

Autonomous Politics and its Problems: Thinking the Passage from Social to Political*

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Part One: Two Hypotheses on a New Strategy for an Autonomous Politics

My aim in this article is to present some hypotheses on issues of strategy for anti-capitalist emancipatory movements. The idea is to rethink the conditions for an effective politics, with the capacity to radically change the society we live in. Even if I will not have the space to analyze concrete cases, these reflections are not a purely "theoretical" endeavor, but spring from the observation of a series of movements I had the chance to be part of –the movement of neighbor's assemblies in Argentina, some processes of the World Social Forum, and other global networks– or that I followed closely in the past years –the *piquetero* (unemployed) movement also in Argentina, and the Zapatistas in Mexico.

From the viewpoint of strategy, the current emancipatory movements can be said to be in two opposite situations (somewhat schematically). The first one is that in which they manage to mobilize a great deal of social energy in favor of a political project, but they do that in a way that make them fall in the traps of "heteronomous politics". By "heteronomous" I refer to the political mechanisms by means of which all that social energy ends up being channeled in a way that benefits the interests of the ruling class or, at least, minimize the radical potential of that popular mobilization. This is, for example, the fate of Brazil's PT under Lula, and also of some social movements (for example certain sections of the feminist movement) that turned into single-issue lobby organizations with no connection to any broader radical movement.

The second situation is that of those movements and collectives that reject any contact with the state and with heteronomous politics in general (parties, lobbies, elections, etc.) only to find themselves reduced to small identity-groups with little chances to have a real impact in terms of radical change. This is the case, for example, of some of the unemployed movements in Argentina, but also of many anti-capitalist small collectives throughout the world. The cost of their political "purity" is the inability to connect with larger sections of society.

To be sure, this is just a schematic picture: there are many experiments here and there of new strategic paths that may escape those two dead-end situations (the most visible example being that of the Zapatistas and their "Sixth Declaration"). The reflections I present here are aimed at contributing to those explorations.

Hypothesis one:

On the difficulty of the Left when it comes to thinking power (or, what truth can be discerned in people's support for the Right).

Let us face this awkward question: Why is it that, being the Left a better option for humankind, we almost never succeed in getting support of the people? Moreover, Why is it that people often vote for obviously pro-capitalist options --sometimes even very Right-wing candidates-- instead? Let us avoid simplistic and patronizing answers such as "the people don't understand...", "the pervasive power of the media...", and so on. These sort of explanations give us an

implicit sense of superiority that we neither deserve, nor do they help us politically speaking. Of course, the system has a formidable power to control culture so to counter radical appeals. But we cannot look for an answer just there.

Leaving aside circumstantial factors, the perennial appeal of the Right lies in that it presents itself (and to some extent really is) a force of order. But why would order be so appealing for those who do not belong to the ruling class? We live in a type of society that rests upon (and strengthens) a constitutive, paradoxical tension. Each day we become more "de-collectivized", that is, more atomized, increasingly isolated individuals without strong bonds with each other. But, at the same time, never in the history of humankind was there such an inter-dependence when it comes to producing social life. Today, the division of labor is so deep, that each minute, even without realizing it, each of us is relying on the labor of millions of people from all over the world. In the capitalist system, paradoxically enough, the institutions that enable and organize such a high level of social co-operation are the very same that separate us from the other, and make us isolated individuals without responsibility with regards to other people. Yes, I am talking about the market and the (its) state. Buying and consuming products, and voting for candidates in an election, involves no answerability. These are actions performed by isolated individuals in solitude.

Such is our current inter-dependence, that (global) society requires, like never before, that each person does not behave as he or she is not supposed to behave. Yes, we have the freedom to dress like a clown if we want to, but we can't do anything that may affect the 'normal' course of society. Because today, a small group of people or even one person has bigger chances than ever to affect that normal course if they/he wants to. Like never before, a single person has the chance to affect the lives of millions and to cause chaos. Why is this the case today more than in the past? Let us consider an example: if a peasant in 17th century France decided not to farm his land, he would not be putting his neighbors' lives in jeopardy, but only his own. Imagine that he was angry or mad, and set out to impede his neighbors to harvest. In that case, the community would deal with him very soon; in the worst scenario, he might affect one or two of his neighbors. Fast forward to any country in the 21st century. If the three operators of the subway security system decide not to work (or to mess with the system just for fun), or if this important guy from the stock exchange lies about the prospects of AOL, they would be affecting the lives and labors of thousands of people, without those people even knowing the reason for the accident they had, or the loss of their jobs. The paradox is that the ever increasing individualism and lack of answerability before the other makes it more likely than ever before that, in fact, there will be people who will be ready to cause trouble or harm other people's lives and interests, even without good reasons. Ask the students of Columbine about that. Our mutual dependence in some respects paradoxically contrasts with our subjectivity of isolated, non-answerable individuals.

As people who live in this constitutive tension, we all feel to some extent the anxiety for the continuity of social order and of our own lives, in view of the vulnerability of both. We unconsciously know that we depend on other individuals doing the right thing; but we don't know who they are, or how to communicate with them. They are close but alien at the same time. This is the same anxiety that popular movies enact once and again in hundreds of films whose narrative structure and themes are almost the same. A person or a small group of people puts society or other people's lives in jeopardy –be it because of evilness, criminal orientation, madness, strange political reasons, you name it– until some powerful intervention restores order –a caring father, Superman, the police, the President, Charles Bronson, etc. As a movie-goer we come out with our anxiety sedated, but that comfort only lasts for some minutes...

Just like those films, the political appeal of Right-wing calls to order comes from society's anxiety for the ever-increasing possibility of catastrophic disorder. From the viewpoint of an isolated individual, it makes no difference if disorder is produced by another individual for random reasons, or by a progressive collective that does it as part of a political action. It does not matter if it is a criminal, a madman, a union striking, or an anti-capitalist group doing direct action: whenever there is fear of catastrophic disorder and of the dissolution of social bonds, Right-wing calls to order find a fertile soil.

There is no point in complaining about that situation: that fear is part of the society we live in. And it is not a matter of attitude: popular support for right-wing options is not due to 'lack of political education' –something that could be remedied by simply telling the people what to think in a more persuasive way. There is no "error" in popular support for the right: if there are reasons to believe that social life is in danger (and there usually are), the choice for more (right-wing) "order" is a perfectly rational option *in the absence of other feasible and more desirable options*.

What I am trying to argue is that there is a valuable truth to be learnt in the perennial appeal of the calls for more "order". It is time that we consider that, perhaps, what we (the radical Left) are offering is not perceived as a

feasible or better option simply because, well, it isn't. The Left has indeed the best diagnosis of what's wrong with society. We now also have a fairly decent offer of visions of what a better society would look like. But what about the question of how to get there? When it comes to that, we either have the option of traditional Leninist parties taking power (sorry, neither desirable nor better for me), or vague and sometimes utterly non-realistic generalizations.

In any case, we invite people to destroy the current social order (which is obviously necessary) so that we can then build something better. Our political culture so far has been more about destroying, criticizing, attacking the present for the sake of the future, than about building and creating new and effective forms of co-operation and solidarity here and now. As we live in the future and despise the present, and as we do not bother to explain how we will protect people's lives from catastrophic social disorder while we try to build a new society, it is normal that the people perceive (rightly) that ours are nothing but vague, unreliable promises.

For reasons I will not have the space to explain here, the tradition of the Left has inherited serious impediments when it comes to thinking social order and, therefore, to relating to society as a whole. In general, the Left cannot think power as *immanent* with respect to social life. We tend to think of it as an *external* thing, a sort of parasite that colonizes society "from without". In turn, we tend to think of society as a co-operative whole that exists before and independently from that *external* entity. Hence the Marxist idea that the state, the laws, etc. are nothing but the "superstructure" of a society that is defined primarily in the economic realm. Hence also the attitude of some anarchists, who tend to consider all rules (with the exception of those freely and individually accepted) as something purely external and oppressive, while believing that the state could be simply destroyed with no cost for a society that – they think – is already "complete" and exists below the state's domination. Hence also the distinction that some autonomists propose between power as "power-over" (the capacity to command) and power as "power-to-do" (the capacity to do), as if it was a struggle between two independent and clearly distinguishable "sides" – one evil, the other good.

What matters for our purposes here is to understand that from all three cases mentioned above, it follows a strategic viewpoint (and also a certain "militant culture") that is based in an attitude of pure hostility and rejection of social order, the laws, and all institutions. While some Marxists reject that order for the sake of the new order to be created after the Revolution, some anarchists and autonomists do in the belief that society already possesses an "order" of its own ready to flourish as soon as we get rid of all the political-legal-institutional burden.

Maybe in the past it made sense to think of social change as, first and foremost, a work of *destruction* of the social order – I do not want to discuss this now. In any case, the situation today makes that strategic choice completely non-viable. Because nowadays there isn't any society "beneath" the state and the market. Of course, there are many social connections and forms of co-operation that happen beyond them. But the main social bonds that organize and produce social life are today *structured by means of the market and the (its) state*. The market-state have already transformed social life in such a way, that there is no "society" outside of them. What would be left if we could make the state and the market cease to function right now by some magical twist? Certainly not a liberated humankind, but catastrophic chaos: more or less weak groupings of de-collectivized individuals here and there, and the end of social life.

From this follows that, if we adopt a political strategy for radical change that is completely "external" with regards to the market and the state, we would be choosing a strategy that is also, and by the same token, "external" with regards to society. In other words, any emancipatory politics that explicitly – in its program – or implicitly – in its "militant culture" or "attitude" – present itself as a purely *destructive* endeavor (or that only offers vague promises of reconstruction of social order *after* the destruction of the current one) will never manage to attract larger numbers of adherents. This is due to the fact that the others perceive (correctly) that that sort of politics puts the current social life in jeopardy, with little to offer instead. We are asking the people to trust us and jump into the abyss, but the people know (and they are right) that the complexity of our society is such that it cannot take that risk. In conclusion, the people do not trust in the Left, and they have very good reasons not to.

I would like to argue that we need to rethink strategy taking into account this fundamental truth: the rules and institutions that enable and organize oppression are, at the same time, the rules and institutions that enable and organize social life as such. They are immanent and constitutive of society. Of course we can have other non-oppressive rules and institutions. But for the time being, the market-state has become the spinal column of the one and only social life we have got. In view of this, we cannot continue to offer a political option aimed at simply destroying the

current social order. On the contrary, we need to present a strategy (and a “militant culture” or “attitude” according to it) that makes explicit the path by which we plan to replace the market and the state with *other forms of management of social life*. While struggling against the current order, we need to *create* and develop, at the same time, *institutions of a new type* that are able to deal with the complexity of society’s common tasks in the appropriate scale.

In conclusion, no emancipatory politics has chances to succeed if it has a strategy that, implicitly or explicitly, remains external to the issue of the alternative (but actual and concrete) management of social life. There is no autonomous politics or autonomy without taking responsibility for the overall management of the really existing society. In other words, there is no future for any strategy that refuses to think of the creation of alternative forms of management here and now, or that resolves that problem either by means of an authoritarian device (such as the traditional Leninist left) or by escapes to utopian day-dreaming and magical thinking (such as “primitivism”, the reliance in angelic and altruistic “New Men” or in abstract schemes of direct democracy, and so forth). To avoid any misunderstanding: I am not suggesting that we anti-capitalists should find and get involved in a nicer way of managing capitalism (that would be the traditionally “reformist” or Social-democrat option). What I am trying to argue is that we need to create and develop *our own* political devices, able to manage the current society (thus avoiding the danger of catastrophic dissolution of all social order) while we walk towards a new world free of capitalism.

Hypothesis two:

On the necessity of an “interface” that enables the passage from social to political.

I shall argue that if we are to present a new political strategy that is both destructive and creative at the same time, we need to collectively explore and design an autonomous “interface” that enables us to link our *social* movements to the *political* plane of the global management of society. I do not mean by this to endorse the traditional prejudice of the traditional Left, according to which social self-organizing is just fine, but the “real” politics starts only in the realm of party and state politics. When I refer to the “passage from social to political” I do not imply any higher value to the latter. On the contrary, I believe that autonomous politics needs to be firmly anchored in processes of social self-organization, but it also needs to expand so to “colonize” the political-institutional plane. Let me explain what would an “interface” be.

In capitalist society, power structures itself in two fundamental planes, the general social plane (bio-political), and the political plane properly speaking (the state). I call the social plane “bio-political” because, as Foucault has shown, power has penetrated there, in our own lives and daily relationships, so deeply, that it has transformed them according to its image and likeness. Market and class relations have shaped us in such a way, that we reproduce by *ourselves* the capitalist power relations. Each and every one of us is an agent who produces capitalism. In other words, power not only dominates us from without, but also from within social life. Yet, in capitalist society that bio-political plane of power is not enough to ensure the reproduction of the system. It also needs a plane that I call simply “political”: the state, laws, institutions. That political plane makes sure that bio-political power relations continue to function properly: it corrects deviations, punishes infractions, decides where to channel social co-operation, deals with larger scale tasks that the system needs, and monitors everything. In other words, the political plane deals with the global management of society; in a capitalist kind of society, it does so under the form of the state.

In current capitalist societies, the social (bio-political) plane and the state (political plane) are not disconnected. On the contrary, there is an “interface” that links them: the representative institutions, political parties, elections, etc. Through these mechanisms (usually called “democracy”) the system gets a minimum of legitimacy so that the global management of society can take place. In other words, it is this “elective” interface that ensures that society as a whole accepts that a particular body of authorities makes all the important decisions that then everybody else must accept. Needless to say, this is an *heteronomous* interface, for it builds legitimacy not for the co-operative whole that we call society, but only for the benefit of the ruling class. The heteronomous interface channels the political energy of society in a way that it impedes society to make its own decisions and to be autonomous (that is, self-managed).

I would like to argue that the new generation of emancipatory movements that is emerging has already done some amazing experiences in the *bio-political* realm, but is facing great difficulties when it comes to the *political* plane. There are numerous movements and collectives throughout the world that are practicing forms of struggle and organization that challenge oppression and capitalist domination. Their bio-politics creates –even if in small scale, local territories– human relations of a new type, horizontal, collective, bringing about solidarity and autonomy instead of competition and oppression. However, we still have not found the way to transport those values so that they also

become the core of a new strategy for the political plane. As we have argued before, this is indispensable for changing the world. In other words, we still need to develop an interface of a new type, an autonomous interface that allows us to articulate forms of political co-operation in a higher scale, thus connecting our movements, collectives and struggles with the political plane where the global management of society takes place. We have rejected the other models of interfaces that the traditional Left offered, namely, the parties –be it electoral or vanguardist– and the enlightened leaders, for we understood that they were nothing but a (slightly) different form of heteronomous interface. Indeed, it was an interface that, instead of colonizing the political plane with our values and ways of life, operated the other way round, by bringing the hierarchical, competitive values of the elite to our movements. So the rejection was healthy and necessary. But we still have to explore and design our own autonomous interface. Without resolving this question, I am afraid that our movements shall never establish stronger ties with society as a whole, and will remain in a state of constant vulnerability. (The experience of the Zapatistas “other campaign” will perhaps bring important developments in this respect).

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Part Two: The Autonomous Interface as an Institution of a New Type

What would an autonomous interface look like? What kind of new political organization, different from parties, would allow us to articulate vast sections of the emancipatory movement in a large scale? How should it be, if it also has to be able to deal with the global management of society, so becoming a strategic instrument for the abolition of the state and the market? These are questions that the social movements are beginning to ask themselves, and that only they can resolve. The following ideas are aimed at contributing to this debate.

Thesis one: On the need of an ethics of equality

Since there is no point in thinking of rules and institutions for abstract human beings, without taking into account their customs and values (that is, their specific culture), let us begin by a thesis on a new emancipatory culture.

One of the most serious tragedies of the Left tradition has been (and still is) its refusal to consider the ethic dimension of political struggle. In general, in both practice and theory, the typical attitude of the Left regarding ethics – that is, the principles that must orient us towards good actions by distinguishing these from the bad actions– is to consider it as a merely “epistemological” issue. In other words, political actions are considered “good” if they correspond with a “truth” that we know beforehand. The issue of the ethically good/bad is thus shrank into the problem of the correct/incorrect political “line” to be followed. In this way, the Left often ends up implicitly rejecting any ethics of care for the other (and I mean here the *concrete* other, our fellow beings); instead, the Left replaces it by a commitment to a certain ideology-truth that alleges it represents an “abstract” other (“Humankind”). The concrete effects of this absence of ethics can be seen in our concrete practice, in countless cases in which otherwise good-hearted activists manipulate and inflict violence upon other in the name of “the truth”. (No wonder, then, that common people tend to keep as far as possible from those activists).

This non-ethical attitude is not bad just due to its lack of ethics, but also because it is often an unconsciously elitist behavior that impedes true co-operation among equals. If you think you own the truth, then you will not “waste” your time listening to the others, nor will you be ready to negotiate consensus. That is why a real emancipatory politics needs to be based on a firm and radical ethics of equality and of responsibility before (and care for) the *concrete* other. We still have a long way to go in this sense, if we are to create, divulge and embody a new ethics. Luckily, many movements are already walking along this path. The zapatista slogan “we walk at the pace of the slowest” is nothing but the inversion of the relation between truth and ethics that we are proposing here.

Thesis two: Horizontality needs institutions (badly).

Our institutions of a new type need to be “anticipatory”, that is, they must embody in their own shape and forms the values of the society we are striving to build.

One of our main problems when it comes to get us new institutions lies in two wrong (but deeply rooted) beliefs: 1) that organizational structures and rules conspire *per se* against horizontality and against the openness of our movements, and 2) that any kind of division of labor, specialization and delegation of functions brings about a new hierarchy. Luckily, social movements in many corners have started to question these beliefs.

Any person who has participated in a non-hierarchical kind of organization, even a small one, knows that, in the absence of mechanisms that protect plurality and foster participation, "horizontality" soon becomes a fertile soil for the survival of the fittest. Any such person also knows how frustrating and limited it is to have organizations in which each and everyone are always forced to gather in assemblies to make decisions on every single issue of a movement –from general political strategy to fixing a leaking roof. The "tyranny of structurelessness", as Jo Freeman used to say, exhausts our movements, subvert their principles, and makes them absurdly inefficient.

Contrary to the usual belief, autonomous and horizontal organizations are *more* in need of institutions than hierarchical ones: for these can always rely on the will of the leader to resolve conflicts, assign tasks, etc. I would like to argue that we need to develop *institutions of a new type*. By institutions I do not mean a bureaucratic hierarchy, but simply a set of democratic agreements on ways of functioning, that are formally established, and are endowed with the necessary organizational infrastructure to enforce them if needed. This includes:

a) a reasonable division of labor, which is indispensable if we are to have a higher scale of co-operation. If everybody is responsible for everything, then no-one is accountable for anything. We need clear rules as to which decisions are to be taken by the collective as a whole, and which ones are to be decided by individuals or smaller groups. This division of labor, needless to say, has to be in agreement with our values: tasks and responsibilities have to be distributed in a way that we all have a relatively equal share of empowering and repetitive, tedious duties.

b) "weak" forms of delegation and representation. We are right in that representatives often end up "replacing" the rank-and-file and accumulating power to the expense of the rest. But it does not follow from this that we can have large-scale co-operation without any form of delegation. The belief that we can do with simply calling an assembly and practicing (abstract) direct democracy whenever something needs to be decided or done is nothing but magical thinking. We need to develop forms of representation and delegation that make sure that no group of people becomes a special body of decision-makers detached from the rest. We need to move from strong leaders to soft "facilitators", who put all their capacity and knowledge at the service of organizing collective deliberation and decision-making processes. For this --again in this case-- we need clear rules and procedures.

c) a clear delimitation between the rights of the collective and its majorities, and those to be kept by individuals and minorities. The belief according to which a collective organization needs to "transcend" the diverging needs/interests of its members, is authoritarian and most harmful. Individuals/minorities cannot, and should not, "dissolve" in the collective. We need to accept the fact that in any human collective there always remains an unresolvable tension between the will and needs of the person, and those of the collective. Instead of denying or trying to suppress that tension, an organization of a new type needs to acknowledge it as a legitimate fact, and behave accordingly. In other words, we need to reach collective agreements on the limits between individual (or minority) rights and collective imperatives. And we need institutions to protect the formers from the latter, and to defend the decision of the collective from unduly individual behavior.

d) a fair and transparent conflict-management code of procedure, so to resolve the inevitable internal conflicts in ways that do not lead to divisionism and to the end of co-operation.

Thesis three:

A political organization that "mimics" our bio-political forms

Forms of political organization tend to establish a "mimetic" relation with regards to bio-political forms. They crystallize normative and institutional mechanisms that so to speak "copy" or "imitate" certain forms that are immanent to society's self-organization. This does not mean that they are "neutral"; on the contrary, the shape that political organizations acquire may direct social co-operation in a sense that either strengthens heteronomy (power-over) or, inversely, favors autonomy (power-to-do). The political-institutional-legal organization of capitalism is a good example of the first situation: its pyramidal form both mimics and strengthens the basic vertical and centralized relationships of domination.

Our organizations of a new type can be better thought of as an "imitation" of the way co-operative, bio-political networks function. Let me explain myself by using the example of Internet. Internet's technical frame and its network-like structure have provided unexpected opportunities for the expansion of social co-operation to a scale that we had never imagined before. The existence of vast "intelligent communities" in Internet, created spontaneously by the users themselves, has been well documented. These communities are non-hierarchical and decentralized, and yet they manage to learn and act collectively, without the need of someone shouting orders. These communities have achieved impressive levels of co-operation.

However, Internet also displays opposite tendencies towards the concentration of information and of exchanges. I am not referring to the fact that certain governments and corporations still control important technical aspects of the web, but to phenomena of emergence of "centers of power" as part of the very life of cyberspace. In theory, in an open network any given point can connect with any other in a free, unmediated way. And yet we all use websites and search engines such as Google, which both facilitate connectivity –therefore expanding our possibilities for co-operation and our power-to-do– and centralize the traffic. Sites like Google thus play an ambivalent role: on one hand they "parasite" the web, but on the other they are part of the very architecture of it. For the time being, the negative effects of the centralization of traffic are not very noticeable. But, potentially, that centralization can easily be transformed –and is already being transformed– in a form of power-over and a hierarchization of the contacts within the web. Take for example the recent agreements between the Chinese government with Google and Yahoo to censor and control the Chinese cybernauts. Take also the possibility to pay Google in order to appear prominently in searches. These examples show how easily the most important sites can restrict and/or channel connectivity.

What to do then with Google-like sites? They help us find each other, but the very use we give them put in corporate hands a great power that can easily be used against us. What is to be done? Let me answer with a joke. The strategy of the traditional Left would be that the party has to "take over Google", eliminate their owners, destroy any rival (such as Yahoo), and then "put Google at the service of the working class". We all know the authoritarian and ineffective consequences of such politics. What would it be instead the strategy of a naive libertarian? He or she would probably argue that we need to destroy Google, Yahoo, etc. and make sure that no other big sites emerge, so no one can centralize the traffic. But the result of this would be the virtual destruction of the potential of Internet, and of the experiences of co-operation that the web enables. We would still be, in theory, able to communicate with each other. But in practice it would be extremely difficult to find each other. In the absence of better options, and in view of the virtual collapse of the possibilities of co-operation, we would all end up surrendering to the first would-be businessman that offers us a new Google...

What would be the strategy of an autonomous politics of the kind we are trying to describe in this text, when it comes to resolve the (rather silly) example that we are discussing? It would probably start by identifying the main crossroads of the web of co-operation that Internet articulates, and the loci of power and centralization (such as Google) that the very life of the web produces. Having identified the immanent tendencies that might give birth to forms of power-over, the strategy of an autonomous politics would be to create an organizational alternative that help us perform the tasks that Google performs in favor of our power-to-do. It would do so by surrounding any necessary concentration of traffic with an institutional framework that makes sure that that concentration will not subvert the emancipatory values present in the "daily (bio-political) life" of the web. This strategy is about creating a political-institutional device (that is, one that transcends the possibilities of the web's own bio-political plane) that protects the network from its own centralizing, hierarchical tendencies. An autonomous strategy would not protect the web by denying those tendencies, but by acknowledging them and giving them a subordinate place within an "intelligent" institutional framework that keeps them under control. The thesis on the "mimetic" nature of the institutions of a new type with regards to the bio-political forms refers to such kinds of "intelligent" institutional operations.

Imagining an organizational model of a new type

Mutatis mutandis, the example of the problems of Internet may be applied to the emancipatory movements as a whole. We have today a loose network of social movements connected in the global level. As part of the very life of that network, there are also loci of centralization and (some) power comparable to Google. The World Social Forum, the "intergalactic" initiatives of the Zapatistas, some NGOs, and even some national governments have helped to expand the connectivity of that network and, therefore, the possibilities to strengthen its co-operating capacities. But that concentration is also potentially dangerous for the movements, for they may easily become a door for the return of heteronomous politics.

How to think an autonomous strategy in this context? Who would do it, and how? The hypothesis of an "autonomous interface" is about answering these questions. It goes without saying that any strategy has to be developed in and for concrete situations. The following thoughts do not intend to be a model or a recipe, but only an imaginative exercise aimed at expanding our horizons.

We have already argued that an organization of a new type that may perform the task of an autonomous interface has to have an anticipatory design (that is, it has to agree with our fundamental values) and also have the capacity to "colonize" the current state structures in order to neutralize, replace, or put them within a different institutional framework, so that we can walk along the path of emancipation. In practical terms, this means that the fundamental virtue of a new type of organization lies in its capacity to articulate non-oppressive, solid forms of social co-operation at a large scale. Even when all this may sound new, the tradition of emancipatory struggles has already experimented with forms similar to the "autonomous interface" we are talking about. The most famous example would be that of the Soviet during the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia. As an autonomous creation of the workers, the Soviets emerged firstly as bodies for the co-ordination of the strike movement. But during the course of the revolution, and without "planning" it in advance, they started to perform tasks of "dual power" or, to say it in the terminology we have been using here, of "global management of society". The Soviets were the meeting of the "deputies" that each factory or collective appointed, in a number relative to their size. In 1917 they offered an open and multiple space for the encounter and horizontal deliberation of a variety of social groupings –workers, but also soldiers, peasants, ethnic minorities, etc– with diverse political inclinations. Unlike political parties, that demanded exclusive membership and competed with one another, the Soviet was a space of political co-operation open to everybody. Besides, during the revolution they dealt with issues such as the provision of food for cities, public transport, the defense against the Germans, etc. Their prestige before the masses came from both aspects: they "represented" the whole of the revolutionary movement in an anticipatory way, and they also offered a real alternative of political management.

The Soviet "interface" had different strategies towards power during 1917: they initially "collaborated" with the Provisional government but without being part of it; then there was the times of "coalition", when the Soviet decided to appoint some of the ministers of the government; then, in October, they finally decided to get rid of the state altogether and replace it by a wholly new government of their own "people's commissars". During that process the dynamics of Soviet self-organizing had multiplied itself: hundreds of new Soviets emerged throughout the country, which came together in the All-Russian Congress of the Soviets.

True, the experience of the Soviets was soon to collapse under the Bolshevik leadership, for reasons I won't have the chance to discuss here. What matters for our purposes here is the historical example of an autonomous interface that was able to articulate the co-operation between those groups and sectors who were in favor of the revolution, and also, at the same time, to take care of the global management of society.

How to imagine a comparable interface, but adapted to our times? Let us imagine an organization designed to be, like the Soviets, an *open space*, that is, an arena for the deliberation of all those groups that are committed to social change (within certain limits, of course). In other words, it would be an organization that does not establish "what to do" beforehand, but offers its members the space to decide it collectively. Let us imagine that this organization emerges by defining itself as a plural space of co-ordination of anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-sexist movements; let us call it *The Assembly of the Social Movement (ASM)*.

The ASM is conformed by one spokesperson for each of the collectives accepted as members (the individuals who may want to participate first need to group in collectives). Like the Soviets, it is the Assembly itself that decided whether to accept or not new collective-members. One of the criteria for the inclusion of new members would be to have the highest possible multiplicity, by having collectives representative of different social groups (workers, women, students, indigenous people, lesbians and gays, etc.) and also of different types of organizations (small collectives, large unions, NGOs, movements, campaigns, parties, etc.). Unlike the Soviets, the larger member-organizations would not have the right to have more spokespersons, but the right to have more "votes" in proportion to its relative importance for the ASM as a whole. For example, the spokesperson of a small collective of political art would have the right to cast two votes, while the spokesperson of a big metal workers union would have the right to cast 200 votes. The "voting capacity" would be assigned by the Assembly to each member according to a series of criteria defined beforehand (of course, democratically decided). Thus, the ASM would be able to acknowledge differences in size, previous trajectory, strategic value, etc. according to an equation that also makes sure that no single groups gets the capacity to unilaterally condition the decision-making process. The ASM would try to decide by consensus or, at least, qualified majority for important matters. If voting was necessary, each member-organization

would have the chance to use it "voting capacity" the way they prefer. Thus, for example, the metal workers union may decide to cast all of its 200 votes in favor of, say, this direct action against the government that is being discussed. However, if the union was internally divided on this matter, they may also decide to "represent" their minority opinion in the ASM also, by casting 120 votes for the direct action, and 80 against it. In this way, the way the ASM functions would not "force" the homogenization of the opinions of its members (which usually brings about divisionism).

Important decisions would always remain in the hands of each member-organization. Each of them would decide freely the style of their spokespersons. Some may prefer to delegate in them the capacity to make all decisions, while others would prefer them to be representatives only in a weaker sense. In any case, the ASM would implement decision-making mechanisms that allow each organization to have the time to discuss the issues beforehand, and then give their spokesperson an explicit mandate on how to vote. By means of electronic methods, member-organizations would also have the chance to express their views and cast votes from afar if they can't be present for any reason, or if they want to follow the debates and make a decision in "real time".

The ASM's decisions would not compromise the autonomy of each member; the ASM would not claim to be the exclusive representative of all struggles, nor would it demand exclusive membership. There may exist several organization like the ASM operating at the same time, with some overlapping members, without that being a problem. It would be in the interest of all to co-operate with any organization that represents a valid struggle.

The ASM would not have "authorities" in the strong sense of the word (that is, leaders). Instead, it would appoint task-groups of facilitators to deal with different functions, for example:

- 1) To receive and evaluate petitions of new membership and recommend the ASM whether to accept them or not, and with how much "voting capacity".
- 2) To deal with fundraising and finances.
- 3) To act as press spokespersons.
- 4) To visit other organization and to invite them to join ASM.
- 5) To act as representatives of the whole ASM before other political organizations.
- 6) To be in charge of conflict management in the case of conflicts between member-organizations.
- 7) To organize a school of emancipatory politics.
- 8) To make tactic decisions in urgent situations when the ASM cannot respond on time.
- 9) To have a partial veto-power on decisions that seriously contradict the fundamental principles of ASM.
- 10) To run specific campaigns decided by the ASM (anti-war, anti-WTO, etc.).
- 11) etc.

The post of facilitators would have a limited duration, and they would rotate between different member-organizations, so to avoid accumulation of power of some to the expense of others, and the typical struggles of power between leaders.

What would such an organization be good for? Depending on the political context, it could serve different goals. Let us imagine a context in which the ASM is only starting to organize. It only has a small number of member-organizations, and therefore has little social impact. In such context, the ASM would be a sort of "political co-operative". Each member would contribute with some of its resources –contacts, experience, funds, etc.– for common goals (for example, to organize a demonstration, to protect the members from state repression, to campaign against the IMF, etc.). This co-operative work would, in turn, help strengthening the links between social movements in the network in general.

Let us now imagine a more favorable context. In view of the evidence that the ASM has been working for some time, and that it has helped to articulate forms of co-operation useful for all and in accordance with the emancipatory values it claim to represent, several new organizations have decided to join. The ASM has grown, and it now gathers a good deal of organizations of all types; its voice is already audible in society as a whole, and many people listen to their messages with interest. In this context, the "political co-operative" may be useful to mobilize its resources so to have direct impact in state policies. The ASM may, for example, threaten the government with strikes and direct actions if it decides to sign this new free-trade treaty. If convenient, the ASM may call for an electoral boycott for the next elections. Alternatively, the ASM may decide that it would be more useful to have their own candidates run

for the legislative elections. According to its main tenets, those candidates would only be spokespersons for the ASM, without the right to decide anything by themselves, and without the right to be re-elected for a second term. In some of those candidates were elected, the "political co-operative" would then have been useful to mobilize forces for electoral purposes, and then distributing the political "benefits" (that is, certain influence in state politics) among all member-organizations. As the candidates would run not as individuals or representatives of particular organizations, but as spokespersons of the ASM, political "accumulation" would be in favor of the ASM as a whole. Moreover, in view of the great capacity for co-operation thus displayed by the ASM, and in view also that the ASM makes sure that its candidates do not become a caste of professional politicians, its prestige would surely grow in the eyes of society as a whole.

Let us now imagine an even more favorable context. The ASM already has a long experience of work in common. It has grown and has several thousands of member-organizations. It has perfected its decision-making procedures and its internal division of tasks. It has contributed to spread a new militant culture and ethics. It has a proficient method to deal with internal conflicts and to make sure that no person or organization accumulates power to the expense of the rest. Its debates and political positions are followed with great attention by the whole of society. The strategy of electoral boycott has been effective, and the government and all parties are losing all credibility. Or, alternatively, the strategy to "colonize" parts of the state with their own people has been successful, and the ASM now controls vast sections of the Legislative power, and some of the Executive power. In either case, the state has lost credibility and a vast social movement is demanding some radical changes. There is disobedience, strikes, and direct action everywhere. In this case, the "political co-operative" may be used to prepare the next strategic step, by proposing itself as an alternative means (at least transitional) for the global management of society. The strategy here may vary: the ASM may decide to continue to "colonize" the electoral positions that state politics offer, thus taking over more and more sections of the state until it controls most of it. Or, alternatively, the ASM may promote an insurrectional strategy. Or a combination of both.

Needless to say, this was just an imaginary exercise only aimed at providing an example of an "autonomous interface" at work. In this hypothetical case the ASM has worked both as a tool for the co-operation of emancipatory movements, and also as an institution able to take care of the management of society *here and now*. Its strategy consisted in, first, developing an institutional model that "mimics" the multiple shapes that structure our co-operating networks (that is, an open and plural space, but also endowed with clear rules), with an "anticipatory" character (it is horizontal and autonomous: it expands our power-to-do without concentrating power-over). Secondly, the ASM developed an intelligent strategy by "reading" the configuration of the main links of co-operation of the current society. Thus, the ASM identified the crossroads in which the power-over has an ambivalent role (that is, those tasks performed by the state that are to some extent useful or necessary) and offered a better, autonomous alternative. In this way, ASM's strategy was not purely destructive. Unlike political parties –including the Leninist ones–, which "colonize" the social movements with the forms and values of heteronomous politics, the ASM provided an interface between our movements and the state that ended up "colonizing" the state with the forms and values of the movements. It did so either by occupying state positions, by draining their power, or by destroying them when necessary.

Once again, this does not intend to be the model of a perfect political machine. The ASM does not require "angelic" beings. Of course, there would be internal struggles for power and conflicts of all kinds. Of course, such an institution would not resolve and eliminate for good the intrinsic distance between social and political. Emancipatory politics would continue to be, as it is today, a difficult, daily task with no guarantees, aimed at expanding day by day our autonomy. The benefit of such an institution of a new type is that all those struggles, conflicts and tensions would be at the same time acknowledged and ruled, so that they do not inevitably destroy the possibilities of co-operation.

Even if this was a purely imaginary exercise with many limitations, I hope it may contribute to expand our horizon of possibilities when it comes to answering the crucial question of an emancipatory strategy: *What is to be done*.

* A more "idiomatic" (and slightly longer) version of this text has been published in Spanish as "Problemas de la política autónoma: pensando el pasaje de lo social a lo político". It can be found in Indymedia Argentina (<http://argentina.indymedia.org/news/2006/03/382729.php>) and in Nuevo Proyecto Histórico (<http://www.colectivonph.com.ar/autonomia/140306.htm>). Originally published in March 2006.