

Think from the Abyss*

by Gustavo Esteva

We are not at the brink of the abyss. We have already fallen into it. We are in free fall down an abyss that seems quite unfathomable. We cannot see the bottom of it.

We are not a “broken state”, a malicious and elusive category that a few years ago was used by the United States’ State Department to rank us alongside Congo and Pakistan. But we no longer know exactly what we are. The country that we had has been falling apart and we do not even know where to find some of its parts.

After attending to this new call of the *Universidad de la Tierra* in Chiapas [University of the Soil], I propose we start off by briefly reviewing the evidence of the disaster, aware of how painful it is to do so.

The disaster

For many years now, Mexico produced the richest man in the world and also the group around him who are in the first places of those scandalous lists of world potentates that today are richer than ever. Mexico also produces some of the poorest poor of the planet and a growing number of Mexicans have joined the poor category. These are not two separate facts. They are the same. What increasingly destroys the country is this maddening machine that accumulates immense riches for some and despoils and impoverishes the majority. The system, capitalism,

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is a device to impoverish the many – as Jean Robert and Majid Rahnema have very well explained in the book that had just been presented here.¹ This machine, this way of organizing society for the benefit of a few, is the root and the background of our disasters. Let's review some of them.

- A fifth of Mexicans have had to leave the country to go to Canada and the United States...and even as far away as Japan. Ours is one of the largest emigrations in history. Each year, hundreds of thousands keep trying to cross this escape door, although it is increasingly closed. Where are our borders now? Our people over our legal borders, who haven't been with us for years, continue to feel Mexican and their remittances are a condition of subsistence for millions of people. The police from there operates and directs the police here. Transnational corporations increasingly control larger sectors of our economy, and reinforce habits, products, attitudes, and music that displace everything that is ours. What is today the current outline of the country in geographical, economic, cultural terms? How did we allow this tragic dismantling?

- The number of crimes daily committed in Mexico is staggering. Its barbarity shrivels the heart. There is no longer a safe place and in large parts of the national territory all civilized forms of coexistence have been lost; only the force of the strongest remains. Violence, more and more general, becomes more and more random. Activists, social leaders, and journalists continue to be favorite targets, but senseless murders also increase. The government calls them "collateral casualties" and intends to hide them under the rug of its criminal war. Women, as always, suffer more than men. Violence has invaded the domestic sphere and is established as a norm of the relationship.

1 [TN] Esteva refers to *La puissance des pauvres*, Actes Sud, 2008.

- These two kinds of brutal violence – the one that separates people from their family, their community and their country and the one that kills and maims indiscriminately – also manifests itself as brutal aggression against *Madre Tierra* [Mother Earth]. Dispossessed villagers are now forced to destroy with very harmful forms of exploitation the lands that they had been protecting until now. What remains of a less and less rich territory, that portion of *Madre Tierra* once considered among the most diverse in the world and described as a cornucopia, has been continually destroyed with the complicity of many.

- The injustice, oppression, and arbitrariness that previously affected, above all, the poorest has become generalized. The institutions created to protect against violence, to offer solidarity in the face of misfortune and helplessness, and to guarantee respect for the freedom of people are producing the opposite. The character of our political regime appears in all its nakedness, in which the laws are formulated and applied as a class privilege. “Our political class” Javier Sicilia has said, “practices a form of crime as unpunished as the crime it claims to fight against”. By turning fraud into a “way of life” and by “making depredation, pillage, and crime simply management techniques, the real difference between legal and illegal crime is only a difference in intensity” (*Proceso* 1811, 17/ 6/11). Instead of formal structures regulated by general norms known and accepted by the social fabric, most of what remains of the country is under the control of mafias and gangs that operate outside all legal and institutional norms, within and outside the state apparatuses. Mexico suffered from this condition for a long time, which was one of the secrets of the PRI’s survival [Institutional Revolutionary Party]. But the point that has been reached is unprecedented and is a clear result of the monstrous and absurd nature of Calderón’s war, which turned a public health issue into a national security issue and tackled it, to

the core, with rotten apparatuses.

- Although we do not want to admit it, we are in the middle of a civil war. It is among the worst of its kind, because it has been losing a clear notion of the contending sides and there is no longer a possible winner. As Subcomandante Marcos recently wrote, “this war...is destroying the last fortress that a nation has left: the social fabric” (“Apuntes sobre las guerras” [Notes on wars], First letter to don Luis Villoro Toranzo from the insurgent subcomandante Marcos, January-February 2011).

Six months ago, I wrote that “a gelatinous horror increasingly threatens our daily lives. In many places you can no longer go outside at certain hours. This undeclared curfew sets limits and guides behavior. In a variety of spheres there are not even curfews that delimit what we can or cannot do. We no longer know where the often-deadly dangers lie.” (*La Jornada*, 7/25/11).

The situation has worsened since then. We are truly in free fall into an unfathomable abyss.

The pain of awareness

Let us cultivate the pain that all this provokes, a pain that would become even more intense if we continued the enumeration. Let's not kill it.

Allow me a diversion. Because of the Germans, the meaning of the word aesthetic is narrow. Long ago it meant to feel, to perceive with the senses. Once, we were all esthetes, we all felt. Traces of this origin are in the rarely used word, hyperesthesia. It means excessive and painful sensitivity. But it is also in a word that we all use, anesthesia, which is the artificially induced insensitivity to pain, the lack of sensation.

With neither masochism nor anesthesia, let us try to feel thoroughly, without veils, pretexts, or reservations, the deep pain

that can cause us to perceive the state in which we find ourselves.

Being restless would be a disease or anomaly if there was no reason to be so, if it were only a pathological anxiety without contact with reality. But there are plenty of reasons for the current restlessness, that restlessness that puts us on alert when something is wrong and tells us we must do something. In this situation, going to tranquilizers requires denying what we perceive to keep us quiet, calm, lulled. That is what they want to do today: anesthetize us, paralyze us, avoid the action induced by a painful awareness.

In traditional cultures, pain is interpreted as a challenge that demands a response, and suffering appears as an inevitable part of a conscious confrontation with reality. In modern society, however, we are taught to interpret pain as an indication we need the comforts and pampering provided by doctors, for whom pain is a technical problem. It is about killing the pain, keeping us anesthetized. Years ago, Ivan Illich said that the increasing use of devices to kill pain turns us into insensitive spectators of our own decadence.

That is what we experience today. Confronting the daily evidence of the growing disaster, the consumption of chemical or discursive tranquilizers increases. With legal or illegal drugs, with cocaine or with Prozac, Valium, or simple aspirin, we lose our vitality and responsiveness, we become passive and dull, we stop feeling... The same thing happens when we consume speeches instead of drugs. Some politicians try to deny the evidence and continually strive to hide it behind clouds of statistics and rhetoric. Others use a kind of apocalyptic joke to carry water to their ideological mill: they say it is enough to pay attention to them and to use the aspirin they prescribe, which will administer until the cancer disappears. The elections are already inducing even some of the most knowledgeable among us to divert our attention away from what matters most and to instead entertain

ourselves with the three-ring circus that is already advertised everywhere. They hide the pain and shame it causes us so that we take refuge in a game of illusions that condemns us to paralysis, so that we do not attempt the action that we would carry out if we fully felt what is happening to us and our country.

I bring all of this up to explore why we got carried away to this point, despite the evidence of what was coming and despite being duly warned. On November 20, 1999, for example, Subcomandante Marcos described in *La Realidad* the characteristics of the Fourth World War. What he said then very accurately anticipated what I have just described. He also explained the collapse of the old strategies and the old conceptions of waging war and analyzed the logic and scope of the new one. In June 2007 he expanded the description. He made it clear that there was finally a completely total world war. He told us, a year before the fall of Lehman Brothers, that “companies and states collapse in minutes, but not from the blows of proletarian revolutions but because of the storm of financial hurricanes.” He also pointed out that neoliberalism “destroys all the discursive fallacies of capitalist ideology: in the new world order there is no democracy, no liberty, no equality, no fraternity” (*Siete piezas sueltas del rompecabezas mundial* [Seven Loose Pieces of the World Puzzle], June 2007). We even had some lines of the path that we could have taken: it was at the time of *La Otra Campaña*.

My topic today is the why. We are facing a serious national emergency that requires immediate, urgent collective action. We cannot wait. Why are there so many waiting? It seems that we prefer to ingest some of the drugs that I mentioned before and take refuge in the passivity and paralysis that they produce.

The democratic illusion

I have the impression that the most serious of the paralyzing drugs that are distributed among us is called the demo-

cratic illusion. It is massively consumed, in full view of everyone, until a deep collective intoxication occurs.

One understands – with don Antonio Machado – that arguments will never supersede beliefs; and the belief in democracy is especially resistant to them. But the fact that this belief is also impervious to repeated experience seems to point to it as a formidable, armored belief (Emmanuel Lizcano, *Diagonal Web*, 11/28/11)

But we are not only dealing with a belief: it is already a form of fundamentalism. More than ten years ago the magazine *Archipiélago* (No. 9) pointed out:

At the point where democracy affirms itself as a fetish of the tribe, it begins to undermine itself, to establish itself as a naked form of domination, as a gross unreason with no other purpose than to perpetuate the intolerable state of affairs for so many... Is not this our peculiar variant of fundamentalism? Does it not consider itself to be the only true path instead of just one of the possible or desirable ones? Does it not share with other fundamentalisms an analogous pretense of definitive truth and inalienable conquest?... Does it not adorn itself with the same blindness with respect to itself? Is not the belief in Democracy under the same *illusion* as the belief in the Koran or in the divine nature of Kings?

Indeed, we are in front of a form of fundamentalism that consecrates as a supreme ideal, untouchable institutions that generate only illusions of democracy and turn it into a spectacle. The pontiffs of the democratic religion tirelessly repeat that the electoral path is the only way to transform the country and add that the armed path is unacceptable. Thus, a double fallacy is revealed. On the one hand, the electoral path is also that of arms. It

is strewn with corpses and inevitably leads to a regime based on violence. The monopoly on “legitimate violence” that was given to the government to protect citizens is increasingly being used against them. The electoral route only serves to define, cunningly, who will have control of the trigger.

On the other hand, insinuating that the only alternative to the electoral path is the armed path traps us in the obsession that only through the seizure of state power – with votes or guns – can we propose change. We need to escape from this trap. The current struggle does not consist of conquering an oppressive device with the illusion that it will be possible to give it emancipatory functions. What is needed is to dismantle this state machinery – as Marx clearly pointed out when he examined the case of the Paris Commune. Foucault has described this in elegant and contemporary terms. He pointed out that some propose to replace the ideology without modifying the institutions and others propose to change them without altering the ideological apparatus. Some say, “everything will go well if I am there”; others say, “with adjustments here and there, correcting vices of the past, we will solve all problems”. What is needed, Foucault stressed, is a simultaneous upheaval of ideologies and institutions. It is useless to replace the captain of the ship, if the ship itself is the problem. And it is sinking.

Going beyond democracy does not mean going back to the authoritarian traditions that marked the left in the 20th century. On the contrary. It is about combating them in all their forms, both the openly dictatorial ones and those that disguise themselves as representative democracies. It is about making clear that the famous “majority government” is profoundly authoritarian and that the elections are just a smoke screen to hide it; that not only will we be facing the ignominy of elections this year, but we will also be facing the ignominy of the vote. This presents us with a very serious ethical and political problem, since it antagonizes

many Mexicans who nevertheless believe they are on our side, who also want the change, who consider the situation just as unbearable as we feel it...

But all this is nothing but a collection of arguments that have obviously been unable to unseat democratic beliefs. The followers of such religion and its fundamentalist pontiffs are multiplying, and their church seems to be consolidating.

Is Raúl Zibechi right when he argues that the problem lies in the lack of options? People resort to chemical or discursive drugs because though they recognize the seriousness of the situation, they do not know what to do and they cannot find a way out of the quagmire. The paralysis comes from this specific anguish, from this feeling of helplessness. Drugs are used only to calm it down, to attenuate its effects, so as not to feel it.

Zibechi rightly says that the traditional movements of the left, as well as the new social movements, seem paralyzed “because the world in which they were born and grew up in has been rapidly disappearing.” He is also right when he emphasizes that “it is not about changing the world, as if it was something external to us, but about changing ourselves with the world.” Finally, he is also right in arguing that “neither capitalism nor the world-system will fall on its own”, that “we need to dismantle them” and that “if we succeed, we will fall with them”. “It would be vain” – concludes Zibechi – “to pretend that we can save ourselves by the sole fact of believing ourselves to be revolutionaries”. Zibechi describes the predicament that seems to befall anti-capitalists everywhere in the world in no uncertain terms:

We do not have strategies to defeat capital, neither electoral nor insurrectionary, and we do not even have an alternative imaginary to the polls or the seizure of the palace. Second, we have not set up self-sustaining economies, capable of sustaining life and encouraging those below to devote all their energies to these tasks. In short, if we suc-

ceed against capital, we do not know what to replace capitalism with, except to insist on a repetition of that “state socialism” (which was really an authoritarian state capitalism) that failed in the late 1980s (*La Jornada*, 11/18/11)

The awakening

Let us carefully examine this hypothesis, which helps to understand the relative paralysis that we are experiencing, and the extent to which millions of people remain prisoners of the democratic illusion. This analysis, however, does not see the other side of the coin. We find ourselves in a radical situation. We can observe a collective awakening produced by the coincidence of a very adverse general situation – disasters – and the general evidence that the conventional response, what governments and capitals do, aggravates this condition and leads to dead ends. Thus, the rupture arises. One begins to think the unthinkable.

The radical situation we are experiencing today stems from the general condition in which the vast majority of the population feels their way of life is at risk, although only a minority sees their survival directly threatened. Jobs, assets, expectations are lost. Solid securities that were the mortar of social life vanish into thin air. In this general condition, it becomes increasingly clear to everyone that the responses of the State and the market are useless and often aggravate the difficulties instead of overcoming them.

Awakening often manifests itself in a chaotic and unpredictable way, like a lightning in a serene night, an illumination, an explosion. Overnight, what was considered normal takes on the appearance of sleepwalking. Suddenly immense cracks that were there for a long time are perceived but we had stopped seeing them as they had become part of the landscape. Some of these outbursts are ephemeral, mere fireworks. But the collective

awakening that characterizes a radical situation does not work that way. It takes time to mature. Its own time. It has its calendar and its geography.

The awakening in the rebellious daily dispersion

Little by little, in the social base, people substitute nouns such as education, health or housing, which would be “needs” whose satisfaction depends on public or private entities, for verbs such as learning, healing or living, which would express the attempt to recover personal and collective agency and enable autonomous paths of social transformation.

- We have reached a point where those who are not afraid of hunger, which grips a billion people every day, are now afraid to eat, because we already know about the harmful ingredients of the food offered on the market. But people are breaking that dependency. The inhabitants of the cities begin to produce their own food. Half of what they eat in Havana is grown right there. In Pasadena, California, three tons a year of more than 400 vegetables are grown on just over 300 square meters. Food is grown even in the center of Mexico City. At the same time, urban consumers and rural producers unite to create an alternative to the market. The traditional struggle for land becomes defense of the territory. In Jaltepec, a couple of years ago, it was said by the *Foro Nacional Tejiendo Resistencia por la Defensa de Nuestros Territorios* [National Forum Weaving Resistance for the Defense of Our Territories]: “We are in resistance. We will not allow ourselves to be defeated by this new neoliberal offensive of dispossession. We deeply believe in the value of our assemblies, in the exercise of authority seen as a service, the collective property of the land and the reconstitution of our territories as *pueblos*, as institutions from which we will obtain strength” (<http://www.huizache.org/noticias/declaracion-jaltepec>). Four years ago, the

Zapatistas announced the *Campaña Mundial por la Defensa de las Tierras y los Territorios Indígenas, Campesinos y Autónomos en Chiapas, México y el Mundo* [World Campaign for the Defense of Indigenous, Peasant and Autonomous Lands and Territories in Chiapas, Mexico and the World]. All these expressions are part of the idea of food sovereignty that has defined the *Vía Campesina*, the largest peasant organization in history: it is about defining for ourselves what we eat... and producing it on our own terms (See *Nyéleni Declaration*, at <http://www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?article291>).

- The educational system is in crisis: it does not prepare people for life or work and marginalizes the majority. Despite the evident and well-documented failure of the school and the daily experience of the damage it causes, there is still a widespread struggle to “get an education”. Most have been educated in the idea that only in this way will they be able to “be someone” and stop suffering the discrimination that is exercised against all “nobodies”. But people have been reacting. Alongside the attempts to reform and improve the system and to promote alternative forms of education, a vigorous movement is increasingly spreading in another direction. Autonomous and free learning practices have become more popular than ever, and the movement is generating, on the fringes, its own institutional arrangements against and beyond the system. Such practices, based on their own theoretical apparatus, go beyond current frameworks. They recover ancient learning traditions and introduce contemporary technologies in the methods of learning and studying as joyful and free activities. It is a peculiar movement. It is possibly the largest in the world, with perhaps billions of people involved. But it is basically invisible and many of those who participate in it do not feel part of a social or political movement in the conventional sense of the term, although they are excited to meet others like

them, establish horizontal relationships and share experiences. In general, they are fully aware of the meaning of what they do: they fully experience the radical nature of breaking with all forms of education in order to learn and study in freedom.

- The health system is increasingly inefficient, discriminatory and counterproductive. The iatrogenic effect has already been documented: doctors and hospitals produce more diseases than they cure. The production, distribution and consumption of health is the second largest sector of the economy in the world, involving a growing number of people and its expansion is as rapid as its failure. People have reacted. Reform efforts continue and alternative therapies proliferate. At the same time, initiatives are spreading to openly challenge the health system itself, to break with the dominant notions of disease, health and even body and mind, while nurturing autonomous healing practices, recovering therapeutic traditions that had been marginalized and disqualified by the medical profession and enable healthier behaviors and more humane forms of treatment, rooted in the home and community. Their new institutional arrangements are already beginning to take shape.

- The disasters that usually accompany public and private developments are still spreading and prompting the proliferation of homeless people. At the same time, the mobilizations that tend to stop them, to reformulate the urban sphere and begin to create different living conditions in the cities, to even rethink even the very notion of the city, are multiplying. Self-building practices that defied urban expansion for a long time are consolidated and strengthened, enriching them with contemporary technologies. Styles of dwelling that for many years were the characteristic way of building for the so-called “marginals” are now spreading to other social strata. Dozens of “transition cities” define a radical

attempt to transform urban life. The occupy movement, neighborhood regeneration efforts, and the creation of new community areas are spreading everywhere. Struggles proliferates to bring political mutation from the countryside to the city and create coalitions of territorial defense – against an airport, a new highway, public and private developments. They tend to become the seed to install autonomous forms of government. Initiatives aimed at recovering self-mobility, on foot or by bicycle, and actively resisting subordination to motor vehicles are part of these movements.

- Although the Walmartization of the world continues and a few companies extend their predatory capacity causing all kinds of damage, a new era of direct exchange that takes place outside the capitalist market is also expanding. Markets in which producers and consumers abandon their abstract condition to instead engage in direct dealings between people are prospering. Local currencies which operate as means of payment and communal mortar to facilitate the various forms of barter, are being reborn. Many different names are given to exchange methods that in many cases abandon the direct use of money-commodity and seek to replace the abstract market with relations between parties that know each other, trust and do not exploit the other. In all cases, these initiatives that openly challenge the fiction of the self-regulating market that has been used to disguise corporate dominance.

New attitudes, well-rooted in their physical and cultural contexts, are manifesting themselves in all spheres of daily life, thriving within new political horizons, beyond dominant ideologies and conventional patterns. Such initiatives gain increasing visibility in times of crisis, since they offer creative options for survival and effectively resist dominant policies and projects.

It is true that many people participate in these initiatives without abandoning the dominant individualism. They not only adapt the attitude to themselves, to their own satisfaction, but firmly reject its social and political meaning. But it is equally true that some even they begin to react against the prevailing hyper-individualism, to suffer its consequences and to open themselves up to others in an attempt to redefine themselves in their social condition.

Many of these initiatives appear as survival reactions, in difficult and even desperate situations. They are generally disjointed from each other: they do not spring up as an expression of a collective and organized movement, but this also reveals their character. They are framed in a radical situation, in that collective awakening in which people with the most diverse characteristics agree in a decision of common awareness and manage by themselves to find answers that have a common denominator: their non-capitalist character. They reflect with full clarity, effective responses to the double alienation of the capitalist relations of production: that of the fruits of labor and that of the creative activity itself. They are also heretical reactions to the religion of money.

The street awakening

Multiple manifestations of the collective awakening that is currently sweeping the world have had great visibility. The Arab Spring, the assault on public squares that spreads everywhere, the massive eruptions as intense as the violent repression that tries to extinguish it, the tenacious marches that defies everything... although they reflect and express the awakening street, we should not confuse them with it.

The mobilizations that took the constituted powers, the citizens and the political parties by surprise, are courageous and coherent initiatives that challenge, sometimes spectacularly, the

normalized, foreseeable and predictable behaviors that has been imposed on us. “*Mis sueños no caben tus urnas*” [My dreams do not fit your ballot boxes], they said in *Plaza del Sol*. “To have demands would be to think that there is someone up there who can attend to them,” they said in the Zuccotti Park on Wall Street; “and that is exactly what we no longer believe.” This is the novelty, which reveals the character of these massive actions.

Those who present themselves as mere managers of the crisis can only offer a specific channel to direct the forces that go beyond and precede them; those who continually wash their hands off measures that are not only unpopular, but unpopular because, according to them, they have no choice but to apply them; those who continually demand “due obedience” to decisions that should be questioned and who therefore criminalize all dissidence; those who install what Hannah Arendt called “nobody’s government”, one of the cruelest and most tyrannical forms of government because none is the authentic author of actions and events and everyone acts as mere cogs in a total machine that no one is in charge of; all these “powers” that preach, generalize, and establish homogeneous forms of behavior are trapped in the norm and subject to the dispositions of the market and the state which configured and molded from above, act as the condition for the machinery to be able to keep functioning. As Amador Fernández-Savater (*through Europe*, 12/06/11) reminded us, it is about making us internalize these imposed automatisms so that we do what we have to do, see what we have to see, say what we have to say and think what is prescribed to think, that is, that we become, internally and externally, what those powers establish. Obviously, it is precisely this attitude that led us to the current catastrophes.

What we have been seeing throughout 2011 fits well into what Hannah Arendt called “the action”, when anyone, ordinary men and women, people without leaders and generally without

parties or specific ideologies, come out of their isolation and impotence and join their equals to start something new, to radically challenge those automatisms, to resist what it means to obey and to follow. These initiatives, emphasizes Fernández-Savater, “do not entrust command to those who know, but rather start from the principle that we can all think; they do not have a single face, but precisely allow each and every one of the singular faces to fit; they do not manage what is there but collectively invent new answers to common problems. Plurality, invention, thought: this is the dance of the nobody against the “Nobody’s Government”.

And here, in this radical attitude that is spreading everywhere, it seems inevitable to remember the moment when we were told, quite clearly: “*Behind us, are you*”...

“Overcoming the barricades of resistance and self-defense, the living forces of the whole world are waking up from a long sleep,” commented Raoul Vaneigem. “Its offensive, irresistible and peaceful, will sweep away all the obstacles raised against the desire to live, that feeds those who, unmentionable, are born and reborn every day. The violence of a world to be created will supplant the violence of a world that is being destroyed”. To shore up his hope, Vaneigem mentions the Zapatistas, who “have undertaken resistance against all forms of power, organizing themselves and practicing autonomy. These ‘faceless’, who have everyone’s face, are about to give humanity back its true face,” because “in the crisis of our parliamentary democracies corroded by corruption everywhere and also manipulated everywhere by multinational companies”. They invent a society that frees “daily life from the economic enterprise in which it is reduced to an object of mercantile transaction”, that is, frees daily life from the capitalist prison. (*L’État n’est plus rien, soyons tout*, 2010; there is a translation by Raúl Ornelas).

2 [TN] *Detrás de nosotros estamos ustedes*, which is the title of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos’ book.

The mind awakening

The current collective awakening is generating new knowledge production centers outside public or private research centers and conventional university institutions. New technologies are born in these centers, based on significant theoretical innovations, which reformulate the perception of the world and introduce new methodologies to interact with it that question the dominant paradigms. As Foucault suggested, there the insurrection of subjugated knowledges is strengthened and deepened: the historical contents that had been buried or masked within functional coherences and formal systematizations are recovered; the specific, local, regional, differentiated knowledge that was disqualified because it was considered incompetent, insufficiently elaborated, naive and hierarchically inferior to the scientific is reassessed; and erudite knowledge is juxtaposed and combined with local memories, to form a historical knowledge of struggle, which requires demolishing the tyranny of globalizing discourses, with its hierarchy and with the privileges that derive from the scientific classification of knowledge, which has intrinsic effects of power.

The autonomous enterprise of thinking, the radical challenge to the institutional production of the statements with which we govern our behavior, has been taking various names, which attempt to go beyond conventional research, even in its form of participatory research. It is called reflection on action or militant or insurgent research and appears everywhere, the same in the *Colectivo Situaciones* in Argentina, in the *Universidad de la Tierra*, in California or in the heart of Italy. This is a really general phenomenon that fits well with the state of things, when the dominant ways of thinking are no longer useful to understand what is happening, much less to build the new world.

Articulate the rebellion

The civil war and the criminal control of social reality, which in many parts of the nation already make a normal daily life impossible, let alone permit an election, is expanding and intensifying. It is possible that its extension to the entire territory constitutes the most realistic outcome. The hypothesis is taking shape that the government has no real interest in stopping it. On the contrary. As they say in Honduras, power is afraid that people are losing their fear. In the same way that in specific localities people openly prefer the disgraceful control of the army to that of criminals, the government could be waiting for this feeling to become general to find a social justification to legally consolidate the undeclared state of exception that we now live in, to deepen the repression and to stop the popular initiatives.

Right here, in his speech at the *Primer Seminario Internacional* [First International Seminar] (December 2009-January 2010), Javier Sicilia pointed out that “the crises we are experiencing... place us in a state of revolution, that is, in need of profound change.” He warned that it is a revolution of a different nature from those we know and remember, because the idea of revolution that comes from the past has become infeasible. The new revolution, for Sicilia, which continues to be in the heart of Zapatismo, has barely been understood. And this is the current challenge: a challenge to understanding and to imagination, based on the explicit recognition that change will come from below, from the people themselves, because that is how true changes occur. This revolution is an art and requires recognizing in people, in ordinary men and women, the artists capable of giving shape and substance to the new creation.

Nobody knows how to make a revolution. It is not something that someone can be planned. Yet we cannot continue to wait. We are really facing a national emergency and we know

well that the political classes will not dare to declare it. To do so would show their uselessness and their complicity in it: they did not know how to foresee it, they have contributed to creating it, and they do not know how to face it.

We need to declare the national emergency ourselves and arrange the consequent action

Our declaration would support the collective awakening in which we find ourselves. It would not be in a vacuum. It could be shown that, contrary to what Zibechi thinks, an “alternative imaginary to the ballot box or the seizure of the palace” has been built from unexpected places (*abajo y a la izquierda*), to defeat capital by means that are neither electoral nor violent. It would reveal that hypotheses and theories have been generated from the social and political soil that allow us to recognize the oppressive nature of the polls and of armed insurrections and to formulate options. The new imaginary, which takes increasingly clear forms, precisely delimits the path. We have already learned to refuse the construction of promised lands, alternative visions of society as a whole, alternative nation projects... we identify in all these formulas useful illusions for manipulation and control, not for authentic transformative action. We now trust that the people themselves, from their own spheres, in their assemblies and forums, from their diversity, will be able to imagine and build, one by one the ingredients of the new world, which, as always, will emerge from the womb of the dying society.

Zibechi says that “we have not set up self-sustaining economies, capable of sustaining life and encouraging those at the bottom to dedicate all their energies to these tasks.” That is why he thinks that if we succeed against capital, we will not know what to replace capitalism with, because we only have already failed formulas. I have tried to show the opposite. I have mentioned examples of the ways in which millions of people have

been organizing life-sustaining economies, knowing that if they don't, they are doomed to extinction. Initiatives such as urban agriculture, the defense of the territory, alternative ways of learning, healing and living, community policing modalities that underpin their own notion of security, initiatives that effectively recompose the social fabric in neighborhoods and communities, the rediscovered capacities to think for oneself, all of them non-capitalist in character, are not acts of the fringe or of small dissident sects. They are initiatives that, far from obeying and repeating the imposed automatisms seeking survival options in the market or in the State, claim ways of living well and demonstrate that despite all the restrictions, against all odds, people can recover step by step their own means of subsistence and their creative capacity, breaking isolation and impotence.

Declaring a national emergency would not operate in a vacuum. It could illustrate in a thousand different ways how we can, wherever we find ourselves, in whatever our contexts and positions, tear apart the authoritarian fabrics in which we have been kept and take liberating action. In this way, the declaration would serve, above all, to avoid the trap of thinking that the mere replacement of leaders will allow us to face the current difficulties and that some of them have the recipes to overcome these difficulties. It is a trap that millions of Mexicans may already have fallen into, perhaps convinced that there is no other option.

The declaration would also serve to show that it is not necessary to forge a prior consensus among citizens for them to affiliate with a candidate or choose to vote blank or abstain. It could put the election itself in perspective and draw attention away from the campaigns, showing their radical irrelevance to everything that matters.

The us that needs to declare a state of emergency and confront it is still tenuous, vague, disjointed... It does not have a clear profile. This corresponds in part to the new forms of social

protagonism, because the subject of the transformation, the one who is taking the initiative in his hands, does not adopt the traditional forms of class organizations and party structures. That does not mean that organization is lacking, it exists in the social base and, in these times, it has been strengthening, despite the difficulties of the days and the permanent aggressions. With an infinite number of names: forums, coalitions, coordinators, spaces, congresses, alliances...; from the simple organizations of the *barrio*, of the community, of the town, organizational forms have multiplied that are already confronting the mafias, the political and economic gangs, legal and illegal that try to control all the territories.

Declaring national emergency against them would be a way of articulating these multiple initiatives in a common endeavor that must carefully avoid the character of a revolt. It would not be a sudden outburst, which can leave lasting traces, like lava from a volcano, but which disappears as quickly as it arose; it could not even be seen as the simultaneous eruption of dormant volcanoes. Nor would it be analogous to episodes that became symbols of lasting transformation, such as the taking of the Bastille, the Winter Palace, or the cry of Miguel Hidalgo.

We need a rebellion – the kind of feat that is the substance of all true revolution. It is about the humiliated and offended, those of us who have been continuously dominated by an oppressive system that has been stripping us of everything that is ours and that in these years threatens what we have left our dignity and our social fabric. It is about all of us fighting the political events of domination.

It seems that we are ready for this novel rebellion because the conviction is increasingly shared, based on the experience of all the previous struggles, that we cannot give up the power, the command, the ability to lead the transformation. We are no longer willing to delegate all our capabilities to a group of leaders,

even those emerging from our own ranks, so that they shape the new legal and institutional framework to limit the new state of affairs. In order not to repeat the historical experience in which what has been achieved is expropriated time and again, today we seek to maintain control of the process. We have been learning to do it in assemblies and parliaments of increasingly broad coalitions, in which agreements are reached between those who come with temporary representation and subject to precise mandates, always exposed to the revalidation of those represented. None of this, which requires sociological and political imagination and creativity, must be decided in advance. It will emerge in the process itself, when required.

The small-scale initiatives that I have been mentioning are a clear anticipation of the society to come, but they must be carried out against an aggressive and hostile system that constantly harasses them and causes serious wear and tear. The uprising is needed – an uprising that operates by contagion (as has always been the case with Zapatismo), rather than by clandestine strategic agreement from the leaders. It is true that fighting is abominable, but that should not weaken our commitment to this militancy. By connecting our desires with reality, weaving anger and discontent into action, instead of withdrawing them into the forms of theoretical or political representation, we will give them full revolutionary force (Foucault, 1983, p. xiii).

Declaring a national emergency and acting accordingly, that is, abandoning “normal” and normalized reactions, as if it were possible to wait for the change – that we urgently need – to fall from some political sky, can constitute a revolutionary act, because it would establish a new possibility. Cultural borders would have been transgressed to open a new path that did not seem possible.

The days of fury in the streets and in the squares, as well as the silent actions in the houses and in the *patios*, follow the

gradations of revolt and rebellion. Through them, a type of revolutionary contagion seems to take place without the Bastille or the Winter Palace and lacking leaders like Zapatas, Villas, Carranzas and Obregones. It exists as an initiative of the people themselves, of ordinary men and women, of the common people... the unsubdued, the rebels, the dreamers, who know well the appropriate calendar and geography for their action. Thus, they exercise their power, which in these conditions is called dignity. From the womb of a shattered society, under unbearable threats, the new one is already being born. It was born to avoid the horror that harasses and overwhelms us and to contain the ongoing evils. It is also born to start a new path of transformation and regeneration.

Declaring the national emergency, by ourselves, will give visibility and dynamism to this new society. It will make it possible to agree on the effort and thus we will be able to get going with the urgency that is needed.