ON THE FORMS OF RESISTANCE IN LATIN AMERICA: ITS ‘NATIVE’ MOMENT

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

In the last fifteen years Latin America has been the scene of very different kinds of resistance and struggle. Each case is at the same time universal and singular; a condensation both of the major fault-lines of the system of domination and of particular local practices of power and expropriation – and of self-determination and autonomous political organization. Every people involved in struggle has its own means of expression and spaces where its project develops and is articulated. In some cases people burst onto the streets, take over public squares or schools, or block roads. In others they rely on silence, absence, invisibility. Masked faces and uncovered faces, metal weapons and wooden weapons, or just paper weapons – the power of printed images; marches and hunger strikes; the seizure of lands, or staying away from work. The reasons for the protests are as varied as their forms, and as motley and complex as the individuals who come together and dissolve again according to the circumstances and motives of each struggle. In face of such diversity, all have to remain open to change; so different are they that people must be content to agree on essentials; so numerous are they that they are able to surprise each other.

So, after its first disruptive and demobilizing impact, neoliberalism in Latin America has had to face mounting discontent: little by little, real social alternatives have begun to emerge, by combining reconstituted older organizations with a wide range of newly-active individuals, often not formally organized, without party discipline (and even allergic to it), and with new ways of understanding the world, constructing new imaginaries and mobilizing for struggle. Urban and rural collectives, people forced into precarious employment, displaced people, informal workers, nomadic collectives, men and women of every background interlinked in the creation of new codes of subjectivity and new forms of community. Among the unifying forces behind all this are water supplies, the tropical rain forests, destroyed and denuded
forests, lack of access to land, pollution, the FTAA, the IMF, the World Bank, the USA and multinational companies, the Puebla-Panama Plan, militarization, the foreign debt, the denial of self-determination. In reply, autonomy, multiculturalism, land reform, direct democracy, a different relationship with nature, and popular sovereignty are the demands repeated from the tropics to the glaciers.

Revolts often begin in communities firmly rooted in a particular place. In general this is true of indigenous movements, like the Zapatistas, and many peasant movements. The same holds for insurrections in parts of cities, as in Cochabamba. But the problems that generate such revolts are world-wide problems, experienced also by people who are geographically dispersed, and it is this that has led to the setting-up of coordinating committees or networks that extend the boundaries of the communities in struggle and unite them with other similar communities, or other people worried about the same problem, often in very distant places. Thus the Coordinating Committee for the Defence of Water and Life in Cochabamba became a point of convergence for all struggles over water, and led to the building of a world-wide network. The same happened with apparently very particular challenges, such as those special to the Zapatistas, leading to the coming together of such widely different groups as, for example, the natives of Chiapas and European and Korean youth, who identified with the Zapatistas’ aims despite having such different backgrounds; and older Latin American activists too, in spite of the fact that the Zapatistas do not represent the revolutionary subject – the urban wage-worker – who had for so long been considered the only real one.

And out of these experiences, continental, or at least regional, movements have emerged, not identified with a particular territory but with shared feelings, which sustain a great deal of cohesion based on their commitment to certain central ideas, such as the fight against the FTAA, or against free trade agreements in general; opposition to militarization and the repayment of foreign debt; the demand for the abolition of foreign military bases world-wide; the demand for people’s self-determination with regard to their form of government and the use of the products of nature and industry. It is through these experiences that a new concept of emancipation has been discovered and articulated, often in a utopian way, yet also attempting to live the utopia in the process of struggle. The Zapatistas, the fighters for water in Cochabamba, the Ecuadorians’ struggle to control their oil, the landless of Brazil, the Argentine piqueteros organizing the blocking of highways, the mapuches of the Southern cone fighting, as they have done for 500 years, against subordination – all those who demand demilitarization, and so many others, who, at different
scales of organization and with different degrees of visibility, and making different kinds of intervention in the construction of that other world glimpsed on the horizon – all are part of a great liberatory cycle now occurring across Latin America, combining millennial visions with immediate ones and making the region stand up with dignity again.

TRANSFORMING THE TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE

The working-class struggles which developed with Latin America’s industrialization – often obscuring the problems of the countryside, the land, and indigenous, peasant life – have been seriously weakened by the global restructuring of work. Factory-based modes of organization have lost their purchase as factory production has been reconfigured internationally, as plants have been modernized and workforces downsized, and as more and more jobs have become precarious or informal. The focus of organization has gradually been displaced from the factory to where the unemployed live – the ‘margins’, broadly understood. The key organization in people’s lives can no longer – or at least can not only – be one based on their place of work, at a time when the workplace is losing its old salience, shifting the boundaries between public and private, work and leisure, production and reproduction.

This shift of the terrain of struggle towards the sphere of everyday life has reduced the centrality of the factory worker as the subject of struggle and social transformation, and opened up the role of agent of resistance to all its other constituent elements: women, peasants, ‘Indians’ (in its Latin American sense of the descendants of aboriginal inhabitants), students, migrants, other kinds of employees, undocumented workers, etc, each one with its particular experience of oppression, specific views and claims, perceptions of reality, modes of adaptation or rebellion, histories and memories.

Among all of these new modes of struggle the most significant has been that of Latin America’s Indians, its native Americans. In constant interaction with a culture and a way of running the world based on relations of domination, appropriation through dispossession, and the predatory subordination of the environment, they are engaged in one of their modest processes of ‘everyday’ resistance, not always clear or explicit, but this time leading towards the assumption of a leading continent-wide role: a role which also involves a new perspective on the meaning of life and a new conception of social relations. The recent Indian mobilizations of the continent have been distinctive from one another in many important ways, yet they all have issued a similarly profound challenge to the existing order. Their perspective focuses on the ‘civilizational rupture’ involved in capitalism’s irruption into America, and their reinterpretation of history is one in which this irrup-
tion is a mere *incident* in a millennial process. In their view Western history, a history of the emergence of Europe and a history of the rest of the world understood in terms of its linking-up with a civilization constructed in Europe and the USA, is not the history of America’s native people. They, instead, after centuries of despotic rule, which have also been centuries of learning and resistance, are proposing their own version of history: a history of people who came from far away, who carry remote imaginaries, ancestral cultures and understandings of the world much older than that of appropriation and accumulation; a history of people who have lived together as *defeated* people for five hundred years without losing their collective memory, without ceasing to construct utopias, and without ceasing to resist; a history of a people whose deep historical roots enable them to look beyond the present to broad horizons that offer a glimpse, not of the end of history, but of its openness – precisely because they can perceive, and fight for, an end of the history of *capitalism*.

Although many of them have known the urban and industrialized world, have worked in construction or textiles, have migrated to the United States and encountered the problems associated with wage work and proletarian struggles, their deepest identity led these rebellions – the Zapatista one in Chiapas most explicitly – to see themselves as searching for the construction of a new historic epoch, the creation of a new world in place of the current one, which can no longer be patched up. And the route to this reconstruction or re-creation entails the reconstitution of the community – or, better, of communities – within a new, enriched culture, arrived at by recognizing *diversity* as the essential ontological element in social relations. This new culture assumes a society without exclusions, but with many differences; it implies a process of mutual recognition and the creation of new bonds which pay attention to the necessarily ‘horizontal’ nature of a society based on these principles.

Spatially dispersed, and often with scant connections between them, contemporary uprisings bearing the stamp of the last five hundred years show many similarities. In the Amazon forest the native people grouped in the Indian, Black and Popular Resistance Movement (MRINP) say they are struggling against ‘the barbarity of the enslaved society that exploited the African people, sacrificing and separating families and communities, [and against] the atrocious cruelty, that wounded and wounds daily the popular sectors’.¹ In the Lacandona forest in Chiapas, an insurrection of *México profundo*, the Mexico of deep indigenous roots, the Zapatistas declare that a ‘world order that destroys nations and cultures brings us together. Money, the great international criminal, has today a name that reflects the incapacity of power to
create new things. A new world war is suffered today. It is a war against all peoples, all human beings, all culture, all history’.2

Even in Cochabamba, where the people in revolt do not see themselves as indigenous, they too stress the rights of indigenous people, and non-capitalist social relations: ‘The workers of the city and the countryside, the communities and indigenous ayllus, have for decades or centuries practised non-neoliberal ways of managing the common good, forms of assembly power, ways of communal, union and town democracy. These institutions allow the direct and permanent participation of everybody, restrict the concentration of power and are resistant to corruption’.3 But while the deep roots of resistance and ways of community organization are invoked, the protest is directed against the total dispossession to which people have been subjected, and which has now reached unbearable extremes: ‘The neoliberal regime has eliminated the national economy. No natural resource belongs to us; the water, the land, the railways, the oil, the gas are in the hands of foreign businessmen whose sole desire is to make profit from somebody else’s work… there is no work, no money, no investment, no growth.’4

Five hundred years of domination and looting have today reached the point of expropriating the conditions of life itself. The land is now converted into a mere platform for the exploitation of resources; nature is converted into codes that allow organisms to be reconstructed in laboratories, or the knowledge obtained from thousands of years of experimentation to be applied to circuit engineering; plants are reduced to their active principles; minerals to energy to drive machinery which robs the earth of its capacity to give shelter to life; water is turned into a commodity; in order to find work people are forced to migrate; human beings are turned into undocumented people, pariahs in their own country, legally non-existent.

People feel the threat to their culture, their history and their moral integrity much more than the threat to their jobs or their wages. Their ability to reproduce themselves independently declines, and they are excluded from all decisions about the future of their region, or anything else that matters to them. Neoliberalism has pushed the long process of dispossession to extremes, verging on the complete negation of what it is to be a human being. In face of this shift in the limits of the possible, all the victims of the system emerge to fight for their very existence, which today, more obviously than ever, means overcoming capitalism. At this point, two elements make the challenge a rebellion, rather than a mass suicide: the dignity of a people who prefer to die for reasons of their own choosing, and the hope of a people whose collective memory evokes the historic possibility of a different future.
HORIZONS AND UTOPIAS

Broad horizons, utopias and dreams are by their nature unattainable, precisely because they are always changing. But images of the future are what make it possible to construct the present. Utopias do become real; dreams are dreamed and eventually lived. They are not absurd, as neoliberal pragmatism would like them to be, but plans for building the future in the here and now. That is why they do not de-mobilize but on the contrary, offer a path to follow and a sense of life that allow people to deal with the squalor of their daily lives by creating an alternative culture – and a way of acting and understanding – that underpins different forms of resistance, organization and struggle. They combine the memories or imaginaries of the history of other times and other worlds with ideal representations of desires and longings.

With the homeland as a basic reference, and with an intersubjective relationship with land and nature, the utopias and dreams of Latin American people extend the history of capitalism both forwards and backwards. As John Berger has written:

These two movements, towards the past and the future, are not as contrary as they might first appear because basically the peasant has a cyclical view of time. The two movements are different ways of going round a circle. He accepts the sequence of centuries without making that sequence absolute. Those who have a unilinear view of time cannot come to terms with the idea of cyclic time: it creates a moral vertigo since all their morality is based on cause and effect. Those who have a cyclic view of time are easily able to accept the convention of historic time, which is simply the trace of the turning wheel.5

The utopias constructed by half-breed, mestizas, baroque cultures (by virtue of which they are also non-linear) are not utopias of abundance but of finitude, and respect. What moves people in such cultures is clearly related to the impossibility of surviving in a world which tries to deny them both the essential conditions of subsistence, and any chance of being able to create such conditions for themselves. Their conviction, however, comes from something positive – a utopia that allows them to glimpse a society in which it is possible for human beings to work and realize their capacity to construct their own lives. To quote Berger again:
bourgeois and marxist ideals of equality presume a world of plenty; they demand equal rights for all before a cornucopia... to be constructed by science and the advancement of knowledge…. The peasant ideal of equality recognizes a world of scarcity, and its promise is for mutual fraternal aid in struggling against this scarcity and a just sharing of what the work produces. Closely connected with the peasant's recognition, as a survivor, of scarcity is his recognition of man’s relative ignorance. He may admire knowledge and the fruits of knowledge but he never supposes that the advance of knowledge reduces the extent of the unknown. This non-antagonistic relation between the unknown and the known explains why some of his knowledge is accommodated in what, from the outside, is defined as superstition or magic. Nothing in his experience encourages him to believe in final causes, precisely because his experience is so wide.⁶

I am well aware of the danger of ascribing to utopias a mobilizing potential which is not always realized in reality, at least not explicitly or obviously. Many contemporary revolts are due to some particular defeat, a particular situation which people rightly see as an outrage to both custom and law, to the moral economy (as in the case of water distribution in Cochabamba); or they are seen as resulting from a diverse set of problems that find their explanation in an abstract structure of relationships, such as neoliberalism, which is provoking similar reactions in other places, unconnected to their own.

But while it is not always consciously invoked, the utopia is as present in the re-conquest, or at least the reconsideration, of the moral economy, as it is in the fight against neoliberalism. Both involve memories and dreams, both implicitly contain the idea of a different world. Sometimes only a slight possibility of it is glimpsed, a diffuse horizon, but one which still, as Eduardo Galeano would say, guides us on the way. It is impossible to imagine a fighter without hope, much less an organized people with no concept of an intention to change its current circumstances. But decoding utopias is a task which not all movements explicitly undertake, and this is true of those which arise from particular defeats, such as the privatization of health services, or of water or other resources.

Throughout history there are numerous examples of revolts which have not paid much attention to making clear their image of the desired future, or which have done so only in a very summary or tangential manner. In some cases this has to do with values common to the group which are expressed in a way, or in a language, not easily grasped by people who are foreign to
it; in others, it is something not even explicit in the group’s own culture, but nonetheless inherent in the participants in the revolt. As Edward Thompson says, in order to understand these movements

it is not enough to merely describe the popular symbolic protests (burning of effigies, putting on ilex sheets, hanging boots): it is also necessary to recover the meaning of these symbols with regard to a broader symbolic universe, and thus find their strength, both as an affront to the hegemony of the powerful and as an expression of the multitude’s expectations.\(^7\)

It is also necessary to work out the different perceptions of the problem, and their distinct tempos, that co-exist within any revolt, if one is to understand its meaning. It is clearly a matter of a complex meaning, which synthesizes an enormous number of determinations and is built up from numerous significations that converge at a critical point, where they acquire both expression and a broad significance. The meanings of a revolt are never trivial; they cannot be grasped by attending only to those demands that are openly articulated. It is essential to disclose a revolt’s concealed codes, the messages from the depth of the history, the culture, the values and shared utopias of those involved. We cannot wait for the patience of a historical craftsman to do this – we need to begin to do this now, albeit without haste or vanity.

THE NEW SYMPTOMATOLOGY OF RESISTANCE

The neoliberal stage of capitalism involves profound transformations of pre-existing technological, organizational, political and conceptual paradigms. The scenery of class struggle has changed, socially, politically and geographically. Among the most important changes, on account of their recurrence in most of the contemporary movements of revolt, we may mention the following:

1. Revolts are led by heterogeneous subjects

New actors appear, making up what could be described as a ‘blurred’ class in search of new features, with perceptions of reality coming from diverse experiences of domination that are much more complex than those growing out of the labour relation alone, much more difficult to identify and recognize. It becomes difficult to think in terms of a single polarity, or a privileged dimension of conflict. As the Cochabamba rebels declared: ‘The workers’ trade-union movement is no longer the main context of discussion. It is the new world of work that has created new models and structures of organiza-
tion and public interpellation in streets, the road blockages, in assemblies and meetings to entwine their solidarities…’. The ethnic contradiction that coexists with relations of slavery or wage-earning, and which has served as a rationalization for the greatest cruelty and plunder, is by no means secondary to the capital-labour relation; nor is gender domination. Today a convergence seems to be occurring between all these dimensions, producing a complex, multidimensional kind of resistance, not disjointed or hierarchical as in earlier periods, but with strong indications of contact and mutual recognition between the parts, indicating a *reshaping of class* through the experience of struggle in accordance with the unforgettable Zapatista slogan – ‘behind us we are you’: ‘the same forgotten men and women. The same excluded. The same un-tolerated. The same persecuted. We are the same you’. 2

It is difficult to know if this is a class in the process of reconstitution, and in any case we need to reflect seriously on the character or the content of ‘class’ and ‘classes’, and the pertinence of maintaining that conceptualization. Many movements themselves speak of ‘civil society’, in order to differentiate themselves from the politicians and businessmen in the power structure, and to highlight their diversity and their collective detachment, their attitude of resistance, to all corridors of power, whether those of the parties, or even of working class organizations. Other movements refer to ‘working people’, pointing to the variety of the sectors which make up the working people, the signs of a collective identity and their distance from the circles of power. In all cases there seems to be a certainty that the insurgent subject today does not correspond to the narrow and clearly defined framework of what used to be thought of as a ‘class’, among other reasons because these new individuals come, to a large extent, from the countryside, or from the sectors which Armando Bartra called ‘orilleros’ (semi-urban marginals), and which the dominant tendency within Marxism used to see as obstacles to progress, or even as counter-revolutionary. 3

2. **Radical questioning of the political system, and a search for new means and spaces of political expression**

Revolts are themselves an indication of the inadequacy or irrelevance of the system of political representation, and are largely due to the inability of the system to construct a social contract that includes, however contradictorily, all sectors of the population. In most cases there is an outright rejection of the institutions and mechanisms of politics, and the very conception of politics and the political as a separate sphere of social life. For the insurgent Zapatistas, for example, the construction of a new world was seen as a deep cultural transformation in which politics becomes a means to generate a con-
sensus, not a weapon of domination. For them, it is in the process of making contact, meeting and holding dialogues with others that real transformation of society occurs; a new way of doing politics, without mediations, without delegations, without secret agreements, without haste – constructing a solid base of collective agreement that does not exclude minorities, but could be worked out with everyone’s assistance.

3. Rejection of vanguards and the construction of horizontal relationships

This too was a utopia, but involved a very relevant questioning of all political institutions in which parties or representatives seen as ‘popular’ or ‘leftist’ often participate. It meant trying to work out a new role for the organizations of the rebellious left, and a shift of focus towards ‘civil society’ or ‘the people’. Dialogue with the state continues, but changes its character. Decisions are taken in the course of deliberation, implying that decision-making should be collective. Advocating direct democracy, unity in diversity, recognition of and respect for differences, implies deliberative practices in which ‘all are equal because all are different’ (in the words of the EZLN). The Zapatistas thereby advanced the argument that the only way of not reproducing relationships based on power is ensuring that no one is more important than anyone else, that relations between equals can only be horizontal.

4. The construction of a different society implies a complete revolution of culture and of the conception of the world

The protagonists of the insurgent movements are perceived much more as excluded than as exploited – excluded and dispensable, excluded and useless. The present system has nothing to offer to the vast majority of the world’s population; market forces have made some of them redundant, while others are paid paltry wages. In either case, they are seen as victims of economic genocide, gradual but inevitable. The existing system offers no way to reverse the levels of poverty now reached on the planet, its progress and development plans are premised on poverty and robbery, a disaster only sustained by the seizure of political control and its counterpart, militarization. Exclusion and material appropriation depend on the exclusion and expropriation of people and their culture; on expropriating also their history and their utopias; on the fatalism of ‘the end of history’. Society is seen as going through an extreme situation in which life itself is at risk.

The restoration of collective self-determination, then, involves a recuperation of history, memory and imagination. Culture, costumes, accumulated knowledge, hope and the capacity to imagine different worlds are the seeds of a project of emancipation with manifold faces, with scant concrete re-
sources, but always with the same certainty: the world must be recreated, and to do this it is necessary to make use of age-old knowledge, human generosity, patience, respect and imagination. And in the process all colours, all experiences, all cultures must be present. The horizon is the creation of a world in which all the worlds, all the struggles and all the utopias have a place.

This process is taking shape every day in different places. Sometimes, as in Cochabamba, defending water, the struggle is for life; new relations are created, new ways of understanding and moulding the world of our hopes, with the help of all and sundry. Sometimes it is marches, actions and campaigns against neoliberalism in Latin American cities that are building, step by step, new relations and new frontiers. Sometimes, in the heart of a forest once forgotten, but today competed for, in the fight for autonomy a great leap forward occurs.

NOTES

2  Zapatist National Liberation Army (EZLN), Documents and Reports, Mexico: ERA, 1995, p. 440.
3  Coordinating Committee for the Defence of Water and Life (CDAV), Declaración de la Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida, 2000.
4  Ibid.
5  John Berger, Pig Earth, New York: Pantheon, 1979, p. 201.
8  CDAV, Declaración.