



Global Uprisings: Towards a Politics of the Artisan

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In this way thought takes on a creative, affirmative function, in order for us to cease to simply make mere reproductions of the present... there are no global knowledges, but rather situational ones. And because of this, struggles don't depend so much on techniques and concrete knowledge as on the possibilities to produce your own situated knowledges. – Colectivo Situaciones

The urgency of today... is the potential force of theoretical practice, an ongoing research that does not look either to linearly prefigure remote futures, or to simply review irreplicable pasts, but rather, to interrogate the present in order to transform it. – DeriveApprodi

There are no shortcuts and if there are they are only 'table tricks.' There is only experimentation as method and substance of the becoming-movement. – Global Project

Our Project (Space)(Ethic)(Practice)

We are part of the editorial collective that produces *Global Uprisings: A journal of ideas & action*—a new journal that seeks to contribute to the emergent alternative globalization movement (AGM)¹ by creating a *space, ethic and practice* in which the politics of alternative globalization movements can be articulated, debated and cultivated. Each of these—*practice, space* and *ethic*—are is a key term to understanding our project.

(Practice)—from theoretical to the everyday

Central to this project, and perhaps contrary to more common-sense

activist and academic notions of the political, is the belief that how we think and narrate, has everything to do with how we live and change it. Similarly, how we live our lives in the everyday has everything to do with the projects we aspire to create and enact. Theory, analysis, and narration are a central part of our daily actions, and these daily actions are by definition the materiality of politics. We are working on this journal not to create yet another isolated academic or intellectual analysis of what social movements and groups do or ‘ought to do,’ but rather because we believe that *theory, thinking and analysis are critical and inseparable parts of our actions.*

(*Ethic*)

At the same time our project goes beyond the understanding of the political and practical nature of theory, analysis and narratives. We aspire to co-create and develop a form of theory that is not only deeply informed by action, but *constitutes a critical and ethical practice in and of itself.* In this vein we avoid classical political labels or definitions of our project as socialist, progressive, anarchist, ecological—although in a sense each of these terms defines aspects of our politics—and argue strongly for an understanding of politics as cultural, based on creating new modes of being and relating, which, we will argue, are based on an understanding of self-making and ethics as being at the core of an effective and radical political project.

We also use the term ‘ethics’ in a different sense, one that is inspired by Foucault’s *Ethic of/Care of the Self.* We see this project as ethical in its attempts to address the subjective and material shifts in what we expect and need affectively. This is as an attempt to humanize activist and academic practice—to consider human bodies, desires, endurance, affects, quirks—to create a new activist and intellectual ethic. This means that our journal is meant to serve as a corrective not only to detached academic research *on* movements but also to the rigid dogmatism that often characterize activist practice—the kind of activism that leaves certain things unquestioned, un-interrogated, and consequently unchallengeable. We see ‘critical praxis’—as a form of as an instantiation of the Zapatista call to “caminar preguntando”—to walk while questioning.² This means that rather than beginning from a totalizing program, ethical practice develops its political interventions processually and conjecturally. As such, complexity and the need to shift course are not perceived as obstacles or setbacks but as the very things that constitute political action.

(*Space*)

Related to this ethical practice is the importance of space as both a concept and relation. It is no coincidence that discussions about the concept of space have proliferated in both academic and activist milieus. Popular concepts like ‘temporary autonomous zones,’ ‘convergence centers,’ and ‘open spaces’ are indicative of spatial imaginaries.³ Our understanding of our project as creating a space (rather than manifesto, movement, or utopic) has come via our direct expe-

riences of the Alternative Globalization and Social Forums. That is to say, when hundreds of thousands were present at a social forum, we would all find ourselves at the same workshops, in the same alternative spaces, interested in and frustrated by very similar aspects of the larger spaces and movements of which they were a part.

We have come to realize that while these spaces at various social forums, conferences and protests were and are phenomenal, they were also extremely temporary and intense. A great deal of energy and connections are generated, but they have not achieved what they aspired to. That is they have not directly produced products or outcomes that could be clearly or linearly linked back to the hopes and plans of those involved. Whether or not this is good or bad is not the issue here. These experiences have nevertheless pointed out the political importance of spaces—specifically spaces of encounters—because of their open and not fully directed or oriented natures. *Global Uprisings* is our attempt at creating a critical public space, one that exists for sustained periods of time and in various physical and virtual places. We believe that the creation of such a space will allow us to be inclusive of more people and different ideas, as well as make possible that wisdom that only comes with reflection; reflection and iteration that in turn only come with time. The content of our politics is more precisely that of a politics of engagement, culture, and encounter than of programs, campaigns and building institutions.

Like many of the groups that comprise the AGM, there is no clear or simple way to define our we-ness, our existence as a group. We do not have what social movement theorists and social psychologists term a ‘collective identity’—even though we identify as a collective. We do not share this space because of a particular political campaign, or structural position vis-a-vis capital.⁴ We do not necessarily share a primary political label like socialist, feminist, libertarian, environmentalist, or even anarchist. We are this collective, because of something akin to a compulsion, an affinity—a shared set of not-easy-to-articulate frustrations and more importantly hopes and beliefs about the politics of our times as well as a sense of connection to one another. A sense of connection that is closer to the love of friendship than the rationality of a political stance.

Background

Many of us who have grown up in the latter half of the twentieth century—especially in the Anglo-speaking world are used to presuming and/or living with a sort of enmity, or at least a very notable tension, between activism and academia—or rather, between what is understood to be ‘properly activist’ versus ‘properly intellectual’ *practice.* We could go with caricatures on with both sides of this stereotype. The point of the matter is that commonplace understandings of activism and politics have been separated from, and pitted against, definitions of knowledge and thought, as well as knowledge and theory production.

For those of us who came together to create *Global Uprisings* this division has impinged upon our everyday lives and passions, and goes against our very

understanding of political practice. In fact, most of us can describe our own biographies as a series of collisions with this divide, collisions that have in turn led us to oscillate ad infinitum between spaces and work that are defined as ‘activist,’ and others that are seen as ‘intellectual.’ Sometimes this oscillation simply meant changing what aspect of our passions and skills we focused on at any given time.⁵ But now we have reached a point where we are dizzy and tired from this constant back and forth between two distinct realms. So we are starting *Global Uprisings* as an attempt to find both a resting point for our perpetual oscillations and a tangible form to our politics, both as a sustainable space and an ethical practice.

Global Uprisings should be understood as a collaborative project—a product of our schizophrenic biographies, on the one hand, and a belief in the political significance of this intersection of knowledge and politics, what we call critical praxis. In this sense, the journal is a positive outcome of a particular political analysis that not only values critique, reflexivity, creativity, and analysis, but sees all of these as essential to producing the kind of subjectivities, social relations and institutions that can reinvent politics in a way that we might really be able to remake the world.

The uniqueness of theoretical-practice today

It is noteworthy that *GU* is part of a growing network and tendency among organizations, collectives and informal groups that are doing a good deal of their activism explicitly at this nexus of thought and politics. The kinds of work and projects done at this nexus are variously characterized as activist-research, action research, hacktivism, theoretical-practice, *conricerca* (co-research), situational praxis, and radical theory.⁶ Our aim in this piece is to explain why so many groups, collectives and practices are emerging now and what the political implications and possibilities of this flurry of critical-praxis might be.

At one level all movements throughout history have worked at this nexus for there cannot be any social or political projects without ideas, analysis, communication, culture, and—what Gramsci referred to specifically as—intellectual work. What we see as notable in the set of practices we mention above is the centrality that this intellectual/critical/thought based practice has in and for these various groups, collectives and individuals. It is not simply that these groups do intellectual and analytical work in order to further their more central *political* agendas, but rather the fact that many define themselves and their core sets of actions and practices *as* intellectual, investigative.⁷ In other words intellectual work is considered part of the ongoing day-to-day work of activism.

This suggests that such practice can no longer be considered the exclusive and superstructural terrain of a vanguard.⁸ Some of the AGM’s most diffuse and widespread concepts and practices, including its architectures and imaginaries, also emphasize the need for thought, reflection and experimentation. Consider for example terms and concepts like ‘caminar preguntando’ (walk while questioning); ‘network(ing),’ ‘open space,’ ‘for a’ and ‘encounters.’⁹ Each

inheres an understanding of politics as open, non-formulaic, non-linear and not necessarily concerned with ends. This is a politics that values communication and the exchange of ideas *not* in order to come to an agreement on one plan or solution but for the unpredictable, often subtle, affective effects the process of critical engagement and encounters create. This includes the production of different, critical, subjectivities and relations.

Each of the terms contains an understanding that thought, dialogue, analysis, critique are central parts of transformative and radical political action. By radical, we should clarify, we do not mean the most extreme or the most violent, but rather, something that gets to the roots—the radices—of the problems and systems we oppose.¹⁰ These ‘critical’ practices are almost more about producing and creating subjectivities and mechanisms that are capable of coping with a constant uncertainty and processes of continuous questioning than they are about producing accurate theories or of building new macro-systems and institutions.

So why now?

The centrality and visibility of these various forms of critical praxis is in part a result of the fact that today following the failures of state-sponsored communism it has become ‘common-sense’ that there are no *meta*-models, narratives or theories of social change. This does not deny that people—even those who claim to avoid them—assert universalizing meta-theories all the time! A growing number of movements around the world have come to recognize the need different theories for specific times and places, and that each of these needs to be partial, continuously interrogated, and revised. This is why the World Social Forum, the International Encuentros for Humanity and other gatherings have come to be recognized as important even when they do not produce clear-cut campaigns.¹¹ Each contributes to this new understanding of radical and effective politics. An understanding that is based on the recognition of politics as a sort of non-directed, critical space and capacity rather than as something necessarily oriented at the institutional level. This does not mean ignoring or neglecting these more traditional political levels, but rather taking seriously how these forms of criticality might be articulated to those spaces and institutions.

Today the particular forms of theoretical practice this network and our collective are developing is one that itself embodies and instantiates *a particular type of politics*. A politics that is quite distinct from what traditionally gets included in the rubric of the term as well as mainstream political actors also affiliated with the AGM and contemporary oppositional politics define the term. It is a cultural politics: a politics that is based as much on creating and producing critical subjectivities, creating carnival and joy, and recombining cultural codes, as it is about changing current laws and institutions.¹² This form of politics corresponds to *a particular mode of theorizing and ultimately of being*. A mode of being that goes hand-in-hand with the new politics and is more ethical because it recognizes the limits and partiality of all knowledge claims.

Simon Tormey distinguishes between two distinct areas of the AGM. This exercise of mapping and describing our differences is something we have been engaged with as we seek to both make sense of and to communicate what we affectively ‘know’ to be the power of contemporary movements. What is particularly striking is Tormey’s choice of how to define the distinction. He differentiates between those who work with the imaginary of “utopian worlds” versus those who deal in the proliferation of “utopian spaces.” One of the key characteristics and differences of working towards *building* utopian *worlds* he argues is the “creation of a fixed and determinate social reality”¹³ in other words the need to base political practice on predetermined understandings of reality fixed before the act of engagement. In this modality of political-theorization one believes that a particular political analysis necessarily translates into the political and social primacy of certain aspects of social reality—i.e. categories such as labor and class. When one has a politics based on this ideological structuring one necessarily tends towards produces a practice that has no space for questions, experiments, or uncertainty. This fixity and rigidity he argues is (also) the very mode of political philosophy—or, we would argue, political philosophy as it most often or traditionally expressed. This fixity and rigidity he argues not only reflects a particular politics but is also the mode of political philosophy. While not all things called political philosophy is necessarily so rigid, the importance is the connection of a form of thought to a form of politics. In contrast a politics engaged in the proliferation of utopian *spaces*, eschews the need for naming one master-narrative or vision of reality, opting instead to create and provide spaces: spaces of encounter, discussion, experimentation, affinity.¹⁴ One form of politics and theory making is open ended, creative and inherently multiplicitous. And the other is constrained by a teleological and universalizing mode of thought, one that subordinates desire and spontaneity to a rational and future oriented schema. Ultimately, the difference between space and utopic refers back to a different ontology corresponding to imply a different understanding of the political.

This is why we see *Global Uprisings* as directly related to and emerging from a particular segment of the AGM that openly articulates a desire to elaborate *new* forms of politics. The politics of GU and this increasingly diffuse network must be understood as a modality of engaging with the world and practicing the political. They are modes of engagement that are partial and reflexive, enacting an ethical criticality that not only avoids creating universalizing programs but also refuses to base itself upon rigid categorizations and judgments of political actions as reformist or radical outside of particular contexts and circumstances.

‘New’ Politics!?

The question of newness is an interesting one. We do not want to claim that these are *new* political practices because the form of intellectual praxis and ethics we are discussing and developing, as well as the definition of the political they are based on, has existed in various instantiations and levels of visibility for

quite a long time. More often than not these have remained subterranean or at the margins, excluded by more mainstream political actors and discourses for being *merely* cultural. They have been rendered marginal and invisible, which has in turn resulted in dominant theories and strategies that leave much of the fundamental political and economic system in place. We can call these marginal politics the minoritarian strain of politics.¹⁵

Today the invisibility and marginality of the minoritarian can no longer be maintained. So while these politics have existed before, today the historical awareness and self-reflexiveness of these practices are of a quantitatively denser nature. This increasing visibility leads to a qualitative shift, a shift to a qualitatively different form and potentiality for politics. And notably this is not simply within and among the traditionally minoritarian actors, but within the terrain of the political overall.

It is even more important to point out that that these new politics have only been made possible by their direct relationships with movements and political theories of the past. The historical specificity of this moment and the diffuse and distributed emergence of a set of practices that emphasize critique, reflexivity and analysis—whether in more formalized modes or informally—has only occurred as a result of many years of collective learning and capacity building within movements¹⁶ and among the ‘submerged networks’ that linger in periods where collective action is less visible.¹⁷

From architects to artisans?

Given the growing visibility of the minoritarian trajectories that are immanent to it, the question remains—where do we go from here? Of course we don’t exactly have *the* answer to this question but we are fond of posing the question in another way, as a means of giving life to the critical praxis we have outlined. Our question, courtesy of Deleuze, concerns whether we understand ourselves to be architects or artisans. The architect is a designer of utopian worlds a would be ‘master’ of the material, who shapes in their mind and attempts to impose through their practice a grand design, a design that is ‘other-worldly’ in that it comes from the outside as an imposition of the will. The grand revolutionary imagination, the blueprint and plan are the means of the architect, relays in a circuit of earnest endeavor. The artisan, however, is someone who works at the cusp of the imaginary and the material, whose imagination is directed by the self-organizing tendencies of social and material systems. The artisan is the under-laborer of utopian spaces, an individual or collective who responds to and cajoles, who traces shapes and sharpens, but who cannot direct or determine. In this sense, we envisage *Global Uprisings* as an artisanal project, something that is struggling to follow and realize that which we recognize in the myriad descriptions—*Zapatismo*, *autonomy*, *carnival*—yet which simultaneously eludes us, that which diverges, reiterates and re-emerges. We are excited, and nervous about the work to be done. More importantly, we invite others to join us in our artisanal theoretical-practice, by contributing to and utilizing the space are creating.

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Notes

1. The AGM can most broadly be understood as the movements against neoliberal corporate globalization that became known through the Zapatistas, protests in

Seattle, Genoa, and Prague, as well as more recently for the various Social Fora. However when scrutinized more closely the term movement is itself too narrow to capture the rich and multiplicitous events, and practices that make up what gets called the AGM.

2. For an excellent description of what the political implications of this phrase are see Holloway, 2004.

3. For the prevalence of the term in political and academic debates, see Pickles, Massey, Lefebvre, Tormey, Whitaker, Sen and Keraghel, Teivenan, as well as TAZ.

4. Although one could argue that we do have the latter, we simply need to redefine what we mean by Capitalism, as well as our relations in structure to it.

5. While some of us are currently situated (sustained economically, professionally, institutionally) in the academy, others of us are located within social-centers, towns, cooperatives, DIY movement groups, or are just working to make a living and living out our politics.

6. For activist-research (www.investigaccio.org). For action research (www.euro-movements.info). For hacktivism (www.rekombinant.org). For theoretical-practice (www.deriveapprodi.org). For situational praxis (www.situaciones.org) and for radical theory (www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2005/06/314299.html).

7. This centrality has at times become quite controversial. For example at the last World Social Forum several groups were worried that the research-activist themes were taking up too much time and discussion and deflecting attention from more urgent issues and goals.

8. Unless we use the Zapatista definition of 'vanguard' which means people who go forward to chart and get to know an unknown terrain. See Al Giordano "Marcos to Launch Six Month Tour of All of Mexico Beginning January 1" narconews.com, September 19, 2005.

9. The International Encuentros For Humanity called by the Zapatistas in the mid 1990s, and the Social Forums begun in 2000.

10. This of course requires that we refine traditional definitions of capitalism as being simply an economic system, and recognize that it is a system that is present and premised on the minutia of our everyday lives, in very many forms.

11. There is a lot of debate, especially within the Social Forums, about whether the WSF should aspire to be more like a movement and clearly articulate goals and objectives around which everyone should unite, or whether to remain an open space. For more see Whitaker and Teivainen's pieces in Sen, J., Anand, A., Escobar, A. & Waterman, P. (eds).

12. For a better explanation of these cultural politics see Osterweil.

13. Tormey, Simon. (2005) "From Utopian Worlds to Utopian Spaces: Reflections on the Contemporary Radical Imaginary and the Social Forum Process" in *ephemera: theory, politics and organization*. Volume 5(2): 398.

14. Ibid. 404

15. See Chesters and Welsh (forthcoming) and Thoburn, Nicholas .(2004) *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*. London: Routledge.

16. By direct we mean either very concretely that the same people have always been present and learned from the practices and analyses of their past experiences and reflections, or when new people have come into organizations or networks that have been formed and informed by this type of collective and social learning processes.

Constituent Imagination

What Welsh calls “capacity building” Welsh, Ian (2000) *Mobilising Modernity: the Nuclear Moment*, London, Routledge. See also Plows, Alexandra *Praxis and Practice: The ‘What, How and Why’ of the UK Environmental Direct Action (EDA) Movement in the 1990’s*. Dissertation Thesis. University of Wales, Bangor 2002. See also Eyerman, R and Jamison, A (1991). *Social Movements. A Cognitive Approach*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

17. See Melucci, Alberto. 1989. *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.