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AUTONOMY
An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

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You may resist the invasion of an army, but
you cannot stop an idea whose time has come.

~ Victor Hugo

As the ongoing uprising in Turkey and the mass protests in Bosnia, Bulgaria and Brazil confirm, the wave of struggles that kicked off with the Arab revolutions of 2011 is still in full swing. However, it is also clear that, two years hence, the “dangerous dreams” of the Arab revolutionaries, Europe’s indignados and America’s occupiers largely remain unfulfilled. In Europe, the austerity mantra is still being uncritically praised and dutifully imposed by governments of the left and the right. In Egypt, Islamist forces have successfully managed to hijack the revolution by taking state power and suppressing its epochal promise of radical emancipation. In the United States, meanwhile, the bodies that once assembled on Wall Street seem to have dissipated back into their previous state of social atomization.

In the present conjuncture, an old but important question arises — both for the movements that kicked off in 2011 and for the ones currently underway in Turkey, Brazil and

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elsewhere: what is to be done? According to some, including prominent leftist thinkers like Slavoj Žižek (2012) and Alain Badiou (2012), the spontaneous and autonomous character of the new revolutions poses a number of risks. Most importantly, these critics argue, the lack of centralized leadership and the fetishism of horizontality that define these movements risk condemning them to an ephemeral existence with limited influence on concrete political outcomes (Harvey 2012a). Without the necessary structuring leadership of what Badiou (2006) and Žižek (2013) have called ‘the Master’ – presumably in the form of a radical vanguard party – the protests are bound to resemble nothing more than flash mobs, marked by temporary explosions of carnivalesque contestation that ultimately do little to undermine the deeper power relations that constitute capitalist society. In the most cynical of these interpretations, the new revolutions could even end up reinforcing capitalism.

**Today’s Movements: Advancing Socialism without the Politics?**

In a recent blog post, David De Bruijn of the University of Pittsburgh echoes some of these criticisms, even if he appears to be arguing more from a ‘realist’ point of view than a Marxist-Leninist one as such2. First, De Bruijn correctly argues that the Tahrir uprising of 2011 was actually much more closely connected to the anti-austerity protests in Greece than most observers at the time were willing to recognize. But, after this basic observation, he moves on to conclude that perhaps the sources of similarity between these movements — which we consider to be part of the same transnational movement family, referred to from now on as the Real Democracy Movement (Oikonomakis and Roos 2013) — are also precisely their main weakness. In fact, the ongoing wave of ‘occupy’ protests, including the anti-austerity protests in Europe and the Taksim uprising in Turkey, may signify what Badiou (2012) has called the Rebirth of History, but they ultimately do so by proposing the return of socialism without the politics:

> Today’s protestors do not affiliate themselves with parties or programs; they do not enter the political arena to obtain particular political goals, or even to actually alter the system entirely. The common refrain is that politics ‘are all hopeless anyway’. As such, today’s protestors want socialism in the abstract: ‘values’ and ‘ideals’ like equality, fairness and non-materialist modes of existence, but not any particular potentially feasible practice embodying these values.

This is a critique that the Occupy movement is very familiar with. First, the mainstream media and political establishment chastised the protesters for failing to articulate any clear demands; then the institutional left joined in, criticizing grassroots activists for refusing to organize themselves into a party and to aim for state power. Previously, a similar line of critique has been levelled at the autonomous Zapatista rebellion in Mexico, the spontaneous popular uprising in Argentina, and the leaderless alter-globalization movement in Europe and the United States, all of which helped to animate the world’s most important anti-capitalist struggles around the turn of the century (for examples, see Sunkara 2011; Petras 2004). In fact, it is a critique that goes back much further than this, extending from Marx’ thundering polemics against the anarchism of Proudhon and Bakunin to Lenin’s scathing critique of Rosa Luxemburg’s concept of revolutionary spontaneity; and from the Stalinist crackdown on the anarchist militias of revolutionary Catalonia to the contemporary Marxist critique of the events of May ’68.

It is quite interesting to note, in this respect, that there is a long-standing and somewhat curious coalition between the theorists of the institutional left — represented in this case by radical thinkers like Slavoj Žižek — on the one hand; and the liberal-conservative political establishment in democratic capitalist society on the other. Both have consistently criticized the Real Democracy Movement for its refusal to respect the organizational exigencies of party politics; both argue that, to be taken seriously, the activists should cast aside their revolutionary illusions and accept the basic rules of the game. Without representation in parliament, they argue, no one will listen to them. If only the protesters would get their hands dirty and do some politics, these two strange bedfellows seem to agree, we can at least start a conversation.

**The Divorce of Power from Politics**

But of course that is precisely what the activists do *not* want. They do not want to engage in a dialogue with the political establishment because they consider the entire system upon which it rests to be fundamentally undemocratic. Moreover, the refusal to engage in the representative politics of capitalist democracy is by no means limited to moral considerations: it is not simply a “soft” and “fluffy” rejection of politics in favor of values. In fact, most of the organizers behind the grassroots movements of the past two years recognize that moving through traditional party structures and state institutions is likely to do their movement more harm than good. This is ultimately a *strategic* consideration as much as it is a moral or ideological one. Look no further
than President Dilma Rousseff, the Brazilian protesters remind us, to see what happens to revolutionary leftists — in this case a former member of various Marxist guerrilla groups during Brazil’s military dictatorship — when they take state power. Or look at the Papandreou dynasty in Greece. Or the Miliband family in the United Kingdom. The examples are endless.

Here, we need to make an important distinction that radically alters the basis of our analysis about relevant forms of revolutionary organization under conditions of global capitalism. It is commonplace to claim that politics is ultimately about power. When politics is seen in this way, the refusal of today’s movements to get bogged down in representative politics is indicative of a failure to recognize the social reality of extant power relations and skewed power structures. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it conflates two concepts that are closely connected but nevertheless crucially distinct. In a word, we need to take our political economy seriously and distinguish politics from power. Zygmunt Bauman (2013) notes that politics is about deciding what is to be done, while power is about the ability to actually do it. In that respect, the nation state and liberal democracy are full of politics but devoid of power.

In the analysis of structural power that forms the theoretical backbone of my own PhD research and social activism, the nation state can no longer be considered a valid or effective basis for transformative political action (see: Roos 2013a). The global legitimation crisis of representative institutions is precisely an outcome of the realization among disaffected voters that elected representatives have ceased to represent their interests, and that this is a problem not of the representatives themselves but of the system as such. What people everywhere are starting to recognize is that voting is pointless if elected representatives do not have the power — or the collective will — to put into practice the promises they make in the lead-up to elections, even if these are free and fair. What people are starting to realize, in other words, is that power has been divorced from politics, leaving the politics behind in a hopelessly vacuous rhetorical universe.

So rather than ignoring the question of power, the Real Democracy Movement actually exposes it for what it really is: it reveals the emperor of democratic capitalism to be naked. As Subcomandante Marcos of the EZLN put in, “in the cabaret of globalization, the state shows itself as a table dancer that strips off everything until it is left with only the minimum indispensable garments: the repressive force,” (Marcos 2004). All around us, we can see the meaningless garments of representative democracy lying abandoned on the ground — the parliaments, the voting booths, the campaign posters — but the emperor who used to wear them has long since migrated elsewhere. From time to time, the state still dresses itself up in the
destructive boredom of the aforementioned “free and fair” elections, but the imperial power that once allowed it to translate their outcome into meaningful political action has all but evaporated into a de-territorial realm of diffuse capitalist sovereignty (Hardt and Negri 2000). This is the essence of politics without power, and the movements of 2011 are merely the latest and most concerted attempt on the part of the general population to point this out.

**From Betrayal to Deception: The Left Turns Right**

This, then, is the ultimate source of the people’s frustration with political parties – and the primary cause for the rise of autonomous forms of self-organization in social movements in such radically different contexts as crisis-ridden Greece and Spain, and booming Turkey and Brazil. In fact, the ‘virus’ of mass popular protest appears to affect left-wing and right-wing regimes indiscriminately, whether the country is developing or developed, religiously inclined or secular-liberal, growing or in a state of collapse. It now seems that today the only substantive domain of politics where the state still has some power to affect a change in outcomes is the cultural politics of identity: it may no longer be able to stem flows of money across borders, but at least the state can still to some extent stop the flow of human beings — and so it does, with cruel effect, cracking down on refugees and migrants as if its life depended on it. When it comes to the economy, however, the state appears to be structurally constrained by the ability of bankers and businessmen to move their investments around as they please: stuffing away trillions of dollars’ worth in profits in remote tax havens while moving investments to whoever offers the easiest regulation and greatest returns. Politicians, meanwhile, are structurally dependent on these private investors to maintain adequate growth and employment levels: otherwise they simply risk being ousted from office in the next elections. As a result, all politicians ultimately have to cater to business interests — if they do not, the market will discipline them through divestment.

The people may therefore have the right to vote, but what is the point in voting if all you get to decide upon is who will implement the policies that favor big business anyway? Populists like Beppe Grillo in Italy may scream “they’re all crooks, kick them all out!”, but what we are really seeing is not corrupt politicians betraying their voters, or the left betraying the workers, but global capital gradually expanding its structural power over the nation state and entrenching the cultural hegemony of its neoliberal ideology (Gill and Law 1989). As the dual process of globalization and financialization continues apace, elected politicians — corrupt or honest,
democratic or authoritarian, left or right — are simply being reduced to managers: they just take care of the state apparatus while the bankers and businessmen wield the real powers of decision-making. This is not a problem of ‘betrayal’. Even if liberal voters may feel betrayed by Obama’s swing to the right, this is not just about power corrupting people (although that may be part of it). Similarly, it is not just that the Workers’ Party betrayed workers in Brazil, or PASOK betrayed voters in Greece. Cornelius Castoriadis, the Greek philosopher of autonomy, was prescient when he wrote in 1955 that left-wing parties have never truly represented working people:

[S]aying that they ‘are betraying us’ makes no sense. If, in order to sell his junk, a merchant tells me some load of crap and tries to persuade me that it is in my interest to buy it, I can say that he is trying to deceive me but not that he is betraying me. Likewise, the Socialist or Stalinist party, in trying to persuade the proletariat that it represents its interests, is trying to deceive it but is not betraying it; they betrayed it once and for all a long time ago, and since then they are not traitors to the working class but faithful and consistent servants of other interests.

The Revolution’s Gradual Retreat into Reformism

It is therefore not that today’s movements are refusing to confront the difficult concept of power, but precisely the opposite. More and more people around the world are beginning to recognize that the democratic capitalist state plays a critical role in stabilizing the diffuse global system of capitalist power relations, and that the parties of the left in turn play a critical role in stabilizing the authority and legitimacy of the capitalist state. As John Holloway put it in a recent interview with ROAR, “one thing that has become clear in the crisis to more and more people is the distance of the state from society, and the degree to which the state is integrated into the movement of money, so that the state even loses the appearance of being pulled in two directions,” (cited in Roos 2013b). Whereas the temporary fixes of Keynesian demand management in the post-war years and cheap credit in the last three decades may have led voters to believe that the state did care about ordinary people, such illusions have all but disappeared in the present conjuncture of widespread capitalist crisis: not just in the eurozone but everywhere.

The position of the institutional left in this respect is extremely self-defeating. On the one hand, most state-oriented radicals, revolutionary socialists and communists would agree with the analysis that the power of capital has grown exponentially under neoliberalism and that the state is becoming increasingly submissive to the dictatorship of the markets. As Žižek himself puts it, the left’s reactionary defense of the welfare state is ultimately a hopeless endeavor: “the utopia [of today’s left] is not a radical change of the system, but the idea that one
can maintain a welfare state within the system,” (Žižek 2010). In fact, he even argues that “if we remain within the confines of the global capitalist system, then measures to wring further sums from workers, students and pensioners are, effectively, necessary.” Clearly such views are difficult to square with Žižek’s support for SYRIZA, the Coalition of the Radical Left in Greece, and the latter’s defense of the welfare state. One day, Žižek’s own theoretical reflections on the Greek debt crisis force him to conclude that the prospects for leftist regimes in general are “‘objectively’ hopeless” (2010); the next day he finds himself praising SYRIZA for its “courage to take over [and] banish the left’s fear of taking power,” (2012b).

The best that leftists can hope for in such an “objectively hopeless” situation is for some modest reform: an Argentina-style debt default, the re-nationalization of some public utilities or perhaps a bank, maybe some family allowances or subsidies to help uplift the poor or bring education to the excluded; not much more. Žižek (2012c) even ends up enthusiastically praising Obama’s healthcare reforms, not realizing that they stripped away hundreds of billions of dollars from hospitals and donated them as profits to the pharmaceutical industry and Wall Street insurance companies (Roberts 2012). Whatever happened to the idea of socialism as the social ownership of the means of production and co-operative management of the economy? It is now clear that all state-oriented forms of revolutionary theory and practice have long since retreated into a defeatist reformism. This is not simply a sectarian jab at the institutional left: the leading radicals themselves recognize it. Speaking at the Subversive Festival in Zagreb this year, Richard Seymour — author of the blog Lenin’s Tomb — admitted that “in practical terms we are all reformists now.” As a result, radical thinkers generally end up supporting political parties whose final policies will be all but radical. In fact, with enough time spent in power, their principal function inevitably becomes the stabilization of the liberal democratic state that anchors the social relations of the global capitalist order. In the process, the cycle of deception that Castoriadis identified — really a cycle of collective self-delusion — continues unabated.

While Slavoj Žižek expresses his unconditional support for a young and charismatic comrade like Alexis Tsipras — the leader of SYRIZA upon whom all radical hopes are now pinned — the latter actually goes to visit Wolfgang Schäuble in Berlin to tell the German Finance Minister that he need not fear a Greek euro exit, before embarking on a charm offensive in the United States to assure the IMF and private bankers of the same, even telling an audience of businessmen, US officials and policy wonks at the Brookings Institution that “I hope to

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convince you that I’m not as dangerous as some are trying to say.”

Apparently the disciplinary power of markets is so great that it even exerts its influence on opposition parties. “Is there anything to fear of the left wing in Greece?” the leader of the Coalition of the Radical Left asked his audience of liberals rhetorically. “In what way are we radical?” By now, the answer should be clear to everyone: in name only.

The End of Domination and the Unleashing of Autonomy

So what is to be done? Rather than reproducing the capitalist state through our continued participation within it, the task of the revolutionary is to destroy it. On a theoretical level, the institutional left would agree with such a lofty abstract goal. But on a practical level, it contradicts itself by continuously trying to seize it, be it through revolutionary or through electoral means — only to be repelled time and again in its objectives of establishing socialism by the exigencies of the market place: from Morales’ Movement for Socialism embracing “Andean-Amazonian capitalism” and cracking down on grassroots movements to expedite large-scale resource extraction in Bolivia, to the Sandinistas of Nicaragua repaying Somoza’s odious debts and selling their land for a nickel and a dime to the Chinese; and from the multi-billionaire Princeling descendants of Mao’s Cultural Revolution to the Revolutionary Family of neoliberal technocrats in Mexico — not a single revolutionary party that successfully seized state power managed to actually wield that power to bring about anything other than capitalism.

To stay true to its revolutionary roots, the radical left now needs to recognize that the struggle against capitalism can only succeed if it starts from the basis of radical autonomy from the capitalist state. Protesting alone is clearly not enough: at this point, the most it can achieve is to scare the government into mild reforms, not much more. Similarly, occupying a square or park for a few weeks or a few months or so is not enough either. Both are a start, however, as they can serve to pry open the suffocating ideological straitjacket of neoliberalism – above all its mantra that “there is no alternative” – swiftly activating and rapidly expanding the radical imagination of the masses. Large-scale protests, or the refusal to obey the logic of submission, cannot overthrow capitalism as such; but they can radicalize a generation of participants on the spot by revealing the framework of institutionalized violence upon which the allegedly democratic capitalist state ultimately rests. Similarly, a handful of neighborhood assemblies in a

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park cannot bring about a truly free and genuinely democratic society, but it can serve as a crucial *lesson in democracy* to those who participate in them, helping to expand revolutionary consciousness and develop new prefigurative forms of direct democratic praxis.

In the long-term, however, lasting forms of self-organization will need to be devised that can both replace the powerless politics of the nation state and destroy the structural power base of global capital. Here we need to make another crucial distinction between two forms of power. John Holloway (2002; 2010) speaks of the meaning of revolution as ‘the end of power-over and the unleashing of power-to’, in other words: the end of domination and the unleashing of autonomy. At its most elementary level, the revolution must have as its goal the elimination of all power structures that allow the few to exert power over the many, in particular the power of capital to undermine the most basic human needs – which would immediately free the people to become fully autonomous (i.e., rule their own destiny) and do whatever they need or want to do to live a materially and spiritually fulfilling life. While the Real Democracy Movement shares that overall objective, we should be careful not to be naïve here: the total abolition of power-over, while forever the objective of genuine revolutionary action, is simply impossible.

In fact, there will always be power-over, even if it develops in the form of virtual hierarchies within nominally horizontal organizations; what Jo Freedman referred to as the tyranny of structurelessness (1972). This implies that the struggle to unleash the self-rule of the autonomous human being and establish an autonomous society is by its very definition always an endless one, involving a continuous fight against the corruption of its own principles and the concentration of power-over in the hands of the few — a danger that forever lurks around the corner. *This*, then, should be the real meaning of ‘permanent revolution’: a recognition by the masses that in an ideal world all forms of domination would be dissolved, even if in the real world human nature will forever be plagued by imperfections and social interaction will to some extent always know a greater or lesser degree of conflict — and therefore a recognition that the struggle will be endless or it will not be at all. As a Subcomandante Marcos quote on a wall in Chiapas puts it, “the struggle is like a circle: you can start anywhere, but it never ends.” In this permanent revolution, there is no End of History and there will never be 1,000 years of peace.

But while total human freedom, perfect equality and an incorruptible democracy may be fundamentally unattainable in practice, they *can* be constantly expanded — not through political reform but precisely through ceaseless social struggle. Political reform in this sense is just a strategy of the constituted powers-that-be to retain their structural position of domination;
essentially a defensive movement involuntarily forced upon them by the insubordination of the
masses. Left to its own devices, the ruling class would never let go of an effective regime of
domination or a profitable mode of accumulation. It is only through the continued struggle of
the masses that those in power are eventually forced to compromise. Here we are reminded of
the so-called Solonic reforms that established the first proto-democratic city state in ancient
Athens. With the aristocracy facing a crippling debt crisis and a rebellious horde of angry debt
slaves at the city gates, the ruling oligarchs realized that the city faced either reform or revolt.
And so to manage the crisis, they appointed the poet and statesman Solon, who immediately
cancelled the debts, abolished debt slavery and instituted democratic reforms, allowing poor
Athenians to vote in the General Assembly and extending its political powers. Solon’s reforms
served to reinforce the aristocracy’s weakened position of social dominance by expanding the
ruling class to include the non-noble wealth-owners and expanding the demos to include the rural
poor. Now both groups would have an incentive not to rebel against the aristocratic oligarchy.

Needless to say, the historical parallels are striking. The Greek oligarchy once again faces
a crippling debt crisis and the mutiny of millions of debt slaves. In this dire situation, SYRIZA
has undoubtedly assumed the functional role of a modern-day Solon. Just as Solon’s reforms
were ultimately the product of the aristocracy’s fear of the masses and not of Solon’s reformist
agenda as such (after all, Solon was appointed a temporary Tyrant by the aristocratic oligarchy
precisely to solve the city’s crippling debt crisis), so a potential SYRIZA government will
probably end up expanding some freedoms and democratic rights while generally entrenching
the capitalist oligarchy that truly rules Greece. Similarly, if any greater freedoms or democratic
rights are attained under a SYRIZA government, it will be not be because of SYRIZA’s
reformist agenda but because of the revolutionary stirrings of the multitude that animated the
autonomous struggles at Syntagma Square in 2011. To their credit, some of the leading SYRIZA
supporters, including critical legal scholar Costas Douzinas (2012), seem fully aware of this fact.

The Stirrings of the Multitude and the Revolutionary Process

Throughout history, the single most important engine behind the gradual and uneven but
nevertheless progressive march of human freedom, social equality and democratic self-rule has
been the “fear of the masses” induced by the rebellious stirrings of the multitude; or, to put it
differently, by the concrete fruits of the endless struggle for dignity (Hardt and Negri 2004). Still,
this line of reasoning raises a crucial question: what meaning does the concept of “revolution” still have if it is not fundamentally re-conceptualized as a process instead of an event? Orthodox Marxists have generally equated the idea of revolution with the notion of the Event: from the October Revolution of 1917 to the Chinese Revolution of 1949 and the Cuban Revolution of 1959, revolutions have tended to become associated with a clearly defined moment: the seizure of state power. Insofar as one can speak of a process, it simply leads from organizational preparations to armed struggle, and ends with defeat or the overthrow of the government.

This idea of revolution as Event is perpetuated in a new guise in the work of Badiou and Žižek, who conceive of the Event as a moment of rupture allowing possibilities to emerge that did not exist before (Žižek 1998). In this view, and somewhat simplistically put, the Egyptian uprising that started on January 25, 2011 created possibilities that did not exist on January 24. But while the notion of the revolutionary Event as a moment of rupture is potentially very useful — and we will return to it later — to equate ‘the revolution’ as such with the Event would be highly problematic. After all, such a conflation only makes sense for the type of political program that stakes its entire raison d’être upon the singular insurrectionary Event leading to the seizure of state power. Here, Žižek proposes such concepts as Egalitarian Terror, the Absolute Act, Divine Violence, the Messianic Moment, and the Revolutionary Truth-Event as the underpinnings of his idea of the ‘new’ communism (for a critique, see Johnson 2011). The problem with this conceptualization of revolution as an Event of Divine Violence and Egalitarian Terror is that – apart from its totalitarian Maoist or even Stalinist overtones – the concept of the Event ultimately hinges upon a mystification of the notion of possibility. Where did the new possibility itself emerge from? If it arose from the moment of rupture created by the popular insurrection, then was it not always-already a latent possibility? If popular insurrections allow new possibilities to emerge, is that not the same as saying that those possibilities had so far simply remained hidden from view as the multitude’s un-actualized potentiality for revolt?

Once we posit the question this way, we are forced to recognize that the Event is ultimately little more than the actualization of a set of potentialities that are created over time through a protracted process of social struggle. As Michael Hardt puts it in the foreword to the last edition of Toni Negri’s Insurgencies, the Event cannot simply be reduced to those isolated instances “that arrive from the outside and have no roots in the immanent political terrain.” Instead, “the constituent power [i.e., the multitude] constitutes events, one might say, like

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5 Admittedly Badiou is more subtle on this – see his latest short piece on Turkey, for instance: ‘Alain Badiou on the recent uprising in Turkey and beyond’, June 19, 2013. Available at: <http://cengizerdem.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/alain-badiou-on-the-uprising-in-turkey-and-beyond/>
electrical charges that accumulate in the atmosphere until the moment when their tension is so extreme that they crash down to earth in a lightning bolt,” (Hardt 1999:xii; cited in Gordillo 2013). Revolutionary events, then, should be situated within the historical process of social struggle. It may be useful here to think in terms of waves. Ultimately, the waves on the ocean are nothing but a body of water in motion — even if their momentary existence appears to our perception as a separate and clearly identifiable ‘event’. In the stormy weather of capitalist crisis, when the revolutionary waves start building up in intensity, we may be tempted to forget about the slow motions of the tides and currents that push the body of water from below. In other words, we mistakenly assume the event of the wave to be the real revolution, forgetting that it is the total movement of the mass of water that we should really be focusing on. The revolutionary wave is merely the actualization of a latent potentiality that already lay embedded within the mass as such. A single wave may break down the bedrock of the capitalist state; but only after the tides, currents and waves have pelted it with full force over an extended period of time.

**Society as a Layer Cake of Historical Residues**

This narrow conceptualization of the revolution as Event has important consequences for the way we interpret history. We still consider the French Revolution to be the high mark of the Enlightenment and liberalism’s rise from the darkness of feudal Europe. But it is easy to forget that the decapitation of King Louis XVI was followed just ten years later by Napoleon crowning himself Emperor, while the remainder of the 19th century witnessed the conservative aristocrats returning to power on a number of occasions. The American Revolution is similarly fetishized by liberals as the event that established the Land of the Free, but it took a civil war, the civil rights movement and nearly two hundred years of black struggle to overcome the fundamentally illiberal reality of institutionalized racism that shackled millions of African-Americans into constitutional un-freedom — not to mention the feminist struggles and indigenous struggles it took to win women and native Americans equal liberal rights.

In other words, the tide went up and it went down again: there was by no means a steady march of freedom unleashed by the great Event of the modern revolutions. The “promises” of liberalism were fulfilled only insofar as the oppressed multitude actually struggled for these promises to be kept, as it did in the Haitian slave revolt. Nor did the Events of the French and American Revolutions really create any possibilities that did not already exist before. The seeds
of liberal democracy had already been sown by Solon — or really by the rebellion of the ancient Greek debt slaves — and were passed on in philosophical terms by Spinoza, Locke and Hume to the free-market liberalism of Adam Smith; and in terms of praxis led from the Medici bankers and Renaissance statesmen to the Amsterdam stock exchange brokers and the Manchester industrialists. Meanwhile, all of this capitalist development was built on the back of slavery and colonial resource extraction: it was by no means simply the product of free trade and capitalist entrepreneurship. The point is that even after the modern revolutions that established liberalism as a dominant ideology and capitalism as the dominant mode of accumulation, fundamentally illiberal and pre-capitalist elements remained central to the material constitution of capitalist society. That same contradictory revolutionary process continues today.

The conceptualization of revolution as Event therefore also has important consequences for how we see our own society. The revolutionary mythology of liberal ideology leads us to assume that, because the modern revolutions are already long past, our society is now truly democratic and thoroughly capitalistic in nature. While there is clearly a moment of truth in this observation, it is certainly not the whole story. In his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, anthropologist David Graeber (2011) makes a passing observation that has profound implications for the way we see capitalist society. While the totalizing tendencies of the capitalist mode of production certainly lead the market to encroach upon more and more spheres of human interaction, many social relations actually remain profoundly un-capitalistic in nature. Just imagine how absurd it would be if your mother came up to you on your 18th birthday and charged you for all the breastfeeding she did when you were a baby; or how offended your friends would be if you invited them over for dinner at your place only to present them with the bill after dessert. We logically and rightly perceive such relations to be outside of the sphere of capital accumulation. Instead of selling our love to one another, we share it. And so, as Graeber puts it, we are all communists towards family and friends.

Society, in other words, resembles a layer cake made up of different historical residues with associated forms of social relations and associated practices. It contains the hierarchical social relations of domination that it inherited from feudalism; it is continuously expanding the diffuse and atomizing social relations produced by the totalizing nature of capitalist development; and even though we cannot identify any clear Event that ever established socialism, our society still and already rests upon what Graeber calls the bedrock of “baseline communism”, which for him constitutes the “ground of all human social life”. Moreover, all three of these layers will continue to coexist in a revolutionary society, even if there will be a
radical rearrangement of their relative importance and a fundamental restructuring of the
different spheres of human interaction. While baseline communism is now mostly limited to the
private sphere of the oikos, or individual household, the public sphere of the agora is being
increasingly privatized and usurped into the commodified realm of capitalist relations.
Meanwhile, as the violent police crackdown on mostly peaceful protesters in Syntagma, Zuccotti,
Taksim, and countless other squares around the world has amply demonstrated, the state
continues to use its hierarchical powers of domination to keep the masses from trying to re-
appropriate the agora as part of the commons. One of the first objects of the revolution is
therefore not to ‘reclaim’ the capitalist state – whose DNA is thoroughly imprinted with its
structural dependence on capital – but rather to reclaim the agora from the imperial expansion of
the shopping mall, re-appropriating it as a public space for truly democratic deliberation.

**Beyond Capitalism: A Permanent Revolutionary Becoming**

Now that we have re-conceptualized capitalist society as consisting of at least three
historically-sedimented layers, and we have re-conceptualized revolution as an interstitial process
of continuous social struggle, we can slowly start to see what ‘moving beyond capitalism’ might
look like. First of all, it will be part of a historical process of social struggle that hinges
fundamentally upon the actualization of a mode of social interaction that is always-already latent
in our current form of sociality. Rather than being misled into thinking that we desperately need
to invent something completely new that has never been tried or thought of before, we have to
conceive of our challenge as an actualization of unrealized potentialities and an expansion of really-
existing alternatives. In this sense, we have to recognize that a revolutionary society is already in-
the-making as we speak — whether it be through the production and distribution of free open-
source software or through the occupation of bankrupt factories and the resumption of
production under workers’ control; whether it be through the formation of direct democratic
rural communes and urban neighborhood assemblies, or through the creation of cooperatively-
run alternative media collectives and open-source academic journals — everywhere around us
signs are beginning to emerge that this world is already pregnant with a new one.

Furthermore, insofar as this process is punctuated by revolutionary moments of rupture,
these Events will merely be the temporary intensification of a formative process – or rather the
energetic release of an affective tension built up over time – that will continue to accumulate in
intensity even after the initial wave has subsided. The Egyptian Revolution is a case in point. The immediate outcome of the uprising may have been the Islamists taking power and hijacking the potential for instant transformation, but the long-term impact of the insurrection and the broader historical process it helped to unleash are yet to be written in the form of history books. It is simply too early to tell how (un)important the event truly was (or will be). To presume that we already have the definite answer in hand, as Žižek (2011) at one point did when he argued that 2011 will be remembered as the “end of the revolution”, is not just a dramatic misrepresentation of reality, it is also very disrespectful to those who continue to risk their lives to take the revolution forward. Again, Žižek’s premature conclusions inadequately equate the revolutionary process with its temporary explosion during the insurrectionary Event; a moment of rupture that is by its very definition limited in time, but whose ending by no means signifies the end of the process as such. Ironically, Žižek consequently ends up echoing both the regime’s and the media’s simplistic and pro-systemic narrative of the revolution as a 17-day ‘event’.

Instead, we should see the Egyptian revolution, and the global revolutionary wave of 2011-’13 more generally, as a surface manifestation of a much deeper tidal shift — a sea change — in the vast currents of human history. Today’s wave of struggles may not yet have produced any directly visible outcomes and may end up being remembered as another “ephemeral” and ultimately “unsuccessful” 1848 or 1968; but the historical significance of the dramatic events that have unfolded during this most recent phase of struggle should always be situated in the context of a protracted historical process. This process, in turn, is animated by a radical political project that — despite its countless detours, setbacks and contradictions — forever inclines towards the establishment of real democracy and a radically egalitarian autonomous society in which the people freely and collectively manage their own affairs, control their own production, and rule their own destiny: a process whose outcome is never pre-determined but always-already in-the-making. To say that the Egyptian revolution has “come to an end” or that Occupy has “failed” to bring about any change is utterly meaningless in this respect.

Besides, the revolutionary event has a value in itself that cannot simply be reduced to any binary metric of victory and defeat (which, not coincidentally, is always measured in terms of whether the movement (a) achieved its demands; or (b) took state power — variables that are at any rate completely useless when applied to autonomous movements that do not make such demands on the state nor aim for state power). In What Is Philosophy? the French thinkers Deleuze and Guattari (1991) remind us that “the success of a revolution resides only in itself, precisely in the vibrations, clinches, and openings it gave to men and women at the moment of
its making and that composes in itself a monument that is always in the process of becoming.” In this sense, they argue, “the victory of a revolution is immanent and consists in the new bonds it installs between people, even if these bonds last no longer than the revolution’s fused material and quickly give way to division and betrayal.” This view of the revolutionary event is not just an easy cop-out to deny or justify defeat: speak to anyone who participated in any of the uprisings that have rocked the world over the past two years and they will tell you that their lives have been irrevocably altered (generally for the better) following their participation in the insurrectionary event. The point is simple: revolutions are liberating in and of themselves.

In this sense, the insurrectionary event has impacts that are far more diffuse and invisible — but nevertheless just as concrete and real — than any armchair socialist or conservative critic could ever understand. They have the power to transform consciousness and permanently alter the individual’s and the multitude’s attitude towards society; but they also have the power to transform the material practices that undergird the dominant forms of capitalist sociality, thereby helping to disseminate alternative forms of social organization like the assembly, the worker-run cooperative and the commune — all of which may one day come to form the organizational bedrock of the autonomous society. Here, Castoriadis (1964) was once again correct to note that insurrections, even if they fail to visibly bring about any immediate changes in the material constitution of society, are still a crucial component of the revolutionary process because they contribute towards the ideological maturation of the revolutionary subject, as well as the flourishing of alternative practices and their early development into new forms of organization that may one day come to supplant the institutions of the capitalist state.

**Concrete Forms of Action: Modalities of Protest**

In this sense, the moments of rupture we witnessed in 2011 opened the field of possibility by actualizing a number of latent potentialities for self-organization. Most important in this respect were the modalities of protest themselves: leaderless, decentralized, horizontal, spontaneous, autonomous, and truly overwhelming. Organized through social media and at the grassroots level without the interference of any central or hierarchical organizational structures, activists still managed to bring millions of people out onto the streets at coordinated times and places. Once on the streets, new forms of solidarity and cooperation developed that allowed the decentralized swarms of protesters to secure impressive victories in running street battles with
the hierarchically-organized forces of the state, while in other situations protecting and looking after one another during peaceful demonstrations. From the construction of barricades and makeshift field hospitals to the impromptu gatherings of citizens cleaning the streets the morning after a riot, and from the emergence of fully-functioning non-monetary mini-societies within the tent camps, replete with kitchens, media centers and libraries, to the spontaneous emergence of neighborhood assemblies, working groups and mutual solidarity networks — the leaderless grassroots movements coordinated and self-managed it all.

Of course, it was easy to crack down on the occupations that formed the key hubs of these movements. Syntagma, Zuccotti and Taksim all still adhered to a more centralized logic of territorial protest with which the state generally feels pretty comfortable. All the police had to do was show up on the spot and start repressing. What the state cannot comfortably deal with, however, is the radical decentralization of movements (which disperses and overstretches police forces); their unpredictable spontaneity (which makes it very hard to anticipate and respond to new actions); their leaderless nature (which does not allow for dialogue or co-optation), but perhaps most importantly the *irrational rationality* of the multitude as such — which poses a neat inversion of the rational irrationality of capitalism. In the latter, the rational self-interested choices of individual investors produce fundamentally *irrational* outcomes at the collective level of the public interest, ranging from climate change to financial collapse; while the former, by contrast, concerns the remarkably *rational* outcomes you achieve when millions of people begin to collectively act in a seemingly irrational way, fearlessly putting their own lives on the line to bring about collective transformation even if it does not serve their immediate self-interest.

In his recent book on the movements, *Why It's (Still) Kicking Off Everywhere*, Paul Mason (2012) argues that the network, in this case, simply beats the hierarchy. Both in violent confrontations with the state and in large-scale peaceful demonstrations or occupations, as long as the numbers add up, the dispersed swarm tactics of an unarmed multitude can completely overwhelm the state apparatus and even win serious strategic victories. Ever since a 2002 military exercise showed that Iran’s swarming tactics could defeat the far-superior navy fleet of the US, American military strategists are perfectly aware of this fact. Just think of how the London rioters completely overwhelmed the centralized police hierarchy with their Blackberry-powered swarming. It is for good reason that *Adbusters*, which originally called for the Occupy Wall Street protests, speaks of “anarchic swarms” as the “emerging model of anti-capitalist mutiny” (*Adbusters* 2012). It is also what a hacker-activist friend meant when he told me at Syntagma Square that “we are like bees, we operate with a hive mind.” For this reason it is not fair to
criticize the activists for failing to take into account the question of power. They are playing power politics: they have just taken it to the next level by contesting the static hierarchical power of the territorially-delimited nation state through a spontaneous activation of the de-territorialized and highly flexible power of the rhizomatic network (Deleuze and Guattari 1980).

But much more than the power of swarm intelligence alone, Mason argues that “the networked protest has a better chance of achieving its basic goals because it is congruent with the economic and technological conditions of modern society.” More specifically, while the global uprisings can by no means be pinned down to one specific generation, there is no denying that the millennial generation of 20-somethings that is animating today’s struggles grew up under radically different socio-economic and technological conditions from their parents. The era of the printing press and TV — with their centralized, hierarchical and unidirectional forms of communication — has come to an end. The era of Web 2.0 — resting upon loose but interactive communities of autonomous networked individuals whose mutual relationships are defined by the sharing of information — has only just begun. Of course, it is a cliché to note that the Facebook and Twitter revolutions are ultimately based on capitalist technologies; or to argue, as Malcolm Gladwell (2010) has, that the soft-ties of the web will never allow for action to be sustained over time. But neither of this seems relevant in the wake of 2011. The fact is that Facebook and Twitter did help protesters organize and even allowed activists to connect and develop strong ties that would otherwise never have developed. Besides, as Marx himself importantly recognized, the revolution cannot retreat into primitivism: to succeed, it must build on the most advanced capitalist technologies available. After all, this capitalist world is all we have — and one day it will be us who inherit its technologies, whether we like it or not.

**Concrete Forms of Direct Democratic Self-Organization**

While the new modalities of protest outlined above should be seen as harbingers of social change in and of themselves, we already established that we ultimately need to move beyond protest if we are to truly challenge the structural power of global capital and the diffuse nature of capitalist sovereignty. Here, the movements again provide their own prefigurative answers, which are clearly replete with imperfections and contradictions, but which may still provide us with a glimpse of what a truly democratic, post-capitalist society could look like in the future. The key ‘innovation’ here is really a re-invention: the return to the popular assembly as a
basic platform of collective decision-making and communal deliberation. One can already hear the critics groaning in the background: how could a complex society like ours ever be organized on the basis of direct democracy? Won’t we always need some form of leadership and political representation to keep society from descending into chaos? The short answer is: no. We don’t. We need organization, of course, but we do not need leadership or representation, at least not in their current liberal democratic form. We only need them now because they form the pillars of the present system: a liberal democracy without leaders or representatives would indeed implode.

But not all societies would. In fact, there are numerous historical examples of entire cities that were administered for months on end precisely on the basis of direct democratic principles, with the workers in control of their factories, workshops and offices; with residents in control of their own neighborhoods; and with all these different communities cooperating and coordinating their activities through federated workers’ councils, syndicates and/or assemblies. What is more, these societies functioned just fine until they were militarily repressed. The Paris Commune of 1871 still stands as the high mark of revolutionary achievement in this respect — although it also represents one of the most disheartening examples of military defeat (Gordillo 2013 argues that the affective resonance of the multitude can even break down military command lines, but that it failed to do so in Paris because the state effectively pitched their army of peasants against the urban communards, thus breaking the affect between them). For nearly one year, the workers were in total control of the city. Neighborhood assemblies took care of all important local administration while decentralized but federated workers’ councils effectively coordinated production and distribution within the urban space. The schism between anarchists and Marxists did not yet exist, and all factions worked together for the establishment of total workers’ control.

Another historical example includes Revolutionary Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. Here, anarchists and Trotskyists fought side by side against the fascists (and later Stalinists) while the entire city fell under workers’ control: the people armed themselves and overthrew the local government; factories were placed under worker self-management; farmland was collectivized; the bourgeois hotels and restaurants were expropriated and turned into military housing and soup kitchens; the city’s public transportation system was free and run by the anarcho-syndicalist union CNT; money was abolished; wages were equalized and paid in coupons redeemable for basic commodities; all locally produced goods were free if not too scarce; tipping was forbidden as a bourgeois insult to the worker; the militias fighting on the front line were made up of men and women who fought side-by-side on the basis of full equality; the officers were addressed informally and wore the same simple ragged uniforms, slept in the
same basic barracks and received the same pay as their soldiers; and the standard greeting of señor or señora was abolished – everyone in the city referred to each other as compañera or compañero, for comrade. As George Orwell (1938) recounted in his classic Homage to Catalonia:

It was the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the Anarchists; every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and with the initials of the revolutionary parties; almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt. Churches here and there were being systematically demolished by gangs of workmen. Every shop and café had an inscription saying that it had been collectivised; even the bootblack’s had been collectivised and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shop-walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal.

A more contemporary example of direct democracy would be the EZLN-liberated indigenous territories of Chiapas, Mexico. This summer, the Zapatista communities of Chiapas are celebrating their first ten years of autonomy since the foundation of the so-called Caracoles and Councils of Good Government in 2003. After the Mexican Army moved out of the EZLN’s zone of influence following the 1994 guerrilla insurrection, the Zapatistas organized themselves into autonomous municipalities run on the basis of indigenous customs of direct democratic self-government. The municipal assemblies send rotating delegates to the regional councils, which then decide collectively upon questions of food and income distribution and taxation. In just ten years, the system of self-government has radicalized the entire poor population into democratic participation, while administering fully autonomous schools and clinics and managing to virtually eradicate the regional problems of alcohol abuse and drug trafficking. If there ever was a movement attesting to the nature of revolution as a process, it must be the Zapatistas.

These concrete examples, while each is clearly specific to its own highly particular context, teach us at least one important lesson: the establishment of real democracy will require a radical decentralization of political power towards the communities in which ordinary people live and work. In fact, it will require the destruction of any form of power-over that does not arise from the bottom-up. Still, in a profoundly interconnect world, pure decentralization alone is not enough: to administer extensive territories, large populations and complex organizations, it must be accompanied by forms of democratic intermediation between the different decentralized nodes. This is the function of the federated councils that we just highlighted from the Paris Commune and Revolutionary Barcelona to contemporary Chiapas. These types of councils are administered by rotating delegates, not elected representatives, who continue to live and work inside their own communities and who can be recalled by their communities at any time. They
are not legislative bodies but purely administrative ones, and their proposals always remain voluntary. All legislative power continues to reside within the communes and/or assemblies.

To make direct democracy work in a complex global society, it is self-evident that we need to move beyond the fetish of horizontalism as a pure concept and accept at least some degree of vertical integration (Harvey 2012a). This vertical integration, however, always rests upon the power base of the assemblies themselves, while the rotation of retractable delegates ensures that no new bureaucratic elite will be abstracted from the general population. David Harvey (2012b) claims that such a federated system of assemblies, councils and/or communes would still constitute a state: “if it looks like a state, feels like a state, and quacks like a state, it’s a state.” But whether you call such a federated autonomous system a state or not is a rather meaningless side issue. The anarchists do not. Castoriadis did. But they are still talking about the same thing: radical democratic self-organization from the grassroots up. It is important to remember that we are not waging a war on words here: we are waging a war against capitalism. When the capitalist state has been replaced it does not matter much what its revolutionary alternative is called — as long as it is thoroughly democratic in nature and functional in practice.

**Two Temporalities of Revolt**

So if these are some of the concrete examples of direct democratic modes of self-organization that have existed throughout history, and if the revolution is about the long-term process in which these potentialities become actualized and these practices gradually mature and expand, then what will our own future society look like? People still come up to us and say: “you don’t have a model, you have no idea what you want, there is no programmatic content to your revolution.” Our answer to such an accusation should be simple: do you think a 15th century Florentine banker or Genovese merchant had even the slightest clue what financialized global capitalism would look like in the 21st century? Do you think they could have foreseen the proliferation of complex financial derivatives, a market worth $600 trillion, whose principal product is entirely immaterial and doubly or triply abstracted from the original asset upon which it supposedly rests? Do you think the people whose trades took about as long as it took a ship to sail from Pisa or Genova to London or Bruges had even the slightest clue that one day their industry would be dominated by computerized high-frequency trading, with its lightening-speed transactions in which lasers send buy-and-sell orders down an intercontinental optical fibre at 26
terabits per second, just to save a few milliseconds on a transaction that could potentially result in hundreds of billions of dollars in additional profits? Clearly such an insinuation seems preposterous. The future is the future precisely because it has not yet happened: how are we supposed to know what socialism, communism or real democracy will look like a hundred years from now? We are only just re-embarking upon the historical trajectory, starting a process that will take years to get underway and decades if not centuries to complete. We ourselves have many unanswered questions, and so preguntando caminamos – we walk by asking.

This is what John Holloway and the Zapatistas mean when they talk about the two temporalities of revolt (cited in Roos 2013b). First, there is the Ya Basta! Enough! We can no longer live in this disaster of a system! Not only is it burdening us with debt, stealing the fruits of our labor, evicting us from our homes, stealing our savings and pensions, marginalizing our poor, amplifying social inequalities, commodifying our knowledge, commercializing our bodies, privatizing our public spaces, appropriating our schools, roads and hospitals, destroying our cultural heritage, reducing us to mindless consumers, undermining our children’s development, preventing the self-actualization of our full potential, annihilating our environment, destabilizing our climate, and quite simply making our lives miserable — but through the combination of all of the above it is also gradually destroying the very possibility of living a materially and psychologically fulfilling life on this planet. The first temporality of revolt is therefore in the now: we must break away from capitalism now — immediately, this instant! The only way to do so is to stop reproducing it in our daily lives and to engage in alternative, non-capitalistic practices.

But such an immediate change in practice can never be complete and can never be enough to revolutionize society as such: if left to itself it will remain a kind of lifestyle anarchism at best. This brings us to the second temporality of revolt, encapsulated in the Zapatista saying that “we are going slowly because we are going far.” This is about situating our struggle within the historical process. It is about recognizing that for all the immediate urge to break from capitalism now, extant social institutions and dominant power relations will simply make it impossible for us to break out and attain complete autonomy within this very instant, or even tomorrow or next year. In this sense, the rejection of representative politics by the Real Democracy Movement is not an “escape” into a form of political apathy or a retreat into lifestyle politics: it is an immanent recognition of the fact that we must combine an immediate rejection of the system with the embrace of the type of organizational forms that can eventually replace it – the assembly, the syndicate, the workers’ council, the commune, you name it – while continuing to confront capital and the state head on through self-organization for insurrection.
Bending the Moral Arc of the Universe

Now we can start to see that the critical claim made at the beginning of this article, that the movements want “socialism in the abstract” without “any particular potentially feasible practice embodying these values”, is not true — just as the idea that autonomous movements will always be ephemeral is not true. In fact, there are numerous concrete forms of direct-democratic self-organization occurring around the world as we speak, many of which have proven capable of lasting for years if not decades, from the Councils of Good Government in Chiapas to the worker-run factories of Argentina, and from the autonomous rural communities of the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil to the participatory budgeting initiatives in that same country. As I write this, popular assemblies are popping up all over Brazil and Turkey, while Greece now has its first worker-managed factory in Thessaloniki as well Europe’s first worker-run TV station. These examples are far from widespread enough to generate the type of radical social change that we are ultimately aiming for, but they are the first steps in a revolutionary process that will take decades to unfold — but which we must embark upon right now if we are to at least maintain the possibility of living a dignified life on an increasingly undemocratic and inhospitable planet. These are the echoes coming back to us from the future, prefiguring another world that may still lie ahead of us. We would be foolish not to heed their call.

But whether or not the project of autonomy succeeds and real democracy is ever established, one thing is now crystal clear. The era of parties is over. They are dead. Finished. Relics of a liberal polity whose content has long since evaporated into the misty realm of capitalist sovereignty. In the process, democratic elections have become a bad joke about the vanity and impotence of political representatives and their empty electoral promises. No one takes them seriously anymore. Instead of casting their votes at the polls, the youth are now hurling Molotovs at police. Athens, Rome and Constantinople burn as the masses cry out to be heard amid the deafening silence of the establishment’s contemptuous complicity in the degradation of democratic institutions. The nation state is equally finished, even though it will linger around in increasingly authoritarian form for quite some time, drawing on the cultural politics of identity and ideology to divide and pacify the multitude and keep it from realizing its true power. The left fares no better. The road to state power now lies strewn with the radical pretensions of nominally socialist parties, thrown off in dutiful worship at the altar of the marketplace, only to be picked up again by the next candidate once the seasonal cycle of electoral self-delusion restarts the same sickening and stale political marketing campaigns all over. In such times of universal deceit, only radical autonomy from the state can take the revolution forward.
At the same time, we need to be realistic: the only meaningful alternative we have — the project of autonomy — is by no means ideal either. There can never be a fully autonomous or genuinely democratic utopia, and even the gradual march towards it is doomed to be a long and arduous one. Society is forever in flux and the temptations of power can never be fully exorcised. But as a young Tzotzil community organizer in Chiapas told me a few months ago, “autonomy is not perfect, but it’s the only thing we’ve got.” Democracy can never be pure and freedom will never be absolute. But they can be expanded and improved. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” For King, there was a God behind this moral magic. But now that the gods and kings have abandoned us, only the people can do the bending. Luckily, the multitude is stirring everywhere and the global revolution remains in full swing. The ones who desperately cling on to power can keep sending their armies of riot police at us — but they cannot stop the idea whose time has come.
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