

Revolutionary immanence? Exploring the political idea of social movements

by Soumitra Ghosh

Introduction: theories of movements, but where is the praxis?

Murray Bookchin once commented that the tragedy of Marxism was that it had become a subject of cloistered academic seminars and not living movements (Bookchin 2015). Today's anti-capitalist mobilisations do not call themselves Marxists, he observed. The recorded experiences of the various square movements, insurrections and revolutions of recent years tend to bear this out. Precious few important theoretical works have been written on these movements by grounded practitioners with Marxist backgrounds, with the notable exception of the movements in Bolivia and Venezuela. Conversely, a corpus of new, largely academic, Marxist literature has sprung up within the last decade. The overwhelming majority of today's more revered, more widely read Marxist thinkers are academics. Though their writings offer many new insights into the politics, history and philosophy of old and new struggles and constitute a collective effort to reinvent and resituate Marxist theory in today's context, they do not, in our view, work as instances of theory in practice or as something that would or could be put into practice anytime soon. It is only to be expected that any discussions of revolutionary immanence or political strategies of movements in general will be informed by readings of specific movements. This is crucial because despite a lot of commonality, no two struggles are intrinsically alike. This is not enough to say that social movements today *believe in horizontality* and *disbelieve in*

vanguardism and parties or that the *multitude* is the *new revolutionary agency in the world of biopolitical capital*. Unless every facet of each specific movement process is examined in detail, such generalisations become meaningless; as a result, Marxist theories lose their uniqueness and do not really help in changing the world. If on a certain day in 2011, the New York Times front page happens to carry news of various revolutions, insurrections, movements and assemblies happening across the globe, should this lead us to infer that *a global social movement* is raging (Buck-Morss 2013)? Since the events making up this “global” movement are various and end equally variously, it all leads to another inference that revolutions are no longer possible but things change nonetheless through non-class popular mobilizations and non-violent resistance (Hardt 2010; Negri 2010). But what has changed precisely? Has the reign of capital been brought to an end? Has the state disappeared or stopped protecting capitalist plunder? Our uncritical belief in the empirical real –largely sensed through the audiovisual media these days – and our obsessive generalisation of the evental blind us to the very idea of immanence: we cannot see beyond the visible present.

Though this paper does not focus on the inadequacy of today’s Marxist theories, one interesting fact merits mention. While Marxist analyses and critiques of specific contemporary movements are almost entirely lacking, several not avowedly Marxist accounts do exist, written by sympathetic researchers, journalists, academics and activists alike. We refer to many of these, in addition to old and new Marxist readings, while framing our problematic about the ‘anti-capitalist’ social movements in today’s world.

Trying to frame the problematic

In order to act as agents of social and political transformation, movements of anti-capital resistance need to

find the right problematic. A movement needs to situate its more immediate tasks within the wider political context (Barker 2013). For the purposes of our discussion here, this wider political context has to be understood through dialectical reasoning encompassing the follies/achievements/lessons of the past and the challenges/probabilities of the future (Marx 1869, 1891, 1895; Holloway 2002, 2005, 2010; Mészáros 1995, 2015; Zibechi 2010, 2015; Sotiris 2015; Barker et al. 2013; Krinsky 2013).

Our hypothesis is that movements need to distance themselves from the lure of operating within a “known” present that contains capital, state and immediate resistance (Holloway 2002, 2005, 2010, 2015; Sotiris 2015; Jay 2016). The problematic must include the state in its entirety, taking in both parliamentary democracy and its known post-capitalist revolutionary variants, which have largely been rejected by history. The state has to be seen as it is: a political and institutional expression of capital and totalitarian economic control (Marx 1869, 1891, 1895; Holloway 2002, 2005, 2010, 2015; Zibechi 2010; Marcos 2018; Sotiris 2015; Barker et al. 2013; Lenin (1917):2016).

We propose that if movements are to shift away from statism and the *State-Capital* hegemony, this may only be done *oppositionally*. In other words, an all-pervading *oppositional* must inform every step of the process. This *oppositional* is the oppositional knowledge that makes movements both necessary and possible; movements as social collectives have to *know* that they cease to exist as movements if they do not perpetually confront the *State-Capital* in its entirety. We have consciously decided to say *State-Capital* rather than *the state and capital*, because the state can no longer be viewed separately from capital nowadays (Holloway 2002, 2005, 2010; Bookchin 2015; Balso 2010; Negri 2010). The *oppositional* in the movement is an expression of its intrinsic *oppositonality*, the sum of the oppositional knowledge that

transforms an event or singularity fixed in time and space into a *political continuity*. We argue that the knowledge of how this is *being done*, or *would or should be done* in a particular time and space – in other words, the political strategy of movements – also includes the knowledge of *what was done*, not only in the immediate past but *also long ago*. However, let us first briefly examine the generic question of “social movements” to see how oppositionality has always permeated the notion of *movements*.

State and society: deconstructing the “social” in social movements

In trying to elucidate the concept of “social movements”, we will follow Marx, who repeatedly expounded the duality of state and society. Society must be understood as distinctly separate from the state, which is parasitic and thus external to the former. Talking about the relationship between the state and society in late 19th-century France in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx said that the state “enmeshes, controls, regulates, superintends and tutors civil society [...] through” a “most extraordinary centralisation” and that “this parasitic body acquires [...] an omniscience”, finding a “counterpart in the [...] actual body politic”. Marx further said that because the “excessive state machine” and “the material interests of the French bourgeoisie” are closely interwoven, the state has to “wage an uninterrupted war against public opinion”, mutilating, crippling and if possible, “amputating [...] the independent organs of the social movement”.

According to Marx, society, public opinion and social movements occupy spaces that not only exist naturally outside the state and the body politic, but are also *opposed* to them. While discussing the momentous events of the Paris Commune, he once again said that as the “class *antagonism* between capital

and labour" (emphasis added) intensified, the "state power" became conterminous with "national power of capital over labour" and became "a public force organised for social enslavement" and "an engine of class despotism". Marx went on to comment that the Paris Commune reorganised "the unity of the nation" through the "Communal Constitution" and the destruction of the "state power" that claimed to be "independent of, and superior to, the nation itself".

We can say that social movements imply oppositional reorganisation of the order enforced by power: power represented by the state in league with capital, which comes at the culmination of a process of accumulation. Wherever this process took place, it remade the actuality of society and reconstructed the very idea of social. Young Marx called it alienation: humans becoming estranged from their collective species-being as human labour was first forcibly, and then through a curious "voluntary" process no less forcible at the end, torn away from humans (Marx 1844). This caused a break, a rupture in the *universality of being*. As the *species-being* was forcibly made to lose its sense of collective subjectivity, the society that was primarily an expression of the universality of the species-being became something else (Marx 1844; Marx/Engels 1976; Mészáros 1970). However, there has always been a dialectical process of going back and forward, from the private to the collective, the self to the other, a battle against capital and the fetish its rule creates. A journey of collective assertion and anti-power, as John Holloway (Holloway 2002, 2005, 2010) says, and which we call *oppositonality*. The oppositional movement reinvents, reconstructs and reclaims the social by creating a new collective identity.

In *Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx commented that social movements do not exclude political movements and political movements cannot but be social. This means class and class struggle, because societies cannot be conceived outside the class

framework as long as that framework exists. Therefore, all social movements, even those with economic demands, are also political. When we say this, we expand what Marx said (Marx 1871). To Marx, economic demands seeking resolution within the intrinsic limits of the capitalist production system are not political; the economic becomes political only when it transgresses the system. We say both are political. The first kind of politics is that of capital, hence the state. The second kind of politics is anti-capital, therefore non-state. Dialectically, the state holds the non-state within it, one kind of politics the other, which goes on to negate it (Mészáros 2015; Holloway 2002, 2005, 2010). There is no point in theorising social movements as autonomous extra-political entities that are free from enormous burdens of histories and carve emancipatory futures out of perfect emptiness. No such emptiness ever existed. All movements are the products of histories, and all human histories are of class struggles. Movements can, knowingly and also often unknowingly, support the politics of the State-Capital. Movements can also support the politics of the non-state and anti-capital; they can express and embody the non-state within the state, the anti-capital within the capital. There can be no middle ground here.

A movement, however, finds its expression through a degree of organisation. While our construct of social movements, after Marx and Holloway, as collective assertions of anti-state, anti-capital social outpouring is unlikely to meet with many challenges, the concept of organisation has always been a controversial one. What, precisely, do we mean by an organisation of the “bottom”? How does it differ, both structurally and functionally, from organisations at the “top”? When we refer generically to the “grassroots”, are we talking about structurally similar processes? What does an Adivasi (tribal) movement focused on forest and land tenure rights in an Indian forest have in common with the indigenous Aymara movement in El Alto, Bolivia or the *gilets jaunes* in

contemporary France? Do they all represent the same social constituencies and have same demands (Krinsky 2013)? How do these movement processes function as organisations? More importantly, do they see themselves as organisations, as institutional entities? This needs to be examined in greater detail.

Social movements: the questions of organising and organisation

The representational of the Leninist party and social democracy

How to approach the questions of *organisation* and *organising*? Here, we understand *organisation* to refer to institutional bodies such as various communist/leftist parties, the mass processes affiliated with these, non-party social movements, and movement alliances. By *organising*, we mean the primary social process of the oppositional mobilising and building up various social collectives including movements, in clear distinction from *organisation*. This question should not be seen as a purely context-specific, strategic question or as a question that leads to inflexible political positions. The last century saw a surfeit of organisations. The revolution that embraces the complex fabric of society and emerges from its embryo (Marx 1869) became epitomised in the concept of the vanguard party, making what was merely representational and transitory (Luxemburg 1904, 1918) a political truth, or rather the only political truth. Though we are not discussing the question of parties at length here, a few words might not go amiss given that social movements have never really been far from parties, vanguard or otherwise. Moreover, of late there has been a renewed plea for the revival of Leninist parties (Dean 2012, 2013, 2016; Žižek 2010), ostensibly to plug the gap between the chaos of the crowd in the streets (represented by social movements) and the immanence of emancipatory politics.

Movements, be it entire movements or just parts thereof, are constantly being transformed into parties. Inversely, parties have been known to initiate movements: the vanguard party was conceived not only to direct movements, but to ensure that movements were revolutionary enough to seize state power (Lenin 1917). As Jodi Dean (Dean 2012, 2013, 2016a, 2016b) keeps on reiterating, there can be no discussion of the left without a discussion of the party—the left is the party.

It is beyond dispute that more than social movements or even unions, parties have so far dominated the discourse of transformatory politics. We need only look at Latin America and Europe to see this confirmed: social upsurges and resistance to capital are often co-optated, resulting in a new flurry of social democracy led by the so-called new left or *progresismo* (Zibechi 2010, 2014, 2015; Dangl 2010; Petras/Veltmeyer 2005; Webber 2011, 2015; Modonesi 2015). Influential mobilisations tend towards party formation as a way of dealing with the political realities more effectively, which means engaging with the state. Following the footsteps of the revolutionaries of the 19th century, John Holloway (Holloway 2002, 2005, 2010, 2015) Raúl Zibechi (Zibechi 2010, 2014, 2015) István Mészáros (Mészáros 1995, 2015) and Alain Badiou (Badiou 2010a, 2010b), among others, posit that anti-capital must be anti-state by default and that a good state is not possible. Despite this, parties flourish, and movements get tamed through involvement in statist exercises. Why does social democracy reappear, forcing us to listen to the same old litany of *societies in transition*, the *impossibility of immediate revolutions* and the pressing need for *experiments with parliamentary democracy* (García Linera 2006, quoted in Bosteels 2014; Webber 2015; Iglesias 2015)? Though we are no longer in the period of the Second International and communists are no longer challenging revisionists, the pattern is very familiar.

The problem is not the parties per se, but rather their

emergence. Why do successful mass movements result in parties? How did the oppositional essence of the indigenous Aymara movement in Bolivia get diluted into the populism of MAS (Movement for Socialism, the party led by Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linera)? What caused the Greek people to support Syriza again, even after its betrayal in 2015 (Sotiris 2015; Kouvelakis 2016)? Do people need states? Do they need to be governed, told what to do? Do we not need a better understanding of the enigma of the state? Holloway's and Badiou's anti-state texts do not indicate how our screams against injustices and tyranny can coalesce in ways that are strong and sustainable enough to take on the state – in other words, in *conscious processes* of slow organising to achieve not cosmetic, but *metabolic change* (Mészáros 1995, 2015). Because such processes do not just *automatically emerge*: the question here is whether we can transform our servile, oppressed and increasingly market-opiated subjectivities into collective revolutionary *subjectivity, will or desire* (the last a Lacanian derivative used by both Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, as well as Jodi Dean) solely through screams, flashes of resistance and occasional inspirations? Do we not need something more coherent, relentless, vertical and yet horizontal?

Do social movements have a generic tendency to resolve opposition to the state, and new parties offer promises of this resolution? Yet movements have been known to persist outside typical party spaces, even after parties emerge and become dominant. A good example is Brazil's *Movimento Sem Terra* or Landless Movement, popularly known as MST: throughout and in spite of its long-standing relationship with the PT, the Brazilian Workers' Party, it lost none of its organisational independence, influence and relevance (Dangl 2010; Stedile 2002). Despite its earlier co-optation, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) – as the October 2019 movement and its many predecessors showed – does not seem to have lost its insurrectionary

potency (Zorilla 2015; Becker 2015; Zibechi2014, 2015). The movements in Argentina seem to have recovered sufficiently (Aranda 2016; Sitrin 2012; Fiorentini 2012) from the rut of the Kirchner era (Petras/Veltmeyer 2005; Dangl 2010) in 2001-2002.

Coming back to the Leninist party, it appears that the party began to replace the society and the working class as the primary site of oppositional politics (Holloway 2002, 2005; Lebowitz 2012; Luxemburg 1918; Levi 2011). Social polarities, such as a range of different classes, occupied and colonised the party that was originally supposed to act as the vanguard of a particular class, namely the proletariat. Domination of the party by class/classes became domination of society, especially in situations where the party could control the state (Lebowitz 2012; Zurbrugg 2016; Hui 2016a, 2016b). The party controlled not by the proletariat but by the ruling classes persistently pre-empted any revolutionary struggles, responding ever more efficiently and ruthlessly (Lebowitz2012; Mao 1973; Hui 2009; Chaohua 2015). The representational of the Leninist party ultimately came to signify usurpation of the social dialectic of class struggles, thus destroying the oppositionality in the oppositional.

Replacing the oppositional social with the representational of the Leninist party and social democracy also meant replacing *organising* with the *organisation*. Because the leftist practices of the last 150 years or so have thus far largely followed the “representational” and statist politics of the *organisation*, they have failed to critically explore the all-important question of the politics of *organising*. We will come back to this later.

Organisationlessness: the politics of anarchy and the apolitical of the event

If the dominant mode of leftist organising in the last century

was expressed through the party, the dominant mode of revolutionary organising today appears to be under-organising and un-organisationality. Beginning with the anti-globalisation and anti-war movements of the turn of the century and continuing on through the anti-austerity movements in Europe and Latin America and finally the Occupy-type movements in the US and Europe, there has been a marked and often deliberate display of distrust in organisations, particularly structured ones such as the party (Sitrin/Azzellini 2014; Taylor et al. 2011; Clover 2016; Dean 2012, 2016). Anarchist opposition to all forms of organisations and organised processes has reappeared, particularly among the Occupy Wall Street movement, the *Indignados* in Spain, the street protesters in Greece and the *Horizontalidad* in Argentina (Sitrin/Azzellini 2014; Dean 2016). Mobilisations have become carnivals of the faceless multitude, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Hardt/Negri 2005) said. Without delving too far into whether movemental mobilisations are indeed carnivalesque in nature, we can say that today's mobilising does have something of an "evental" and casual character (Dean 2016; Jameson 2015; Jay 2016), which is quite disturbing. Distrust in organisation is not just a historical response to the tyranny of the representational and the repressive history of party-states, it also masks a deeper absence of oppositionality. This has also been termed post-ideological and post-modern (Petras/Veltmeyer 2005; Dean 2016). The oppositional core of anti-capital seems to be holding from one movement to the next, but for how long? Movements that eschew organisational processes altogether are likely to fail in their primary task of organising the social opposition to enable it to continue beyond events. Furthermore, they tend to either become more representational than parties through their charismatic leaders (the rise of Evo Morales from Bolivia's Aymara movement is a case in point: see Zibechi 2010, 2014) or be co-opted by big NGOs and the state (Petras/Veltmeyer 2005; Zibechi 2010).

Framing the politics of organising and organisation today

As happened in the international working-class movement in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, *organising–organisation* has become one of the most crucial political questions. While we cannot prescribe an ideal form of organising that will become the new norm, we can and must discuss the possibilities strand by strand and context by context.

It is clear that the fallacies of organising and organisation will not sort themselves out overnight: each new process of organising might inexorably result in a new organisation with new leaders and a fresh hierarchy. Movements-as-organisations, whether party or not, will be more vulnerable to co-optation by the state, as is borne out by many recent experiences from across the world: India, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Greece and, probably, Spain. Inversely, organisations and even states have been known to initiate and foster movements by organising from below: examples include the Zapatista agricultural communes in Chiapas (Hesketh 2013; Oikonomakis 2016, 2019; Khasnabish 2010; Gahman 2016); the Rojava communes in Kurd-occupied Syria, which were inspired by the writings of social ecologist Murray Bookchin (Dirik 2016; Leverink 2015); and the “communal” Chavista state of Venezuela (Mills 2015; Foster 2015; Ciccariello-Maher 2016a, 2016b). Outside the orbits of structured organisations and any form of institutionalisation, movements have been known to remain as purely organising processes, both fluid and temporal (Zibechi 2010). The 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, the *Indignados* in Spain, and the *Nuit Debout* movement and *gilets jaunes* in France all rejected verticality of organisation, though the latter showed signs of more intense organising in the form of regular general assemblies (Sitrin 2016; Gerbaudo 2016; Sourice 2016; Kouvelakis 2019; Goanec 2019). Movements can

also overlap or even take the form of riots (Badiou 2012; Clover 2016; Dean 2016).

The increasingly dominant role of the new digital media in street protests and the emergence of movements-as-spectacles form another key aspect of the organising/organisation discourse. Because the advent of the new media as an oppositional proposition raises serious questions about all previous notions of organising and disrupts the process of oppositional cognition, we need to address it separately.

The new media and social movements: emancipatory digitality or disruption of oppositional cognition?

Online networks have been hailed as potentially revolutionary (Dean 2013) and described as the revolutionary “common” where the gravediggers of capital congregate (Hardt 2010; Negri 2010). The scenario of angry and disgruntled people pouring onto the streets in response to online campaigns, “viral” Facebook/Twitter posts garnering millions of hits, and social media “events” is by now familiar (Tufekci 2017; Herrera 2014). If the events are colourful, well attended and violent, the mainstream media starts paying attention and new spectacles are born. But does this scenario, which segues from one spectacle to another, across geographies, politics and culture, raise new hopes for oppositionality? Events and spectacles are usually short-lived—once crowds shrink and the state steps in with its weaponry of repression, soft containment and co-optation, the media loses interest.

Hardt claims that capitalism is producing the common and that since the autonomy of the common is the essence of communism, the “conditions and weapons of a communist project” are now more available than ever (Hardt 2010). Both Hardt and Negri

(Negri 2010) further posit that capitalist production nowadays has moved from industries to the “biopolitical” and that capital is now producing new forms of life. Hardt forgets that capital has always produced new forms of life by constantly revolutionising the means of production at its disposal as well as producing and reproducing its own social relations, and that in a fully capitalised world, commons cannot survive without being oppositional. In other words, the society of commons survives in spite of and in constant opposition to the State-Capital (Caffentzis/Federici 2014). Made-to-order revolutions are not real, for all their insurrectionary flash mobs and spectacular events. They generate images, collect millions of new social media users and boost corporate profit, but do not foster oppositionality. Facebook and Twitter revolutions are real only as instances of capitalist appropriation of the process of oppositional knowledge and/or as counter-revolutions brought into being by state agencies and their imperialist backers, such as the US State Department (Herrera 2014). A revolution as a new workspace for generating corporate profit is an impossible aberration: it cannot exist.

We must be wary of spectacles. Not all insurrections are oppositional: movements without revolutionary content either lapse into stasis, reinforce the status quo or devolve into simulacra, things that are not really there. Events and their impressive visuals represent such simulacra. The illusion of revolution displaces actual oppositional action; the real is taken over by the capitalist real, thus effectively pre-empting, or acting against, the potential revolutions that take shape more gradually.

Flashmob insurrections by themselves prove nothing. Each of them must be examined critically in order to identify the social meanings behind the images and words. Because, as the Soviet linguist Voloshinov pointed out, histories of class struggles lend meanings to words and images (Voloshinov 1973). Layers of mass-produced knowledge, along with lies and

fictions, must be stripped away to get at the oppositional meanings.

Below, we analyse three contemporary movements in greater detail to better understand the reality of their oppositionality.

Movements as political continuities

Gilets jaunes: from movement-as-spectacle to Revolutionary Anarchy?

The *gilets jaunes* (Yellow Vests) movement in France shows how a present-day social movement defies easy categorisation. It apparently started, like many such movements in the recent past, with an online petition and a couple of viral Facebook posts denouncing the tax burden on motorists and calling for a mass blockade of the roads. Before long, the leaderless movement had evolved into a full-blown and often violent revolt against President Macron and his government. The issue at stake was no longer simply the price of fuel (Harding 2019).

The thing to note here is that although they carried out a succession of “Acts” (spectacular demonstrations) [\[i\]](#) and managed to retain a high profile as a spectacle for an astonishingly long time (at the time of writing, the movement is 12 months old), the *gilets jaunes* cannot simply be understood in terms of their signature yellow vests and the sequence of violent incidents they came to represent, at least in the eyes of the Western media. Beyond the spectacle, slow day-to-day organising went on in occupied roundabouts and neighbourhood assemblies throughout France, where the *gilets jaunes* debated the future of the movement and interacted with citizens who might not be *gilets jaunes*, but were nonetheless angry and sceptical about what the Macron government was doing (Kouvelakis 2019). Local neighbourhood assemblies fed into a

bigger Assembly of Assemblies, where representatives from several hundred *gilets jaunes* groups debated, framed and issued political demands and statements. At the time of writing, three Assemblies of Assemblies have taken place, with the third one at Montceau-les-Mines being attended by 650 delegates representing 250 local groups from all over France (Goanec 2019). As the movement progressed, it gradually acquired more political clarity. No longer a Facebook-driven group that lacked a clear political agenda and counted among its members anti-immigrant right-wing sympathisers (Harding 2019) and perhaps a multitude of angry protesters and rioters (Harding 2018; Fassin/Defossez 2019), it decided to challenge not only the state, but also capital:

We are putting into action new forms of direct democracy. [...] The Assembly of Assemblies reaffirms its complete independence from all political parties, trade unions [...] We are inviting all people who want to put an end to the appropriation of the living [...] to assume a conflictual stance against the actual system [...] aware that we have to fight a global system, we believe that *we must get out of capitalism*. (The Yellow Vests' Call after the Second Assembly of Assemblies in Saint-Nazaire, 5-7 April 2019—emphasis added) [\[iii\]](#)

The second Assembly of Assemblies, from which this exhortation emanated, was relatively poorly attended (according to the preamble to the text, only 200 delegates were present, due perhaps to systematic repression by the Macron administration and also the government's so-called participatory democracy exercise in form of the Great Debate; see Harding 2019) and the third Assembly of Assemblies had to revisit many of the points contained in the document. Despite heated debates, there emerged a consensus on “exiting capitalism” (Goanec 2019). Moreover, some of the participants referred to themselves as revolutionaries and there was a great degree of emphasis on practising a variant of libertarian municipalism originally theorised by Murray Bookchin, though engagement

with the state had not been ruled out (Goanec 2019).

It appears that while the number of *gilets jaunes* in the street was dwindling, the movement was consciously trying to develop itself as a better-organised process with long-term political objectives. Though some organising is still done over social media, many organisers seem to prefer direct personal interaction to Facebook, which is seen as both a “site of manipulation ‘from below’ and state surveillance ‘from above’” (Kouvelakis2019). Organising is key in determining whether the *gilets jaunes* will survive state repression and the cycle of media indifference and attacks. No libertarian municipalism and no revolution without a disciplined, politically informed organisation, said Bookchin (Bookchin 2015), marking a clear departure from classical notions of libertarianism or communist anarchy. From the little we know of the *gilets jaunes*, the evident presence of many anarchist organisers in their midst could have one of two results: the movement may remain limited to local assemblies, shunning a more organised form; alternately, desperation may push it (if not the entire movement, then some parts) towards more violent street actions.

Would we call the *gilets jaunes* a revolutionary movement with the oppositional knowledge of its potency? It is difficult to predict how the movement, devoid of any regular organisation, could function as a political continuity and whether its intensely oppositional character could be maintained for long in the face of repression. This issue merits further discussion.

Occupy Wall Street and Democratic Socialism

The experiences of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement show that contemporary oppositional collective processes are often structurally and politically fluid. Participants and

sympathisers have written extensively about the movement/events (Dean 2016; Sitrin/Azzellini 2014; Bray 2013; Chomsky 2012; Taylor et al. 2011) that took place in 2011 and we will not linger over them here. However, a few observations might be relevant. First of all, for many of the participants, Occupy was a call for a world revolution.^[iii] Though the model of the “revolution” was “imported” from the Arab Spring Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt(White 2016) and action was initiated through social media(White 2016), from its very outset OWS targeted the global rule of capital and the economic, social and political inequality inherent in it. “We are the 99 percent” was an anti-capital slogan that directly targeted class rule (Dean 2016; Sitrin/Azzellini 2014), and the young and not-so-young people who took part in the Occupy movement in New York and elsewhere shared the common conviction that capital’s rule had to be challenged (Sitrin/Azzellini 2014; Taylor et al. 2011). OWS also re-emphasised that not only were anarchists, rather than the traditional left, emerging as the dominant voice of the left in the new movements of the 21st century – from the neighbourhood councils and factory takeovers in Argentina to the popular assemblies in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and the anti-austerity movements in Greece and Spain – but also that the anarchist idea of direct neighbourhood democracy and horizontalism was the preferred organisational form in each case(Sitrin/Azzellini 2014).

Given this context of anarchist un-organisationality, is it not somewhat surprising that a large majority of the active occupiers gravitated towards the party form in their future organising, and that they primarily came out in support of self-proclaimed “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders? Going by what some of the organisers of the newly launched party Democratic Socialists of America(DSA) are currently thinking (a collection of insider takes on the resurgence of leftist politics in contemporary America appeared in *New Left Review*;

see Gong 2019; Mason 2019; Alcázar 2019; Sallai 2019; Moya 2019), it seems that either the anarchist strand within OWS has knowingly decided to embrace Marxism or the non-anarchist left was always present within the movement. Though there are many disagreements over supporting the mainstream Democratic Party and taking part in electoral politics, it appears that all the DSA organisers believe there is a need for more intense organising in the future, including unionisation and even methodical recruitment of potential organisers. There is much talk about class, class struggle and working-class organisation: “[w]e should be an organization of the working class”, argues Arielle Sallai, a DSA organiser. She says there is a lot of talk inside DSA about whether *“the group itself can organize the working class towards revolution”* and thinks that *“DSA can and should be a revolutionary organization”* which needs a *“deliberate process of base building”*, something which is *“about politics”* as well as *“structure”*. In a similar vein, René Christian Moya, another DSA organiser, remarks that the fate of DSA depends on its willingness *“to struggle with the working class”* and that *“the prospects of organized labour are vital to our chances of building hegemony around socialist demands”*. Moya says further that *“it is a task of the organized left, in DSA and beyond, to work towards the construction of sites of power independent of the political system, and of the existing infrastructure of progressivism—including the unions”*. He calls for *“direct and intentional engagement with worker and community struggles”*, which is *“arduous, time-consuming work”* (emphasis added).

Though the DSA is *“a collection of fairly autonomous chapters spread across much of the United States, with wildly different leadership structures and priorities”*, this does not prevent its members from asking political questions about the *“form or mode of politics [that] is best suited to develop and equip the working class with the power it needs to challenge the rule of capital”*. It seems that at least some of its members view the DSA as a working-class party of the future, a party

whose members keep on debating about horizontality and centrality, but feel the urgent necessity of involving new people in extra-parliamentary politics through the party, while ensuring the party itself does not simply become a “move-on.org for the Twitter generation”.

In the *gilets jaunes*, we saw a typical street protest, a movement-as-spectacle striving to reinvent itself as a more consistent political formation of anarchists that opposes capital and state and tentatively supports libertarian municipalism. In Occupy-DSA, we find another political continuity where a predominantly anarchist movement-as-spectacle with an anti-capital political worldview is slowly morphing into what its members see as a revolutionary working-class party of the future. Our known repertoire of movement categories and oppositional politics is constantly being unmade and remade by actual movement processes that embody the historical and subjective processes of oppositional cognition. A brief look at the political-organisational history of the Zapatista movement lends weight to this statement.

Zapatismo: oppositional politics of listening

There is a growing body of literature on the Zapatistas; consequently, we need not dwell on the chronology or narratives of the succession of events and silences-without-events that raised new hopes for oppositional politics not only in Mexico and Latin America, but worldwide. Instead, let us turn our attention to how *Zapatismo*, as a form of oppositional politics, has evolved over the years, both historically and philosophically. This is important because the Zapatistas seem reticent about tracing the history of their movement beyond the 1994 insurrection in Chiapas. Subcommander Marcos-Galeano^[iv], the main spokesperson of the movement, likes to talk about how a “small group of urbanites” that originally arrived in the Mexican jungles to start an

armed insurrection in the time-honoured Latin American tradition of *Guerrilla Foco* stopped in their tracks, ceased talking and started listening to the “other” –here, the indigenous people of Chiapas. “Something happened that saved us. Saved us and defeated us in those first years”, says Marcos, going on to explain how from “a movement that *proposed putting the masses at its service, making use of proletarians*”, peasants and others “to take power”, the Zapatistas were “turning into an army that ‘serves’ the indigenous communities.[\[v\]](#)”

This “turning into an army that had to serve” instead of “putting the masses at its service” signals not only a renunciation of the *Guerrilla Foco*, but also a total epistemological reversal of the theory of revolutionary vanguardism that gained currency since the 1917 Russian Revolution and became somewhat synonymous with the left, especially the more orthodox kind of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist practice. Marcos elucidates further:

...our entire previous proposal, and the orthodox Left's previous proposal up to then, was the opposite, it was: from above things are solved for below [...] this below-for-above change meant not organizing ourselves [...] or [...] other people to go vote, nor to go to a march [...] to shout [...] but to survive and turn resistance into a school (emphasis added).

Zapatismo, born out of turning resistance into a school, transforms the entire process of oppositional learning and knowledge-making into a site for practising a new kind of revolutionary pedagogy, where the teachers themselves are taught. The actual process on the ground, however, followed a different path. The first indigenous members of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) were recruited way back in 1978-80 by the “urbanite” guerrillas who had succeeded in setting up a *safe house* in San Cristóbal de las Casas with the help of the indigenous people (Oikonomakis 2019). The EZLN safe houses

were also schools where young indigenous recruits were taught how to read and write as well as being educated in Marxism, other typical subjects, weapon use and survival skills (Cedillo 2010; DeLa Grange/Rico 1999, quoted in Oikonomakis 2019). Once their training was complete, the students would return to their villages to become “instructors” for the next batch of newly recruited students. The EZLN still uses the same system of self-instruction in its own autonomous territories (Oikonomakis 2019). Looking at the history of the EZLN and the Zapatista revolution, we wonder how much of the new oppositional knowledge of “commanding by obeying” can be traced back to older, orthodox forms of leftist pedagogy and organising, whereby students had to be recruited and taught to prepare them for roles as militants/soldiers of the impending revolution. Though the Lacandon jungle in Mexico has witnessed many revolts, uprisings and organised denials of the Mexican state (Oikonomakis 2019; Khasnabish 2010), it cannot be considered a pre-determined, historical given that Zapatismo, with its essential philosophical otherness based on a process of learning to listen, obey and serve (Dussel 1998, quoted in Paradiso-Michau 2008), would have evolved as it did without the long and heroic efforts of the members of the hierarchical and vanguardist Marxist-Leninist party *Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional* (FLN, Forces of National Liberation). The Zapatistas and the EZLN no longer talk about their FLN past (apart from remembering the martyrs), but it is a fact that the EZLN was first conceived as the rural wing of FLN in 1980 (FLN 2003, quoted in Oikonomakis 2019). FLN, most likely an offshoot of a still-earlier revolutionary process called *Ejército Insurgente Mexicano* (EIM, Mexican Insurgent Army), was formed in 1969, and its attempts to penetrate the Lacandon jungle probably began in 1972. When, in 1993, the indigenous leaders in the *Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena* (CCRI, Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee) and the EZLN had already decided to go to war, FLN’s leadership had to be persuaded of the desirability of the proposed course of action (Cedillo 2010; DeLa Grange/Rico 1999, quoted in Oikonomakis 2019).

After a discussion that continued for several days, it was decided that from then onwards, the CCRI – in other words the EZLN's indigenous leaders –and not the “politico-military organisation” of FLN would assume leadership of the Zapatista revolution (Le Bot/Marcos 1997, quoted in Oikonomakis 2019).

The above account proves that in the terrain of oppositional politics, neither organisational forms nor “political beliefs” are static and nothing is sacrosanct besides oppositionality. This is because both the organisational form of a movement and the convictions of its militants respond to the movement's actuality: they have to remain fluid; otherwise, no revolutionary praxis is possible. Fluidity ensures that the learnt is constantly unlearnt and re-learnt: ideas appear, disappear and reappear. The vanguardist hierarchy of a Marxist-Leninist party can take an informed decision to dissolve itself in a from-the-below indigenous-led revolution that aims not to seize state power but to establish autonomous municipalities and territories in opposition to the capitalist nation-state and its from-the-above “geographies” (Marcos 2018). Once again, the Zapatista call for autonomy and horizontality does not stem from any anarchist concept relying on spontaneity rather than organisation. Instead, it is backed up and put into practice by a well-structured organisational network and a revolutionary army that came into being through the arduous work of generations of political workers belonging to a traditional leftist party. It is surely not a coincidence that the municipalist revolution in Rojava by the stateless Kurds, led predominantly by women, was also initiated by what was originally an orthodox Marxist-Leninist formation and is also supported by an armed militia. It is doubtful how long the autonomous cantons at Rojava and the Zapatistas' territories could survive systematic military aggression by the capitalist nation-states that surround them were full-blown conflicts to break out, but that is a different question altogether. Besides, it is possible that all processes of oppositional politics have to face similar challenges, because

the state can respond in devious ways. The art of engaging, dealing with and resisting the state forms part of the oppositional knowledge that makes revolutionary praxis possible. Movements and their militants do not acquire this knowledge through mere participation in organisations, events and un-organisational horizontality. Rather, the knowledge is born of, and is part of, the political continuities formed by the past, present and future in equal proportions: the past because revolutionary processes and ideas from the past, more than the historical evolution of production systems, inform all present oppositional processes; the present because that is where praxis unfolds, erupts and create ruptures; and the future because the emancipation of the working class and the human species, e.g. communism, is part of that future. All social movements with a political dimension must consciously and collectively situate –as well as discover – themselves in those continuities.

Conclusion: understanding and deepening oppositionality

To situate and discover themselves within fluid political continuities, movements must *internationalise* opposition. Without *internationalisation*, the horizontal grassroots of the local and the autonomy they profess to represent would probably shrivel in double quick time. Revolutions would appear and disappear, insurrections would be suppressed or co-opted, riots would succeed riots, and yet the immanence would remain unrealised: the perennial spring of freedom would never be ours.

When we talk about internationalising, we do not mean building a new revolutionary International. Internationalisation, as we see it, would require each association, assembly, union, organisation or party to acquire collective criticality. That is, each movement practice must learn to see beyond the

hegemony of the capitalist real and revisit its theories, strategies and actions with relentless criticality, which cannot be compromised for the sake of organisational and other compulsions, such as state repression and the necessity of “positive” engagements with the state. Suspending criticality might help in immediate mobilising, but seriously harm the collective’s cognitive ability to grasp the oppositional not only within the society but also within the apparently autonomous spaces created by the movement collectives. As long as movement collectives are forced to exist in spatially and organisationally separate enclaves within a dominant capitalist real, any victories can only be ephemeral.

The movements of perpetual oppositionality have to transcend themselves. This transcendence is both social and political: social because the movements remake the social relations of power firstly by remaining alive and secondly through conscious oppositionality; political because the process is neither conceivable nor actualised without constant analysis, critique and confrontation of the state. Thus the transition from the particularity of an insurrection to the philosophy of a revolution, from the tumultuous moment of the evental to the eternity of the revolutionary horizon and the reclaiming of the individual, “free-active” subject: movements that organise for the present and not a future that is and isn’t part of that present fail to posit emancipatory politics. Since the working class constitutes itself as an oppositional force only through its collective political will to oppose (Gramsci 2001, quoted in Galastri 2018; Galastri 2018; Thompson 2013), whosoever revolts against the State-Capital tyranny and fights for a non-state, non-capital world is part of the proletariat (Balibar 1977, 1994). And only the proletariat can keep the rebellion going (Marx/Engels 1976; Dean 2016).

All movements and movement organisations, if they are oppositional, are part of greater political continuities that transcend space-time. We can even re-imagine a new kind of

party that acts purely as a facilitator, an organiser entity, that senses the immanence but does not usurp its vanguardist agency as a higher body (Beaudet 2016; Dean 2012). It remains true to the idea of communism and communist revolution, but does not lead it by commanding. Conversely, it learns to command by obeying, as the Zapatistas do. Like the Chinese Communist Party in the pre-revolutionary China, it practises a mass line and learns from the mass, which it helps to come into being by spatially and politically linking various strands of non-state oppositionality, insurrectionary and otherwise (Hui 2016a, 2016b), existing within the capitalist real. It ensures that the oppositional knowledge of the non-state, non-capital informs the movements that unfold and erupt within the present enclosed by the State-Capital; even if the insurrections end not in a bang but pathetic whimper of social democracy, it sees the rupture latent in the event and champions the transcendence that is no longer visible. Anything is possible as long as oppositionality does not die.



Soumitra Ghosh, a social activist and independent researcher, has been working with forest communities in sub-Himalayan West Bengal in India for several decades. He has written extensively on issues related to the politics of struggles for forest Commons as well as climate justice and climate change, particularly its political economy.

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Endnotes

[i]The *gilets jaunes* staged their 49th Act on 22 October 2019, roughly two weeks before the movement’s first anniversary. See <https://www.connexionfrance.com/French-news/Giletss-jaunes-Acte-49-protest-marches-honour-France-s-striking-firefighters>

[ii]<https://resistance71.wordpress.com/2019/04/10/english-translation-of-the-yellow-vests-call-after-the-second-assembly-of->

assemblies-in-st-nazaire-april-5-7-2019/

[iii] See the homepage of Occupy: <http://occupywallst.org/>.

[iv] In a Zapatista programme in 2014, Marcos died as Marcos and was reborn as Galeano, another of the martyrs of the revolution. See Nick Henck(2018): *Introduction to The Zapatistas' Dignified Rage*.

[v] Subcommander Marcos's Words for the National and International Caravan for Observation and Solidarity with Zapatista Communities, La GarruchaCaracol, 2 August 2008. (Emphasis added)