

Another Perspective, Another Democracy

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Prologue¹

We came to the Festival with immense outrage. Atenco, Oaxaca, Gaza, the shot that killed Alexis – all of them came with us. And we were in Zapatista territories, which were under daily attack. We came with the conviction that the time had come to transform our outrage into courage, the courage of rebellion. And we came ready to learn from other outrages how to do this.

Outrage mounts daily, stimulated by incessant political and economic provocations. How to prevent its overflowing? How to make it creative? How to transform it into courage? Not just the courage that expresses annoyance, anger, resentment. The courage that means bravery, the decision to act, the capacity to take initiatives.

Forty years ago, at the time of the March on the Pentagon, Ivan Illich, Robert Fox, Robert Theobald and some of their friends launched a "Call to 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. . .

All of us are crippled – some physically, some mentally, some emotionally. 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.

In the future we must end the use of coercive power and authority: the ability to demand action on the basis of one's hierarchical position. 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. (Illich 1971: 16–18)

This spirit, this attitude, expresses well the call to the Festival. There is no time for crying, destructive fury, or least of all desperation. The Festival is an invitation to celebrate, with the spirit of a fiesta, a new hope, "that rebellion that rejects conformism and defeat," a hope that also is called dignity, "that homeland without nationality, that rainbow which is also a bridge, that heartbeat which does ask whose

blood is driving it, that rebel irreverence mocking frontiers, customs and wars” (EZLN 1997: 126).

The corrupted perspective

We need another perspective. The one we have inherited blinds us to reality and turns our rage in a perverse direction. Our political perspective (*mirada*) was built up on the notion of a vanguard and fixed its gaze on the state. Since Lenin’s time it has been widely assumed that a group of enlightened revolutionaries would lead the masses to the promised land it had

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conceived for them. The struggle *against* the state would become instead a struggle *for* the state, with the aim of conquering it. The left seems to agree on this. Raised in this tradition, we have come to perceive the state as an instrument which simply does whatever it is told to do. The state is fascist or revolutionary or democratic depending on who runs it. As Poulantzas ironically put it: let the people get rid of the usurpers and the state will take care of everything.

We must recognize that the nation-state, be it the most ferocious dictatorship or the gentlest and purest democracy, has been and remains a structure for dominating and controlling the population, in order to put it at the service of capital. The modern state is the ideal collective capitalist. As such, it functions as a dictatorship even when it has the most up-to-date democratic institutions. It must therefore be resisted at every turn in the anticapitalist struggle. By the same token we must flee like the plague any temptation to occupy the state or

forward for decades by authors such as Jacques Ellul, Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich, and Leopold Kohr. Lummis (1996) focuses especially on this link.

11. In “El mundo [the world]: siete pensamientos [seven theses] en mayo de 2003,” *Rebeldía*, no. 7, May 2003, p. 10, Subcomandante Marcos suggested that, in the ship in which we are all traveling, “There are those who imagine that the rudder exists and who fight for possession of it. There are those who look for the rudder, certain that it must be somewhere. And there are those who turn an island not into a refuge for themselves but rather into a ship with which to meet another island and another and another . . .”

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7. The reaction of the State and the parties against autonomy makes perfect sense. The struggle for autonomy threatens Mexico's dominant regime with dissolution. But it's not true, as has been alleged, that it contains elements of separatism or fundamentalism, nor that it supports the fragmentation of the country or the formation of patrimonial castes or estates. Recognition of the autonomy and cultural self-determination of the Indian peoples – made explicit in the San Andrés accords – calls into question the social pact bequeathed by the Mexican Revolution and gradually dismantled in recent decades. It demands a new one in its place. In changing the content of social life, it would necessarily change the nature of the continent, which will no longer be shaped by nation-states. With a new sense and meaning, the nation would have more unity. Form is always substance. Democracy cannot be reduced to a mere form containing undemocratic components; form and substance alike must be democratic.
8. In the formalist version of autonomy, “self-government” or “autonomous government” is simply “a specific instance (*orden*) of government that is part of the system of vertical powers that makes up the organization of the State” (Díaz Polanco 1996: 109). Such “autonomy” has historically involved the full subsumption of the people within the order of the state. Gaining it would be a pyrrhic victory. In exchange for jurisdiction over an administrative unit, with “autonomous” institutions granted by the centralized State, the structure of the latter would be further consolidated, introducing into the midst of the people's own systems of government the virus of their dissolution. In exchange for certain tenuous advances in formal democracy, any possible advances in radical democracy would be frustrated.
9. Klaus Zimmermann is Director of the German Institute for Economic Research (Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung). See <http://www.netzeitung.de/wirtschaft/wirtschaftspolitik/1233037.html> (Dec. 15, 2008).
10. At the threshold of the industrial mode of production Engels wrote: “*Lasciate ogni autonomia, voi che entrate!*” (You who enter, leave behind all autonomy!). The connection is central. Generalizing the political style of radical democracy would bring deep changes in the organization of work, along the lines of what has been put

collaborate with it. Once the battle has been won, we must shake free of the state and must totally dismantle the state machinery.

The left's obsession with taking power gives rise to two types of self-destruction. The first and more obvious one is corruption. Ethical sensibility disappears when one takes power. High ideals gradually dissolve in the course of struggle. Taking power ceases to be a means and becomes instead the end. At this point, all means become justified, including treason, collaborationism, complicity, any kind of crime, dishonesty, impunity – in short, a blatant and cynical lack of integrity.

But there is another type of self-destruction which is often overlooked. We lose or abandon our perspective not only by looking *to* the top (*mirar hacia arriba*) but by thinking that we are seeing *from* the top (*ver desde arriba*). In our eagerness to hold state power, we begin to *think like a state* (Scott 1998). A long tradition of political theory and practice has accustomed us to adopting this view from above – as if we were already up there – and to attributing almost magical powers to abstract entities like the state. The political imagination thus becomes carried away with grand theories and imperial visions, and we lose any sense of reality.

Many militants committed to transformation base their work on a prior totalizing vision of society, including a description of the Promised Land and the formulation of a revolutionary program that every-one will have to follow. But transformative action does not have to be based on such a vision; on the contrary, we must break radically with the tyranny of globalizing discourses. Society “as a whole” reflects a multiplicity of initiatives and processes, most of them unpredictable (cf. Foucault 1979). As Marx said of the Paris Commune, the workers “have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation . . . they will have to pass through long struggles. . . . They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant” (Marx 1978b: 633f).

The issue for us is not who holds power, nor is it the means – electoral or other – by which any particular person, group, or party got into power. The issue is the very nature of power in the nation-state, as a structure of domination and control.

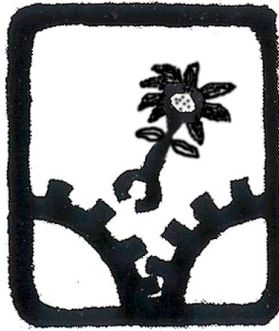
“Let’s not be in love with power,” advises Foucault (1983: xiii). Those who taste power, whether at the summit of the state or in the smallest of posts in some remote town, are made delirious by it. A similar delirium affects those who struggle for it. Because in the end power is a *relation*, not a *thing* that can be distributed, that some have and others lack, that one can conquer and exercise in the name of diverse goals, like any tool. Within the nation-state, Power expresses a relation of domination and control, in which the dominant player can carry out what it wants, from high ideals to petty swindles. He who strives for power acquires the virus of domination and applies it without scruple over his own comrades-in-arms, since every means is justified for the sake of his “noble goals,” and his rivals may stand in the way of attaining them.

Instead of this dead-end street, the left’s defining struggle should be to generate social relations in which there is no room for those associated with such power – new social relations in which power exists only as the autonomous expression of dignity; relations built from below by the common people, not by an enlightened vanguard. The idea is not for social engineers to lead the masses to a paradise they have invented for them. Quite the opposite: it is to place full trust in the creativity of real, ordinary men and women, who are, in the final analysis, the ones who make revolutions and create new worlds.

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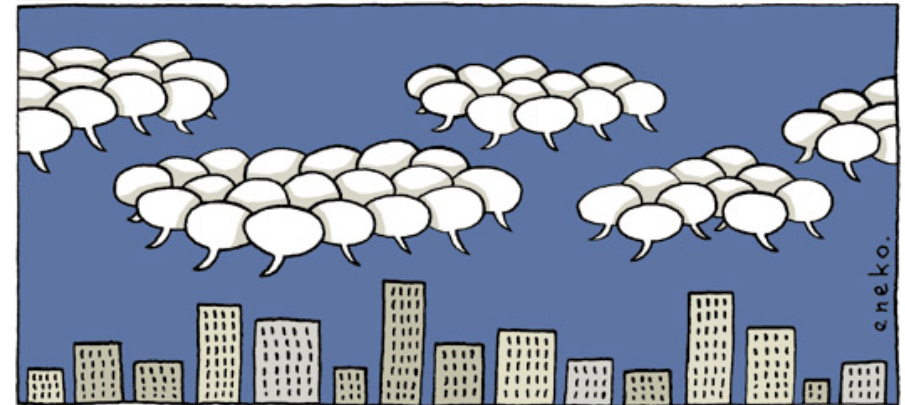
3. In the introduction the 20th anniversary edition of *The Civil War in France*, Friedrich Engels wrote: “Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat” (Marx 1978b: 629). These ideas also inspired the revolutionaries of 1917 who began building workers’ councils, the soviets. In August, writing the third chapter of *The State and Revolution*, Lenin enthusiastically invoked Marx’s analysis of the Commune, including the need to smash the state and create another democracy. The theme was central to the debates of socialist theoreticians in the 1920s, leading up to Pannekoek’s classic work of 1940 on workers’ councils (see Bobbio 1981: 493ff). However, the face of the dictatorship that the world came to know, as a result of change of political course taken by Lenin, was that of Stalinism, not that of the Paris Commune (Lummis 1996: 25–7).
4. Politics and place are in fact deeply interconnected. The focus on place refers to the management of issues common to a shared space. But contemporary political science has few concepts to elucidate this idea. Not to belong to a place, to a community, is a generalized condition of modern mass societies. In the mass, one loses the capacity to mobilize oneself, to act purposefully for political ends. In spite of its seemingly radical sound, the word mass is of ecclesiastical and bourgeois origin: it reduces humans to a condition they share with material things – that of being measured by numbers and volume.
5. The European model of the nation-state, clearly Western and capitalist, changed the meanings of its constitutive terms and acquired universal hegemony (Nandy 1992: 267). A current project of rebuilding society from scratch would have many historical reference-points to ground a new sociological invention adapted to the “era of globalization.”
6. The principle of representation – in a social organization or a party as in a government – inevitably transfers power from the group to the representative, allowing the latter free rein in the exercise of power, even if held to account and subjected to the possibility of recall.

We are at a decisive moment. It is terrible to have to fight, but we should commit ourselves without regret to the militancy which is now needed. In connecting our desires with reality, in interweaving our grievances with our actions, we will for the first time be injecting the theoretical or political forms of representation with real revolutionary force (Foucault 1983: xiii). This is our present task. I would like to think that this is the common theme of our festival.



Notes

1. This text is based on a presentation at the Festival Mundial de la Digna Rabia, convoked by the Zapatista National Liberation Army in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, January 4, 2009. *Digna Rabia* translates roughly as “dignified outrage.” For background, see Esteva (1994). English translation by Victor Wallis.
2. This notion of democracy should be distinguished from the formal notion. It is not the same as the idea of a government “of the people, by the people, for the people.” In Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, in which that phrase originated, the word democracy does not appear. Lincoln was referring to an ensemble of governmental institutions supposed to give power to the *people*; he was not referring to the people that possess it. For Lincoln himself, the Union was not a democracy. “It was to clarify just this distinction that he made his famous figure: government institutions were not the golden apple of liberty but rather the silver frame by which the apple was (hopefully) to be protected” (Lummis 1996: 24). Nor does our notion correspond to so-called “direct democracy.” This expression alludes to a regime that antedated modern democracy. It may have functioned in ancient Athens, but it could not function in any modern state (Mayo 1960: 58). Finally, our notion is not satisfied by practices such as referendum and recall, which are mere appendices of formal democracy (Cronin 1989). It goes beyond all this.



The other democracy

The anticapitalist struggle requires firmly demanding another kind of democracy.

The debate over democracy usually focuses on the *forms* needed for the popular will to be expressed fully and freely through elections and for it to be respected in the exercise of governance. The prevailing assumption is that “democracy is formal or it is not democracy.”

In the real world, the democratic model has normally been elitist, in that it assures the perpetuation in power of self-selected minorities. In a democracy, a small minority decides for the others: it is always a minority of the people and almost always a minority of the voters that decides which party will govern; a still smaller minority promulgates the laws and makes the important decisions. Alternation in power and constitutional checks do not change this fact.

In any case, the cynicism, corruption and disarray into which governments have fallen in democratic societies – not to mention the continuous injection of fear, misery and frustration which they apply to their subjects – make necessary a reconsideration of the dominant institutions, avoiding what seems to be a new “democratic fundamentalism” (*Archipiélago* 1993). The State has turned into a conglomerate of corporations, in which each one promotes its own product and serves its own interests. The combination produces “well-being,” in the form of education, health, jobs, etc. At appropriate moments, the political parties assemble all their stockholders to elect a

board of directors. And these stockholders are now not only the private companies (national or transnational), but also the big professional associations that serve them or the State (like education or health workers), which, in defending their own interests, reinforce the system that gives them status and income while at the same time keeping them under its control (Illich 1978: 207–8).

In the last 20 years, we Mexicans have learned what in other places has required decades and even centuries: *the limits of representative democracy*. We already know what that regime cannot give us. Now we need to examine ways to reconstruct social life that stay clear of the democratic illusion without falling into new forms of despotism or dictatorship. Being in favor of democracy no longer has any precise meaning; it lends itself to a variety of positions. The political classes and the media embrace a notion of democracy which confines it to what goes in the higher reaches of government (*allá arriba*). This notion has never held much attraction for most Mexicans. For those who belong to “the people,” democracy is a matter of common sense: that ordinary people run their own lives. They have in mind not a set of institutions but rather a historic project. They are thinking not of a specific form of government, but rather of the affairs or policies of government, of the thing itself, of the power of the people.² This popular conception has been called “radical democracy.” Although the expression has not been used much in Mexico, it accurately reflects people’s experiences and discussions. Those who call themselves radical democrats convey its content clearly:

Radical democracy means democracy in its essential form, democracy at its root. . . . From the standpoint of radical democracy, the justification of every other kind of regime is something like the illusion of the emperor’s new clothes. Even a people that has lost its political memory . . . may still make the discovery that the real source of power is themselves. . . . Democracy is . . . the root term out of which the entire political vocabulary is ramified. . . . Radical democracy envisions the people gathered in the public space, with neither the great paternal Leviathan nor the great maternal society standing over them, but only the empty sky – the people making the power of Leviathan their own again, free to speak, to choose, to act. (Lummis 1996: 25–7)

As a notion of political theory, radical democracy is at once omnipresent and yet peculiarly absent. One flirts with it while yet

institutional transformation. Among other things, it will thus be possible to change the organization of work to make it more convivial than the industrial mode of production.¹⁰

All this requires that we channel our indignant rage into the peaceful and democratic uprising that we have been forging since the Zapatistas launched *La Otra Campaña*.

Some time ago, I thought that a particular image encapsulated what was happening. The great ship that carries the human race runs into a ferocious storm. In its machine room are all the leaders: politicians, scientists, financiers, intellectuals, activists. They argue so intensely about what decisions to make, that they fail to notice that the ship has started to sink. Above, on deck, where the people do notice, there is also debate. They can’t find the rudder. Those who think that it still exists fight among themselves to take control of it. Others go searching for it. Some, in desperation, dive overboard and are drowning. The rest, in small groups, in communities, build or take over lifeboats and start to navigate. A short time later they realize that they are in the middle of an archipelago and they steer toward its beaches, to make each island into a ship in which they will be able to go and meet others.¹¹

This image no longer works for me. It reflects well what is happening, but not what remains to be done. It’s true that there is no captain and no rudder and that the ship is sinking. It’s true that some, stuck in their individualism, throw themselves into insane adventures which cause them to drown. And it’s true that many groups are creating autonomous worlds, in their own local spaces, where they build social relations beyond capital and in open resistance to the dominant system, and that they are increasingly joining in broad coalitions with others like themselves. But the problem is much bigger. These small-scale initiatives are a clear anticipation of the future society, but they are up against an aggressive and hostile system which harasses them continually and wears them down. As John Berger has suggested, we are living today in a kind of prison. Under these conditions, we cannot hope that the flowering of isolated initiatives will be enough to bring our emancipation and prevent the disaster that is being prepared from above. The oppressive and destructive capacity of the established powers remains enormous.

the recent proposal to spend between 7 and 10 percent of the global gross product (ten times the amount so far put forward) on new bailouts and stimulus packages. Just as they may thus accelerate the liquidation of capitalism, they will at the same time be able to deepen the state terrorism which they have been preparing under various pretexts. Despite their fundamental blindness, the political and economic leaders seem to realize that at the root of the current crisis are ourselves, the undefeated, the insubordinate, the rebels, those who have been resisting neoliberal virulence and, in our autonomous spaces, creating new social relations. For this reason, they increasingly apply repressive mechanisms of control, dismantling freedoms gained in 200 years of struggle for civil rights and building protective barriers in the form of both police lines and physical walls. We could be at the threshold of a crazed form of authoritarianism, worse than the fascisms of the past century, in the kind of regime foreseen by the dystopian imagination of Orwell.

The only way we can stop such a catastrophic development is by effectively channeling the rage and discontent that have been provoked by neoliberalism. The corrupt, unresponsive, and inefficient bureaucracies must be broken up, not to privatize the functions of the state – as the neoliberals would have it – but rather to socialize them: to leave them in the hands of the people, reducing political bodies to a suitable scale. This is what is actually being sought by many popular movements – in Mexico and elsewhere – that are refusing to let their experiences of self-government be watered down into an individualistic and purely statistical kind of democracy, manipulated by parties and the media. They are countering the old watchword of democratic centralism with decentralism; they are convinced that democracy depends on localization, on the local areas where people live. “Democracy doesn’t mean putting power some place other than where people are” (Lummis 1996: 18).

Radical democracy will only be consolidated with a new constitution – not only formal but substantive. The transition is a process of building political spaces in which people can exercise their power, rejecting the dominant political mythology. With a new Constitution formulated by delegates of local powers, it will be possible to develop a juridical process inspired by opposition to professional or state bureaucracy, to carry out the necessary

avoiding it. No one seems ready to engage it in depth. It’s as though it were too radical or illusory: what everyone looks for but no one can find. Given the dominant rhetoric, it is useful to keep in mind that the only explicit manifesto for radical democracy is found in Marx:

In monarchy the whole, the people, is subsumed under one of its particular modes of being, the political constitution. In democracy the *constitution itself* appears as only one determination, that is, the self-determination of the people. In monarchy we have the people of the constitution; in democracy, the constitution of the people. Democracy is the solved *riddle* of all constitutions. Here, not merely *implicitly* and in essence but *existing* in reality, the constitution is constantly brought back to its actual basis, the *actual human being*, the *actual people*, and established as the people’s own work (Marx 1978a: 20; emphasis in original)

Examining the experience of the Paris Commune, in *The Civil War in France*, Marx clearly points out that it is not enough to simply take hold of the state machinery and use it for other ends; it is necessary to demolish this machinery, as the Commune did, and to establish in its place a democracy, understood as the practical alternative to representation: “The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time”; its public servants were to be “elective, responsible, and revocable.” The central government would be left with “few but important functions.” According to Marx, universal suffrage was to be used by the organized people for the constitution of its own communities, not to establish a separate political power. The regime thus established “would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society” (1978b: 632–4).³

Radical democracy contends that the power of the people means their actual exercise of that power and not some role in merely establishing a constitution. It is a matter of living democratically – implementing democracy in daily life, via political bodies through which the people can exercise their power. There are no clear models of this; for a hundred years we stopped thinking, obsessed with ideological dispute. But if we search, we find a variety of urban or rural communities and new reformulations of the nature of the State. Communities appear as an alternative because they restore the unity of politics and place,⁴ and the people acquires a framework in which it

can exercise its power without having to hand it over to the State. It is once again coming to be felt that “the future will in some way be communitarian. Socialism had a communitarian impetus, but it became collectivism, bureaucracy, and self-destruction” (Esteva and Shanin 1992).

The centralized nation-state cannot prescribe democratic process for urban and rural communities. This in no way rules out, however, its serving as the framework of contemporary societies. It is possible to conceive and implement modalities of “state” or “nation” that can coexist with such communities, reserving certain general functions, sharply limited, to political bodies that would operate in an authentically democratic fashion at the national level.⁵ Such a redefinition comes at an opportune historical moment, in that the main function of the nation-state, namely administration of the *national* economy, is rapidly disappearing, as all economies lose their national contours. The effort to shift that function to supranational structures has not had much success, but has instead revived various forms of national-ism along with the impulse to restore economic control to communities and regions. The resulting social and political tension has made it timely to take up the challenge of giving a new form to political bodies.

While consolidating and deepening democracy at the community level, we need to revisit juridical and constitutional processes in order to reshape the country’s political structure, basing it on the power of the people and on a social pact that accepts a fundamental pluralism, that generalizes to all spheres of power the principle of “leading by obeying” (*mandar obedeciendo*), and that reduces to the indispensable minimum – for clearly specified and closely monitored functions – the spaces and

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the economic integration, growth and expansion effect produced by government controls. (1992: 11; emphasis in original. See also Kohr 1986: 147)

In face of the current disorder, the ideological arrogance of the leaders – public and private – of the global capitalist empire prevents them from understanding what is happening and drives them, as a conditioned reflex, to take increasingly drastic measures which only make the situation worse. Knowing that no single country can bring things under control, they hold to the illusion that appropriate steps can be taken by all the great economic powers acting together. But they failed in November 2008 when they met in Washington, and they will fail again. The bigger the measures they might take, the more devastating will be their effects.

Leopold Kohr offered clear evidence that Keynes was right and that for decades, the policies implemented in his name have been aggravating the problems they purported to correct. But they continue to be applied mechanically, as if nothing had happened. The theoretical possibility of starting a new cycle of capitalist expansion lacks political feasibility, because the current structures of power cannot do what is necessary: restore human scale to the political bodies in which decisions are made. They will continue bailing out failed enterprises and precarious banks, instead of allowing a massive destruction of capital which would reestablish opportunities for investment. They will hold back wage increases and invoke Keynesian methods to stimulate employment, instead of raising demand via higher wages and supporting the informal sector so as to facilitate local self-sufficiency. They have neither the ideology nor the political resources to do what is necessary.

If the problem lies with size, rather than with the business cycle, then instead of attempting an increase in government controls until they match the devastating scale of the new type of economic fluctuations, what must be done is to “reduce the size of the body politic which give them their devastating scale, until they become again a match for the limited talent available to the ordinary mortals of which even the most majestic governments are composed” (Kohr 1992: 11).

Instead of this, the political and economic leaders who continue destroying the planet come up with ever more absurd measures, like

battalions of discontents, whose actions – struggling for mere survival or for their own interests or in the name of old ideals – would be the root cause of the current crisis.

The government regulations intended to bring the market under control depend on two conditions for their success: perfect visibility and margin of error.

- The first is a matter of common sense: it is necessary to see clearly what one wants to control. But this has become impossible. As shown by the persistent mystery of the financial instruments created in the last 20 years, there can be no transparency for globalized economic activities that take place outside the field of vision of all governments (singly or in combination) and international agencies. Even with the necessary enforcement machinery, it would be impossible to know where and to what end to apply it.
- The second condition refers to the need to foresee miscalculation and human error, within a margin of security. During the first 25 years of experimentation with government controls, there was still a margin of security because things remained within reasonable proportions. But this margin became increasingly narrow as the economy grew. The smallest error in launching a rocket to Mars can send it into empty space. The current crisis is due in part to miscalculations by both speculators and government. The new financial engineering “makes calculating the margin and the requirements of capital extremely difficult if not impossible” (Soros 2008: 65).

Leopold Kohr, the founder of social morphology and Schumacher’s mentor, argued some time ago that

Recent fluctuations are no longer caused by the *system* but by the *scale* which modern economic activities have assumed. Capitalism no longer figures. Like waves in the ocean, these giant swells are caused by the chain-reacting instability inherent in everything that has grown too large, be it the mass of a heavy atom, a building, a market, or a state. They are no longer *business cycles*, but what may be called scale or *size cycles* which take their amplitude not from any particular economic system but from the size of the body politic through which they pass. Unlike the old-fashioned business cycles, size cycles are therefore not diminished but magnified by

instances of service and coordination, in which the principle of representation will no longer be applied.⁶ If the social movements can effectively apply both juridical procedures and political force, then people’s power will count. Instead of being surrendered through representation, it will progressively reduce the power of the state.

All this, to my mind, is being shaped in the current struggle for autonomy which the Zapatistas have thrust into the national political agenda: “As the indigenous peoples that we are, we insist on governing ourselves, with autonomy, because we wish no longer to be subjected to the will of any national or foreign power. . . . Justice must be administered by the communities themselves, in accordance with their customs and traditions, without the intervention of illegitimate and corrupt governments” (Autonomea 1995: 297). Thus did the communities confront the dual challenge of consolidating themselves in their own spaces while at the same time projecting their political style to the whole society, without imposing it on anyone.⁷

This regime of autonomy does not arise as a counterweight to state power; rather, it renders the latter superfluous. It thus differs from the European autonomist tradition, which frames autonomy within the current structure of the State and envisions it as part of a process of political decentralization.⁸ By contrast, the substantive view of autonomy is radical democracy itself, the power of the people. With it arises the possibility of leaving behind the aphorism of Hegel which since 1820 has framed the debate on democracy: “The people is not capable of governing itself.” The Zapatista communities are striking proof of the opposite.

A different response to the crisis

We need a different perception of the current crisis and a different way of reacting to it. We are at the end of a historical period. But the almost universal consensus on this point breaks down when it comes to characterizing that period.

- Some, turning their backs on reality and finding refuge in their ideology, claim that it was just another economic downturn, soon to be replaced by an expansionary phase.

- Those who blame the crisis on the greed and arrogance of financial speculators think that simply restoring the State's regulatory functions and applying Keynesian remedies will restore capitalist normality.
- Many believe that the neoliberal policies known as the Washington Consensus are finished. Some who hold this view recently organized in San Salvador a funeral for those policies. But for most of those who wrote that obituary, this implied only a slight shift of functions between the market and the state, without substantive changes in orientation.
- Some understand that the position of the United States has changed substantially; Wall Street is no longer the world financial center. But they haven't given up their hegemonic ambitions, and the liquidation of the empire is full of tensions and irrationalities.

The spectacle of today's political leaders and experts, in relation

to the crisis, is that of a chicken with its head cut off. On December 15, 2008, the prominent German economist Klaus Zimmermann denounced the confusion which his colleagues were creating with their predictions and proposals. It seemed to him that they were acting like charlatans, because the models that they use for their analyses and predictions do not include financial crises like the present ones.⁹ They can recognize that the situation is serious, but they can't tell how serious it is, let alone what can be done about it. For example, those who feel vindicated in their view that the State must regulate the economy seem to

Despite their fundamental blindness, the political and economic leaders seem to realize that at the root of the current crisis are ourselves, the undefeated, the insubordinate, the rebels, those who have been resisting neoliberal virulence and, in our autonomous spaces, creating new social relations.

forget the role that it has played in capitalist society and the depth of its current decadence. In the wake of excessive deregulation, one can observe a wave of new regulations. As George Soros has noted, however, "regulations can be even more defective than market mechanisms....The regulators are not just human beings, but also bureaucrats exposed to lobbying and corruption" (Soros 2008: 65). The issue of free trade is typical. All kinds of abuses and outrages have been committed in its name. But the reaction is to shift the pendulum to protectionism, ignoring the fact that it never protects *people*. In the end, one side tells us to trust the market while the other side tells us to put our faith in bureaucrats – who are nothing but agents of capital!

Following the 1929 crisis and under the influence of John Maynard Keynes, all governments and international financial agencies adopted a regime of government controls to stem the increasingly painful and disruptive effects of economic cycles. Instead of solving the problem, however, these policies made it worse. The compensatory measures taken by governments merely restrain and conceal cyclical forces; they do not eliminate them. Although this made possible an unprecedented rate of economic growth, it also produced a new type of phenomenon unknown to economic theory: economic activities reached a magnitude that outran any possibility of human control. Keynes himself may have anticipated this "when he wrote in the 1930s that by 1955 most Treasuries of the world would have adopted his policies, but by then they would be not only obsolete but dangerous. Since policies based on his theories have failed to prevent the more recent recessions, both his foresight and his gloom seem to have been borne out" (Kohr 1992: 10).

The irresponsible greed and arrogance of the last 20 years – the period of so-called neoliberal globalization – has led to an impasse. What precipitated capitalism's current breakdown, strictly speaking, was not so much its structural contradictions as a peculiar kind of suicide, based on a sinister fusion of free-market fundamentalism with the ambitions of big capital. Wallerstein has repeatedly noted that although capitalism is in its final phase, this could prolong itself for decades. The acceleration seems to have been caused by the irresponsible delirium of capital, at the end of the Cold War, combined with the insurrection of the people, all over the world. More than any other thing, aggressive neoliberal arrogance produced everywhere