What Does it Mean to Live? Notes from the Zapatistas' First International Gathering for Women in Struggle

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By the Kilombo Women's Delegation**

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Far from mainstream media coverage but at the heart of the autonomous organization of women's struggle on the continent, the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle was held in Zapatista territory, Chiapas, Mexico, from March 8-10, 2018. Convoked by the women of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) and in what turned out to be an event of unexpected and unprecedented size, between 5,000 and 8,000 women, including trans people, from more than 50 countries

traveled to the Zapatista *caracol* [center of autonomous government] of Morelia, joining some 2,000 Zapatista women for three days of events. For the first time ever at a Zapatista gathering, only women were permitted inside the *caracol* while accompanying men (and boys over 12 years of age) camped in the parking lot until the formal closure of the event on the third day.

The gathering celebrated International Women's Day (March 8) and marked a context of accelerating violence against women, which has intensified in Mexico alongside the "War on Drugs." Victims of that "war" continue to mount: by 2015 the official count (likely severely under-estimated) had reached 200,000 dead and over 30,000 disappeared, to which we must add some 1.65 million internally displaced, and 2017 went down as the most violent year since the drug war began. Mexico moved into the top 10 countries worldwide for firearm murders categorized as femicides, with rates in some states at 15 times the global average.As with other violent crimes in Mexico, impunity for femicide hovers above 95% and many crimes against women are passed off as domestic issues or women's own fault.[i]It is in this context that the Zapatista women proposed that the first agreement to be made at the gathering should be "to continue to live and to struggle."[ii]

The scope of the organizing effort required for such a gathering is difficult to capture: infrastructure for lodging, bathrooms, showers, food, and transport for thousands of women in the mountainous countryside; security provided by the presence of hundreds of unarmed but impeccably organized *milicianas*[Zapatista women civilian reserves]; the organization of Zapatista health teams, doctors, and an ambulance on standby for emergencies; the unfailing and attentive presence of a delegation of Zapatista women in each of the hundreds of workshops and activities offered by their guests; and dozens of "*Tercios Compas*," the Zapatista media teams—again, all women—running a sophisticated technology platform across multiple stages and dozens of simultaneous events. In addition to this organizational feat, the Zapatista women provided a theoretical framework for women's struggle that is striking in its historical and analytical depth and, it is important to note, not necessarily shared by many of the non-Zapatista women present. But the Zapatistas were clear about their purpose: this was not a gathering for women in general, but for *women in struggle*. As they said during the opening events, "We didn't hold this event so rich women could come boss us around." The lessons demonstrated by the Zapatista women throughout the event are too profound and numerous to summarize, but as women delegated by Kilombo to attend the event on behalf of our larger community, we want to summarize a few things that we learned and that we think could be helpful to women's struggle across the world.

Women's Freedom: Self-expression or Collective Self-organization

As the mountains around Morelia began to echo with women's voices, music, and the sounds of basketball and soccer games, there was a tangible excitement to being part of such an enormous crowd with such a diverse range of activities coordinated across the *caracol*. Within this diversity, what immediately struck our delegation was that many of the workshops proposed and led by non-Zapatista attendees were focused on struggle understood as challenging the limitations imposed on self-expression and the individual female body. These workshops involved, on one hand, a wide variety of ways of using movement, voie, and art in order to heal, honor, or express oneself, and on the other, topics that address (what presenters imagine to be) the realities of the female body including reproductive rights and experiences as well as corporal self-knowledge and self-care.[iii]While many of these themes certainly must have a central place in any women's struggle, we were concerned by the fact that the sheer number of presentations in this vein came at the expense of struggle understood as a question of structural social transformation. That is, self-expression seemed to come at the expense of questions of collective self-organization, "biological reality" at the expense of political strategy. Please note that we are not saying that these are mutually exclusive emphases; on the contrary, exactly what we want to point out is that it seemed that in the presentations of many attendees, self-expression and the body appeared entirely divorced from the questions of

collective self-organization and structural transformation.

We think the risk in focusing on forms of individual expression is that they can easily remain within the realm of a cathartic and ephemeral release, and that this can stand in for the long, arduous process of building alternatives to a capitalist system that has proven itself adept at accommodating and even manufacturing these forms of release. Think here of the explosion of the self-care industry, yoga, new-age spirituality, and other appropriations of Eastern meditative practices that place a focus on the body and spirit and that in the context of contemporary capitalism only help recuperate us for another day of work. In other words, in this context, practices that might prepare us for struggle and liberation are easily assimilated, increasing our productivity and making us more enthusiastic and flexible participants in our own exploitation. The same could be said for forms of protest that allow for a release of collective energy but leave us little or nothing the day after, except perhaps a new aesthetic of rebellion.

Secondly, we think the risk inherent in the focus on corporal self-knowledge and self-care is that it can delink the necessary understanding and defense of our bodies from the structures that impose corporal controls on us in the first place and mask the reasons why the struggle over "the body" is so central to a project of emancipation to begin with. Here it is helpful to remember that capitalism has made control over women's bodies compulsory in order to reproduce itself on whatever terms necessary for the system at a given time, whether that is obligatory procreation, forced sterilization, coerced reproduction to produce workers, postponed reproduction in order to work, or generalized sexual objectification. But reclaiming our bodies in this context is not about gaining control over our individual bodies—that particular understanding has only led us into a reality where some women in some places have been able to gain substantial control over their bodies and reproductive choices, while other women's bodies are ravaged by poverty, police repression, overwork, and the vulnerability to violence that accompanies a life lacking in resources. This includes those who have had to give up control over their own reproductive life and domestic sphere in order to perform waged labor in someone else's.

Therefore, while we do not discount the importance of the forms of corporal expression mentioned above, we do think that it is important to recognize that given the total social fragmentation brought by capitalist relations and values, there is very little hope for redemption of the individual body without the construction of a collective body willing to fight for its freedom. Without this protracted process of collective organization, we remain embattled on the terrain of the individual as produced by the system, rather than moving the struggle to a collective terrain where we can begin to create new people with desires and needs far richer than those available to individuals in the current system.

Freedom According to the Zapatistas: From Subjugation to Self-government

It was exactly this creation of new individuals through the process of collective organization that was highlighted in each speech, song, theater piece, and work of art presented by Zapatista women from each of the five zones of Zapatista territory. They began by theorizing the triple oppression they experience under the capitalist system for being poor, being indigenous, and being women, giving a multi-generational account of the indigenous history of colonization, slavery, violence, rape, forced labor, forced marriage, military harassment, and many other forms of violence and repression. It was this context that framed their emphasis on a particular point, articulated most explicitly by *Insurgenta* Erika who was charged with speaking on behalf of all the Zapatista women at the opening ceremony: "The struggle for our freedom as Zapatista women is ours. It's not the job of men or the system to give us our freedom. On the contrary, the work of the patriarchal capitalist system is to keep us in submission. If we want to be free, we have to conquer our freedom ourselves, as women."[iv]With this statement the Zapatistas are not claiming, as we will discuss below, that patriarchy is a concern only for women. Rather, what they are highlighting here is their conviction that nothing other than the actions of the oppressed themselves have ever or will ever move us toward liberation. Building on this point, each of the presentations that followed then laid out their struggle as the EZLN, and as women of the EZLN, to organize themselves and to build a series of autonomous institutions on recuperated lands that would allow them to take collective control over their lives. Here we want to take a step back to look at the creation of that collective, politicized terrain through the history of women's struggle in the EZLN.

In 1993, on the eve of the Zapatista uprising when the Women's Revolutionary Law was made public in the EZLN's first publication, *El Despertador Mexicano*,[v]it had already been passed and adopted by consensus across the EZLN ranks and by all their community assemblies. The law outlined women's rights to participate in struggle and hold positions of authority, to choose their partners and control their own reproductive health, to access healthcare and education, and to hold the same rights and responsibilities as men under revolutionary law.[vi]This framework for women's rights and role in struggle throughout Zapatista territory reflected the immense organizational work already undertaken by women to create, educate about, and decide upon such a radical shift across a broad social base.

A mere 10 years later, in 2003, the EZLN announced the creation of five *caracoles*to be the political homes for the newly formed *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* [Good Government Councils] that would provide a third, zone-wide level of self-government for the Zapatista communities and autonomous municipalities. At this time, despite lacking full integration of women into these self-governing bodies,[vii]it became clear that the EZLN had already achieved an internal revolution of its own: the construction and institution of a community-based, self-governing civilian authority over the rebel army and throughout Zapatista territory, a victory not of women over men in the limited framework of gender, but of the values of

community self-organization and collective self-government over the traditionally masculinist forms of dominance by force and military hierarchy.

Ten years later again, in 2013, the EZLN held the legendary Zapatista Little School in which over 7,000 students from all over the world attended a course given by the EZLN communities themselves under the title "Freedom According to the Zapatistas."[viii]One of the four Zapatista textbooks published as part of the course, *Women's Participation in Autonomous Government*, documented through the Zapatista women's own accounts their widespread and advanced participation at all three levels of self-government and in the autonomous education and health systems, economic independence built through women's cooperatives, transformation of the family and social spheres to allow for these shifts in women's role; and the transformative growth of each of these community institutions to make good health, literacy, political experience, and organizational leadership standard aspects of women's daily lives.

And then, just five years later and exactly a quarter century after the publication of the Women's Revolutionary Law, the Zapatista women coordinated across all five zones of Zapatista territory to hold this historic International Gathering for Women in Struggle, demonstrating not just that unparalleled Zapatista power of convocation, but a profound analytical and organizational capacity across the social base (and military ranks) of women in the movement. This is something, they explained, that no one else could grant them nor take away from them, "not god, not man, not a political party, not a savior, not a leader, not a woman leader nor a female boss."[ix]

In effect, Zapatista women went from practical slavery under the control of colonial and domestic masters and into the rule of their own Women's Revolutionary Law and positions within the highest bodies of collective autonomous authority in a matter of decades. It is clear from this history that Zapatista women's struggle (including the ban on drugs and alcohol in Zapatista territory) has brought about extraordinary, although of course uneven, advances in the protection of women from physical abuse, rape, and other forms of violence. But we think that the Zapatista women have also made clear that these advances were made possible not through avenues of individual expression and protection, but through the struggle to transform their concrete material conditions—in land use, food production, health, education, and conflict resolution—a transformation both generated by and generative of an understanding of self-organization and self-government so deeply socialized across the community base and collective consciousness that it gives rise to unique and constantly evolving forms of practice. Thus, the integrity and strength of any one Zapatista woman reflects the collective organization of all Zapatista women to struggle against the social order of capitalism that structures violence, inequality, and indignity into every

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If on one hand the Zapatista women insisted that women’s freedom is women’s job to conquer collectively, they also repeatedly emphasized, in presentations by women from each zone, that their struggle was not against men but against the system. *Insurgenta* Erika, again speaking for the intergenerational collective of Zapatista women, elaborated, “You should know that it wasn’t always men who exploited me, robbed me, humiliated me, beat me, scorned me, and murdered me. Often it was women. And it still is.”[x]In this sense, while the Zapatista women critique and counter sexist and patriarchal practices at every level of their resistance, their thought and actions help us to see the limitations of those forms of feminism where the imaginary of struggle does not go beyond the displacement of men and the desire to take their place. In other words, they don’t confuse overturning their own oppression with upward mobility within the given relations of domination.

We think that in the Zapatista framework there is an understanding of patriarchy not as a women’s issue or a men’s issue, or even primarily as a gender issue, but rather as a systemic form of domination and inequality that structures all social relations and licenses the domination of men over women, but also of men over other men and women over other women. Here we think it is important to note the parallels between the way that the Zapatista women understand women’s struggle and the struggle of Kurdish women within the Kurdish freedom movement.[xi]In these frameworks, we can see that excising systemic

problems as women's issues is merely a marginalization of the issues that marginalize women. The fact that patriarchy teaches men that their self-worth is tied up in their ability to exercise (and inevitably experience) domination certainly damages women but also debilitates men and society as a whole, corroding from the outset one's external ability to create relationships of non-domination and one's internal ability to participate in a project of thinking and organizing with others. The politics of collective self-organization we are discussing here is so challenging to many men (but not only men) that they can perceive it as self-destruction rather than a social reorganization that could force all of us out of the roles of dominating or being dominated imposed by the capitalist system. We desperately need a politics that destroys these roles rather than rearranging them. Here we see how Zapatista women's struggle can simultaneously articulate the triple oppression they suffer under patriarchal capitalism—as poor, as indigenous, and as women—and at the same time recognize that freedom from such oppression is not specific to women.

Which body?

At the end of the encounter, the Zapatista women put forward three proposals.[xii]First, they proposed that as women we continue to live and to struggle; this was met with enthusiastic applause and agreement. They then proposed that, due to the fact that not all the women present were in agreement that women's struggle is against the capitalist system, each woman return home to her collective to study, analyze, discuss, and determine whether it is in fact this system that is responsible for women's oppression. This proposal received more solemn applause. Finally, the Zapatista women proposed another women's gathering to be held next year (enthusiastic applause), adding that this gathering should take place not just in Zapatista territory (considerably less applause), but in each place from which the women present came. This third proposal was not just a suggestion to multiply the event, but one tightly woven into the second: the necessity for organized collective bodies that can discuss and determine the cause and form of our subjugation and thus the path and strategy of our struggle. The Zapatista women had just walked us through their own process of doing this, something that for them included an aspect of technical illiteracy—of need to learn to read and write and to speak Spanish in order to participate in a collective struggle across multiple languages. What they are proposing to others is perhaps the much bigger challenge of overcoming a kind of social illiteracy—of needing to learn to think, analyze, discuss, and decide together over our lives.

It seems to us, and the Zapatistas themselves have pointed out,[xiii]that it is only through this possibility of building a collective—and building a collective analysis—that one can gain a sense of self and therefore orientation on a path of struggle. But in the current system we are offered only weak substitutes for that sense of self. We have been sold many forms of "freeing" ourselves from oppressive conditions that necessarily pass through the process of becoming *somebody*—of achieving recognition or a place in the limelight. These are enticing

forms precisely because so many women and others have been silenced in or erased from our collective consciousness and memory. But those places and lights are not only increasingly fleeting but largely circumscribed and proscribed by and for the system itself. Neoliberal capitalism offers no shortage of opportunities for individual recognition and self-promotion disguised as freedom, and in our current context the result is an abundance of "movement leaders" with social media presence but no community base and performative acts of "opposition" without practical consequence, both of which can be attention-grabbing in the immediate but lack the serious, sometimes tedious, ongoing and unrecognized processes of collective organization and personal sacrifice that by necessity constitute struggle. We think the Zapatistas are showing us a process of becoming, all together, *nobody*, of creating a largely invisible and mostly anonymous social power from below with a far more profound response to exploitation, dispossession, repression, and humiliation than the symbolic and select somebodies permitted by capitalist structures. In the EZLN's words, "when the powerful refer to others, they disdainfully call them 'nobody.' But 'nobody' makes up the majority of the planet."[xiv]

We must of course protect and respect the individual bodies—women's and men's—that are violated in so many different ways through the absurd horrors of the capitalist system. But in that effort the only body that can free us is the social body, constituted by those anonymous acts of collective self-organization capable of birthing a new way of life. Women's struggle, then, is not a fight for recognition, access, or inclusion in existing structures; it's an insistence on fighting for a world where neither social relations nor material production are based in the false hierarchies and decaying institutions of the capitalist system. In that sense, as the Zapatista tale goes, "in the world to be made, in contrast to the current one and those that came before and whose creation is attributed to

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On that day that will be night

As dusk set in on the first day's events, we noticed Zapatista women moving in organized lines through various parts of the *caracol*, though in the falling darkness it was hard to make out their ultimate formation. At the end of the evening, they called for a moment of silence for Eloísa Vega Castro, a member of the Baja California support team for the Indigenous Governing Council who was killed in a car accident while accompanying the Council and its spokeswoman, María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, on a tour of that state on February 14, 2018. Across the chilly, starlit mountain valley, the lights went out and two thousand candles went up, held by all of the Zapatista women who had formed, as of almost two hours before, a great ring around the central plaza of the *caracol*. What clearer expression could there be of solidarity in struggle than thousands of organized Zapatista women encircling with all of their discipline, tenderness, and tenacity the thousands more women they had invited to their territory and raising all those tiny flames in memory of another. At the close of the gathering, they offered another message for that moment, in the voice of Zapatista *compañera* Alejandra, worth citing at length:

"On March 8, at the end of our contribution, each of us lit a small flame. […] That small light is for you. Take it, sister, *compañera*.

When you feel alone.

When you are afraid.

When you feel that the struggle is very hard; when life itself is very hard.

Light it anew in your heart, in your thoughts, in your gut.

And don’t just keep it to yourself, *compañera*, sister.

Take it to disappeared women.

Take it to murdered women.

Take it to incarcerated women.

Take it to women who have been raped.

Take it to women who have been beaten.

Take it to women who have been assaulted.

Take it to women who have been subjected to all kinds of violence.

Take it to migrant women.

Take it to exploited women.

Take it to deceased women.

Take it and tell each and every one of them that she is not alone and that you are going to struggle for her; that you are going to struggle for the truth and justice that her pain deserves; that you are going to struggle so that the pain she carries will not be repeated in another woman from any world.

Take it and turn it into rage, courage, and determination.

Take it and unite it with other lights.

Take it and, perhaps, you will come to think that there can be neither justice, truth, nor freedom in the patriarchal capitalist system.

Then, perhaps, we can meet again to set fire to the system.

And perhaps you will be beside us ensuring that no one puts out that fire until only ashes are left.

And then, sister and compañera, on that day that will be night, perhaps we will be able to say together with you:

'All right, yes, now we are really going to begin building the world we need and deserve.'"[xvi]

[i]For the data cited here as well as additional statistics, see David Agren, "Mexico maelstrom: how the drug violence got so bad," *The Guardian*, December 26, 2017; Arturo Conde, "In Mexico, Grieving Parents Call for End to Drug Wars, Legalization," *NBC News*, April 26, 2016; *BBC Monitoring*, "Mexico's war on drugs: Arrests fail to drive down violence," January 25, 2018; *Agence France-Presse*, "Officials: 2017 was Mexico's most violent year in two decades," December 23, 2017; David James Cantor, "The New Wave: Forced Displacement Caused by Organized Crime in Central American and Mexico," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 34–68;The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development: "Global Burden of Armed Violence 2015: Every Body Counts," May 8, 2015; reports from the Mexican Statistical Institute [INEGI] as reported in *Telesur*, "State of Mexico Issues Emergency Alert Over Gender Violence," July 9, 2015; and information from Mexico's National Women's Institute and the UN Women Agency as reported by *The Guardian*, "Mexico: murders of women rise sharply as drug war intensifies," December 14, 2017.

[ii]EZLN. March 8, 2018. "Zapatista Women's Opening Address at the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle."

[iii]For the preliminary list of the workshops proposed by attendees, see this report from the support teamfor the organization of the gathering.

[iv]EZLN. March 8, 2018. "Zapatista Women's Opening Address at the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle."

[v]For digitized content of the initial *El Despertador Mexicano*, see the EZLN archive.

[vi]EZLN. Women's Revolutionary Law.

[vii]EZLN. August 21, 2004, "Leer un video Segunda parte: Dos fallas"

[viii]For information on the Zapatista Little School, see the EZLN's text from March 2013, "Dates and other Details for the Little Zapatista School."

[ix]EZLN. March 8, 2018. "Zapatista Women's Opening Address at the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle."

[x]EZLN. March 8, 2018. "Zapatista Women's Opening Address at the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle."

[xi]Here we recommend, for example: Abdullah Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan: Kurdistan, Woman's Revolution and Democratic Confederalism*. Pluto Press 2017; and Brecht Nevenand Marlene Schäfers, "Jineology: from women's struggles to social liberation." ROAR Magazine, November 25, 2017.

[xii]EZLN. March 10, 2018. "Words of the Zapatista women at the closing ceremony of the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle in the Zapatista Caracol of the Tzotz Choj Zone."

[xiii]El Kilombo. 2009. *Beyond Resistance, Everything: An Interview with Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos.*

[xiv]EZLN. March 1, 2003. "Otra Geografia."

[xv]EZLN. March 1, 2003. "Otra Geografia."

[xvi]EZLN. March 10, 2018. "Words of the Zapatista women at the closing ceremony of the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle in the Zapatista Caracol of the Tzotz Choj Zone," (*emphasis ours*).

**The Kilombo Women's Delegation attended the Women's Gathering in representation of El Kilombo, a community political project in North Carolina dedicated to building counter-institutions to meet our needs for material survival, study and analysis, and a healthy and vibrant community life. You can contact them at elkilombo@riseup.net.

Mexico's Indigenous Governing Council: Actually Existing Anti-Capitalism for the 21st Century

Publicado en español en Rebelión.
The Workshop's own Mara Kaufman describes the significance of the actually existing anti-capitalist movement in Mexico today, represented by the Indigenous Governing Council and its spokeswoman, Marichuy. [Originally published in English on Counterpunch and in

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In the midst of the multiple hurricanes battering North America and the Caribbean, the fires burning in the US west, two major earthquakes in September, and a flurry of neglect and opportunism around emergency disaster aid and rescue, a rather different storm gathers in Mexico. The anti-capitalist Indigenous Governing Council and its spokeswoman, María de Jesús Patricio Martínez (Marichuy), a Nahuatl woman who will run as an independent candidate in the 2018 Mexican presidential elections, have just begun a national tour of Mexico, starting in the southernmost state of Chiapas in what has become a bastion of self-government and an inspiration for the world—Zapatista territory.

The Indigenous Governing Council (CIG) is an initiative of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN), created through a referendum approved by 523 communities in 25 different Mexican states and proposing to collectively govern the country according to the CNI/EZLN's seven principles of "Rule by Obeying."* The CIG represents 42 indigenous peoples and 39 indigenous language groups—the majority of originary peoples in the country—and proposes to organize the (self)government, healthcare, education, and defense of indigenous and non-indigenous communities across Mexico. The CIG tour and its presidential campaign, as stated repeatedly by the CNI, does not aim to win votes but to harness the electoral limelight to denounce Mexico's entire political class and the capitalist system which it holds responsible for the devastating violence, crumbling institutions, environmental destruction, and thriving organized crime that now dominate Mexico. According to CNI delegate Mario Luna of the Yaqui Tribe of Sonora, this campaign intends to enter the realm of elections—what has otherwise become "an internal negotiation among political parties"—with the explicit aim of promoting the expansion of assembly-based community self-organization across the country. The choice the CNI wants to provide the Mexican people, then, is not among candidates, but among

entirely different forms of government.

From October 14-19 of this year, a caravan of dozens of vehicles carrying Marichuy, 156 CIG council members, and several hundred more delegates of Mexico's originary peoples wove through the mountains of Chiapas where they were met by tens of thousands of Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas across all five zones of Zapatista territory. The historic significance of the first indigenous woman presidential candidate was matched only by the stunning series of speeches given by indigenous women at every level of Zapatista authority: women representatives of the Good Government Councils, women regional authorities of the Zapatista Army, and women members of the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee which commands the army—to name just the most prominent—a broad and powerful base of women's leadership across both military and civilian entities in a place where just a few decades ago both indigenous women and men worked in slave-like conditions of permanent peonage for large landowners across the state.

An Electoral Turn?

The CNI, formed in 1996 as a result of the convergence of indigenous peoples all over the country around the demands of the 1994 Zapatista uprising, is the first nationally organized and representative indigenous body fully independent of state and party forces. The CNI's deep community roots and autonomous organizing process stand in stark contrast to the tokenism and clientelism that characterized the past century of indigenous subjugation to the Mexican state. The CNI's radical political independence make it an extremely inconvenient presence for the Mexican political class and thus a frequent object of total erasure and misrepresentation. This new initiative is no exception.

In fact when the Indigenous Governing Council has been mentioned, it has often been in the context of either condemnations or congratulations directed at the EZLN for having supposedly left behind a politics of autonomy and joined the electoral arena. Many within the Mexican government have long pushed the account that the EZLN had either fallen apart due to faulty leadership (inevitably attributed to then Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, today SupGaleano) or faded into irrelevance due to isolation in their remote community strongholds. The CIG and the launch of its tour over the past weeks however has illuminated not a tired and outdated EZLN as some sources so desperately hoped for, but a wide range of flourishing community institutions and self-governing bodies that displayed, even at a glance, the breadth of Zapatista organization across multiple generations, multiple language groups, and multiple geographical contexts, articulated together as a large-scale, assembly-run, community-based social order with unparalleled organizational capacity.

More specifically, each stop in Zapatista territory revealed autonomous health clinics staffed with trained health promoters and medical equipment; autonomous school systems which

had educated the young people now running their own media teams, governing bodies, and production cooperatives; tens of thousands of hectares of productive land worked collectively to provide sustenance for hundreds of thousands of people across Zapatista territory; independent transportation infrastructure; and thousands of Zapatista civilian army reserves that provided unarmed but formidably disciplined security rings around the CIG and its spokeswoman at every step. Noticeably, it was the Zapatista men who served visitors steaming plates of beef stew and homemade tortillas, organized lodging and distributed blankets, and washed dishes for the next busload of hungry travelers—this as Marichuy, the CIG councilwomen, and women authorities of the EZLN addressed the crowds from the stage.

Unsurprisingly, it seems that the political class doesn't actually believe its own lies about the EZLN. They instead seem to be panicked that this form of collective self-emancipation will gain influence across Mexico. As evidence of this panic, and while the CIG initiative has been met with noticeably scarce media coverage, those who did try to cover the CIG's tour of Chiapas ran up against the obstacle that as the caravan moved through the state, internet service, cellphone signals, and even landline service were cut across entire regions that would normally have robust communications, making timely media coverage nearly impossible. In addition to this communications blockade, the political class has done everything possible to inhibit the collection of the over 860,000 citizen signatures required by law for an independent candidate to appear on the ballot. The cellphone application made available by the National Electoral Institute (INE) for this purpose has proven not to function adequately except on high-end devices with new operating systems that cost well over the monthly earnings of the majority of the Mexican population. In a country lacking adequate internet service over large portions of the national territory, the application itself, as denounced by Marichuy on October 18, takes hours to download and once installed can take up to 16 hours to register a single signature (instead of the 4 minutes and 30 seconds claimed by the INE). There are many more examples, all of which point to an enormous amount of energy expended on subverting the reach of an organization and an anti-capitalist form of governing which the political class insists doesn't exist.

Mexico's Decomposition and the Urgent Need for an Alternative

In May of this year, the International Institute for Strategic Studies named Mexico the second deadliest country in the world, surpassing the violence in war zones like Yemen and Afghanistan and following only Syria in its death toll. Much of the violence in Mexico is attributed to the drug war launched in 2006 by then-President Felipe Calderón, but the numbers of dead (well over 200,000) and disappeared (30,000 by official estimates) and the utter impunity (around 98%) for these crimes display a more profound problem and the state's complicity—when not direct involvement—in the violence. In addition, some 90% of productive land in Mexico has been ceded to foreign mining or logging companies and the

paramilitary violence and state repression that tend to accompany such extractive industries to clear lands of resistant populations has resulted in millions more people subject to forced migration or internal displacement.

It is in this context that indigenous communities across the country have established autonomous self-governments and community self-defense units, expelling both drug cartels and political parties from their towns and cities, including (but not limited to) Cherán (Michoacán), Santa Maria Ostula (Michoacán), an extensive network of community police forces in the state of Guerrero, hundreds more CNI communities that are actively organizing to kick political parties out of their towns, and of course, as of almost a quarter century ago, the Zapatistas in Chiapas whose territory remains impenetrable to narco-control. In fact, practically the only places in the country not overrun by narco-related violence, trafficking, extortion, and joint rule by political party and cartel forces are these small sites of autonomous self-government where an intact or rebuilt social fabric and community self-defense mechanism has prevented such forces from taking hold. Such experiments in self-government constitute not an untouched outside to the otherwise grim reality of narco-state and capitalist mafia that stands in for government in Mexico, but an actual propositional alternative that relies on democratic processes and mass civil participation. It is in the context of a generalized social collapse that we can make sense of the CNI's insistence that the Indigenous Governing Council is for all of Mexico, not just indigenous people, and they have invited non-indigenous people to join this initiative. In the words of Marichuy:

"That's why we the indigenous peoples of the National Indigenous Congress and our brothers and sisters of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation have said that we won't allow this anymore, that we are going to struggle and fight for everyone, not just for the indigenous peoples […] It is time for us to walk this path together with our brothers and sisters from the countryside and the city."

Isn't There Already a Left Presidential Candidate in Mexico?

As is standard across electoralist perspectives where the "least worst" establishment candidate is marketed as the only viable option to stop the reactionary right, that title in this case belongs to MORENA party founder and presidential candidate, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO). As three-time presidential candidate for the PRD (defrauded of a presidential win in 2006 and possibly 2012), AMLO has consistently promised to maintain "macroeconomic stability" and protect the interests of private capital while giving lip service to poverty reduction, a standard recipe for applying neoliberal policy behind a leftist veneer. One might ask, if "the left" has been characterized by its critique of capitalism, how is it that we have come to a point where a project for the attempted stabilization of capitalism can still be touted as on the left? In any case, the EZLN/CNI understand that

given the crisis dynamics of contemporary capitalism, accepting a "lesser evil" logic means accepting the continued disintegration of Mexico and the disappearance of their peoples, and they thus recognize that Mexican society and the world have little choice today but to directly confront capitalism and all of its devastating consequences.

An Indigenous Governing Council for the World

As the failures of "progressive" electoralist forces pile up across the world—Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the PT in Brazil, renascent Peronism in Argentina, to name just a few—it becomes clear that we are not experiencing a battle between a reactionary right set on implementing xenophobic policies and protecting the class structure and a progressive left dedicated to inclusion and redistributive policies. Rather, where we are all going together is deeper into capitalist crisis and the disintegration of the system as a whole, with increasingly unstable global economic conditions, skyrocketing levels of inequality, scapegoating, and an alarming acceleration of environmental destruction. Under these conditions, the problem is not one of the political will of any individual politician or party; all kinds of cartels accompany systemic collapse and any political class under the imploding capitalist system merely becomes another. There are few places in the world where not only is the dissolution of the system clear, but an alternative already in formation with years (centuries!) of practice in collective decision-making and self-government. The insistence of the Indigenous Governing Council that the only alternative is not another political class but the elimination of the political class altogether is what makes this initiative not only the only viable organized possibility for the survival of indigenous communities in Mexico, but the path out of the disaster that is capitalism for all of us.

We must convince ourselves, as the CIG has, that no one will save us from the ruins but ourselves. As the EZLN's Comandanta Miriam explains:

"But let's not think, *compañeras*, that the Indigenous Governing Council or our spokeswoman are going to save us. We, each of us, has to work to save all of us, because if we don't do anything our spokeswoman will not be able to save us either. She's not the one who rules: it is the people who have to give the strength to our spokeswoman; it is the people who rule and our spokeswoman and our Governing Council have to obey the people."

*The Seven Principles of Rule by Obeying:

To obey, not command
To represent, not supplant
To serve others, not serve oneself

To convince, not defeat
To go below, not above
To propose, not impose
To construct, not destroy

On the ‘Hodor Effect’ Paralyzing the US Left

Anna Curcio, militant scholar and coordinator of Commonware.org, interviews Alvaro Reyes of the Workshop for Intercommunal Study about Charlottesville, white supremacy, and contemporary challenges for politics in the US. [Original at Commonware in Italian, at CounterPunch in English, and at Radio Zapatista in Spanish. Radio Zapatista also interviewed Reyes about this topic. Listen to the Spanish interview here]

Anna Curcio: Could you briefly explain the events that took place in Charlottesville and help put them in context?

Alvaro Reyes: As some of your readers may know by now, on August 11 and 12, an alliance of some 500 white supremacists and neo-Nazis marched through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, in what they called a “Unite the Right” rally. They gathered to protest the planned removal of a monument of Robert E. Lee, the general that led the slave-holding confederate states’ army during the U.S. civil war. “Unite the Right” organizers have since hailed this rally as the largest gathering of white supremacists in decades.

In response, many hundreds of antifascist counter-protesters also converged on the city to repudiate what they rightly denounced as “racist terror.” On the afternoon of the 12th, James A. Fields, a neo-Nazi associated with the white supremacist group “Vanguard America,” attacked the antifascists by plowing his car into the crowd (a tactic that we now know right-wing organizations had been promoting online for the last few months), injuring 35 people and killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer, a member of the Democratic Socialists of

America.

Fueled by anger over Heyer's death, people across the country have since demanded that confederate monuments be removed from their cities. On Monday, August 14, here in Durham, North Carolina, protestors took the streets and pulled a statue of a confederate soldier off its pedestal, bringing it crashing to the ground. The very next day, the Baltimore city council voted unanimously to take down all confederate monuments. The demand for the removal of confederate monuments has spread like wild fire across the country and has grown to target a whole array of monuments dedicated to figures involved in slavery, Native American genocide and the massacre of Mexicans in the United States, and even monuments from the more recent past. A substantial movement for example has emerged demanding the removal of the statue honoring Frank Rizzo, the Police Commissioner and Mayor of Philadelphia from the late 1960s to the early 1980s who was notorious for terrorizing Black and Latino Philadelphia with a 'shoot first ask questions later' approach throughout his time in office.

It is important, I think, to note that for both the fascist and antifascist forces, the struggle over these monuments is not just about the way that history gets told; it is about two different visions of what we should do regarding the extraordinary level of racism present in the country today. The fascists point to these monuments as a reminder of the white supremacist foundations upon which the United States was built and argue that these foundations fully justify calls for the incarceration of Blacks, the criminalization and deportation of Latino migrants, and the exclusion of Muslims. Meanwhile, the antifascist forces point to these monuments to argue that unless we deal with the foundational nature of white supremacy in this country – a white supremacy, it must be remembered, that served as a direct if rarely mentioned inspiration for Hitlerian fascism – we cannot adequately explain the contemporary growth of racist extremism. In other words, it is as if it's only at the moment when the global conditions of possibility for that project called the United States are rapidly disappearing that everyone is forced to see that project for what it was.

Do you think that events of Charlottesville and its aftermath constitute a turning point in politics in general and racial politics more specifically in the U.S. today?

It may sound cliché but I think the answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, we have certainly not been accustomed to the level of organized neo-Nazi violence that we saw in Charlottesville and in that sense, it changes the forces that we must now consider as part of the national political equation. On the other hand, I think it is a mistake to believe that there has been some sudden and sweeping upsurge of neo-Nazi organizing since Trump's election, which is how this situation has often been portrayed in the media. The truth is that these extreme right-wing groups have been growing slowly but surely since September 11, 2001,

and those who have been following this growth were not surprised at all by what took place in Charlottesville. And despite the fact that we have to take their growth seriously, we must also recognize that in a country of 323 million people, any movement that can only muster 500 adherents for a national convergence is a movement with an extremely limited operational capacity. If we don't pay attention to this fact, then the overwhelming media coverage these events have received may very well make us think that there is already a neo-Nazi around every corner, creating a sense of panic and paralysis that, at this point, is out of proportion to the dimensions of this particular problem.

This is not, however, to understate the threat that white supremacy poses to U.S. society. Quite to the contrary, my point is that by overstating the threat of organized neo-Nazi violence we risk missing how the more mundane operations of a structural white supremacy have, since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, proliferated within the mainstream political parties (Democrats and Republicans) to such an extent that it is nearly impossible to imagine that either party could survive any serious reckoning by U.S. society with white supremacy. If there is a "turning point" at all, I think it is to be found here, and we must think of the events in Charlottesville within this context.

But I want to pause here and give specific examples of the key role played by mainstream Republican politicians in sustaining this more structural white supremacy. For the last forty years, they have been appealing to white voters in the suburbs of the country's major urban centers by promoting an all-out tax revolt against the city-centers. After desegregation, middle and upper income white residents fled to the suburbs, creating a crater-sized hole in the capacity of cities to raise tax revenue. The loss of revenue was compounded by de-industrialization that emptied the city-centers of job opportunities. This created a particularly toxic situation in which there was a concentration of extremely marginalized economic subjects confined within cities that had little to no resources to help them meet their needs. Instead of explaining the origins of this "urban crisis" and white suburbanites' own complicity in its creation, the Republican party for decades promoted the entirely delusional and racist narrative amongst its white voters that the condition of these city-centers was due to the faulty moral character of the Black and Brown residents that by that time made up the majority of those cities. According to Republican propaganda, by asking for State and Federal funds to alleviate this situation, these Black and Brown urban residents were now unjustifiably reaching into the pockets of productive white professionals – in effect, stealing – in search of the money that their faulty moral character would not allow them to make through hard work. Thus, although often avoiding explicitly racial references, the Republican party was absolutely central in creating and circulating the myth of the "undeserving poor" – a mass of Blacks and Latinos portrayed as criminal "thugs" and "welfare queens" freeloading off hard-working whites.

Now, this might seem like a distant and rather schematic historical account, but I think it's

essential to understand both the re-emergence of explicitly white supremacist organizations and the parallel swell of racist extremism that found a voice in the figure of Donald Trump. To see this connection more closely, we need to revisit a debate that immediately followed the election of Trump. On one side, there were those who insisted that Trump's victory had been due to his ability to use his speeches to acknowledge the anxiety created by deteriorating economic conditions across the country. Others argued that such an explanation downplayed the fact that it was Trump's explicit appeal to racism that motivated a large part of his base to forgo other more mainstream candidates and vote Trump. The fact is that both of these arguments miss entirely the specific effects of the history I have just briefly outlined.

That is, thanks to 40 years of mainstream Republican propaganda regarding the "undeserving poor," for a sector of the U.S. white population today, there is no "economy." There is only a structure of conspiratorial parasitism that posits our current social decomposition as a consequence of the fact that their own hard labor is being feasted upon by a swarm of 'others,' a horde of shiftless Black and Brown bodies violently demanding unearned handouts (Trump's "Mexican rapists", "Muslim terrorists", and Black "inner cities"), a situation they believe can only be solved by the elimination of these others from the scene. In other words, this sector of the white population has been carefully trained to read the social decomposition created by the contemporary involution of capitalism as one and the same as an alien attack on white (and particularly male) society. In the United States then this is how, for this sector of white society, what might otherwise be understood as the consequences of a "class war" are instead channeled into a "race war" that only gains valence as the collapse of contemporary capitalism deepens. After Charlottesville, every major Republican figure was quick to denounce both Donald Trump for his thinly veiled endorsement of the Unite the Right Rally and the neo-Nazi organizations that had gathered there. What these Republicans don't acknowledge is that the well of racial resentment that they helped dig has finally taken on a life of its own, making them largely irrelevant, providing Donald Trump with his core political base, and now threatening to swell into organized fascist violence.

Ok, but you also seem to want to claim that the Democrats were just as complicit in this exacerbation of structural white supremacy as the Republican, is that right? But how can we square that idea with the fact that the Democrats were the ones behind the first Black president of the United States?

That's right, it is an entirely counterintuitive proposition and it has been very difficult for people here in the U.S. (and nearly impossible for people abroad) to understand that the Obama phenomena and his administration fit into a larger pattern of the Democratic Party's role in exacerbating structural white supremacy, the dramatic results of which we are now living through. On the one hand, the Obama presidency was undoubtedly the product of a

long civil rights era that had sought to break down the rather explicit forms of white supremacy that had barred Black people from political office through organized participation in the Democratic Party. In this respect, the civil rights movement was incredibly successful—consider the fact that in the mid-1960s there were some 600 elected Black officials in the United States and that by the time of Obama's presidential campaign there were over 10,000!

What we must take into account is that the Democratic Party, whose mildly reformist agenda had been built in dialogue within labor unions and the civil rights movement, had by the time of Obama's rise transformed into a party whose sole purpose is the monological administration of capitalist collapse (i.e. "neoliberalism"). Yet, with such a strong Black presidential candidate, the Democratic Party was able to (temporarily) evoke the affective charge of the battle against explicit white supremacy and its historically reformist alliances at the very moment it was enthroning the neoliberal narrative regarding the ongoing capitalist crisis. That did not last long, however, and as soon as it became apparent to the public that the Obama administration would in no way challenge the preset automatisms of the neoliberal agenda, the Democratic Party at every level entered into its own free-fall implosion, losing 17 governorships (53% of their seats), 13 U.S. Senate seats (22% of their seats), 61 U.S. congressional seats (24% of their seats), and at least 960 seats in state legislatures across the country by mid-2017 (24% of their seats).

But in order to understand how this shift within the Democratic Party actually exacerbated structural white supremacy at the very same time as it created opportunities for Black and Latino politicians, we need to examine it in the context of the urban fiscal crisis I discussed above in relation to the Republicans. Due to the fact that the Republican's electoral base became increasingly suburban, it was left almost exclusively to the Democrats, and more often than not Black mayors and Black and Latino majority city councils, to manage the major urban centers. Here the Democratic agenda was at first an attempt to fight the suburban tax revolt and demand increased state and federal resources for investment and jobs. When this was not successful, the Democrat party began to slowly turn on its urban base by adopting a two-pronged strategy to rid themselves of the concerns of this electoral base (knowing full well that within the two-party system these Black and Latino residents had nowhere else to go). On the one hand, Democratic administrations in cities across the country looked to increase revenues by handing city policy over to real estate developers and the financial industry in hopes of large infrastructural investment that would lead to "revitalization" (i.e. gentrification) and therefore increase the possible tax pool. On the other hand, they looked to put an end to public housing, transportation, schools, and parks that might allow for the continued presence of low-income Black and Latino residents in the city centers.

This toxic mix came to a head during 2008. Due to systematic discriminatory predation,

many Black and Latino families were given subprime mortgages that forced them and many others into default. This, when added to the continued upward pressures on rents and property values due to gentrification and the destruction of public resources, led to an absolute collapse of Black and Latino wealth and the mass migration of Black and Latino residents out of the metropolitan areas. Here the public image of "racial progress" touted by the Democratic Party generally and Black and Latino politicians in particular runs up against a brutally grim reality. For example, consider that the racial wealth gap today is far worse than it was 30 years ago: that Black and Latino communities lost between 30% and 40% of their wealth in the late 2000s; that median Black household wealth is less than 7% that of white household wealth; and that if you are a single woman of color your median total wealth is a grand total of five dollars! Larger and larger portions of these communities have been transformed into "surplus populations" with little or no relation to the increasingly financialized global economy, and contained by swelling police forces and disproportionally warehoused in the prison system.

In other words, the policies of the Democratic Party have been the key mechanisms for the mass-displacement, dispossession, and thus continued racial subjugation of Black and Latino communities—for the exacerbation of structural white supremacy. Some might claim that the Democratic Party had little choice but to implement these policies given the changing nature of the capitalist economy. I would like to point out, however, that these larger, structural changes did not make the Democratic Party some passive victim. To the contrary, they became infinitely adept at glorifying these changes as some sort of progress and simultaneously blaming Black and Latino communities for their condition. Consider in this regard the Clinton-manufactured narrative of Black and Latino "superpredators" who demanded repression not solidarity, or Obama's vision in which these and other social problems were not due to a capitalist economy gone mad but to resistance to that economy, what he called "the excesses of the 1960s."

Yet, I would claim that this strange marriage between Black and Latino politicians and the neoliberal agenda dominant within the Democratic Party is also culpable in the re-emergence of explicit white supremacy in that today, if you attempt to raise the issue of the death-driven dynamics of contemporary capitalism, as for example Bernie Sanders tried to do in the most mild-mannered fashion, the issue of "race" is weaponized against you. That is, if you dare mount a critique of the neoliberal agenda of the Democratic Party, you are immediately accused of not caring about "race" or "racial inequality," which the Democratic Party apparently does care about since it is today home to thousands of Black and Latino politicians. Given the influence that the Democratic Party has on the media and even the University system, this effectively becomes a bar to the discussion of the dynamics of capitalism at the very moment when that conversation is so obviously needed. The outcome is that within mainstream discourse, the sole "coherent" explanation for the destructive effects of contemporary capitalism that is circulated on a large scale is the eliminationist

imaginary of the extreme right wing that I explained above. This situation became obvious during the last presidential election where, once the Democratic Party had done everything possible to eliminate Bernie Sanders, the options were between the explicitly racist explanations of the crisis offered by Trump ("Make America Great Again") or the absolutely delusional statements on the part of Hillary Clinton that there simply is no crisis ("America is Already Great").

Since Charlottesville, Donald Trump has made some troubling statements that basically amount to an endorsement of the "Unite the Right" rally. It is obvious that throughout his campaign he made innumerable racist statements, but what do you think that his link is to these more organized and explicitly neo-Nazi groups? Why does he seem to refuse to denounce them?

Yes, in fact Donald Trump went so far as to say that there were some "very fine people" that participated in the "Unite the Right" Rally. He has most definitely refused to condemn these organized fascist groups and since Charlottesville has gone on a bit of an offensive himself. He has insisted on defending the racist monuments around the country and just a few days after Charlottesville, chose to hold a campaign-sized rally (some 15,000 people) in which he went on at length about the dangers of immigration and the necessity to "build the wall" between the United State and Mexico. In addition, he surprised everyone by going so far as to pardon Sheriff Joe Arpaio, a brutal racist who was convicted for illegally targeting Arizona residents based solely on race and who made a name for himself nationally by keeping prisoners and immigrant detainees in outdoor prisons where they were known to have been beaten and left to die.

One has to wonder why Trump, after being criticized for his tacit endorsement of the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, would come out and double down on his relation to explicit racists. From my perspective, Trump realizes that his administration is being penned in as both his global and domestic agenda are increasingly dictated by the mainstream of the Washington establishment. He is also very aware that this isolation is likely to lead to an investigation of his long-term involvement in money laundering that may very well end in a criminal prosecution. I am increasingly convinced then that Trump realizes that it is his extreme racist middle-class base that he can actually rely on, and that this base is not likely to be swayed to the contrary by either Democrats or Republicans. In other words, it seems more and more likely that he will continually pump his racist base with ever more scandalously racist remarks and policy for the foreseeable future so that he when the time comes, he can use them as an insurance policy of sorts against the establishment: "if you try to get rid of me, I'll light the match on this powder keg." This is where I see the real danger over the next few years—although this is not a reality today—that through Trump, that sector of the electorate that has shown so much sympathy to his racist statements might very will begin to build formal links to those organized fascist groups that Trump is currently doing

everything to normalize.

We've talked about the Republicans, the Democrats, Trump and this small group of neo-Nazis, but what about the movements on the left? What about Black Lives Matter? There must be an enormous amount of social energy that is not captured by any of these elements? Where are they? Are any interesting proposals coming from these groups?

Yes, absolutely. It's amazing to watch how the discontent with all of these options is absolutely palpable and, I would say, even constitutes the dominant feeling in the country. Despite appearances, there has been no massive shift to the right. Even at the level of electoral politics it is important to remember that had it not been for the decision made by the Democratic Party and its donors that they would rather lose the presidential election with Hillary Clinton than win it with Bernie Sanders, we would today very likely be talking about the possibilities and limitations of "socialism" (which for Sanders clearly means nothing more than the welfare state) rather than the endorsement of neo-Nazis by the White House. In fact, even today Bernie Sanders is by far the most popular politician in the U.S., with approval ratings almost double that of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton (who, even after nearly nine months of the catastrophe that is the current administration, is still more unpopular than Donald Trump). We also have to take into account that in response to these neo-Nazi rallies there have been enormous crowds around the country denouncing racism, with *Antifa* contingents ready to physically confront the fascists if necessary, and overall outnumbering the right-wing extremists to such an extent that these hate groups have had little choice but to not show up for or even cancel their own events. All of this must be added to the very strong after-effects of the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore that powerfully questioned the direction this society is headed and led to a whole wave of activism around the brutal effects of policing and incarceration on Black communities.

All of this is very promising, with each of these instances creating waves of excitement and rounds of street protests, but nevertheless leaving one with the very distinct and ominous impression that none of this has been able to in anyway cross, let alone slow down or stop, the process of social collapse. It seems to me that in the U.S. (as in much of the rest of the world), we are in the depths of something I like to refer to as a collective "Hodor effect" (after the character from *Game of Thrones*), where at a deep level we have understood the enormity of the task that lies before us (i.e. the creation of an affirmative alternative before the snowballing collapse created by the structural impasse of capitalism engulfs us all), while on a daily basis we seem mired in paralysis, involving ourselves again and again in practices that simply aren't up to what's required of us by the situation. Nevertheless, the hope is that for us, like Hodor, that paralysis is also the sign that when the moment arrives, we will collectively do what needs to be done.

Of course, unlike *Game of Thrones*, we cannot simply wait for this to be true. We must work

to make it true and in that sense we need to analyze, situation-by-situation, how each of the openings mentioned above might become dead ends. For example, on the one hand, the Bernie Sanders phenomena has clearly opened up capitalism as an object of critique on a mass scale in this country like never before in my lifetime. On the other hand, it has led to a lot of people, money, and energy being redirected into the political party that has shown no other interest than to absolutely crush Sanders and marginalize his base. Or, on the one hand, the rise of *Antifa* has importantly brought to consciousness the increasing necessity of organized forms of self-defense as neo-Nazi organizations gain cohesion. On the other hand, being against Nazism is a rather low political bar that is likely to lead us right back into bed with the forces that got us into this mess. In addition, there is a growing segment of people on the left who, absent affirmative political alternatives, reduce politics to physical confrontation. This is a dangerous proposition in an age in which the State, having lost legitimacy and capacity in so many other arenas, would like nothing more than to "solve" problems in the one arena that it still clearly easily dominates—violence. Finally, on the one hand the revolts in Baltimore and Ferguson shook the consciousness of the country in a way that left the foundational and ongoing anti-blackness and racism of this society exposed for all to see. On the other hand, these uprisings have given life to a new generation of well-connected Black activists (more than a few that have been involved with Black Lives Matter) who have turned to electoral politics and are likely to become the new life-blood of a moribund Democratic Party at the local level. Even today you can hear many of these "Young Democrats" exclaiming that the Obama years constituted some type of golden age or at the very least an era of "progress." Of course, this perspective leaves one with little to no explanation for why these revolts occurred nearly at the end of Obama's second term. Could it be instead that these revolts were an act of rage and despair from communities who, having expectations heightened by the rise of a Black president, came to understand that the promise of Black political inclusion has little to no relation to them?

Time and again, the U.S. Left remains absolutely obsessed with resolving our situation by changing the politicians. It seems that our job on the left today then must be to broaden the discussion to show that the depth of the abyss that we have entered makes changing politicians rather beside the point. We must instead insist on changing politics; we must insist on an affirmative vision capable of creating some coherence out of the mass of discontent by insisting that life beyond capitalist collapse is immediately practicable. If we do not move beyond imagining that the administration of this collapse, no matter how diverse, is the best the Left has to offer, then we as a Left (of all races) in this country will share responsibility when the exacerbation of structural white supremacy continues to spill over, in greater and greater numbers, into organized fascist violence.

Workshop Analysis: “They Thought They Had Taken Power. In Reality They Were Taken By It.”

Συνέντευξη | ΑΛΒΑΡΟ ΡΕΓΙΕΣ, καθηγητής

«Δεν κατέλαβαν την αυτή τις κατέλαβε»

Ο Ρέγιες αναλύει τις αντιφάσεις και τις ασυνέπειες των «προοδευτικών κυβερνήσεων» στη Λ. Αμερική, τη σχέση τους με τα κοινωνικά κινήματα, αλλά και την ενσωμάτωσή τους στην κυρίαρχη καπιταλιστική λογική. Οι επισημάνσεις του αποτελούν έναν πολύτιμο οδηγό για τις πάσης φύσεως αριστερές και προοδευτικές κυβερνήσεις και στη Δύση.

• Ποια είναι τα μαθήματα από την αντιφατική σχέση μεταξύ κοινωνικών κινημάτων στη Λατινική Αμερική και των «προοδευτικών κυβερνήσεων», τις οποίες αυτά τα κινήματα βοήθησαν να έρθουν στην εξουσία;

Πιστεύω ότι στη Λατινική Αμερική τα κινήματα τις τελευταίες τρεις δεκαετίες, κυρίως αυτά των ιθαγενών λαών, ήταν πιο συνεκτικά και ριζοσπαστικά απ’ ό,τι έχουμε δει μέχρι σήμερα οπουδήποτε αλλού. Το βασικότερο όμως είναι να καταλάβουμε ότι αυτή η σχέση μεταξύ κινημάτων και «προοδευτικών κυβερνήσεων» στις περισσότερες περιπτώσεις

λων. Αυτό που δεν ήταν ξεκάθαρο τότε είναι ότι ο «νεοφιλελευθερισμός» ήταν περισσότερο ένα αντικειμενικό αποτέλεσμα, παρά μια υποκειμενική αιτία τής χωρίς προηγούμενο αποσύνθεσης της καπιταλιστικής κοινωνικής μορφής. Σ’ αυτό το πλαίσιο, της εμφανούς συρρίκνωσης της «αυτοαξιοποίησης της αξίας», ο αφανής δομικός δεσμός ανάμεσα σε μια διαρκώς μειούμενη καπιταλιστική ανάπτυξη και τις «προοδευτικές κυβερνήσεις» ήρθε στο προσκήνιο. Υπ’ αυτές τις συνθήκες, η πολιτική τάξη έθεσε ξανά και με δυναμικό τρόπο σε λειτουργία και προσδιόρισε έναν νέο στόχο, ελπίζοντας ότι θα αποφύγει την κατάρρευ-

Interview with Alvaro Reyes (the Workshop for Intercommunal Study)

By Tassos Tsakiroglou (*Efimerida ton Syntakton*) [Original in Greek Here]

What are the lessons from the contradictory relationship between social movements in Latin America and the "progressive governments" that these movements helped bring to power?

I believe that the Latin American movements of the last three decades, particularly those of indigenous peoples, were far more cohesive and radical than anything we have yet to see elsewhere. All the more reason why it is important to understand that the relation of these movements to the "progressive governments" in most cases proved fatal. This disheartening outcome was due in no small part to an underestimation of the global political situation. That is, many of these movements framed their struggle as one against what they understood as the effects of "neoliberalism"–an onerous debt crisis, austerity measures, and an interminable wave of privatizations. They consequently placed their energies on removing the traditional political class and bringing explicitly anti-neoliberal parties to power. After their wild success in these efforts it was difficult to understand why it was that, despite programs to alleviate the worst effects of "neoliberalism," the motor behind those effects, an extremely inegalitarian and volatile form of capitalist accumulation, remained untouchable. In retrospect, and thanks to these struggles, it is easier to see that this impasse arose because the general strategy of the dominant strains of these movements had presumed that "neoliberalism" was a subjective political offensive on the part of elites that could be reverted through a subjective counter-offensive through existing state channels. What was not clear then is that "neoliberalism" was instead the *objective effect*, rather than a *subjective cause*, of the unparalleled decomposition of the capitalist social form. Within this context of the evident contraction of "the self-valorization of value," the otherwise invisible structural tie between an ever-receding capitalist growth and "progressive government" came to the fore. Under these conditions the political class had been forcefully refunctionalized and assigned a new purpose–guarding "profitability" in the hopes of avoiding collapse. This in turn made it clear that the impersonal mechanisms of the market had become a direct, rather than indirect, constraint on state actors, leaving little room for "progressive" parties to respond to social demands for even moderate structural change. Given these constraints, and thus seeing structural demands as a threat, it is no surprise that the key figures of the "progressive governments" slowly moved to supplant and eventually neutralize the movements. In sum, although these counterhegemonic projects imagined that through the "progressive governments" they had "taken power," in retrospect I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that in reality they had been taken by it.

Some of these "progressive governments" in Latin America continue to implement the same neoliberal "growth" policy of their political predecessors, i.e extractivism and exportism (exports orientation for the produced goods). How do you explain?

Exactly. Many of the "progressive governments" were able to paper over the net effects of

this structural impasse of contemporary capitalism by taking advantage of windfall profits stemming from a rather unique and evidently unrepeatable global demand for natural resources. This “boom” created exceptionally high levels of regional economic growth and gave the “progressive governments” additional income with which to create state subsidies for the most marginalized sectors – both of which allowed the “progressive governments” to temporarily reduce the social conflict that otherwise accompanies a crisis. As we see today, the moment this “boom” came to an end these conflicts have reemerged with a vengeance.

What’s the role of the “programs against poverty” in the process of neutralization of mass social movements?

I would argue that the greatest damage was done by “progressive governments” at the level of fabricating and managing the subjective desires of the movement. That is, the movements that had shown such incredible political effectivity at removing the region’s traditional elites were through these programs encouraged to channel all social discontent into demands for consumption at the direct expense of the logic of social solidarity. Ironically then, by attempting to neutralize potential threats from the most marginalized sectors, the “progressive governments” simultaneously eroded the cohesion of the only social forces capable of confronting those on the right. In this sense the “progressive governments” not only decimated the movements but also undermined their own long-term viability.

Raul Zibechi claims that social change won’t be the outcome of government action, but of the mobilization and the fight of those “below and to the left”. What’s your point of view?

Well, let me first clarify that the concept of “below and to the left” comes from the Zapatistas. I think that it is important to mention this because they coined this concept in order to point out that given the structural constraints placed on the contemporary state by the decompositional dynamics of capital, they have concluded that today, “above and to the left” can exist only as an oxymoron. So yes, a fight of those “below and to the left,” but a fight for what? If it is simply a fight to influence or pressure those above, then the last 30 years of the Latin American experience shows us how such a mobilization is likely to end. In contrast, the Zapatistas insist that in the context of an increasingly generalized social abandonment, we must move beyond the cycle of demands, protests, elections, and broken windows that characterize so many movements around the world today. As an alternative, they suggest that those “below and to the left” must make the permanent exercise of self-government their single greatest strategic priority (with state engagement reduced to uneven tactical necessities). They believe that it is only by creating a new web of institutionality (at ever expanding levels of local, regional, supraregional, etc.)–in order to both exercise the capacity for collective decision-making and meet our pressing needs (food, housing, education)–that we might organize the social force necessary to revert the consequences of contemporary capitalism and move to make these new institutions the

basis for a new society-wide order. It seems impossible, I know, but I think a sober look at our situation shows that nothing short of impossible will suffice.

What do the western countries have to learn from indigenous people's culture about the relation between humans and nature and about the idea of progress?

I think what these peoples have to teach is absolutely vital, but I'm not sure it's cultural. 'Capitalist civilization' (if we can speak in these terms) divided the world into a system of production and a system of enslavement and plunder. European descendent peoples were firmly within the protection provided by the categories of 'worker' and 'citizen,' while non-European people (more specifically Black and indigenous peoples) were most often objects of colonialism and extermination. This 'civilization' is in the midst of an unmitigated involution and consequently the protections previously afforded to European descendant peoples are being nullified. Thus, European descendant people today have a choice: they can either lament this catastrophe and pretend to blame non-European peoples for their new condition, or they can become students of Black and indigenous peoples who were forced to learn to survive and resist *within* this catastrophe (that for them began five centuries ago) and together move to build a life after capitalist "growth."