

»»Paula X. Rojas

## are the cops in our heads and hearts?

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LIKE MANY OTHER ACTIVISTS ON THE LEFT, I HAVE BEEN STRUGGLING with the contradictions found in organizing work here in the United States. I have worked in community-based organizing, both within and outside. My experiences both in the United States and in Latin America have shaped my analysis of the non-profit system as well as alternatives to it. In the US, I am involved in grassroots organizing work with a multigenerational community of poor and working-class women of color in Brooklyn (Sista II Sista and Pachamama). But what has most pushed my analysis has come from my work and experiences outside of the US, specifically in Latin America. As an adult, I have spent a few years in Chile, my country of origin, supporting organizing efforts against the military dictatorship headed by Augusto Pinochet and the neoliberal "democracies" of the Christian Democratic Party that followed. From Chile, I had the opportunity to travel to La Paz and El Alto, Bolivia, in 1994, and meet with local activists. In Mexico, I have worked with women's groups on political and physical self-defense in rural and urban areas. I also had various opportunities to visit the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, first spending three weeks in the autonomous territories in 1999. In 2003, I spent a few days visiting an encampment and a settlement of the MST (Landless Rural Unemployed Workers Movement) in Brasil and attended a continental gathering of autonomous movements in Argentina held at an occupied factory in 2005. Through these experiences and many (mostly informal) conversations over cheap wine and good music, with other *compañer@s*,<sup>1</sup> organizers, friends, and family in both Latin America and the United States, I have gathered these reflections that I want to share.

### lessons from latin america

More than once, *compas* from Latin America have asked me: Why are you getting a permit from the police to protest police brutality? Why are you being paid to do organizing? Why are people's movements based in non-profit offices? Behind

these kinds of questions are different assumptions about organizing that might challenge activists in the United States to think outside the non-profit system.

Contemporary Latin America provides a helpful model for reconceptualizing and reimagining organizing strategies in the United States. The relatively recent articulation of powerful new revolutionary movements, as well as the economic connections and geographic closeness to the US makes it an important region for us to watch closely and learn from. In the past 15 years, we have witnessed the rapid development of mass-based movements that have significantly impacted the social, political, and economic structures in Latin America. From the perspective of the establishment Left, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Sandinista electoral loss in Nicaragua in 1989 seemed to signal the death of revolutionary struggle. But across Latin America, people's movements were quietly but steadily building their base for years before making their work public. Gerardo Rénique notes:

Today the specter haunting capitalism journeys through Latin America. The region's ongoing social and political upheaval threatens the hegemony of global capital and neo-liberal ideology. In an unprecedented cycle of strikes, mass mobilizations, and popular insurrections extending from the early 90's to the present, the marginalized, exploited, and despised subaltern classes have drawn on deeply rooted traditions of struggle to bring down corrupt and authoritarian regimes closely identified with the IMF [International Monetary Fund], the World Bank and Washington.<sup>2</sup>

Some countries, such as Brasil, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, have produced movements aimed directly at resisting US imperialism as a result of people gaining some control over their governments. In other countries, like Mexico, where the government is not in resistance to the US empire, we still see large social movements that are much stronger than current movements in the United States, ones that are able to put significant pressure on their governments.

On January 1, 1994, the day NAFTA was signed into effect, the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) began an armed uprising by indigenous peasants in Chiapas, Mexico. I have vivid memories of the rebellion and its international impact. I lived in Chile at the time and the uprising made all the mainstream news for days (newspapers, television, and radio). It was major news everywhere along the continent except in the US. Within days, smaller rebellions popped up in various countries. Like the MST, which had been growing in Brasil since 1978, the Zapatistas had been steadily building their base since 1983, before becoming publicly known. This was a powerful moment that reignited hope for movements all across the continent in the possibility of revolutionary transformation from the ground up. It was a 12-day war that succeeded in capturing five municipalities that constitute 25 percent of the state of Chiapas. This defiant action was

unprecedented in modern Mexican history. In the next year, 1995, the EZLN held the Consulta Nacional por la Paz y la Democracia, in which 1.3 million people participated in making the decision of what the future structure and scope of the EZLN would be.

This hope grew throughout the late 1990s, and new visions guiding revolutionary struggles emerged. Though there are still a number of traditionally Marxist/Leninist-based armed and/or political party national liberation struggles in Latin America, there are many other examples of revolutionary visions of transformation that are well worth listening to. Instead of a unified line, broad tendencies are developed through critiques of past struggles and organic modes of organization of the most marginalized, and are inspired by movements like the EZLN. These visions embrace principles like *autonomia* (autonomy) and *horizontalidad* (horizontalism); recognize daily life and the creation of liberated communities as political work; support collective, nonhierarchical decision-making; and aim, above all, to build a society grounded in justice and peace for all. As Raul Zibechi, a Latin American writer and researcher at the Popular Education Center of the Multiversidad Franciscana de America Latina notes:

It is revealing that Latin America has seen a whole set of revolts without leadership, without organizational memory or central apparatus. Power relations within the space of the uprising tend to be based on other forms. The mortar which binds and drives those who are in revolt does not correspond to the state-form—vertical and pyramidal—but rather is based on a set of ties that are more horizontal but also more unstable than bureaucratic systems. The best known instance of this rejection of representation is the slogan “que se vayan todos” (“they all should go”—all being the politicians) which emerges in the course of the December 19–20 [2001] events in Argentina. Both in the neighborhood assemblies and among the groups of “piqueteros” (people blocking commercial traffic on major highways) and in the occupied factories, this general slogan has concrete expressions: “entre todos todo” (“among everyone, everything”), which is similar to the Zapatista “entre todos lo sabemos todo” (“among everyone we know everything”). Both statements (which express the daily life of the groups that coined them) are directed simultaneously at non-division of labor and of thought-action, and also at there being no leaders who exist separate from the groups and communities.<sup>3</sup>

Another deep lesson we can learn from these struggles is to question the analysis of power—the difference between taking power and creating power. According to Rodrigo Ruiz, editor of the New Left magazine *Surda* of Santiago, Chile:

The questioning of the traditional forms of political organization is mixed with the questioning of whether those organizations are necessary. Certainly, what weighs heavily is the combination of popular defeats, in addition to many of the left parties being justly discredited. The new movements, the experiences

of resistance to neoliberal globalization, like Seattle, Quebec, Genoa, movements like the MST...the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, or the Zapatista process in Chiapas, has meant a significant shake-up of the old knowledge of parties that were unable to resolve with efficacy the construction of forces.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, both political and revolutionary struggles focus on toppling state power and replacing it with people's power. One problem with this model is that most of these movements re-created oppressive governance structures modeled on the same system they were trying to replace. In addition, this model rested on the notion that power lies mostly in institutions, instead of recognizing and building from the power that people already have. According to Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, for the Zapatistas,

the project will have succeeded when the struggles for autonomy have evolved into networks of autonomous peoples. Its objective is to create—with, by, and for the communities—organizations of resistance that are at once connected, coordinated and self-governing, which enable them to improve their capacity to make a different world possible. At the same time, as far as possible, the communities and the peoples should immediately put into practice the alternative life that they seek, in order to gain experience. They should not wait until they have more power to do this. It is not built on the logic of “state power” which entrapped previous revolutionary or reformist groups.<sup>5</sup>

Implicit in these models is what could be described as a spiritual framework for understanding power that recognizes and respects the humanity of all peoples. In these newer movements, such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas or the MTD (Unemployed Workers Movement) in Argentina, though each is very different from the other, the emphasis is on the people's struggle for autonomy, not gathering power to topple the state and take it over. Revolution is about the *process* of making power and creating autonomous communities that divest from the state. And as these autonomy movements build, they can become large enough to contest state power. Raul Zibechi, for instance, suggests:

If we look closely at the more important challenges launched by the popular sectors, we will see that they all emerged from the “new” territories, which are more autonomous and independently controlled than those that existed in previous periods of capitalism: El Alto, in Bolivia; the neighborhoods and settlements of the unemployed in Argentina; the camps and settlements of the landless in Brazil; the popular neighborhoods in Caracas; and the indigenous regions in Chiapas, Bolivia, and Ecuador.<sup>6</sup>

These movements emphasize not just winning a specific political goal, but creating new communities that model the vision for liberation. While direct confrontations with state power are ongoing and necessary, these are actually just one small part of the struggle. As Zibechi observes: “To understand this involves reversing

one's perspective: rejecting the negative and state-centered viewpoint—which defines people by what they lack (needy, excluded, marginalized)—and adopting another way of looking which starts with the differences that they have created in order then to visualize other possible paths.”<sup>7</sup>

For example, when US activists think about the Zapatista movement, the first image that frequently comes to mind is the popular Left postcard of Zapatista indigenous women fighting with the Mexican military. One of the women is choking a soldier. However, this kind of confrontation, though important, is really a small part of the work being done to build this movement. For over 20 years, the Zapatistas have organized almost 100,000 people to create their own separate communities, their own justice system, their own health care system, their own agriculture, and their own educational system. The day-to-day groundwork of these projects is not the sexy thing that gets the attention of the public like the dramatic confrontation of an unarmed woman with soldiers. But the Zapatistas' global contributions run far deeper. Casanova addresses this directly: :

Among the rich contributions of the Zapatista movement toward building an alternative is the recent project of the “caracoles” (conches). The project of the “caracoles,” according to Comandante Javier, “opens up new possibilities of resistance and autonomy for the indigenous people of Mexico and the world—a resistance which includes all those social sectors that struggle for democracy, for liberty and justice for all.” It invites us to build towards community and autonomy with the patience and tranquility of the conch. The idea of creating organizations to be used as tools to achieve certain objectives and values, and to ensure that autonomy and the motto “mandar obedeciendo” (“lead by obeying”) do not remain in the sphere of abstract concepts and incoherent words.<sup>8</sup>

This framework is an alternative model for confronting the state and for social transformation. When the Zapatista autonomous communities open their own schools and do not participate in state schools, it challenges state power because there is one less thing that the people need from the state. And the existence of a movement living its vision has deepened the conscience of the people of Mexico as a whole and has inspired many other social movements. All of these are in direct solidarity with the EZLN, like the radical student movements, squatters' movements, teachers' movements, other peasant movements, and more, forming the frontlines of what is now a very advanced mass struggle.

A powerful example of autonomous movements that may speak more directly to current US conditions is that of Argentina. Argentina had long been viewed as a Latin American model of economic growth and development under neoliberalism. But, apparently, this was not the case for the majority of Argentines. Peter Ranis writes,

The rebellion in Argentina [in] December 2001 was a spontaneous outpouring of wrath and a demonstration against the imposition and consequences of a prescribed neoliberal economic model. But it also included a direct confrontation with the governing institutions and political leadership. Argentines massively demonstrated in December 2001, beating on pots and pans, directing their opposition to President de la Rúa's establishment of controls over savings and checking accounts (*corralito*). The economic turmoil precipitated the sacking of supermarkets by impoverished consumers, which in turn resulted in a declaration of a state of siege, counter-demonstrations, and the death of 27 people. De la Rúa resigned, and after a series of interim presidents, the congress designated the Peronist Eduardo Duhalde as president. The "cacerolazos" (pots and pans demonstrations) that began in December 2001 represented the mass of Argentine society from all walks of life. Argentina had never experienced such a spontaneous multiclass uprising.<sup>9</sup>

Even before these mass uprisings, since 1996, groups of unemployed people had been beginning to organize as MTDs, as autonomous movements (autonomous from political parties and non-profit/NGOs and foundation funding) throughout the country, mostly concentrated in the marginalized neighborhoods surrounding the capital of Buenos Aires. Tactics varied and included takeovers of abandoned factories. These MTDs were also autonomous from each other; each had its own name, its own political principles and practices, and its own interpretation of *autonomia*. After 2001, many began to network and attempt to coordinate their power while still attempting to maintain horizontalidad; the goal was not to build a centralized MTD national power. Meanwhile, the mass rebellions intensified as did the repression of the state.

Many of these movements were thinking beyond the state, and even beyond an alternative version of current institutions, by politicizing every aspect of daily life and alternative forms of dealing with them. Specifically, the personal relationships between people also became politicized, with *compañer@s* looking for just ways to treat each other in the context of the movement work and beyond.

In Argentina, the *piqueteros* politicize their social differences when, rather than going back to work for a boss with a miserable wage, they opt to form collectives of autonomous producers without division of labor; when they decide to take care of their health by trying to break their dependence on medication and on allopathic medicine; or when they deal with education using their own criteria and not those of the state.<sup>10</sup>

Though many challenges have emerged along the way, these projects have demonstrated the possibility of nonhierarchical collective production, self-management (*autogestión*) on a large scale, in neighborhoods or in large industries with hundreds of workers.

## challenges to the non-profit system

These new organizing models pose some important challenges to the non-profit system. First, they challenge the notion that hierarchy and centralization are required to do mass-based political organizing. In the current non-profit system, organizations, particularly those that have a scope extending beyond the local level, tend to be based on a hierarchical governance model, with an executive director, board of directors, and on down. People often argue that collective and horizontal decision-making structures are inefficient. And to the extent that they do work, many activists insist that they work only for local organizing projects or projects that are small in scope.

However, in some recent Latin American experiences we see horizontal structures for very large groups, groups much larger than any current movements in the United States. Generally these movements hold *asambleas populares* (popular assemblies) to determine political agendas through consensus. They are used by the Zapatistas, the MTD in Argentina, and many others engaged in struggles for *autonomia*. Grounded in the underlying principle of direct collective power, these practices are used to avoid power cementing in certain people placed in representative roles. People gather locally, in their community or neighborhood, on a street corner or somewhere else public and easily accessible to discuss and reflect on issues that need to be decided. What seems like a facilitator's nightmare—a large, sometimes very large, group of people without a set agenda—becomes a space to practice how we want to live collectively. They may then select rotating representatives who will meet in another popular assembly to share what is going on throughout the movement. These non-permanent representatives take these ideas back to their original popular assembly, where they then report to fellow community members and gather feedback. Popular assemblies are very inclusive—even children can participate if they are interested. Sometimes, the decision-making can be slow: this process went on for a year in order to lay the groundwork of the Chiapas uprising. During the Zapatista negotiations with the Mexican government, they took a pause of several months to consult with their thousands of members before moving forward. However, similar horizontal non-centralized processes have also been used to make almost spontaneous decisions that led to the shutdown of entire countries. These processes were used to make very quick decisions to shut down Argentina in 2001 and to force out the president of Bolivia in October 2003. In other words, horizontal decision-making can be done on a mass scale.<sup>11</sup>

These models demonstrate that everyday life is political and that everyone can participate politically. Political work is not outside the struggle for subsistence or in an organization's office or center, but in life. For example, some of the MTDs in

Argentina set up collective kitchens, whether in joint community spaces or in the homes of MTD members. As Raul Zibichi notes, this kind of shared “domestic” space became one of MTD’s most important organizing fronts:

The tendency was for the non-state orientation of domestic spaces to extend as a form of action into very broad public spaces. The rupture of the “domestic wall” brought with it, to the surprise of the protagonists themselves, the novelty that public space was occupied using the articles and practices associated with domestic space (pots and pans in Buenos Aires; rumor-mongering in El Alto). Thus, in Buenos Aires, neighbors came to the assemblies—in the local squares—with their domestic animals and with chairs from their houses, while in El Alto they watched over their dead in the dusty streets built by the community.<sup>12</sup>

This contrasts strongly with the frequent habit of US non-profits to show their ownership over an issue or a particular campaign: to be considered engaged, community members must go to their office for training or attend their events. But for some movements, political education does not necessarily take place in a building; instead, it is integrated into the organizing itself. For instance, Brasil’s MST centers education, including political education, in its work, arguing that one cannot build a movement among people who are not actively engaged in learning. This is in the context of a movement that is 300,000 families strong. Given the instability with which people in the landless movement live, education must take place “on the run,” in whatever conditions people are living under. So the MST developed Itinerant Education, an education system available for all children and adults based on Paolo Freire’s principles of popular education, which work toward liberation, not indoctrination.

“The Movement of Unemployed Landless Workers of Brazil (MST) that gathers homeless, tenants, rural workers, squatters, and small-scale farmers is without a doubt, the most powerful social movement of Latin America,” says Marta Harnecker, a Chilean political writer, analyst, journalist, and researcher who has spent the past 30 years gathering and raising the visibility of popular struggles in Latin America from La Habana, Cuba. Nevertheless, as movement leader Joao Stedile points out, “It’s evident that both the right and the left have not been able to correctly interpret the political character of the Movement.”<sup>13</sup> But the MST has no intention of becoming a political party, focused instead upon on-the-ground commitments to centering everyone’s education, the development of settlements that model the world they are trying to create, and a spiritual grounding that points to unlearning internalized social practices, including an active “gender” sector and monthly rituals called *místicas* (mystics). The “gender” work includes safety patrols of MST members, armed with machetes and trained in gender issues. They intervene in domestic abuse situations and bring offenders to com-

munity accountability sessions. This organizing work breaks with the traditional revolutionary mold and centers activities that most non-profits could ever dream of getting away with.

### the cop in the head—internalized capitalism

One of the scariest manifestations of modern capitalism is the system’s ability to co-opt experiences, practices, even culture, and to then re-create and repackage them within a careerist, profit-driven (even in “non-profits”), and competitive logic. The non-profit system, as other essays in this volume demonstrate, supports the professionalization of activism rather than a model of everyday activism. For many of us, activism has become something that you do as a career. When organizers from other countries see that activists are paid to do work in the United States, it makes them wonder. It took my father (who is very familiar with grassroots struggles) a few years to understand the work that I was doing. “Your job is a community organizer; what does that mean, it’s your employment? Who is paying you to do this work? And why?” And since many of us are being paid by foundations allied with corporate interests, my father also said, “Clearly, they are paying you to keep you from really challenging the system, to make sure that you are accounted for.” As long as we are doing our social transformation work through a paid job, it is much easier to pressure, relate to, and keep track of what we are doing.

When we focus on organizing as part of everyday life, the process becomes as important as the final product. In many cases, foundation funders and the non-profit culture expect groups to achieve a campaign goal in a relatively short period of time. They are not interested in funding the much slower work of base building, which takes years and years to do. Consequently, non-profits become short-term-goal oriented, even if they did not begin that way. Many also become focused on “smoke and mirrors” organizing, in which you do something that looks good for a photo op but has no real people power behind it. A critique from some organizers in Latin America on this is that there is no one who can do “smoke and mirrors” tricks better than the mainstream corporate right-wing media. They are better at manipulating information to push forward their political agenda. Why would we want to play that game? Our true power is people’s power, but that work is slow and does not necessarily catch the attention of the mainstream public and actually challenge the interests of those behind the funders.

When models focus on everyday activism, they have achieved a mass scale that can really push for change. Here in the United States, we are impressed if 100,000 people come to a march on Washington. In Chile, during the Socialist

Popular Unity government, you could expect to see a turnout of almost a million people (out of a population of about 10 million), on a regular basis. At the last mass demonstration a week before the military coup on September 11, 1973, the number reached a million people. If we were to have the same level of participation in the United States, that would be a protest of about 28 million people! This is exactly the kind of large-scale movement building we need to create in the United States. But if the revolution will not be funded, then we have to be ready to stop jet-setting to conferences on airplanes every few months or weeks, and stop staying in hotels and fancy retreat centers with "all you can eat" buffets. We would have to be prepared to do the hard work of long 20-plus hour bus rides, sleeping on the floor in communal halls, and peeling 50 onions to cook one meal. Yet the non-profit system clearly hinders us from building such movements. Through the non-profit industrial complex's institutionalization of our movements, people who are not "professionals" do not have equal access to organizing. Negotiating all these bureaucratic systems requires specialized skills that are unfamiliar to many of us. Rather than challenging state power, the non-profit model actually encourages activists to negotiate, even collaborate with the state—as those police permits for anti-police brutality marches illustrate.

I have known some widely respected organizers in Latin America who were part of land occupations and settlements involving thousands of people. Clearly, activists in the United States could learn so much from these movement builders, particularly those that are now in this country. Instead, their work and efforts have been marginalized because many are not fluent in English or formally educated; nor are they "executive directors" with professionalized organizer skills. Meanwhile, the NPIC has cultivated an "elite class" of non-profit managers skilled at fundraising and formally educated, but often not deeply connected to the communities they are working with, even as people of color. Many of these managers/directors know a lot less about political history, analysis, and movement building than some *autodidacta* (self-taught/organic) political organizers/intellectuals who don't stand a chance at getting a non-profit job.

But this critique of the NPIC is just the tip of the iceberg. Our analysis must examine how we have internalized these dominant ideas of how to live and organize as the only possible way. The most radical non-profit "staff collectives" that have formal hierarchies and titles just "to deal with the outside institutions" don't flinch at having the executive director make \$40,000 a year and an organizer make \$25,000. These are our deeper contradictions. Within Sista II Sista (SIIS), we tried to address these issues by having no titles of position and a flat salary for everyone, regardless of formal education or years of experience. We did not realize that this flat structure was not actually equitable because paying a single person with no dependents, like myself, the same as a single mother made no

sense at all. But even after stripping away the corporate non-profit model at SIIS, we did not realize how much we had internalized capitalism, not knowing how to address the new reality that one ex-staff member was going to work making \$8 an hour at a store while another was making \$30 an hour as a consultant. We never pushed ourselves to collectivize our income and truly break from the cop in our heads. But trying, risking, and creating new ways of existing and living outside the NPIC is one possible step. Another is to keep looking to our imagination while embracing the inspirational stories of others living their future in the present.

### new relationships with non-profits

While it is important to be critical of the non-profit system, we do not necessarily need to get rid of it all together. Revolutionary movements around the world use non-profits (NGOs) as well, but they have a different relationship with them. In the United States, many are attempting to do organizing work *through* non-profits. In other places, the movement building happens outside non-profits. However, these groups will sometimes start an NGO that serves a strategic purpose (such as providing technical assistance), but the non-profit does not have power to determine the movement's direction. Rather it is accountable to the movement.

For instance, the MST works with some NGOs that provide technical assistance for agronomy, sustainable development, and organic agriculture. The Zapatistas worked with an NGO to produce a video documentation project that would train Zapatista community members to document their work as well as abuses from the state. After ten years, each region will have its own video documentation center, and that non-profit will dissolve. The Zapatistas have also partnered with an NGO to help communities create their own education systems. Once this task is accomplished, that non-profit must leave the autonomous territory. Other revolutionary movements in Central America started NGOs as fronts to provide a public face and help advocate for the human rights of its members. However, in all these cases, the membership base does not come from the non-profit. Thus if an NGO loses funding, it does not impact the movement. Nowhere do those non-profits have files of the movement's membership; it is completely separate from the non-profits. NGO "professionals" bring tools and skills but have no decision-making power at all. In many cases (when the NGO is not a front for the political organization), the non-profit workers, though they may work very closely with these movements, are not considered members of these movements—they are supporters or allies and see themselves as such.

In the current US context, it's clear we still have a lot of work to do. I would argue that we need to do more organizing and base building that works outside the non-profit system. Non-profits then could participate in structured relationships of

accountability created by the movement and support the work without co-opting the movement itself. The work that is now publicly visible in Latin America did not happen overnight but was the result of much trial and error and invisible work that laid the base for a powerful movement. If we want to build powerful movements here, we need a spectrum of approaches and we need to figure out ways to organize without paid staff and without funding. We need to take risks, and then compare strategies. In addition, we need to think of strategic ways to involve people of all sectors in the movement—be they unwaged mothers, non-profit workers, teachers, or grocery store workers. We need to answer the question of how to strategically involve not just traditional political sectors to effect mass social change.

### the cop in the heart—internalized patriarchy

These reflections, lessons, and revolutionary guiding principles are particularly helpful for those of us who are organizing at the crossroads of oppression (on the basis of class, gender, race, sexuality, and so on). Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were many national revolutionary struggles that did achieve real change in their respective countries. However, these movements generally focused only on overthrowing capitalism and did not address the intersections of capitalism with patriarchy, racism, and other forms of oppression. Class was identified in the classic Marxist analysis as the “primary” contradiction. By the early 1970s, organizers began critiquing this model for marginalizing women, indigenous peoples, and other people from “ethnic minorities.” In addition, these older models conceptualized the struggle as happening only at the level of institutional change, either armed or traditional electoral political struggles. Struggle was not something one could participate in through one’s everyday life. Rather, true revolutionaries were supposed to leave their home, go to the mountains to be trained to join armed struggle, or work grueling political election campaigns for months away from home and family. This mode of organizing was based on a macho revolutionary standard of struggle in which commitment is measured by how “tough” you are, how much you can sacrifice family and love in order to focus on the revolutionary process. Mostly, this resulted in women being left behind to raise children on their own, many times not knowing if their partners had been murdered or if they had chosen new intimate relationships. Some women were also integrated into these struggles, but only if they “dressed like men,” acted in cold blood, left their children and families for years at a time, and followed the order of command and obey.

As economic, military, and ecological devastation continues, to make life in our world ever more violent and dehumanized, there is a clear need to step up our commitment and militancy. But we must be careful not to equate patriarchal, hier-

archical militarism with militancy. Some US-based organizers, including feminists of color, seem to romanticize this “old-school” revolutionary model, equating militaristic talk and dress, top-down chains of command, “tight security,” long hours at meetings every night, and personal-life sacrifice with being truly revolutionary. This is ironic because many women’s groups and queer folks, and ex-cadres and some comandantes of the revolutionary Left in Latin America have spent the past 15 years critiquing the inherently patriarchal, hierarchical, dehumanizing basis of these models of organizing.

But today it still plays out in strange ways. For example, in 2004, SIIS was part of a citywide coalition that coordinated well-organized community contingents for a series of marches against the Republican National Convention (RNC). This coalition was committed to the important work of keeping our people safe and security was stepped up. But somehow this also manifested as security marshals barking orders at people to get in single file without explanations, and as loud and hard commands to the young people holding the banner to “Hold Up the Banner!” whenever they lowered it from being tired. Security persons were not to socially interact with marchers, and talking and smiling were not allowed. When SIIS shared in the debrief session our concerns about what we felt were patriarchal practices and unnecessary levels of hierarchy, others looked at us with blank faces; most of them were other women of color.

This story is not *at all* meant to disrespect those organizers. Rather, it is an opportunity to think about how deeply we have internalized patriarchal dominance, even as women and queer folks. Our critique did not fully register with some people present at that meeting, in large part because we did not know how to clearly and compassionately articulate it, as we were trying to figure it out for the first time. It was only the next year, when a few of us were visiting with the Argentinean autonomous MTD Solano movement, that we learned much from listening to their reflections of how important it is that “security” people at the roadblocks not have any power over others. The political intentionality they put toward not re-creating policing relations between people was eye-opening, especially considering the high-risk conditions of their struggles—people in the past had lost their lives. Learning from these practices and comparing them to our relatively small and peaceful RNC protests was an important lesson.

Many powerful voices have spoken of these conflicts and contradictions of the revolutionary Left. One example comes from the 1979 film by Pastor Vega, *Retrato de Teresa* (Portrait of Teresa), which documents how many women in postrevolutionary Cuba did not end up with easier lives, but, rather, with a triple workload: the work of earning a living, the work of participating in revolutionary politics/culture, and the work of taking care of children and the home. Similarly, Lorena Pena, better known as Comandante Rebeca of the FPL (Fuerzas

Populares de Liberación) in El Salvador, has pointed to her organization's lack of understanding of the extra burdens carried by the women and mothers who are militants and combatants. She shares her own experience of having had to part with her 8-month-old child in order to fulfill her responsibilities as a clandestine organizer working in the *tugurios* (shantytowns): "Separating from a child is like having your arm amputated. I cannot explain the sensation even physically that one feels.... I remember that to give myself strength I even read some writings of Lenin aimed at women where he speaks of motherhood in the historical-social sense."<sup>14</sup> Rebeca also critiques her organization's policies toward women combatants who become pregnant; they are subsequently demoted regardless of their technical and political skill level. While she recognizes the need for pregnant women to take on a role with less physical strain, she argues that this should not mean being placed in roles of less political value and recognition within the organization. These experiences eventually led Rebeca to help create the *movimiento de mujeres* (women's movement) Melida Anaya Montes, which began within the FPL and later became an autonomous organization in order to more powerfully challenge the patriarchal, discriminatory practices and culture of political organizations in El Salvador.

One of the most confrontational and beautiful voices belongs to Pedro Lemebel, a gay communist from Chile. In his poem "Punto de Vista Diferente" (A different point of view), Lemebel directly addresses—and critiques—the "revolutionary" Left parties of Latin America with a radical vision of his own.

But don't talk to me about the proletariat  
Because being poor and gay is worse...  
What will you do with us "compañeros"?  
Will you tie us up by our braids  
Destined for a Cuban "sidario"<sup>15</sup>  
Will you put us on a train to nowhere...  
Are you afraid of the homosexualization of life?  
And I'm not talking about sticking it in and pulling it out  
I'm talking about tenderness "compañero"...  
I'm not going to change for Marxism  
That rejected me so many times  
I don't need to change, I'm more subversive than you.

Still active in the autonomous Chilean Left, Lemebel has found a way as a writer and radio/television personality to make his experience and politics accessible to ordinary Chileans, including older working-class women like his mother and my grandmother. He speaks of everyday struggles of everyday folks as political, reaching many more people than the official Left parties ever could. Like Lemebel, many activists realize that this hierarchical and male-dominated model of being a revolutionary ultimately fails to address the concrete experi-

ences of oppression in everyday life. Committed to building movements that are sustainable in the long term, increasingly activists are focused on creating struggle within the context of one's life. The battleground of the struggle is in how we live, how we survive, and how we sustain our lives. Instead of bringing people to a political world, argues Gerardo Rénique, this model grounds the political in everyday life:

Confronted by the retrenchment of the state from its most basic social duties, many popular movements organize to address such aspects of everyday life as housing, nutrition, childcare, education, and productive work. One thinks here of the communal kitchens in Peru, squatter organizations in Uruguay, cooperatives of unemployed workers in Argentina, landless peasants in Brasil, and the autonomous municipalities and Juntas de Buen Gobierno (good government councils) in the territories in Mexico controlled by the EZLN. Driven by principles of solidarity, self-respect, collective participation, and communal interest, these popular institutions constitute a powerful challenge to the individualism, self-interest, and exclusion that are the core values of neoliberalism.<sup>16</sup>

In these new movements, much of the political work happens close to home. It's not that mass demonstrations are no longer considered useful. But there is a growing understanding that such tactics, once required on a regular basis to demonstrate your political commitment, are largely, if not entirely, alien to the reality of most people's lives, especially poor people struggling just to survive. When collectively reimagined by movement members, however, mass demonstrations can take on a new and differently gendered character. For the Zapatistas, as Javier Elorriaga, one of the EZLN's main public figures explains,

it's necessary to build from below, to be constantly consulting; to be looking for new forms of participation, for those who have time [to] participate and those who don't have time; the woman who has children and has, in addition, another job and comes home to feed them; even the mother who can't attend the assemblies, that she, too, have the possibility to participate politically. And all of this on the margins of power.<sup>17</sup>

In other words: What if, as a tired, overworked, and underpaid or unpaid woman I do not have to add going to this march to my list of things to do? What if, instead, I could integrate my political participation into my daily life? What if there were a "space" where I could build and learn politically with others, a space I could go to that was part of how I take care of myself and others? Here again, the Zapatistas' caracoles offer us another visionary model that extends beyond mere protest or demonstration to a long-term and integrative approach to resistance.

It has taken me a long time to truly understand how to apply this theory to my lived experience as a social justice activist. Until recently, I was a full-time organizer type, single with no dependents, who received a paycheck from a non-profit for part-time work (while also teaching self-defense part-time). That



non-profit is Sista II Sista, an organization I've been a part of for ten years. For almost the first four years of its life, SIIS was run as a volunteer collective; this all changed in 2000, when we incorporated as a non-profit with paid staff and foundation funders.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, financial crisis, as well as the reflections of paid and unpaid collective members, led us to decide to return to our roots as a volunteer grassroots organization. This difficult transition, in addition to my becoming a first-time mother, showed me how challenging yet important it is to participate politically. In my view, living a full, difficult, and complicated life, like all the folks we are organizing with, while also being a caretaker for an individual and/or a volunteer for an organization is *the* political task at hand.

If our commitment to organizing is to build with those who are most marginalized, if we want to prioritize poor and working-class women of color in the US, most of whom are responsible for the care and survival of children and/or other family members, then it is essential that we look for alternative models to movement building. We must also recognize another major challenge observed from outside the US: the dismantling of "community," social connections, and relationships of solidarity and love. If we are faced with these conditions, it seems crucial that we try forms of organizing that center the daily experiences of those caught in the crossfire of all forms of oppression. From Latin America, we can draw from the examples of the gigantic efforts for daily survival by the oppressed, an effort that involves strengthening the communitarian spaces and ties they are constructing and re-creating every day. It is not enough to center poor and working-class women and queer folks of color's experiences in our organizing if the mode of organizing is still very similar to male-dominated labor or US-style community organizing. In this model, only those who have the privilege and/or obligation of being full-time organizers—because they are single without dependents, or fathers who do very little parenting, or people who can afford to pay others to do the caretaking of their families—can actively participate, let alone lead our movements. Ultimately, political involvement that comes at the expense of our relationships with loved ones and the larger community is not truly liberatory.<sup>19</sup>

As the material conditions worsen in the US, it is ever more clear that many people's lives in this country are becoming as precarious as those of the peoples of the Global South, as we have seen with the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast. Especially during these times, I encourage US activists to keep thinking outside the non-profit box and learn from movements, both past and present, wherever they may be, that have been able to achieve much more by working outside this narrow, even compromising structure. While the contexts are not the same, the principles of the movements in Latin America and elsewhere can help inform our organizing work here. Because they come from

people who are not living in the "brain of the monster," the US empire, they can help us identify the cops in our heads and hearts, release us from the US-centric tunnel vision, and expand our dreams of possibility.

### acknowledgments

As this is the first time that I have written an article alone (not as a collective process), I feel it is my responsibility to include some of the names of those with whom I have developed these reflections in practice over the last ten years in New York City. The collectives of Sista II Sista, Pachamama, Community Birthing Project, Sisterfire, Center for Immigrant Families, NYC Childcare Collective, Sistas on the Rise, Harm Free Zone, Refugio, INCITE! and Lola's informal childcare crew have been working hard to embody and support these alternative revolutionary visions. Along with all those amazing compañer@s, I have had the incredibly valuable experience of being able to learn, organize, cry, and struggle closely with Nicole, Adjoa, and Ije, powerful mothers or caretakers of family. All of these folks along with my closest *familia*, my mother, Ximena, my grandmother Dolores, my mentor Eugenia, as well as my compañero Eric and my daughter, Xue-Li Dolores, have lovingly taught me more than I could have learned in ten more years of radical organizing as a single "organizer" with no dependents.

### notes

The term "cop in the head" comes from an acting exercise in Theatre of the Oppressed to identify the dominant social ideology that becomes internalized through a complex series of cultural, political, historical, and economic processes. Theatre of the Oppressed is a methodology created by Brazilian theater director and activist Augusto Boal in the 1970s.

- 1 *Compañer@s* or *compas* are warmer terms for the English equivalent, *comrades*; rather than using the letter *a* or *o* to designate a gender, as traditionally required by Spanish grammar, some activists and writers use the @ symbol to make the term both feminine and masculine.
- 2 Gerardo Rénique, "Introduction, Latin America Today: The Revolt Against Neoliberalism," *Socialism and Democracy* 19, no. 3 (November 2005): 1.
- 3 Raul Zibechi, "Subterranean Echos: Resistance and Politics 'desde el Sotano,'" *Socialism and Democracy* 19, no. 3 (November 2005): 30.
- 4 Marta Harnecker, introduction to *América Latina la Izquierda después de Seattle*, by Rodrigo Ruiz (Santiago, Chile: Surda Ediciones, 2002), 10. My translation.
- 5 Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, "The Zapatista Caracoles: Networks of Resistance and Autonomy," *Socialism and Democracy*, 19, no. 3 (November 2005): 81–82.
- 6 Zibechi, "Subterranean Echos, 19.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 8 Casanova, "The Zapatista Caracoles," 79.
- 9 Peter Ranis, "Argentina's Worker Occupied Factories and Enterprises," *Socialism and Democracy* 19, no. 3 (November 2005): 97–98.
- 10 "Un Jardín Piquetero en la Matanza," *Página 12* (May 2004). My translation.

- 11 In Bolivia, these sectors “were capable of mounting an insurrection without leadership or leaders....when workers formerly left the organization of their work to employers and the management of society to the state, they had to rely for their struggles on hierarchical and centralized structures, and depended on their leaders—union and political—to represent them and make decisions. The autonomy of such persons *vis-à-vis* capital runs in tandem with their autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state. In fact, the most important problems of their daily lives, from the construction and maintenance of their environment (dwelling, water, sewage, and streets) to essential aspects of education and health, have been taken in hand via an impressive network of basic organizations. In El Alto alone there are, according to different sources, between 400 and 550 neighborhood juntas, one for every 1,000 inhabitants over the age of 10.” Zibechi, “Subterranean Echos,” 23.
- 12 Zibechi, “Subterranean Echos,” 31.
- 13 Joao Pedro Stedile, *Brava Gente* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Barbarroja, 2000), 42. My translation.
- 14 Marta Harnecker, *Retos de la Mujer Dirigente 2* [includes an interview with Comandante Rebeca] (Havana, Cuba: Colección Letra Viva, MEPLA, 1993), 2.
- 15 *Sidario* is a Cuban quarantine for people living with HIV.
- 16 Rénique, “Introduction, Latin America Today,” 1.
- 17 Javier Elorriaga, interview, *Viento Sur* 35 (December 1997): 24. My translation.
- 18 For a fuller history of SIIS’s journey through the non-profit system and beyond, see “On Our Own Terms: Ten Years of Radical Community Building With Sista II Sista,” which appears in this volume.
- 19 One project I am currently involved in was inspired by *colectivos de mujeres* (women’s collectives) from different Latin American movements, such as the Sandinista struggle in Nicaragua. Prior to the revolution, much work was done through day care centers clandestinely developed by the Sandinistas. No one realized they were revolutionary institutions that provided women and children with an opportunity in their everyday lives to meet for political education, organizing, and mobilizing. We are currently developing a childcare cooperative in Brooklyn, Pachamama, that is attempting to be financially self-sustaining through barter and sliding-scale fees. We opened our first Pachamama cooperative in April 2005 and it has inspired some of the members to break off and begin a separate similar cooperative, Little Maroons, launched in September 2005. We are also connecting with two other working-class women-of-color groups interested in starting similar projects. In our vision these spaces can become a base for doing grassroots political education and organizing work that fits in with the lives of poor women of color in Brooklyn. Is this as a legitimate location from where to organize and participate in movement building? I hope so.

>>Eric Tang

## non-profits and the autonomous grassroots

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ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE COULD BE NO NASTIER INDICTMENT than to be labeled an affiliate of the state. Yet today, some of the movement’s best and brightest openly, even self-confidently, claim membership in organizations whose links to the state—through either public funding or through official registration with the government—are unambiguous and well documented. Indeed, there are an impressive number of radical-minded grassroots groups which, while continuing to sincerely abide by the ethos of “our movement,” have assumed the form of a non-profit (NP) entity. At times NPs go by their other name, non-governmental organization (NGO)—a term more commonly used in the rest of the world, which ironically underscores its complementary relationship to government. Among grassroots organizers in the United States, there is yet another moniker: 501(c)(3). The grassroots parlance cuts straight to the chase, stripping the NP down to its most essential nature—that of an IRS tax category, an official registration with the US government that allows, among other privileges, the accreditation needed to receive government funding, as well as the majority of funds available through private philanthropic foundations. In exchange, the grassroots NP must adopt legally binding bylaws, form a board of directors modeled after the corporation, and make its board minutes and fiscal accounting accessible to the public. While these practices were once considered anathema to the grassroots Left, they are actually the long-standing rules which have governed many community organizations, particularly religious institutions and some labor unions.

### fractured left

“We, the Left, have been described as being weak, fractured, disorganized. I attribute that to three things: COINTELPRO. 501(c)(3). Capitalism,” deadpanned Suzanne Pharr, while speaking before an audience of 800 at the historic 2004 conference *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. Few grassroots organizers can claim a body of work more