

On Knots and Challenges in Processes of Emancipation

Ana Esther Ceceña

The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are "status quo" is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given.

Walter Benjamín, Central Park¹

Capitalism is not a system organized for the wellbeing of humanity, but rather, for competition and profit. The emergency in which it has placed life is not the effect of some devotion, but rather of its unfolding capacity to achieve its own guiding objectives. Capitalism has neither the capacity nor the intention to solve "the problems of humanity" that it creates and intensifies as it develops, rather its capacities lie in perfecting the mechanisms of social discipline, extraction of surplus value, and accumulation of wealth – the mechanisms for the concentration of wealth and power.

The destruction of nature through, on the one hand, its classification (taxonomy) and ordering and its exhaustion of nature in the interest of profit on the other, has created an ecological emergency. At times capital destroys forests to expand the cattle frontier, or unilaterally exploits valuable

species, and even more simply crosses through them with highways and privileges the exploration of subsurface resources.

At present, only 30% of the earth's surface (4,000,000,000 hectares) is covered with forests, of which only 36% are primary forests, and 52.7% are modified forests, or those that have already been destroyed and then recreated through administration.² In addition to this transformation, or genetic impoverishment of the forests, forest reduction in absolute terms reached 13 million hectares annually as of 2005, most of which have been lost in the Americas and Africa. Globally, continued deforestation and forest degradation caused carbon stocks in the forest biomass to decrease by 1.1 gigatons (GT) annually between 2000 and 2005.³ The average global temperature increased nearly one degree between 1880 (13.75 degrees Celcius) and 2009 (14.57 degrees Celcius) and the currently proposed two-degree limit appears nearly utopian.

The industrial revolutions opened paths toward growth and abundance, they improved life expectancy, they allowed us to explore the cosmos and the microcosmos, but buty also propelled us into a suicidal race, or what the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) calls an "ecological overshoot"

During the 1970s, humanity as a whole passed the point at which the annual Ecological Footprint matched the

Earth's annual biocapacity – that is, the Earth's human population began consuming renewable resources faster than ecosystems can regenerate them and releasing more CO₂ than ecosystems can absorb.⁴

[In 2007 there was an] ecological overshoot of 50%. This means it would take 1.5 years for the earth to regenerate the renewable resources that people used in 2007 and absorb the CO₂ waste. Put another way, people used the equivalent of 1.5 plants in 2007 to support their activities.⁵

The deterioration or mutation of climates that has resulted largely from deforestation and excessive emissions into the environment, is causing the polar ice caps and glaciers to melt and changing marine currents.

The 20th century has been [...] a period of dramatic glacier retreat in almost all alpine regions of the globe, with accelerated glacier and ice-fields melt in the last two decades. The first phase of this glacier retreat was associated with emergence from the Little Ice Age that ended in the 19th century. It corresponded with a warming of 0.3°C in the first half of the 20th century in the northern hemisphere (24° to 40°N). In the last 25 years, a second 0.3°C warming pulse has caused northern hemisphere temperatures to rise to unprecedented levels

compared to the last 1,000 years. The 1990s were the warmest decade of the millennium and 1998 the hottest year of the millennium.⁶

...up to a quarter of the global mountain glacier mass could disappear by 2050 and up to half could be lost by 2100...

...most of the glaciers in the Himalayan region 'will vanish within 40 years as a result of global warming.'⁷

On a planet where 99.7% of the water is saltwater and 70% of the remaining 0.3% is located in glaciers, global warming threatens to bring about a massive transformation of geophysical phenomena. The damage to life and its conditions for regeneration is increasingly irreversible. The Gangotri glacier, which provides 70% of the water for the Ganges River, is decreasing by 35 meters per year, which is a rate of decrease twice as fast as 20 years ago; Kilimanjaro lost 80% of its glacial area in the last decade, with 33% of this loss occurring between 1989 and 2000; the glaciers of Peru and Bolivia lost one third of their area between 1970 and 2006.⁸

According to the United Nations, fresh water species declined approximately 47% between 1970 and 2000.⁹ The wetlands have been deeply affected and there is no longer any way to mitigate the effects of hurricanes on dry land. Dam construction fragments river basins and changes their relationship to the environment, causing species to either flee

from those areas or to become extinct. If contamination continues at the same rate of growth as the population, by the year 2050 the world will have lost 18,000 square kilometers of fresh water – quantity nearly nine times greater than is currently used each year for irrigation.¹⁰

All of this damage to nature, evidently, is nothing but an indication of the social catastrophe in which the world finds itself at the beginning of the 21st century. Entire peoples are devastated by unimaginable famine, wiped off the earth by tsunamis or hurricanes, burdened by unpayable debts, driven to precarity, or expelled (or threatened with expulsion) from their ancestral lands – their roads are blocked, water sources cut, and forests expropriated...

In the face of people's resistance, capitalism unleashes war. It is a multidimensional war that commandeers all decision-making spaces, setting and violently enforcing its rules, and thus seeking to paralyze any attempts at liberty. It is a war that extends itself out over society as an increasingly broad and deep enveloping cloak.

This war penetrates the private sphere by incentivizing the consumption of stories of perversion and war – produced by a powerful domestic film industry – that provokes distrust, fear, and an evacuation of the senses that leaves one feeling isolated.¹¹ Conversely, these stories generate a zeal for reproducing the victors' actions within one's own

surroundings, profoundly altering community relations. This war also creates super-national norms on the terrain of 'security,' imposing anti-terrorist laws that convert every citizen into a suspect, and places of the world's resources at the disposal of the powerful. The military bases multiply,¹² torture is legalized, and impunity reigns for counterinsurgent acts that amount to indiscriminate predation, both frontiers and ghettos tend to be reinforced,¹³ and 'mercenarism' becomes the politics of the state.

21st century capitalism creates insecurity in all aspects of life beginning with jobs that enslave, humiliate and alienate, sap creativity, rob peoples' dignity, and reproduce and multiply subordination, and even these are scarce. Further, these jobs do not even have the potential eliminate poverty and need, because they are products of the contradictory dynamics that mark the path of progress. Technological innovation that has enabled the organization of production on a planetary scale, is the cornerstone of a generalized normative rationality that imposes laws and sanctions serving interests, perspectives, and capacities of the world's powerful. Paradoxically then, the very technological innovations that could contribute to resolving deprivations and needs, actually increase these, as it while increasing its capacity to appropriate nature. The success of capitalism in *dominating* nature is a consequence of expulsions, plundering, destruction

of communities and the social fragmentation of entire peoples. These people are reduced to absolute transience, without direction, and at risk of losing their conditions for reproduction, their collective sensibility and their unique sociality. The greater capitalism's success, the greater its progress, the more emptiness it produces. The more it expropriates of the conditions for human life, and the greater its destruction of nature. These are its immanent tendencies.

Efforts to the contrary, including the recuperation of nature, climate control, relief from extreme poverty, and others are, judging by the results, insufficient and obviated.

The long struggle of entire people and societies to survive, to maintain their spaces, their cosmologies, their ways of understanding life and the social relations that sustain it, which they have recreated in interstitial spaces and underground, today must make their open and definitive appearance against capitalism's threat of planetary cataclysm.

The majority of these movements, although their specific visions vary, share the idea of a two-dimensional time. The concrete singular expressions of life are understood as ephemeral and finite materializations – as small moments – of a greater existence that is unfolding circularly through linear time. Anxiety regarding the end is not an element of non-capitalist cultures. These cultures understand life from the perspective of a complex totality that is nearly without time

and which contemplates the articulation of various dimensions (cosmos, world, and underworld), appealing to the collective and to the convergence of apparently disparate times (past, present, and future). This conception is intimately related to the capacity for transmutation, inheritance, and regeneration or reincarnation of superior existences – existences that can be identified as cultural. Life refers to a spiritual existence, because it is concerned with the cosmological, historical, and cultural formulations that have guided the constitution of each peoples. The finitude of singular beings (i.e. their impermanence) is offset by the relative infinitude of collective ones.

From such a perspective, it is possible that even the event of great ecological catastrophe such as the one, which appears to be imminent (barring actions to impede it) might be relativized. Nonetheless, even from this perspective, it is difficult to imagine recuperating any continuity in a remote future resurgence of life on the planet, which would certainly take millions of years to occur. Even the most widespread forms of existing life would be faced with a terminal event that would prevent their possible continuation.

The severity of this ecological threat has even led capitalist institutions themselves to prioritize ecological crisis on their agendas. The World Bank, the Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OCDE) and the

United Nations, through their various agencies, have busied themselves developing policies that might stop, or in a few cases even reverse, the damage, and thus they direct resources toward what they consider to be measures for the protection, conservation, and sustainable use of nature. Such measures, nevertheless, have no possibility of solving the problem. One cannot expect that the institutions generated by capitalism can or will act against their own principles. Thus, these efforts aimed at finding a less predatory mode for the appropriation of nature, maintain the goal of appropriating it, rationalizing its use, and making its exploitation sustainable in terms that generate acceptable profitability without completely destroying the totality of ecosystems. Rather, they order nature in order to privilege the extraction of prized species without rendering them extinct (at least not the valuable and useful species) even if this ordering does alter their equilibrium and composition. In other words, capitalism is not going to negate itself. It would sooner provoke a cataclysm than renounce profits and its immanent anxiety for appropriation. The proposals for sustainability promoted by these institutions are simplifications, and thus they paradoxically exacerbate the risk to the environment, mirroring the way in which their achievements in the organization of production exacerbate the social situation and multiplies dispossession and misery.

This situation leads Immanuel Wallerstein's to characterize the current moment as a systemic or civilizational bifurcation. In one way or another, peoples, movements, and collective sensibilities must reorganize life on other foundations and according to other norms, based in other conceptions and principles, and in accordance with distinct practices, which are in part dragged along, repeated, and improved throughout the long history of resistance, and in part invented in view of the present crisis.

However, a bifurcation or transformation with this civilizational character that would place human-nature, object-subject, and subject-subject relationships on a new physical and epistemological plan and thus subvert the foundations of capitalist society, presupposes a total change in mentalities and practices. Such a change does not occur immediately, but rather in the slow transpiring of inter-subjective relations.

This leads us to the central knot within the challenge of our times.

Knot #1: There are no solutions within capitalism but there are serious challenges to exiting from capitalism

Because, following Foucault, power circulates and reproduces itself everywhere. Therefore:

The individual is not, in other words, power's opposite number. The individual is one of power's first effects. The individual is in fact a power-effect, and at the same time, and to the extent that he is a power-effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through the individual that it has constituted.

Power functions. Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not only circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are its elements of re-composition.¹⁴

Exiting from capitalism implies abandoning all of its social practices. It requires much more than simply "taking power." "Taking power" may mean drafting general policies, but does not eliminate the actual instantiations of economic and political power. Beyond formally changing the ownership of the means of production, exiting capitalism requires the establishment of new codes of social behavior, the transformation of the political, and the corresponding construction of new institutionalities. It requires dissolving the particularized boundaries that organize life into distinct dimensions and letting the politicality of social collectives flow into all spheres of life without limits. It requires a decentered comprehension of the complex vitality of which humans are a

part, in order to reestablish the relations between ourselves, the tangle of less impositional species,¹⁵ and the tree, in order to thus burst open the dykes that maintain the separation between nature and society. It requires a rethinking of humans' place in the world, and of the world's place in the cosmos, and the development of intersubjectivity as a daily practice that produces the vital and collective meanings of social practice and understandings of the world.

This process is necessarily the construction of *collective* knowledges. It requires decision, political will, and *subjectness*.¹⁶ Beyond this it also requires patience, tenacity, construction, experimentation, learning, discovery, and invention. It requires the construction of frameworks and the deconstruction of corrupted or undesirable relations while simultaneously forging new ones. It requires, as the Zapatistas say "walking at the pace of the slowest" "because the journey is long." In sum, it requires an entire refounding of the individual and the community.

A transformation of this magnitude does not permit repetitions or half-measures. Rather, it implies the profound subversion of the entire edifice of society and the processes of its construction. Such a process cannot commence without the decision to overcome inertia. To decide to move, following John Holloway, from "being" to "doing."¹⁷

Knot #2: We must obtain victory such that the conquered of today are not the conquerers of tomorrow¹⁸

...if there were a society in which the two opposite concepts that define the political – on one side community and on the other power – were to come together to the point of being confused, indistinguishable, it might be said of this society that it, in its own way, created the possibility of political unity and invented, in a way, its concept – a singular rather than a double concept. If there were a community which, instead of maintaining itself through its own distinct power (something organized specifically to this end, a very powerful boss, a managing group, a dominant class, a state) it maintained its unity only through its own power, a society in which political power could only be located in the political community as a whole, we could say that this was the society that realized the idea of politics...

Francis Wolff, The Invention of Politics¹⁹

The challenge of creating a new society without winners or losers, dominators or dominated, is to transform the

confrontational political practices that lead to competition, impunity of power, and the violence of repression.

Within the existing context of market-governed, utilitarian social relations, which are imminent to a society defined by competition and private property, there is an inescapable tendency toward a political strategy that seeks to equalize or balance out competing positions. A game of positions that does not transform the game-board itself can only reproduce existing practices, even while appearing to be the path toward neutralizing the enemy's power. This approach implicitly assumes the point of view of the dominators, with the only difference being who holds the power. To think in terms of the construction of a new society, on the other hand, it is not enough to simply substitute one group for another in decision-making spaces or in the exercise of 'legitimate violence.' It is clear, however, that the countless failures at attempting such substitution show the inadequacy of this strategy to provoke a change in perspective, given that under these conditions most people continue to think in terms of relations of power, class society, and domination, and that their political objective can be reached by defeating the former victors.

The enemies opposing such change are powerful, which does not imply that efforts to weaken them, or to equalize

their forces with those of resistance, should proceed along the lines of the US-Soviet arms race during the Cold War. In that instance the two 'great' powers functioned as a scale where the two sides remained calibrated by constantly shifting proportions, and yet always maintained the same overall weight. Rather, we must discover other paths to disempower our enemies without necessarily having to constructing an isomorphic power to confront them.

Posing the problem in terms of a correlation of forces is a simplification usually made in order to focus on "the basics," but which in doing so sacrifices the richness of the processes of resistance. That is, this approach obviates social complexity in order to move toward a bi-polar field, dividing the world in two more or less homogeneous and clearly opposed parts. This approach transfers, without mediation, Marx's abstract vision of capitalist antagonism onto the terrain of real historical processes. In doing so it limits our ability to recognize the many paths and possibilities opened up by a host of interrelated actors. It is as if we were envisioning a tree without the biodiverse surroundings that nurture it, or without the rain that gives it life.

To effectively utilize the notion of correlation of forces, we must, following Sun Tzu, understand it not as an attempt to counterbalance power, but rather, as an attempt to harness asymmetry and difference in order to force the

enemy onto new terrain. "To win *100 battles* is not the height of skill. The height of skill is to subdue the enemy without fighting." ²⁰

We must find a way to get around, dismantle, disorganize, and undermine the foundations of our enemy without a direct confrontation, says Sun Tzu. Such non-confrontational strategies add elements to the conflict that actually modify the totality in question. Thus, in assessing the subsequent conditions for re-establishing a "correlation of forces" it becomes apparent that a qualitative and quantitative transformation has taken place. In other words, following the uncertainty principle of any complex system, the process of modifying correlating forces produces a totality whose composition is distinct from that of the original. This altered composition emerges not from the simple relocation of common boundaries but from an entanglement of practices that also alters their protagonists. The idea of constructing power in order to confront power is, however, widely shared, despite the fact that historical experiences mandate a change of strategy and vision to avoid reproducing that which we are fighting.

There are many opinions regarding where our concrete force might come from or how we might construct it, but if this force is that which we call power, wouldn't it mean that what we are envisioning is that the losers would become the

winners? Aren't we implying then that it is sufficient for the rebels of today to not have dominators? For it will be them who will now occupy that space in society.

John Holloway, one of the principle referents in the contemporary debate about power and power's relationship to the processes of constructing autonomy, distinguishes between the idea of *power* and that of the *force*, which allows movements to break the necessary barriers in order to move forward in constructing the new world. He characterizes, "power-over," which corresponds to the conventional understanding of *power*, where, "the vast majority of doers are converted into the done-to, their activity transformed into passivity, their subjectivity into objectivity,"²¹ tending toward isolation and the rupture of "we-ness," [*nostredad*]. This "power-over" is distinguished by Holloway from "power-to," which only occurs in collectivity and which calls forth the power of the negative and thus the capacity to decide and rebel. From this perspective, both "power-over" and "power-to" are powers, but they are qualitatively different due to the fact that the latter stimulates subjectness, and the former represses it for the sake of the objectification that allows for the subduing and ordering of human activities – the "doing" according to unilateral will.

While the emphasis of this conceptualization on the autonomy to decide and to "do" is appealing, it can also be

ambiguous and easily confused with the idea of a confrontation of powers between equivalent forces (the very type of confrontation that we have already discussed and which Holloway himself attempts to eschew). A force is not always a power, understood following Max Weber as the ability to and the exercise of determining the behavior of others. It is essential for critical thought and processes of emancipation to exit the conceptual apparatus that reproduces the system of domination, and to name and recognize the collective self with the freshness and novelty generated by liberatory processes.

The force of collectives in resistance is located in their substantive generation of self-determination and autonomy, their distancing from power, and their constitution of sovereign collective beings, rather than in their capacity to make others behave according to their dictates.

Thus, what we are calling the 'power' built by movements of resistance is not power in the conventional sense of the term, which is precisely what makes these movements subversive. It is, however, force or *potencia* – the creative capacity of the other and a liberating force. If the movements' force were simply power, it would not be subverting, but seeking power and disciplining others. These movements, then, would not be establishing the foundations of a new world but rather changing the tone and matrix of

this one. This may make this world more democratic through constant mobilization and determined participation, but does not fundamentally necessarily corrode its foundations. In other words, it cannot produce the bifurcation necessary for systemic or civilizational change.

The most audacious movements of the current moment do engage a determined struggle for democratization, but they are inspired by a democracy understood differently and built upon other foundations. This is a decentered democracy (see below) that is a path to the construction of *the other* - the other possible world, autonomy, *sumak kawsay* or *sumac quamaña* - and they seek to *transcend* rather than improve the current system, although such improvement may also be a part of the conditions that enable bifurcation.

Knot #3: Connecting the historical trajectory to the emancipatory horizon

Many understand utopia as a real process of historic construction, rather than as an idyllic, unattainable paradise. This is exactly what is suggested in Zapatismo's invitation to walk while questioning - the creation of consensus in ways that construct community rather than impose the will of the majority,²² attentiveness to both to horizon and process, and the privileging of methodologies that transform political culture and our vision of the world. The Zapatistas use a

beautiful metaphor. They say that while pointing to the moon, some focus on the finger that points. Meanwhile others look at the moon without noticing the finger. Others still see the entire path from the finger through its arrival at the moon. It is in this perspective, which moves from the beginning, through the trajectory to the horizon, where one accesses the panoramic perspective that makes possible the complete perception of the phenomenon. In other words, without the process there is no point of arrival. Without the will or passion of the origin, there is no process of searching or construction. The moon itself is the orienting point on the horizon. History – the one that is made every day – creates the conditions for coming closer to the moon, even one never moves. That is, it allows for the attraction or repulsion of the moon. If, following the Zapatistas, we look to build “democracy, liberty, and justice” and “a world where all worlds fit,” the historic trajectory, or the line drawn by the finger, will have to move in that direction. If the process heads in a different direction, we will arrive at another destination. In other words, it is process that makes possible an advance toward the desired horizon. This process is made up of our daily practices and happenings.

From this perspective we can understand Atilio Boron’s critique of John Holloway’s approach, “the dissolution of the

relations of power [...] is not something that can be discussed in the abstract.”²³

Instances of historical mediation constitute the concrete terrain upon which the paths of the possible and the desirable paths are woven. It is these historical mediations, which arise from collective action and the constitution of subjects in struggle, are unavoidable in order to think the world as subjective and objective flux, as interrelation and invention.

The social process constituting such horizons is located within that history that has moved through:

... labor strikes and spectacular rebellions; [which are] equally present within the fight of rural communities for dignity, self-government and solidarity economies, as well as within the insurrections that concern the matters of daily life and which have as their territory kitchens, beds, and desks...²⁴

It is history understood as “invention” and as “a feat of freedom,”²⁵ that moves with its contradictions, boldness and retractions, that marks the paths and the times of emancipatory processes:

...utopia is not a future project, but an ongoing one. A dream that materializes in the here and now in events

and living relations, but also in structures, norms, apparatuses and systems of ideas and values, that frequently become petrified and drag us into inertia.²⁶

Thus, although they may be indispensable components of the emancipatory process, neither spectacular events nor theoretical formulations alone can destroy the conditions of possibility for the relations, and exercise, of power. Such conditions must be depleted on a daily basis, in every space. Again following Sun Tzu, what we are proposing is a reversal of a basic principle of counterinsurgency. We must “take the water from the fish,” *disappearing* or *dissolving* its very conditions of possibility.

The way that we construct the path of emancipatory struggle is in itself key to transcending the given situation of oppression. The construction of the path itself is simultaneously the construction of the new world and a liberatory strategy. The traces of this process are the foundations of the world that is both to be created and in the process of construction; they are crystallizations of a utopia that is always just over the horizon, as Eduardo Galeano says, compelling us to move.

It is precisely because this combination of horizon and praxis never moves in a straight line but instead consists of

multiple, contradictory, and sometimes random crossings, that we can understand and embrace diversity as a condition.

In this context, one of the most complicated knots to resolve is certainly:

Knot #4: Achieving unity in diversity while moving toward a decentralized democracy

Capitalisms practices and customs tend toward centralization at all levels. Within the sphere of the political, the figure of the state appears rapidly such that it is difficult to imagine a society or conglomeration of societies without a central power. The fear of disorder or “chaos” – which are not the same although many assume that they are – is nearly common sense, and it stands in contradiction to the logics of evolution and liberty. Despite the attempts by power to restrict or avoid it, chaos is inevitable, because it the space of liberty where life recreates itself. Given that it is complex and unforeseen, we might say that chaos is on our side. Chaos precludes hierarchies: even the flapping of butterfly’s wings has repercussions for the general order, which always remains in a permanent state of transformation.

According to the Heisenberg principle, examining the smallest (known) particles, which are the components of energy in all of its forms, it becomes apparent that any

intervention – even observation itself – alters behavior. This discovery confirms that processes are complex and have multiple determinations. There is no linearity, no homogeneity, but rather subtleties and variegations from which we can begin to reflect on the behaviour or systems of organization.

The human system is undoubtedly the most complex system on earth. The simplification and centering of social organization is a transitory and historic modality, imposed due to the fact that it disciplines and rationalizes everything for efficient *use*. It is part of the fetishization that makes subjects appear as objects, and introduces a process of hierarchization that is legitimized by property and sanctioned by the laws of equality, but that does not correspond to the complexity of actually-existing interrelations.

In order to subvert the system of power, these apparatuses of centralization must be thrown out as is being done today in the struggles of disparate collectives, with different experiences and methods, and with demands that often may not appear to be complementary but that are actually articulated around a few universal demands. These demands include the defense of the commons, of territory (including in the abstract), the rejection of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, and of the militarization of the world. In each of these struggles there is a seed that

articulates differences, incorporating multiple situations and forms of struggle, whose characteristics do not allow for centralization. It is a nascent, almost involuntary, experiment of decentralized and denationalized democracy that also has material and symbolic roots in particular territories.

The recent recognition of the *other* as complementary, as a mirror of oneself rather than as an enemy, is a springboard that moves us toward the torsion of dimensional and epistemological planes. In many cases this relation to the other is undergirded by cosmovisions with millennial roots, where the essential elements maintain a harmony that prevents the subjugation of some by others. This can be seen in conceptual constructions where, for example, water is considered as valuable as fire. That is, where neither is more important than the other, except circumstantially, and where it is thought that one cannot be maintained without the other without resulting in total destruction. In these epistemological universes, there are no centers, everything is fluid. As Marx might say, "all that is solid melts into air."

The temptation to centralize and obviate difference has, however, become convention. It forms the culture, the *habitus*, of even subaltern worlds, and this one of the biggest challenges facing the processes of emancipation. As is evidenced by vanguards that rapidly re-appear, and people who speak easily of "educating the masses." In these all too

frequent situations, democracy mixes with cronyism; emergency obviates learning; and the sweetness of power affects even the most conscientious. Eliminating the risk of reproducing relations of power as if it were our liberation is a slow process. In order for the disposition to emerge that will allow for the construction of new frameworks, the creation consensus without urgency, voluntary collectives instead of majorities, and community sensibilities, we must function on another temporality.

But how do we convert this approach into a new consensus? That is, how do we find the force through which we might propose without hegemonizing?

Knot #5: Creating the hegemony of non-hegemony

At the precise moment when Fordism was constituted as a system of production and technical organization of class conflict, Gramsci was reflecting on the changes in worker mentality, on the obliteration of their customs, and the destruction and refashioning of their community and private lives.

How, he pondered, could revolution be made during a capitalist boom such as that of the 1930s? How might a revolution succeed at a time when the system was clearly flourishing and expanding at every turn and the means of

communication were infiltrating imaginations and transforming visions of the world?

In this historical circumstance, Gramsci, who was primarily concerned with the ways in which cultural alienation impeded the development of a radical political character among the workers, emphasized the importance of constructing a critical vision of the world that was capable of countering and demystifying the capitalist one. He thus ascribed much importance to the organic intellectuals and to the work of formulating an alternative vision of the world that could challenge the consciousness and imaginaries of the dominant narratives of power. One of the enormous virtues of this approach is that it politicized and complicated class conflict, rescuing it from the objective determinism that had paralyzed it up until then. In this framework, workers move to seek the transformation of society not because they *objectively exist* as the antagonistic class that can rebel,²⁷ but rather because they been organized in the struggle and have thus *become* the bearers of a particular vision of the world.

In this theoretical-historical framework, Gramsci developed his concept of hegemony as a relational concept that gestures toward the capacity to universalize one's own vision of the world and thus to construct, through consent and coercion, social processes.²⁸ Thus, hegemony is not a collective construction, but a form of leadership, from which

an extensive current of interpretation of the world and a corresponding practice can be developed and disseminated from a *mobilizing center*.

Although historically radical movements have emerged, grown, and initiated revolutionary processes in this manner, there is every reason to fear involution of these processes should they confuse content and form, tactics and strategies, or historical trajectories and horizons. We run the risk of reproducing a tendency toward centering without creating the antidotes that act from within it to dissolve it.

From this perspective the theoretical argument that some have proposed regarding the need to posit a “true hegemony” or a “hegemony of the majority,” seems impossible if we are wagering on a society constituted by autonomous groups, themselves articulated in their democratic decentering, where difference does not signal inferiority, superiority, exclusion or domination. That is, if our goal is a society in which it can be said, as the EZLN often states, “we are equal because we are different”.²⁹

Thus, the postulate of a “true hegemony” might make sense, but only in reference to the process that constitutes the social magma that can produce a bifurcation.³⁰ This proposal is incomplete, however, if our goal is a society of egalitarian societies. It must be accompanied by a content with the capacity to undo itself, to transform itself into its

opposite. That is to say, the world in which all worlds fit does not allow for hegemonies; it would make no sense. For this world, the only way to make the historical trajectory coincide with the historical horizon is to promote a very singular hegemony that would hold within it its own negation. A hegemony that dissolves the conditions of possibility for the existence of “hegemons” by substituting the processes of *convincing* with those of the *construction of consensus* in the *tojolabal* sense.³¹ That is to say, the construction of consensus understood as the expression of visions forged through the confluence of ideas, generated in the daily work and thinking of collectives.

To conceive of a world without hegemony and work to materialize and universalize it would be the way to bring about a new hegemony that dissolves hegemonies.

Knot #6: Making the organization and production of life an act of liberty and autonomy

Tyranny makes you indignant. But tyranny does not exist without the desire to be dominated.

Ret Marut (Bruno Traven), *In the Freest State in the World*³²

A democratically decentered world without hegemonies requires a corresponding *economic* organization that is

autonomous and self-sufficient. It also requires a non-hegemonic relation to nature, where humans relate to the web of life as just one of the many species that constitute its apparently disorganized and non-hierarchical character. In addition, it requires an awareness that the unilateral nature of capital has generated an ecological crisis and thus an awareness we must adhere to the principle that all species are indispensable, in their own way, for the overall functioning of global forests (Scott 1998; Ceceña 2008). Therefore, rather we must establish and recuperate this *intersubjective* relation with all other living rather than subjugating them.

We must undo irrational urbanization by disrupting the boundaries between rural and urban and re-establish connections the land. This move challenges common notions of accumulation that allow for depredation, looting, and competition.³³ It confronts the well-established processes of de-peasantization and virtualization and the supposed separation between manual and intellectual, or abstract and concrete labor, serving instead as an opportunity to transform labor into an act of creation and sociality. It is a call to blur the boundaries between the economic and the social, or the economic and the political, by integrating the social and the economic in the act of production, or the economic and the political in the act of organization, integrating the design of labor and the distribution of its fruits.

If self-organization and production are to be an act of community construction that enriches sociality, dignity cannot be destroyed or neglected in the process. In this sense, the praxis of consensus is fundamental to the community intensification and enrichment that allows for the combination of singular and collective dignities. Material production is always simultaneously the production of both meaning and common sense. A communal and autonomous organization must avoid that schizophrenia present within capitalism that attempts to separate these terms through the production of a distorted description of reality.

If, as Boaventura de Souza Santos argues, in order to move toward the construction of decentered democratic relations we must, “unlearn democracy” as we now know it, then to conceive of a non-accumulative material reproduction, we must also unlearn avarice and abandon the near-religious devotion to both money and machines.³⁴ We must learn to use money and machines when it is convenient, but also dare to think of material satisfaction and the processes that make it possible based in other logics. We must use our wisdom, , rather than just our technology, for the reproduction of life.

The Zapatista experience of constructing autonomous communities (or groups of communities), like similar experiences, draws on wisdoms accumulated throughout a long history. It recuperates forgotten practices and also

critically incorporates some elements of modern agriculture, while rejecting others (e.g. transgenics). They use their experimental knowledge, relevant practices and customs, but without being fundamentalists. In other words, for the Zapatistas, the criterion for discernment is always the location for the creation of new ways of doing things, and thus also expresses the simultaneous transformation of the collective, which itself sustains production. Otherwise they might have continued without creating new styles and methods of working, and thus not *making themselves* as a collective in the process.

However, autonomy in the Zapatista communities is still an experiment that stumbles at every step. History and theory go hand in hand simultaneously transforming each other. Sometimes they move in opposite directions and other times they move along distinct paths. Later, they meet again, recognizing one another.

There is nothing idyllic about emancipatory processes. Reality is much more complex and at times vulgar than theory would like to concede. However, for all of the pitfalls and fluctuations, the emancipatory processes in the Zapatista communities and all of the other communities who are wagering on a world without subjugation, are strengthened and made possible by their capacity to see the horizon from within their own cosmovision, and by their knowledge of how

to create the paths that allow them to advance toward that horizon, despite all of the obstacles, encountering ways to work around problems and misfortunes.

Knot #7: Constructing the conceptual flows of emancipation. Generating the praxis of a world where all worlds fit.

Intellectual laziness is the greatest evil. It is much worse than being wrong.

Ret Marut (Bruno Traven), In the Freest State in the World

All possible liberation must begin with thought. The emancipatory process demands the removal of all of layers of oppression, among them descriptions of the world that reduce our perception of it, preventing us from glimpsing the different orders of reality and the different dimensional and epistemological planes upon which it is possible to organize sociality. Changing the way that we think is one of the greatest knots or challenges in the liberatory process. We must break the mold in order to invent something new discover what is not visible, that which has been repressed or denied. We must rediscover complexity and learn to recognize points of bifurcations; we must displace our angle of vision, dislocate our senses, and multiply meanings, in this way redimensionalizaing finitude and infinitidue. The Zapatistas

call this, creating an “other political culture.” For them, it is the culture of respect, of unity in diversity, of the concert of difference. It is the culture of the world where all worlds fit. The difficult challenge is to reconstruct the web of complexity, to accept distinct rhythms, focuses, styles, languages, and tones, which implies a direct struggle against the competitive, vanguardist, authoritarian, sectarian, racist, arrogant, patriarchal and greedy *habitus*.

Therefore, constructing a world where all worlds fit implies “stopping the catastrophe.”³⁵ It implies winning, but not becoming the dominator; subverting power while simultaneously subverting who we are; removing ourselves from the entrenched relations of power. It implies acting as a mobilizing *center* in order to bring about decentering, denying our own authoritative character and accepting uncertainty as a general organizing principle. To construct with others and transform ourselves along with them is a long, slow process in which the historical itinerary, the praxis, and the horizon continually take on the figure of a serpent biting its own tail. As subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas says, “*it is the time for dignity, the time when the window is also a bridge. It is the time to see and be seen, without shame or fear*”³⁶

The serpent biting its tail marks the close of one societal cycle and the opening of another. It unites its temporal extremes. In our case, it connects the *original* conquest by

capitalism/modernity, which began the process of objectification and private accumulation of life's creative capacities, with the devastation that leads to its ultimate limits and suicide.

Now, 500 years later, nature calls us to live to live together. The unity in diversity, complementarity, the care for the whole in order to care for each of its parts, entails the diluting of the centers, the privileged subjects, and the hierarchies.

The reemergence of the ancient *ethos* that we, as all other creatures, belong to Mother Earth, rises up in thunderous protest in the face of the ecological and social catastrophe brought on by the modern *ethos* that says that Mother Earth belongs to us and is meant for our use. It opens the path toward the re-invention of intersubjectivity, of unity in a diversity that is not only cultural but pertains to all forms of life – a fabric consisting of new frameworks of ecosociality – and depends upon a systemic bifurcation that may have one or many branches enunciated within it. Thus, the most profound and significant knot is:

Knot #8: To discover and construct the paths of systemic bifurcation that lead to a world in which all worlds and all forms of life can truly fit.

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- ¹ Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings, Volume 4 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings College (Boston: President and Fellows of Harvard, 2003).
- ² James Scott meticulously recounts this substantial transformation in the relationship with nature. His systematic, exhaustive, careful, and rigorous approach to this fundamental aspect of the construction of capitalism makes it imperative to consult his work, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1998).
- ³ Food and Agriculture Organization, *Evaluación de los Recursos Forestales Mundiales 2005* (Roma: FAO, 2006).
- ⁴ WWF International, *Living Planet Report 2010: Biodiversity, biocapacity, and development* (Gland: WWF International, 2010), 34.
- ⁵ WWF International, *Living Planet Report 2010: Biodiversity, biocapacity, and development*, 33.
- ⁶ WWF Nepal Program, *An Overview of Glaciers, Glacier Retreat, and Subsequent Impacts in Nepal, India and China* (Nepal: WWF Nepal Program, 2005), 1.
- ⁷ WWF Nepal Program, *An Overview of Glaciers, Glacier Retreat, and Subsequent Impacts in Nepal, India and China*, 2. (WWF, 2005: 2).
- ⁸ Production, Supply, & Distribution, Earth Policy Institute from U.S. Department of Agriculture, Last updated 9 July 2010. www.fas.usda.gov/psdonline.
- ⁹ UN Water, *El agua, una responsabilidad compartida*, (United Nations, 2006), 15.
- ¹⁰ Arriba, Primera evaluación de los recursos hídricos mundiales realizada por el conjunto del sistema de las Naciones Unidas, Last updated 1 April 2013, http://www.prodiversitas.bioetica.org/desagua1.htm#_Toc34620487
- ¹¹ This point is elaborated extensively in Ana Esther Ceceña, “Sujetizando el *objeto de estudio* o de la subversión epistemológica como emancipación” en Ceceña, Ana Esther (coord) *Los desafíos de la emancipación en un contexto militarizado* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2006).
- ¹² Ana Esther Ceceña, *Los desafíos de la emancipación en un contexto militarizado*; and Ana Esther Ceceña, 2013.
- ¹³ The most extreme case of border reinforcement with impunity as a method of enclosure is Palestine. There are, however, many other similar experiments, including the anti-immigrant wall on the US-Mexico border and all of its apparatuses, such as security forces and ‘volunteers’ such as the Minute Men, who amuse themselves using undocumented people for target practice.
- ¹⁴ Translator’s note: This is quoted from *Genealogía del racismo*, page 32, which was translated into English in 2003 as *Society Must Be Defended*, page 29-30. There are some differences in the English and Spanish translations. In order to better understand what

Ceceña is saying here, I have translated any deviations directly from the Spanish.

Foucault, Michel 1996 *Genealogía del racismo* (Argentina: Altamira).

¹⁵ Throughout the text, we refer to “tangle” as a space of intersubjective freedom. The tangle refers to all of the species that are considered to be lessor, of little importance, or noxious that exist in a virgin forest, accompanying the species with recognized value. We know that the species neglected by the market are part of the complex complementarity that constitutes an ecosystem, and are as essential to maintaining its health as any other. The notion of entanglement is mine but it emerges from the reflections my reflections on the work of James Scott in *Seeing Like a State*.

¹⁶ I understand subjectness [*sujetidad* in the original Spanish] as a conscious and deliberate act of political intervention by subjects. In other words as the full exercise of their “politicity” [*politicidad*].

¹⁷ John Holloway, *Cambiar el mundo sin tomar el poder* (España: El viejo topo, 2002).

¹⁸ In a suggestive text on Walter Benjamín, Jorge Juanes poses the problem like this: “What is it that today’s conquered must do in order to avoid becoming tomorrow’s conquerors? Because in reality, history has been an uninterrupted repetition where those who have defended, in a given moment, redemption, freedom, and reconciliation, have arrived in power only to become the new oppressors. What, then, must be done in order to defeat the conquerors, without recreating the conqueror/conquered relationships that, until today, have accompanied history: Jorge Juanes, “*Arte y redención*” en Echeverría, *Bolívar La mirada del ángel. En torno a las tesis sobre la historia de Walter Benjamín* (México: ERA, 2005), 245.

¹⁹ Francis Wolff, “A invenção da política” en Novaes, Adauto org. *A crise do Estado-nação* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2003).

²⁰ Sun Tzu 1999 *El arte de la Guerra* (Colombia: Panamericana, 1999), 118.

²¹ John Holloway, *Cambiar el mundo sin tomar el poder*, 49.

²² Consensus is understood and constructed in different manners in each society, according to their constituent characteristics. Our thought matrixes often blind from seeing phenomena located within other orderings of reality or in other epistemological contexts. Carlos Lenkersdor’s experience in the *Tojolabal* communities of Chiapas, who are part of the Maya people, allowed him to know how consensus in a community assembly was constructed in process, where they didn’t make a resolution until y everyone had expressed their views and were convinced that they had arrived at the best solution for everyone. Generally the agreement reached was very different than the original proposal that had been advanced because it was undrawn and redesigned by the collective. Carlos Lenkersdorf has worked very carefully with the conception of “we”[nosotros] or the conception “*nosótrica*,” [we-ness] as he calls it, in which the relations and the knowledge of the *Tojolabal* societies are based, strongly related with the practice of the construction of consensus. See, for example, my interview with him in Chiapas 7 (Ceceña, 1999).

²³ Boron, Atilio, “Poder, ‘contrapoder’ y ‘antipoder’ . Notas sobre un extravío teórico-político en el pensamiento crítico contemporáneo” en *Chiapas 15* (México: ERA-IIEc, 2003), 153.

²⁴ Armando Bartra, 2003 “Las guerras del ogro” en *Chiapas 16* (México: ERA-IIEc, 2003), 133-4.

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- ²⁵ Armando Bartra, “Las guerras del ogro”
- ²⁶ Armando Bartra, “Las guerras del ogro”, 136
- ²⁷ This should not be treated as an ontological determination but a socio-political derivation.
- ²⁸ On my approach to understanding and working with the concept of hegemony and its problematization, see my previous work (Ceceña 2002, 2004, 2006).
- ²⁹ Translator’s note: This is a phrase often used by Comandante Tacho of the EZLN.
- ³⁰ (Mouterde, 2005: 122)
- ³¹ See the interesting explication of Carlos Lenkersdorf in Ana Esther Ceceña, “El mundo del *nosotros*: entrevista con Carlos Lenkersdorf” en *Chiapas 7* (México: ERA-Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, 1999), 191-205.
- ³² Marut, Ret/Bruno Traven, *En el estado más libre del mundo* (Barcelona:AliKornio, 2000).
- ³³ While I was writing this text, there was a news story reporting that, “The richest one per cent has increased its income by 60 per cent in the last 20 years,” at the same time that “members of the richest one per cent are estimated to use as much as 10,000 times more carbon than the average US citizen,” according to a study done by OXFAM International (2013).
- ³⁴ Santos, Boaventura de Sousa, *Reinventar a democracia* (Lisboa: Gradiva, 1998).
- ³⁵ Walter Benjamín, *Tesis sobre la historia y otros fragmentos* (México: Contrahistorias, 2005)
- ³⁶ Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2001 extracto de comunicado en “Comienza la marcha de la dignidad indígena, la marcha del color de la tierra” en *Chiapas 11* (México: ERA).