

# Grassroots Movements & Electoral Politics:



## Strategies for Change in Latin America

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**T**he three essays collected here address the question of political power and social change in Latin America. What are the most effective sources of transformation? Are the grassroots movements most powerful when acting alone, in opposition to constituted power, or in conjunction with institutional, electoral methods? The answers sometimes depend on political values and judgments about power; at other times, they rest on pragmatic considerations and differing notions of what constitutes pragmatic vs. “romantic” strategies. The first essay, “Government or Grassroots: Political Transformation in Latin America” lays out some of the arguments in favor of popular mobilizations and some of the arguments against their often exclusive claims. The second reviews Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History. The authors, Staughton Lynd and

Andrej Grubacic, make a case for a politics from below rooted in an anarchist sensibility. In the last essay, “Activism and Theory: A Case for the Grassroots and Government,” based on a collection of case studies entitled *The New Latin American Left: Utopia Reborn*, edited by Patrick Barrett, Daniel Chavez and César Rodríguez-Garavito, I explore alternatives to grassroots-only strategies. I would like to thank the following for talking with me about these issues: Katherine Hoyt, Chuck Kaufman and James Jordan in the U. S.; Alejandro Bendaña, Sofia Montenegro and William Grigsby in Nicaragua.

**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.**

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

## 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 grassroots 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 neoliberal 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 neoliberal 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

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 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.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the recent insurrections, unlike the NSM, turn their backs on the state as a mechanism for social change.

### **The Grassroots**

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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. Nor has its militant, oppositional stance been diluted over time.<sup>10</sup>

Neoliberal 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’) 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> The

theory and ideology of horizontalism came later.

Despite the belligerence and creativity of popular rebellions, the movements were largely co-opted and demobilized under Kirchner's government after his election in 2003.<sup>14</sup> 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.

Recently, a new wave of popular mobilizations against neoliberal governments has taken place: the insurgency in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2006; Columbia's indigenous protests in 2009; and the indigenous Amazonian uprisings in Peru in 2008 and 2009. Popular insurgency has also challenged progressive governments in the region. In 2009, indigenous and environmental movements in Ecuador organized protests against a mining law that favored transnational corporations, President Correa's anti-neoliberal rhetoric notwithstanding. The same year, supporters of Evo Morales in Bolivia denounced new mining and oil operations.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, the economic crisis, neoliberal attempts to control natural resources and right-wing efforts to oust increasingly beleaguered progressive governments will undoubtedly result in more popular rebellions, according to historian Gerardo Rénique's pro-grassroots introduction to Latin America: The New Neoliberalism and Popular Mobilization.<sup>16</sup>

### **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 grassroots and by observers to categorize the political posture of the mobilizations.<sup>17</sup> 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 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.<sup>18</sup> 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."<sup>19</sup>

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 power at all, is seen as hostile to self-determination and solidarity.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.

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.<sup>23</sup> 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 Fernandez de Kirchner.<sup>24</sup> 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 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.<sup>25</sup>

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

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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, ignoring more organized forms of struggle like parties and unions.<sup>26</sup> 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 neoliberal 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."<sup>27</sup> 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 transformatory process,"<sup>28</sup> as he thinks may be happening in Venezuela.<sup>29</sup> 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-Coordinator of the Alliance for Global Justice Chuck Kaufman endorses the statist position. He quotes approvingly Chavez' admonition to the 2006 World Social Forum to have state power

as a goal or risk "just a debating society."<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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."<sup>32</sup>

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.

## Activism and Theory: A Case for the Grassroots



*A shorter version of this essay is forthcoming in Z Magazine. It discusses the text Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History, by Staughton Lynd and Andrej Grubacic, PM Press, 2008, 261 pp.2*

The political activism of the 1960s, especially in the early years, was known for experimentation and spontaneity, decentralized action and local participation. It valued self-expression over ideology, action over theory. As New Left leader Tom Hayden told activists, "Depend more on feel than on theory because action produces its own evidence which theory can never do."<sup>33</sup> Although most activists rejected political labels, they identified more with anarchism than Marxism. Marxist theory was, among other things, judged to be rigid and divorced from struggles on the ground.

With the disintegration of the New Left and the civil rights movement, the expressivist ethos

was translated into the identity politics of the new social movements. Meanwhile, the social theory that flourished in academia affirmed diversity and the hostility of these movements to all totalizing theories of society, especially Marxism. Like the 1960s mindset, postmodern critical theory distanced itself from the authoritarianism that clung to the notions of vanguardism and seizure of state power.

This anti-authoritarian bent also characterizes today's global justice movement. Long-time activist Staughton Lynd and radical historian Andrej Grubacic put this movement front and center in their book, Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History. Revolutionary practice has always been the strong suit of anarchism, while theory has been the focus of Marxism.<sup>34</sup> The new generation of activists, defining themselves as anarchists, avoids philosophic or strategic thinking as both coercive and irrelevant. Lynd and Grubacic, while siding in the main with this impulse, try to find a way around the seeming incompatibility of practice and theory.

The synthesis of anarchism and Marxism which they propose is meant to be a solution to this dilemma. Not because theoretical coherence is an end in itself, something they do not care about, but because taking the best from both traditions could help activists overcome their weaknesses — an absence of momentum and organizing between major actions, an overall lack of direction.<sup>35</sup>

The synthesis of Marxism and anarchism suggested here bears the imprint of Lynd's 1960s politics, and his is the dominant voice in this conversation. As opposed to those who, like Stanley Aronowitz and James Weinstein, argued then for a coordinated left strategy, he defended grassroots organizing in all its autonomy and diversity.<sup>36</sup> That stance has not changed much. In the synthesis that Lynd and Grubacic propose, Marxism's utility lies in showing us how the capitalist system works. But in terms of strategy they have both feet planted in a notion of grassroots organizing that seemingly has no place for unified struggle — even of a non-vanguardist kind. The idea of an open, non-elitist vanguard, admittedly, fraught with problems, has been on the table in Latin America — a region that provides a political touchstone for this book — at least since the Saõ Paolo Forum of 1992 in Nicaragua. In the context of the later history of the Sandinista Revolution, for example, Orlando Nuñez has argued for a “democratic vanguard” that is in effect a network

of popular organizations.<sup>37</sup> Though they find much to admire in Nicaragua, the authors of Wobblies and Zapatistas not surprisingly choose a different path. For them, the Zapatistas are the inspiration, along with other Latin American social movements that avoid any hint of vanguardism, reworked or not, and statism, socialist or otherwise. (Their take on the role of the state in the region is to me unclear, especially the case of Bolivia and Venezuela.) The Zapatista motto is “mandar obediciendo” or “lead by obeying;” their model of organizing is horizontal networks.

The book calls on Marxist theory to neutralize the episodic character of anarchist-type activism at a time when summit mobilizations and anti-war demonstrations have lost momentum. “Well-intentioned individuals drift in a sea of vague idealism [as did SNCC in the 1960s], but with little conception of how to get from Here to There.” Enter Marxism. It gives us a sense of the direction that history is taking and hope for the outcome. That's it? Absent is any idea of coordinated struggle — probably thought to be too regimented — on the part of diverse social movements such as that propounded by activists, editors and writers clustered around Z Magazine and South End Press in Liberating Theory (1986). The authors do not even put forward a critique of such a coordinated strategy, nor of the notion of leadership and what a non-authoritarian leadership might entail.<sup>38</sup> Never mind a reconsideration of that suspect entity — the state. It is not that the authors oppose all theory. On the contrary, they advocate something called “low theory.” Not only does “low theory” arise from practice; it also deals solely with the immediate problems that arise from specific, local, struggles. Whatever goes beyond that falls into the category of “high theory” — unintelligible, divorced from everyday life.

Academics, especially Marxist scholars, are deemed guilty of such useless pedantry. But even writers on the left who reject Marxism's grand narrative in favor of an anti-statist, anti-vanguardist politics do not fare any better. John Holloway, whose admittedly daunting and to me excessively genuflecting posture towards the grassroots, Change the World without Taking Power (2002), is popular with many activists here and in Latin America, together with Antonio Negri, author of another influential work in this vein, Empire (2000) are dismissed for their “theoretical elitism.” (Though Michael Hardt, Negri's co-author, was besieged by autograph seekers at the World Social Forum in 2002.) It is not that I think that this trio has

anything close to the rightly discredited last word. But Wobblies and Zapatistas slights too many contributors to the question of social transformation; it finesses too many important issues. At the risk of writing about the book I would like to see written instead of the one at hand, it can be argued that Lynd and Grubacic open themselves up to this approach. By pointing to the inability of grass-roots movements, past and present, to sustain themselves or, more ambitiously, to change the overall social framework, they invite the kind of potentially fruitful speculation that they then shut the door on.

## Activism and Theory: A Case for the Grassroots and Government



*The New Latin American Left: Utopia Reborn*, edited by Patrick Barrett, Daniel Chavez and César Rodríguez-Garavito, Pluto Press, 2008, 272 pp.

Since the 1990s, social movements across Latin America have been a major force in the struggle against neoliberalism.<sup>39</sup> As discussed above in “Government or Grassroots: Political Transformation in Latin America,” opposition to dysfunctional neoliberal regimes began with disruption and rebellion at the grassroots. In the case of Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico and the piqueteros (road picketers) in Argentina, rebellion focused not just on particular governments but on all political institutions as untrustworthy and authoritarian. The Argentinian slogan, “Que vayan todos” (they should all go) summed up the distrust of all forms of power — bureaucratic, electoral, governmental — on the part of many of the mobilizations.

The dismissal of politics as usual extended to the parties of the old Left. Not only were these out of touch with the unorganized popular sectors; they were also too vanguardist to respond to grassroots needs. The state and state-centric notions of radical transformation were rejected by popular mobilizations for similar reasons. The theoretical dimension of this position appeared prominently in the work of Raul Zibechi, John Holloway, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in the 2000s.<sup>40</sup> Holloway’s slogan, “change the world without taking power,” became the rallying cry of movements and movement-oriented analysts.

In the U.S., this politics of anti-power and change from below emerged as the philosophical arm of the anti-globalization movement. It has recently taken shape in the work of the long-time activist and progressive icon, Staughton Lynd. Together with Andre Grubacic, he has authored Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History (2008), reviewed here. Lynd and Grubacic see all power, especially that congealed in the state, as unacceptably authoritarian. Hence only initiatives from below — such as the anti-corporate led globalization movement and especially the Zapatista uprising — are to be trusted. (How these effect the kind of systemic change they advocate is, they admit, unclear, but that is another story.) Their perspective on the Latin American political landscape is also rooted in an anarchist-leaning sensibility. The government of Evo Morales in Bolivia is — somewhat inexplicably — a beacon because it ostensibly follows Marcos in “mandar obediciendo” (to lead by obeying.) The government of Hugo Chavez is not mentioned at all.

Much contemporary thinking about the left in Latin America has transcended the dichotomy of grassroots and government exemplified by Lynd and others in the North and South. In the more flexible model, social movements, political parties and the state each play a role: to oversimplify, movements pressure governments; parties crystallize their demands; the state implements them.

The balance between non-institutional and institutional politics is taken up in The New Latin American Left: Utopia Reborn, edited by Patrick Barrett, Daniel Chavez and César Rodríguez-Garavito (2008). Their case studies point to the fact that most political actors in the region play a part on more than one level. While acknowledging the by now widely accepted validity of the new left’s critique of the state, the editors and several of the contributors make a point

of vigorously dissenting from the views of Zapatistas and piqueteros. By avoiding electoral politics, these popular rebellions ignore alternative levers of radical change (at their peril).

Other left critics of change from below go so far as to dismiss the grassroots position as “romantic” or “utopian.”

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Such a stark juxtaposition of institutional versus movement politics is, in the view of the New Latin American Left, “a pseudo-debate.”<sup>42</sup> It is not a question of either/or. Jeffery Webber has a similar take on the subject. Positing Hardt and Negri’s Empire — with its elevation of the amorphous “multitude” as the privileged agent of revolution, as is too common — does an injustice to the grassroots argument in the region. For one thing, it sets up a straw man. There are many more sophisticated and “realistic” analyses of socialism from below in the global South than this treatise.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the actors at the World Social Forum, a former bastion of the grassroots-only approach, have in recent years been debating the merits of party politics.<sup>44</sup>

The New Latin American Left presents politics on three levels: movements, parties and states. Social movements are the “most essential” because of their ability to pressure those inside the political arena. In Argentina, piqueteros, the unemployed and popular assemblies propelled Nestor Kirchner into office. In Mexico, according to Armando Bartra, “the most promising Left is in the streets” rather than in Chiapas or in the government.

Yet it is also true that the movements run into trouble on the terrain of institutional politics. For example, Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement (MST) has not been able to move Lula’s agricultural policy away from support for large landholders. And Kirchner succeeded in isolating and coopting the piqueteros.

In addition to the grassroots movements, political parties are important institutional players in leftist Latin American countries and this for three reasons: they can be the electoral arm of the social movements; they can integrate diverse movements and sectoral interests (as Sandinista leader, Luis Carrion, hoped the FSLN would do for the left in 1990s Nicaragua);<sup>45</sup> and parties can give coherence and direction to state actions. Ideally, strong movements, parties and governments collaborate to carry out popular objectives. Such a best case scenario is fleshed out on a theoretical level by Buenos Aires-based economist Claudio Katz. It is worth quoting him in full:

“Movements and parties constitute two modes of contemporary popular organization. Both are essential to the development of socialist convictions. They reinforce confidence in self-organization, and they develop the norms for the future exercise of people’s power.

Movements sustain the immediate social struggle, and parties fuel a more fully developed political activity. Both are necessary for facilitating direct action and electoral participation. But this complementarity is frequently questioned by exclusivist advocates of movement or party. Some movement-oriented theorists — who subscribe

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to autonomist points of view — believe that party organization is obsolete, useless, and pernicious.

But their objections apply only to the actions of certain parties and not to the general operation of these structures. No emancipatory project can evolve exclusively in the social realm, nor can it do without the specific platforms — the links between demands and power strategies — that party groupings provide. These groupings help overcome the limitations of spontaneous rebellion. The party facilitates the maturation of an anti-capitalist consciousness that does not emerge abruptly from protest actions

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but requires a certain processing in order to transform the battle for immediate improvements into a struggle for socialist objectives.”<sup>46</sup>

In such a dialectical relationship, movements do more than pressure parties and parties do more than put forth grassroots demands.

As we see in The New Latin American Left, the actions of movements and parties are, not surprisingly, more or less efficacious depending on the country. Bolivia comes closest to the model of fruitful interaction — no doubt why it gets a favorable mention in Wobblies and Zapatistas. The governing party of Evo Morales, The Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), has been largely responsive to the demands of indigenous movements and people’s assemblies. But the collaboration between grassroots movements and political parties has been more vestigial in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay. (The chapter on Venezuela by Edgardo Lander takes up this issue only tangentially. The popular movement embodied in community councils, Bolivarian circles and other groups at the base has had a changing relationship with the government over time. Like other sympathetic observers of Venezuela under Chavez, such as Gregory Wilpert, Lander points out that dependence on one leader limits the self-organization of the grassroots and the Chavista party.)

Theoretical contributions to this volume reinforce the position of the editors: the state is on an equal footing with parties and movements in advancing a left agenda. Bonaventura de Sousa Santos, the Portuguese sociologist who has been active in the World Social Forum (WSF) argues that “the state is always relevant” and not for the usual reasons of movement insufficiency. The state must always be reckoned with because in capitalist societies it is so inextricably intertwined with civil society, most importantly with the corporate order, which makes it futile to act as if it were dispensable. No struggle against oppression can pretend otherwise. Moreover, the social movements at the WSF attest to the fact that “while the state can sometimes be an enemy, it can also be a precious ally, particularly in peripheral or semi-peripheral countries” and particularly as a counter to foreign corporations. This has been true with regard to the recent U. S. and Canadian efforts to promote extractive industries in Latin

America. In 2009, for example, under pressure from indigenous groups, Peru repealed the laws that opened the Amazon region to activities like mining and logging.<sup>47</sup>

Argentine researcher Atilio Boron also gives the state a prominent role in liberatory change. In contrast to neoliberalism (and grassroots-only movements), both of which sideline government, the state is the only force which can undertake the “Promethean task” of regulating markets for the common good and protecting citizens

that the neoliberal order has abandoned.

Boron and several other contributors to The New Latin American Left seem to accept reform as all that can be hoped for these days. But, unlike the old social democrats, they acknowledge that reform “is not a revolution that advances slowly or in stages, until, with the imperceptibility of the traveler who crosses the equator, it arrives at socialism.” What saves the day are “revolutionary reforms.” These can build popular political capacity which in turn can lead to greater transformational change down the road. However, the obstacles to such change in capitalist states remain formidable.

## End Notes:

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 Enríque, 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).

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).

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 Perspectives*, (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.

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,

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, *Genealogía 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 Gerardo Rénique, “Introduction,” in *Socialism and Democracy: Latin America: The New Neoliberalism and Popular Mobilization*, ed. Gerardo Rénique, 23 (November, 2009), 1-27.

16 Rénique, *Socialism and Democracy* (November, 2009), 4.

17 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.

18 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.

19 Quoted in Sitrin, *Horizontalism*, p. 8.

20 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.
- 21 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).
- 22 *Change the World Without Taking Power*, London, (2002), pp. 166-175.
- 23 Michael Hardt and Antonion Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA, (2000), xii-xiii.
- 24 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.
- 25 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.
- 26 Aronowitz, 179-195.
- 27 Castorina, *Socialist Register*, (2008), 280-281.
- 28 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.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 150-151.
- 30 Keynote address to the Managua Solidarity Conference, May 13-15, 2007, *Nicaraguan Monitor*, 2007, p. 5.
- 31 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).
- 32 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.
- 33 Quoted in *Participatory Democracy*, ed. T. E. Cook and R. N. Morgan, Harper & Row, 1971.
- 34 David Graeber, "Anarchism or the Revolution of the 21st Century," <http://www.zmag.org/znet/viewarticle/9258>.
- 35 Barbara Epstein and Chris Dixon present a sympathetic yet critical account of anarchism today in "A Politics and a Sensibility: The Anarchist Current in the U. S. Left," *Toward a New Socialism*, Anatol Anton and Richard Schmitt, eds., Lexington Books, 2007, pp. 445-461.
- 36 *The New Left: A Documentary History*, ed. Massimo Teodori; The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969, pp. 215-217.
- 37 Katherine Hoyt, *The Many Faces of Sandinista Democracy*, Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1997, pp. 89-101.
- 38 For a consideration of different kinds of leadership on the left, see D. L. Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today*, Pluto Press, 2006. Ellen Meiksins Wood shows how the concept of civil society in post-Marxist politics is used to downplay the severity of capitalism as a system of oppression and socialism as a solution. "The Uses and Abuses of Civil Society," *Socialist Register*, 1990, 61-84.
- 39 For a recent account, see Gerardo Rénique, "Introduction," *Socialism and Democracy: Latin America: The New Neoliberalism, and Popular Mobilization*, ed. by Gerardo Rénique, (November, 2009), 1-26.
- 40 R. Zibechi, *Genealogia de la Revuelta*, La Plata, (2003); Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*, London (2002); Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA, (2000).
- 41 D. L. Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today*, London (2006), p. 3.
- 42 Other representatives of the two extremes are Gustavo Esteva, "Another Perspective, Another Democracy," *Socialism and Democracy* (2009), 45-61, for the grassroots and Tom Mertes, "Grass-Roots Globalism: Reply to Michael Hardt," *New Left Review* (September/October 2002), 101-110 for the state.
- 43 Jeffery R. Webber, "Where is Venezuela Going?" *Against the Current*, (January/February 2010), 33-39. See for example Claudio Katz, "Socialist Strategies in Latin America," *Monthly Review*, (September, 2007), 25-41.
- 44 Katz, *Monthly Review*, (September, 2007), 40.
- 45 Midge Quandt, *Unbinding the Ties: The Popular Organizations and the FSLN in Nicaragua*, Washington, DC (1993), 63.
- 46 Katz, *Monthly Review*, (September, 2007), 40.
- 47 Greg Grandin, "Muscling Latin America: the Pentagon's New Monroe Doctrine," *The Nation*, (February 8, 2010), 13.