“Taking Power or Re-Making Power?
The Not-so-New yet Never Seen Cultures of Resistance Today”

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Our lives today are marked by crisis – climate change, financial meltdown, U.S. militarism in Iraq and Afghanistan, the “hollowing out” of representative democracy, rising inequalities between First and Third Worlds – or perhaps better put the Rich World and the Majority World – and the perennial issue of poverty in the Majority World and growing inequality of life conditions in the Rich World.

In short … we are in a mess!

Yet the signs are everywhere that people are rising to oppose these intertwined crises. “If Egypt can get rid of Mubarak, Wisconsin can get rid of Walker!” John Nichols, in *Uprising*, tells of a demonstrator in Madison who was holding up this sign, the words written in Arabic. When he asked the man how he had come to know Arabic, he said, “I don’t. I had it translated on Google last night.” Nichols comments that when a middle-aged unionized American is inspired enough by the Arab Spring to translate a slogan for his struggle in Wisconsin into Arabic, then something is going on. And something is indeed going on.

The events and movements of 2011 are of a world-historical order, destined to pass into the history of human societies as one of the most revolutionary ever, with 1789, 1848, 1917, 1968, 1989. The wave of radical social change – in the sense of a deep transformation of a society, community, region, or the whole world in the direction of
greater economic equality and political participation, achieved through the actions of a strong and diverse popular movement – is clearly in the air we now breathe.

Explosions of change always raise the question: Where do they come from? It looks like these dramatic events just happen. But there is always a history, and a context. Their global sweep affirms the need for what Hamid Dabashi calls a “liberation geography,” and leads to another question: Are these events connected? What – if any – threads of affinity do they share, and what explains their simultaneity and common sensibilities?

We are witnessing today the rise and articulation of new political cultures of opposition, not altogether unprecedented but very different from those that inspired the great social revolutions of the twentieth century. And these threads of resistance may also point towards future prospects as we try to imagine the enduring results, self-evident and more subtle, of the Arab Spring and Occupy. It seems likely that these will be many, widespread, and long-lasting, no matter what happens in the next election or at the next public confrontation.

Political cultures of opposition and fundamental social change

In my 2005 book Taking Power, I discerned a pattern to the origins of revolutions in the Third World that brought together the economic and social dislocations of dependent capitalist development, the political vulnerabilities of dictatorships (and, paradoxically, of truly open polities where the left could come to power through elections), and a conjunctural economic downturn accompanied by a favorable geopolitical moment where leading outside powers did not (or could not) intervene.

Looking at the world since 2009, we see versions of each of these: the glaring
contradictions of neo-liberal capitalist globalization, the persistence of personalist regimes (especially in the Arab world) and the hollowing out of representative democracies in Europe, North America, and Latin America, the deepest and most dangerous global economic downturn since the 1930s, and finally, the attenuation of U.S. economic and political power.

In the twentieth century, when all of these more or less structural conditions presented themselves, the final, indispensable piece for fundamental social change was one of agency and culture: the ability of revolutionaries and ordinary citizens to fashion powerful political cultures of opposition capable of bringing diverse social groups to the side of a movement for deep social change in the Mexican, Russian, Chinese, Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Iranian revolutions.

I have argued, and both the Arab Spring and Occupy suggest, that the origins of political cultures of opposition lie in the experiences and memories of people and the emotions and relationships that animate their daily lives and color their politics. Sometimes revolutionary ideologies – such as socialism and national sovereignty in the twentieth century – travel from revolutionary groups into local settings and circulate between revolutions. Other times, more popular idioms or folk understandings circulate in communities, putting people’s concerns in everyday language such as fairness, justice, dignity, or freedom, or as concretely as “Bread, land, and liberty” (echoed in Tunisia as “Work, liberty, national dignity”). Importantly, there may exist more than one political culture of opposition in a society, for people don’t necessarily share the same experiences, respond identically to the same words, or welcome the same ideologies. The great revolutionary movements of history found ways of tapping these profoundly, often
by creating a common goal such as “the regime must step down” or “the foreign powers must leave” and attracting enough committed followers to take power. The forging of vibrant political cultures of opposition is an accomplishment, carried through by the actions of many people, and, like revolutions themselves, is relatively rare in human history.

It now seems clear that the political cultures of opposition that enabled the great social and anti-colonial revolutions of the twentieth century are being transformed in new directions. The classical picture of revolution generally featured armed insurgents who directly engaged the state and its military. In Russia and China, and more loosely in Nicaragua and Cuba, socialist political parties existed alongside the armed revolutionaries and gave direction to them. In Iran, networks of mosques and clerics did the same for the mass demonstrations and general strike that undermined the shah’s government without taking up arms. A common thread was the hierarchical structure of the movements, with well-identified individuals at their head – Zapata and Villa, Lenin and Trotsky, Mao, Fidel and Che, Khomeini, and the rather less famous Ortega brothers. The hierarchical nature of guerrilla militaries, socialist parties, and religious leadership meant that influential figures – always male, and often privileged in background – would lead in the name of the people.

These political cultures produced broad and powerful revolutionary movements, defeating highly militarized states with powerful external backers (usually, in fact, the U.S.). Once in power, however, they often fragmented, as the various parts of their broad social forces typically had different aims, and the common bond that had united them often proved fragile and difficult to sustain.
The limits of these revolutions cannot be laid entirely at the feet of the political cultures that made them. Of substantial weight in the outcomes of each external intervention and disadvantageous positions in the world economy. But despite the strength and creativity of these revolutionary political cultures, so crucial in overthrowing the states they opposed, they still possessed features – especially their emphases on ideology over popular idiom, and the hierarchical leadership and organizations that came to power – which bear some responsibility for the disappointing outcomes that followed.

In the twenty-first century, the nature of movements for radical social change has itself changed, as activists, reformers, dreamers, and revolutionaries around the world have pursued nonviolent paths to a better world, intending to live and act as they would like that world to be. That is, the ends of justice are no longer held to justify the means of violence, but the means of non-violent resistance reflect and guarantee the ends that they seek.

To the question posed famously by Lenin – not a particular favorite of the movements under discussion – “What is to be done?” the social movements in the last decade of the twentieth century and the opening years of the present one are offering some strikingly new and interesting answers. We are now living a moment of profound transition in the radical tradition, in which an older political culture of armed struggle led by a vanguard in the name of socialism is yielding to more inclusive, democratic, and nonviolent movements in the name of … something else.

Two distinct and rather different paths to change have been pitted against each other by scholars and practiced by participants on the ground: the electoral path to state power of the “Pink Tide,” most radically in Venezuela and Bolivia, versus the route of
turning one’s back on state power and instead carving out autonomous spaces both below it at the level of the community as the Zapatistas are doing, or beyond it, as the global justice movement and Occupy have sought to do. The Arab Spring opens up a third new path, starting with massive non-violent direct action and following up with a struggle for new democratic institutions. All of these experiments are creatively attacking the multiple crises of our time.

New yet not-so-new

“Power to the imagination!” The path of the great social revolutions has partly obscured the legacies of a number of movements that prefigured the new political cultures. Their harbinger may have been the events of May 1968 in Paris, so compellingly captured by Daniel Singer in Prelude to Revolution. As in 2011, a movement seemed to come out of nowhere, growing with an unprecedented intensity and speed from small actions into a wave of revolt, involving occupations of schools and factories, demonstrations and direct action in the cobble-stoned streets, democratic debate with participation open to everyone, and a stunning general strike. Its tactics grew out of a vision of a different mode of everyday life, of a new community that would be personally liberating and empowering. It presaged a world of direct, participatory democracy, on as large a scale as possible. In its best moments, “The direct communication of the spoken word, even to total strangers, transformed the stiff politeness of bourgeois interactions…. Many people, not only students, but old and young, men and women, intellectuals and workers, the specialized and the unskilled, spoke simply about what shape the world should take, what should they do and be, what life should be like.”\(^1\)
Its charismatic, rather reluctant spokesperson Daniel Cohn-Bendit told the London *Sunday Times*: “I don’t believe in unalterable leadership. Within two months I shall no longer be an identifiable leader…. What we are proposing is very difficult to understand. People suppose that someone, somewhere, makes decisions for them, leads them toward a goal, and they think that there must be a central authority structure. We want to prove to them that they are mistaken.”

Their creative spontaneity and disavowal of any hierarchical leadership brought benefits, but also raised the problem of the absence of any alternative once the state is confronted and exposed. With no agreed-upon demands or goals, and no organized political outlet, the forging of a political culture strong and effective enough to hold together the disparate parts of the movement eluded them; by mid-June the movement seemingly vanished into thin air as suddenly as it had appeared.

Or did it? The 1962 Port Huron statement of radical students in the United States coined the term “participatory democracy.” May 68 offered “participatory revolution.” Though the protests around the world in 1968 ended in defeats almost everywhere, perhaps most consequentially in France, Czechoslovakia, and Mexico, they created significant political and cultural legacies of protest that have re-emerged in the social movements of today, with the aim of deepening and broadening democratic participation.

*La via chilena al socialismo.* Another precursor of the twenty-first century followed close on the students’ heels when socialist Salvador Allende led his Popular Unity coalition to power in Chile with a slim plurality in the 1970 elections and began to construct “the Chilean path to socialism,” making a social revolution through legal, constitutional means and backed by an outpouring of popular enthusiasm and support,
departing sharply from the armed struggle path to power of previous revolutions, and achieving a share of state power that had eluded the movement in France.

Allende’s initial success soon took a tragic turn as U.S. machinations destabilized the economy and strengthened anti-democratic elites and social forces. On top of this, the revolutionary parties inside and outside the UP differed on how to preserve and extend the revolution, though the political cultures of Chile’s left and centrist social forces – perhaps two-thirds of the population – at the outset had presented a vibrant, varied panorama of social justice-oriented, class-conscious, and articulate reformers and democratic revolutionaries. In the ensuing pressure-cooker, Chilean society polarized politically. When the military seized power on September 11, 1973, the dictatorship that followed and the world’s first neo-liberal economic model condemned Chileans to a reign of terror and loss.

The Allende years represent an incalculably precious missed opportunity for the transformation of society through democratic means. Many observers at the time argued that revolutionary democratic paths to a better world were doomed by internal contradictions and powerful counter-revolutionary intervention, and the experiences of the Grenadian and Sandinista revolutions in the 1980s reinforced this view. Yet now, a quarter century later, the Pink Tide governments in Latin America are suggesting that the Chilean path to socialism contains more positive lessons, with Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador pursuing a “twenty-first century socialism” that is democratic and original, reminding us that flexibility and imagination should temper both historical and contemporary analysis, and political action itself.

“We want a world where many worlds fit.” Just before the emergence of the Pink
Tide, the Zapatistas opened the twenty-first century on January 1, 1994 at the height of Mexican-U.S. celebrations of their NAFTA deal, claiming roots as recent as the 1968 student movement in Mexico City and as old as the 500-year struggle against the first wave of European colonialism and the dawn of capitalism waged by the indigenous peoples of the Americas. The Zapatistas struck the first global blow against neoliberalism and Thatcher’s infamous diktat “There is no alternative.” Not an ideology, but rather a new way of making radical change, Zapatismo embraced the vision of changing the world without taking power, as the title of John Holloway’s 2002 book put it, and instead attempted to remake the nature of power altogether.

The rebellion also marks very clearly the movement away from ideologies and toward more popular discourses of resistance and opposition, tinged with visionary alternatives. Indigenous communities, frequently led by women in numbers and ways rarely seen anywhere before, provided such core Zapatista principles as mandar obedeciendo – “to rule, obeying” – the view that leaders serve the community and the struggle for its issues or else they are recalled. Another innovative Zapatista practice is suggested by the phrase dar su palabra (literally, to have one’s say). The goal is to make decisions that benefit from the unique insights of all present, to find solutions which have eluded them in the past. Part of this involves “walking at a slower pace,” acknowledging that change is a long and slow process, not secured with the mere seizure of power or electoral victories. Indeed, the Zapatistas have said that they do not aspire to take state power in the traditional sense, but rather, to create “a free and democratic space for political struggle.” They have done this far beyond their own communities, drawing the emergent global justice movement to an “Intergalactic Encounter” against neoliberalism.
“Another world is possible.” The latter half of the 1990s also witnessed the rise of the global justice movement, a “movement of movements” that first rose to public visibility when a broad coalition of people joined in non-violent direct action, insisting “This is what democracy looks like!” actually shut down the meetings of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in November 1999. As with the Zapatistas, the movement made a sharp turn toward popular ways of speaking over ideology. For activist L.A. Kauffman, “the central idea behind the carnival is that protests gain in power if they reflect the world we want to create. And I, for one, want to create a world that is full of color and life and creativity and art and music and dance. It’s a celebration of life against the forces of greed and death.”

To this, we may add the subjective experience of hope (is hope an emotion?). In the words of David Solnit, one of the key organizers of the Seattle action: “Hope is key. If our organizations, analysis, visions and strategies are lanterns, then hope is the fuel that makes them burn bright and attracts people to them…. The world cannot be changed for the better by taking power…. Capturing positions of state power, either through elections or insurrection, misses the point that the aim of uprooting the system is to fundamentally change the relations of power at the root of our problems.”

Occupy would emerge from and take a page from this movement.

Twenty-first century socialism. Meanwhile, an electoral route to radical social change unfolded throughout much of Latin America, most vigorously in the Venezuela of Hugo Chávez, first elected in 1998, and in Bolivia under indigenous president Evo Morales since 2006. There has been far less emphasis on an ideological appeal to socialism, and in its place we find an upsurge in new, popular conceptions of social justice. When asked what he understood by “socialism,” Morales replied: “To live in
community and equality…. It is an economic model based on solidarity, reciprocity, community, and consensus. Because, for us, democracy is a consensus…. And beyond that, [it means] respecting Mother Earth, the Pacha Mama.”

A new form of national sovereignty has been articulated for the era of globalization, shifting from only confronting outside powers such as the United States to targeting transnational corporations and capitalism itself as a set of destructive, anti-human social and economic arrangements. Felipe Quispe, an Aymara leader critical of all politicians, including Morales, puts it this way: “The foreigners can stay as long as we get 90 percent of the power. If not, there will be war…. We will rewrite history with our own blood. There will be a new sun, and even the rocks and the trees will be happy.”

Despite their differences, the center-left Pink Tide governments of Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Argentina all tap into political cultures that differ in key respects from the older revolutionary tradition, highlighting instead a democratic route to power and efforts to build a more participatory political system. For Morales, “democracy” is more than elections and political representation by a leadership: “This is something I’ve learned from Subcomandante Marcos, from his messages – that is, to govern by obeying the people.”

The future of 2011

We arrive at last to the movements that shook the world in 2011. In January and March, long-entrenched dictators fell to popular uprisings in Tunis and Cairo, and elected new political leaderships offering greater hope for positive social change than has existed in the region in decades. This came about through massive occupations of public space by broadly-based social forces that resolutely resisted state repression with non-violent,
ongoing, and creative direct action (“civil disobedience” seems too mild a term for this). And these movements did not come out of nowhere. The interconnectedness of global crises meant that one could “read the world in a loaf of bread,” as Christian Parenti put it: the hot summer of 2010 devastated the Russian grain harvest, raising the cost of the people’s staple and bringing many to the point of rebellion. Nor did their political cultures of opposition spring up ready-made. To take but one example, young Egyptian activists of the April 6 movement had visited Serbia to learn the techniques of non-violent civil disobedience from the Otpur (Resistance!) youth movement that helped unseat Slobodan Milošević in October 2000. Another example was given when the people of Iran took bravely to the streets of Tehran in June 2009 to protest their clerical dictatorship.

In both Tunisia and Egypt, and unlike Iran or elsewhere in the greater Arab Spring, the regimes gave way to popular demands and ceded power. The U.S. staggered from shocked disbelief and compromise maneuvers to withdrawing its support for the “democratic dictatorships” of Ben Ali and Mubarak. After these clear targets were sent into exile or prison, the movements surmounted the next challenge of pushing old regimes into elections to cement their non-violent political revolutions.

The question remains: can the new regimes be further pushed toward social transformation aimed at crushing poverty and class inequality? Their futures depend on the courageous engagement of the social movements that brought them democratic openings and their ability to shape the direction and composition of the newly elected democratic leadership and parties. And this, in turn, depends on sustaining and forging the new political cultures – of democracy, reformist Islam, and popular sovereignty – that
brought them victory in the first place. Popular experiences, emotions, and speech must find organizational expressions capable of this daunting task.

The originality of this approach to overthrowing dictators suggests that yet another path to radical social change has opened up in the twenty-first century: the sustained occupation of public space followed by the struggle for a more open democratic polity, a kind of third way between taking national power through elections and re-making power by wrestling communities from neo-liberalism’s clutches. The challenge now is to turn the political revolutions into social ones.

The second half of 2011 witnessed the rise of an equally improbable challenge at the heart of the system. Occupy Wall Street succeeded against all the historical and cultural odds to electrify ordinary Americans in the fall of 2011. It drew on threads of resistance that I have traced back to at least 1968: discussion-based decision making, occupations of the commons, non- or post-ideological ways of speaking, affinity groups dedicated to addressing particular issues and sustaining the encampments – in sum, new and yet not-so-new ways of doing politics. Occupy Wall Street tapped the Arab Spring’s techniques of struggle and the Indignados’ liberating public festivals of occupation in Spain, the street battles and creative actions in austerity-hammered Athens, and the temporary occupations in the English and Chilean student movements over the course of 2010. To these, the Occupy movement added a brilliant discursive attack on the political and economic elite, seen as “the one percent” responsible for the deteriorating lives of “the ninety-nine percent.” A wide-ranging national discussion on the crisis was held, knocking the American political and economic establishments off balance for a time. The system struck back in late fall with a military offensive coordinated by U.S. mayors
across the country, forcing Occupy to abandon most of its public spaces. Yet like May 68, the movement didn’t end with the police brutality in Oakland and elsewhere. The world is watching for the re-emergence of the movement in new forms, while occupiers are discussing and acting on the ways to do this most effectively.

**Problems and prospects**

The obvious political question is: *Can* these new political cultures of opposition produce – or at least contribute to – some type of global transformation of the sort that is needed to deal with the crisis? These cases have shown their ability to move beyond ideology in favor of the strengths of popular idioms demanding social justice and have shown us some of the advantages of horizontal networks over vertical hierarchies. But how we fashion large-scale popular spaces for democracy, and how we articulate the discourses that will bring together the broadest coalition ever seen onto a global stage, constitute great challenges.

The left has achieved state power in an important set of Latin American countries: can it now redirect resources to the poorest sectors of society? The experience of Obama and the European Center-Left has shown the limited room for maneuver and the dimming prospects for significant reform, domestically or globally, through their parties. The Zapatistas have registered concrete gains on a local level: will they be able to generalize these accomplishments beyond Chiapas? The global justice movement and Occupy have raised significant opposition to neoliberal globalization. Can these movements along with all the others reverse the tide of neoliberal capitalism?

The disappointing experience of Lula and the Workers Party in Brazil watering down their radical program once in power has shown that elections are *not* a magic
solution to undoing fundamental structures of exploitation. But neither is direct democracy. Both can be subverted by new forms of domination even as they seek to avoid old ones. Behind the institutions of global capital lie other forms of internal oppression and malevolent power: patriarchy, racism, militarism, religious fundamentalism, environmental destruction, consumerism, corporate media control. There are no guarantees in conditions of crisis and scarcity. Fighting a system is even more difficult than overthrowing a state, and that was rarely achieved in the past century in any case.

What, then, lies between direct action and elections? Do we have the imagination to know?

One idea is to combine the election of “progressive” governments and their base of social movements in order to push both into making links with other movements, nations, and organizations while galvanizing the governments from below to make good on their promises. Rather than making a choice between seeking to change the world through elections or building a new society from the bottom up, the future of radical social change may well lie at the many possible intersections of deeply democratic social movements and equally diverse and committed political coalitions.

The Pink Tide is already working near this intersection. Other struggles that point toward this include the long movement for radical reforms in Kerala, India; the experiences of the world’s Green Parties; the developments in Iceland since 2008; and the global climate justice movement.

In Kerala, elected, non-charismatic (in a positive sense) left-of-center governments over the past fifty years have raised the quality of life – nutrition, health,
life span, access to food and shelter, and literacy education – that would be the object of envy most anywhere in the world. They have done this despite the lack of monetary resources, and even with deep structural unemployment, because they have been pushed from below by strong, independent social movements of workers, women, and lower castes to maintain relatively equitable, more participatory, conditions of life for the 30 million people who live there, even when the left has not been in power.

The world’s Green Parties also embody the new political cultures of opposition, sometimes operating to bridge the divide between those who seek to take state power and those who seek to transform the very nature of power. They remain far from power in many places (notably the U.S. and U.K.), and have made invidious compromises when in government in Germany (now, perhaps Australia may avoid the German example). Yet they hint at the powerful combination of social movement dynamism from below and a new kind of party organization. They are also transnational in vision and organization in a way that other parties, including those on the left, often are not. And the threat of climate change is something to which Green parties have long proposed solutions and ideas to draw upon.

And it is not just the Greens who offer possibilities for the future. Iceland is involved today in a hopeful political experiment, following popular protest in the streets in January 2009 that forced out the right-of-center government which had led Iceland into the crisis, and electing a new coalition of socialists, democrats, greens, and the left. In the face of profound economic crisis, the creative actions of the Left-Green Movement and Social Democratic Alliance government, and the many networks that pressure them when they were unwilling, have produced solutions such as the 2009 referendum where
98 percent of the population rejected the previous government’s agreement to repay the foreign debt of the failed banks.

2011 ended with the impact of Occupy on the UN climate negotiations in Durban, South Africa. The negotiations themselves produced the expected non-ambition and genocidal delay, but a growing coalition of progressive countries inside the negotiations, young activists outside who raised their voices and built their own strong ties, and the global climate justice organizations that stood and sat with them in an occupation of the corridors worked together to deliver an outcome different from the triumphalist official one or the pessimistic verdict of some movement leaders. The actions and communication processes established between the inside and the outside are working together for a fair and binding treaty to lower greenhouse gas emissions, perhaps the most pressing issue of our time.

**Conclusions**

The future of radical social change lies at the many possible intersections of such deeply democratic social movements and equally diverse and committed political coalitions. The secrets of their success lie in their ability to draw people together across their differences, the incredible creativity and joy that they bring to their actions, their fearlessness, and their openness and willingness to try new forms of activism. The challenge is to create the biggest and most inclusive social movement the world has ever seen, crossing the barriers of class, nation, gender, race, and generation. In searching for ways out of the crisis, we need to cast a web wide enough to intertwine the possibilities of all such experiments.

The crisis we are living through is one of unprecedented proportion and danger,
with the very real possibility of a deeply more horrifying world to come. But it could just as well turn out very differently. Whether another world is possible depends in some measure on how these new political cultures of opposition build on and beyond the past and how they read the lessons of each other’s bold experiments.

Let us change the world without taking power violently. Or, let us re-make power if and as we seek to take power. There are many paths to a better future, one worthy of us and our children, and depending on the concrete situations that people face in different corners of the world, it should be no surprise that there are going to be different ideas about electing progressive governments pushed by uncompromising radical movements from below, or perhaps the other way around. This combination, it seems to me, might be the best way forward.

2 Quoted in Philippe Labro and the staff of *Edition Special, “This is Only a Beginning.”* New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 55.