, gemeentegronden. All these venerable Spanish, English, Italian, Russian, Germanic, Norwegian, Catalan, French, Náhuatl, or Dutch words, along with many others, with their local variants, allude to spaces that are neither private nor public. “Commons” is thus a generic term for very different forms of social existence. In the same way, the immense richness of the social organizations currently existing or being created in Latin America cannot be reduced to the formal categories community or commons. The Spanish ejido is not identical to the British “commons,” to the pre-Hispanic communal regimes, or to the Mexican ejido invented in the Constitution of 1917, implemented in the 1930s, and reformulated in 1992. The emerging new commons are clearly different from their predecessors. All these forms, both actualizations of ancient traditions and contemporary creations, are beyond the private threshold but cannot be defined as public spaces, collective refuges, or hunting preserves. They are not forms of property or land tenure. Specific ways of doing things, talking about them, and living them—art, techne—express, in these forms of commons, cultural traditions and recent innovations. Their precise
limits (their contours, their perimeters) as well as their internal strings (their straightjackets) are still insufficiently explored territory.

Instead of the individual, the commons is currently replacing the individual as a cell for the society. An increasingly vigorous movement seeks to recover the enclosed commons and regenerate those who resisted its enclosure, who are not a small amount of people: for example, 70 percent of the world’s fisheries still operate by way of commons, and 85 percent of the territory in Oaxaca, a state in southern Mexico, is in communal hands. There are also attempts to apply the rules of the commons—restricted and regulated access to common patrimony—to what are now considered global commons: water, air, forests, seeds . . . all of them threatened by the savage exploitation of private corporations and their regimes of free access. The term “commonism” was coined to refer to an increasingly extended alliance between those who seek to claim their rights to the commons and those who intend to protect what remains of the biosphere and remove themselves from individualistic consumerism. All of them try to form what André Gorz calls the “archipelago of conviviality,” which also begins to adopt political shape. The National Indigenous Congress of Mexico, which is an articulation of innumerable and different communities dispersed throughout the country, has adopted a very clear motto: “We are a web when we are separated and an assembly when we are together.” In the tradition of the Iroquois nation, which brought together many diverse cultures throughout the northern United States that were in conflict, indigenous peoples in Mexico cultivate the autonomy exercised in their communities. They give specific mandates to representatives who can come to agreement with others, much like them, through assemblies. Real parliaments capable of giving form to social norms, respecting them as common initiatives, and put them into practice.

The Reconstitution

Since 2011 there have been very visible manifestations of profound indignation in many different parts of the world. In these movements the creativity and vigor of people have been demonstrated.

- In places like Tunisia or Egypt the outbreaks and liquidation of authoritarian governments have been a prerequisite and precursor to deep social transformations only beginning to take shape,
while very serious and dangerous attempts to restore the old regime are on their way.

- In other places such as Greece or Spain, recovering plazas and other sites of great symbolic value as appropriate spaces for political assemblies and continuous debate had a cathartic effect for expressing massive indignation. These spaces also became the beginning of a far-reaching movement that has only begun to find its direction. In Greece an autonomous movement is taking root, applying previous experiences to create new paths.

- In Mexico, the Movimiento Nacional por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (National Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity), convened and lead by the poet Javier Sicilia after the loss of his son in a horrendous crime in April 2011, is still mobilizing many people to stop the violence that has plagued the country since the government became the entrepreneur of violence with the pretext of the drug cartels. On December 21, 2012 the Zapatistas peacefully occupied the same towns they had occupied at the beginning of their uprising, on January 1, 1994. They are taking a series of initiatives, renovating their presence in the political scenario, and articulating again many other initiatives and movements.

- In Bolivia, 2011 began with massive expressions of discontent against unacceptable stances taken by the government of Evo Morales. The tensions and contradictions between his regime and the social movements have been increasing since then. The same is happening in other countries in the region that have “leftist” heads of state, like Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Venezuela, some of them committed to what they call “twenty-first-century socialism.” The massive mobilizations in Brazil of June 2013 took the political classes by surprise, but the social movements, like the Mouvemento dos san Terra, knew very well what was at stake: the attempt to give neoliberalism a human face clearly failed.

- On September 17, 2011, the symbolic occupation of Wall Street was the beginning of a movement without clear precedent. It produced a new awareness, giving voice to general concerns about the condition of American “democracy.” Many people identified with what Naomi Klein told the people gathered in Zucotti Park on October 7, 2011: “What took you so long? We’ve been
wondering when you were going to show up. . . . And most of all: ‘Welcome.’” The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek emphasized that the movement gave visibility to the lack of freedom and invented a language to talk about it. He also offered other memorable phrases: “The marriage between democracy and capitalism is over.” “We are not dreamers. We are those who are awakening from a dream that became a nightmare.” “We are not destroying anything, but witnessing how the system is destroying itself.” In an article in Foreign Affairs, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for their part, examined how the movement gives voice to a widespread feeling of economic injustice: “It has become evident that the outrage against corporate greed and economic inequality is real and deep.” But according to them, the movement is above all a protest against the lack or failure of representation. “It’s not just that this or that politician or this or that party are ineffective or corrupt. . . . But that the representative system itself is inadequate. This movement of protest can, and perhaps should, become a genuine constitutional democratic process.” A few months later, those still in the plaza made a recap: “On September 17 people from all over the country and the world came together to protest the massive injustice of our era, perpetuated by political and economic elites. That day we stood against the deprivation of human rights and the social and economic injustices. We speak, resist and occupy Wall Street successfully. We are happy to be here in Liberty Plaza and we consider ourselves an autonomous political entity committed to nonviolent civil disobedience and the construction of solidarity based on mutual respect, acceptance and love. From this reconquered land we tell all Americans and the world: Bastar!” While some people are still seeing the movement as a kind of global revolution beginning at the heart of the beast, others did not want to celebrate too soon, and still others, for example the media, consider the Occupy movement to be basically dead. What is clear is that thousands of initiatives inspired by it are currently flourishing and spreading throughout the United States.

For John Berger, to name the intolerable is itself hope. When something is considered intolerable, action should follow. Those outraged at Wall Street,
much like those in Madrid and Athens and São Paulo, dared to name the intolerable and thus forged a hope that is the essence of all popular movements.

It is impossible to anticipate the evolution of the movements currently erupting all over the world. Governments that initially responded with indifference or repression are now obligated to pay attention. The mainstream media could not maintain its initial indifference, because among other reasons there was a flood of information coming from alternative media sources. The attempts to reduce the movements to a limited set of manageable demands, many of which were presented by some of the protesters, clearly failed.

Some specific measures and policy changes may deactivate the movement in many parts of the world. But there is another option. There is a widespread conviction that, given the failures of the representative system and capitalism, the current crisis requires a regime change that can only be mediated through a people’s organization that allows for the recomposition of a social fabric, which has been ripped apart and nearly destroyed. A reconstitution from below begins with neighborhood assemblies, which take diverse forms of organization adequate for each location. There are places where the social fabric is still strong; what is needed is to activate and regenerate it. At the other extreme, there are places in which the social fabric has been ripped apart so completely it has left no sign of ever being there. One cannot organize an assembly here, not even of one block or between neighbors in an apartment complex. But two or three neighbors can organize themselves, and in their small assembly, which will slowly but surely connect with others, they will be spreading seeds for the new reconstitution. It’s about, once again, creatively bringing together the constituent power of the people. These assemblies, from the smallest to the largest, are constituent assemblies.

From this point what’s next begins to emerge. From a regenerated social fabric, a political power of the people can be legitimized. In certain areas of the world, for example in Mexico, there are some immediate and urgent tasks at hand, like protecting everyone from the spreading violence in a vicious civil war without clear sides, to create a safer community. The challenge today is above all for social creativity and imagination. “For a long time, Teodor Shanin had a very relevant and clearly formulated intuition: ‘The future should be, one way or another, communitarian. Socialism was clearly carrying a message of communitarianism. The problem is that it was translated into collectivism, statism and self-destruction.’”

Communitarianism becomes fundamentalism only in a nation-state framework. The actual transformative subjects are those who radically
disengage from national state paradigms, and instead promote social and political experiments capable of addressing current challenges and beginning to construct a new society. However, the proponents of this transformation are damaged subjects, influenced and constituted by power that cannot always clearly express their new vocation. “We are not pure,” say the Zapatistas. Their decision to openly challenge the conditions of exploitation and the internalization of dominant political practices does not mean they are alien to them. “All of us are crippled—some physically, some mentally, some emotionally,” observed Ivan Illich, Robert Fox, Robert Theobald, and some of their friends fifty years ago, in the time of the March on the Pentagon against the war in Vietnam. In their “Call to Celebration” they affirmed: “We must therefore strive cooperatively to create the new world. There is no time left for destruction, for hatred, for anger. We must build, in joy and hope and celebration.”

Their manifesto was an invitation to celebrate what we can do together: “For every one of us, and every group with which we live and work, must become the model of the era which we desire to create.” It described an opening: “If any one phrase can sum up the nature of the new era, it is the end of privilege and license. . . . The expanding dignity of each man and each human relationship must necessarily challenge existing systems. . . . This call is a call to live the future. Let us join together joyfully to celebrate our awareness that we can make our life today the shape of tomorrow’s future.”

The time is ripe for these words. We learned the lesson: the 1960s ended in disaster, the great defeat that paved the way for the nightmare of neoliberalism. The new initiatives proliferating in the world can be seen as regenerative processes to search for others in the same conditions, similarly damaged, similarly hopeful, to construct together what has ceased to be a utopia, because it already has a place in the world, though it still lacks a name.

“I can no longer believe in magical transformations, like a victorious uprising which transforms a society,” recently said Mercedes Moncada, from Nicaragua. “I believe that revolutions are gradual, deep and associated with the daily life. They must be rooted in all the spaces of the societies, in the families, in the personal relations, in the little ones, in the neighborhoods, all of which also define the shape of power.”

Howard Zinn stresses that “revolutionary change is something immediate . . . something that we need to do today, right now, wherever we are, where we live, where we work or study. It implies to begin right now
to get rid of all the authoritarian and cruel relations, between men and women, parents and children, between different kinds of workers. This is not an armed uprising. It happens in the little corners which cannot be reached by the powerful but clumsy hands of the state. It is not centralized or isolated: it cannot be destroyed by the powerful, the rich, the police. It happens in a million places at the same time, in the families, in the streets, in the neighborhoods, in the work places. Suppressed in one place, it reappears in another until it is everywhere. Such revolution is an art. That is: it requires the courage not only of resistance but of imagination.'"14

And so, the social revolution of the twenty-first century, the revolution of the new commons, commonism, beyond development, beyond the economic society, beyond capitalism and socialism, is not associated with the great epic of magnificent leaders and mass movements. It has three strong pillars, the very simple, common pillars, all too familiar, of friendship, hope, and surprise.

Friendship is the stuff generating new commons, particularly in the cities, for individualized people who don’t have anything they can call community.

Surprise means to acknowledge our condition, as humans. We don’t know the future. We are now back from the future, from any promised land, any technical design for social engineering. This is a call to our imagination, living in the present.

And hope, the essence of social movements, is not the conviction that something will happen but the conviction that something makes sense, whatever happens.

All over the world, we are smelling hope, exploring hope, instead of falling into despair or apocalyptic randiness.

It is an adventure into unknown territory.

NOTES


8. Raúl Zibechi, *Dispersar el poder* (Guadalajara, Mexico: La Casa del Mago, 2006).


