

Rebuilding a Dissident Common Sense. An Interview with Raquel Gutiérrez.

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How can we think about the contemporary situation in Latin America? There are sectors proposing the end of the cycle of the so-called progressive governments.

I'm not sure that the expression "end of cycle" can be applied to the progressive governments in Latin America... There are some discrepancies in the processes that continue, for example in Bolivia and Ecuador with respect to Venezuela, especially after Chávez's death. However, more than an "end of cycle," I think we are witnessing the political consolidation of a cycle that began after the constituent processes in Bolivia as well as in Ecuador. I think that what we are seeing is the growing consolidation of the monopoly of privileges over the most important political decisions in the hands of small groups of political officials. This "blockage" – to put it one way – of the other visions and political paths that opened up years ago is what, in my perspective, has reached an extraordinary point of saturation.

How is this saturation expressed?

There is, I think, in Bolivia and Ecuador, a very strong moment of consolidation of the state and a growing tutelage of popular and indigenous initiatives, which have to increasingly abide by the decisions of others. This is what I see: a reiteration of liberal forms of politics entrenched in the expropriation of the social capacity to intervene in public matters that affect everyone.

Are there reconfigurations of the state that could be called post-neoliberal?

I think that the current moment is not the same as the liberal moment of policies and politics that swept Latin America in the '90s. That is easily verifiable living, as I do now, in Mexico, where the (neo)liberal ideology of structural reform that limits state intervention is still present and in force, assaulting what tend to be called "social gains" and promoting the predominance of monopoly business interests through the excuse of the predominance of the market. This, I think, no longer happens, you no longer hear this, in countries where there were vigorous and energetic mobilizations during the previous decade, countries that went through constituent processes and have progressive governments.

Is a new type of conflictivity constructed through these mobilizations and changes at the level of the state?

What is terrible is that in the countries that had strong social mobilizations, the interests of the most powerful financial capital are still fully dominant, and now appear to have also "captured" the state forms that were reconstructed after the shock of the last decade. This is what one finds when one tries to understand what is happening based on the similarities between the conflicts unfolding in different countries, some which are increasingly liberalized and formally "democratic," like Mexico; or, like Ecuador and Bolivia, where indigenous peoples have to, time and time again, defend their territories and lives being threatened by new efforts of plunder, and struggle against the imposition, without any consultation, of policies that, in the South, are allegedly promoted "for the good" of those same peoples defending themselves. At stake is what appeared in the turbulent and rebellious times once again as a horizon of the common that strongly dislocated the terms of modern liberal political discourse.

What does the horizon of the common mean as politics?

From my point of view, what a few years ago was envisioned as political possibility was a kind of shared collective disposition, not without internal tensions, to reappropriate previously expropriated material wealth and political capacities. This key allows you to understand the ongoing struggles that seek to establish limits to the expropriating-privatizing action of the most powerful capital, as well as efforts to establish new terms of social control over recuperated wealth – whether water, forests, or hydrocarbons.

From these practices of struggle, societies gradually recovered and reconstructed political capacities in the broadest sense: possibilities to collectively manage that which concerns everyone because it affects us all. This tended to erode and threatened to dissolve certain modern terms of political understanding, like the private/public distinction. And the threat of dissolution of this ancient distinction, that founded a great part of our understanding of the political, well the moments of struggle were also energetic times of the production and reproduction of the common. The common is not a classificatory category alluding to property but rather it is a central idea-force for the reorganization of social life.

It supposes a new form of cooperation and authority? How is it different from the public?

The common is that which is produced collectively and whose control and decision are not delegated to other political mediations other than those that produce it. The common is a way of naming that “non-state public.” The horizon of the common is, above all, a perspective of struggle launched to directly and collectively reappropriate and recover what has been taken from the hands of communities. In that sense, the common is not something that is merely inherited, but rather, primarily, it is the reiterated production of meaning and relations to collectively equip ourselves with capacities to intervene in general affairs.

How can we read the current violence in Mexico? How does the question of drug trafficking play out in respect to social movements?

This issue is overwhelming... I'll give you a few keys for interpretation: beyond the so called “transition to democracy,” in Mexico there is a form of the political, still fully in force, based on a stark patrimonialism. Mexico is a country of monopolies and their defense by any means. In this context, the war on drugs – driven by the United States, and which in Mexico started mainly during the second government of Calderon's conservative National Action Party (PAN) – forced a redefinition of the terms of one of the most profitable businesses in Mexico: the production and distribution of controlled substances. This has unleashed an authentic war on several fronts with many actors, whose possible identification is not always clear.

Thus, a confrontation has generalized in which two levels can be distinguished: on the one hand, the violent struggle between mafias that exercise territorial control as a guarantee of the permanence of their business and, on the other, an underground war against the people and civilian population, which intends to compel obedience at gunpoint and adding up murders.

All of this is not only very confusing but also highly dangerous. And worst of all, this authentic dissolution of state authority – in many parts of the Republic – is almost completely covered up, because it is difficult for information to circulate. What is certain is the proliferation of an infinity of local struggles of self-defense in multiple communities, localities, towns and regions. In these struggles there is hope for the reconstruction of the ruins in which we live.

Faced with this situation, what are the challenges for activism?

It is a time for words and conversations. We need to rebuild a common sense of dissidence and of struggle, because almost all of what we managed to clarify in the previous wave of mobilizations and uprisings has been “recodified” in state terms. First there was a semantic “capture” of our words, that no longer designated with clarity what we were alluding to in times of great political crisis; that was followed by a political “capture” and later, an “organizational” capture, of the most philosophical political contents of our struggles. Because of this, it is important to refocus the discussion not so much in what the state and different governments are currently doing, but rather in what we have learned.

Is the concept of dignity, that the Zapatistas put forth in their moment, useful for thinking about current struggles?

Dignity, for me, is always the starting point for political and moral autonomy; as well as the fissures that are imprinted on the cages of fear and distrust. It could be said, being formal, that dignity is always necessary, but not sufficient for the unfolding of struggles for social and political transformation. The “what else is needed?” constitutes, I think, the heart of the contemporary militant political debate.

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