

Raúl Zibechi on Popular Struggles in Latin American Shack Settlements

Raúl Zibechi is an Uruguayan writer and militant who has, perhaps more than anyone else, brought a bottom-up understanding of popular struggles in contemporary Latin America to an international audience. Two of his books have recently been translated into English: [Dispersing Powers: Social Movements as Anti-State Forces](#) (2010) and [Territories in Resistance](#) (2012). In this serving of Padkos we are dishing up an essay from his latest book that examines struggles in Latin American shack settlements. It is titled: *The Urban Peripheries: Counter-Powers from Below?*

While there are some obvious differences between the situations in Latin American and South Africa, Zibechi's analysis also reveals some striking similarities in the thinking and practices that have emerged in struggle in Latin American and in South Africa. He reveals some equally striking similarities in the inability of much of the middle class left to recognize popular political agency.

In his 2010 book he stressed that institutions of representative leadership have become deeply suspect in the struggles emerging from Latin American shack settlements. When people decide to represent themselves this produces an “epistemological earthquake” says Zibechi (2010). This idea resonates deeply with all of us who have observed the derision and slander by parts of the South African state and the “left” aimed at formations like the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and Abahlali baseMjondolo when they have acted on their principles to represent themselves and to refuse the representation and conscription of their struggles by others. As Zibechi insists: when popular struggles emerge from the shack settlements “the road forks: we either accept that the oppressed have their own autonomous political capacities or label their activity ‘spontaneous’, that is politically blind....unconscious and pre-political” (2010). He also stressed, in a formulation that has a profound resonance with some of the thinking that has emerged in the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo that “self-movement” requires that the oppressed “refuse the place that they have been historically assigned”. And he made the point that actually existing forms of popular emancipatory political action don't conform to the forms of political action “proposed by the state, academia and political parties”.

In his new book Zibechi (2012) argues that there is “not the slightest difference in perspective between the left and the right” when it comes to the prejudices with which the urban poor are viewed from the middle class world. He also observes, again with obvious resonance for us here, that most researchers, including those on the left, regard the urban poor as objects rather than subjects.

The starting point of the essay that we are serving up today is that in Latin America, and contrary to Marxist orthodoxy, the primary challenge to the dominant system is emerging from the shack settlements and not from the industrial working class. Zibechi also stresses that these struggles “make the road by walking”, that they are self-organised, that women often take a leading role, that they are committed to self-presentation rather than representation, that they invariably take a territorial form, that the road blockade and the land occupation are key tactics, and that new forms of class and political identities are being created in struggle. He stresses that community itself becomes a form of struggle. All of this is very familiar to anyone who understands popular emancipatory struggles in contemporary South Africa - as is his observation that there is a widespread rejection of political parties and electoral abstentionism in Latin America.

Zibechi also argues that government housing programmes can be a form of social control rather than inclusive development and uses the example of the housing programmes developed in Chicago (US) for the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile to illustrate this point. This point is of crucial importance for us given that key components of housing policy in post-apartheid South Africa were based on the model developed for Chile under Pinochet. It is also vitally important in light of the pervasiveness of the depoliticising language that presents ‘service delivery’ as both the answer to all our social problems and as the demand emerging from all protest.

Zibechi also argues that formal social movements can become bureaucratized and co-opted by the state, NGOs or political parties and that in Latin America it is often more useful to think of emancipatory energies expressing themselves via societies in movement outside of formal modes of organisation.

The forms of left thought that dominate the academy and some NGOs in contemporary South Africa are usually rooted in attempts to think about emancipatory political projects in 19th and early 20th century Europe and are often linked to left projects in England or the USA. They are not irrelevant to our time and place but when they are imposed on our current realities in a dogmatic way, which they often are, they often occlude rather than illuminate the reality of actually existing modes of oppression and resistance. We at CLP are committed to learning as much as we can from contemporary struggles around the global South in order to be able to develop the best understanding that we can of the contemporary moment. This essay by Zibechi is a very important intervention and we are sure that you will find it as rewarding as we have.