

Strategies for the Latin American Left Problems of Autonomism

by CLAUDIO KATZ

SINCE THE mid-1990s, autonomist politics has gained influence in Latin America. Its theorists are attentively listened to and their practical proposals awaken great interest. But this scenario has begun to change with the appearance of new nationalist and center-left governments. The rise of Lula, Kirchner, and Tabaré, the increased strength of Chávez, the resurgence of Fidel, and the shift of López Obrador changes the playing field that favored the expansion of libertarian theories.

The autonomists eschew political affiliation and ideological definition. They share feelings, attitudes, and projects, but they do not support a common doctrine. They broadcast a moral critique of capitalism from an anti-authoritarian perspective, rejecting all forms of leadership and state power. They use a libertarian language and defend *autoorganización* [self-organization], emphasizing values of solidarity and community. They question participation in mainstream institutions and encourage *autogestión* [self-management] in the economic sphere.

But the autonomists are a very heterogeneous group and lack recognized spokespeople as common proponents of their vision. In order to frame the debate, it is necessary to select certain authors who express this political current's most relevant theories. Zibechicocaleros [coca growers], and the Argentine *piqueteros* [the unemployed workers' movement].

In terms of theory, Negri

The Argentine laboratory

The popular uprising of 2001–2003 in Argentina was a particularly relevant experience for the autonomists because they concluded that their project was beginning to take shape in the organizations emerging during this rebellion. They presented the neighborhood assemblies and the *piquetero* protests as examples of a new emancipatory *autoorganización* and extended this assessment to the bartering clubs (where workers and farmers exchanged goods and services without cash), the reoccupied factories, and the counter-cultural collectives.

But the upsurge of these experiments in popular control did not prevent the old political system from reestablishing itself in record time. The bourgeoisie's recovery weakened the assemblies and pickets and diminished expectations for the continuation of popular action. The ruling classes deactivated the immediate democratic demand "*Que se vayan todos*" ["They all must go"] through governmental channels that the uprising was not able to counteract.

The autonomists did not grasp that the oppressors took advantage of the limitations of a rebellion that took

militant action, but lacked organization, leadership, and ideological coherence. Moreover, they celebrate these features as a sign of the uprising's novelty ("a festival without programs, nor objectives").

The assemblies emerged when the collapse of government institutions turned neoliberal propaganda against politicians and the "government" into a radicalized mobilization against the entire regime. The assemblies focused popular participation in the key moments of the uprising, but they declined when the ruling class regained the reigns of power. Many autonomists refuse to see this, forgetting that the oppressed cannot liberate themselves if they do not develop their own political project. They do not consider this to be an obstacle because they think that the social movements will construct a new society from the spontaneous act of rebellion.

This vision extends to the characterization of the *piqueteros* as architects of parallel forms of social organization. Many autonomists see them as creators of political networks and economic alternatives, and therefore conclude that the *piqueteros* "do not want to be workers, or citizens." But the experience of recent years does not bear out this characterization. The *piqueteros* always attempt to join with other oppressed groups and bring their marches into the centers of the cities to avoid isolation in remote localities.

It is wrong to suppose that the *piqueteros* do not want to return to formal work or that they have constructed an identity opposed to that of workers. This belief contradicts the core of the demands and actions of the unemployed. They always demand unemployment assistance and reinstatement in the formal workforce. In their mobilizations they demand genuine employment and decent salaries.

During the popular rebellion many varieties of economic organization proposed by autonomism flourished. Of these, the bartering clubs were particularly short-lived because they took commerce back to primitive forms. Bartering only lasted under the particular circumstances created by devaluation of the peso and issuance of province-level currencies. As the circulation of goods and the cash economy recovered, the bartering clubs disappeared.

The impulse that fueled other experiments also diminished under the impact of the economic recovery. Capitalism's competitive pressure especially affected the self-managed shops. Some autonomists lose sight of the defensive character of these experiments, which emerged as a means of survival at the height of economic crisis. Because the principal objective of these initiatives was to preserve some source of income in the midst of the catastrophe, they began to decline when the depression receded.

But many bakeries, soup kitchens, and peoples' gardens continue to exist because they were creations of popular struggle. They developed without government assistance, but only with the support of the community. Now they are part of the tradition of resistance because they demonstrate that the unemployed are not lazy and could surely contribute to the development of a people's program for economic recovery. But they do not generate large-scale employment, nor provide income to the bulk of the population. Many

autonomists ignore these limitations.

The worker-managed enterprises constitute another major achievement of the rebellion. They won difficult battles with the courts, governments, and ex-proprietors that wanted to expel them or to strangle them economically. They survived repression, from judicial attacks to financial strangulation, showing that they could run the businesses without the bosses. But certain autonomists forget that these companies operate in a limited segment of the labor force and should not be idealized. They ignore the difficulties created by government pressure to convert them into small capitalist firms. The worker-managed enterprises can develop and assist an emancipatory project. But it is wrong to imagine they are liberated islands within a capitalist universe.

The regional picture

The autonomists extend their romantic vision of the rebellion in Argentina to all of the social movements of Latin America. With this projection they frequently ignore the difficulties these organizations have in winning their demands in the political arena.

The autonomists refuse to grasp the fact that the representatives of the ruling classes co-opt many popular movements. They do not recognize the importance of the challenges that confront the Ecuadorian indigenous movement, the landless of Brazil, or the *cocaleros* of Bolivia in the face of betrayals, neoliberal policies, and right-wing repression from the governments that emerged from their struggles. They promote an idyllic image of the social movements, acting as if these groups advance from strength to strength.

The autonomists trust in the sufficiency of the social struggle and dismiss the necessity of a socialist political project of the oppressed. They think that the accumulated experience in popular action leads to the spontaneous development of anti-capitalist sentiments within the population.

But if it were so simple, the MST of Brazil would not be forced to fight the disillusionment created by Lula and the *piqueteros* would not be fragmented in the face of Kirchner's machinery of cooptation.

The autonomist image of *zapatismo* as a spontaneous emergence of the indigenous struggle does not acknowledge the intense preparation of a force that waited ten years to come "above ground" with guerrilla actions that required training and much political work beforehand. Since, the Zapatistas have demanded legal recognition of indigenous rights, confronted the military cordon around Chiapas, and exposed the deceptions of the government.

In no case has experience alone or the identity forged in struggle sufficed to resolve the political dilemmas of Latin America. Solutions do not arise from the dynamics generated by each movement. In order to confront the well-oiled machinery of domination that the oppressors maintain, the popular organizations must strengthen anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist consciousness among the oppressed. The capitalists have centuries of experience in deception and repression; these cannot simply be overcome

with spontaneous action from below.
Events, fetishism, history

Some autonomist currents propose including a new “anti-politics of events” in the struggles of the oppressed. They believe that the course of events themselves illuminates the road to liberation.

This cult of spontaneity contradicts the autonomists’ own calls for participation. On the one hand they support large-scale involvement and popular debate and discussion, but on the other hand, they assert that action alone is enough to produce favorable results for the oppressed. Autonomism denies that the workers need tactics and programs to move them in an anti-capitalist direction. But tactics and programs are indispensable in appraising situations, weighing the balance of forces, detecting weak links, evaluating crises, and acting in revolutionary circumstances. Socialist politics is also an instrument to resist the retreat into individualism that neoliberalism promotes.

Actions of this type would permit the development of an emancipatory political practice in the face of the alienation of capitalism. Holloway

Many autonomists extol these small acts of rebellion more than systematic political activity. They value the experiences of the present and give little attention to the lessons of each struggle. For this reason they denigrate history even to the point of asserting the uselessness of collective memory.

Holloway *zapatismo*, which draws on a century of peasant struggles?

Holloway sees the past as expendable without recognizing that this ends up burying all the traditions of the oppressed. If the popular classes lose all traces of resistance, they are left without history and trapped by the ideological universe of their rulers. The exploited need to remember their triumphs and defeats because absolute *presentismo* [concentrating only on the present] results in prolonging capitalism indefinitely. If “they escape their history” they destroy the legacy that empowers them to confront the real challenges of today.

Included and excluded

Their sharp separation between the “included” in society and the “excluded” is another example of the way autonomists deprecate traditions of struggle. Many autonomists identify the included with conservatism and the excluded with emancipatory attitudes. In Argentina, this contrast appears, for example, in the description of the excluded *piqueteros* as the “indigenous people of industrial society,” who rebel, unlike the passive employed workers (i.e., the included).

This perspective sees differences where there are really similarities. The *piqueteros*’ tactics (blocking traffic, erecting barricades, etc.) come from the tactics of employed workers’ strikes. These tactics are used by leaders of the unemployed who had a great deal of trade-union experience before they lost their jobs. This [union] training explains why such a strong movement of the unemployed emerged and why the

unions again took up the tactic of picketing in their struggles over wages. The unemployed, the *precarizados* [the underemployed, day laborers, and part-time workers] and industrial workers share a history of mobilization that has not disappeared with the loss of employment or with their being forced into the informal sector.

Many autonomists tend to claim the excluded of Latin America as a social subject differentiated from the working class. Some highlight this distinction because they see the Left as having dismissed peasants and the unemployed.

The point of departure for this evaluation is to underline how deindustrialization has modified the class configuration of the region, displacing conflicts to rural or marginal areas on the fringes of the main cities. The autonomists have also emphasized the awakening of the indigenous peoples and the upsurge of a new generation displaced from formal work.

These characterizations adequately take account of the brutal changes that have been created by the opening of local markets to imports, the corporatization of agriculture, the shuttering of numerous industries, and the recession in the world market. But from the recognition of these transformations it does not follow that there has been a radical change in the protagonists of social struggle. The autonomists do not see that the map of resistance in Latin America is very diverse and differentiated. The weight of rural sectors in the Andean region coexists with the preeminence of urban workers in the Southern Cone and the notable presence of public employees in all countries.

The most significant feature of this process is the mixture of traditions between social subjects who share methods of struggle. To emphasize the role of the excluded at the expense of formal workers is to downplay this multiplicity and convergence.

Many autonomists use the term “excluded” to describe the situation of the unemployed and informal sector workers. However, this label tends to place the “precarious” outside of the working class. This point of view implicitly reduces the proletariat to industrial workers. It forgets that both informal sector workers and all others who live only by their work also form part of this exploited social class. To see the excluded as separate actors tends to minimize their affinity with the whole of the working population. This separation discounts even more the weight that employed workers have in the most strategically important sectors of the economy. The actions of this section strike more directly at the foundations of domination, because they directly affect capitalist profits. In contrast, other popular resistances have less impact on these mainsprings of capital and can be neutralized more easily. This is the reason that strikes in transportation, the banks, or in particular factories have more impact than the protests of the unemployed or of informal workers. This is the reason that the defeat of the ruling class requires decisive participation of the employed working class.

The autonomists magnify the role of the excluded at the expense of traditional workers, because they place more weight on the relations of domination than on the forms of exploitation. They have lost sight of the

neurological center of capitalist reproduction located in the extraction of surplus value. For this reason, they tend to take up certain notions of post-industrialism and interpret the retreat of the traditional workers' movement as a symptom of the structural decline of work. They forget that, whatever the dislocations or changes in the labor process there have been, capitalism would cease to exist without workers' labor. Understood this way, the arguments of the autonomists lose all meaning.

Democracy, horizontality, elections

The defense of social struggle at the expense of political action leads many of the autonomists to promote the expansion of an "anti-power" outside the boundaries of bourgeois institutions. They proclaim this alternative will be constructed by means of direct democracy, with horizontal methods and by avoiding all types of hierarchies.

Undoubtedly, self-organization plays a decisive role in any popular explosion, but experience shows that this mobilization declines in periods of retreat. For this reason it is necessary to have stable, continuous popular organization that is reinforced with forms of indirect representation. Only on a small local scale can these measures be set aside.

The operation of the contemporary economy and the complexity of the political choices that confront society today demand that we delegate authority and use legislative tools. The different forms of direct democracy proposed by autonomists could only contribute in a complementary way to the organization of society in the process of constructing a socialist society.

Autonomism counterposes the broadening of communal forms of democracy to the institutions of the bourgeois regime. For this reason, autonomists regularly oppose participation in elections, or hold their noses to take part in certain races. They only intervene explicitly when they perceive a serious right-wing threat.

Holloway is right to point out that, under capitalism, formal equality of citizens masks real social inequality.

With their abstention from elections, the autonomists allow the dominant classes to maneuver without any opposition in the electoral arena. This desertion is particularly counterproductive in Latin America, because here the oppressors have rid themselves of the inept dictatorships and used elections to hide social inequality, to derail rebellions, and to depose presidents.

The impact of the new nationalist and center-left governments illustrates how the abandonment of the electoral arena has significant consequences for the autonomists even within their own ranks. The impact of these administrations is noted even by the most emblematic figures of autonomism. While Holloway questions the new center-left leaders, Negri praises Kirchner, the Argentine president, and Hardt praises Lula, the Brazilian president. In Argentina, moreover, the autonomists have been divided: some see

Kirchner as a representative of the rebellion of 2001 and others see him as its gravedigger.

Fraternity or militancy?

Some autonomist authors counterpose the smooth and flexible organization of the social movements with the vertical structures they see in the radical Left. They contrast the organizing role of Christian base communities

But this contrast describes an opposition between two stereotypes: the authoritarian militant versus the sensitive social movement activist. It locates dogmatism in the Left and solidarity in the social movements, placing ideological conviction in the first camp and ethical impulse in the second. This schema of ideal types cannot be proven in reality. Neither are the cadres of the Left so calculating nor social movement activists so friendly. Rational judgment and ethical motivation are features of both groups because they participate in the movements of the oppressed.

Reclaiming the emotional dimensions of social struggle constitutes a central concern of all of the autonomist authors.

Some autonomists are particularly critical of the radical Left because they attribute to it the pretension of forcibly imposing its ideas on the social movements. They object to the authoritarianism they observe in many organizations. But they also suppose that their own ideas naturally accord with the popular will. They forget that radical ideas do not arise instinctually from inhabitants of each community. What usually emerges as “common sense” is only an ideology of the ruling class that is just as hostile to socialism as it is to the libertarian project.

Other critics of the radical Left question the Leninist conception of constructing firm political organizations dedicated to promoting socialist consciousness. They think that this strategy disdains the self-emancipatory capacity of workers and leads to Stalinist totalitarianism.

This appraisal distorts Lenin’s advocacy of building of stable organizations in order to transform the social struggle into conscious workers’ political action. The Bolshevik leader also emphasized the role of organization in confronting powerful enemies. In the conditions of clandestine struggle against Tsarism he argued for rigorous organization, but he never claimed this was a universal model of revolutionary action. He always encouraged the adaptation of forms of organization to changing political realities (for example, emphasizing professionalism in some periods and flexibility in others).

To present Lenin as a precursor to Stalinist massacres is a liberal caricature. To interpret any political discipline as inexorably leading to terror would mean that we would have to object to all forms of collective structure, including those adopted by social movements that the autonomists support!

Recognizing the importance of organization does not imply ignoring that a tendency of small groups to proclaim themselves the leaders of struggles and the cult of the party are problems in many groups on the

Left. This vanguardism substitutes preconceived recipes for the process of building a socialist alternative. But paternalism is not a defect exclusive to the Left. The peculiarity of socialist militants is their commitment to struggle for a society without exploiters or exploited. The autonomists' hostility towards the radical Left lacks justification, when both groups share this emancipatory objective.

How not to take power

“Changing the world without taking power” is the strategic project of many autonomists. But how can one avoid the state? How can the target of every popular demand be ignored? The state can be combated or reformed, but it cannot be ignored. All demands made by social movements are directed towards the state. The Zapatistas demand pro-indigenous legislation from the Mexican congress, the *piqueteros* demand unemployment benefits from the Argentine Ministry of Labor, and the MST raises the demand of expropriation of land and the legalization of landless peasants' encampments to the Brazilian parliament. In “developed” countries, “illegal” immigrants demand citizenship rights (France) and public housing residents ask for social legislation. The last of these are particularly “statist” demands.

Some movements are successful in imposing their demands, and others only manage to move public opinion. But the result of the demands in question is measured by the responses obtained from the state. Should the addressee of these demands be changed? Should they be directed towards other institutions? Autonomism doesn't provide answers to these questions, and some authors explicitly declare their ignorance of alternate avenues to pursue.

But this ignorance is not a minor problem. Struggles for power involve the fates of millions of individuals. They are dramatic confrontations that demand great sacrifices. Successes are rewarded with great victories, while failures are paid for in blood, pain, and frustration. For this reason, it would be worthwhile to invert the autonomist question and ask about the consequences of *not* taking power. If capitalism is responsible for so many wars, social suffering, and daily tragedy, it is because many revolutionary movements *did not* take power. They accepted the continuation of the bourgeois system or delegated the government to politicians who patched up the existing regime.

Holloway counsels against any form of power because he concludes that any exercise of power will reproduce oppression. But he doesn't take into account the fact that refusing to take over the state leads to the preservation of the status quo and the consolidation of the impoverishment of the dispossessed. If we want to change the world, it is not enough to reject the state. We have to look for strategies to extinguish it progressively until the end of a process of socialist transition. This transformation would necessarily begin with the establishment of a new state administered by the popular majority.

The proposal to change the world without taking power disqualifies one road without suggesting another. Thus, it leaves us with a bitter sensation of impotence. It demands insubordination and rebelliousness, but it never suggests how to triumph in the difficult battle against oppression.

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1 Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva is president of Brasil, Nestor Kirchner is president of Argentina, Tabaré Vazquez is president of Uruguay, Hugo Chávez is president of Venezuela, Fidel Castro is president of Cuba, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador was the mayor of Mexico City, and is now candidate for the presidency of Mexico.

2 Raúl Zibechi, *Genealogía de la revuelta* [*Geneology of the Revolt*] (Letra Libre: Buenos Aires, 2003).

3 Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Imperio* [*Empire*] (Paidós: Buenos Aires, 2002).

4 John Holloway, *Cambiar el mundo sin tomar el poder* [*Change the World Without Taking Power*] (Herramienta-Universidad de Puebla: Buenos Aires, 2002). The English edition of the book is published by Pluto Press, 2002.

5 Editorial. “Del deseo a la realidad” [“From desire to reality”], *El Rodaballo*, 15, invierno 2004.

6 An example of this vision is, Adamovsky Ezequiel, “El movimiento asambleario en la Argentina” [“The popular assembly movement in Argentina”], *El Rodaballo*, n 15, invierno 2004.

7 Zibechi, “¿Qué hay de común entre piqueteros y zapatistas?” [“What do the *piqueteros* and the Zapatistas have in common?”], *Correspondencia de Prensa* 1015, December 18, 2004. By “citizens” Zibechi means participants in mainstream politics. He contrasts that type of citizenship with the creation of new governmental and economic forms that he believes the *piqueteros* desire.

8 Zibechi, *Genealogía*, chapter 4.

9 The Kirchner government has enacted a number of programs of assistance for the unemployed that have served to recreate patronage networks tying *piquetero* organizations to the ruling Peronist party.

10 Colectivo Contrapoder. “Somos autonomistas, pero somos más que eso” [“We Are Autonomists, But We Are More Than That”], *Herramienta*, 26, julio 2004.

11 Holloway, *Cambiar*, chapters 4–5.

12 Holloway, “Eso no es democracia, sino revolución” [“This isn’t democracy, it’s revolution”], *Herramienta*, 23, invierno 2003. “Conduce tu carro y tu arado” *Herramienta*, 24, primavera/verano 2003–2004.

13 Zibechi, *Genealogía*, chapters 4 and 1.

14 Hernán Ouviaña, “Zapatistas, piqueteros y sin tierra” [“Zapatistas, *piqueteros* and the landless”], *Cuadernos del Sur* 37, mayo 2004.

15 Holloway, “Change the world without taking power,” *Capital and Class*, 85, spring 2005.

16 Adamovsky, *El movimiento*.

17 I have discussed this problem in Claudio Katz, *El porvenir del socialismo* [*The Future of Socialism*], Ed. Herramienta e Imago Mundi, Buenos Aires, 2004, chapter 5.

18 The decision of several autonomist leaders to support Kerry against Bush is a recent example of this attitude.

19 Holloway, “Eso no es democracia.”

20 A movement of religiously motivated activists spurred on by the 1960s reforms in the Catholic Church that lived and organized in poor communities in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.

21 Zibechi, *Genealogía*, chapters 2, 3, 4, 5.

22 This is the sense, for example, of the call of Holloway to highlight “the making of humanity based in friendship and love.” In Holloway, “Nunca fue tan obvio que el capitalismo es un desastre,” *Convergencia socialista* [“It has never been so obvious that capitalism is a disaster,” *Socialist Convergence*], 16, julio-junio 2002. “Entrevista,” September 9, 2002, 12.

23 Werner Bonefeld. “Estado, revolución y autodeterminación” [“State, revolution and self-determination”], *Cuadernos del Sur* 34, noviembre 2002.

24 Holloway, *Cambiar*, chapters 3 and 11. Holloway writes: “Hay que cambiar el mundo sin tomar el poder. ¿Cómo hacerlo? No lo sabemos... Al final de este libro no se responde...(porque)...no saber es parte del proceso revolucionario.” [The English edition, p. 215, reads: “How then do we change the world without taking power? At the end of the book, as at the beginning, we do not know.... We ask not only because we do not know the way (we do not), but also because asking the way is part of the revolutionary process itself.”]

