

Moving Against-and-Beyond

or

Interstitial Revolution

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1. Why are we here in Porto Alegre? To say NO. NO to war, NO to the destruction of the environment, NO to injustice and exploitation, NO to neo-liberalism, NO to capitalism. We come from a whole world of rebellions, of insubordinations, of refusals, of people saying NO to capitalism: “NO, we shall not live our lives according to the dictates of capitalism, we shall do what we consider necessary or desirable and not what capital tells us to do.” These refusals can be seen as fissures, as cracks in the system of capitalist domination. At times they are so small that even those involved do not perceive them as refusals, but often they are collective projects searching for an alternative way forward and sometimes they are as big as the lacandon jungle or the argentinazo of three years ago or the revolt in Bolivia just over a year ago.

2. All of these insubordinations are characterised by a drive towards self-determination, an impulse that says “No, you will not tell us what to do, we shall decide for ourselves what we must do.” The question of how we multiply and expand our rebellions is at the same time the question of how we strengthen the drive towards social self-determination.

What I want to do in this talk is simply to make a few points about this drive towards social self-determination.

a) I say *social* self-determination because individual self-determination does not and can not exist in any society: our doing is so interwoven with the doing of others that the individual self-determination of our doing is an illusion.

b) I say *drive towards* because social self-determination does not and can not exist in a capitalist society: capital, in all its forms, is the negation of self-determination. The drive towards self-determination is a moving against-and-beyond: a moving against the society which is based on the negation of self-determination and *at the same time* a projection beyond existing society. This is a moving outwards from where we are, a pushing against and beyond limits, a process of experimentation, not the following of a programme, but always guided by a utopian star, by the idea of conscious determination of our own lives. This drive towards self-determination is the core of the struggle to create another world.

c) The drive towards self-determination is rooted in everyday practice. The drive to self-determination is anchored in the everyday practice of its negation. If that were not the case, the struggle for communism (or for another world) would make no sense. Self-emancipation would be impossible and the only possibility

of revolution would be a revolution *on behalf of*, a revolution led by an elite which would do nothing more than lead to a restructuring of class domination. This is the terrible political-theoretical challenge hurled at us by the zapatistas in their simple statement that "We are women and men, children and old people who are quite ordinary, that is rebels, non-conformists, awkward, dreamers" (*La Jornada*, 4 de agosto de 1999).

That does not mean that everyone is a radical anti-capitalist at heart, but simply that radical anti-capitalism is part of the daily experience of capitalist oppression. The problem of organisation is not to bring consciousness from outside to inherently limited subjects, but to draw out the knowledge that is already present, albeit in repressed and contradictory form. The task is like that of the psychoanalyst who tries to make conscious that which is unconscious and repressed. But there is no psychoanalyst standing outside the subject: the "psychoanalysis" can only be a collective self-analysis – a collective self-education. This implies a politics not of talking, but of listening, or, better, of talking-listening. The revolutionary process is a collective coming-to-eruption of stifled volcanoes.

Note that this approach is not characterised in any way by a romantic assumption that people are "good", but simply by the assumption that in a society based on class antagonism, we are all permeated by this antagonism, we are all self-contradictory. The notion that we are all rebels, that revolution is ordinary,

can only be sustained if we see people as contradictory, as self-divided subjects. We are rebels fighting for the survival of humanity in one moment, then we go to the supermarket and participate actively in processes that we know are leading to the destruction of humanity. The drive towards self-determination is not a characteristic exclusive to a particular group of people but something present in contradictory form in all of us.

To put the point slightly differently: we are all composed of different, often contradictory parts. The question is how these parts are articulated. Capitalism is a form of organisation that promotes an articulation of our contradictions which is highly destructive, socially and personally. The problem of revolutionary organisation is to promote a different articulation of these parts, an articulation which promotes the distillation of creativity and the drive to social self-determination.

d) The drive towards self-determination implies a critique of representation, a moving against-and-beyond representation. Representation involves exclusion and separation. Exclusion because in choosing a representative, we exclude ourselves. In elections we choose someone to speak on our behalf, to take our place. We create a separation between those who represent and those who are represented and we freeze it in time, giving it a duration, excluding ourselves as subjects until we have an opportunity to confirm the separation in the next elections. A world of politics is created, separate from

the daily life of society, a world of politics populated by a distinct caste of politicians who speak their own language and have their own logic, the logic of power.

e) The drive towards self-determination is not compatible with the aim of taking state power. The state as a form of organisation is the negation of self-determination.

The state is not a thing, it is not a neutral object: it is a form of social relations, a form of organisation, a way of doing things which has been developed over several centuries for the purpose of maintaining or developing the rule of capital, that is, for the purpose of excluding us from the social determination of our own lives. The state seeks to impose upon us a separation of our struggles from society, to convert our struggle into a struggle *on behalf of, in the name of*. It separates leaders from the masses, the representatives from the represented, it draws us into a different way of talking, a different way of thinking. It also draws us into a spatial definition of how we do things, a spatial definition which makes a clear distinction and a clear distinction between citizens and foreigners. The state excludes and fragments us.

The drive towards self-determination moves in one direction, the attempt to win state power moves in the opposite direction. The former starts to knit a self-determining community, the latter unravels the knitting.

f) The drive towards self-determination moves against-and-beyond representation, against-and-beyond the state and, above all, against-and-beyond labour.

Although the issue of democracy and the organisation of assemblies attracts more attention, the central problem that underlies all attempts to develop the drive towards self-determination is the movement of doing against labour. If by labour we understand alienated labour, labour which we do not control, then clearly the drive for self-determination is a drive against labour, a drive for the emancipation of socially self-determined doing, a push towards the conscious control of the social flow of doing.

Democracy, no matter how “direct” its structures, will have relatively little impact unless it is part of a challenge to the capitalist organisation of doing as labour. That is why it is important to think not just of democracy but of communism, not just of people but of class, not just of rebellion but of revolution, meaning by that not a process of social change instigated from above by professional revolutionaries, but a social change which transforms the basic organisation of doing in society. To separate the struggle for radical democracy from the struggle of doing against labour means to overlook the anger and the

resistance that is part of the experience and tradition of the labour movement. If by communism we understand a self-determining society, then democracy means communism: it is simple, obvious and should be stated explicitly.

This is no doubt the most difficult part to conceive. How can we free ourselves from labour? Doing exists in constant revolt against labour. Collectively or individually, we are probably all involved in some sort of struggle against the alien determination of our activity – by refusing to work, by arriving late, by sabotage, by trying to shape our lives according to what we want to do and not just according to the dictates of money, By trying to infuse meaning into our activities, by coming together to form alternative projects for the organisation of our doing, by occupying factories or other places of work.

That doing exists in constant revolt against labour is clear. The more difficult question is whether it is possible for doing to move beyond labour before there is a revolutionary abolition of capitalism.

The creation of cooperatives solves nothing unless the articulation between different groups of doers is tackled at the same time. The move towards self-determination cannot be seen simply in terms of particular activities but must inevitably embrace the articulation between those activities, the re-articulation of the social flow of doing (not just production, but production and circulation). The drive to self-determination cannot be understood in terms of the creation of

autonomies, but necessarily involves a moving beyond those autonomies. Factory occupations or the creation of cooperatives are insufficient unless they are part of a movement, that is, unless they simultaneously reach beyond to the creation of new articulations between people who are beyond the particular cooperative project.

The only way that we can begin to answer this problem is by thinking of it as movement, as a constant moving against-and-beyond labour.

3. It is clear that revolution is both necessary and urgent. It is clear too that the only way in which we can think of revolution is interstitially, as the growth and spread of different social relations in the interstices of capitalism. All these interstices are different, but what they have in common is the drive towards self-determination. It is clear that the way forward is full of problems, but that is why we are here – to discuss these problems.

Additional note: *Does this mean that we should have no contact at all with the state? Does it in certain circumstance make sense to say: "we are building forms of self-determination and we know that the state is a process of negating self-determination, but in spite of that, we think that, in this particular situation, struggling through the state can give us a way of strengthening or protecting our struggle for self-determination"? This is a question that is, initially at least, quite distinct from the question of taking state power. There are many people who quite clearly reject the notion of taking state power but nevertheless see it as important for their struggle to influence or gain control of parts of the state apparatus.*

This is a difficult question. Most of us cannot avoid contact with the state. We have, as it were, a "situational" contact with the state: our situation, our condition in life brings us into contact with the state, we are forced to engage with the state in some way. This may be because of our employment, or because we depend on state unemployment subsidies or because we use public transport, or whatever. The question is how we deal with this contact and the contradictions that are inseparable from it. I work as a professor in a state institution: this channels my activity into forms which promote the reproduction of capital: authoritarian forms of teaching and grading, for example. By working in the state (or in any other employment) I am actively involved in the reproduction of capital, but, in spite of that I try to struggle against the state form to strengthen the drive towards self-determination. Living in capital means that we live in the midst of

contradiction. It is important to recognise these contradictions rather than to brush them under the carpet with a "but also". It is important to understand our engagement with the state in such situations as a movement in-and-against the state, as a movement in-against-and-beyond the forms of social relations which the existence of the state implies.

Can we extend this argument to extra-situational, chosen contact with the state? Can we say, for example: "we, in this social centre, are struggling for the development of a self-determining society; we know that the state is a capitalist state and therefore a form opposed to self-determination; nevertheless, in spite of this, we think that, by controlling our local council, we can strengthen our movement against capitalism"?¹ This is essentially the argument made by certain social centres in Italy and by movements in Brazil, Argentina and elsewhere.

Probably the validity of such arguments for a voluntary, chosen contact with the state will always depend on the particular conditions: there is no golden rule, no purity to be sought. Thus, for example, the Zapatistas in Chiapas make an important principle of not accepting any support from the state, whereas many urban pro-zapatista groups in different parts of the world accept that they cannot survive without some form of state support (be it in the form of unemployment assistance or student grants or – in some cases - legal recognition of their right

¹ One of the most impressive experiences in the discussion of this book was the discussion that took place in the Centro Sociale of Garbatella in Rome, where one of the leading members of the Centro Sociale (Massimiliano Smeriglio) is also president of the local municipality (Municipio XI of Rome).

to occupy a social centre). The important thing, perhaps, is not to paint over the contradictions, not to hide the antagonistic nature of the undertaking with phrases such as "participatory democracy", not to convert the but in spite of into a but also.² But the translation of "in spite of" into "but also" is precisely what is involved in our contact with the state. Engagement with the state is never innocent of consequences: it always involves the pulling of action or organisation into certain forms (leadership, representation, bureaucracy) that move against the drive to self-determination.³ The crushing force of institutionalisation should never be underestimated, as experience in all the world has shown, time and time and time again.

² It is precisely because of the practical difficulty of such situations that it is important to emphasise that the state is a specifically capitalist form of social relations. This can be too easily lost in analyses that point to the contradictory nature of the state: see Mabel Thwaites Rey. The fact that the state (like any phenomenon in an antagonistic society) is contradictory does not mean that it (like capital, like value, like money) is not a specifically capitalist form of social relations, a form of organisation that impedes the drive towards social self-determination.

³ Armando Bartra's (2003, 134) metaphor of wearing a condom in our contact with the state is suggestive, but underestimates the force of institutionalisation.