

The Bolivian Disconcert

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1.

The recent events in Bolivia once again defy the ways of understanding and naming what takes place in the present. This is also the case for the ways in which we situate ourselves and make our way in fluctuating battlefields and the evanescent borders in which the doing and the sense of politics are disputed. Sifting through the loose threads, I will begin by analyzing a quote from René Zavaleta Mercado from *The Masses in November*, published in 1983 where he reflected on the military coup of the 1980's and, toward the end, noted:

"In any case, the political history developed in a manner that exceeded what was actually a quite modest capability of analysis from the left, sickened now as it was then, not only with sad ideas but an anti-intellectualism that considered itself militant. The explanations, as is well known, revolved around the Argentinian intervention and the issues of cocaine. An emerging cause (the Argentinian, cocaine) had altered -in their eyes- a course of events that would've otherwise remained safe. The history of the country would've been this occasional. The facts, rather, show that Bolivia contained at the same time large active masses and profound static reflexes. Social structures, even Bolivia's, tend to be more conservative than they seem and there is always a powerful set of reactionary means in every country. In this instance, the democratic revolution had been ceding the means for the establishment of the apparatus that acted unsuccessfully with Natusch and successfully with García Meza."

The tendency to look only to the emerging and, above all, occasional causes such as the how and the why of a coup, ultimately leads to a reduction of the facts, generating nebulous convictions to conceal and avoid a course of events, or, like the polemic essayist likes to say: "The history of the country would've been this occasional." This is because they are determined to remain blind before reality and they have become immune to the memory and the history that constitutes them, displaying their "sad ideas" as incapacities of even a minimum critical sense of things and much less of words.

We won't purport to explain the Bolivian disconcert with this quote, but it can help us to take notice of and begin to collect some of the threads that might reorient our perspectives so that we can confront the density of the different historical temporalities at play. That is, at least let us assess the subjectivities and events in their own dimensions, without having to reduce them to subjects and passive facts of powerful dark forces that can define destiny and make it manifest. We must turn to René Zavaleta Mercado as the minimum homage to an untimely thinker which of course, in his time and now, in his various interventions, always made dismayed and discomforted the firm strands of those who call themselves the left.

But he was not just capable of ironizing on the subject of these arguments and explanations about the tricks of the coup. He was also adamant in that it would be insufficient to utilize it as an index for comprehension to be contrasted with the democratic government because from the perspective of the national-popular, these valorizations took on completely different meanings

based on the material actions that are pursued and executed. Once more he disturbed the dashboard and the historical order instituted by the class hegemony and dominant culture. For Zavaleta Mercado, considering a positioning in the present is always in terms of the processes and tendencies that might place into consideration the historical densities and the political temporalities that are at play with the urgency of a perspective of struggle and emancipation.

2.

Times have changed radically since then and so have the conditions of the struggles yet an 'order of things' and a distribution of what is knowable have stubbornly persisted. In this way, continuities and ruptures were established and disputes were configured by the customs of memory and history. This is what has been brought into play in treating decolonization as a political project of emancipation, as well as with the experience of the constitutional process in Bolivia, which had the strength and capacity to open up horizons and paths to transit. This is the Bolivian potentiality, which at that moment could imprint and project horizons and meanings to experiment in their naming: plurinational, autonomy, living well, pluralism and interculturality. That these may still be potent living words, that vibrate and designate possible projects of ways of life and living is part of what is at stake today.

Thus, I want to begin with and strongly highlight the profound collective and deliberative character with which that constituent horizon was built and point out that once established as the new constitution, with all the revisions and changes required for its negotiation and compromise with those who opposed it, the structure and components of state transformation would remain present. But once it was promulgated in 2009 and Evo Morales was elected with wide support for its implementation starting in 2010, the decision was not to pursue a state transformation but rather the continuation and growth of the existent state apparatus. This was the crossroads moment of the paths to follow. Consequently, the time of deliberation and participation from the governmental side was considered to be finalized as it was now the time for working and invigorating what was there, of taking care of the *status quo*. What corresponded was to manage and administer the supposed new state sphere as loyal and excellent bureaucrats. Just by a change in names and nomenclature, the politics of the constitution had finally come into being. This signified an elusion of the depth and magnitude of the crisis of the nation-state form, an omission which we inherited and now sustain.

We have delved deeper into a permanent crisis that, when it manifested, was treated as a matter of mere deficiencies and a lack of coordination between institutional policies that could rapidly be corrected, even though in effect they were continuous interpellations about inefficacy and corruption as an atavistic mode of public institutional culture. From this point of view, in the public realm, the institutional dimension and administrative management was not transformed. Instead, it grew in volume and paperwork, and through its centralistic statism actually ended up reinforcing and accentuating its role as an authority and imposed itself as a strictly normative function. All those citizens who, in the constituent process had been essential to the democratization of spaces and public, social and cultural instances, were swept away and silenced in the institutional and quotidian practices. In this way, the entire state apparatus that had to be dismantled in order to be decolonized persisted and at its core continued cultivating

poison and its potential agonies, or, as Zavaleta Mercado noted, “conceding the means for staging its apparatus.”

3.

It is necessary to be able to distinguish the different times in the Bolivian political process that are open and visible in rise since 2000 and are configure with constitutional power since 2003 with the October Agenda. The rapid ascent and widespread electoral triumph of Evo Morales in 2005 is achieved through a commitment with this Agenda, as with the following primary governmental tasks to be completed in his first presidential term: the establishment of a Constituent Assembly, the so-called nationalization of hydrocarbons, and the beginning of the liability judgements against past governmental authorities. However, after the promulgation of the new Constitution and the configuration of new alliances and pacts to prepare for the new election, the first steps toward a profound change regarding the correlation of forces and perspectives for the primordial duties of the state which would henceforth be aligned with the nuclei of economic, territorial and corporate power, particularly with regard to agroindustry, were also undertaken. This would be the fresh progressive face of the new administration and the construction of the 2025 Agenda, which would pursue societal and state modernization, betting on the leap toward the industrialization of natural resources and the country's transformation as the main regional exporter of energy. The entire agenda of the indigenous originary peasant movements began to be displaced and disrupted, and the different organizations found themselves in urgent need to reformulate their strategies or once again embark on a confrontation against state power. It is in this governmental tendency that social conflicts changed stage and protagonists: from the wounds of the TIPNIS in 2011 to the ongoing fights in Tariquía in El Chaco.

This will also be a moment in which the apparatus of the electoral machinery of the party, now strengthened by its status as an official party, will prevail over the social and indigenous organizations that proposed constitutional policies of transformation. It is perhaps in this choice to prioritize the party that the nucleus of the FONDIOC corruption scandal in 2015 lies, which ended up catapulting an entire generation of indigenous leaders that activated and participated in the constitutive process, clearing the way for the MAS to become the hegemonic political party. In this way, organizations increasingly found themselves in a situation of subordination and functionality, or, on the other hand, they ended up being displaced and fragmented, even duplicated, gradually losing their articulation and the rotations between leaders and base.

4.

The scenario of the presidential administration that began in 2016 changed radically and was made visible with the results of the referendum to modify the constitution and allow for a new candidacy for the following elections. Not only did the administration lose in the referendum results, it also set out on a path of legal strategizing to impose its will. Indeed, the panorama of social and economic dynamics of the past decades was modifying the fluidity and cultural and organization plot of the political scenario and new subjectivities and conflictivities. This is to say, how to read, not only the result of the referendum after such encouraging results in the presidential elections that had taken place only months before, especially considering that the question voters asked themselves was: Why so soon, when the new administration has just

begun, are we going to have to decide the direction of elections that are four years into the future? What are we bringing into play or is it that we won't make it with the necessary sturdiness to that moment? Because for these voters not only were great uncertainties and apprehensions toward the political class being generated and the gap between governors and governed expanded, but lived experience also proved that the electoral fights and queries were not contributing to the settling of their issues nor interests, much less political horizons. They were, rather, being held hostage to the demands due to the rearranging and *prebendalism* that they stirred up.

These are the consequences of the state-organized and promoted depoliticization; now, they repeated, is the time for the middle classes and the developing cities as if these were the key words for confronting and debating what happens in Bolivia. With the feeling that we are doing so well in economic ratings, we are the envy of neighboring countries. Allegedly, our preoccupations and wishes have finally become modern. These are "the sad thoughts" with which we had to perform the following years and strive to explain the course of things that began to overwhelm the state level and the dynamics of society. Thus, it is not by chance that there emerged new frontiers for the political struggle with the rise of ecological and feminist movements, and perhaps more tepidly with respect to the public sphere and public services.

In these conditions of eroding social support for Evo Morales and his party-centric initiatives, in this panorama of such acute depoliticization, a presidential re-election will be pursued with electoral campaigns where the MAS proclaims itself as the only guarantor of political stability and economic growth. At a moment when in the globalized world nationalist anger and calls for economic protectionism were being unleashed, the squandering in social rights and the privileging of minorities made culprit, and the isolation and relocation of immigrants condemned, in Bolivia we could take pride of our statistical achievements and the recognition we received from international organisms. We stopped being poor or, at least, we left extreme poverty behind. When the order of things, the harshness of reality, interpellated us daily, what was the Bolivian miracle to which we could hang on to when wages were insufficient to make it to the end of the month (if wages were even had as the greater percentage of labor is precarious and extremely competitive), public services nor social benefits could be counted upon, well, there was no option but to go into debt. Ultimately, with this forced modernization, we are a population composed in the majority of *precarios* and indebted. What horizons can they promise? Stability and growth, how can they be believed?

These are some of the knots that bred that incredulity and inconformity in an electoral moment that also provided a glimpse of the generational question that would come to embody the resistance against the discomfort with the electoral fraud. It is the youth, as we say to make them visible even when they are the majority in our South American countries. It was them that gave their bodies so that the rebellion and pacific protest could be sustained for days, weeks. The media's lights and microphones were focused on capturing the figures of political voices, who could wonder and give their thanks to the dedication of the youth but did not go beyond that, because if they cannot be turned into voting capital, they don't want their customs, nor their practices, and much less their solidarities and networks. There persist those views of the traditional society that they are 'young', that is, docile matter that must be straightened through

the instituted values, as they are also easily susceptible to being derailed or to embrace external idealisms. In effect, they must be shaped, they must be made. Here is where the failure to meet generationally, socially and culturally that is emerging with different facets in Bolivia and all of South America lies, which we will have to learn to see and listen to if we want to politicize these impossible worlds.

A decisive component in the framework of what was named a civilian pacific rebellion is the re-articulation of the civic committees as the strongest current of the antipolitical. They present themselves as not-political so that they are able to wield the greatest incidence with political effects. The argument that they are every-day citizens whose participation is sustained by civic and patriotic conviction, gives us the foundational elements of their origin and their proceedings in the most crystalline tradition of urban and commercial, as well as familial and patriarchal power. For our purposes it is not necessary to further uncover the surprises and danger that they imply, but it is paramount to point out a rearticulated return with a profound capacity of resolution in the succeeding spaces and actors of the political scene. This is the conservative and reactionary line that many had thought abandoned and overcome, but its untimely yet secure return was sheltered by the profound depoliticization deployed from the state apparatus and fueled by the expansion of churches of all affiliations as the most robust networks for the multiple survival strategies of a precarious and indebted society.

5.

Disconcert is generalized in Bolivia, but it is also so beyond its borders. That is, we are in the midst of globalized disconcert, living in, if we can frame it in this way, the ruins of neoliberalism -as Wendy Brown has titled her most recent book- because it has not just been about the passage of the neoliberal storm with its structural adjustment and free trade recipes, but also about the shift to a subtle and powerful technological unfolding of behaviors and desires to produce subjectivities. In this sense, in South America and in Bolivia, we have modernized and the so-called progressive governments have played a decisive role. At long last, we have contemporized globally and these progressive governments have been the most suitable and subtle instruments for its full implementation and deployment throughout society. What we have now are the frayed threads and fragments of society, an extended motley- who knows if Zavaleta Mercado foresaw it- in the ruins of neoliberalism that is activating and reformulating the possible horizons of emancipation. The fury is already on the street, but also the joy of being and talking to be able to weave the worlds and lives to come.

The Bolivian disconcert is not a reason for sadness nor disillusionment nor disappointment. It is a time of "sad ideas", with the impositions of civics, values and bibles, and with questionable characters occupying the role of politicians. Such as the fact that it is temporary, that it is a transitional government and that the next elections are the institutional way to be able to glimpse and resolve the living conditions that continually affect everyone and everything. It is not in the heads nor in the hearts much less in the gut, but our vote, we know, is mandatory. We must religiously attend the urns. We can be joyful still...

To be able to fight against and resist in the ruins of neoliberalism we must utilize all the resources that we inherited from the struggle. Without memory and without dignity, as the indigenous and Afro-American struggles teach us, there is no resisting body that can walk, talk, produce and

create. To achieve this, we must modify our scales and perspectives to be able to produce multiple joyful and creative subjectivities; as the feminist movements have taught us in their rise, potency and strength are produced in the acknowledgement of the vulnerability and fragility of the body, life, and that which is alive. Only in this way will we manage to generate, produce, and create the availability and ductility in the linkages, networks and the commons. Step by step, in the home, the *barrio*, the community, the territory, the city, the nations, the *pueblos*, an *other* world to invent.

Disconcert can also be the opportunity to create the paths to come.

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