

*Territories in resistance: A cartography of Latin American social movements* by Raul Zibechi. (2012). Oakland: AK Press. 363 pages. ISBN-13: 9781849351072

Raul Zibechi's "Territories in resistance" offers a unique analysis on resistance and social movements in Latin America for social activists who perceive Latin America as a source of political inspiration for subaltern rural/urban and indigenous subjects. Contrary to similar accounts that celebrate the victory of social movements in terms of bringing progressive governments to power, this work suggests a critically nuanced stance towards the growing presence of progressive/Leftist presidents, such as in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Moreover, it is a book that will challenge readers to re-examine the magnitude of new territorialities, i.e., territories of the "constant struggle" as the most indispensable contribution of Latin American social movements while simultaneously addressing the various strategic setbacks experienced by other movements to date.

The book consists of four parts, which are divided into seventeen chapters, plus the introduction and an epilogue. Part one outlines the trends of social movements in Latin America, where the "margins/the excluded/the basement of society" (p. 62) become new subjects of the struggle to collectively build new social organizations and seize the space under their control. The capacity to appropriate the territory then serves as robust ground for various political projects, including turning social movements in to spaces of learning, i.e. reconstructing the "arenas of knowing and understanding" (p. 22). Thus the new subjects embrace the act of education to be part of the struggle "to transform oneself by transforming" (p. 24) the new world. With respect to health for instance, Zibechi points to the ongoing efforts of indigenous communities to revive their traditional "indigenous cosmovision" (p. 31), where the health of individuals as physical bodies is strongly influenced by the health of the community as an organic whole.

The communal viewpoint is, accordingly, the core foundation for transforming social relations and is the main prerequisite for resolving the question of power, which is not going to be settled by simply "taking the government palace" (p. 49), i.e., the struggle for social transformation is pursued in a way that does not prioritize the need for structure or unification in the process of construction and reconstruction of social bonds. Reflecting on past movements, it is exactly the exigency for unification and centralization of these movements that made it possible for the state and capital to neutralize the resistance. To avoid such a trap, it is imperative to understand the meaning of actual social practices at the margins as the basis for reinforcing and magnifying social movements. Such astute and genuine comprehension of the meaning of social practices can be gained only from within by developing the inner viewpoint. In this respect, the Zapatista slogan of "asking we walk" makes perfect sense, as "we walk because we are in movement and we can only but ask questions while moving, or resisting" (p. 56). In addition, the notion of "the militant researcher" (p. 57) is the embodiment of such a conception wherein the researcher takes part in accordance with the direction (teleology) of the movement.

Part two covers case studies of what Zibechi describes as "societies in movements" (p. 208) where he draws from his extensive involvement in a variety of "leaderless revolts" (p. 80). Here he expands the "territoriality of resistance" concept further by questioning the idea that "challenges to the system are unthinkable without spaces beyond the control of the powerful" (p. 67). Indeed, it was the triumph of the oppressed to occupy such territories that enabled them to secure certain autonomy. One example of

such spaces is the recuperated factories in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, where workers took over the control of production and continued operations without bosses. Moreover, the experience at Zanon Ceramics in Argentina showed how such practice opened the opportunity to build solidarity between workers and the surrounding communities. The factory, which was formally renamed later as Fasinpat (Fábrica Sin Patrón [Factory Without Owner]) (p. 104), became a cooperative and provided support to community groups and services that suffered from the economic crisis at the time. This remarkable case demonstrates how a social struggle can appropriate space and creates new relationships in order to construct a rejuvenated sense of territorial rootedness.

The experience of the Landless Movement (MST) in Brazil, on the other hand, demonstrates that the victory of fighting for reclaiming land rights, as one form of building territories of resistance, is just the beginning of an endless struggle. Indeed it took vigorous perseverance to continuously learn to overcome challenge after challenge, particularly in dealing with the accelerating control of multinational corporations over knowledge and markets in the insatiable process of primitive accumulation. To build such persistence, the long journey of the Zapatista movement provides some inspiration and insight in terms of their capacity to link a twofold interrelated and interdependent dynamics: the constant formation of local autonomy and the inter/national struggle to shift the balance of power. Another striking and fascinating aspect of Zapatismo concerns the profound changes in the production and reproduction of everyday life in terms of health, education and economic livelihood, as prerequisites for the construction of political autonomy. On the other hand, the highly militarized zones of many parts of Latin America, like Colombia as but one case in point, where established paramilitaries become the “social and political alternative” and violence is a “modality of politics” (p. 166), points to the magnitude of the difficulties faced by social movements in the region. Zibechei subsequently poses the question, “How can one create a social movement in a militarized society, one in which the spaces for public action are closed, and where the activists and leaders are systematically killed and kidnapped?” (p. 166)

The next two parts of the book consider essential theorizing for what amounts to a novel understanding of social movements in Latin America. Here Zibechei extends the concept of territorialization to urban-based movements, where, for the last several decades the poor urban peripheries have turned out to be the proverbial spanner in the working of the dominant neoliberal colonial developmental system. Subsequently, the control of the urban poor becomes a formal policy direction for governments, global financial institutions, and the armed forces. In complementary to this process of violent “displacement and containment” (p. 219) of the urban poor, the ruling elite are also devising new strategies such as the delivery of economic subsidies/social plans (formal education/schooling) as well as other forms of material assistance to urban poor communities in order to multiply the means of social control, discipline and assimilation on elite terms and time lines. In addition, the liberal and welfare state offer the formula of electoral democracy in response to people’s democratic and immediate demands for sustenance in an attempt to restrict the threat of these “dangerous social classes” (p. 194) through the democratic delay of relying on an election every 4-5 years to be heard/dismissed. Here, Zibechei, also provides a groundbreaking critique of the dominant Eurocentric social movement theories, which hamper a deeper and genuine comprehension of experiences in the urban margins in Latin America. Contrary to the conventional analysts who tend to focus on formal aspects, he calls for decolonization of

social movement theories by emphasizing “the character of a social movement as a moving-of-itself, as a capacity to flow and shift, or to circulate” (p. 229). The capacity to move/shift, however, always requires a territory/physical space to allow the subjects to demarcate their distinction from the territories of capital or the state. The territory, thus converted, is the arena for constructing counter-hegemonic social interactions and practicing distinctive ways of existence. Therefore, the territorialization of popular power is the precondition for the struggle in order to be able to persistently reconstruct the resistance. Such territorialization would need to occur simultaneously with the processes of transforming social relations. These social relations would allow popular sectors, particularly women from subordinate classes, to nurture their capacities “to produce and re-produce their lives without relying on the market” (p. 229), and more importantly, “not only without the state, but also against the state” (p. 230).

Based on his first hand observations on the robustness of the territoriality of resistance and communitarian movement, Zibechi claims that brutal repression alone will not easily defeat the popular movements. However, he also notes that emancipatory forces may not share similar resilience in dealing with what is generally characterized as the leftist/progressive regime, the groups of professionals, NGOs, and political parties, who employ more complex tools to moderate and split the movement. Of course, such an agenda, deployed in the interests of the ruling elite, can only succeed by co-opting certain people or factions within the movement. While Zibechi acknowledges that the struggles from below have made substantial direct and indirect contributions in helping to bring progressive and leftist governments to power, he denounces the tendency of Leftist governments in Latin America to deploy what he calls “the art of governing the movement” (p. 268); a set of measures to revoke the anti-systemic effects of social struggles.

In the final analysis, this book succeeds in terms of “focusing our attention on dynamics that escape academic conceptualization but clearly have political potential” (p. 5); a task that the author has set for himself and his readers. Although there are some instances of overlap and repetition (some of the chapters have also been published elsewhere), this is a smooth read and flows easily for those who are familiar with social movements, social movement scholarship and popular/informal political education. The repetition, to some extent, actually helps to emphasize the theoretical and ideological positions that this book foregrounds in relation to Latin American subaltern movements. As a long time journalist, activist and theorist, Raul Zibechi has crafted a highly readable book without sacrificing an analytical and theoretical depth and sophistication and this is significant, given the challenge aimed at dominant Euro-American social movement theories and its’ armchair academics and proponents.

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