

Kali Akuno: Until We Win: Black Labor and Liberation in the Disposable Era

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Since the rebellion in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, Black people throughout the United States have been grappling with a number of critical questions such as why are Black people being hunted and killed every 28 hours or more by various operatives of the law? Why don't Black people seem to matter to this society? And what can and must we do to end these attacks and liberate ourselves? There are concrete answers to these questions. Answers that are firmly grounded in the capitalist dynamics that structure the brutal European settler-colonial project we live in and how Afrikan people have historically been positioned within it.

The Value of Black Life

There was a time in the United States Empire, when Afrikan people, aka, Black people, were deemed to be extremely valuable to the "American project", when our lives as it is said, "mattered". This "time" was the era of chattel slavery, when the labor provided by Afrikan people was indispensable to the settler-colonial enterprise, accounting for nearly half of the commodified value produced within its holdings and exchanged in "domestic" and international markets. Our ancestors were held and regarded as prize horses or bulls, something to be treated with a degree of "care" (i.e. enough to ensure that they were able to work and reproduce their labor, and produce value for their enslavers) because of their centrality to the processes of material production.

What mattered was Black labor power and how it could be harnessed and controlled, not Afrikan humanity. Afrikan humanity did not matter - it had to be denied in order create and sustain the social rationale and systemic dynamics that allowed for the commodification of human beings. These “dynamics” included armed militias and slave patrols, iron-clad non-exception social clauses like the “one-drop” rule, the slave codes, vagrancy laws, and a complex mix of laws and social customs all aimed at oppressing, controlling and scientifically exploiting Black life and labor to the maximum degree. This systemic need served the variants of white supremacy, colonial subjugation, and imperialism that capitalism built to govern social relations in the United States. All of the fundamental systems created to control Afrikan life and labor between the 17th and 19th centuries are still in operation today, despite a few surface moderations, and serve the same basic functions.

The correlation between capital accumulation (earning a profit) and the value of Black life to the overall system has remained consistent throughout the history of the US settler-colonial project, despite of shifts in production regimes (from agricultural, to industrial, to service and finance oriented) and how Black labor was deployed. The more value (profits) Black labor produces, the more Black lives are valued. The less value (profits) Black people produce, the less Black lives are valued. When Black lives are valued they are secured enough to allow for their reproduction (at the very least), when they are not they can be and have been readily discarded and disposed of. This is the basic equation and the basic social dynamic regarding the value of Black life to US society.

The Age of Disposability

We are living and struggling through a transformative era of the global capitalist system. Over the past 40 years, the expansionary dynamics of the system have produced a truly coordinated system of resource acquisition and controls, easily exploitable and cheap labor, production, marketing and consumption on a global scale. The increasingly automated and computerized dynamics of this expansion has resulted in millions, if not billions, of people being displaced through two broad processes: one, from “traditional” methods of life sustaining production (mainly farming), and the other from their “traditional” or ancestral homelands and regions (with people being forced to move to large cities and “foreign” territories in order to survive). As the International Labor Organization (ILO) recently reported in its World Employment and Social Outlook 2015 paper, this displacement renders millions to structurally regulated surplus or expendable statuses.

Capitalist logic does not allow for surplus populations to be sustained for long. They either have to be reabsorbed into the value producing mechanisms of the system, or disposed of. Events over the past 20 (or more) years, such as the forced separation of Yugoslavia, the genocide in Burundi and Rwanda, the never ending civil and international wars in Zaire/Congo and central Afrikan region, the mass displacement of farmers in Mexico clearly

indicate that the system does not possess the current capacity to absorb the surplus populations and maintain its equilibrium.

The dominant actors in the global economy - multinational corporations, the transnationalist capitalist class, and state managers - are in crisis mode trying to figure out how to best manage this massive surplus in a politically justifiable (but expedient) manner.

This incapacity to manage crisis caused by capitalism itself is witnessed by numerous examples of haphazard intervention at managing the rapidly expanding number of displaced peoples such as:

- * The ongoing global food crisis (which started in the mid-2000's) where millions are unable to afford basic food stuffs because of rising prices and climate induced production shortages;
- * The corporate driven displacement of hundreds of millions of farmers and workers in the global south (particularly in Africa and parts of Southeast Asia);
- * Military responses (including the building of fortified walls and blockades) to the massive migrant crisis confronting the governments of the United States, Western Europe, Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, etc.;
- * The corporate driven attempt to confront climate change almost exclusively by market (commodity) mechanisms;
- * The scramble for domination of resources and labor, and the escalating number of imperialist facilitated armed conflicts and attempts at regime change in Africa, Asia (including Central Asia) and Eastern Europe.

More starkly, direct disposal experiments are also deepening and expanding:

- * Against Afrikans in Colombia,
- * Haitians in the Dominican Republic,
- * Sub-Saharan Afrikans in Libya,
- * Indigenous peoples in the Andean region,
- * The Palestinians in Gaza, Adivasis in India,
- * The Rohingya's in Myanmar and Bangladesh,
- * And the list goes on.

Accompanying all of this is the ever expanding level of xenophobia and violence targeted at migrants on a world scale, pitting the unevenly pacified and rewarded victims of imperialism against one other as has been witnessed in places like South Africa over the last decade, where attacks on migrant workers and communities has become a mainstay of political activity.

The capitalist system is demonstrating, day by day, that it no longer possesses the managerial capacity to absorb newly dislocated and displaced populations into the international working class (proletariat), and it is becoming harder and harder for the international ruling class to sustain the provision of material benefits that have traditionally been awarded to the most loyal subjects of capitalisms global empire, namely the "native" working classes in Western Europe and settlers in projects like the United States, Canada, and Australia.

When the capitalist system can't expand and absorb it must preserve itself by shifting towards "correction and contraction" - excluding and if necessary disposing of all the surpluses that cannot be absorbed or consumed at a profit). We are now clearly in an era of correction and contraction that will have genocidal consequences for the surplus populations of the world if left unaddressed.

This dynamic brings us back to the US and the crisis of jobs, mass incarceration and the escalating number of extrajudicial police killings confronting Black people.

The Black Surplus Challenge/Problem

Afrikan, or Black, people in the United States are one of these surplus populations. Black people are no longer a central force in the productive process of the United States, in large part because those manufacturing industries that have not completely offshored their production no longer need large quantities of relatively cheap labor due to automation advances. At the same time agricultural industries have been largely mechanized or require even cheaper sources of super-exploited labor from migrant workers in order to ensure profits.

Various campaigns to reduce the cost of Black labor in the US have fundamentally failed, due to the militant resistance of Black labor and the ability of Black working class communities to “make ends meet” by engaging in and receiving survival level resources from the underground economy, which has grown exponentially in the Black community since the 1970’s. (The underground economy has exploded worldwide since the 1970’s due to the growth of unregulated “grey market” service economies and the explosion of the illicit drug trade. Its expansion has created considerable “market distortions” throughout the world, as it has created new value chains, circuits of accumulation, and financing streams that helped “cook the books” of banking institutions worldwide and helped finance capital become the dominant faction of capital in the 1980’s and 90’s).

The social dimensions of white supremacy regarding consumer “comfort”, “trust” and “security” seriously constrain the opportunities of Black workers in service industries and retail work, as significant numbers of non-Black consumers are uncomfortable receiving direct services from Black people (save for things like custodial and security services). These are the root causes of what many are calling the “Black jobs crisis”. The lack of jobs for Black people translates into a lack of need for Black people, which equates into the wholesale devaluation of Black life. And anything without value in the capitalist system is disposable.

The declining “value” of Black life is not a new problem – Black people have constituted an escalating problem in search of a solution for the US ruling class since the 1960’s. Although the US labor market started to have trouble absorbing Afrikan workers in the 1950’s, the surplus problem didn’t reach crisis proportions until the late 1960’s, when the Black Liberation Movement started to critically impact industrial production with demands for more jobs, training and open access to skilled and supervisory work (which were “occupied” by white seniority-protected workers), higher wages, direct representation (through instruments like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers), constant strikes,

work stoppages, other forms of industrial action, militant resistance to state and non-state forces of repression and hundreds of urban rebellions.

This resistance occurred at the same time that the international regime of integrated production, trade management, and financial integration, and currency convergence instituted by the United States after WWII, commonly called the Bretton Woods regime, fully matured and ushered in the present phase of globalization. This regime obliterated most exclusivist (or protectionist) production regimes and allowed international capital to scour the world for cheaper sources of labor and raw materials without fear of inter-imperialist rivalry and interference (as predominated during earlier periods). Thus, Black labor was hitting its stride just as capital was finding secure ways to eliminate its dependence upon it (and Western unionized labor more generally) by starting to reap the rewards of its post-WWII mega-global investments (largely centered in Western Europe, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan).

One reward of these mega-global investments for US capital was that it reduced the scale and need for domestic industrial production, which limited the ability of Black labor to disrupt the system with work stoppages, strikes, and other forms of industrial action. As US capital rapidly reduced the scale of its domestic production in the 1970's and 80's, it intentionally elevated competition between white workers and Afrikan and other non-settler sources of labor for the crumbs it was still doling out. The settler-world view, position, and systems of entitlement possessed by the vast majority of white workers compelled them to support the overall initiatives of capital and to block the infusion of Afrikan, Xicano, Puerto Rican and other non-white labor when there were opportunities to do so during this period.

This development provided the social base for the "silent majority," "law and order," "tuff on crime," "war on drugs," "war on gangs and thugs" campaigns that dominated the national political landscape from the late 1960's through the early 2000's, that lead to mass incarceration, racist drug laws, and militarized policing that have terrorized Afrikan (and Indigenous, Xicano, Puerto Rican, etc.) communities since the 1970's.

To deal with the crisis of Black labor redundancy and mass resistance the ruling class responded by creating a multipronged strategy of limited incorporation, counterinsurgency, and mass containment. The stratagem of limited incorporation sought to and has partially succeeded in dividing the Black community by class, as corporations and the state have been able to take in and utilize the skills of sectors of the Black petit bourgeoisie and working class for their own benefit. The stratagem of counterinsurgency crushed, divided and severely weakened Black organizations. And the stratagem of containment resulted in millions of Black people effectively being re-enslaved and warehoused in prisons throughout the US empire.

This three-pronged strategy exhausted itself by the mid-2000 as core dynamics of it (particularly the costs associated with mass incarceration and warehousing) became increasingly unprofitable and therefore unsustainable. Experiments with alternative forms of incarceration (like digitally monitored home detainment) and the spatial isolation and externalization of the Afrikan surplus population to the suburbs and exurbs currently abound, but no new comprehensive strategy has yet been devised by the ruling class to solve the problem of what to do and what politically can be done to address the Black surplus population problem. All that is clear from events like the catastrophe following Hurricane Katrina and the hundreds of Afrikans being daily, monthly, and yearly extrajudicially killed by various law enforcement agencies is that Black life is becoming increasingly more disposable. And it is becoming more disposable because in the context of the American capitalist socio-economic system, Black life is a commodity rapidly depreciating in value, but still must be corralled and controlled.

A Potential Path of Resistance

Although Afrikan people are essentially “talking instruments” to the overlords of the capitalist system, Black people have always possessed our own agency. Since the dawn of the Afrikan slave trade and the development of the mercantile plantations and chattel slavery, Black people resisted their enslavement and the systemic logic and dynamics of the capitalist system itself.

The fundamental question confronting Afrikan people since their enslavement and colonization in territories held by the US government is to what extent can Black people be the agents and instruments of their own liberation and history? It is clear that merely being the object or appendage of someone else’s project and history only leads to a disposable future. Black people have to forge their own future and chart a clear self-determining course of action in order to be more than just a mere footnote in world history.

Self-determination and social liberation, how do we get there? How will we take care of our own material needs (food, water, shelter, clothing, health care, defense, jobs, etc.)? How will we address the social contradictions that shape and define us, both internally and externally generated? How should we and will we express our political independence?

There are no easy or cookie cutter answers. However, there are some general principles and dynamics that I believe are perfectly clear. Given how we have been structurally positioned as a disposable, surplus population by the US empire we need to build a mass movement that focuses as much on organizing and building *autonomous, self-organized and executed social projects* as it focuses on campaigns and initiatives that apply *transformative pressure*

on the government and the forces of economic exploitation and domination. This is imperative, especially when we clearly understand the imperatives of the system we are fighting against.

The capitalism system has always required certain levels of worker “reserves” (the army of the unemployed) in order to control labor costs and maintain social control. But, the system must now do two things simultaneously to maintain profits: drastically reduce the cost of all labor and ruthlessly discard millions of jobs and laborers. “You are on your own,” is the only social rationale the system has the capacity to process and its overlords insist that “there is no alternative” to the program of pain that they have to implement and administer. To the system therefore, Black people can either accept their fate as a disposable population, or go to hell. We have to therefore create our own options and do everything we can to eliminate the systemic threat that confronts us.

Autonomous projects are initiatives not supported or organized by the government (state) or some variant of monopoly capital (finance or corporate industrial or mercantile capital). These are initiatives that directly seek to create a democratic “economy of need” around organizing sustainable institutions that satisfy people’s basic needs around principles of social solidarity and participatory or direct democracy that intentionally put the needs of people before the needs of profit. These initiatives are built and sustained by people organizing themselves and collectivizing their resources through dues paying membership structures, income sharing, resource sharing, time banking, etc., to amass the initial resources needed to start and sustain our initiatives. These types of projects range from organizing community farms (focused on developing the capacity to feed thousands of people) to forming people’s self-defense networks to organizing non-market housing projects to building cooperatives to fulfill our material needs. To ensure that these are not mere Black capitalist enterprises, these initiatives must be built democratically from the ground up and must be owned, operated, and controlled by their workers and consumers. These are essentially “serve the people” or “survival programs” that help the people to sustain and attain a degree of autonomy and self-rule. Our challenge is marshaling enough resources and organizing these projects on a large enough scale to eventually meet the material needs of nearly 40 million people. And overcoming the various pressures that will be brought to bear on these institutions by the forces of capital to either criminalize and crush them during their development (via restrictions on access to finance, market access, legal security, etc.) or co-opt them and reincorporate them fully into the capitalist market if they survive and thrive.

Our pressure exerting initiatives must be focused on creating enough democratic and social space for us to organize ourselves in a self-determined manner. We should be under no illusion that the system can be reformed, it cannot. Capitalism and its bourgeois national-states, the US government being the most dominant amongst them, have demonstrated a

tremendous ability to adapt to and absorb disruptive social forces and their demands - when it has ample surpluses. The capitalist system has essentially run out of surpluses, and therefore does not possess the flexibility that it once did.

Because real profits have declined since the late 1960's, capitalism has resorted to operating largely on a parasitic basis, commonly referred to as neo-liberalism, which calls for the dismantling of the social welfare state, privatizing the social resources of the state, eliminating institutions of social solidarity (like trade unions), eliminating safety standards and protections, promoting the monopoly of trade by corporations, and running financial markets like casinos.

Our objectives therefore, must be structural and necessitate nothing less than complete social transformation. To press for our goals we must seek to exert maximum pressure by organizing mass campaigns that are strategic and tactically flexible, including mass action (protest) methods, direct action methods, boycotts, non-compliance methods, occupations, and various types of people's or popular assemblies. The challenges here are not becoming sidelined and subordinated to someone else's agenda - in particular that of the Democratic party (which has been the grave of social movements for generations) - and not getting distracted by symbolic reforms or losing sight of the strategic in the pursuit of the expedient.

What the combination of these efforts will amount to is the creation of Black Autonomous Zones. These Autonomous Zones must serve as centers for collective survival, collective defense, collective self-sufficiency and social solidarity. However, we have to be clear that while building Black Autonomous Zones is necessary, they are not sufficient in and of themselves. In addition to advancing our own autonomous development and political independence, we have to build a revolutionary international movement. We are not going to transform the world on our own. As noted throughout this short work, Black people in the US are not the only people confronting massive displacement, dislocation, disposability, and genocide, various people's and sectors of the working class throughout the US and the world are confronting these existential challenges and seeking concrete solutions and real allies as much as we do.

Our Autonomous Zones must link with, build with, and politically unite with oppressed, exploited and marginalized peoples, social sectors and social movements throughout the US and the world. The Autonomous Zones must link with Indigenous communities, Xicano's and other communities stemming from the Caribbean, and Central and South America. We must also build alliances with poor and working class whites. It is essential that we help to serve as an alternative (or at least a counterweight) to the reactionary and outright fascist socialization and influences the white working class is constantly bombarded with.

Our Autonomous Zones should seek to serve as new fronts of class struggle that unite forces that are presently separated by white supremacy, xenophobia and other instruments of hierarchy, oppression and hatred. The knowledge drawn from countless generations of Black oppression must become known and shared by all exploited and oppressed people. We have to unite on the basis of a global anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial program that centers the liberation of Indigenous, colonized, and oppressed peoples and the total social and material emancipation of all those who labor and create the value that drives human civilization. We must do so by creating a regenerative economic system that harmonizes human production and consumption with the limits of the Earth's biosphere and the needs of all our extended relatives - the non-human species who occupy 99.9 percent of our ecosystem. This is no small task, but our survival as a people and as a species depends upon it.

The tremendous imbalance of forces in favor of capital and the instruments of imperialism largely dictates that the strategy needed to implement this program calls for the transformation of the oppressive social relationships that define our life from the "bottom up" through radical social movements. These social movements must challenge capital and the commodification of life and society at every turn, while at the same time building up its own social and material reserves for the inevitable frontal assaults that will be launched against our social movements and the people themselves by the forces of reaction. Ultimately, the forces of liberation are going to have to prepare themselves and all the progressive forces in society for a prolonged battle to destroy the repressive arms of the state as the final enforcer of bourgeois social control in the world capitalist system. As recent events Greece painfully illustrate, our international movement will have to simultaneously win, transform, and dismantle the capitalist state at the same time in order to secure the democratic space necessary for a revolutionary movement to accomplish the most minimal of its objectives.

Return to the Source

The intersecting, oppressive systems of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy have consistently tried to reduce African people to objects, tools, chattel, and cheap labor. Despite the systemic impositions and constraints these systems have tried to impose, Afrikan people never lost sight of their humanity, never lost sight of their own value, and never conceded defeat.

In the age of mounting human surplus and the devaluation and disposal of life, Afrikan people are going to have to call on the strengths of our ancestors and the lessons learned in over 500 years of struggle against the systems of oppression and exploitation that beset them. Building a self-determining future based on self-respect, self-reliance, social solidarity, cooperative development and internationalism is a way forward that offers us the

chance to survive and thrive in the 21st century and beyond.

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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 κινήματων 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 κινήματων 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 της 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 κατάρρευση

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."

EZLN: Get Organized (On the Elections)

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To the *compas* of the Sixth:

To those who are reading because this interests them, even if they're not part of the Sixth:

These days, just as every time this thing they call the "electoral process" rolls around, we hear and see all that stuff that comes out saying that the EZLN calls for abstention, that the EZLN says that people shouldn't vote. They say this and other idiocies, these dunces who don't study history or even care to find the truth. They even put these absurdities into history books and biographies and then charge for them. That is, they charge for these lies, like politicians. Of course, you know that we're not interested in the things that those above

do in order to try to convince those below that they're concerned about them. As Zapatistas, we don't call for people not to vote nor do we call them to vote. As Zapatistas, every time we get the chance, we tell people that they should organize to resist and to struggle for what they need. We as Zapatistas, like many other ordinary peoples of these lands, already know how the political parties operate, and it's a bad history of bad people. And for us Zapatistas, it's a history that we've left behind.

I think it was the late *Tata*[1] Juan Chavez Alonso who said that political parties separate and divide people, creating confrontation and conflicts between them, even among members of the same family. Here we see this happen again and again. You all know that in many of the communities where we live, there are people who aren't Zapatistas and who aren't organized and who are scraping by hoping that the bad government will give them a few handouts in exchange for letting them snap a photo that will make the government look good.

We see that every time there are elections, some people dress up in red, others in blue, others in green, others in yellow, and others in faded colors and so on. They fight amongst themselves and sometimes they even fight amongst family members. Why do they fight? Well, they fight over who is going to be in charge of them, who they are going to obey, who is going to give them orders. They think that whatever particular color wins, the people who supported that color will receive more handouts. They claim that they are very aware and yet very determined to be party members, and sometimes they even kill each other over a fucking [political party's] color. It's the same thing among all those who want a political position, regardless of whether they dress up in red, in blue, in green or yellow, or even in some new color. They say they are of the people and that therefore the people have to support them. But they aren't of the people, they're the same bad governments who one day are local representatives, the next day are union leaders, then they are party functionaries, and then municipal presidents. That is how they work, bouncing from one position to another and from one color to another. They are the same people as always, they have same last names, from the same families as always, the sons, grandchildren, uncles, nephews, relatives, brothers-in-law, boyfriends, lovers, and friends of the same assholes[2] as always. They always say the same thing: that they are going to save the people; that this time they are going to behave themselves; that now they won't steal so much; that they are going to help those who have nothing; and that they're going to pull them out of poverty.

Well, then they spend their little money, which by the way is not theirs but rather what they take from tax revenue. But those assholes don't spend that money to help those who are down-and-out. No, they spend it on their political propaganda, putting up posters and photos, buying radio advertisements and TV spots, placing ads in newspapers and magazines, and even buying time at the movies.

As soon as it's clear who won, those people in the communities who are such loyal *partidistas* during the election and so determined about which color they're supporting, all switch to the victorious color because they think that way they're going to get their little handout. For example, supposedly now they're going to give out televisions. Well, as Zapatistas, we say that what the people are being given is a garbage can because through this television what they are getting is a mountain of garbage. Regardless of whether the parties give out what was promised, at this point they can't and won't give them anything at all.

If the parties gave them anything, well, it was in order to make them lazy. The people even forgot how to work the land. They're just there, waiting for the next government handout to arrive so they can waste it on booze. And there they are in their houses, making fun of *us* because we are *working* the land, while they just sit there waiting for their wife or daughter to return from collecting the government's handout that they sent her to go pick up.

It goes on like this until the day comes that the handout doesn't arrive. There is no notice that the handouts will stop; it isn't announced in the paid press and no one comes any longer to tell them that they are their saviors. The handouts dry up. At that point, these brothers and sisters realize that they have nothing; that there is no money for booze, but there's also no money for corn, beans, soap, or underwear. So they have to return to the land that they had abandoned, now so overgrown that they can't even walk through it. Since they have forgotten how to work, soon their hands are covered in blisters and they can't even hold a machete. That's how useless they have become living off of handouts from the government instead of working.

This is already happening. They don't talk about it in the news that's controlled by the bad government. Quite the contrary, the news says that there is a ton of government programs. But none of this is getting to the people. Where does the money go that the government says it's spending on handouts in the campaign against poverty? Well, we know that those above have already told these brothers and sisters that there is going to be less money or that there isn't going to be any money at all. Do you really think that if the *campesinos* who were getting hand-outs stopped working, that those above distributing the handouts still work? Of course not. That guy above is also accustomed to getting something for nothing. He doesn't know how to live honorably from his own work; he only knows how to live off his government position.

Well, now that there is less money, there are no handouts. All of the money remains up above. The governor takes a chunk; the judge takes some, so do the police, a bit goes to the local representative, some to the municipal president, some to the administrator, some to the *campesino* leader and well, there's nothing left for the *partidista* families. Before there was a little something, but now there's nothing. "What's happening?" ask the *partidistas*.

They think that this is happening because their chosen [political party] color is failing and so they try another color. But the result is the same. In their assemblies, the *partidistas* get angry. They shout and accuse each other of things, they call each other corrupt, traitors, and sell-outs. Ultimately, it's *both* the ones who are shouting and being shouted at who are corrupt, traitors, and sell-outs.

So the ones that they call the base of the party lose hope, they start to worry and to feel bad. They stop joking because they realize that in the Zapatista homes there is corn, beans, vegetables, and a little bit of money for medicine and clothes. Our collective labor helps us support one another when there is a necessity. And for us, there is a clinic and there is a school. None of this is because the government has come to help us. We ourselves have helped one another as Zapatista *compañeros* and *compañeroas* of the Sixth.

So the *partidista* brother comes to us all sad and asks us what to do, saying that he is screwed. Well, you know what we say to him:

We don't tell him that he should change to another party—the one that is now the least bad option. We don't tell him to vote. Nor do we tell him not to vote. We don't tell him that he should become a Zapatista because we already know, from our history, that not everyone has the strength or heart to be a Zapatista. We don't make fun of him. We tell him that he should organize, plain and simple.

“And then what do I do?” he asks.

We say to him:

“Then you will see for yourself what to do, what emerges in your heart and your head. No one else is going to tell you what to do.”

And he says,

“The situation is really bad.”

We don't lie to him, grandstand, or make speeches. We tell him the truth:

“It's going to get worse.”

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Well, we know that that's how things are.

But as Zapatistas, we are clear that there are still people, in other parts of the city and countryside, who fall into the same trap as the *partidistas*. Being involved with the party seems very attractive, because you can get money without doing any work, without toiling away to make a few cents and have something dignified to eat, to clothe yourself and be able to take care of your health.

But what those above do is deceive people. That is their job and that is how they survive. And we see that there are still people who believe them, who still think that yes, the situation is going to get better, and that this leader is going to fix their problems. They still believe that this one is going to behave himself and not steal so much, and that he'll only be involved in a couple of dodgy dealings. So they give him a chance.

We say that these are pieces of little histories that have to play themselves out, that people have to learn for themselves that no one will solve their problems for them. We say that instead we will have to solve these problems ourselves, as organized collectives. It is the people who create solutions, not leaders or parties, and we're not saying this because it sounds nice, but because we see it in reality, because we are already living it.

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It could be said that a long time ago, before they became part of the institutional apparatus, some of the *partidistas* on the left sought to build awareness among the people. They weren't seeking power through elections, but rather to move people to organize themselves, struggle, and change the system—not just the government, the whole system.

Why do I say before they became *partidistas* of the institutional left? Well, because we know that there have been parties on the left that aren't involved in the dealings of the world above. They have the same form as the political parties, but they don't sell out, or give up, or change their belief that we must end the capitalist system. We as Zapatista know—and we don't forget—that the history of struggle from below has also been written with their blood. But money is money, and above is above, and the *partidistas* of the institutional left have changed their thinking, and now they seek paid positions. It's that simple, money—in other words, they're looking to get paid.

Do you really think that it's possible to create political consciousness by disdain, humiliating, and scolding those below? Do you think it's possible to do this by telling those below that they're a bunch of freeloaders^[3] who don't think? By telling them that they are ignorant? Do you think that you create political consciousness by asking people to vote for you while simultaneously telling them that they're fools who would sell out for a television? When someone says to you, "hey you, *partidista* of the left, this asshole who says that he's the hope for the future actually used to work for the other colors [parties] and he's still a

rat,” do you think that you create consciousness by responding that whoever says this has sold out to Peña Nieto? Do you think that you create political consciousness by lying to people and telling them that we Zapatistas tell people not to vote, when actually you’re just reacting to the fact that you don’t have enough people on your voter rolls [to be recognized as an official party], that is, enough people to guarantee that you’ll receive [government] money and so you’re simply looking for someone to blame? Do you think that you create consciousness by having the same people work in your party who just recently used to be yellow, or red, or green or blue? Do you think that you create consciousness by saying that people who have no formal education shouldn’t vote and that they are poor because they are ignorant fools who only vote for the PRI?

If in Chiapas, Velasco literally slaps people,^[4] those *partidistas* slap people around with their poorly-hidden racism. It is clear that the only thing about which those *partidistas* are creating consciousness is that in addition to being arrogant, they’re also idiots. What do these *partidistas* think? That after being insulted, lied to, and scolded, the people from below are going to get down on their knees in front of their color, vote for them, and beg to be saved?

We Zapatistas say that here is the proof that in order to be a party politician above, one has to be shameless, a fool, a criminal—or all three.

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We say that we shouldn’t be afraid of having the people rule. It is the healthiest and most just way. It is the people themselves who are going to make the changes that are truly necessary. It is the only way that a new system of government is going to exist. It’s not that we don’t understand what choosing a candidate or participating in an election means. It’s just that we Zapatistas have a different calendar and geography for how to have elections in rebel territory, in resistance. We have our own ways in which the people truly choose, and not through spending millions, much less producing tons of plastic rubbish and posters with photos of rats and criminals.

It is true that it’s been barely 20 years now that we’ve been choosing our autonomous authorities through real democracy. But this is how we have been able to move forward, with the freedom that we have achieved for ourselves and with an ‘other’ justice, that of an organized people. Here thousands of women and men are involved in the process of electing our authorities and everyone comes to agreement and organizes to ensure compliance with the mandate of the people. It is a system where the people organize to determine the work that will be undertaken by those authorities. In other words, the people command their government.

The people organize in assemblies where they begin to express their opinions, and from there, proposals emerge, and these proposals are studied for their advantages and disadvantages to decide which one is best. Before making a decision, the proposals are taken back to the people and the assembly for approval. In this way, a decision can be made in accordance with the majority of the communities.

This is Zapatista life in the communities. It has become our culture. Does this all seem very slow to you? That is why we say we do things according to our calendar. Do you think we can only do this because we are indigenous peoples? That is why we say that it is according to our geography. It is true that we have made many mistakes and have had many failures. It is also true that we will have more. But they are our failures. We make them and we pay for them.

This is different than in the political parties where the leaders make mistakes, where they even get paid for them, and then those below pay the price. That is why the elections coming in the month of June mean nothing to us either way. We don't call for people to vote, nor do we call for them not to vote. It just doesn't interest us. What's more, it doesn't worry us. What interests us as Zapatistas is knowing how to resist and confront the many heads of the capitalist system that exploits us, represses us, disappears us, and steals from us.

It is not just in one place or in one way that capitalism oppresses you. It oppresses you if you're a woman. It oppresses you if you're a white-collar worker. It oppresses you if you're a blue-collar worker. It oppresses you if you're a *campesino*. It oppresses you if you're a young person. It oppresses you if you are a child. It oppresses you if you're a teacher. It oppresses you if you're a student. It oppresses you if you're an artist. It oppresses you if you think. It oppresses you if you are human or plant or water or earth or air or animal. It doesn't matter how many times they wash or perfume it, the capitalist system is still "dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (it's on you to figure out who wrote this and where).[5]

So our idea isn't to promote voting. It's also not to promote abstention or nullifying your vote. It's not to provide recipes for how to confront capitalism. Nor is it to impose our thinking on others.

The idea of this seminar is to look at the different heads of the capitalist system to try to understand whether it has new ways of attacking us or whether they are the same ones as before. If we are interested in other ways of thinking, it is in order to see if we are right about what we think is coming—that there will be a tremendous economic crisis that will be added to existing evils and do tremendous damage to everyone everywhere, all over the world. So if it's true that this is coming, or that it's already happening, we need to think about whether it will work to keep doing the same things that have been done before.

We think that each of us has an obligation to think, to analyze, to reflect, to critique, to find our own pace, our own way, in our own places and times. Now, I ask those of you who are reading this, whether you vote or don't vote: will it do you any harm to think about what is going on in this world that we live in, to analyze it, to understand it? Does thinking critically impede voting or abstaining from voting? Will it help us to organize or won't it?

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Finishing up on elections: Just so that it's very clear and you aren't misled about what we say and don't say. We understand that there are those who think that it is possible to change the system by voting in elections. We say that's a difficult position because it is the boss himself who organizes the elections, who decides who the candidates are, who says how, when, and where to vote, who announces who wins, and who says whether the election was legal or not. Well, there are people who think that this can work. That's fine, we don't say it can't, but we also don't say it can.

So, whether you vote for a color, for one of the washed-out colors, or you don't vote: what we say is that we have to organize ourselves and take into our own hands the decision of who governs and find a way to make them obey the people. If you already decided that you won't go vote, we don't say that's good, nor do we say that it's bad. We only say that we think that it's not enough, that besides all that, you have to organize yourselves. Of course, you also have to prepare yourself because they will blame you for the poor showing of the institutional parties of the left.

If you have already decided that you are going to vote and you already know who you will vote for, well same thing, our opinion isn't that that's good or bad. What we do say is that you should prepare yourself because you're going to be enraged by the cheating and fraud that will occur. Those in Power are experts in cheating; what's going to happen has already been decided by those above.

We also know that there are leaders who deceive the people. They say that there are only two paths to change the system: the electoral struggle or the armed struggle. They say this because they're ignorant or shameless, or both. First of all, they aren't fighting to change the system, or to take power, but to be government. That's not the same thing. They say that once they are in government, they will do good things, but they are careful to make it clear that they're not going to change the system; they're only going to get rid of the worst aspects of the system.

Perhaps they should study a little and learn that to be in government isn't to have Power. You can see that they don't realize that if they get rid of the bad parts of capitalism [as they say they want to do], then it won't be capitalism anymore. I'm going to tell you why:

because capitalism is the exploitation of man by man, of the many by the few. Even if the system includes women, it's the same. Even if it begins to include *otroas*, it's the same. It's still the system where *unoas* enrich themselves with the work of *otroas*. The *otroas* above are few, and the *otroas* below are many. If those *partidistas* say that this is fine and they just have to be careful that they don't push it too far, that's fine, let them say it.

But there are more than the two ways that they describe to get into government (the armed path and the electoral path). They forget that the government can also be bought (or have they already forgotten how Peña Nieto got there?) Not only that, but perhaps they've also forgotten that it's possible to rule without being in government. If these people say that it's only possible to get into government through weapons or elections, the only thing they are actually saying is that they don't know their own history, that they haven't studied it, that they have no imagination, and that they have no shame. It would be healthy for them to see just a little of what happens below. But they can't; their necks have cramped because they've been so set on looking above.

That is why we Zapatistas don't get tired of saying organize yourselves. Let's organize ourselves. Each person where they are must struggle to organize themselves. Let's work to organize ourselves. Let's begin by thinking how to start organizing and let's gather together in order to unite our organizations for a world where the people rule and the government obeys. In sum, as we said before, and as we say now: whether you vote or not, get organized.

And well, we Zapatistas think that we have to have good ideas in order to organize ourselves, which is to say, we need theory; we need critical thought. With critical thought we can analyze the ways of the enemy, of the one who oppresses us, exploits us, represses us, devalues us, and steals from us. But with critical thought we can also examine our own path, our own steps.

For this reason, we are calling on all of the Sixth to have meetings of thought, analysis, theory; about how you see the world, your struggle, and your history.

We call on all of you to have your own seminars and share with us the ideas that you cultivate there.

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As Zapatistas, we are going to continue governing ourselves as we already do: here the people rule and the government obeys.

As our Zapatista *compañeros* say: *Hay lum tujbil vitil ayotik*. Which means: how good it is,

the way that we are now.

Another: *Nunca ya kikitaybajtic bitilon zapatista*. Which means: we will never stop being Zapatistas.

One more: *Jatoj kalal yax chamon te yax voon sok viil zapatista*. Which means: even after I'm dead, I'll still be a Zapatista.

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast.

In the name of the EZLN, the men, women, children and elders of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation.

Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés

Mexico, April-May of 2015.

NOTES

[1] Father, or elder. A term of respect.

[2] The text uses "*cabrón*," like bully or asshole, and "*cabra*," (literally "goat"), playing with the feminine form of gendered nouns in Spanish.

[3] In the original text this is "*come-tortas*," or "sandwich-gobblers," a reference to those who accept gifts or handouts—often a sandwich at a rally—from the political parties in return for support.

[4] A reference to Chiapas governor Manuel Velasco slapping an assistant at a public event on December 9, 2014, which was caught on camera.

[5] From Karl Marx' *Capital Volume 1*, Chapter 31.

Anselm Jappe: Politics Without Politics

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STUDENTS, USING TRASH CAN LIDS AS SHIELDS, MARCHING IN PARIS, FRANCE IN MAY 1968.
MARC RIBOUD.

At first, the “primacy of politics” was a pet notion of Hitler’s jurist, Carl Schmitt. But for some time now the “radical” left has hitched its wagon to a “return of the political” in which “politics” *per se* is looked on as the polar opposite of the “market.” Must it be taken then as an article of faith that opposition to capitalism, or to its contemporary excesses, goes via what is commonly called politics? It is clear that nothing would have changed if Ségolène Royal, the 2007 French Socialist Party candidate for president, had been elected instead of rightist Nicolas Sarkozy. But even if the Trotskyists, who have taken over from the social democrats turned liberals, were to share power in France, they would not exactly rock the world to its foundations. In Germany, the “Party of Democratic Socialism” takes part in regional government; in Italy, *Rifondazione Comunista* had cabinet posts; even the Italian *Centri sociali*, often considered the cutting edge of dissent, send a few deputy mayors to city hall. Everywhere, these representatives of the “radical” left end up supporting neoliberal policies. Therefore, should “truly” radical parties be formed that would never sink into the

same quagmire? Or are the reasons for these “betrayals” structural? Does every involvement in politics inevitably lead to surrender to the market and its laws, regardless of any subjective intentions to the contrary?

It would therefore make sense to ask a basic question: what is meant by the term “politics”? The whole topic is home to a confusion similar to the one that bedevils “labor” and its critique. Criticising labor makes no sense at all if it is identified with productive activity as such, which is undoubtedly a fact of life present in every human society. But everything changes if by labor we understand what this word actually denotes in capitalist society: the self-referential expenditure of mere labor power regardless of its content. Thought of in this way, labor is an historical phenomenon that exists only in capitalist society and that can be criticized and eventually abolished. Indeed, the “labor” that all the actors on the political stage, left, right, and center, want to save is labor as understood in this narrow sense. Likewise, the concept of “politics” must be clearly defined. If it is identified with collective action, with the conscious intervention of men in society, with “love of the world” (Arendt), it is obvious that it enjoys unanimous support and that a “critique of politics” could only be understood as mere indifference to the world. But those who regularly advocate a “return to politics” have a much more specific idea of what “politics” is: the politics whose alleged disappearance causes them such serious withdrawal symptoms. The ritual evocation of “politics” as the only possible way to change the world is the core concept of today’s “left,” from the Bourdieusian sociologists to *Multitude*, from ATTAC to the “radical” electoral left. Despite their explicit intention to create a “completely different” politics, they still lapse into “realism” and the “lesser evil,” take part in elections, comment on referendums, discuss the possible evolution of the Socialist Party, seek to make alliances and seal some “historic compromise” or other. Faced with this desire to “play the game”—and almost always as a “representative” of some “interest”—movements and moments of radical opposition that embraced “anti-politics” should be recalled: from the historical anarchists to the artistic avant-gardes, from certain movements in the global South, such as *Critica Radical* in Fortaleza, Brazil, to the wildcat strike of May ’68 in France and the continuous state of insubordination in Italian factories during the 1970s. This “anti-politics” is just as far removed from the refusal of conscious intervention as “anti-art,” the rejection of art by Dadaists, Surrealists, or Situationists which was not a rejection of artistic means but, on the contrary, was conceived as the only way to remain faithful to the original intentions of art.

But can anyone seriously believe that politics is the social sphere that might allow limits to be placed on the market? Or that politics is “democratic” by nature and opposed to the capitalist economic world, where the survival of the fittest is the rule?

Modern capitalist society, based on the commodity and universal competition, requires a body that takes care of those public structures without which it could not exist. This body is the state, and politics, in the modern (and narrow) sense of the term, is the struggle to

assume control over the state. But this sphere of politics is not external or an alternative to the sphere of the commodity economy. On the contrary, it is structurally dependent on it. In the political arena, the object of contention is the distribution of the fruits of the commodity system—the workers' movement has essentially played this role—but not its actual existence. The visible proof: nothing is possible in politics that has not been previously "funded" by commodity production, and whenever the latter goes off the rails, politics becomes a clash between armed gangs. This kind of "politics" is a secondary regulatory mechanism within the fetishistic and unconscious commodity system. It is not a "neutral" body or a victory that opposition movements snatched from the capitalist bourgeoisie. Indeed, the bourgeoisie is not necessarily hostile to the state or the public sphere; that all depends on the historical moment.

Contemporary advocates of "politics" distort the original goal of "action" because they reduce it to mere tinkering with a machine which has come to be accepted as such. Today, "action" must face situations that are far too serious to be confronted with the out-dated means of politics. The new arena is that of a real anthropological transformation, which is both the result of over two centuries of capitalism and, in the course of the last few decades, of its increasingly visible programmed self-destruction. This regression is leading to *barbarisation*. Given the increasing frequency of incidents—such as the one involving teenagers who laughed as they used a camera phone to film a dead female classmate of theirs who had just been run over by a bus so that they could later upload the video to YouTube—it is somewhat inadequate to resort to unemployment, the casualization of labor, or the shortcomings of our schools as an explanation. Rather, we are witnessing a generalized, albeit inconsistent, "anthropological regression" which appears to be the product of a deep-seated collective mental disorder, of a narcissistic psychosis bequeathed by commodity fetishism and the relation it imposes on the way individuals interact with the world. No one can honestly offer any effective short-term remedies in the face of this crisis of civilization. Indeed, precisely because the situation is so serious, the circumstances call on us to do something, anything, right now, on the grounds that there is zero time for discussion and that *praxis* is better than theory. In this age of financial and molecular capitalism, Fordist-era forms of opposition will simply not do.

A precondition for reviving the prospect for action is to break clearly and definitively away from all "politics" in the institutional sense. Today, the only possible form of "politics" is radical separation from the world of politics and its institutions of representation and delegation, in order to invent and replace it with new forms of direct intervention. In this context, it seems pointless to confer with anyone who still wishes to cast their *vote*. Those who, almost 140 years after the introduction of universal suffrage, still flock to the ballot box, only deserve the words proclaimed by Octave Mirbeau in 1888,¹ or Albert Libertad in 1906.² The conquest of the universal franchise was one of the great battles of the historic left. The right-wing voter, however, is not such a fool: sometimes he gets the little he

expects from his candidates, even when it is not in the official platform of his party (for example, toleration of tax evasion and violations of labor laws). His representatives do not betray him too much; and the voter who only votes for the candidate who is going to hire their relative or obtain vast subsidies for the farmers in his district is, after all, the most rational voter. The left-wing voter is much more stupid: although he has never obtained what he has voted for, he persists. He has obtained neither great change nor scraps. He lets himself be lulled by mere promises. That is why those who voted for Berlusconi in Italy were by no means fools: they were not just seduced by television networks, as his opponents would have everyone believe. They obtained limited, but very real, benefits from their government (and above all from its *laissez-faire* policies). But to vote again for the left after their time in government—and on this score one can only side with Mirbeau—smacks of the pathological.

The rejection of “politics” thus conceived is not the product of a mannered taste for extremism. Faced with a threatening anthropological regression, to appeal to parliament is like trying to quell a hurricane with a religious procession. The only “realistic” proposals—in the sense that they could effectively change the course of events—are of the following kind: the immediate abolition, starting tomorrow, of all television. Is there a party in the world, however, that would dare to embrace such a proposal? What measures have been adopted during the last few decades that could really slow down the advance of barbarism? It will be said that a few small steps are better than nothing. But where have such steps actually been taken? Thirty years ago, those most undaunted laid down proposals for one television-free day a week. Today, there are hundreds of television channels for the asking. If nothing has managed to stop this continuous degeneration, it means that the goals and methods were wrong and that a complete rethink is required. And it is self-evident that this cannot be done by keeping the public sweet or by appearing on television.

There are some examples of anti-political action: the “volunteer wreckers of genetically modified crops,” especially those who operate at night, thus reviving the tradition of sabotage rather than resorting to media stunts, or actions seeking to put surveillance and biometric recognition equipment out of action. The residents of Val di Susa in the Italian Alps could be cited in this respect. On various occasions they have blocked the construction of a high-speed train line in their mountains. This prevalence of “defensive” struggles does not necessarily imply the absence of a broader perspective. On the contrary, these struggles against the worst “nuisances” help to keep such a perspective open. Against the dehumanization engineered by the commodity, which threatens to put a stop once and for all to any alternative, at the very least the *possibility* of future emancipation needs to be safeguarded. This may allow for new fronts and new alliances to be created. There are issues, such as the expropriation of individuals from their own biological reproduction, publicized under the rubric of “artificial fertilization techniques,” where the positions of the modernist left are so fully consonant with the delusions of technological omnipotence

entertained by contemporary capitalism that even the Pope's stance seems to acquire an air of rationality. The opposite of barbarism is humanization. This concept is real enough, but hard to define. A feasible "policy" nowadays would be defense of the minor victories that have been historically achieved on the road to humanization, and opposition to their abolition. Contemporary capitalism is not just the economic injustice that still lies at the heart of debate, and its list of misdeeds is not even complete with the environmental disasters it causes. It is also a dismantling—a "deconstruction"—of the symbolic and psychological foundations of human culture, which is especially evident in the process of dematerialization that electronic media have brought about. With regard to this aspect of the problem, it is of no importance whether it is Sarkozy or Royal, Besancenot or Le Pen whose face appears on the small screen.

Practice still needs to be reinvented without surrendering to the demand to "do something and do it quick," which always leads to a rerun of things that were already tried and found wanting. The real problem is general isolation—one that is above all mental—within the fetishistic forms of existence affecting the alleged adversaries as well as the supporters of the commodity system.³ The struggle to break with these forms that are anchored in everyone's minds, to strip money and the commodity, competition and labor, the state and "development," progress and growth of their innocent air, relies on those "theoretical struggles" situated beyond the fixed opposition between "theory" and "*praxis*." Why should the analysis of the logic of the commodity or patriarchy be dubbed "merely" theory, whereas any strike for higher pay or any demonstration by students protesting because the university is not doing enough to prepare them for the world of work is labelled "*praxis*" or "politics"?

Thought and feeling precede men's action, and the way they act derives from what they think and feel. Changing the way men think and feel is already a form of action, of *praxis*. Once there is a clear idea, at least among a minority, of what the goals of an action are, things can rapidly unfold. May 1968 comes readily to mind in this regard, seemingly appearing out of the blue but in fact silently prepared by lucid minorities. On the other hand, we have often seen—and never more so than in the Russian Revolution—even the best opportunities for action lead in the absence of a clear theoretical grounding. Such clarification does not necessarily take place in books and conferences but must be present in people's minds. Rather than identify politics with the public institutions of commodity society, it could be identified with *praxis* in general. But this *praxis* must not be opposed to theory in some abstract way. The theory under discussion here is not the servant of *praxis*, nor its preparation, but an integral part of it. Fetishism is not a set of false representations; it is the entirety of forms—such as money—in which life *really* unfolds within a capitalist society. Every step forward in theoretical understanding, as well as its spread, is therefore in itself a practical act.

Naturally, the story does not end there. Future forms of *praxis* will no doubt be somewhat diverse and will also involve defensive struggles at the level of material reproduction (such as struggles against the casualization of labor and against the destruction of the Welfare State). While there is a need to break with “policies” that only offer to defend the commodification of the social categories constituted by fetishistic logic itself along the lines of say, “purchasing power,” it is nonetheless necessary to prevent capitalist development from destroying the basis of survival for large sectors of the population and generating new forms of poverty, which are often due more to exclusion than exploitation. Indeed, to be exploited these days has become almost a privilege compared to the fate of the masses of those who have been declared “superfluous to requirements” because they “are unprofitable” (i.e. they cannot be used profitably in commodity production). The reactions of the “superfluous,” however, take many different forms and may themselves tend towards barbarism. Victimhood is no guarantee of moral integrity. One fact is thus overriding all the others: the behavior of individuals in response to the vicissitudes of life within capitalism is not the mechanical result of their “social situation,” their “interests,” or their geographical, ethnic, or religious background, nor of their gender or sexual orientation. Nobody’s response to the collapse of capitalism into barbarism can be predicted. This is not because of the supposedly generalized “individualization” that sociologists are crowing over non-stop so as to sidestep all mention of the increasing standardization that it conceals. But the dividing lines are no longer created by capitalist development. Just as barbarism can arise anywhere, in Finnish high schools and African shantytowns, among yuppies and ghetto kids, among high-tech soldiers and unarmed rebels, so too can resistance to barbarism and the impulse for social emancipation arise anywhere (although with infinitely greater difficulty!), even where one would least expect it. While no single social *category* has squared with the forecasts of those who sought an agent of social emancipation, opposition to the inhuman conditions of life under capitalism is nevertheless always re-emerging. This landscape teeming with false friends and unexpected aid constitutes the present necessarily ill-defined terrain on which all “political recomposition” must now take place.

NOTES

1. “One thing fairly fills me with surprise. In fact, I’d even say that it leaves me dumbfounded, and that’s at the scientific moment in which I write, after countless experiences and daily scandals, there can still exist in our dear France [...] one voter, one single voter—that irrational, inorganic, hallucinatory animal—who agrees to take time out from his affairs, his dreams, and his pleasures in order to vote in favor of someone or something. If we think about it for just one instant, is this surprising phenomenon not one fit to upset the subtlest philosophies and confound reason? Where

is the Balzac who can give us the physiology of the modern elector, or the Charcot who will explain the anatomy and mentality of this incurable lunatic? ... He voted yesterday, he'll vote tomorrow, and he will always vote. Sheep go to the slaughter; they say nothing and expect nothing. But at least they don't vote for the butcher who will kill them and the bourgeois who will eat them. More bovine than cattle, more sheep-like than sheep, the elector names his butcher and chooses his bourgeois. He has fought revolutions in order to enjoy this right. ... So, my good man, go home and strike against universal suffrage" (Originally published in *Le Figaro*, November 28, 1888, and republished in Octave Mirbeau, *La Grève des électeurs*[The Electors' Strike] (Montreuil-sous-Bois: L'Insomniaque, 2007). This English translation available online at:

www.marxists.org/subject/anarchism/mirbeau/voters-strike. One hundred years after this call for a "voters strike," it is still possible, and necessary, to repeat the same arguments. Were it to be published now with a few name changes, anyone would think the text from which these lines are excerpted had been written today and not in the early days of the Third Republic. After more than a century, electors are clearly none the wiser, which, admittedly, does not amount to a very heartening state of affairs.

2. "The elector is the criminal ... The elector, the voter is you, the one accepting the status quo, the one whose support for the ballot-box sanctions all its misery, whose activity underwrites the enslavement it perpetrates ... You are a danger to we free men, we anarchists. In the danger you pose you are no different from tyrants, from the masters you choose, name, support, feed, protect with your bayonets, defend with your brute force, extol with your ignorance, legalise with your ballot papers and foist upon us by your idiocy ... If command-hungry and platitudinous candidates kowtow to your paper autocracy, if you get carried away by the incense and promises showered on you by those who have always betrayed, deceived and sold you off, it is because you are just like them ... Go on, vote! Trust your representatives, believe in your deputies, but stop complaining. You yourself have donned the yokes you bear, just as you commit the crimes whose consequences you suffer. You are master and criminal and yet ironically slave and victim too." Albert Libertad, *Le Culte de la charogne: Anarchisme, un état de révolution permanente (1897-1908)* [The Carrion Cult: Anarchism, A State of Permanent Revolution (1897-1908)] (Marseilles: Agone, 2006).
3. On the other hand, one of the new realities that anti-capitalist *praxis* must confront today is the blurring of borders between supporters and enemies of the system and in the dissemination of fragments of critical thought among numerous individuals who simultaneously participate fully in the ordinary business of this world: they read Marcuse and work in advertising, they manage businesses and donate money to the Zapatistas, they declare themselves anarchists and forge careers as administrators, etc. The need to live does not, however, imply a willingness to be played for a fool. A veritable "mithridatism" designed to arrest any awareness that might disrupt an individual life may be discerned here.

Anselm Jappe

Born in Germany in 1962, ANSELM JAPPE is one of the key proponents of “the critique of value” school in France today. He is the author of several major works of critical theory, including *Guy Debord* (University of California Press, 1999), *Les Aventures de la marchandise: pour une nouvelle critique de la valeur* (Denoël, 2003), *Crédit à mort* (2011) and, with Robert Kurz, *Les Habits neufs de l’empire* (Lignes, 2004). He currently lectures in both art history and sociology in universities across France and Italy. “Politics Without Politics” is an excerpt from a forthcoming translation of *Crédit à mort* by Alastair Hemmens, John McHale, and Mike DeSocio.