

New Political Horizons: Beyond The “Democratic” Nation-State

by *Gustavo Esteva*

In these pages, I explain why it is not possible to eliminate the despotic nature of the “democratic” nation-state. Recognizing its limits opens up the exploration of many options for the people to rule themselves.

Democratic despotism

Small groups of people have ruled themselves, freely formulating the norms of their ways of living and dying in their localized settings. This democratic idea has been in fact used as a principle of social organization from time immemorial in human history, in the most diverse cultures and circumstances. However, when any group begins to operate at a scale that is no longer proportionate to its political capacities, such a democratic idea transmogrifies into its opposite: despotic imposition.

Modern institutions are counterproductive to their stated aims, because they operate at a scale that leads inevitably to the betrayal of its raison

d'être, as Ivan

Illich warned half a century ago. What he anticipated is entirely evident today.

However, every betrayal is misconstrued: as mere defects of these institutions

or their operators that can be corrected with techno-fixes or marginal reforms.

The evidence that the health system produces illness and death, for example, is

attributed to errors or to the need for reforms or improvements, not to the system itself.

“Democracy”

illustrates well such counterproductivity. Today, corporations and politicians

at their service, not the people, make primarily all social and political decisions

everywhere. Corporations are in fact ruling the world. For Illich, political

majorities are fictitious groups of people with very different interests,

unable to reasonably express the common good. He explained why democracy will

not be able to survive the use that corporations can give to law and democratic

procedures to establish their empires. According to him, the modern

nation-state has become the holding corporation for a multiplicity of groups,

each of which serves its own interests; periodically, political parties gather

shareholders to appoint a board of directors. In the face of disaster, institutions

lose respectability, legitimacy and the reputation of serving the public

interest.

Disasters

are now the order of the day. The world we knew is falling apart around us every moment. Increasingly we are immersed in sociopolitical and environmental chaos, taking us beyond naked horror. Until recently, most people believed that the electoral procedure expressed—with honesty, transparency and effectiveness—peoples' collective will. They also believed that representatives elected through the dominant procedures of the day were at the service of the people: their interests and well-being. The fact —almost always evident — is that things do not work that way. That fact was commonly attributed to circumstantial failures. Just as with every ritual, failures increase faith in the myth, rather than weakening it. If it does not rain, those who participate in the rain dance will dance with more intensity and fervor, without doubting the validity of the ritual. The ritual generates faith, not vice versa. Such has been the case, until recently, with “democracy”. Although some people still trust electoral procedures and their outcome, no longer do the majority. As Illich warned, most institutions have lost legitimacy, respectability and reputation of serving the public interest.

Two

centuries ago, particularly in Europe, to substitute unbearable monarchies for a softer and more disguised despotism won out as more attractive. Out of a tacit acceptance of a lesser evil, however, a certain fascination gradually emerged in many places; the belief that the modern nation-state was truly democratic grew among a great number of people. They also believed that certain adjustments would remove its despotic expressions. Today, no one would seriously argue that in any democratic nation-state people rule their own lives. Today, the idea that this kind of sociopolitical organization is truly democratic appears as a gigantic hoax, a foolish illusion and an instrument of domination. It produces the opposite of what it promises.

The original sin and its consequences

The

kind of “democracy” born in the West was openly contradictory with the democratic idea. “Democratic” Greek men fiercely discriminated against women and had slaves; they considered barbarians all people who neither spoke a Greek tongue nor had “moral qualities” similar to their own. For Aristotle, democracy, like tyranny or oligarchy, could never seek for the common good. He offered several arguments against any

government by the majority.

The political regime that became the universal model for the modern nation-state was not conceived as democratic. The Federalists explained that it would be irresponsible to put the government of the American Union in the hands of "the people:" even if this category alluded only to white men. If "the multitude" had the power, the country would be controlled by demagogues who would, for their own interest, produce fragmentation: a group of small states instead of a Union would likely arise. Sharing Aristotle's preoccupations, the American Founders conceived a regime, a republic, which kept power in the hands of a small elite group, with only certain limited functions granted to some sectors of "the people." This republic began to be called democracy half a century later, when slavery was formally abolished. But neither the change of name nor the amendments to the original U.S. constitution eliminated the racist, sexist, classist character or the despotic nature of the regime.

The colonial seal of Western tradition was added to these traits to shape the nation-state. Particularly after the Enlightenment, Westerners assumed they had

a “civility” of which certain classes and peoples lacked. They should thus be “civilized” for their own good, even through violent, brutal means.

In the democratic nation-state, the power of the people is usually transferred to a small minority of the electorate, whose votes decide the party that will exercise the government. (No more than 25% of the electorate appoints the president of USA). A tiny group promulgates laws and makes all major decisions. “Political alternation” or “democratic checks and balances” cannot remedy such despotic operations.

The undemocratic elements of all versions of “indirect” democracy constructed after the American model inspired in the 20th-century initiatives to make it less despotic. What has been called “participatory” or “direct” democracy, and many consider “populism”, include the *initiative* (that citizens directly submit bills), the *referendum* (the direct approval, by popular vote, of laws, policies or public decisions), the *recall*, *consultations* and other dispositives^[1]. In certain cases, such as in Switzerland or California, USA, the number of issues on which they must vote, often without sufficient information or knowledge, annoys citizens. In other cases, as in Hungary, those dispositives are openly dictatorial instruments of “illiberal democracy”.

The experience demonstrates the limits of this political regime. In no “democratic” nation-state are people actually ruling their lives, regardless of which “democratic”

dispositives are introduced. The rule of a few prevails in all of them.

The
despotism inherent to every form of “representative democracy”
has
thus become undeniable.

[\[1\]](#) I am using the Foucauldian notion of *dispositive*, a heterogeneous set of elements with a strategic function. For Agamben, it is “anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.” See the note in the Appendix.

The extinction of the nation-state and the exhaustion of capitalism

The
modern nation-state took shape in 1648, with the Treaty of Westphalia. The concept
acquired its conceptual and political force during the French Revolution by
combining it with nationalism, displacing or disqualifying previous concepts of
state and nation. The nation-state, moreover, was soon perceived as the fullest
embodiment of the industrial mode of production, which in turn was presented as
the natural culmination of humanity: the zenith of progress.

Throughout

the nineteenth century, the modern nation-state, the political form of

capitalism, both the idea and its practical implications, were strongly criticized.

However, no critique broke its hegemony over academics, intellectuals and large sections of the society.

In

the course of its evolution, capitalism operated in all sorts of dictatorial

regimes, but the democratic nation-state was preferred for the operation of the

“free market”. In spite of the worldwide vocation of capitalism,

expressed in all forms of colonialism, the nation-state always was the main

arena for its expansion.

In

the latter part of the 20th century, however, national borders increasingly

became an obstacle for capitalist expansion. Macro-national structures,

designed for the free movement of capital and commodities, did not solve the

problem. As a consequence, the substance of the nation-state began to dissolve.

The main function of its governments, the administration of the national

economy, became impossible: all economies are exposed to transnational

movements that are beyond the control of each nation. While

national rituals
and the nation states themselves still persist as a general
referent, their
raison d'être along with the material substance giving them
reality have disappeared.

The
progressive dissolution of the democratic nation-state is also
a consequence of
the fact that capitalism has come up against its own internal
limits. The
political dispositives launched since the 1970s, as well as
the technological "revolution"
accelerated since the 1980s, dismantled social conquests
accumulated over 200
years of workers' struggle, affecting jobs, salaries, benefits
and public
services as well as economic growth. The highly concentrated
and unprecedented
accumulation of "wealth" in the last 40 years killed the goose
laying the
golden egg. The majority of what is produced today in the
world still has a
capitalist character, but capital can no longer resort to the
mechanism that defines
it: to invest profits in the expansion of production through
purchasing labor
and to compensate every increase in productivity that reduces
labor through an
equivalent increase in production. For these and other
factors, the world reproduction
of the capitalist system is no longer feasible.

Since

the last decade of the 20th century, economic and political leaders began to talk about a 20/80 world: once the technological revolution is completed, only 20% of the population would be necessary for production. This is a highly controversial statement. But what seems to be a reality is that a new social class has been created: disposable human beings. In the past, the unemployed fulfilled functions for capital: its industrial reserve army. Now and forever, the new class has no use for capital. Political and economic leaders are continually redefining the "surplus population", accommodating in it new social categories. They continue asking themselves, time and again: "what can be done with the disposable 80%?" In increasing numbers, for the time being, they are exterminating many of them.

The system has slipped into barbarism. Speculation, dispossession and compulsive destruction are replacing production as a source of accumulation of wealth and power. The democratic façade no longer remains useful. From the old design of the nation-state, only the dispositives for direct or indirect control of the population remain. New technologies give to them previously unimaginable shapes.

The rule of law in democratic nation-states was the condensation of 200 years of struggle for civil rights and democratic freedoms. It is today being replaced by a declared or undeclared state of exception (emergency). Everywhere, new laws are used to establish illegality as a general norm and to guarantee national and international impunity for crimes that multiply. Instead of the rule **OF** law –common norms properly enforced- we are increasingly under the rule **BY** law.

The dominant irresponsible forms of production and consumption have brought environmental destruction to extreme abuses of the most basic common sense. “Global warming” or “climate change” become mere euphemisms. The planet is on fire, not only the Amazon. The climate we had has been destroyed. We know nothing of the compatibility between human life and the emerging climate.

New forms of political domination are emerging. Fascism was a phenomenon bounded in time and space. It is no longer a “problem” of our time; labeling as fascist new authoritarian regimes like Orbán (Hungary) or Bolsonaro (Brazil), only creates confusion. We can now, however, derive relevant lessons from the fascist experience – as many of its features reappear in a different historical context. The appeal to patriotic emotions as a “raison d’Etat” has been reborn,

across Europe and the United States. New nationalist discourses are no longer linked to authentic national projects; “Hungarian sovereignty”, Brexit or “Make America great again” are good examples of the new political use of patriotic emotions. The formation of a survivor consciousness is encouraged, with an implicit acceptance that there will be groups of people hopelessly doomed to disappear; everywhere, that role of the “to-be-disappeared” is being assigned mainly to migrants. People now cling onto leaders to whom messianic abilities are attributed—those singularly equipped to steady the ship—within a storm now dooming all. Trump, Orbán, Bolsonaro, Modi or Johnson illustrate this process. People cling desperately to fundamentalisms—spiritual, religious, or political—as the ideas and institutions in which they trusted dissolve before their disbelieving eyes.

Political

leaders with an open anti-democratic vocation and even fascist propensities are currently elected or re-elected, or at least ascendant. They pretend to embody the general discontent, promising to dismantle “the system”... They fulfill their promise, once in power, by dismantling whatever “democratic” elements remained. They count upon a broad social base, especially among those most affected by the state of affairs, after convincing them that the authoritarian option is the best hope for remedying all their ills and discontent.

Almost

everywhere, democracy is being “democratically” dismantled.

Radicalizing discontent

The 21st century is now characterized by the proliferation of discontent, appearing in the most unexpected places. No space of social reality is immune. Even those who have concentrated an obscene proportion of wealth recognize the instability and dangers of the current state of affairs.

The rebel “spirit of the 1960s” appeared in many mobilizations of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Europe. The Alternative Forum in Berlin (1988), the Campaign of 500 years of Resistance (1992), the Counter-summit of the Earth (Rio, 1992), and the creation of Via Campesina (1993) illustrate reactions against the globalization of neoliberal capitalism and the New World Order. Most anti – systemic movements celebrate today the Zapatista rebellion (Chiapas, Mexico, 1994) for their awakening. The European marches of the 1990s, the creation of the People Global Action Against Free Trade and the WTO (Geneva, 1998), and popular movements like Reclaim the Streets, in England, illustrate the political climate of the period.

The 1999 “Battle of Seattle”, when nearly 40 000 protesters converged against the Millennium Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO), is often used as a reference point for the

anti-globalization movement. Thereafter, all meetings of the WTO and many other international organizations face “counter-summits” strongly challenging them.

In the wake of the Battle of Seattle, new waves of popular demonstrations articulately expressed a diversity of discontents with the dominant system; particularly with representative democracy. “Let them all go!” said the Argentines in 2001. Ten years later, the Indignados, in Spain, pointed out sharply: “My dreams do not fit into your ballot box,” while the Greeks announced that they would not leave the squares they occupied until “they” were out. Occupy Wall Street stood strong in New York: “You have demands when you trust that governments can meet them. That’s why we don’t have them.” Since October 2018, the “yellow vests”, in France, radically reject all systems of representation.

Grassroots insurrections

For sheer survival or in the name of old ideals, common women and men at the grassroots, the salt of the Earth, are adopting new political horizons beyond the dominant political mentality. They are diverse expressions of societies in

movement. The term that can better express what people are weaving at the grassroots is "radical democracy". Going to the root of the democratic idea, "radical democracy" rejects equally the great paternal Leviathan and the great maternal society. The root of all legitimate democratic power can only be the people themselves. No dispositive that transfers or concentrates such power in any form of representation can be truly democratic.

While

it remains impossible to characterize and classify effectively all initiatives being birthed, most of them share a common rejection of patriarchal, statist, capitalist, racist, sexist, caste-ist and anthropocentric roots of the dominant regime. Its common "NO!" opens to a plurality of "YESs!", to radically diverse paths and life choices.

Grassroots

initiatives usually start in areas or aspects of everyday life in which the people can no longer get what they were getting before and where they can do something by themselves to deal with the new challenges. Those areas are conventionally associated with names that generate dependence and allude to contemporary "needs": food, education, health... Common women and men are now recovering verbs that refer to personal and collective agency. Eating, learning, healing, dwelling...allude

to autonomous ways of living, juxtaposing old traditions with contemporary innovations. Their attitude implicitly acknowledges that modern “needs” have been created by the dominant systems, in the tradition of the enclosure of the commons that gave birth to capitalism: the commoners, deprived of their commons to create private property, immediately need food, dwellings, jobs... They have become models of modern “needy man”.

Eating

In these times of global fear, wrote the Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano, “Whoever doesn’t fear hunger is afraid of eating.”[\[2\]](#) Hunger is again amongst us as almost one billion people are currently going to bed with an empty stomach. Famines forgotten since the middle ages are reappearing. More and more people are currently afraid of the toxic foods offered to everyone.

No solutions can be counted upon from the market or the State, the main perpetrators of both mass hunger and food toxicity. People need to do something to avoid starvation or to eat without fear... and they are doing it. People are taking back their kitchens and intestines from the control of corporations. Since 1996, Via Campesina, the largest people’s organization in human history, redefined food sovereignty: to define by ourselves what we eat

... and to produce it. They defend these ideas in relevant fora, influencing public policy, while advancing autonomous food production and self-sufficiency. Small producers, mainly women, feed 70% of the world's population today. Agribusiness, which controls more than half of the planet's food resources, feeds only 30%.

There is an impressive multiplication of community gardens. Community spaces producing and distributing food for free proliferate. Havana illustrates well the potential of urban farming: 60% of the food consumed in Havana is produced right there. Arrangements between urban consumers and farmers, which apparently started in Japan and Germany, are now everywhere.

These examples are just the proverbial tip of the food iceberg. Grassroots initiatives with very modest beginnings are coming together and begin to have collective expressions that reflect an increasingly relevant conceptual and political shift. Old agrarian claims are retaken, next to a renovated relationship with Mother Earth, no longer transmogrified into a marketable commodity or "resource," currently desecrated by public and private developers.

<https://reader-list.sarai.narkive.com/4pTXfJtw/global-fear-by-eduardo-galeano>

Learning

60%

of children currently entering schools will not reach the level that their countries define as compulsory education; consequently suffering permanent discrimination. Those who manage to accumulate certificates after great effort and debt will face high unemployment rates. The market, moreover, doles out jobs with little or no relation to what has been studied. Dispersed and chaotic forms of education, through new technologies, severely affect the formation of children and youth.

People

are resisting everywhere the dismantling of the education system that the governments call "education reform". Countries that started their reforms long before the current wave –such as Finland- show interesting advances, while alternatives IN education also proliferate. Yet, alternatives TO education–autonomous forms of learning in freedom–are advancing even further. Millions of people, even billions, participating in such efforts, are not part of a movement in the conventional sense of the term. They are just courageously

enjoying learning opportunities they create beyond the school system and the media, while generating new knowledge in non-conventional ways and participating in the generalized insurrection of disqualified knowledge.

Healing

The obvious failures of the health system and its iatrogenic effects are already supported with statistical evidence: doctors, medicines and hospitals produce more diseases than those they cure; prescription drugs are the third leading cause of death in the US and Europe. Every family has suffered cases of iatrogenesis. Such facts have intensified the efforts to reform the system, but fail to get very far. Even the "pursuit of health," for many, has a pathogenic character.

The most interesting and effective initiatives are breaking from the dominant notions of health and disease and even body and mind, while nurturing autonomous healing practices and recovering familial and communal therapeutic traditions – avoiding any rigid fundamentalisms. Gradually they are shaping new institutional arrangements ...while healing from "health."

Dwelling

Public

and private developments, producing urban and environmental disasters continue unabated; gentrification grows; homeless people multiply.

Simultaneously,

self-construction practices are consolidated and strengthened; “cities in transition” proliferate; squatter movements are extended and new struggles bring to the city the spirit of those enacted in the countryside. Very diverse movements and initiatives resist the inertia of urban life and change dominant patterns. By reorganizing daily life, people recover self-mobility: on foot or by bicycle, reestablish family life, strengthen communal spirit...and live again their own lives.

In

all spheres of everyday life, people are manifesting new attitudes, well rooted within their physical and cultural contexts. An increasing number of people are adopting new political horizons as they change their habits and attitudes of **exchanging**, **playing** and **loving**. Practices such as the “social and solidarity economy”, still embedded in the dominant dispositives, contain organizational and conceptual elements with potential to generate radical change. These are efforts that gradually break with the

dominant regime,
although they remain exposed to continuous harassment; are
still forced to use
legal procedures and practices of the democratic nation-state;
and depend on it
in various contextual and practical aspects, like taxes,
public services,
traffic regulations...

Many
of these grassroots initiatives go beyond “ecological
conscientiousness”.
They express an experience of relationship with Mother Earth
associated with principles
of respect and reciprocity. A new sense of responsibility is
continually transforming
producing and consuming habits, catalyzing the recovery of
moral principles
that have long been abandoned.

Friendships
are being re-claimed, as their political nature becomes
evident in the
formation of new cells of social organization. *Cariño* becomes
a political category, with a central place within
new social relations that reject both the patriarchal and
economic frames of society.

The
Global Tapestry of Alternatives, an initiative that was made
public in May
2019, aims to identify and link initiatives that challenge the
dominant system
at local, regional and national levels, encouraging mutual

learning, solidarity,
and political articulation. It intends to contribute to the
formation of a
critical mass of initiatives that are rebuilding everywhere
collective life
under new principles.

Reformulating democratic ideals

Grassroots
initiatives all over the world are already a form of social
existence that
radically reformulates the dominant democratic ideal.

Beyond patriarchy

There is an increasing awareness that the very root of all
dominant systems is to be found in thousands of years of
patriarchy. Our patriarchal ways of being and thinking,
expressed in our behavior patterns, have been “normalized”. It
is necessary to challenge them in all their manifestations.

Patriarchy
has always implied a hierarchical order, established by men,
in which their
control and domination operate under their assumption that
their artificial
constructions are better than living expressions; the latter
must thus be destroyed
and replaced. Ongoing initiatives recover a different

narrative. They put the care of life at the center of social life and insist on the elimination of every hierarchy, every system of command, control and subordination, dismantling democratic despotism from its base.

Beyond development and the economic society

Many initiatives were born as forms of resistance or response to specific development projects since the 1950s. Today they are already beyond development itself – in all of its meanings. There is a rejection of the universal definition of the good life and the paradigmatic *American way of life* that defined the development enterprise since its birth. Since the 1980s, when international institutions declared a decade lost for development in Latin America, many people got the point. Based on the official figures of the World Bank in 1988, it was possible to estimate that the “poor” countries will catch-up with the rich in 497 years; that is, never. Alternative ways of thinking, like those associated in South America with the notion of *buen vivir*, lead to fully recovering your own ways; while challenging commodification and homogenization endemic within economic societies and the industrial mode of production. Initiatives beyond development leave behind the conventional notion of “needs” and “consumption”, aware of its modern, patriarchal and developmentalist root; reformulating in contemporary terms the spirit of the commons in community entanglements in very different configurations. They establish a respectful and loving relationship with Mother Earth at the center of social life.

Economic

societies are a quintessential expression of the patriarchal world. They have been organized on the logical premise of scarcity, assuming that the desires/needs/ends of humans are unlimited while their means/resources are limited. Therefore, a dispositive is required to allocate those limited means/resources to unlimited ends, to choose between butter or weapons.... The function of allocating resources is entrusted to the market in capitalism and to the plan (government, bureaucracy) in socialism; in reality, in all societies there is a combination of "market" and "plan" to allocate resources. Such functions define economic societies. Leaving their framework comes with adopting and embracing the premise of sufficiency; while trusting the gifts of natural abundance and abandoning the very notion of "resources". As people are doing everywhere at the grassroots.

Beyond counterproductive arrogance

In the 1950s, Leopold Kohr warned that ongoing economic fluctuations had ceased to be business cycles; they had become size cycles. Economic activities, Kohr argued, had reached a scale beyond the possibility of human control. In response to every crisis, however, institutional efforts usually increase the scale of control, thus aggravating the very problems they intended to resolve. Instead of more centralization and unification, what is needed is to "cantonize" economic activities, insisted Kohr. Instead of waves of masses of water

in the open sea, we need to act at the scale of ponds, because their ripples, no matter how agitated, can not achieve the destructive force of oceanic waves.

Mice

the size of an elephant will collapse; a case of disproportionality. Likewise, elephants the size of mice will also collapse because of disproportionality. Proportionality is a central feature for both natural and social beings. Size and proportionality go hand in hand, but not mechanically. For the people to rule themselves, the group should have the political capability of looking together for the common good through consensus. This can be achieved by a group relatively big in Indigenous communities, used to the tradition of "we-ing", but only pretty small groups of individualized urbanites can have such political capabilities, at least for some time.

People

at the grassroots seem to know all this by experience and common sense. Instead of trying to construct dispositives or organizations of national or international scope, autonomous initiatives take care of what is within their reach. They construct collective and communal agreements that recover a sense of limits and proportionality. They are increasingly certain that global thinking is impossible. Only destruction can occur on a global

scale.

Kohr's

classic proposal of breaking up nations to get them back to the human scale makes more sense than ever before. Studied in some think tanks and dissident groups, the idea still lacks enough popularity and feasibility. However, something equivalent is happening at the grassroots. Many people are no longer adopting national horizons to define their actions and initiatives. They are still forced to deal with national and international state apparatuses, but they are no longer relying on the nation-state as a legitimate or practical interlocutor.

Initiatives

rooted in their physical and cultural contexts are conceived as alternatives to both localism and globalization. They are localized, but they are not locked into their contexts. While fully committed to those local contexts, they are open to other similar nuclei for bonding with each other. They act with a clear sense of proportion, taking serious account of forces and phenomena of global and national character that affect them, without adopting global perspectives to guide their actions.

As

diverse initiatives collide and conjoin, it becomes necessary

to construct stable forms for harmonious interaction at various scales. Options that avoid bureaucratic and centralized structures of power are being creatively considered and practiced for that purpose. The National Indigenous Congress of Mexico, for example, articulating thousands of disperse communities belonging to different peoples and cultures, with different languages, adopted the principle: "We are an assembly when we are together; we are a web when we are separated". The Congress has been in operation for 25 years, without any central office, leaders or bureaucratic structures.

The critical point seems to be to reduce the need for coordination at a national or international scale. At the grassroots, most people think that there is no need to define in advance a specific political embodiment, a certain doctrine or design, to orient collective efforts. Bridges are built when the time comes to cross them.

During September 6th-11th, 2019, a gathering took place in Iceland to reflect on different forms of radical democracy, with examples from different parts of the world. The participants discussed new political strategies of grassroots groups; particularly the diverse ways in which

communities and movements can organize their collective defense in the present circumstances and interact harmoniously and convivially beyond local, regional and even national spaces. Members of very diverse networks and movements reflected intensely on democratic confederalism, libertarian municipalism and other political tools to interact, without abandoning the horizontality and democratic elements constructed at the grassroots.

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives and the Iceland meeting illustrate well the current efforts to find ways to link people's initiatives, without building bureaucratic or representative structures, while avoiding doctrinarian dogmas or utopic promised lands.

New pathways

The efforts of an increasing number of people challenging dominant regimes, constitutes the opening to radically diverse new ways of living. They imply political attitudes that break with the conventional past but are supported in tradition and experience.

The
“society as a whole” is always the product of a multitude of
factors,
phenomena and forces. It cannot be programmed, and strictly
speaking, it is not
even possible to think of it with any real meaning. The
ongoing initiatives are
not conceived with a general or global change in their
horizon, but keep a
sense of scale and proportion. They are also conceived with
the conviction that
what they are constructing will be, as the Zapatistas
suggested, a world in
which many worlds can be embraced. They leave behind all
Leninist eagerness to
be the *avant-garde*, leading the masses to some promised land.
They
intuit that the future has no future and that only
institutions –obsessed with
progress and development– have “a future”. They pack into the
present as much past
and future as they can, convinced that the survival of the
human species
depends on recovering hope as a social force.

The
initiatives under way are shaped beyond reform and revolution.
They use,
instead, new stories that firmly sweep away the old myths and
integrate past
and present into a coherent set that may shed light on the
steps to follow.
They change their ways to change, transgressing cultural
boundaries. They are
creating new opportunities for emancipation and tracing the
shape and limits of

new ways of living.

They

represent a renaissance of the democratic idea –people really and actually governing themselves- leaving behind its corruption incarnated in all modern and contemporary shapes of illusory “democracies” / “democratic” nation states.

The

time has come, perhaps, to abandon the loaded word “democracy” and use another to identify and celebrate people’s direct, unmediated self-governance.

San Pablo Etlá, September 2019

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CLUES

(I am listing only the references I used directly in the essay)

Main references

Zapatistas. The Zapatista experience is both a theoretical and practical source of inspiration for this essay. Most of the Zapatista writing is available, in various languages, at: <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx> (09/28/2019)

Ivan Illich. In my view, he is more pertinent than ever. Reading his 'classic' pamphlets of the 1970s is particularly useful. (Deschooling Society, Medical Nemesis, Energy and Equity). For the themes of this essay, see particularly the last section (V. Political Inversion) of (1973) Tools for Conviviality. New York, Harper & Row. (I am using almost literally ideas expressed in pp. 102-109). The whole essay is inspired in some of his more important contributions, like the notion of **counterproductivity**, the political nature and role of **friendship** in social reconstruction, the critique of the **industrial mode of production**, going **beyond reform and revolution**, the **sense of proportion** and particularly **interculturality**.

Leopold Kohr. The theory of social morphology of Leopold Kohr is central for the approach of this essay. His classic The Breakdown of Nations is still very pertinent. See also (1979) Development

Without Aid. The Translucent Society. New York, Schocken Books. I used for the essay specific formulations in an article published in *El Mundo de San Juan* in 1958, reproduced in *Fourth World Review*, 1992, 54, 10-11, as *Size Cycles*. See Ivan Illich, *The Wisdom of Leopold Kohr*. Available at: <https://centerforneweconomics.org/publications/the-wisdom-of-leopold-kohr/> (09/28/2019)

Michel Foucault. I

am following some of his main lines of thinking. The notion of the '**dispositive**', central in his thinking, is also central in the essay. For him, it is "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble, consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural planning, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic proportions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the dispositive. The dispositive itself is the network that can be established between these elements." (Foucault blog, April 1, 1977. (1977), 299; (1980) *Dits et écrits*. Paris, Gallimard, 194; (1980) *The Confession of the Flesh*, in Colin Gordon, Ed., *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York, Pantheon Books). □ See Agamben G. (2009) "What is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays. Stanford, Stanford University Press. (The quote in the footnote is in

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