

*A New Stage of Insurgencies:  
Latin American Popular Movements,  
the Gwangju Uprising, and  
the Occupy Movement*

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Grassroots insurgencies are today multiplying across the planet. Not organized by any one party or organization, the current wave of uprisings appears to be derived in opposition to local injustices, yet in significant ways, these various struggle share essential characteristics and prefigure a global revolution with pluralist and decentralized forms. In the 1980s, Asian uprisings were directed against corrupt, “crony” regimes and succeeded in sweeping several dictatorships into the dustbin of history.<sup>1</sup> In the same decade, Africans rose against IMF-imposed austerity programs, as did Latin Americans who also opposed US imperialism. Today, on all continents, grassroots insurgencies target global capitalism, and the struggles increasingly resemble each other in their internal organization despite national, linguistic, cultural, political, and economic differences. In this article, we seek to portray these similarities to help provide unity to the now fragmented global movement.

At first glance, the armed citizens’ uprising that erupted in response to severe military brutality in Gwangju, South Korea beginning on May 18, 1980 may appear to be worlds apart from Latin American social movements and the relatively peaceful protests against the corrupt system benefiting the global financial elite (the 1%) that resulted in occupations of hundreds of public places in the United States last year. The political and cultural contexts of these social movements differ strikingly, and their short-term outcomes have little in common: the US-mandated onslaught of the South Korean military on May 27, 1980 involved tanks, helicopters and guns, resulting in scores of people being killed, wounded, and arrested, while the occupy movement was cleared out of the parks and squares relatively peacefully as winter approached. In Latin America, the February 1989 popular uprising in Caracas (Venezuela) against IMF/WB sponsored program of economy austerity marked the beginning of an extraordinary wave of anti-systemic mobilizations across the region. The spotlight focused on the progressive presidents – the majority in a region not so long ago considered the US backyard – has eclipsed the fact that their way to power was paved by a myriad of subaltern mobilizations.

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<sup>1</sup> See George Katsiaficas, *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings, Vol. 2: People Power in the Philippines, Burma, Tibet, China, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand and Indonesia* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).

Mass actions, general strikes, and indigenous and popular rebellions have fostered the downfall of some of the regimes most committed to the “Washington Consensus” in Peru (2000), Argentina (2001), Ecuador (1997, 2000, 2005) and Bolivia (2003, 2005). Popular mobilizations across the region have also defeated attempts to privatize public services and natural resources, kept agricultural lands from being taken by multinational mining corporations, and overturned counterrevolutionary attempts in Venezuela (2002) and Bolivia (2008). Student insurgencies most notably in Chile and Mexico are waging massive campaigns against the commoditization/privatization of knowledge and for democratization. Many of these movements have expanded their reach beyond Latin America to inspire the global anti-capitalist struggle. These include the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Councils) in the autonomous Zapatista territories in Mexico; the encampments of the Landless Peasant Movement (MST) in Brazil; worker-controlled factories in Argentina; the global campaigns of Via Campesina against genetically modified seeds and food and in defense of peasant economies against free trade, corporate monoculture, and bio-fuels; and the networks woven by Peruvian and Ecuadorian indigenous peoples with ecologists across the world in defense of water and natural resources threatened by privatization. Furthermore the emergence of popular and indigenous organizations as alternative territorial forms of local and regional autonomous power constitutes a powerful challenge to neoliberal ideology and ethnocentric western liberalism.<sup>2</sup>

Despite apparent divergences, these movements are strikingly similar to each other insofar as they are based upon principles of:

**1. Autonomy:** They arose outside the realm of political parties and traditional labor unions and remain distinct from them.

**2. Direct democracy:** Their participants practice direct democratic discourse and deliberation, with a diversity of coexisting viewpoints.

**3. International solidarity:** They naturally embrace people from around the world. During the Gwangju Uprising, foreigners circulated freely. Baptist missionary Arnold Peterson reported that his car, flying an American flag and with a large sign reading “Foreigners’ Car,” was cheered by people in the streets. Alongside the Gwangju people’s conscious rejection of regionalism was international solidarity. In the midst of the struggle, the Choson University Committee for Democratic Struggle compared Gwangju to Vietnam: “In the city of Gwangju, just being young is a crime, and the young are condemned to be crippled for life or killed.... Alas, the genocide of unarmed people in Vietnam is being repeated upon our own people.”

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<sup>2</sup> Gerardo Rénique, ed. *Latin America: The New Neoliberalism and Popular Mobilization*, special issue of **S&D** (#51, November 2009).

**4. Eros Effect:**<sup>3</sup> Love, not hatred, has been at the core of these movements, as participants develop strong feelings of identification with each other. Crime rates dropped in the cities where these events transpired (including in Oakland, California in 2011, where the police chief secretly informed the mayor that the crime statistics were much lower during the Occupy Oakland events). In the city of Oaxaca (population 600,000) between June and October 2006, without police present even to direct traffic, there were fewer deaths and injuries than in any similar period in the previous decade. Fidelia Vásquez, a 55-year-old schoolteacher who became a member of the security detail protecting the state radio and television station occupied by women during the Oaxaca rebellion, declared in the name of her compañeras that all we want is “love, tranquility, and peace for the entire world, no more teargas bombs, no more shooting.”<sup>4</sup>

In relation to the Gwangju Uprising, Rev. Park Hyung-kyu observed that, “...warm bonding among citizens and self-controlled order demonstrated the beauty of human love that blossomed in the midst of fierce resistance.” Sociologist Choi Jungwoon developed the notion of the “absolute community” to describe the collective energy and love which arose among Gwangju people as they battled the paratroopers and drove the military out of the city.<sup>5</sup> In this context, Che Guevara’s insight that “The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love” takes on a more universal meaning.

**5. Occupation of public space and decommodification of everyday life:** During such moments, thousands of citizens change the routines of daily life. Instead of going to work or school, they congregate at the epicenter of the revolt and devote themselves entirely to the movement’s needs. The Gwangju Uprising found its natural home around the fountain in front of Province Hall. Similar occupations of public spaces for the movement to formulate itself and prepare for actions took place, for example, in:

- The Sorbonne (University of Paris) in May 1968
- Yale University in May 1970
- Thammasat University and around the Bo tree in Bangkok in 1973
- Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) in Manila in February 1986

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of the eros effect was developed to explain the rapid spread of revolutionary aspirations and actions during the strikes of May 1968 in France and May 1970 in the US as well as the proliferation of the global movement in this same period. In the global context of movements in 1968, we can observe the spontaneous spread of revolutionary aspirations in a chain reaction of uprisings and the massive occupation of public space. The sudden entry into history of millions of ordinary people who acted in a unified fashion is predicated upon an intuitive understanding that they could change the direction of their society. In moments of the eros effect, universal interests become generalized while the dominant values of society (such as national chauvinism, hierarchy, and individualism) are negated. See Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Gustavo Esteva, “Oaxaca: The Path to Radical Democracy,” *S&D* #44 (July 2007); Lynn Stephen, “Women Leaders in the Oaxaca Rebellion,” *S&D* #44 (July 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Choi Jungwoon, *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement that Changed the History of Modern Korea* (Paramus: Homa and Sekey Books: 2006). In a 2003 meeting, Professor Choi expressed his surprise at the ways in which the concept of the eros effect matched the results of his own empirical investigation into the Gwangju Uprising.

- Shwe Dagon pagoda in Rangoon in 1988
- Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989
- the jungles of Chiapas after 1994
- Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011
- Plaza del Sol encampment in Madrid in 2011

## **Uprisings and occupations in Latin America**

Occupations are central to Latin American subaltern traditions of resistance, mobilization and rebellion. Since colonial times, the “recovery” of lands from landlord or state control has been a common strategy of both indigenous communities and peasant villages against encroachment and proletarianization. Popular neighborhoods across the region have their origins in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century occupations of urban empty lots. The occupation of main city squares – the symbolic center of state power – serves as the main scenario of protest. From below, people appropriated public spaces and transformed land taken from landlords, took over factories, and barricaded marginal neighborhoods into self-managed, autonomous and sovereign spaces – territories of collective decision-making. Set against an expanding systemic crisis and long traditions of resistance and rebellion, these territorialized struggles represent – paraphrasing Gramsci – the new that is not yet born while the old hasn’t finished dying.<sup>6</sup> In a similar fashion to the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century seismic wave of rebellions and uprisings that heralded the consolidation of Enlightenment thought and the first global wave of anticolonial struggles, the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America also ended amidst an unprecedented wave of anti-systemic mobilizations:

- The land occupations, encampments and cooperatives of the MST in Brazil from 1983 to the present
- The 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico
- Argentina’s 1996-97 “piquetero” or Unemployed Workers’ Movement (MTD) and the Neighborhood Assemblies that coalesced in the 2000-01 uprising
- The 2000 Cochabamba “Water War” and the 2005 “Hydrocarbon War” in Bolivia
- The 2002 mobilizations against the privatization of energy in Arequipa, Peru
- The 2006 Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) uprising in Mexico
- The 2008 indigenous-popular Minga in Colombia
- The 2009 Amazonian indigenous-popular uprising in Peru
- The 2011 General Strike in Cajamarca (Peru) against open pit mining

These Latin American mobilizations also embody the dramatic transformation of the region’s political landscapes during the last decades. These movements have displaced the labor movement and the traditional left from their role as the main defenders of democratic rights and national sovereignty, and as the central force for social transformation. Devastated

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<sup>6</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 276.

by neoliberal deindustrialization, unemployment, and the elimination of workers' rights in most countries across Latin America, the labor movement lost its political clout. In response to the demoralizing effects of the neoliberal ideological offensive and the fall of "really existing socialism," many left-wing intellectuals, parties and organizations retreated from revolutionary aspirations. On the other hand, confronted by the retrenchment of the state from its most basic social duties, many popular organizations mobilize to address such aspects of everyday life such as housing, nutrition, childcare, education, healthcare, and productive work. Driven by principles of solidarity, self-respect, collective participation, and communal interest, these organizations constitute a powerful challenge to the individualism, self-interest, and exclusion that constitute the core values of neoliberalism. They also represent a frontal assault on post-Cold War triumphalism and the neoliberal celebration of unrestricted markets, free trade and electoral regimes as the only path to a modern, democratic and civilized existence.

Unlike the traditional working class, whose political subjectivity was determined by its struggles against subordination to capital, the anti-systemic militancy of today's indigenous and popular movements is informed by the relative degree of control they exercise over the production and reproduction of their living conditions. By the late 1960s migrant workers with peasant/indigenous background took over lands where they built self-managed settlements that after a few decades evolved into semi-autonomous cities, such as El Alto (Bolivia), Villa El Salvador (Peru) and others in Caracas, Asunción, São Paulo, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires that in many cases include also occupied factories under worker control. In April 2002 grassroots organizations in the popular *barrios* surrounding Caracas spearheaded the massive demonstrations that in less than 48 hours reversed the US-supported coup against President Hugo Chávez. Autonomous popular organizations also played a crucial role in defeating the 2002-3 "oil strike" led by managers and technocrats of the Venezuelan state-controlled oil company. In Bolivia, popular mobilization broke the political paralysis of the Evo Morales administration in the face of the September 2008 counterrevolutionary attempt. Following the same pattern as the 2000 "water war" and the 2003 and 2005 "gas wars" and acting on their own independent initiative, popular sectors rallied against the violent right-wing separatist insurrection in the country's Eastern provinces. More recently in Honduras and Paraguay, grassroots movements are at the center of the resistance against the "parliamentary coups" that forced their progressive presidents out of office.

## **Global dimensions**

During uprisings, liberating spaces can be decisive in determining whether the movement will continue or whether the forces of order will restore the status quo ante. Such spaces become key to formulating and implementing the popular will, through forms of direct democracy. As the Egyptian movement's return to Tahrir Square months after overthrowing Mubarak illustrated, continuing occupation of public space can rejuvenate subaltern groups' counterpublic discourse and challenge the system's cooptative forces. In cases such as those of Gwangju and Oaxaca, these liberated spaces give birth to the Commune – the form of

freedom that breaks through the illusion of contemporary “democracy” offered by ritualized elections between candidates of the ruling elite.

In all the cases listed above, the movement spread beyond the boundaries of the city – and nation – in which it first emerged. The Gwangju Uprising resulted in more than a dozen cities and towns in Jeolla province having citizens’ uprisings, and if not for the military’s cordon around the city, might have resulted in a nationwide uprising against Chun Doo-hwan. It became an inspiration for democratization movements throughout Asia. Instances of the spread of movements across borders, involving a process of mutual amplification and synergy, are significant precursors for future mobilizations. In the period after 1968, as the global movement’s capacity for decentralized international coordination developed, besides the Occupy movement, several other episodes of the international eros effect can be discerned:<sup>7</sup>

- The disarmament movement of the early 1980s
- East Asian uprisings in the 1980s and 1990s<sup>8</sup>
- The alterglobalization wave and anti-war mobilizations on February 15, 2003
- The current wave, embracing the Greek struggle, the Arab Spring of 2011, Spain’s 2011-12 *Indignados* movement actions and occupations from Madison to Wall Street and Quebec.

No single organization has been responsible for these recent waves of “conscious spontaneity”; multiple organizations were involved in every case. The only instance of explicit international coordination was for the February 2003 actions (which were called for by the October 2002 European Social Forum in Florence).

### **Anti-systemic movements: eros effect and the question of organization**

The period since 1968 has witnessed sudden and simultaneous contestations of power by hundreds of thousands of people. Taken together these occupations comprise a significant new development in the revolutionary process. The threads connecting what might seem like very different grassroots movements around the world are woven together often intuitively, independently of any organizational means of communication. The movements themselves may have existed for some time, but their amplification and multiplication through such intuitive channels is unprecedented. The notion of the eros effect brings this intuitive dimension into focus as a positive revolutionary resource. As Herbert Marcuse understood, Nature – including internal, human nature – is an ally in the revolutionary process, grounded

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<sup>7</sup> The case of the 1989-91 movements against the Soviet and East European regimes might be cited in this context. However, whatever eros-effect manifestations they displayed were in a context of major maneuverings for the restoration of capitalism, including manipulation of the type discussed below in connection with the more recent “color revolutions” in the same region. Authentic popular aspirations, although expressed for years before and after the regime changes, were eventually overwhelmed by varying doses of shock therapy. They were not powerful enough to predominate. (Generally speaking, there may in practice be complex juxtapositions of such antagonistic forces. However, one of them may decisively upstage the other in importance in any given case.)

<sup>8</sup> See Katsiaficas, *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings*, 2 vols. (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).

in the fact that humans have an instinctual need for freedom.<sup>9</sup> Rejecting overly rationalistic models such as that of Habermas, who considered the unconscious “inner foreign territory,” Marcuse saw the erotic and unconscious dimensions of human nature as central to the project of liberation.

The instinctual basis for action was also gleaned by social scientist Choi Jungwoon in reference to the Gwangju Uprising. As an established scholar unfamiliar with what had transpired in 1980, Choi was subsequently approached by his professional academic association to investigate the uprising. After extensive research, he concluded that Gwangju citizens had crystallized an “absolute community” in which all were equal and united by bonds of love. For Choi,

...it was not ‘mobs’ of cowardly people hoping to rely on the power of numbers. The absolute community provided encounters among dignified warriors. The absolute community was formed only from love... In Western Philosophy, reason is derived from solitary individuals. However the Gwangju uprising demonstrates that reason was achieved by human beings who were conscious of being members of a community. Reason was the capability of the community, not that of individuals....<sup>10</sup>

So impressed was Choi with this solidarity that he added, “The most basic human values travel beyond history and culture; they began with the birth of humankind and will continue into the unknown future... The term to refer to this primeval instinct has not been found in South Korea’s narrow arena for political discourse and ideology.” The empirical history of crowd behavior in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – most clearly in Gwangju – demands a reevaluation of the frozen categories of crowds, through which they are viewed as emotionally degraded, when Gwangju’s people were passionately intelligent and loving.

Tahrir Square was the site of one of the most important occupations of public space in recent times. It served as the nerve center and organizing focus for a massive and militant insurgency that successfully overthrew Mubarak and that continues to battle his US-supported successors. Of all organizations and venues for Egyptian movement activity, it alone symbolizes and encapsulates the popular impetus. It alone is the refuge where the insurgency regroups and prepares for each new stage thrown before it.

Soviet Marxism denigrated such popular thrusts as “spontaneous” and called upon the “masses” to obey the dictates of the Party. In the mechanistic Soviet view, based on an oversimplified base-superstructure paradigm, conditions precede consciousness, economy takes precedence over actions. The corollary denunciation of “spirit” – in favor of “primacy of the material base” – was a philosophical underpinning to the unsustainability of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Marxism. This kind of thinking was manifested on a number of specific occasions when Left organizations failed to support – or even sought to undermine – popular insurgencies:

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<sup>9</sup> See “A Biological Foundation for Socialism?” in Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 6-22.

<sup>10</sup> Choi Jungwoon, *The Gwangju Uprising*, 134.

- France in 1968, when the French Communist Party opposed the student revolt and attempted to negotiate a reformist end to the workers' wildcat strike wave;
- Thailand in 1976, when thousands of students taking refuge from savage urban repression found rural communists highly suspicious and repressive;
- Italy in 1977, when the Italian Communist Party sided with police against students and autonomous protests;
- Philippines in 1986, when the Communist Party, seeking to recover from its "Khmer Rouge" phase, sat out the People Power Uprising.

Today's movements have a momentum driven by people's emotional ties to each other. They are guided by conscious appropriation of the tactic of occupations, more often than not leaving parties and unions trailing behind. A different tactic can be found in the armed insurrections organized by Communist Parties in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In advance, they built proletarian hundreds (Germany), red guards (Russia), combat squads (China), and then launched synchronized coordinated attacks on the centers of power in attempts to seize control of the country. Following victories in Petrograd and Moscow, similar insurrections were launched in Germany, Bulgaria, and Cracow in 1923, in Reval, in Canton, Shanghai, and others places – all with more or less disastrous results. In Hamburg, the uprising was scheduled precisely for 5 a.m. on 23 October 1923. Centrally commanded, the insurrection faltered when a high-ranking Party leader returning from a conference decided unilaterally to end it. Communist revolutionaries summed up the wave of party-organized insurrections in the 1920s and 1930s by declaring that "...The proletarian revolution does not follow a straight line. It proceeds by way of partial advances and victories, temporary declines and defeats.... Thanks to this experience, it succeeds in *creating policies and tactics of its own.*"<sup>11</sup>

The eros effect occupation is one such tactic created from the grassroots, from the legacy of past struggles' successes and failures. Moments of the eros effect reveal the aspirations and visions of the movement in actions of millions of people, a far more significant dimension than statements of leaders, organizations, or parties. People's actions are not merely responses to historical moments; they constitute history themselves, and change conditions in a mutually amplifying fashion. Clearly, instinctual and structural levels of activity are both vital, and we need to better understand each in relation to the other. Levels of building organizations, community organizing, and enhancing the consciousness of grassroots uprisings (and their outcomes) are all significant. These two dimensions – structural and emotional –encompass the total context within which "moments" of the eros effect arise. The Zapatistas' actions beginning on January 1, 1994 provide a significant example of the role organizations can play. Leading up to 1994, decades of organizing left a legacy of struggle, and capitalism's brutality spurred people to rise up.

Humanity's unending need for freedom, posited by Marcuse, constitutes the planet's most powerful natural resource. In the struggle to create free human beings, political movements play paramount roles. Uprisings accelerate social transformation, change governments, and revolutionize individual consciousness and social relationships. Most

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<sup>11</sup> A. Neuberger, *Armed Insurrection* (London: New Left Books, 1970), 56 (our italics).



popular insurgencies result in expanded liberties for millions of people. If a regime represses them, its days are numbered. If it survives, it can do so only as a hollow shell, lacking legitimacy in the eyes of the majority. Uprisings' enormous energies transform people's everyday existence and continue to energize long past their apogee. The post-uprising surges that occurred in the Philippines, Taiwan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Thailand reveal the same phenomenal activation of civil society and mobilization of subaltern groups, whether working class, students, minorities, or women. After uprisings, autonomous media and grassroots organizations mushroom, feminism becomes stronger, and workers are more disposed to strike. Even among non-participants, bonds are created through the intense experience of those exhilarating moments. Such instances of what Marcuse called "political eros" are profoundly important in rekindling imaginations and nurturing hope.

Recent militant uprisings in Mexico, Colombia, and Peru shed light on the creative and transformative power unleashed by insurgent mobilization.

Triggered by an unusually brutal repression against defenseless striking teachers encamped in Oaxaca's main square on the early morning of June 24, 2006, labor unions, youth and women's organizations, artist collectives, religious groups, poor neighborhood associations and indigenous organizations coalesced in the creation of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) – a movement of movements rooted in longstanding Oaxacan indigenous and popular traditions of social struggle. A massive campaign of civil disobedience brought the authoritarian and corrupt government of the state of Oaxaca to a virtual standstill for almost six months. Rejecting centralist and statist modes of social organization and political action, the Oaxaca insurgency owed its strength to a broad-based, non-hierarchical and communitarian approach to organizing. Not only did the insurrection weather for several months one of the most brutal repressions in recent Mexican history, but more importantly, it managed to expand the reach of APPO as an effective subaltern oppositional bloc.<sup>12</sup>

In Colombia between September and November of 2009, what started as an indigenous mobilization in defense of Indian territories and autonomy, expanded into a massive indigenous-popular march to the capital city of Bogotá. Support to the marchers generated a national multifaceted web of non-violent action and civic engagement in solidarity with indigenous demands. As a result of the dialogue and assemblies between indigenous populations along the march to the capital, a consensus emerged that embraced an agenda opposing the country's free trade agreements and the privatization of indigenous territories for the benefit of mining and lumber corporations; demanding an end to the militarization of the country and to expansion of the "drug war"; and calling for a national inclusive dialogue to jointly construct a "new society." In a country ravaged by internal war, paramilitary and narco-traffickers' violence, the indigenous-popular march created an opening for the emergence and rearticulation of oppositional voices silenced by almost five decades of militarization.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Esteva, "Oaxaca: The Path to Radical Democracy" (note 4).

<sup>13</sup> Mario Murillo, "The 2008 Indigenous and Popular Minga in Colombia: Civil Resistance and Alternative Communications Practices," *S&D* #51 (November 2009).

In response to new legislation furthering the privatization of natural resources and curtailing their territorial autonomy particularly in Peru's Amazonia, indigenous organizations in the region responded by occupying oil wells and energy plants, and by closing rivers to navigation. Although the poorest and most marginalized sector of the country's population, Amazonian indigenous peoples are perhaps the best and most extensively organized, drawing upon traditional communitarian relationships. The new legislation – enacted by special legislative powers granted to the President by Congress to implement the free trade agreement with the United States – represented a severe blow to the survival of the indigenous peoples and to an already endangered environment considered to be the richest repository of biodiversity in the region and one of the most important sources of oxygen and water for the entire planet. Under these circumstances and with the support of local non-indigenous populations through marches and regional strikes, Amazonian indigenous peoples managed to forge the broadest coalition against neoliberalism in over a decade. As a result of massive actions and demonstrations, Congress was forced to reject the most damaging provisions of the legislation. The alliance established by Amazonian peoples with indigenous peoples elsewhere in the country and with other subaltern peoples will be pivotal for the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic bloc of forces, for the re-foundation of Peru's nation state, and for the re-imagining of a strategy of development respectful of nature and aimed at the well-being of the majority.<sup>14</sup>

While anti-systemic and anti-capitalist impulses are a constant among these different movements, the more immediate source of their radicalism can be found in the rich traditions of resistance, mobilization and rebellion of each Latin American country. In order to decipher the “genetic code” shaping subaltern rebelliousness, one must look at the ways in which popular classes remember and register their history, which in turn feeds their cultures and their traditions of struggle. Plunder and violence have stood at the center of Latin American history from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century European colonization to the current neoliberal age. The widely accepted and commonly used description of the neoliberal onslaught in Latin America as a “third conquest” had its origins among indigenous organizations in the mid-1980s.

In a similar fashion to what Marx called original or primitive accumulation, plunder stands also at the core of the process characterized by David Harvey as “appropriation by dispossession” – the defining characteristic of neoliberal modernity. As Marx put it, the “discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent,” together with the colonization of Africa and India, were “pivotal to the primitive accumulation sustaining the creation of a world capitalist market.” In Europe primitive accumulation led to the almost total privatization of the “common goods” (land, forest, water and pastures) and the obliteration of the peasantry as an independent class. In contrast, the process in what today is Latin America was rather incomplete. Even though the original inhabitants of the region lost important resources to mines, plantations and rural estates, the loss was not total. Latin America – together with Africa – has again become a battleground for the control of strategic resources. Following

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<sup>14</sup> Gerardo Rénique, “Indigenous Amazonian Uprising Against Neoliberalism: Law of the Jungle in Peru,” **S&D** #51 (November 2009).

multinational capitalist pillaging of public services in the 1980s-90s, the recent frantic race for control of Latin American bio-resources underlines neoliberalism's second stage. With the most coveted resources – water, minerals, fossil fuels, forests, bio-diversity, and land for bio-fuels – located in indigenous and public-domain territories, capitalism continually reasserts its inherently colonialist character. The defense of basic resources against such appropriation has become the rallying point of popular democratic resistance. With almost 120 major conflicts affecting 150 communities, dam construction, mining, and oil projects currently constitute the major source of social discontent in Latin America.

In the present historical conjuncture overdetermined by a looming capitalist crisis, Latin American movements from below have opened new horizons of hope. Their embracing of cultural diversity; their amalgamation of collective interest and democracy; and their adoption of indigenous communitarian ethical values and principles, constitute a radical departure from both parliamentary and traditional “revolutionary” approaches premised on the special entitlement of leaders to speak for their constituents. These principles and practices offer an innovative and creative model of political community premised on people's ability to speak to each other – a radical form of democracy that requires direct grassroots participation in decision-making. Privileging unity of action over political homogeneity, and diversity over uniformity, these movements not only have emerged as a pole of attraction for anti-systemic forces but also constitute a challenge to the practices of the “old left,” the “old labor movement,” and “new social movements” theories. Collective participation, understanding of leadership as service, and decision by consensus challenge the top-down organization and “democratic centralism” of traditional left-wing parties and show as obsolete labor organizations and forms of struggles suited to increasing the bargaining power of unions whose structure mirrored the unitary and centralizing logic of the state they were struggling against. In this changing scenario, subaltern insurgency and its simultaneous deployment of direct action, reform, and rebellion have also proved pivotal for the articulation of networks of resistance, of broader oppositional alliances, and counterhegemonic organizational and programmatic alternatives.<sup>15</sup>

### **Elite use of uprisings, and popular response**

Ordinary people's capacity to govern themselves during uprisings consistently produced democratic forms of deliberation that made intelligent and reasonable decisions. The wisdom of ordinary people may surpass that of any elite, but the rich and powerful are often able to use uprisings to consolidate their hold on people's lives and resources. In the name of individual liberty and “neoliberalism,” billionaires appropriate as their private property the vast social wealth produced by generations of laborers. In the name of democracy, politicians make militarized nation-states into provinces of power that stand above ordinary citizens – and sometimes destroy human lives by the thousands. As political leaders pontificate “solutions” like cutbacks of funds for education and pensions, they

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<sup>15</sup> Raul Zibechi, “Subterranean Echoes: Resistance and Politics ‘Desde el Sotano,’” *S&D* #39 (November 2005); Rénique, *Latin America: The New Neoliberalism*.

squander precious resources by waging “just” wars and “saving” giant corporations. The corporate mass media’s constant messages of fear serve to discipline us to accept wars as necessary (even “humanitarian”), while billions of dollars of advertising seek to channel our life-forces into consumer choices.

Uprisings may be powerful vehicles for overthrowing entrenched dictatorships, but they are also useful to global transnational elites. The world capitalist system has long been adept at riding waves of uprisings to stabilize its operations by using “new” regimes as its public face. The wave of Asian People Power uprisings from the Philippines in 1986 to Indonesia in 1998 helped to incorporate more of the world into the orbit of Japanese and US banks. The South Korean working class’s heroic struggles for union rights became useful to neoliberal economic penetration of the country.<sup>16</sup> In democratic South Korea and Taiwan, as in the Philippines after Marcos and elsewhere, newly elected administrations accelerated neoliberal programs that permitted foreign investors to penetrate previously closed markets and to discipline workforces of millions of people in order to extract greater profits.

The advent of progressive and left-wing regimes in Latin America, while substantially transforming relations with US imperialism, also brought new challenges to subaltern movements. Not only did these movements lose to the state their central role as agents of change, but more importantly, they saw their political autonomy severely undermined. Incorporation of popular movements into state structures, social programs, and ruling party clientelistic networks led to fractures and splits among subaltern movements, frustrating some who initially supported progressive regimes.

Intelligence services of the US government have in some ways proven more skillful in interpreting and harnessing the energy of popular uprisings for their own purposes than have revolutionary parties and organizations. Working behind the scenes, US agencies have mobilized NGOs with great effect. In the 1986 Philippines uprising, the CIA maintained 24-hour direct contact with Reform the Armed Forces leaders and provided them real-time intelligence on the movements of Marcos’s troops. The relationship of the US to recent waves of democratic insurgencies is a topic scarcely revealed in existing studies. The insidious and furtive interventions of the CIA and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), to say nothing of the promulgation of corporate interests by George Soros, are relatively untouched areas of research.<sup>17</sup> Beginning in the late 1990s, “color revolutions” (sometimes called “velvet revolutions”)<sup>18</sup> broke out in a number of countries, including Slovakia (1998), Serbia (2000), Belarus (2001 and 2006), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005) Uzbekistan (2005), Azerbaijan (2005), Kazakhstan (2005). Coming as they did in strategic areas surrounding Russia, and involving remarkably similar tactics, many questions about western involvement have been raised. Are these Color Revolutions NATO’s Fifth Column?

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<sup>16</sup> See Loren Goldner, <http://libcom.org/history/korean-working-class-mass-strike-casualization-retreat-1987-2007>.

<sup>17</sup> An important counterexample can be found in William Blum’s “Anti-Empire Report.”

<sup>18</sup> See Timothy Garton Ash, “Velvet Revolution: The Prospects,” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 56, no. 19, December 3, 2009.

CIA involvement in Eastern European struggles against communism has a long history. Among the many agencies which acted against regimes unfriendly to US corporate interests during the war on communism were Voice of America, Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Europe. In 1973, the CIA engineered protests by housewives banging pots and pans in the streets of Santiago and encouraged a strike by truck drivers to destabilize Allende's socialist government. Unrecognized US intervention sometimes obscures its bloody imposition of neoliberalism in Chile in 1973, in Thailand in 1976, and in Korea and Turkey in 1980. Today, direct CIA involvement in regime change is often unnecessary, since other government agencies have taken up its projects.

Since the end of the Cold War, US entities like NED, Heritage House, AFL-CIO, and Freedom House, have stepped up their activities in countries near Russia. They helped create a web of "NGOs" that are increasingly dependent upon government funds for the bulk of their incomes. In Central and Eastern Europe from 1990-99, "democracy assistance" grants, many from the US Agency for International Development, totaled almost \$1.5 billion.<sup>19</sup> After the appearance of democratic movements throughout the world, global capital sought to use them for their own purposes. Massive protests complete with color-coded shirts and banners were orchestrated and financed from outside the country in question. Such manipulated demonstrations, based as they are upon hatred, have nothing in common with eros effect uprisings, which are inspired by people's self-determined needs.

The more recent form of US intervention has been to foster dissent through NGOs and civil society as well as to bombard target countries with propaganda broadcast by US/UK media. In Iran after the 2009 presidential election, opposition forces went into the streets to contest election results, but long before that occurred, they had a series of meetings with Western foundations. The Iranian Mehr News agency reported: "Half a year before the Iranian presidential elections, the CIA was preparing an orange revolution scenario. CIA agents met Iranian oppositionists and gave them instructions in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kuwait, and the UAE [United Arab Emirates]. The Woodrow Wilson Center and Soros Foundation are accused of setting up an Iranian revolution plan and providing \$32 million funding to fulfill the strategy."<sup>20</sup>

A decade after its successful appearance in the global political scenario, early progressive defiance of the "Washington Consensus" has given way to what Walden Bello characterizes as neostructuralism, a technocratic project involving higher spending on social programs and education as a means to increase the productivity of the poor and, more importantly, as an instrument of subaltern political control. Although social programs help alleviate poverty, they do not transform the dominant patterns of inequality and concentration of wealth. Adopting the language of social movements and through the implementation of "participatory" local policies, reforms are patterned to undermine the networks of solidarity,

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah E. Mendelson and John Glenn, eds., *The Power and limits of NGOs: A Critical Look at Building Democracy in Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 5, 191-2.

<sup>20</sup> PanArmenian.net, June 29, 2009 as quoted in Rick Rozoff, "West's Afghan War and Drive into Caspian Sea Basin" (July 10, 2009), <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stopnato/message/40624>.

reciprocity, and mutual assistance created by the subaltern to survive and resist neoliberalism.<sup>21</sup>

With the Cold War structure of global domination now in disarray, Latin America – together with Africa – has again become a battleground for the control of strategic resources. Following multinational capitalist pillaging of public services in the 1980s-90s, the recent frantic race for control of Latin American bio-resources underlines neoliberalism's second stage. With the most coveted resources (water, minerals, fossil fuels, forests, bio-diversity, and land for bio-fuels) located in indigenous and public-domain territories, capitalism continually reasserts its inherently colonialist character. Under the control of transnational capital, extractive industries act as a siphon of profits and destroyer of natural resources – including the lives of workers and the existence of nearby communities. Concessions to foreign corporations of resources resting on public lands, national reserves, and indigenous territories not only undermine national sovereignty and biodiversity but also threaten the very existence of indigenous peoples.

The indigenous peoples, however, are rising to the challenge. From the Amazonian lowlands to the highlands of Peru, Guatemala, Colombia, Brazil, northern Argentina and southern Chile, they are at the forefront of resistance. They have taken over the role of the left as the most important voice in defense of public resources and national sovereignty. Their struggles have also brought to the surface Latin American nation-states' legacy of colonial oppression and racism. By calling into question the role of capital at a moment when the overlapping environmental, cultural, food, and social exclusion crises threaten the survival of the planet, Latin American socio-environmental mobilizations stand at the forefront of the global antisystemic struggle.

### **The Emergence of a Global Struggle**

Although most theorists delineate social movements on the basis of nation and region, we understand insurgencies today as rooted in a global conflict that will only grow more acutely polarized in the decades ahead. Long divided by capitalism's uneven development as well as by national and cultural divisions, the subjective forces of world revolution increasingly resemble each other and focus on the same enemy: global capitalism. A long historical upsurge has created the current global confrontation. The roots of the Occupy Movement in the US can be found in the food riots against IMF-imposed austerity programs in Africa and Latin America in the 1970s. In Berlin in 1988, tens of thousands of people militantly confronted a gathering of the global financial elite and compelled the world's bankers to adjourn a day earlier than planned. Huge protests against corporate-imposed measures erupted in Caracas (1989) and Seoul (1997). All over the world, grassroots

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<sup>21</sup> Walden Bello, "The Post-Washington Dissensus," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, September 24, 2007, and "The Coming Capitalist Consensus," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, December 27, 2008; Marisela Svampa, "The End of Kirchnerism," *New Left Review*, 53, September-October 2008; Francisco de Olivera, "The Duckbilled Platypus," *New Left Review* 24, November-December 2003; Raul Zibechi, "Governments and Movements: Autonomy or new Forms of Domination?" *S&D* #53, July 2010; Rénique, *Latin America: The New Neoliberalism and Popular Mobilization*.

movements for global economic justice and peace confronted elite summits in the 1990s, making such demands as ending structural adjustment programs, canceling the national debt of poor countries, and abolishing the WTO, IMF, and World Bank.

Beginning with “global carnivals” in 1998 and 1999, activists in dozens of countries synchronized actions to protest elite meetings. In 1999, Seattle’s exhilarating victory in halting WTO meetings broke new ground when Teamsters and Turtles, workers and ecologists, Lesbian Avengers and Zapatista partisans converged for unified action. The worldwide coordination of protests that day involved actions in many other cities around the world.<sup>22</sup> After Seattle, ordinary people in places such as Cochabamba, Bolivia (2000) and Arequipa, Peru (2002) fought back against attempted privatization of communal natural resources and won significant victories. All over the world, whenever elite summits took place, tens of thousands of protesters showed up, including at meetings of the:

- World Bank in Washington DC (April 2000)
- Asian Development Bank in Chiang Mai, Thailand (May 2000)
- World Economic Forum in Melbourne, Australia (September 2000)
- World Bank and IMF in Prague (September 2000)
- World Economic Forum in Davos (January 2001)<sup>23</sup>
- Summit of the Americas in Quebec City (April 2001)<sup>24</sup>
- European Union summit in Gothenburg (June 2001)
- G-8 meetings in Genoa (July 2001)

The cumulative effect of this wave of summit confrontations was to pose the question of the system’s irrationality and raise the need for an alternative, thereby stimulating the many Social Forums and other types of organizing. As a result of popular opposition to their rule, world elites were compelled to schedule meetings in remote places, far from people’s capacity to travel, such as the Qatar WTO ministerial in November 2001, or the G-8 summit in 2002 in the high Rockies. Although the Occupy movement did not emerge until almost a decade later, its aspirations and form of organization grew organically from the movement’s earlier incarnations. Such moments of global confrontation arise rarely.<sup>25</sup> By becoming conscious of their history and significance, we can prepare to broaden their future impact. Revolutionary organizations that disregard such moments do so at the risk of assuring their own irrelevance.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century will be remembered for its horrific wars and mass starvation amid great prosperity. It will also be known as a time when human beings began a struggle to

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<sup>22</sup> See Mark Laskey, “The Globalization of Resistance,” in *Confronting Capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement*, eds. Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose and George Katsiaficas (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Some 20,000 people simultaneously gathered in Porto Alegre, Brazil for the first World Social Forum.

<sup>24</sup> See McDonald Stainsby, “Quebec City: Before and after the Storming of the Wall,” *S&D* #30 (Fall 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Globally focused waves of protests are quite rare; less focused rebellions against specific policies, such as wars or global austerity, are more common. For a recent wave of strikes against austerity, see Steve Colatrella, “In Our Hands is Placed a Power: Austerity, Worldwide Strike Wave, and the Crisis of Governance,” *S&D* #57 (November 2011), 82-106.

transform the entire world system. In the past three decades, millions around the world have waged a protracted uprising against capitalism and war, confronting elite meetings of the institutions of the world economic system – practical targets whose universal meaning is profoundly indicative of people’s yearnings for a new world economic system. Similarly, without tightly disciplined organizations, as many as thirty million people around the world took to the streets on February 15, 2003 to protest the second US war on Iraq. As the global movement becomes increasingly aware of its own power, its strategy and impact are certain to become more focused. By creatively synthesizing direct-democratic forms of decision-making and militant popular resistance, people’s movements will continue to develop along the historical lines revealed in 1968 and subsequent Asian uprisings.

Looking into the future, it appears that both objective and subjective global forces are becoming favorable to a global movement that can effect systemic change. The objective factor is evident in the financial crisis that nearly toppled the US banking and automobile industries in 2008 and threatens European economic stability today. The subjective factors have developed along parallel lines. In the 1970s and ‘80s, African and Latin American movements arose against neoliberalism, with anti-IMF/World Bank actions forming the most significant episodes of protest. In East and South Asia during the 1980s and early ‘90s, popular uprisings erupted against entrenched local dictatorships – against what the global corporate media called “crony capitalism.” These uprisings successfully dislodged dictators in the Philippines, South Korea, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand and Indonesia. As global banks (mainly Japanese and US-based) subsequently took over larger shares of these countries’ finances and industry, Asian movements increasingly focused their opposition on global neoliberalism rather than on local “crony” regimes. At the same time that movements around the world have a common focus, so too do they exhibit similar subjective orientations to autonomy, direct democracy, international solidarity, the eros effect, and occupation of public space.

As we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Arab Spring provides empirical evidence of the growing consciousness of ordinary people who go into the streets to change history. In 1968, “the whole world was watching.” Today, it is increasingly the case that the whole world is awakening. Visible in Asia’s uprisings, Latin American insurgencies, and the alterglobalization movement, ordinary citizens’ aspirations for people power and more democracy have emerged everywhere. Although seemingly marginalized, the international movement today involves more activists than ever before. While the airwaves broadcast a version of history that emphasizes the need for central authorities and social conformity, beneath the radar, people’s understanding and self-guided actions constitute a powerful undercurrent. As we become increasingly aware of our own power and strategic capacities, our future impact can become more focused and synchronized. One tendency we can project into the future is the continuing activation of a global eros effect, in which synchronous actions unify people across the world.

The real axis of evil – the IMF, WB, and WTO – will not willingly relinquish its grip on humanity’s vast wealth. Globally synchronized struggles by hundreds of millions of people are needed to create lives worthy of being called “free.” Recent Asian and Latin American insurgencies, especially the Gwangju Uprising, the Zapatista Juntas de Buen Gobierno, the



APPO Uprising, Peru's Amazonian Insurgency among others, will help inform future uprisings – which, however reluctantly undertaken, are necessitated by the systemic crisis tendencies of the existing world system. Sad and joyous, full of suffering while bringing forth tears of happiness, uprisings are moments of extreme desperation, during which human hearts act according to people's fondest dreams. By understanding these dreams and remaining true to them, we become capable of a future of freedom.