Introduction

Reinventing the Lefts in Latin America

Critical Perspectives from Below

by

Sara C. Motta

The Venezuelan popular educator and activist Joel Linares tells us, in Pablo Navarrete’s 2009 film *Inside the Revolution*, that “one morning in Guarenas, behind the mountains [on the outskirts of Caracas], at 5 a.m. on February 27, 1989, a woman tried to get on the bus. When she refused to pay the new bus fare, the driver pushed her. When the driver pushed her, that was the beginning of everything. . . . The other passengers . . . got up from their seats and attacked the bus with sticks and then turned it upside down and burned it.” The popular uprising known as the Caracazo that emerged from this event turned isolated acts of resistance into mass rebellion and challenged “normal” politics. Those who had been silenced by the elite pact of developmentalism and its descent into neoliberalism began to speak as political subjects. The Caracazo marked the beginning of a new era of popular struggle in Venezuela and, arguably, across Latin America.

As Mendieta (2008: xii) argues, the ideological prophets and political architects of neoliberalism sought to create an age of “the abolition of politics.” This “antipolitics” was primarily an effort to disarticulate, delegitimize, and criminalize popular-class political horizons and imaginaries, projects, subjectivities, moral economies, and ways of life. The embodied and visceral rupture of the Caracazo signaled the emergence of cracks in neoliberal elites’ ability to speak for Latin America’s popular classes. The fault lines in this project of antipolitics deepened in the following decade and eventually resulted in the election to power of various governments falling under the broad rubric of the “pink tide,” including those of Luiz Ignácio (Lula) da Silva of the Workers’ Party in Brazil, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and Evo Morales in Bolivia, and the development of social-movement and community struggles—the recovered-factories movement in Argentina, the Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers’ Movement—MST) in Brazil, the water movements in Uruguay, the indigenous movements in Ecuador and Bolivia, the urban land committees in Venezuela,

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and women’s community work in Mexico, to name but a few. Our intention in this issue is to open the way for the exploration of the reinvention of Latin American lefts that this tide represents. Specifically, its focus is on the way in which this reinvention is being developed from below, the challenges it presents to twentieth-century political categories and conceptualizations of left alternatives, and the possibilities and contradictions of these new forms of popular politics. This focus was chosen because, as Ana Ceceña (2012: 118) points out, “places of dislocation and epistemological invention . . . are created on a daily basis. It is from such spaces that the new world springs.”

Transgressing traditional left conceptualizations of popular political subjectivities and the nature of political and social change, the reinvention of Latin American lefts from below presents a challenge to the dominant androcentric social-cultural matrix of the twentieth-century left, in which organized labor was often viewed as the key agent of popular struggle and the state as the key political tool of social transformation. This was combined with particular forms of political organization—the party and the union, for example—and expressed in a laborist moral economy and political culture in which the key site of political struggle was often the workplace as opposed to the home or the community (see Leiva, 2012, for an analysis of this in the case of the Chilean labor movement). According to Enrique Dussel (2008: xvi), these new movements and events “represent signs of hope, in the face of which we must begin to create a new theory. This new theory cannot merely respond to the presuppositions of the last five hundred years of capitalist and colonialist modernity; it cannot set out from bourgeois postulates or from those of real ‘socialism.’”

Rather, it must first, as Ceceña (2012: 118) explains, develop knowledge for and by those excluded from and on the margins of political power and theory production. Second, it must speak from the placed body or the particular (Gutiérrez, 2012: 61) and thus from the experience of oppression. Third, it must foster the emergence of subjects historically rejected and ignored by capitalist colonial modernity (Mignolo, 2009). In Ceceña’s words, “Speaking about and from these knowledges involves putting them, from the beginning, on a different plane from the practices of power that have condemned popular learning. . . . It is necessary to dislocate the planes, moving from a Euclidean plane to another (or to others) with multiple perspectives that break up and expand the dimensions of understanding, opening them to the penetration of other cosmologies.”

This new theory is not created by positing a dichotomous history of popular struggle that undercuts the role of history and popular traditions or ignores the repertoires of protest and political institutions characteristic of previous left struggles. Rather, it aims to make visible the historical and current micropolitics from which new popular political subjectivities and practices emerge. Many of the analyses in this issue focus on histories of struggle influenced by, for example, liberation theology, popular education, struggles over land, housing, and habitat, and the left traditions of the twentieth century. Today’s reinvention occurs in dialogue with these traditions.

The development of new concepts and theories is embedded in a commitment to a politics of knowledge that begins from the ground up and builds from the realities of popular politics in community struggles, movement organizing, and everyday life. The contributors to this issue approach the task of
analyzing the reinvention of lefts from below through fine-grained empirical analysis, ethnography, and participant and activist scholarship that builds upon the practical-theoretical contributions of the movements themselves. They foreground the multiplicity that is at the heart of this reinvention and the necessity to speak and theorize in the plural. In speaking with, through, and about new forms of popular politics they suggest—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—that what is being experienced and built in Latin America is not a model that can be transported from one place to another but emerges from concrete places, bodies, traditions, cosmologies, spatialities of power, forms of capital and the state, and histories of struggle.

The urgency of comparative engagement with the reinvention of the lefts from below is not only empirical and political but historiographical and ethical. As many of the contributors to this issue argue, the communities, subjects, and movements that are the lifeblood of this reinvention are commonly “spoken over” by discourses that misname and misrepresent their struggles. These misrepresentations are enacted not only through bourgeois accounts but also through the conceptual framings of much twentieth-century-left-inspired thought and practice. As Diniz and Gilbert (in this issue) show, such discourse colored the MST’s initial development, in which the leadership criticized the camponeses for “an isolationist attitude with respect to union organizing” that was “structurally incompatible . . . with the development of character and social participation.” This was a misreading of camponês culture in that it missed the complex interplay of tradition, culture, and meaning in the sociabilities, moral economies, and forms of anticapitalist labor relations that developed in MST settlements. As I note in my article on the feminization of resistance in Venezuelan shantytowns, the private has often been ignored as a site of value production, and thus community-based struggles over social reproduction such as access to health care, education, and housing have largely been viewed as secondary in revolutionary change. Traditional conceptual and political categories blind us to the complexities and intricacies of the popular political processes being developed. The contributors therefore suggest the need to stretch our understanding of the content, form, and nature of left politics and political subjectivities.

Foregrounded in many of the contributions is commitment to a methodology that begins from the specificity of the place of the community and movement experience, such as the participatory qualitative research of Diniz and Gilbert with the MST. This approach enables engagement with the lived realities and complexities of the everyday construction of social relationships, sociabilities, strategies, solidarities, and practices. Importantly, none of the contributors suggest that this means confining the analysis or the development of political categories to a reified localism, which can result in a liberal relative pluralism and/or a fragmentation and conservative articulation of popular politics (Harvey, 1997; Wainwright, 1994). Instead, they suggest other methodological pathways. One of them is activist participatory and ethnographic research in which the researcher develops relationships of solidarity and trust with the movement. This enables the co-construction of research questions, design, implementation, and analysis to produce knowledge that is relevant to both movement strategic and political concerns and broader political/theoretical debates. This approach draws on the work of activist scholars such
as Bevington and Dixon (2005), Chatterton (2008), Mohanty (2003), and Wainwright (1994). A second approach is border thinking, which privileges the margins, the oppressed, and the excluded. It conceptualizes research practice as enabling the creation of connections between movements in order to foster reflection on practice and strategic development. It enacts a research ethics committed to revealing the practices, knowledge, ways of life, and philosophies of those otherwise excluded and marginalized from theory production and political power (see Motta, 2012, for an example of border thinking and Ceeña, 2012, for an analysis of the relationship between emancipatory struggles and the politics of knowledge).

In both of these approaches there is a clear politics and ethics of knowledge that politicizes not only the content but the process of knowledge production—that builds upon communities’ lived realities and embodied experiences of oppression to develop theories and strategies capable of transforming those conditions. These approaches politicize the traditional division of labor between the thinker/analyst/knower and the known and replace it with methodologies and pedagogies that reflect the democratic and participatory practices that many of these movements are forging (see, e.g., Chukaitis, 2009; Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Mignolo, 2009; Motta, 2011a).

The contributors to the issue have engaged with the task of theorizing the reinvention of Latin American lefts from below in a number of ways. Some have developed hybrid critical political economy frameworks that involve conversations between Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci (1971) and Lefebvre (1991), engaging with Marxist social movement analysis such as that developed by Petras and Veltemeyer (2005) or revitalizing and developing Marxist feminist theory as in the work of Federici (2004). Others have engaged with thinkers from the Latin American subalternist and postcolonial tradition such as Mignolo (2009), creating hybrid conversations between autonomist and more orthodox Marxist accounts. Still others have developed an epistemology arising from the philosophical and theoretical traditions of the movements themselves. Each theoretical framing enables engagement with different elements of this reinvention—spatiality and temporality, subjectivity, everyday cultures and religiosity, relationships with the state, the “pink tide” government, and/or the market, and movement cosmologies.

What unites the different approaches is neither their foci nor their underlying assumptions about the political but that they come from the margins of the accepted scholarly repertoires of politics. Because of the plurality of their foci and their assumptions, they are able to weave a rich tapestry of insights that reflects the multiplicity and the tensions in the popular political struggles that are being played out across the continent. We hope to contribute to the empirical mapping of the reinvention of Latin American lefts from below and develop theory that will be of use to critical scholars who seek to engage with this reinvention in Latin America and beyond.

**COUNTER-SPATIALITIES**

As the contributors to this issue demonstrate, many of the popular movements and community struggles that participate in the reinvention of the lefts
of the region involve occupations of physical space. Yet, as Diniz and Gilbert argue (quoting Almeida), the fulfillment of the MST’s goals “requires not merely the occupation of land but ‘the whole conjuncture of actions carried out to this end.’” It is this “conjuncture of actions” that makes all the difference in turning a land occupation into an embodiment of socialist values. Thus, what is at issue is not just the physical occupation of land but a challenge to the colonization of space by neoliberal capitalist logics through the creation of counter-spatialities. This challenge occurs along multiple axes—political, social, economic, cultural, epistemological, embodied, affective, and cosmological—and reinvents the political.

**REINVENTING THE POLITICAL**

**A POLITICS OF LIFE**

Out of these counter-spatialities come new conceptions of the political. First, there is a politics of life that cuts to the very heart of the logics of neoliberal globalization, in which large sections of the popular classes become disposable, reduced to conditions of bare life in which they are unable to ensure their social reproduction and survival (see Agamben, 1998; Rancière, 2004). Yet from these conditions emerge struggles that challenge the foundations of capitalist accumulation. Paradigmatic of this is the contribution of Philipp Terhorst, Marcela Olivera, and Alexander Dwinell, who point out that “the basis of water movements in a ‘commons’ approach generates . . . a renewed reference point for the community and alternative community economies of water. The activists themselves see it as a new kind of politics, a new kind of economics, and a new model of life that has far-reaching implications for politics and society in general.” It is from concrete and particular struggles for basic resources that practices are developed that enable the flourishing, remembering, and reinvention of cosmologies, social relationships, and political imaginaries. This prefigurative politics challenge the basis of capitalism by enacting an alternative basis of social life.

**SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND FEMINIZED RESISTANCE**

The contributors call attention to the centrality of social reproduction as a place of resistance and popular political construction around struggles over health care, education, land ownership and use, housing, and community and family life. As Chris Hesketh points out in his article on Mexican movements, the Zapatistas have created “‘counter-spaces’ in which spatial production is based upon collective need. Collective control is asserted over space, and political activity is associated with everyday life.”

Further, because women are at the heart of the community, many of these experiences are marked by a feminization of resistance, as noted in my article (see also Motta et al., 2011). Women play key roles in the reconstruction of the possibilities of family and community social reproduction and the development of new forms of collective organization of health care, education, and land. Their resistance counters frameworks that victimize them by suggesting that they need external guidance or intervention or focus on their poverty (on
the feminization of poverty see, e.g., Chant, 2008; González de la Rocha, 2001; Olivera, 2006). It contests the individualization, isolation, and competition that mark feminized labor in neoliberal capitalism and transforms them into solidarity, dignity, and collectivity.

The contributors demonstrate that the reinvention of lefts involves a shift in focus from the political to the everyday, the private, and the informalized world of work. They highlight the urgent need to direct traditional left conceptualizations of politics and the site of political struggle away from a narrow focus on the point of production and the public script of politics to be found in political parties, unions, and the state.

**THE REFUSAL AND REIMAGINING OF CAPITALIST LABOR**

A number of contributors to this issue highlight the refusal and reimagining of capitalist labor. The new practices are often embedded in a commitment to collective need, community dignity, and the creation of solidarities of mutuality and equality. As Natalia Vanesa Hirtz and Marta Susana Giacone say in their article on Argentine recovered factories, “At first [the workers] were not aiming at controlling the company, but in the process of protecting their source of income they developed new relationships of solidarity and more horizontal forms of organization that called into question certain aspects of the established social relations.”

These struggles also result in significant subjective and affective transformations that dislodge from the hearts and minds of workers their experiences of alienation and dehumanization. An MST member told Diniz, “Before, we worked for the boss, but today we work for ourselves. . . . For me everything is better because I am no longer a prisoner. . . . To be a prisoner is to live the way the bosses want.” Emerging from the concrete struggle to defend their jobs or ensure their survival are complex and multilayered alternatives to capitalist labor relations that involve much more than control of the means of production (see Ceceña, 2012: 120–121). In these open, creative, and unpredictable struggles workers, movements, and communities are building relationships of solidarity, horizontal ways of organizing, and affective politics (see Sitrin, 2012, and Motta, 2011b, and, on the revolutionary potential of cooperative forms of production, Lebovitz, 2006). These processes have the potential to transform alienated and commodified social relationships into noncapitalist structures of feeling,3 moral economies, subjectivities, and ways of life.

**“OTHER” COSMOLOGIES AND EVERYDAY RELIGIOSITIES**

Movements build upon (and also forge) alternative cosmologies and everyday forms of spirituality and religiosity. These often act as foundational frameworks that shape the worldviews, embodied commitments, and affective landscapes of their popular political practices. Diniz and Gilbert’s and my own articles show how everyday religiosity shapes the building of moral economies and political commitments at the interface of liberation theology with disillusionment over a politics of traditional elites and traditional left forces in which peasants and shantytown-dwellers were patronized or ignored.

Everyday forms of spirituality and religiosity can also be generated out of theological traditions generally framed as conservative and depoliticizing such
as Evangelical Christianity. As Arthur Scarritt shows in his article on communities in the Peruvian highlands, the conflictual and complex terrain of everyday spirituality can foster resistance to domination and rebuild sociabilities and solidarities in communities wracked by the exclusion and violence of global capitalism. At other times, as Anna Maria Kowalczyk, writing about the Mapuche struggle in Chile, popular cultures involve a rearticulation of indigenous philosophies and cosmologies with religious beliefs and practices that, while forced on communities under colonialism, have become part of their religious practice. As Cecena (2012: 119) argues, the development of popular political horizons and cosmologies involves “people unlearn[ing] their community customs and the memories of time that reaffirm them, recreat[ing] them, and invent[ing] others, maintaining the length of the roots but multiplying the complexities, mestizajes, and variations.”

These contributions make clear that the subjectivities, moral economies, and worldviews that shape movements confound any analysis that seeks to treat their beliefs and practices as backward or as false consciousness. Rather, they suggest the complexities of subaltern subjectivities, the methodological imperative of learning to listen, and the necessity of building conceptual and political categories that engage in solidarity, recognition, and humility with popular moral economies and cultural practices.

NEW POPULAR LEFT SUBJECTIVITIES

Many of the articles in this issue show that it is not political parties, institutions, or charismatic leaders that have been pivotal in the building of a new popular politics but largely invisible labor-intensive community organizing: projects involving art, music, photography, and theater as tools of critical understanding, bible study groups that link the reading of the New Testament with the struggle for social justice and paradise on earth, and communal meals in the street to bring people together to talk and break down the individualization that often afflicts poor communities. These everyday processes of construction, often exhausting and often lonely, rarely result in visible political events, but it is only through this kind of creative, unpredictable, and painstaking work that the foundations for the reconstruction of structures of feeling, narratives of understanding, relationships of solidarity, and cultures of resistance can be built.

Many of the articles also show that at the heart of these processes are new popular political subjects—the shantytown-dweller, the precarious and unemployed worker, the black single mother, the illiterate peasant, the indigenous. Often presented as passive victims of poverty and exclusion, uneducated, lacking consciousness, and only secondary agents in the struggle for social and political change, they are taking center stage in the struggle for left alternatives. Their assumption of this position suggests the need for decentering of conceptual and political frameworks that mask the processes of political construction from which they emerge.

IN, AGAINST, AND BEYOND REPRESENTATION

The political practices and institutional logics that crisscross all the experiences examined in this issue are marked by differing commitments to participation,
voice, mutuality, and self-government or what Marina Sitrin calls “horizontalism.” For movements such as the MST, the urban land committees in Venezuela, and the movements in Oaxaca, these commitments and practices were influenced by liberation theology—a radical and popular Catholic tradition characterized by an ethical commitment to the body of suffering poor, faith realized through action for the oppressed, the Bible reread collectively, a focus on direct access to the word of God, and a commitment to self-actualization of the oppressed through their own liberation (Boff and Boff, 1987: 1–9). As Boff and Boff (1987: 9) describe it, it is a biblical frame of reference in which “knowing implies loving, letting oneself become involved body and soul, commune wholly—being committed.” In the collective practices and moral economies inflected by this tradition, all had the right to speak and to play a part in realizing their faith and self-liberation.

In other movements the combination of indigenous cosmologies with elements of Catholicism in Ecuador and Chile and Evangelical Christianity in Peru has produced popular beliefs, ways of life, and community forms of social reproduction. These tend to be organized around the common good and created through relationships of respect for each other and the land, with all living things being viewed as possessing divine energy. These hybrid spiritual practices and cultures have contributed to the creation of structures of feeling, moral economies, and participatory forms of politics and community life. These traditions of popular organizing have created fertile terrain for the development of postrepresentative forms of politics and institutionality. As Kowalczyk says, “In this context, various Mapuche organizations began to distance themselves from the traditional left and political parties and demanded autonomy. The idea of autonomy . . . is oriented toward restoration to the social body of the power to control its resources and way of life.”

The existence of horizontal political practices and cultures does not mean that representative forms of politics are absent from movement practice; in fact the two forms coexist. However, the new forms of popular left politics are stretching traditional conceptions of the political beyond their representative foundations. In the process they challenge the separation between private and public and everyday life and politics upon which they were often premised, the division between leaders and led that they reinforced, and the separation between thinkers and doers that they fostered (see also Day, 2005; Holloway, 2002; Motta, 2011a; Santos, 2007; Sitrin, 2012).

Thus, movement organizing often focuses on postrepresentative practices and horizontal forms in the pursuit of self-government. However, movements are also involved with left political parties and mediate contradictory relationships with left and left-of-center governments. The tensions between these practices and processes in everyday political organizing and the politics of the state and government bring us to two sites of contradiction highlighted in these contributions: the movements’ relationships with left governments and the internal contradictions in community practice.

IN, AGAINST, AND BEYOND THE CAPITALIST STATE

Terhorst, Olivera, and Dwinell’s analysis of national water movements in Uruguay, Bolivia, and Ecuador reveals contradictory relationships between the movements and left governments. These contradictions, they argue, are
conditioned by structural dependencies and institutional weaknesses, and consequently the movements have failed to develop state-society relations conducive to sector transformation. They argue that the effective implementation of left alternatives “requires, even at the risk of ongoing conflict, forms of interaction between movements and governments that respect the autonomy of the people, reduce predominant capitalist dependencies, and transform the state.”

Kowalczyk suggests that the Mapuche movements that have strategically opted for incorporation into the institutions of national or regional decision making have seen their struggles co-opted by the dominant rationality of neoliberalism. In contrast, the movements whose strategic focus is the (re)invention of indigenous politics that contest this dominant rationality have achieved some autonomy but also entered into “direct confrontation with the modern ‘gardening’ state, which does not tolerate difference unless it is compatible with its homogenizing project.” As a result, they often face the violent coercive force of the state and government.

Kowalczyk argues that the creation of sustainable experiences of self-government is fundamental to the development of left alternatives to neoliberalism, and this brings us to the second site of contradiction—the internal contradictions in movement and community practice. Scarritt, reflecting on the revolutionary influence of Evangelical Christianity in highland Peru, suggests that while it contributed to the community’s ability to challenge some political forms of dominant power and build sociability and collectivity, it also reinforced conservative norms of family life and gendered social relationships. Thus women were often excluded from positions of authority and relegated to the private realm. My research shows that while women’s central role in the urban land committees enables them to build dignity, collective agency, and revolutionary epistemologies, these achievements are contradictory with the traditional roles of subservient wife and mother rearticulated in the home and with Chávez’s gendered discourse, which casts women as caregivers and nurturers providing the context but not the content of the revolution. These contradictions often result in women’s bearing the triple burden of paid, domestic, and political work. This can lead to the reproduction of patterns of self-sacrifice in which they neglect their own physical, emotional, and material needs.

The contributors suggest that the possibility of constructing sustainable left alternatives, whether these work through the capitalist state, are in conflict with the state and experience repression and delegitimization, or seek to create a left politics of counter-spaces, will have to find ways of politicizing and transforming these contradictions.

ON THE PEDAGOGICAL TURN

It is here that the role of the pedagogical takes center stage, with “pedagogical” used broadly to refer to an articulation of educational aims and processes in social, ethical, spiritual, and affective as well as cognitive relationships. Pedagogical practices help to constitute the processes of unlearning dominant subjectivities, social relationships, and ways of constituting the world and learning new ones. They are at the heart of the production of subjects and communities differently and therefore of politicizing contradictions in popular
politics (see Gibson-Graham, 2006, for a conceptualization of producing ourselves differently; see also Motta, 2013, for a discussion of the role of the pedagogical in social and political transformation in Latin America).

As the contributors demonstrate, many movements explore and experiment with participatory, collective, and postrepresentative forms of epistemological practice. These create immanent theoretical and strategic knowledge relevant to the concrete political experiences of movements. Here movements are challenging not only the content of twentieth-century left political categories but the form of popular left alternatives.

The politics of knowledge of popular movements involves the development of pedagogies of the oppressed through popular education with a focus on dialogue, the horizontal, collective, and political nature of knowledge production, an understanding of everyday life as the substance of critical theoretical reflection, and the overcoming of the distinction between thinkers and doers in movement strategizing and research (Motta, 2011b; see Freire, 1996, for an introduction to popular education).

The reinvention of Latin American lefts from below is characterized by pedagogical processes that develop out of reflection on the lived realities of excluded and oppressed communities. Thus, as is demonstrated by many of the contributors, the spiritual and cultural become important elements of moral economies and popular imaginaries and practices. Oral traditions, dance, theater, song, and ritual are considered knowledge that is not a mere instrument of social transformation but a central part of creating new ways of life that contest neoliberal capitalism.

The politics of knowledge and the pedagogies that result do not simply engage with intellectual and theoretical production as disembodied processes. Rather, they seek to overcome the separations between intellect and emotion, mind and body, and thought and action that characterize one-dimensional man and many twentieth-century left alternatives and to create what Boff and Boff call “integral liberation.” Thus, affective and embodied pedagogies foreground different ways of being and relating to each other and the earth. They enable marginalized and oppressed communities to become embodied political subjects. They bring popular subjects, in all their complexity, to the heart of the reinvention of lefts from below.

INTO THE BORDERLANDS

Our collective exploration of the reinvention of Latin American lefts from below dispels neoliberal capitalism’s fantasy that it could eradicate popular politics, political imaginaries, and ways of life. The contributors illustrate the complexities of this rearticulation of a popular left politics, highlighting the creation of counter-spaces and spatialities, a politics of life, the politicization of social reproduction, the refusal and reimagining of capitalist labor, the emergence of a multiplicity of new popular subjectivities, and the intertwining of popular cosmologies, everyday spirituality, and cultural beliefs.

Underlying all the movements and communities explored here is a politics that questions conceptual frameworks and political categories embedded in representative understandings of the political, developing practices and experiments in postrepresentative, participatory and horizontal forms of organizing
community life and resistance. The contributors also highlight two key sites of contradiction in the struggles to create sustainable alternatives to neoliberalism: the relationship with the state and left governments and the movements’ own practices of self-government. Here the pedagogical may play a pivotal role as it opens up the possibility for movements and communities to politicize these fault lines and tensions, developing strategies, practices, and subjectivities that take us toward worlds beyond capitalism.

However, the reinvention of Latin American lefts is marked by multiple temporalities and rhythms. The contributors suggest that movements that seek to contest the dominant rationality of neoliberalism and market capitalism in the now face delegitimization and coercion by state forces and left governments. Yet building a sustainable left politics from below is a long-term process, and this points to tensions between the rhythms of power politics and those of popular politics. However, as Hesketh reports, when he asked a Zapatista in La Realidad about the possibility of state repression he was told, “They want to bury us, but they have forgotten that we are seeds.”

The knowledge, philosophies, cosmologies, institutions, and practices developed by Latin American lefts from below suggest that, as critical scholars, in addition to learning to listen we need, as Mignolo (2009: 4) argues, to “change the terms of the conversation”:

Changing the terms of the conversation implies going beyond disciplinary or interdisciplinary controversies and the conflict of interpretations. As far as controversies and interpretations remain within the same rules of the game (terms of the conversation) the control of knowledge is not called into question. And in order to call into question the modern/colonial foundations of the control of knowledge it is necessary to focus on the knower rather than the known.

Andrés Antillano, one of the founders of the first urban land committees in La Vega, told me that besides learning to listen we need to unlearn many of the taken-for-granted of twentieth-century left political categories. This is a call not to forget but to enter the borderlands, where “to step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage” (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2002: 3). Embracing the discomfort that arises when our assumptions about left politics, subjects, categories, and strategies are decentered is an act of decolonization of ourselves as critically engaged scholars committed to enacting alternatives to neoliberal capitalism with others and in our everyday lives.

NOTES

1. The informal system of norms and values that regulates economic and social interaction in poor and marginal communities, often autonomous from formal legal structures or dominant liberal norms of economic behavior. First developed in the work of E. P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976) to refer to precapitalist peasant forms of resistance to the advance of capitalist social relations.

2. David Harvey (1997) and Henri Lefebvre (1991) have argued that capitalist development has a spatial dynamic that creates the conditions for uneven and combined forms of economic, political, and social power across space (urban/rural, core/periphery, industrial/postindustrial) that are actively reproduced, contested, and/or transgressed by popular-class political agency.
3. Originally identified by the British socialist Raymond Williams, structures of feeling are emotions and intuitions—however buried, undefined, and fragile—of unease with and difference from the values and practices of the oppressor. As Wainwright (2011) suggests, “‘Structures of feeling’ can help us to understand the renewed unease at the social consequences of the rampant free market system on daily life, and provide insight to the lived experiences of co-operative, solidaristic values and open, anti-authoritarian organisational logics that are in a process of formation.” They can also help us understand the processes that underpin the emergence of oppositional moral economies, subjectivities, and institutions.

4. I employ the term “postrepresentative politics” to capture dynamics of organizing power, authority, and decision making that contest and at times violate the paradigm of representation (through delegation of power) dominant in twentieth-century politics. It includes both experiments in participatory governance that work to deepen representative democracy and those with a focus on self-government that seek to transcend this paradigm. It suggests a conceptual and empirical focus on the practices, political subjectivities, and institutions that emerge from this political imaginary.

5. The idea of decolonization builds on the philosophical work of postcolonial and Latin American subalternist thinkers who suggest that the politics of coloniality often structure the practices and theories developed by critical scholars engaging with popular politics. It suggests a deconstruction of colonial frameworks and the affirmative production of ourselves in a way that transgresses their logics (Mignolo, 2009; Mohanty, 2003; Motta, 2011a; 2012).

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